

LIFE IN HIS NAME

PREPARATION

John 1:19-34

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.

The next day he 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 ranks before me, because he was before me.’ I myself did not know him, but for this purpose I came baptizing with water, that he might be revealed to Israel.” And John bore witness: “I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’ And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God.”

We began our study in the gospel of John right before Christmas, and we took our Christmas story from John’s version of the birth of Jesus in the first part of John 1. We read that incredible prologue. If you remember, as we read through this description of Jesus, the Word of God, John inserted in that important passage these references about John the Baptist. Actually, there are moments when you read through those first 18 verses where it almost seems like an interruption. It almost seems to break the flow of thought. And yet John, inspired by the Spirit of God, gave us

that information, and it's important. It's important because this is where the story begins. We read now about the testimony of John. He came to bear witness.

Let's go back to the prologue, verses 6 through 8. Let me remind you of those verses that we read. "There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light." John the Baptist came to bear witness about the one true light. And now, we read a description of what that looked like.

This is one of those passages that in some ways is kind of easy to break down as a bible study, but it's a little more difficult to present as a message or as a sermon that is fashioned to help you know what to do with it. And yet, it contains a critically important truth, because John's ministry was all about preparation. In fact, that's my title for today: Preparation. John 1:19-34. John came preparing the way for the Messiah.

That simple truth illustrates something about how God works. Let me say it like this, as eloquently as I can: God prepares you before he does you. Before you meet God and encounter God, God is working in your life. Before you are maybe even aware of God, he is working in your life. This simple truth really is transforming. I know I say that a lot. I know I say, "This is the best passage I've ever read," and "This is the best thing I've ever come upon." It's just because that's my experience every time I go to the Word of God, it seems.

But last week when we started the new year, we were talking about the theme of restoration. We took a little break from John. We were talking about restoration, and beginning again, and getting up, and starting again, and keeping the Word of God prominent. Do you remember that? Today's message is so timely, because many, many do not go on because they can't stop looking back. Your past doesn't make sense to you. You are battling with regret, what you failed to do, what others failed to do, what didn't go right, what could have been, what was lost. And this simple truth helps you to see: No, no, no, no, wait. God was using that, even though maybe the specific circumstances were contrary, in one sense, to what God would term right or wrong, what is right or wrong. Nonetheless, God was working, fashioning in you, carving out in you a place for him to dwell in his fullness. I have very good news for you: There was purpose in everything that has happened in your life, and God promises you, in Christ, to use it for good.

So, let's look at Preparation. I am going to give you three words:

- Perspective
- Preparation
- Presentation

Let's jump into the first one: Perspective, verses 19-23. The Jewish leadership sends a delegation out to John. John is across the Jordan. He is preaching, he is baptizing, and they send out some individuals to find out just who this John is. Historically, we know that John was very popular. He is not in Jerusalem. He is way out in nowhere preaching and people are flocking to him.

Understandably, the religious leaders of the day send out someone. They say, "Hey, go find out what's going on." So they come to John and they say to him, "Who are you?" John responds by telling them who he is not. He says, "I am not the Christ. Let me say emphatically, "I am not the Messiah." So then they ask him, "Are you Elijah?" There were those in John's day who expected Elijah to come, according to the prophecies of Malachi. Malachi 4:5: "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord."

Do you remember, Elijah? If you know his story, he was this massively powerful prophet of God. Really, his life is just a chronicle of supernatural happenings. And he didn't die -- he just went to heaven, he was translated. So there was this belief that he was going to literally come back - Elijah, or someone would come with the mantle or in the spirit of Elijah. So they are asking John now, "Are you that promised individual?"

John says, "No." Then they ask him, "Are you the Prophet?" There had been a 400-year period from the end of the Old Testament to this point, and God had been silent. There was no record of prophecy or of scripture given during that period. They are asking John, "Are you the Prophet?" Moses, in Deuteronomy, Chapter 18, prophesied that a prophet would come that would be greater than himself. Deuteronomy 18:15: "The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers - it is to him you shall listen..." Now they are asking, "Are you the Prophet?" John says, "No, I am not."

Here is what's interesting: John was correct. He was not the Christ. He was not the Anointed One. He was not the Messiah. He was not the Prophet. He was not the one that Moses spoke of or prophesied about. That was actually a reference to Jesus. Jesus is the fulfillment of that promised

Prophet. However, John was the fulfillment of the Elijah prophecy. This is fascinating. Jesus teaches us in Matthew 11 that John was the fulfillment of that prophecy. In Matthew 11:10 he says, “This is he of whom it is written (Jesus quotes Malachi 3:1):

“Behold, I send my messenger before your face,
who will prepare your way before you.”

Then just a couple of verses later in Matthew 11:14: “...if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come.” Jesus is speaking there about John the Baptist. So Jesus clearly identifies John as the fulfillment of that Elijah prophecy.

