

The Messiah's Forerunner

By David Harrell

Bible Text: John 1:19-37

Preached on: Sunday, September 22, 2013

Will you join me this morning by taking your Bibles and turning to the gospel of John. We continue our verse-by-verse study of this amazing gospel. We will be in verses 19-37 this morning. While you're turning there, let me take you back to Israel, 26 AD. The Jews remain under the iron hand of Rome. They are frustrated. They are weary of Roman bondage. They are looking for the Messiah. They are wondering if the Kingdom is ever going to come as the prophets have promised. Will the glory years ever return? The mood is gloomy. Hearts are forlorn. Religious hypocrisy runs rampant. The people are spiritually famished. They are politically oppressed. They are physically tired of being a mockery to the Gentile world. And then suddenly, out of the Dead Sea wilderness region of Judea, comes an austere, mysterious looking man clothed in a garment of camel's hair cinched together with a leather belt. A man whose food is locusts and wild honey.

And the people are wondering who is this man? Vast numbers of people come out to see him and to hear his message. There is a great stirring among the people. The mood is electric. He speaks with the authority of a prophet, with passion, with power, with clarity and they wonder, "Is he the Messiah? Is he Elijah? Is he a prophet? We have not heard from a prophet for over 400 years. Maybe it's time? Ah, but his message is so strange. He's calling all men to repentance, even Jews. And baptizing them. He's saying, Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand." And many of the Jews are saying, "Repent? Calling us, the sons of Abraham, to repent? People of the Covenant? We have no need of repentance and baptism. Jews have no need of purification. Ah, but many are coming. Many are repenting. Many are being baptized." Not only that, he is relentless in his denunciation of the religious elite of his day.

What a remarkable spectacle that must have been. One sure to get the attention of the Jewish leaders of Israel in Jerusalem. Wouldn't you have loved to have been there and seen that?

Let's go there together right now in John 1 beginning in verse 19, and let's meet this last of the Old Testament prophets, this man, John the Baptist. Beginning in verse 19,

"This is the witness of John, when the Jews sent to him priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, 'Who are you?' And he confessed and did not deny, but confessed, 'I am not the Christ.' They asked him, 'What then? Are you Elijah?' And he said, 'I am not.' 'Are you the Prophet?' And he answered, 'No.' Then they said to him, 'Who are you, so that we may give an answer to those who sent us? What do you say about yourself?' He said, 'I am a voice of one crying in the wilderness, "Make straight the way of the Lord," as Isaiah the prophet said.' Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. They asked him, and said to him, 'Why then are you baptizing, if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?' John answered them saying, 'I baptize in water, but among you stands One whom you do not know. It is He who comes after me, the thong of whose sandal I am not

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The background of this text is fascinating. Let me take you back to the first century BC when the angel, Gabriel, appeared to a priest named Zacharias who was taking his turn serving in the Temple. The terrified priest was shocked when Gabriel came and stood before him; he was terrified at the sight of him. But he was also dumbfounded with the announcement that the angel gave to him. The angel told him that he and his wife, Elizabeth, would have a son and they would name him John. Luke records this in Luke 1, beginning in verse 15, "For he will be great in the sight of the Lord; and he will drink no wine or liquor, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit while yet in his mother's womb. And he will turn many of the sons of Israel back to the Lord their God. It is he who will go as a forerunner before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers back to the children, and the disobedient to the attitude of the righteous, so as to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." Again, Zacharias was dumbfounded and for good reason. He and his wife were very old and she was barren. So, he doubted and because of this, God took away his ability to speak, took away his voice until the son would be born.

Well, as promised, Elizabeth became pregnant and in the sixth month of her pregnancy Mary, pregnant with Jesus, came to visit her and when she approached, the Spirit-filled John, still within the womb of his mother, Elizabeth, leaped for joy just as Gabriel promised he would do. But we're not told a lot about what happened to John later on in his childhood and his young adult years but we know that sometime during his early life, the Spirit-filled servant of God disappeared into the wilderness. At age 29 or 30, Luke tells us that the Word of God came to him and he then emerged from the wastelands of the wilderness, somewhere in the vicinity of the Dead Sea, to begin his public ministry. Mark records this in chapter 1:4, he "appeared in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."

