

Lecture 1 - John 1:1-51

Today's lesson naturally divides itself into three main events:

1) the introduction of Jesus - the Word, the Creator, the Son of God;

2) the introduction of John the Baptist who baptized the Lamb of God; and

3) the introduction of Jesus' first disciples.

The Jewish nation had no problem with the concept of one, supreme, eternal God. The Old Testament is full of verses attesting to that fact – God was the source of all creation in Genesis, He alone delivered them through the Red Sea out of Egypt, and Isaiah 43:10 says, "Before me no god was formed, nor will there be one after me. I, even I, am the Lord, and apart from me there is no savior."

Now of course, we know that Israel fell into idolatrous practices with the idols of the nations around her and abandoned loyalty to her God, but the concept on One True God was the basis of their lives and laws and legalistic religious practices.

What makes Christianity different from other religions in essence is belief in the Trinity . . . God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit . . . three persons (a trinity) but only one God.

This is not a lecture to try and explain the Trinity, but it does give us some background on what John declares in John 1:1 – “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.”

Jesus, the Son of God, was Creator, was God Himself, and (vs. 14) “The Word became flesh and lived for a while among us.” It’s an awesome thought! If we want to know what God is like, in terms we can comprehend, we look at Jesus Christ. He is the exact representation of the Father. But He laid aside the glories of heaven to come down to mankind . . . to a world that did not recognize Him, a world that did not receive Him . . . a world that rejected the light He brought to it.

The modern viewpoint of so many today is that every person born is a child of God. The truth is that every person born is a creation of God. Vs. 12 tells us what Jesus did for us . . . “to all who received Him, to those who believed on his name, he gave the right (the authority) to become children of God ...”

To be adopted, to be co-heirs with Jesus Christ, to be regenerated (born again), to be a new creation – clean and forgiven and righteous in God’s sight, we must recognize Jesus

Christ as the Son of God, our Lord, our Savior, our Redeemer and we receive Him into our life by faith. We confess 'Jesus is Lord' with our mouth and believe in our heart that God raised Him from the dead and we are saved. That alone entitles us to be called His children – a child of God through faith in Jesus Christ.

Well, in the middle of John's gospel introduction to the Word coming to dwell among us and be a light to the world, we are introduced to another man named John whom we'll come to know as the Baptist. He was a forerunner of the Messiah, one who would bear witness and proclaim His coming. In vs. 8 we're definitely told he was not the light, but he came only as a witness to the light. When people came out to see him he denied being the Christ (another word for the expected Messiah), he was not Elijah or one of the prophets reincarnated. No, he was the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy in Isaiah 40:3 "I am the voice of one calling in the desert, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'" So, John had three responsibilities: to clear the way for the Lord, to prepare the way for the Lord, and to get out of the way of the Lord!

Now John the Baptist is a very interesting character. His parents, Zacharias and Elizabeth, were a godly pair (Luke 1:6 says both were righteous in the sight of God) but long past the

child-bearing age. Then . . . an angel, a message, a pregnant wife, a speechless husband.

Zacharias had entered the temple to pray and make the incense offering – praying for the blessing, peace and messianic redemption of Israel – when the angel Gabriel appeared to him and said, according to Luke 1:13-15, they would have a son to be named John. He would be great in the sight of the Lord and would drink no wine or liquor. He'd be filled with the Holy Spirit while yet in his mother's womb.

This was too wonderful for Zacharias to believe, so because of his unbelief, God caused him to remain mute until John's birth. Gabriel also revealed the baby's extraordinary calling – "And he will turn back many of the sons of Israel to the Lord their God. And 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." (Luke 1:16-17)

For nine long months Zacharias said not a word. Then eight days after the birth of his son, at the circumcision ceremony, he wrote "John" on the tablet instead of the expected "Zacharias" as the boy's name, and immediately he began to speak in praise to

God. By naming his son John, Zacharias relinquished his prerogative to determine the boy's future. John belonged to God.

Unlike any other person except his second cousin, Jesus, John was filled with the Spirit from conception to birth. And as he grew, the Spirit drew him to the desert wilderness, where he stayed until his thirties. Now, that's not desert like a Palm Springs desert, that's desert like Barstow desert. That's desert like the scrub and the brush of the wilderness . . . real desert. John's life in the desert seems eccentric to us, but in his world, his camel-hair clothes with the leather belt and his locust and honey diet were recognized as characteristics of a "holy man."

Again, John's mission? To bear witness, to talk about someone other than himself. What is a witness? Well, I suppose a simple answer would be one who testifies to what he has seen and heard. I found it interesting to read that the Greek word for witness is the term "martyr." That's not changing any of the letters. Martyr is not an English word; it's a Greek word. And it's translated all the way through the New Testament as "witness." Webster tells us that a martyr is "one who sacrifices his life for the sake of a principle or person considered of greater value than he." That's John. John, throughout his testimony in the New Testament, was talking about THE LIGHT, not a lamp.

When he came on the scene and began to draw crowds, how different he was from all the priests around. He came to a group of people we would call today the clergy. His message was very unique. Matthew tells us that one of his first sermons began, "YOU BROOD OF VIPERS!" You don't win friends and influence people with those kind of sermons. In fact, he wasn't addressing the people, he was addressing the priests, the religionists. Oh, how they hated him. He didn't fit their legalistic system. He was preaching repentance, baptizing thousands with a baptism usually given Gentile proselytes, amassing followers. They wanted to know who he was, what authority he had? People were listening . . . responding . . . that scared them.

If there's one outstanding lesson from John the Baptist that should speak to our lives today it is that of humility. His reply to the inquiring priests was simple, "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'm not worthy to untie."

So John was declaring "I have a ministry, and it's to baptize in water, but it's not all there is to it. My baptism is a baptism of repentance. It's a point of identifying with the Messiah. But it is He who has the final message. He has a Spirit baptism that will change a life from within."

Invariably, when God uses a life (and He is using some of your lives in strategic ways) He calls some to hold influence over many. You, however, may minister to just a few, maybe only those in your family. Right now you are being used in that way. The answer for you is not to feel useless; that's not humility. Humility is not the same as inferiority. Inferiority becomes an illness and can actually lead us into sin. But humility is knowing what ability God has given us and then exercising it for His glory – knowing our role. Paul said to the Romans, "Let no one think more highly of himself than he ought to think." But he didn't add, "Let him think more lowly." That's not in the passage.

John, was useful, but he never considered himself indispensable. Can we fall into that trap? Are you serving in a place where you feel you're indispensable? All of us are replaceable. Staggering thought, but we all are. And, at times, even more rapidly than we would want to believe. People don't struggle half as much replacing us than we wish they would. There's a little poem that goes . . .

Sometime when you're feeling important,/ Sometime when your ego's way up;

Sometime when you take it for granted /That you are the prize-winning "pup";

Sometime when you feel that your absence /Would leave an
unfillable hole,

Just follow these simple instructions,/ And see how it humbles
your soul.

Take a bucket and fill it with water, /Put your hand in it up to
the wrist.

Now pull it out fast and the hole that remains /Is the measure
of how you'll be missed.

You may splash all you please as you enter, /And stir up the
water galore,

But STOP and you'll find in a minute, /It's back where it was
before.

Man is a strange creature. He is the only one I know that
when you pat him on the back he suffers from the swelling of his
head. He can hardly handle it. Now the point is – that doesn't
mean we never are to encourage one another. That's a foolish
extreme. But how very few of God's people can handle success
or failure because of the old problem of ingrown eyeballs (It's all
about me! as the teenagers think). John never suffered from

that. His sight was clear. Christ must increase and he must decrease.

One day Jesus edged His way through the crowd and silently slipped off His sandals and eased into the murky Jordan to be baptized. Trying in vain to dissuade Jesus, John said, "I have need to be baptized by you, and You come to me?" Genuine humility. But Jesus reassured him, "Permit it at this time; for in this way it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." All John could say was, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" And he testified about seeing "the Spirit of God come down from heaven as a dove and remain on Him and he heard a voice from heaven saying "This is my Son, whom I love; with Him I am well pleased" as we studied from Matthew's gospel. John the Baptist says, "I have seen and testify that this is the Son of God." The Messiah had begun His public ministry.

If your Bibles are open look at verses: 29 – "the next day"; 35 – "the next day"; 43 – "the next day." We have three days back to back presented and unfolded in simple, straightforward, chronological order, from one day to the next. So we're not missing any part in the beginning of Jesus' ministry.

We have the appearance of five men in the remainder of John, chapter 1. Each is given an approach to the gospel which

comes in the form of a message, then an opportunity to respond, and a result or decision that is made on the part of the hearer.

There are five of them, four of whom are named. John, the writer, leaves himself unnamed. Verse 35 begins by saying two of John the Baptist's disciples were with him as Jesus passed by. (That's Andrew and the Apostle John.) Encouraged by the Baptist, they leave to follow Jesus.

Let's analyze their encounter a little bit. The approach that is used is what we could call mass evangelism. By that I mean, there was one gifted person who gave the good news to those that didn't know it. In our day, it's like Billy Graham. In days past, it would be Dwight L. Moody or George Whitfield or John Wesley or John Knox.

John the Baptist was the evangelist of the first century. And he gave the gospel to these men. "There is Jesus Christ, God's Lamb! Follow Him."

Now the message that he used is right in verse 36. "Behold, the Lamb of God!" That's the only message any true evangelist has. True evangelism revolves around the true presentation of Jesus Christ. "Men, He is God's Lamb. Follow Him." Look at the result. The two disciples heard him speak, and they followed Jesus.

How simple. How beautiful. That's precisely what happened when you heard the good news. By the way, can you think back to when you first heard it? Can you remember the person God used in your life? Maybe it was your mother or father. Maybe it was someone else in your family. It could have been a preacher or an evangelist. Some of you followed because of a person you worked with that lived the claims of Jesus Christ consistently day in and day out. Think back. All you did was follow Jesus Christ.

That's the way it was with some of you, wasn't it? Remember when you gave your heart to Christ? Maybe you were like the individual that wrote, "I had walked life's way with an easy tread. I'd traveled where pleasures and comfort led. Until one day, in a quiet place, I met the Master face to face.

"With station and rank and wealth for my goal, much thought for my body, but none for my soul, I had entered to win this life's mad race, when I met the Master face to face.

"I'd built my castles and reared them high, 'till their towers had pierced the blue of the sky. I'd sworn to rule with an iron mace, when I met the Master face to face.

"I met Him and knew Him and blushed to see that His eyes, full of sorrow, were fixed upon me. I faltered and fell at His feet that day, while my castles melted and vanished away; they

melted and vanished and in their place, nothing else could I see but the Master's face.

"My thoughts are now for the souls of men. I've lost my life to find it again, since that day in the quiet place, when I met the Master face to face."

That's the way it was with these two men: Andrew and John met the Savior and followed Him.

Now look at the response Jesus gives in return to their following. "What do you want?" They said, "Rabbi, where are you staying?" He responded, "Come and you will see."

That must have been magnificent day . . . sitting and chatting with Jesus until sunset.

Then verse 40 switches gears on us. They've left this dwelling, at least Andrew did. And it says that he left to find his brother Simon and tell him, "We have found the Messiah." Imagine the scene where Andrew's pounding on Simon's door saying, "Come on . . . I know where the Messiah lives! I just left there." And so here's Andrew, bringing someone one to Jesus.

He does it again in chapter 6 – brings a little boy to Jesus. A little later on in chapter 12 of John he brings the Greeks to Jesus – the most threatening situation you could imagine. Not even Philip would do that, even with a Greek name. Philip took him to

Andrew and Andrew brought him to Jesus. Now Andrew says, "Simon, we've found Him." And so Simon goes with his brother to Jesus.

Simon walked along and came face-to-face with Christ. Verse 42, it says, "Jesus looked at him." Oh, wow, did He ever see what was there. When Jesus looks into a person, He looks into his soul.

Jesus saw men not as what they were but as what they were to become. That's how He saw you. That's how He saw me. We see ourselves only as what we are. We suffer terribly from inferiority because we are so overwhelmed with our own inadequacies. And Jesus sees us as what we are to become. And He saw, in this vacillating, moody man named Simon something special. He said to him, "Ah, you're going to be called Cephas – Peter – the rock."

Now, before we go any further, let me say that the approach here is personal evangelism, not mass. This is not one on many, this is one on one. That's personal evangelism. That's what happened here. Simon listened to Andrew, and he was brought to Christ. Then the message was, "We have found the Messiah." And the response is right here: Peter became a part of the band of followers.

The next disciple we read of is Philip – John is the only gospel writer that mentions the details about Philip in depth.

We've seen mass evangelism, and personal evangelism and here we have an example of contact evangelism. Here is a stranger with a stranger. Philip had never met the Lord, though the Lord certainly knew him inside and out, as He knows all people, but they had never met. So there was a stranger meeting a stranger. And this stranger who spoke said to him, "Follow Me." That's the message. And the response or the result was implied in the following passage, verses 44 to 51 – he followed Him.

I want you to stop and think what that meant. Jesus made no big promises for sensational ministry, offered no job security, no promise of a raise every year or every other year, none of that. He simply said to Philip, "Abandon your way of life and follow My way." That's what He says to you today. He doesn't ask us to carve out a minute or two each day in our lives. He asks us to put Him in first place. "Philip," Jesus said, "follow Me," and he did.

The fifth disciple called is in verses 45 to 51. His name is Nathanael. In the other Scriptures he is referred to by his

surname Bartholemew. He is an illustration of Word evangelism or Scripture evangelism.

The Talmud (which is the writing of Jewish scholars), encouraged men to meditate under a large tree (and often the fig tree would provide that kind of shade), to get alone with God at least once each day. They were perhaps the originators of the quiet time. That's where one could meet with God.

It may be that Nathanael was reading the passage from Genesis 28 which narrated the vision of Jacob's ladder. Remember the story? Jacob had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth with its top reaching to heaven and the angels of God ascending and descending on it. And the Lord spoke to Jacob saying all peoples of the earth would be blessed through his offspring. Then Jacob took a stone he'd been using for a pillow and marked the place, anointed it with oil and call the place Bethel. God had given Jacob the vision of open communication between heaven and earth. The ladder is what we call a theophany of Jesus in the Old Testament. A picture appearance of one who would be the bridge between man and God.

So, considering Jesus told him (and us) that He'd seen him under the fig tree, it's a possibility he was in the Word, studying,

meditating when Philip rushed up. "Nathanael, you're looking for the Messiah, the One Moses and the prophets wrote about," said Philip, "but we've found Him!"

Now look at Nathanael.

Nathanael said to him, "(Nazareth!) Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?" . . .

You might say, "Why does he respond like that?" Well, if you'd lived in that day, you'd know that Nazareth was a caravan town. It was a stopover for the soldiers of Rome. It was a synonym for vice and immorality. Just like saying today, "We found Jesus of Las Vegas!" "Vegas! Can anything good come out of Las Vegas?" Critical perception . . . "Nazareth! That's the last place in the world to find the Messiah."

You see, that's why they wouldn't believe in Him in His day, humanly speaking. They expected Him to come from the highest hill of Rome, or at least to land from the upper pinnacle in Jerusalem. But Nazareth? Yuk! You don't want Nazareth!

Notice Jesus didn't rebuke him. Look at Jesus' response. "Jesus saw Nathanael coming and said to him, 'Here is a true Israelite, in whom there is nothing false.'" An interesting play on words when you consider that guile (dishonesty) was Jacob's chief character trait. In fact, Merrill Tenney writes "What Jesus

really said was: Behold, an Israelite such as Jacob became after God's revelation to him, in whom there is no old Jacob left."

Nathanael was an Israelite with an honest heart seeking God!

Jesus said, in effect, "Nathanael, you've been seeking the Word. I am the Word made flesh. I'm offering a message as the Son of God and Son of Man to the nation and ultimately the world. You and all the other disciples are going to see great things." (The "you" in vs. 51 is plural) Nathanael said, "I accept it. I believe it."

What was that? Word evangelism. The Word had done its work. It was wedged into Nathanael's heart, and he couldn't turn it off. He wanted to know God intimately. That's what's happened to some of you. God's Word has that magnetic appeal and it comes in like a flood. Nathanael would never be the same. May that be true for all of us who love the Word of God.

Jesus doesn't ask us to carve out a few minutes every day or every Sunday to seek His face. He says, "I want your life – every moment of your day brought under the authority of My control – be my disciple – totally committed as these five men were."

May we bow together, please. At this moment, and for the next few seconds, I want to invite you consider that . . .

✓God became flesh that He might speak to you in terms you can understand . . . to enable you to get a grasp of the infinite with your finite mind.

✓Think about the testimony of John the Baptist as he announced, "This is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." A man humble enough to step aside and send his own followers to follow the true light.

✓Remember evangelism in any and every form can be effective to bring people into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. That's His desire that none should perish, but that all should come to repentance.

Lord, we thank you for this opening study in the gospel of John. Your Word is strong and powerful and we ask Your blessing, not only as we depart from here now, but as we prepare ourselves to come together again next week. In Jesus name. Amen.