Isn't that fascinating? Think about it - the transparency of Scripture. John is saying, “It's not me.” John is unaware of his place in history. We think so much about knowing your destiny and fulfilling your destiny. We are all into self-awareness, but John teaches us something about perspective. His perspective is that your greatness is found in your closeness to Jesus. That little truth helps you, because remember we started by saying that God prepares you, then he does you. God is working in your life. If you are fixated on achieving your “destiny” and you don't understand this radical truth that it's really just found in getting close to Jesus, then everything makes sense and everything falls into place -- God does it -- then, you are always looking at how your past is keeping you from where you could have been, and your perspective is off.

I am not implying for a moment that we do nothing and we have no vision. No, no, no. John gets to an emphatic mission statement about what he is doing. He just doesn't understand that he is the fulfillment of this prophecy and that he could be getting some great title out of it. How is that possible? It's all about perspective. Your greatness is found in your closeness to Christ.

Let's go to the second point: Preparation, verses 24 through 28. The conversation continues, and in a sense in verse 23 John really answers their question: Who are you? He says, “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’ as the prophet Isaiah said.” He is quoting there Isaiah 40:3. Listen to verse 3, and then I will include verse 4 as well:

A voice cries: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain.

Isaiah was originally written to people who were in exile. They were in captivity. And Isaiah, Chapters 40 through 66, prophesy of God's people returning to him. The Lord starts that whole section with preparation. God is going to repair the desert highways. He is going to make the path back to Jerusalem smooth. But as only the prophet can do, it's not just about a road reparation project; It's dramatic. God is going to bring up, he is going to lift up the valleys. He is going to level the hills. He is going to make a straight path, but the image is really not of the exiles traveling that path, it is God traveling that path. God is preparing a way to come to you!

Then Isaiah's prophecy builds to this point, where he is talking to a people who have been so bad, so under the judgment of God, they are in exile. This is a little worse than being sent to your room for the afternoon. They have been carried off in humiliation into captivity. And God says, "I am going to send my suffering servant who will pay the penalty of your sin so that you can return to me. I am preparing a highway in the desert of your spirit." It's powerful! And as Isaiah builds this prophecy, he concludes with a vision of a new heaven and a new earth, where we will dwell with God forever. And this, according to Isaiah's vision, includes not just the Jews, but all the nations. Wonderful! God is preparing a pathway to commune with you.

It begins with preparation. It alters our perspective. God sends now John the Baptist, fulfilling the initial parts of this prophecy, preparing the way. What does he do? What is his message that helps us prepare? It's a message of repentance.

This especially becomes clear in other gospels. This is the message that John gives in Matthew 3:2-3: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.'"

Do you see what's happening there in Matthew? I read it quickly. Did you see? Matthew is introducing John the Baptist just as John is in his gospel. He says, "John came." He gives the same Isaiah prophecy -- Isaiah 40:3 -- but he says, "Here was his message: 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.'" This is what happens when God comes in. He begins to prepare your soul. He calls you to repentance. He brings you under a conviction of sin and your need for righteousness. Initially, that is very difficult and even very troubling, but it's critical. If you try to cut out this step of understanding your sin and the conviction that follows, you are going to delay or dilute what God has for you.

The best way to illustrate that is with Pilgrim's Progress. If you have read Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress, it's powerful. Several hundred years ago, Bunyan wrote this story. He is in prison as he writes, and he says he falls into a dream. He dreams about Christian and he writes this story. It's Christian's life, and we read about his journey of salvation.

He begins with this heavy burden on his back. It's the burden of his sin. He is told to go to the narrow gate, and (Bunyan is borrowing from Matthew 7:13-14) that the way to destruction is broad. Many there be that find it, but the way to salvation is narrow -- few there be that find it. So, he is going to this narrow gate to get rid of his burden. This is the beginning of Pilgrim's Progress, the beginning of his journey.

Then he comes into this bog, this swamp. It's called "The Slough of Despond." In the Old English, it was "slau," then the American equivalency would have been "sloo." We say "slow" now, speaking of the description of this horrible, muddy place, which he got into, but couldn't get out of. He is in a place of despair. Bunyan is graphically describing Christian coming under the conviction of sin, but he hasn't yet gotten to the gate. He hasn't tasted the gospel, and he is now under the full load of his guilt and shame because of his sin.

He has a friend traveling with him -- the characters are great -- this character is named Pliable. Pliable does not make it to the gate, as you might imagine by his name. Pliable gets disgusted with the whole thing. He gets mad at Christian, climbs out, and goes back home.

