

Now 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." Then they said to him, "Who are you, that we may give an answer to those who sent us? What do you say about yourself?" He said: "I am 'THE VOICE OF ONE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS: 'MAKE STRAIGHT THE WAY OF THE LORD,' ' as the prophet Isaiah said." Now those who were sent were from the Pharisees. And they asked him, saying, "Why then do you baptize if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?" John answered them, saying, "I baptize with water, but there stands One among you whom you do not know. It is He who, coming after me, is preferred before me, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose." These things were done in Bethabara beyond the Jordan, where John was baptizing. (John 1:19-28)

With this passage John begins the narrative part of his gospel. In the prologue he has shown what he intends to do; he is writing his gospel to demonstrate that Jesus is the mind, the reason, the word of God come into this world in the form of a human person. Having set down his central thought, he now begins the story of the life of Jesus.

No one is so careful of details of time as John is. Starting from this passage and going on to 2:11, he tells step by step the story of the first momentous week in the public life of Jesus. The events of the first day are in 1:19–28; the story of the second day is 1:29–34; the third day is unfolded in 1:35–9. The three verses 1:40–2 tell the story of the fourth day. The events of the fifth day are told in 1:43–51. The sixth day is left a blank. And the events of the last day of the week are told in 2:1–11.

The ancient world had seen many great men. It had known feared war leaders, like Alexander the Great; judicious lawgivers, like Hammurabi; profound thinkers, like Socrates; powerful rulers, like Augustus Caesar; wise men, like Solomon; and noble religious leaders, like Abraham, Moses, David, and the judges and prophets of Israel. But the greatest of them all was a most improbable candidate by human standards for that supreme honor. He lived his life in obscurity in the desert, far from society and the seats of power and influence. Nor was he wealthy; by the way he dressed and ate he identified with the poor (Matt. 3:4). Yet he had the most important and elevated task in history: to announce the arrival of the Messiah. This man, John the Baptist, the last of the Old Testament prophets, was introduced in verse 15 where it is recorded that he confessed that Christ was greater than he. Yet Jesus pronounced him greater than any other person who had ever lived before him (Matt. 11:11). He also said that everyone after John in the kingdom was greater than John because they lived in the fullness of all the new covenant work of the Messiah. John died before the cross and resurrection, though its merits were applied to him as to all Old Testament saints.

His birth was totally unexpected, since his mother, Elizabeth, had always been barren, and she and her husband "were both advanced in years" (Luke 1:7) and beyond childbearing times. While his father, Zacharias, a priest (v. 5), was fulfilling his course of ministering in the temple, the angel Gabriel suddenly appeared to him and made a shocking and unexpected announcement: he and Elizabeth were to have a son (vv. 13–17). Though initially terrified (v. 12), Zacharias found it so unlikely that his fear gave way to doubt and he recovered sufficiently to question the veracity of the angel's message

(v. 18). While his incredulity is understandable, having used his voice to express that sinful doubt, Zacharias was denied by God the use of it until the birth of his son (v. 20).

In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy Mary, pregnant with Jesus, visited her. In keeping with Gabriel's prophecy that John would "be filled with the Holy Spirit while yet in his mother's womb" (1:15), the unborn baby John, prompted by the Spirit, leaped for joy at the sound of Mary's greeting (vv. 41, 44).

The unusual circumstances surrounding John's birth reached a climax at his circumcision. After naming his son John in obedience to Gabriel's command (v. 13), "at once [Zacharias's] mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he began to speak in praise of God" (v. 64). No wonder "fear came on all those living around them; and all these matters were being talked about in all the hill country of Judea" (v. 65), and "all who heard them kept them in mind, saying, 'What then will this child turn out to be?' For the hand of the Lord was certainly with him" (v. 66).