Now, geographically, this would have been about a full days' journey from Jerusalem down to the lowest point on the planet. The Dead Sea basin is about 1,400 feet below sea level and Jerusalem is about 3,800 feet above sea level, so the people would have to

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descend about 4,000 feet into this desert area to see and hear this prophet. Well, gradually, we know that John ascended from that basin up into the higher lands and to the Jordan Valley and he came to a place, according to John 1:28, called Bethany beyond the Jordan. We're not certain about the precise location of this particular place, but evidence points to an area not far from Jesus' home in Nazareth, in the general vicinity of Galilee but not necessarily in Galilee itself. And this is where John's historical narrative before us takes place.

Now, a little bit concerning Jesus during this time. In late December, AD 26 or possibly January of 27, Jesus left his home in Nazareth to begin to do his Father's will and make his long journey towards the cross. And we know that the very first place he went was where John the Baptist had ascended. This very place, Bethany beyond the Jordan which, again, would not have been too far from his home. And it was there that John baptized Jesus. Luke records this in chapter 3, beginning in verse 21, "And while He was praying," referring to Jesus, "heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon Him in bodily form like a dove, and a voice came out of heaven, 'You are My beloved Son, in You I am well-pleased.'"

And from there, the Incarnate Son of God was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil, Matthew 4:1, and there he was tempted for 40 days and 40 nights. Unable to defeat the sinless Savior, the devil left him and the angels came and ministered to him and in all likelihood, it was after our Savior's triumph over Satan that Jesus left the wilderness and came once again to this place, to Bethany beyond the Jordan and that's why here in our text in verse 29 it says, "The next day," in other words, after the events recorded in verses 19-28, "he saw Jesus coming to him and said, 'Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!'" With that background, we come to our text.

So, the scene takes place here, not far from the Sea of Galilee and a place called Bethany beyond the Jordan. The Jordan River flows into the Sea of Galilee and the time would have been sometime about February, maybe early March, AD 27. And here in verses 19 through the end of the chapter, John the Evangelist describes what happened during a period of about three successive days and then in verse 1 of chapter 2, he describes what happened on the third day after that.

Now, before we look at this, I want you to remember that John's primary purpose in his gospel is "that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and believing you might have life in his name." And, certainly, we see this evidenced in his account of John the Baptist's testimony during these three successive days where he spoke to three different groups about three different aspects that focus on the person and work of our Lord Jesus Christ and how we should respond to him. He emphatically emphasizes three astounding, very sobering and, I might add, crucial truths that every man and woman and boy and girl should understand and that will be my outline for you this morning: number one, He's going to say, "Prepare your hearts, the Messiah has arrived"; secondly,

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recognize him for who he is; and finally follow him. A message we all must hear and heed.

So, come with me and let's go to Bethany beyond the Jordan. Notice verse 19, "This is the witness of John, when the Jews sent to him priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, 'Who are you?'" Now, throughout John's gospel, he uses the term "Jew" to describe, very often, the menacing religious leaders of Israel; the elite establishment that were often hostile to Jesus and, perhaps, that's what he had in mind here. But, they certainly don't know Jesus yet. There is no indication of any jealousy, any antagonism here at this point, although their self-righteous hearts are already predisposed to that kind of hostility, predisposed to being antagonistic towards anyone who threatened their rule, their authority or who would stir up any trouble amongst the Jews with the Romans because ultimately the Sanhedrin answered to the Romans and they didn't want to lose their power.

So, they send an investigative committee, if you will, and perhaps this is a legitimate inquiry. They're wondering, "What's going on here? Who is this guy? What's all this stuff about repentance and baptism and the Messiah?" It's interesting, there was widespread speculation that John the Baptist was the Messiah, that he was the Christ. In fact, Luke chapter 3:15 says, "The people were in a state of expectation and all were wondering in their hearts about John as to whether he might be the Christ." Ooo, for the religious leaders to hear this they're thinking, "What? This might be the Messiah? Coming out of the wilderness? You can't be serious? What's going on here?"

So, here we learn that this delegation consisted of priests and, certainly, these would be men who would, no doubt, feel threatened by some guy doing what they would normally do, baptizing people, especially baptizing fellow Jews. And we also see that it consisted of Levites and the Levites, of course, assisted the priests in their sacerdotal duties in the Temple. But they also served as the Temple police force, okay? So, they were sent along to protect the priests in case of some kind of a mob.