Finally, a character named Help comes and picks Christian up out of this bog, and they have this conversation. Christian is like, "Would someone fix this? This is a mess! I am trying to get to the gate! Why doesn't the master of the kingdom repair this?!" Help says (to this effect - I am summarizing), "Yeah, this ground is beyond repair. What happens is -- certain things accompany conviction: anxiety, fear, guilt, and shame -- and all the filth that comes with that fills this place so that it becomes very difficult to travel." He says, "But there are steps that lead out. Those steps are the promises of God that there is the forgiveness of sin in Jesus Christ." But Christian tells us, "I couldn't see those steps. I couldn't find them. My head wasn't right. I couldn't see anything."

What's fascinating about this is that Bunyan is describing this as almost essential in the process of conversion. There are preachers today, there are churches today who will tell you: "We don't want to talk about repentance. We don't want to talk about sin. We just want to talk about the love of God. We are not denying that that stuff is there and that it's real, but that's for other people. That's for other ministries." I want to say that you can't exclude God's preparation of your soul. If you don't know your sin, if you are not under conviction for your sin, you don't even know that you

need a savior! So what happens is you just tack on God or Jesus or a better life to your sin, and it doesn't work! Don't despise God's preparation in your life. It's valuable.

Let me, if I might, give you four thoughts on how to practice this.

1. The first of the four quick applications is: Embrace God's work of preparation. Don't try to skip it. Embrace especially the conviction of sin.
2. Be ready to change. Cultivate a practice of repentance in your life. Repentance is a basic Christian skill. Are you perfect? Are you, Christian, without sin? Does anyone here want to stand up and say, "I've got it figured out -- I'm there"? Unless that's you, you will be repenting until Jesus returns -- and the more you mature, the faster you will repent upon seeing your sin. Embrace God's work of preparation. Be ready to change. Cultivate a life of repentance.
3. Consecrate yourself to the Lord. Give yourself to God in advance. This is a work of preparation. We did this some Wednesday night as we prayed. We are saying, "Lord, cleanse us. Change us. Show us anything in our lives that might not be right. Lord, we want to commit ourselves to you at the beginning of this new year. We want to consecrate ourselves as a church to you." That's so important. I have to say with Joshua, "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." There must be that point where you settle it: You belong to God, your ways are committed to God, you will serve the Lord God Almighty. He is Lord -- you follow him. He is Savior -- you follow him. Otherwise, when you get into the moment of temptation and your mind is not settled, you will be swept away by the enticement of the moment.

Young people: If you don't settle what you are going to do with morality and partying... If you come to the conviction to say, "Okay, I am not going to get drunk because this is what Scripture says..." If you go to God's word, and God's word is clear that drunkards will not inherit the kingdom of God... We are all guilty of sin in various ways. Perhaps many of us are guilty of this sin. The goal is not that by our own morality we are going to work our way up to God. That is not the message. But when God's grace sweeps in and we go to God's word, we want to form biblical convictions and settle them, so that I don't get into the moment and say, "Let me decide now." No, in that moment I will not be prepared for the temptation that sweeps over me. That little sermon on self-control, college students, was free -- just extra. Consecrate yourself to the Lord.

4. Embrace Christ in faith. He is the answer. This is really a part of the preparation. There is this anticipation of all that Jesus will do.

That gets us to our last point, which is: Presentation. We see in John a different perspective. It's not all about me. It's actually about Christ, and my closeness to him. There is a preparation of soul -- that is not about how everyone else has disappointed me or how my life just isn't falling together. It is actually an examination of my own need and my own soul, and an anticipation of how Christ is the answer for all that I need. Then look at what John does in verses 29-34: He presents Christ. There is this: "Here. Here he is. I am all about bearing witness to the true light." These are just some of the excerpts from verses 29-34:

I came baptizing so that Jesus might be revealed to Israel.
Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.
I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God.
I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him.
He who comes after me ranks before me, and was before me.

In all of these statements John is basically saying, "Look: Here is Jesus. He is the Lamb of God. He takes away your sin. The Spirit descended on him. I was told that this would be a sign -- that the Spirit would remain on him. As I have baptized you in water, he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit. He will immerse you with the Spirit of God. He is the Son of God. I came before him, but I am after him. He ranks before me and he existed before me."

In fact, John uses this powerful illustration that would have carried great currency in his own day, saying that he was unworthy to undo the sandals of Jesus. There was an understanding that students would follow a teacher, a rabbi, a master, and that they would basically follow whatever instruction they were given. But there was a certain understanding that there were some things the master could never ask the student to do -- they were just so nasty. Wearing sandals and dirty robes day in and day out, a servant was never to be asked to stoop down and to take those sandals off. John says, "I am not even worthy to do that. Not only would I do it, I am unworthy to do it." He is magnifying Jesus, saying, "Look! Look at the one who has been sent to take away your sin and to bring you into fellowship with God. I am coming to prepare the way for that, and it's fulfilled in Jesus."

