

JOHN — WEEK 2

ACTION



F. Michael Slay

A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The cover image is *Ecce Homo (Behold the Man)* by Caravaggio

John's narrative of Jesus and John the Baptist in action proceeds at a blistering pace. We learn many new names and roles for Jesus as He recruits His disciples.

But we also see spiritual warfare begin.

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1 John 1:19–28 (ESV)

And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, “Who are you?” He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, “I am not the Christ.” And they asked him, “What then? Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.” “Are you the Prophet?” And he answered, “No.” So they said to him, “Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?” He said, “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’ as the prophet Isaiah said.”

(Now they had been sent from the Pharisees.) They asked him, “Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?” John answered them, “I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know, even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie.” These things took place in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

John’s historical narrative begins with John the Baptist and his testimony about the Christ. The *priests and Levites from Jerusalem* sound like they’re cross-examining him. They ask pointed questions about his identity, to which he keeps answering, “No.” Then comes the big tell.

So they said to him, “Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?”

They need to give an answer to those who sent us? What’s that all about?

They’re under pressure. They can’t return empty-handed. They need an answer that fits standard preconceived notions about scriptural prophecies. So, John gives them an answer they can relate to.

He said, “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’ as the prophet Isaiah said.”

In the context of everyone in Israel’s anxious anticipation of the Messiah, this should have been satisfactory, even thrilling. He’s clearly saying that the Messiah is coming now.

But instead of being happy with John’s answer, they challenge him. *They asked him, “Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?”* That’s weird. Why do they think he can’t baptize unless he’s one of those people?

They don’t. The assumption in their question has no support in scripture, and they know it. It’s a trick question designed to trap him. They’re hoping he’ll say something clumsy in response.

But he’s up to the task and uses their ridiculous question to announce the coming Messiah—again.

As always, John’s gospel packs many profound things into a few words. Here we get a clear view of just how insanely vicious the opposition is. It’s clearly supernatural, and this opposition will never let up.

It’s the greatest spiritual warfare of all time.

2 John 1:29–34

The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, “Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is He of whom I said, ‘After me comes a Man who is preferred before me, for He was before me.’ I did not know Him; but that He should be revealed to Israel, therefore I came baptizing with water.”

And John bore witness, saying, “I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and He remained upon Him. I did not know Him, but He who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘Upon whom you see the Spirit descending, and remaining on Him, this is He who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’ And I have seen and testified that this is the Son of God.”

Again, we see information densely packed into this gospel. This time we get yet another name for Jesus. The Word/Life/Light/Son of God is also *the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world*. His death on the cross is a long way off, but John is already asserting it. He also asserts that Jesus *was before* him.

That’s profound because John surely knows that his mom (Elizabeth) was well along in her pregnancy while Mary was just starting hers. So, in terms of birthdays, Jesus was most definitely not *before* John. The events surrounding Jesus’s birth, and John’s too, weren’t secrets; the family members would be expected to know all about it. Given the amazing circumstances surrounding Mary’s pregnancy, John would be expected to think Jesus is the Messiah.

But none of that says anything about lambs. John calling him *the Lamb of God* is huge, as is the line, “*who takes away the sin of the world!*” How could anyone besides Jesus have a clue what he’s talking about. That aspect of the Messiah won’t be understood for years. John has some major prophetic skills.

This makes every word in the second paragraph important. The spirit *descending from heaven* on Jesus is especially significant. Isaiah prophesied this.

The Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon Him, — Isaiah 11:2a

The Spirit remaining on Him is a sign that He’s the anointed one.

*“The Spirit of the Lord God is upon Me,
Because the LORD has anointed Me”* — Isaiah 61:1a

So, John had seen a clear sign that Jesus is the Messiah. That part he could figure out on his own.

But that Lamb bit and saying, “*He was before me,*” are pure supernatural insight.

This passage adds another precious detail that isn’t in Matthew’s account of Jesus’s baptism—God saying, “*Upon whom you see the Spirit descending, and remaining on Him, this is He who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.*” The account in Matthew 3:17 only notes God saying that Jesus is His beloved Son.

And suddenly a voice came from heaven, saying, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.”

3 John 1:35–42

Again, the next day, John stood with two of his disciples. And looking at Jesus as He walked, he said, “Behold the Lamb of God!”

The two disciples heard him speak, and they followed Jesus. Then Jesus turned, and seeing them following, said to them, “What do you seek?”

They said to Him, “Rabbi” (which is to say, when translated, Teacher), “where are You staying?”

He said to them, “Come and see.” They came and saw where He was staying, and remained with Him that day (now it was about the tenth hour).

One of the two who heard John speak, and followed Him, was Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother. He first found his own brother Simon, and said to him, “We have found the Messiah” (which is translated, the Christ). And he brought him to Jesus.

Now when Jesus looked at him, He said, “You are Simon the son of Jonah. You shall be called Cephas” (which is translated, A Stone).

As always, John’s retelling of these events proceeds at light speed. The events proceed at light speed too. John the Baptist points out Jesus as *the Lamb of God* and two of his disciples take off after Him. Jesus asks the perfect diagnostic question, “*What do you seek?*”

True to form, they answer a question with a question, “*Rabbi, where are You staying?*” Calling Him Rabbi answers His question; they seek to be taught. That earns them an invite—kind of a non-answer too, but perfect.