I would imagine that this would have been a pretty significant caravan that came all the way from Jerusalem. This would have been, as I estimate, somewhere between a fifty and sixty mile trip and I know that if you are riding a horse normally, the average daytime ride that you would endure would be about 26 miles. So, it would have taken a couple of days plus for them to get there. And if you assume, and this is pure speculation, but let's just say there were five priests and fifteen Levites to guard them. Well, there you have 20 horses and I know from doing this many times myself, that you will have to have at least one pack animal per person. So, you've probably got roughly 40 horses. You've probably also got some other wranglers with them so it would have been a rather large caravan of people. They would have stirred up a lot of dust; they would have attracted a pretty big crowd. "What is going on here?"

So, here in verse 19, they come to John the Baptist and they say, "Who are you? And he confessed and did not deny and he confessed, 'I am not the Christ.'" This is put in such a

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way as to make it extremely emphatic. He is basically saying, "I, for my part, very emphatically am not the Christ. Don't even think that."

Verse 21, it goes on to say that, "They asked him, 'What then? Are you Elijah?' And he said, 'I am not.'" Obviously, there was a lot of wishful thinking here and anticipation of the arrival of the Messiah. They longed for a prophet to appear and announce that the Messiah was coming as the prophets had foretold. Don't we all long for Jesus to return today? Of course we do and yet we've got it really good here. How much more so, those people of that day longed for the Messiah to come.

Now, the Jewish people and their leaders were all aware of the prophet Malachi's prophecy in chapter 4:5. There we read, "Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the LORD." So naturally, they're wondering, "Is this Elijah?" Now, many of the Jews had extrapolated from that particular text some superstitious understanding of Elijah and what was to be expected. Many of them thought that three days before Messiah that Elijah would come in the mountains of Israel weeping over the people saying, "O land of Israel, how long will you remain arid and desolate," and so forth. This was part of their superstitious beliefs.

So naturally, some thought that he was Elijah. After all, his attire and his demeanor were very similar to Elijah. In 2 Kings 1:8, Elijah is described as a "hairy man with a leather girdle bound about his loins." So, you add this similarity in description with the John the Baptist's message of boldly calling people to repentance and warning of impending judgment, naturally, some people would assume, "Well, this must be Elijah." As a footnote: at their Passover seder, most Jews today leave an empty seat at the table for Elijah to sit in; that gives you an idea of the anticipation.

But John the Baptist adamantly denied that he's not Elijah. However, although he was not a reincarnated Elijah, in a very real sense, he was the fulfillment of Malachi 4:5 that I just read. We know this from what Jesus said in Matthew 17, beginning in verse 10. He told his disciples when they asked him "Why then do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?" And He answered and said, 'Elijah is coming and will restore all things; but I say to you that Elijah already came, and they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they wished. So also the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands.' Then the disciples understood that He had spoken to them about John the Baptist."

Now, you might recall that the angel, Gabriel, told Zacharias that his son "will go as a forerunner before him," referring to Christ, "in the spirit and power of Elijah." So, to that extent, John was an Elijah-like prophet, one similar to Elijah and would have, therefore, been the fulfillment of Malachi's prophecy had they believed. You see, every Jew understood that the final word of the Old Testament prophet, Malachi, predicted the appearance of Elijah as the precursor of the Messianic Kingdom and they were all longing for this and this would have happened had they believed in the Son of God. In fact, in Matthew 11:14, Jesus described to them, "If you are willing to accept it, John himself is Elijah who was to come."

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Alright, so the delegation, okay, they understand, "Oh, you're not Elijah. Alright, so if you're not Elijah, then," verse 21, at the end, he says, "Are you the prophet?" Now, what are they talking about here? The prophet? What is that referring to? Well, this is a reference to Moses' prophecy found in Deuteronomy 18:15-18, where "The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you." It goes on to say, "and I will put My words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him." Now, the Jews were very confused about who this was speaking of. Some thought it referred to Elijah. There were even many that thought it referred to Jeremiah and there were those who thought that it referred to the Messiah, himself, which, by the way, is the correct interpretation. We know that Peter and Stephen both indicated in separate passages that that is the correct interpretation, that this prophecy was fulfilled in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. But, again, as we'll see in verse 21, John's answer is, "No, I'm not him either."

Alright, so this delegation you can imagine, was getting a bit frustrated here. We've made this long trip, we're getting nowhere with this guy. Verse 22, "Then they said to him, 'Who are you, so that we may give an answer to those who sent us? What do you say about yourself?'" And he said, "I am a voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as Isaiah the prophet said." How interesting. He says, "I am nothing but a voice." Such humility. It reminds me of the Apostle Paul, the greatest of the Apostles, yet he referred to himself as the very least of all the saints. Would that we all see ourselves in the same way, nothing but a voice crying out in the wilderness of a wicked world. Beloved, remember: Jesus was the Word, John was merely the voice, the instrument that really expressed what the Word needed to communicate. The voice merely bore witness of the Word and while the voice would soon grow silent, the Word would endure forever.

But John's response was actually a fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy because, you see, it harkened back some 600 years when Isaiah prophesied concerning the messenger who would come to warn of the leveling judgments of God as well as announce the glory of the Kingdom that was coming. This must have confused the investigative committee, but if this is true, why is the Messiah's forerunner making his announcement here? Why not in Jerusalem? This doesn't make any sense. Why is he not shouting this from the heights of the Temple so that everybody can see and hear? Beloved, the answer is: because God was not in that Temple. Like the religious leaders, it had only the outward pretense of spirituality. There was only death within. The glory of God had departed some 400 years earlier and now it was housed in the Temple of the Incarnate Christ. The wilderness, here, really symbolized the desolation, the lack of fruitfulness, and the barrenness, I should say, of the Jewish people.

So, this brings us to the first truth that John boldly declared and that is: 1. prepare your hearts, the Messiah has arrived. He says here in verse 23, "make straight the way of the Lord." Now, the people of that day would have been very familiar with that imagery. It was common practice among the ancient Eastern kings to have a crew travel ahead of

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them to make sure that the roads were not washed out, that they were not blocked, that all of the lodging preparations were made and that there would be the proper welcome when they arrived at wherever they were going. They needed to have the proper reception to bolster their egos and make sure that everybody loved them. But here, my friends, the imagery is deeply spiritual. Here the Baptist is crying out for Israel to level the rugged ridges of self-righteous legalism. He's crying out to them to flatten the rocky crags of moral rebellion. He's saying to them to fill in, shall we say, the deep gorges of religious hypocrisy, remove any impediment in your heart that might prevent the Messiah coming into it and advancing into your life and make your heart ready for repentance, for reformation. The Messiah has arrived.

Dear friend, let me pause for a moment and let this sink in: you must remember that the Lord Jesus came once in humility but he is coming again in glory. That's what we're looking for now. The Lord Jesus came once as a lamb, he will come again as a lion. He came once as a Savior, he will return as a King. He came the first time to save sinners, the next time he will come to judge sinners. So, we want to make sure that we are all ready to meet him.

John continues in verse 24, "Now they had been sent from the Pharisees." The Holy Spirit doesn't put anything in the Word of God just to fill in. This is very informative. You see, the liberal minded Sadducees were in power in the Sanhedrin, the Sanhedrin being the ruling religious body of Israel, and the Pharisees were in the minority here. But we see that the Sanhedrin did not dispatch this delegation, it was the Pharisees that came and the Pharisees were the fastidious law-keepers and they're now, obviously, upset about John's lack of proper credentials and authority. No doubt, they're seeing him as some kind of an interloper, as an imposter. He's not a Pharisee; he's not a Sadducee; he's not a Herodian. Who is this guy? He's outside the boundaries of the religious system, out here in the wilderness.

Verse 25, "They asked him, and said to him, 'Why then are you baptizing, if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?'" As I was reading this, it struck me, how typical the response of a legalist who knows nothing of Christ. Rather than interacting with John concerning what he had just said, that astounding statement pertaining to their need to prepare their hearts for the arrival of the Messiah and his Kingdom, they want to focus on rules? On baptism? It's almost like they didn't hear what he said. "Well, why then are you baptizing?" Are you kidding me? Didn't you hear what he just said? And the answer is, no.

Sin causes us to have selective hearing. A hypocrite will only hear what he wants to hear, the rest of it he discards. Those who are convinced, those who I should say have convinced themselves that they have no need of a righteousness other than their own, will care nothing about a Savior. Their sole obsession is with religious rule-keeping and demeaning and destroying those who don't agree with them.