Sometime after his remarkable entry into the world, John disappeared into obscurity "in the deserts" until the beginning of his ministry, when he was about twenty-nine or thirty years old (Luke 1:80). When the word of God came to him (Luke 3:2) initiating his prophetic ministry (cf. Jer. 1:2; Ezek. 1:3; Jonah 3:1; Hag. 1:1; Zech. 1:1), he suddenly "appeared in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Mark 1:4). Israel had been waiting for four centuries for God to send them a prophet, so John's dynamic, forceful preaching stirred up an enormous amount of interest. Large crowds from "Jerusalem ... and all Judea and all the district around the Jordan" (Matt. 3:5) flocked to hear his message. In keeping with his role as the herald of the Messiah (v. 23; Mark 1:2-3), John exhorted his hearers, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt. 3:2) and baptized those who repented as a symbol of their spiritual cleansing (Mark 1:5; John 1:28; 3:23).

Let us now turn to the passage itself. Right at the beginning, we come upon a characteristic of the Fourth Gospel. It is emissaries of the *Jews* who come to cross-question John. The word *Jews* (*Ioudaioi*) occurs in this gospel no fewer than seventy times; and always the Jews are the opposition. They are the people who have set themselves against Jesus. The mention of the Jews therefore brings the opposition on to the stage at an early point. The Fourth Gospel is two things. First, as we have seen, it is the exhibition of God in Jesus Christ. But, second, it is equally the story of the rejection of Jesus Christ by the Jews, the story of God's offer and their refusal, the story of God's love and human sin, the story of Jesus Christ's invitation and the Jews' rejection. The Fourth Gospel is the gospel in which love and warning are uniquely and vividly combined.

The delegation sent to investigate John was composed of priests and Levites, at least some of whom were Pharisees. The priests were the human intermediaries between God and man, and officiated at the religious ceremonies (cf. Luke 1:8-9). They were also the theological authorities in Israel. When they were not serving in the temple for their two-week annual duty, they lived throughout the land as local experts on religion. The Levites assisted the priests in the temple rituals (cf. Num. 3:6-10; 18:2-4). Since the temple police force was made up of Levites (cf. 7:32; Luke 22:4; Acts 4:1; 5:24), they likely served as a security detachment to protect the priests in the delegation.

Their interest was very natural, for John was the son of Zacharias, and Zacharias was a priest (Luke 1:5). In Judaism, the only qualification for the priesthood was descent. If a man was not a descendant of Aaron, nothing could make him a priest; if he was a descendant of Aaron, nothing could stop him being one. Therefore, in the eyes of the authorities, John the Baptist was in fact a priest, and it was very natural that the priests should come to find out why he was behaving in such an unusual way. Second, there were emissaries of the Pharisees. It may well be that behind them was the Sanhedrin. One of the functions of the Sanhedrin was to deal with anyone who was suspected of being a false prophet. John was a preacher to whom the people were flocking in hordes. The Sanhedrin may well have felt it their duty to check up on this man in case he was a false prophet.

The whole thing shows how suspicious orthodoxy was of anything unusual. John did not conform to the normal idea of a priest; and he did not conform to the normal idea of a preacher; therefore the religious authorities of the day looked upon him askance. The Church always runs the danger of condemning a new way just because it is new. In one sense, there is hardly any institution in the world which resents change so much as the Church does. It has often rejected a great teacher and often refused some great adventure simply because it suspected all things new.

The religious leaders fire off five rapid questions, with the first four focused on pinpointing John's identity. They start broad, fishing for information: "Who are you?" This question reflects the Jewish leaders' confusion regarding him, since he did not fit into any of their messianic expectations. John doesn't hesitate. He clears the air immediately and declares that he is not the promised Messiah. The Jews were waiting, and are waiting to this day, for the Messiah. There was no one idea of the Messiah. Some people expected one who would bring peace over all the earth. Some expected one who would bring in the reign of righteousness. Most expected one who would be a great national champion to lead the armies of the Jews as conquerors over all the world. Some expected a supernatural figure straight from God. Still more expected a prince to rise from David's line. Frequently, messianic pretenders arose and caused rebellions. The time of Jesus was an excited age. It was natural to ask John if he claimed to be the Messiah. John completely rejected that claim; but he rejected it with a certain hint. In the Greek, the word *I* is stressed by its position. It is as if John said: 'I am not the Messiah; but, if you only knew, the Messiah is here.'

If John were not the Messiah, was there a possibility that he might be another significant figure associated with the end times? The delegation next asked him, "Are you Elijah?" Based on the prophecy of Malachi (3:1 and 4:5), the Jews expected Elijah himself to return in bodily form just before Messiah returned to establish His earthly kingdom. Even today many Jewish people leave an empty seat at the table for Elijah when they celebrate their Passover Seder.

It might sound like a strange question to us—Elijah had been gone from the earth for hundreds of years! But John shared some striking similarities with that ancient prophet. Matthew tells us that John wore "a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist" (Matthew 3:4). That sounds virtually identical to the description of Elijah in 2 Kings: "A hairy man wearing a leather belt around his waist" (2 Kings 1:8). But their connection went deeper than outward appearance. Both were bold men of God who confronted sin in high places, challenged corrupt leaders, and called the nation to radical repentance.

It was the Jewish belief that, Elijah was to come to arrange all disputes. He would settle what things and what people were clean and unclean; he would settle who were Jews and who were not Jews; he would bring together again families which were estranged. So much did the Jews believe this that the traditional law said that money and property whose owners were disputed, or anything found whose owner was unknown, must wait 'until Elijah comes'. It was even believed that Elijah would anoint the Messiah to his kingly office, as all kings were anointed, and that he would raise the dead to share in the new kingdom; but John denied that any such honor was his.

He was not Elijah, at least not in the literal sense that he knew his questioners meant; he was not Elijah returned to earth from heaven where he had gone in a whirlwind (2 Kings 2:11). Yet there was a sense in which John was Elijah, as Jesus explained to His disciples:

And His disciples 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. (Matt. 17:10–13)

John was not actually Elijah as the Jews expected; instead he was Elijahlike, coming "in the spirit and power of Elijah" (Luke 1:17). As noted above, John preached with the same boldness and power as Elijah did. Had the Jewish people believed his message and accepted Jesus as the Messiah, John would have been the fulfillment of Malachi's prophecy. "If you are willing to accept it," declared Jesus, "John himself is Elijah who was to come" (Matt. 11:14). With those words, Jesus interpreted Malachi's prophecy as referring to one similar to Elijah and not to the prophet himself. John's reply to the delegation may also suggest that he did not understand himself to be Elijah even in the sense that Jesus affirmed he was. Leon Morris notes,

"No man is what he is in his own eyes. He really is only as he is known to God. At a later time Jesus equated John with the Elijah of Malachi's prophecy, but that does not carry with it the implication that John himself was aware of the true position.... Jesus confers on John his true significance. No man is what he himself thinks he is. He is only what Jesus knows him to be."

Next, they ask, "Are you the Prophet?" Notice the phrasing. They don't ask if he is a prophet; they ask if he is the Prophet. They were thinking back to the famous promise God gave through Moses: "The Lord your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your midst, from your brethren. Him you shall hear" (Deuteronomy 18:15). That was a promise that no Jew ever forgot. They waited and longed for the emergence of the prophet who would be the greatest of all prophets.

There was no consensus in first-century Judaism about the precise identity of that Prophet (cf. John 6:14; 7:40). Some believed that he, like Elijah, would be a forerunner of the Messiah (possibly Jeremiah or one of the other prophets resurrected; cf. Matt. 16:14); others saw him as the Messiah Himself. The latter view is the correct one, since both Peter (Acts 3:22–23) and Stephen (Acts 7:37) applied Deuteronomy 18:15–18 to Jesus. Thus John denied being that prophet, answering simply, "No."

The religious leaders missed the simple truth here. Asking John if he was the Messiah and then asking if he was the Prophet was entirely redundant—the Prophet is the Messiah! Peter highlighted this in Acts chapter 3, and Stephen proclaimed it in Acts chapter 7 before he was martyred. The religious establishment missed the Prophet, rejected Him, and crucified Jesus Christ.

Frustrated by John's string of negative replies and out of obvious options, the exasperated members of the delegation finally said to him, "Who are you, so that we may give an answer to those who sent us?" In light of John's popularity (and thus his perceived threat to the authorities), they needed a positive answer from him to include in their report to those who sent them. Giving up trying to guess who he might be, they demanded, "What do you say about yourself?"

John's reply was undoubtedly not what the delegation expected to hear. Rather than claiming to be someone important, he humbly referred to himself merely as a voice of one crying in the wilderness.

John's answer was that he was nothing but a voice bidding men and women prepare the way for the King. John answers by pointing directly to the scroll of Isaiah: "I am 'The voice of one crying in the wilderness: "Make straight the way of the Lord,'" as the prophet Isaiah said" (John 1:23; quoting Isaiah 40:3). All the gospels cite it (Mark 1:3; Matthew 3:3; Luke 3:4). The idea behind it is this. The roads of Palestine (Canaan) were not surfaced. They were mere tracks in the dirt and clay. When a king was about to visit a province, when a conqueror was about to travel through his domains, the roads were smoothed and straightened out and put in order. What John was saying was: 'I am nobody; I am only a voice telling you to get ready for the coming of the King, for he is on the way.'

When Isaiah originally recorded those words, he was speaking of the return of the Jewish exiles from Babylon. Because of Judah's persistent sin, God allowed them to be taken captive, but in Isaiah 40, God promises deliverance. Isaiah pictures a herald shouting that a royal highway must be prepared: steep hills flattened, valleys filled, and rough roads made smooth because God Himself is coming to deliver His people. John takes that image and applies it to his own ministry. He was the voice calling out to a spiritually destitute Israel: "Get your hearts ready! Stop playing religious games, repent of your sins, and prepare for the salvation of God!"

John was what every true preacher and teacher ought to be – only a voice, a pointer to the King. The last thing that he wanted anyone to do was to look at him; he wanted people to forget him and see only the King.

At this point the apostle John said, Now they had been sent from the Pharisees, which further clarifies the specific intention of the phrase "the Jews" (v. 19). The Sadducees controlled the temple at this time and were the majority party in the Sanhedrin. But here we learn that the Pharisees had sent this delegation. Because the high priest and the chief priests were Sadducees, they would have been concerned about John, since he was from a priestly family. This statement, then, may indicate that the Pharisees prompted the confrontation and were included in the delegation. Not content to let the matter drop, they further questioned John about his authority to baptize—something Pharisees would have been far more concerned about than the more religiously liberal Sadducees. The Pharisees' question, "Why then are you baptizing, if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?" was a

further challenge. Since by his own admission John was not one of those figures, what authority did he have to baptize?

John answered them by again directing their attention away from himself and onto Christ. Instead of defending his baptizing ministry, he merely acknowledged its limitations by saying, "I baptize in water." He then shifted the discussion back to the One to whom he bore witness, declaring, "but among you stands One whom you do not know."

What made the matter still more strange was this. This kind of baptism was not for Israelites at all. It was *proselytes*, incomers from other faiths, who were baptized. Israelites were never baptized; they were God's already and did not need to be washed. But *Gentiles* had to be washed in baptism. John was making Israelites do what only Gentiles had to do. He was suggesting that *the chosen people had to be cleansed*. That was indeed precisely what John believed. But he did not answer directly.

He said: 'I am baptizing only with water; but there is one among you – you don't recognize him – and I am not worthy to untie the straps of his shoes.' John could not have cited a more menial office. To untie the straps of sandals was slaves' work. There was a Rabbinic saying which said that a disciple might do for his master anything that a servant did, *except* only to untie his sandals. That was too menial a service for even a disciple to render. So John said: 'One is coming whose slave I am not fit to be.' We are to understand that by this time the baptism of Jesus had taken place at which John had recognized Jesus. So here John is saying again: 'The King is coming. And, for his coming, you need to be cleansed as much as any Gentile. Prepare yourself for the entry into history of the King.'

John's function was to be only the preparer of the way. Any greatness he had came from the greatness of the one whose coming he foretold. He is the great example of a man prepared to obliterate himself in order that Jesus Christ may be seen. He was only, as he saw it, a signpost pointing to Christ. God give *us* grace to forget ourselves and to remember only Christ.

What stands out most in this encounter is John's deep, genuine humility. The religious leaders were arrogant and condescending, demanding credentials. John could have listed his spiritual accomplishments! He could have said, "I'm the last of the Old Testament prophets! An angel announced my birth to my father in the Temple! I was filled with the Holy Spirit while still in my mother's womb! And Jesus Himself said that among those born of women there has not risen one greater than me!" (Matthew 11:11).

John refuses to be the focus of attention by deflecting from himself and onto Jesus Christ. He says, "It is He who, coming after me, is preferred before me, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose" (John 1:27). John recognized that he wasn't the main event.

As followers of Jesus, we are a bit like stagehands in a theater. Our job isn't to stand under the spotlight; our job is to pull back the curtain and point everyone to the Star of the show, Jesus Christ. The primary mission of the church is to point a lost and dying world to the Savior. We gather together to worship Him, to study His Word line upon line and verse upon verse, and then we scatter into our communities to make Him known.

Just over a century after the Apostle John passed away, the early church father Tertullian wrote about the undeniable impact of Christians across the Roman Empire:

"We are but of yesterday, and we have filled every place among you—cities, islands, fortresses, towns, marketplaces... tribes, companies, palace, senate, forum—we have left nothing to you but the temple of your gods."

What a standard! May that be said of Christ-followers today. May we walk out of our traditional church buildings or home Bible study groups and take the Gospel into every sphere of society—our neighborhoods, schools, offices, job sites, restaurants, and grocery stores—leaving no corner untouched by the light of Jesus Christ.

"Now 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.' Then they said to him, 'Who are you, that we may give an answer to those who sent us? What do you say about yourself?' He said: 'I am "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: "Make straight the way of the Lord,"' as the prophet Isaiah said.' Now those who were sent were from the Pharisees. And they asked him, saying, 'Why then do you baptize if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?' John answered them, saying, 'I baptize with water, but there stands One among you whom you do not know. It is He who, coming after me, is preferred before me, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose.' These things were done in Bethabara beyond the Jordan, where John was baptizing" (John 1:19–28).

With this opening historical scene, the Apostle John begins the narrative portion of his Gospel. In his prologue, he established his foundational focus: demonstrating that Jesus is the eternal Word of God made flesh, taking on humanity to bring light and life to a dark world. Having set down that core truth, he begins recounting the earthly ministry of Jesus Christ.

The Apostle John is remarkably precise with time. Beginning here and continuing through John 2:11, he provides a day-by-day record of the first momentous week of Jesus' public ministry. The events of day one are recorded in John 1:19–28; day two in John 1:29–34; day three in John 1:35–39; day four in John 1:40–42; day five in John 1:43–51; day six is left quiet; and day seven culminates in the miraculous wedding at Cana in John 2:1–11.

Throughout history, humanity has seen many powerful leaders, brilliant thinkers, and prominent religious figures. Yet the man whom Jesus called the greatest born of women was, by human metrics, an improbable candidate for such honor. John the Baptist lived in obscurity in the Judean wilderness, far removed from political corridors and financial centers. He wore simple clothing made of camel's hair and ate locusts and wild honey (Matthew 3:4). Yet he was entrusted with the most crucial assignment in human history: to herald the arrival of the Son of God.

Jesus declared that "among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist; but he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he" (Matthew 11:11). John served as the final prophet under the Old Covenant framework, pointing forward to the dawn of the New Covenant. While Old Testament saints looked forward in faith to the coming Redeemer, believers today live on this side of the cross and the empty tomb, experiencing the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit.

John's very entry into the world was miraculous. His parents, Zacharias and Elizabeth, were upright before God, but Elizabeth had been barren her whole life, and both "were well advanced in years" (Luke 1:7). While Zacharias was serving in his priestly division at the temple, the angel Gabriel appeared with an astonishing promise: they would have a son (Luke 1:13–17). Overwhelmed and momentarily doubting how this could be, Zacharias asked for a sign. Because he used his voice to express unbelief, he was rendered unable to speak until the promise was fulfilled (Luke 1:20).

Months later, when Mary—carrying the Lord Jesus in her womb—visited her relative Elizabeth, the unborn infant John leaped in his mother's womb, responding to the presence of the Savior (Luke 1:41, 44). At John's birth, when Zacharias faithfully wrote on a tablet that his name would be John, as commanded by God, his mouth was instantly opened, and he began praising God (Luke 1:64). The surrounding country was filled with awe, asking, "What kind of child will this be?" (Luke 1:66).

Following his early years, John remained in the wilderness until the appointed time (Luke 1:80). When the word of God came to him, he emerged as a bold, uncompromising voice "preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins" (Mark 1:4). Israel had experienced four hundred years of prophetic silence since the days of Malachi. Suddenly, John's dynamic preaching awakened the spiritual conscience of the nation. Multitudes from Jerusalem, Judea, and the entire Jordan region went out to hear him (Matthew 3:5). Fulfilling his calling, he proclaimed, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" (Matthew 3:2), baptizing those who responded as a visible sign of spiritual preparation and cleansing.

In John 1:19, we read that "the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem" to interrogate John. In the Gospel of John, the phrase "the Jews" often refers specifically to the religious establishment in Jerusalem who positioned themselves in opposition to Jesus and His message. This delegation consisted of priests, who managed temple sacrifices and served as religious authorities, and Levites, who assisted with temple logistics and served in the temple security force.

Their interest in John was understandable on multiple levels. First, John was the son of a priest, and priestly lineage in Israel was strictly traced through birth. To the religious leadership, John was officially part of the priestly line, making his unconventional lifestyle in the wilderness highly unusual. Second, the Sanhedrin—the high council in Jerusalem—was responsible for investigating those claiming prophetic authority to ensure the nation was not led astray by false teaching.

When this delegation confronted John, they fired off a series of direct questions regarding his identity. Their first question was broad: "Who are you?" They were trying to categorize him within their own expectations. John answered plainly: "I am not the Christ." In the original language, John's statement places strong emphasis on the word I, as if to say, "I am not the Messiah, but He is standing among you."

Because John denied being the Messiah, they asked their second question: "What then? Are you Elijah?" Based on Malachi 3:1 and Malachi 4:5, Jewish expectation held that Elijah would return prior to the Day of the Lord to prepare the hearts of the people. Even today, at the Passover Seder, an extra cup of wine is placed on the table in anticipation of Elijah's coming.

John shared striking outward and spiritual parallels with Elijah. Matthew notes that John wore "a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist" (Matthew 3:4), mirroring the description of Elijah in 2 Kings 1:8 as "a hairy man wearing a leather belt around his waist." More importantly, both men spoke with uncompromising authority against moral decay and called the nation back to single-minded devotion to God.

When John replied, "I am not," he was clarifying that he was not literal Elijah descended back to earth in bodily form. Yet, as Jesus later explained to His disciples, John served in the spiritual capacity foretold by the prophets: "Elijah is coming first and will restore all things. But I say to you that Elijah has come already, and they did not recognize him... Then the disciples understood that He spoke to them of John the Baptist" (Matthew 17:11–13). John came "in the spirit and power of Elijah" (Luke 1:17), fulfilling the essential function of calling the people to spiritual readiness.

They then asked their third question: "Are you the Prophet?" They were referring to Deuteronomy 18:15, where Moses declared, "The Lord your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your midst, from your brethren. Him you shall hear." While some first-century Jewish tradition held that "the Prophet" was a separate figure who would precede the Messiah, the Scriptures confirm that "the Prophet" promised by Moses is the Messiah Himself. Both Peter in Acts 3:22–23 and Stephen in Acts 7:37 explicitly applied Deuteronomy 18 to Jesus Christ. Thus, John answered with a direct "No." Asking John if he was the Messiah and then asking if he was the Prophet was redundant; the Messiah and the Prophet are one and the same.