Then things continue developing at a blistering pace. One of the two disciples who followed Jesus recruits his brother, Simon, calling Jesus the Messiah. He understood exactly what John meant when he talked about the Spirit descending and remaining on Jesus.

Jesus takes one look at Simon and jumps years ahead by renaming him “*Cephas.*”

Simon hasn’t even said anything yet.

God’s sense of timing can look anachronistic while events are unfolding. Later, looking back, we sometimes get to see how it was all planned out.

This is especially true with answered prayer. God’s sense of timing can seem strange, but it’s not a sense of timing at all; it’s a sense of purpose. We see things from inside of time and wonder why He’s so slow.

He’s not slow; He’s deliberate. Our impatience reflects a desire for comfort instead of sanctification.

We’ve got a lot to learn, and He designs to teach us.

4 John 1:43–50

The following day Jesus wanted to go to Galilee, and He found Philip and said to him, “Follow Me.” Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael and said to him, “We have found Him of whom Moses in the law, and also the prophets, wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.”

And Nathanael said to him, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

Philip said to him, “Come and see.”

Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward Him, and said of him, “Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom is no deceit!”

Nathanael said to Him, “How do You know me?”

Jesus answered and said to him, “Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you.”

Nathanael answered and said to Him, “Rabbi, You are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!”

Jesus answered and said to him, “Because I said to you, ‘I saw you under the fig tree,’ do you believe? You will see greater things than these.”

Things continue to develop incredibly rapidly. Two words—“Follow Me”—are all it takes to recruit Philip. Then, again, we hear the line, “Come and see.” It’s like the ultimate apologetic comeback. If someone sounds skeptical, just invite them to see for themselves. They can’t argue with that.

And Nathaniel gets quite an eyeful—actually an earful—as Jesus speaks of things that He shouldn’t be able to know. This blows Nathaniel’s mind and he blurts out a confession of faith.

But Jesus doesn’t just let that go at that. Why does he continue to press the issue? Why, in this incredibly fast-paced scene, does He stop to elaborate?

Nathaniel’s newfound faith still needs to grow and mature. Jesus is setting up Nathaniel (and everyone within earshot) to recognize and remember important signs. They’re going to need this later.

He’s already preparing them for martyrdom.

One of the things I love about Sherlock Holmes is that he’s on a different wavelength. Sometimes, while everyone else is perfectly calm, he will just up and announce, “This is dangerous.” Other times, he is totally sanguine while everyone else is worried. His vast understanding makes everything different.

Jesus is that on steroids. He has a totally different set of priorities, plus He’s three steps ahead of everyone else. Here it looks like He’s just recruiting disciples.

In reality, He’s been training them from the get-go.

5 John 1:51

And He said to him, “Most assuredly, I say to you, hereafter you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.”

Jesus finishes up His conversation with Nathaniel with two major developments. First, He calls Himself, “*the Son of Man.*” Jesus never says, “*Son of God*” when referring to Himself; He says, “*Son of Man.*” The gospels record Him doing this 78 times. This label harkens back to a messianic line in Psalm 8.

*What is man that You are mindful of him,
And the son of man that You visit him?
For You have made him a little lower than the angels,
And You have crowned him with glory and honor. — Psalm 8:4–5*

Similarly, John doesn’t call himself “John” in his gospel; He calls himself, “the disciple that Jesus loved.” Throughout this gospel, “John” means John the Baptist. This third person way of speaking in the first person may seem strange to us, but it was common back then.

Second, the bit about *the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man* is deeply significant. What could that possibly mean?

It’s referring to Jacob’s vision of what is commonly known as “Jacob’s ladder.”

Then he dreamed, and behold, a ladder was set up on the earth, and its top reached to heaven; and there the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. — Genesis 28:12

We already saw a dove descend from Heaven and rest of Jesus. Now we read that He will be the conduit between the two realms. What this exactly means may be beyond human comprehension, but it’s surely significant.

There aren’t many other references to help puzzle through what this means. Here’s one:

(Now this, “He ascended”—what does it mean but that He also first descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is also the One who ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things.) — Ephesians 4:9–10

Also, John the Baptist referring to Jesus as, “*He who baptizes with the Holy Spirit,*” hints at Jesus connecting Heaven and Earth. Jesus fulfilled this by breathing the Holy Spirit on His disciples in John 20:22. Two other references provide more background. First, remember that the world was made *through* Him, not by Him (see John 1:3). Second, there’s the veil of the temple being torn top to bottom at His death (see Matthew 27:51, Mark 15:38, and Luke 23:45). This symbolically removes a barrier.

Jesus as a ladder connecting Heaven and creation is the most complex image of the Lord in all of scripture—and possibly the most profound one.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. Have you ever seen hostility that struck you as supernatural?
2. Are you enjoying John's "different" perspective?
3. Have you noticed a pattern in how God answers prayer?
4. Has anyone ever been confused by your Christian perspective?
5. Does Jesus as a ladder fit into your image of Him?

Items for prayer: