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“Jesus promises Nathanael that, as a disciple, he will see not only God’s power but also God’s love.”

COME SEE THE GREATNESS OF JESUS

Christianity begins with the question, “What do you think about Jesus?” John 1:19-51 poses that question in a variety of forms. What is John the Baptist’s relation to Jesus? What is Jesus’ role as Lamb of God? What is Jesus’ ministry in the Holy Spirit? What is His relation to Moses and the prophets? Is He great? Such questions touch lives of several people as John begins telling the story of Jesus. The reactions of the people illustrate ways in which ancient and modern humans can understand or misunderstand Jesus. Faith, curiosity, and doubt present themselves vividly even before Jesus’ public ministry begins.

This section of study divides into two units. Verses 19 through 34 deal with the witness of John the Baptist. The second unit, verses 35 through 51, tells how five people face the decision of whether or not to follow Jesus. John the Baptist and his testimony introduce the first section. People come to question John’s personal claims and seek his rationale for baptizing people.

Before continuing it is desirable to comment on John’s use of the word “Jews.” It is an important issue since some people charge John with being anti-semitic or anti-Jewish. Frequently the Gospel of John uses the word “Jews” not to describe a race of people but to indicate religious leadership that opposes Jesus. Certain Bible translations interpret the word correctly when they translate “Jewish leaders” (Living Bible) or “Jewish authorities” (Today’s English Version). I like to paraphrase “Jews” with terms like, “religious leaders opposed to Jesus.” For example, the term in verse 19 must indicate such a meaning because the priests and Levites would, in the ethnic sense, also be “Jews.” The main characters in chapter one, including John the Baptist, Andrew, Simon Peter, and Jesus Himself, were ethnic Jews. The Gospel of John is not anti-Jewish. The Gospel of John wants all people, including ethnic Jews, to respond in faith to the Good News of Jesus.

JOHN THE BAPTIST IS QUESTIONED – JOHN 1:19-28

The prologue told us (1:6-8) that John the Baptist was sent by God, not as the light of the world but to bear witness to the light. John 1:19-28 elaborates and illustrates the truth. “Who are you?” stands as a loaded question. The intent of the question would be captured well in American slang with the words, “Who do you think you are anyway?”

The inquisitors suggest three options. First, “Is John the Christ?” “The Christ” translates the Hebrew title “The Messiah” (cf. 1:41) and was a loaded word at the time of John.

During the Roman occupation of Palestine the title often referred to a leader who would bring national freedom by providing military leadership. Popular usage had so drained the title of its spiritual meaning that Jesus avoided the term and preferred the more neutral title “Son of Man” (cf. Mark 8:29-31). By asking John the Baptist if he was the Messiah, the people ask if he views himself as a God-given military leader. John the Baptist proclaims that he is not in the desert trying to raise and organize an army.

The second question they asked of John was: “Are you Elijah? On the basis of Malachi 4:5, people of John’s time believed that Elijah would return shortly before the Lord would rescue His people. Therefore, they ask if John is the beginning of the end. John replies in the negative (Matthew 11:14).

Finally, they ask if John is “the prophet.” Again the question has an Old Testament background based on an interpretation of Deuteronomy 18:18. “The Prophet,” according to popular belief, would be a Moses-like figure who would again lead people into realizing God’s promises. Although “The Prophet” and “The Messiah” cover two distinct expectations (cf. John 7:40-41), they are similar. The people are asking John if he is personally ushering in God’s Rule. John correctly rejects such a role.

John the Baptist interprets his ministry in terms of Isaiah 40:3. He is a voice calling people to action. He is not the Messiah, Elijah, or the Prophet bringing about God’s Rule. He is helping people get ready for God’s coming. John is witness to the impending action of God. He prepares people for God’s action but he himself is not the Divine Actor.

John then faces a second question. Why does he baptize? (vs. 25) John does not immediately answer the question. He neither explains nor defends his ministry of baptism, but he continues to function as witness and points to something or, actually, someone greater. John tells the questioners that they search for unimportant information. Seeking to understand John’s ministry they overlook someone greater — someone whose sandals John is not worthy to untie.

The curiosity of John’s questioners is, nevertheless, understandable. “Baptizing” had a broader meaning at John’s time than it does for Christians today. “Baptism” referred to a range of ways in which water was used to purify people or things for service to God. (cf. Leviticus 14:9, 15:6-23, 17:15; Mark 7:1-5) John’s questioners want to know why he dares to “purify them.” To use modern slang, “What gives you the right to ‘clean up our act?’

But John, as the faithful witness, will not be diverted by unimportant questions. Rather than deal with ignorance of his baptismal authority, John points to a more important deficiency. They don’t know Jesus. The first section leads us from the question, “Who is John the Baptist?” to a much more important question, “Who is the unknown one who is greater than John?” John the Baptist introduces the Gospel story pointing to Jesus rather than drawing attention to himself.

THE LAMB OF GOD – JOHN 1:29-34

In verses 29-34, the person, power, and ministry of Jesus is set forth in the witness of the Baptist. First, John calls Jesus “the Lamb of God.” That metaphor is loaded with Old Testament symbolism and meaning. Readers familiar with the history of Israel connect Jesus as the “Lamb of God” with the Passover lamb (Exodus 12), the lambs of daily temple sacrifice (Exodus 24), and the prophetic lamb of Isaiah 53:7. Since the Lamb is described as carrying the sins of the world, Isaiah 53:4-6 creates a vivid background for interpreting John’s proclamation.

Second, John the Baptist points to Jesus as the one who was “before” him (vs. 30). Then John confesses that the Spirit enabled him to know that Jesus is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit (vs. 32-33). Finally, the section ends with the testimony that Jesus is the Son of God (vs. 34).



Observe how clearly John's Gospel focuses on Jesus. In telling the story, John even omits important details that might distract our attention. For example, from the Synoptics we know that the Baptist saw the dove descend at Jesus' baptism. John's Gospel doesn't even mention the baptism of Jesus. The Gospel soars like an eagle. Earthly details fade away as we soar in the theological vision of the heavens. The important question is "Who is Jesus?" — not "What is John doing to Him (in baptism)?"

THE FIRST DISCIPLES – JOHN 1:35-51

The chapter concludes on the theme of discipleship. The person and power of Jesus do not operate in a vacuum. Jesus affects people. He changes lives. John the Baptist takes the initiative in the first scene (vs. 35). John's witness that Jesus is the Lamb of God leads two people to investigate, to stay with Jesus, and then (one of them) to invite his brother to consider Jesus as the Messiah (vs. 36-41). To redirect Simon's life, Jesus names him "Peter." Furthermore, naming or re-naming a person was a way to claim, bless, or guide a person (cf. Genesis 17:5-8, 15-16; 32:28). Like a good shepherd, Jesus calls His own by name to show His protecting love (cf. John 10:3, 14; John 20:16).

The story continues when, moving north to Galilee, Jesus finds and calls Philip to follow Him. (vs. 1:43). As if to illustrate the fact that Good News dare not be hidden (4:35-48; 20:21; 21:15, 17), Philip approaches Nathanael with the claim to have found in Jesus fulfillment of expectations given in the prophecies. Nathanael's hesitation need not be criticized because there is not one specific passage claiming that the Messiah will come from Nazareth. The expectation seems to rest on a number of passages using Hebrew words that sound something like "Nazareth." For example, a "nazir" is a person consecrated to do God's work (Judges 6:1-21). The promised Messiah comes from the "neser" (stump) of Jesse (Isaiah 11:1, cf. Matthew 2:23). Philip's invitation rests (1:46), like that of Jesus (1:39), on direct contact. Rather than engage in an argument concerning data or even the interpretation of Scripture, proper evangelism means asking people to come and see Jesus.

Jesus then confronts Nathanael on two levels. First, He speaks with divine extraordinary knowledge (1:47, 48). His words give a sign that leads Nathanael to confess Jesus as Son of God and King of Israel. Second, as if to strengthen Nathanael's faith, Jesus points to a faith based on revelation of divine matters.

Jesus' words (1:51) allude to Jacob's experience (Genesis 28:12) where a ladder connects heaven and earth. Jesus promises that He is now that link to God. Significantly, Jesus points to Himself as Son of Man rather than repeating either title, Son of God or King of Israel. Son of God and King of Israel may be understood to embrace only kingdom, power, and glory. Son of Man includes rejection and suffering (cf. John 3:14; 6:27, 53; 8:28; 12:23-28; Mark 8:31). Jesus promises Nathanael that, as a disciple, he will see not only God's power but also God's love.

PERSONAL APPLICATION – JOHN 2:1-25

*Read thoughtfully John 2 and pray for the guidance of the Holy Spirit
as you fill in your answers to the questions on this chapter.*

John 2:1-11

1. Why is it significant that Jesus' first miracle-takes place at a wedding?

What sort of "tone" does that set for the power of Jesus?

2. Mary simply tells Jesus that the wedding lacks wine (2:3). What do you think is her intention or motivation?

Is she merely giving information or is she asking a favor?

3. Do you sometimes pray like Mary with statements that hide deeper meaning? If so, can you illustrate?

4. (a) How does Jesus answer Mary?

(b) Do the words in English sound kind or rude?

(c) How do we expect Jesus to answer our prayers?

(d) Does your understanding of Jesus' words fit that image?

5. From the following references, what is the "hour" of Jesus? (John 12:23, 27; 13:1; 17:1)

What does “My hour is not yet come” mean? (2:4)

6. How does Mary react to Jesus’ reply?

How is she a model for us?

7. Assuming that John wants us to observe a contrast between the “raw materials” (stone jars and water) and the “finished product” (good wine), what might the contrast mean?

8. Usually we speak of Jesus’ “miracles” but what does John call this wonderful deed?

9. A “sign” often points to someone or something apart from itself. To what does the “sign” of Cana point?

10. It is important that John says the “glory”, rather than the “power” of Jesus was revealed. Why did the disciples believe?

John 2:12-25

11. Tell when and where the event described in these verses took place and what the emotional and religious state of mind of the people was at this time and place.

12. What three things does Jesus do in the temple area?

13. The temple plaza was filled with commercial enterprises set up to facilitate the offering of sacrifices and giving of charity. Why did Jesus attack activities that were intended to support worship?

14. Are there “religious activities” or “programs that support service to God” that keep you from loving God with all your heart, soul and mind? Are there things that we do for the church that, in some ways, are similar to the ‘buying and selling in the temple area?’ If so, describe and state how you think they hinder genuine worship.
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15. Psalm 69:9 interprets Jesus’ action for His disciples (2:17). What does being “consumed” by zeal mean?
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Read the context of the verse in the Psalm. Does the verse suggest that Jesus’ action already points to His suffering and subsequent glorification?

16. How do opponents of Jesus react to the cleansing of the temple area? Have you ever reacted to God’s work (or the work of one of His disciples) in a similar way?
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17. Note the event in Jesus’ life given in 2:19 as the key to understanding His cleansing ministry. How can contemplation of that same event influence the way we view “cleansings” in our lives?
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18. What does Jesus’ reaction to some believers suggest about their motivation? (Also see Matthew 15:19: Romans 7:19-20: Galatians 5:15-21)
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How does “what is in us” sometimes push Christ away?

19. How does this story help our lives in Christ when we, like the disciples, “remember and believe?”
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