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Verse 26, "John answered them saying, 'I baptize in water, but among you stands One whom you do not know.'" What a great comeback. Think about it, I mean, John is standing his ground here. He's not going to be intimidated with these guys; he has no fear of man, he fears God. So, he ignores their foolish self-righteous attempt to humiliate him and he points them, once again, to Christ, the very subject they don't want to hear. That's fascinating. Once again, John was baptizing Jews. This was unheard of. Old Testament baptism was only for Gentile proselytes who were converted to Judaism. In fact, it was a public acknowledgement of a need for spiritual cleansing. No Jew is going to want to do that. A need to be brought into the realm of God's saving covenant. So, this would have been a real slap in the face to the Pharisees.

But I want you to understand something else, it's very crucial here: Old Testament baptism was always associated with the spiritual cleansing of the New Covenant and the New Covenant was also always associated with the establishment of the Messianic Kingdom. Ezekiel spoke of this in Ezekiel 36:25-28 and also in verse 33. Here is what he says, "Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean;" this is God now speaking through Ezekiel, "I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances. You will live in the land that I gave to your forefathers; so you will be My people, and I will be your God." In verse 33, he goes on to say, "Thus says the Lord GOD, 'On the day that I cleanse you from all your iniquities, I will cause the cities to be inhabited, and the waste places will be rebuilt.'"

Again, the Old Testament context of spiritual cleansing, the giving of a new heart that signifies a new birth, this regenerating work of the Holy Spirit, all of this was always associated with Israel's restoration to the Lord and national salvation. And they missed this. The Pharisees didn't see it. There are so many passages that speak of this. Zechariah 13:1, "In that day a fountain will be opened for the house of David and for the inhabitants of Jerusalem, for sin and for impurity." This is a prophecy concerning the cleansing and purification that would come through the atoning work of the Messiah. This is another reference to the New Covenant that we read in Jeremiah 31 and Ezekiel 36 when salvation will turn sin into righteousness and the gladness and the glory of the Kingdom that Christ will establish when he returns. But they missed all this. Their hearts were hard. Their spiritual eyes were blind. Their spiritual ears were deaf because of their self-righteous hypocrisy.

How true this is today. Even, perhaps, with some of you. Your religious life is a sham; your spirituality really doesn't exist. Oh, but you claim you belong to this church or that church and you claim that you are a believer but in reality you want nothing to do with any of it in your heart.

Well, they were looking for a prophet to announce the King who would deliver them from the yoke of the Romans but they had no desire for a Savior/Priest who would

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deliver them from the wrath to come. Verse 26 at the end, "among you stands One," John says, "whom you do not know." Again, a statement that continues to ring true today, doesn't it? Perhaps even among some of you. Many know Jesus by name but not by experience. There is no real love for him; no desire to commune with him; no desire to serve him; to obey his will. What a horrible shock you will have some day if that is you when you stand before him and he says, "Depart from me you worker of iniquity. I never knew you."

Verse 27, John goes on and says, "It is He who comes after me, the thong of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie." Once again, we see John's humility, a virtue foreign to his interrogators. John was merely the one that was there to bear witness to Christ. Spurgeon said, "He was the Morning Star which heralds the rising Son. When the Son appeared, he had no more reason for shining."

Dear Christian, the same must be said of us. Think about it: our lives should make absolutely no sense to anyone apart from Jesus. I want people to look at my life and look at your life and say, "I just don't understand that guy. He spends all of his time and his treasure serving this church. Why would anybody do that?" I will tell you why: because Christ is the head of the church and for me to live is Christ and to die is gain. That's where we must be. Take him away and I have no reason to live because nothing else in life really matters. How absurd to live with the fleeting pleasures of this life alone rather than for Christ with whom we will spend eternity. John the Evangelist understood this, so did John the Baptist.

Verse 28, and he tells us where this happened, "These things took place in Bethany beyond the Jordan, where John was baptizing." So, this brings us, now, to the second day of John's witness in this account, to the second group, with a second emphasis. The first was: prepare your hearts, the Messiah has arrived. Secondly: recognize him for who he is. Notice verse 29, "The next day he saw Jesus coming to him and said, 'Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is He on behalf of whom I said, "After me comes a Man who has a higher rank than I, for He existed before me."'" Now, as we look at this, it is obvious that many of the same people who had witnessed the interchange with the priests and the Levites the day before, were present once again. And what a dramatic statement here. Here we have the Spirit presenting Messiah not as King but as the Lamb of God. You see, Israel needed a Savior to make them acceptable subjects for the King. He must first take his place on the altar before he can ascend the throne.

And as you think about the sequence of how the Lamb was presented, it is reminiscent of a sequence in which the Lamb is presented in Scripture. First, it was a lamb, the firstling of the flock. That was the only acceptable sacrifice that God revealed to Abel in Genesis 4. The picture of the need for the shedding of blood for the forgiveness of sins. Second, it was an innocent ram that God provided Abraham to be a substitute who would die in the place of Isaac. A marvelous picture of the atoning work that would ultimately find its fulfillment in the death of the Lord Jesus Christ. Third, it was the blood of the Passover

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lamb in Exodus 12 that pictured God's saving grace, that pictured his mercy, that pointed to the Lamb of God, the only means of deliverance and the terrible consequences of sin. Fourth, Scripture reveals how there were lambs sacrificed every single day continuously for centuries in the Tabernacle and later the Temple in Exodus 29 that we read earlier. Fifthly, the lamb was personified and prophesied in Isaiah 53:7 where we read, "He was oppressed and He was afflicted, Yet He did not open His mouth; Like a lamb that is led to slaughter, And like a sheep that is silent before its shearers, So He did not open His mouth."

But, my friends, all of these things were mere shadows of the Lord Jesus Christ, the ultimate Lamb, the Lamb who existed from eternity because he was the Lamb that was slain before the foundation of the world for those whose names had been written in the Lamb's Book of Life, Revelation 13:8. My friends, he will be the Lamb, the only one who will be able to open the great seals of the pre-Kingdom judgments that will be poured out upon the nations of the world before Christ returns that we read about in Revelation 5. And I believe because of the constellation of signs of Bible prophecy that there is a drum roll occurring right now. The great curtains of the final days, the pouring out of the pre-Kingdom judgments are right upon us.

This will be the Lamb, the one of whom the saints and angels will sing together in Revelation 5:12, "Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing." There is every reason to believe that we will be right here singing that. Maybe you will remember this time right now some day. Indeed, this Lamb that no one knew will be the glorified Lamb seated upon his everlasting throne as John will tell us in Revelation 22:1. Utterly astounding, "Behold," he says, "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the," Jews? Just the Gentiles? No, he says "the world." World in this context speaks of humanity in general. You see, we must understand that Jesus' sacrifice upon the cross was sufficient for all men without distinction, regardless of race or sex or anything like that.

1 John 2:2, "He himself is the propitiation," or the satisfaction, "for our sins and to for ours only but also for those of the whole world." Now, this does not mean that Christ's atoning work saves everybody. That's the deceptive heresy of universalism. We know from Scripture that most people will perish in their sins and spend an eternity suffering in hell. You will recall in Matthew 7 that Jesus said that there is a narrow gate and a wide gate. Few are even going to be able to find the narrow gate. He says, "The way is broad that leads to destruction and many are those who enter by it." But he says, "The gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life and few are those who find it." That's the gate of repentance and self-denial and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

But what John means when he says "the Lamb of God takes away the sin of the world," is that, again, his sacrifice is sufficient for all men without distinction but it is only efficacious or effective for those who savingly believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, who put their trust in him as their only hope of salvation. "Behold," he says, "the Lamb." Behold, is the idea of "fix your eyes upon him. Train your ears to hear what the speaker has to say

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The Messiah's Forerunner

By David Harrell

Bible Text: John 1:19-37

Preached on: Sunday, September 22, 2013

about him. This is the Lamb of God who takes away," present tense, "takes away the sin of the world."

Think about it: at that very moment Jesus was engaged in removing the sin of all who would believe in him and still today, he comes alongside sinners to take upon himself that which we could never bear, a load that we could never carry. Indeed, the Lord has laid upon him the iniquity of us all. My friends, there is no greater weight in all of the universe than the weight of sin, the sin that was laid upon the Lord Jesus Christ. It is a weight so heavy that at times we read how the earth has absolutely collapsed under the weight of it and swallowed up sinners and pushed them to the lowest hell. And yet, the Lamb of God takes it all away.