Exasperated by his answers, the delegation asked their fourth question: "Who are you, that we may give an answer to those who sent us? What do you say about yourself?" They needed a clear statement to take back to Jerusalem.

John's response demonstrated profound spiritual posture. Rather than claiming a high title or magnifying his own ministry, he quoted Isaiah 40:3: "I am 'The voice of one crying in the wilderness: "Make straight the way of the Lord.'""

In the historical context of Isaiah 40, God promised to lead the Jewish exiles home from captivity in Babylon. Isaiah pictured a herald announcing that a royal highway must be prepared for the King—smoothing out rough places, filling valleys, and leveling obstacles so the glory of the Lord could be revealed. John applied this imagery directly to his mission. He was not the King; he was simply the voice calling out in the spiritual desert of human hearts, urging people to clear away the obstacles of sin and pride through repentance to receive the salvation of God.

The apostle notes in John 1:24 that "those who were sent were from the Pharisees." While the Sadducees held major administrative power in the temple, the Pharisees were meticulous regarding ceremonial purity and religious tradition. This explains their fifth and final question: "Why then do you baptize if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?"

In first-century Jewish practice, ceremonial washings were common, but full immersion baptism was typically reserved for Gentile converts—proselytes—who were entering the covenant community of Israel. By calling born Israelites to be baptized in the Jordan River, John was declaring that mere physical lineage or outward religious heritage was not enough. Every individual needed personal repentance and heart cleansing before God.

John answered their challenge by deflecting attention away from his baptism and pointing directly to Jesus: "I baptize with water, but there stands One among you whom you do not know. It is He who,

coming after me, is preferred before me, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose" (John 1:26–27).

In ancient culture, untying the strap of a master's sandal was considered the most menial task imaginable, assigned only to the lowest servant. Rabbinic tradition even noted that a disciple could perform many tasks for his teacher, but untying sandals was considered too low. Yet John declared that compared to the majesty of Jesus Christ, he was not even worthy to perform that lowliest service for Him.

John understood his purpose clearly: he was not the light, but came to bear witness to the Light (John 1:7–8). He was willing to decrease so that Christ might increase (John 3:30).

A Practical Application & Challenge for Believers

As followers of Jesus Christ, we are called to embody that same heart of genuine humility in our daily walk. In a world that constantly pushes us to elevate ourselves, seek recognition, and demand our own rights, the example of John the Baptist reminds us of our true calling: we are heralds pointing people to the Lord.

Our goal in our families, workplaces, neighborhoods, and churches is not to draw attention to our own accomplishments, but to lift up the person of Jesus Christ. When people look at our lives, our words, and our actions, they should not see a platform for self-promotion; they should see a clear signpost directing them to the Savior.

Ask yourself today: Are you acting as a faithful witness, or have you settled into being a passive bystander? Are you using your voice, your daily interactions, and your resources to make straight the way of the Lord in the lives of those around you? My challenge to you this week is to intentionally step back from seeking personal spotlight, look for practical opportunities to serve others with Christlike humility, and share the truth of who Jesus is with someone who needs Him.

An Invitation to Receive Salvation

If you are reading these words today and have never entered into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, know that God loves you deeply and has provided the only way for your sins to be forgiven. Salvation is not found in religious tradition, good works, or human merit. It is found exclusively in the person and finished work of Jesus Christ.

Jesus came to this earth, lived a completely sinless life, died on the cross as the substitute for your sins, and rose again on the third day to defeat sin and death forever. He offers you full forgiveness, peace with God, and eternal life as a free gift.

The Bible declares: "If you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved" (Romans 10:9). And again, "For 'whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved'" (Romans 10:13).

You do not need to clean up your life before coming to God; you come to Him just as you are. Turn away from your sin, place your trust entirely in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, and invite Him to transform your life today.