I want to bring this together by going to a couple of passages before we conclude. Would you turn to Matthew, Chapter 11? Jesus is in his ministry here, and John the Baptist has fulfilled his role as

one preparing the way of Christ. He is in prison -- he has been imprisoned by Herod -- and he sends some of his disciples to inquire of Jesus. Verse 2:

Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" And Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me."

Bold John, preaching in the wilderness -- now his circumstances are dramatically different. He is in prison. He is about to die. His head will be cut off -- we know that from history. He has a moment of doubt. He sends his followers: "Just go ask." Then there is the statement -- not, "Yes, I am the one." There is a mild rebuke here. "Go and tell John this: The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleaned, the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. Are you expecting someone else? Is there someone who will do better than that?"

Let the impact of that hit you! This is the Son of God raising the dead, giving sight to the blind, healing the leper, preaching to the poor: "There is life for you in God." Ah, perspective. I may be in prison. I may be tempted to doubt everything that's happening, but it doesn't matter! I know him! It's about him! And he's got a plan!

We continue. There is this mild correction, then look at what Jesus says. This is stunning. This has great relevance for you and me.

As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is he of whom it is written,

"Behold, I send my messenger before your face,
who will prepare your way before you."

Jesus is kind of correcting. He is saying, "Listen, don't be undone by this little interchange. John is not a reed blown in the wind. He is the messenger of God, bringing this message of preparation."

Then verse 11: “Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.”

That verse is very, very powerful. First of all, he now affirms John in the most spectacular fashion. Of everyone who has lived, there is no one greater than John the Baptist. He is at least tied for first with everybody. Start listing Moses, Samuel, Noah, whoever you want -- that’s impressive, right? If you are in the kingdom of God and Jesus Christ is your Lord and Savior, you are greater.

Do you see it? Perspective. Your greatness is found in your closeness to Jesus Christ. That’s what made John the greatest to that moment. That’s what makes you, as a New Covenant, Spirit-filled, Christ-indwelling believer, greater. Good grief people – get excited! Right?! Jesus is presented to you! The Lamb of God! We have been slaughtering lambs at the Passover. We have been making sacrifices morning and night. Now we find out that that is embodied in a man who is the Son of God, who will offer himself once and for all for the forgiveness of sin for all time!

Acts, Chapter 10. Just 19 or 20 more of these passages and we will be done. I told you that Isaiah prophesied that God is preparing the way, that Jesus comes as a suffering servant to make the way, and he goes all the way to this vision of a new heaven and a new earth that includes not just the Jews, but all the nations. Now we have come to the point in the history of the church where the nations begin to come to Christ -- the first conversion of the Gentiles. The Apostle Peter goes to the house of Cornelius. It’s hard for us to believe -- most of us here are Gentiles -- but they weren’t even sure we could be saved. (That was supposed to be funny.) And there is this event that happens. I can’t tell the whole story, though it is fantastic. Peter gets up to preach to Cornelius in this house full of people. Acts 10:34:

So Peter opened his mouth and said: “Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. As for the word that he sent to Israel, preaching good news of peace through Jesus Christ (he is Lord of all), you yourselves know what happened throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism that John proclaimed: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power.

Peter is telling the story of Jesus and the gospel. He begins with John the Baptist, the baptism, and the anointing of Jesus with the Spirit. He goes on. We won’t look at the rest of the message, though I wish we had time. This is wonderful. Go to verse 44. He is preaching, and while Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the Word. The Spirit of God is poured

out. There is this dramatic manifestation of the Spirit of God. They are baptized in the Spirit and they all get saved. This is fantastic. This is good preaching. Yes. Peter.

Now Peter is in trouble. He has all of these saved Gentiles and he has to answer back to the Jerusalem church. All of Chapter 11 is Peter just explaining himself. He tells them what happened. He has recounted the whole story and we get to verse 16. He is reporting to the church: "And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.'"

Do you see that? Now we go back to John 1. John is out there. He is baptizing. He doesn't get the significance. He is saying the right things. He knows what God has called him to do, but he is actually enacting physically what God does to you spiritually, and not just to you - the Jews, the chosen people of God - but to the nations! I will cover you with my spirit. I will drench you in the Holy Spirit of God. That's what it means to get saved. The presentation of Jesus.

Let's back up for a moment. Let me look at this. I remember my childhood. I'm not one of those people who remember my third grade teacher. I don't remember any of those things, but I remember the bad things that happened to me. I remember the really painful moments, and I remember my big failures. I am old enough now to look back at my life, even at current events in my life, and say, "Oh, I just wish I could get this better and get this right." And, "What if that hadn't happened to me?" or "What if I had made a different choice?" God is saying, "Have you not heard the good news? It's not you, it's me. And all that matters is: Get close to me and I will wash you and cleanse you and I will show you there is a purpose in all of that -- all of that that took place in your life -- and I will baptize you with my Spirit." That is amazing good news.

Let's pray.