Scripture says he blots it out, he remembers it no more, he casts it as far as the East is from the West, he buries it in the depths of the sea and on and on. My friend, I ask you as believers: where is your sin today? And the answer is: Jesus has taken it away. He has taken it away. He has finished transgression. There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. He is the one who has made an end to sin. He has brought in everlasting righteousness. Oh child of God, this is the gospel of grace. Behold the Lamb of God.

Verse 30, "This is He on behalf of whom I said, 'After me comes a Man who has a higher rank than I, for He existed before me.'" For the third time now, John underscores his inferior status to the Son of God.

Verse 31, "I did not recognize Him, but so that He might be manifested to Israel, I came baptizing in water." Interesting statement here: although John the Baptist was Jesus' cousin, no doubt they knew each other, at least when they were younger, but here we see that John did not recognize him. Not so much physically, but he didn't recognize him as the Messiah. He didn't know he was the Messiah until he baptized him and he saw the Holy Spirit coming upon him and heard the voice of the Father say, "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased."

John then describes what had happened earlier at that baptism. Verse 32, "John bore witness saying, 'I have seen the Spirit descending as a dove out of heaven, and He remained upon Him. I did not recognize Him, but He who sent me to baptize in water said to me, "He upon whom you see the Spirit descending and remaining upon Him, this is the One who baptizes in the Holy Spirit."'" You see, by this token, Jesus was revealed as the Christ, the Anointed One, the one set apart by the Spirit to do the mighty work of redemption. John's baptism with water was really a sign that pointed to that which only the Messiah and he alone could do, namely, bestow the cleansing power of the Holy Spirit.

Then he concludes saying in verse 34, "I myself have seen, and have born witness that this is the Son of God." And then finally in conclusion, notice what happened on the third day to the third audience in the third focus concerning Jesus, verse 35, "Again the

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next day John was standing with two of his disciples, and he looked at Jesus as He walked, and said, 'Behold, the Lamb of God!' The two disciples heard him speak." I love this next phrase, "And they," what? "And they followed Jesus." We will learn later in verse 40 that one of these disciples was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, and the other was John the Evangelist who has written this gospel, who never mentions his name in his gospel. Beloved, three crucial truths: prepare your hearts, the Messiah has arrived; recognize him for who he is; and finally, follow him.

As we close this morning, may I ask you how can you not follow him? What manner of blindness would prevent you from following your Creator? The self-existent eternal God? The Word that came and dwelt amongst men? The Messiah? The Son of God? The Lamb of God who takes away the sins of all who place their faith in him? So, I ask you this morning: do you know him? Not know of him but know him? Do you love him? Do you serve him? Do you long to be with him? Do you long to see him? Do you long to tell others about him?

There was a man, the very, very gifted baritone voice, who had an opportunity to sing professionally in the secular world but he had been introduced to Jesus and he wanted to follow Jesus with all of his heart. And there were some words of an author that were written in 1922, a man by the name of Ray Miller, words that struck this man and it became somewhat of his theme song. We're going to sing it in a moment. The words are this,

"I'd rather have Jesus than silver or gold,
I'd rather be his than have riches untold.
I'd rather have Jesus than houses or land,
I'd rather be led by his nail-pierced hand."

George Beverly Shea, born in 1909. He just died April 16th of this year. He was 104 years old. Will you sing this with me?

"Than to be a king of a vast domain,
Or be held in sin's dread sway.
I'd rather have Jesus,
Than anything this world affords today.

I'd rather have Jesus than man's applause,
I'd rather be faithful to his dear cause.
I'd rather have Jesus than worldwide fame,
I'd rather be true to his holy name."

Father, this indeed is the desire of our heart and I pray that by the power of your Spirit it will be more than just words but that we will manifest a true heart attitude that deeply, passionately loves the Lord Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away our sin. For it is in his name that we pray. And all God's people said, Amen.

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Thank you and you're dismissed.

We pray you've been edified by this presentation. You've been listening to Pastor, Bible Teacher and Author, Dr. David Harrell. For more information or for other messages from Dr. Harrell, please visit the Olive Tree Christian Resources website at otcr.org.