



John 1:19-34
 So That You May Believe: John
 "The Way Prepared"

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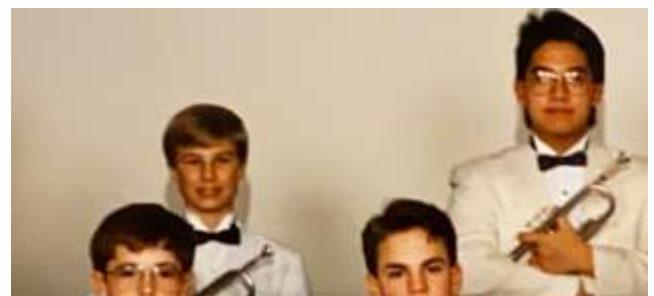
Have you ever played “second fiddle” to the star of a show? When I was in High School I played trumpet in the band and Jazz Band. Most of my High School musical career I was first or second chair. However, my freshman year I was one of two freshmen in the #1 Jazz Band and I played 3rd trumpet. So, I was not really second fiddle, but third fiddle. And the lead trumpet player was a senior who was phenomenal. Literally, he was one of the best High School trumpet players, if not *the* best, in the nation his senior year. His name is Cuong Vu, **(Photo)** and since High School he’s gone on to play with some of the greatest jazz musicians of our time, he’s released 8 albums of his own, and for the last 10 years or so he’s been professor of trumpet and the chair of Jazz studies at the University of Washington.



And my freshman year not only did I play second or third fiddle to him...the whole band did. **(Photo)**



Actually, every musician at every Jazz contest we went to played second fiddle to him. No one was ever better. We all knew Cuong was destined for musical greatness and to this today **(Photo)** I am still in awe that I got to play alongside him and take lessons from him my freshman year



(yes, that's me next to him in the back row – I had hair!).

And when you're in that kind of situation, you want to contribute your part to the best of your abilities, and otherwise, just stay out of the way. Because you know he's going to nail it every time, whether it's playing the lead parts with the whole band or ripping off some improvised solo that seems to come from another planet. You just want to make sure that the star gets the spotlight because that's going to be good for the whole band: he was our ticket to victory at each jazz competition we went to.

Well: **There can be no doubt that Jesus is the star of the Gospel of John...or any of the gospel accounts...or any of the rest of the New Testament, really.** And even the Old Testament points to and is fulfilled by Jesus...but there are certain people who play second fiddle to him and help us to see what it means for us to be in that same second fiddle role: to do the best we can, stand back and let Jesus do his thing, knowing that he is our ticket to victory. And today's passage helps us see that. So, as we continue our journey through the gospel of John that we started just last week, I invite you to follow along as we read **John 1:19-34**.

Now, **John the Baptist was himself quite the character, and people were enamored with him and his message.** In Luke 3:7, we're told that crowds of people were coming out to John to hear his message and to be baptized by him. So, there was a buzz in the air about him. And remember, John is the son of Zechariah, a Jewish priest, and so he's in that lineage and is a bit of a known entity in Jewish leadership circles as a result. And so, some of those leaders send out some priests and Levites to find out more about him.

And while we aren't told specifically what their first question was, we are told in verse 20 what John's answer is, "I am not the Messiah." So, they wondered if he was the long-expected star of the show. The Messiah had been foretold by prophets of old, such as Isaiah, Hosea, Micah, and the lone Italian prophet: Malachi (Malatchee). *(If you're reading this, I'm joking...I know how it's pronounced and also know that he's not Italian. ☺)* The point is, John says he's not the Messiah.

Then they ask him, “**Are you Elijah?**” (**John 1:21**). Now, this is kind of weird because Elijah lived from about 900 to 850 B.C. And “reincarnation” (though Elijah doesn’t die, according to Scripture, so it’s not really reincarnation) doesn’t have anything to do with Jewish theology. But John doesn’t bat an eye. He says, “I am not.” Now, not only does this strike us as an odd question, but elsewhere Jesus seems to contradict John’s answer. He says that John *is* Elijah. So what’s the deal? Two background things.

First, in 2 Kings 2 (back in the Old Testament), in kind of a mysterious event, the prophet Elijah is caught up in a whirlwind and taken to heaven. He’s just taken straight there, which is admittedly weird because heaven isn’t up in the clouds at 20,000 feet above sea level or something like that. Even 3,000 years ago they didn’t believe that. But Scripture tells us that he didn’t die. He just disappeared into thin air as he was taken up.

The second background thing is that: **The Old Testament prophesies that Elijah would return.** This is in Malachi 4:5, with an earlier prophecy in 3:1 about a messenger. So, 4:5 seems to bring clarity to 3:1. And Jews in their day took this to mean that God would bring Elijah back. So, with this as their background, these guys in today’s passage think that Maybe God has brought Elijah back in John. And John denies it.

But as I said, a while after today’s passage, Jesus teaches, “**If you are willing to accept it, he [John] is Elijah who is to come. Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear**” (**Jesus, in Matthew 11:14-15**). But John says he’s not Elijah. What’s going on? Two things to note here. First, “if you are willing to accept it” makes it clear that Jesus is teaching that John is not literally Elijah. It’s more like he’s saying, “John is Elijah in a sense, but not in the way you were expecting.” Second, is Jesus’ phrase – which he says at other times as well – “Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear.” In other words, in order to understand this you’re going to have to put your thinking cap on and be willing to consider things in ways you hadn’t before.

So, John is not Elijah in the way they were expecting: He’s not *literally* Elijah. That’s why John answers “no I am not” to these guys when they ask if he’s Elijah. He’s just John. But he *is* Elijah in the sense of the spirit and

flavor of his ministry, and his role in Jewish history, which is why Jesus can say that he is Elijah.

Perhaps what helps us understand this best comes from the Angel Gabriel when speaking about John to his father Zechariah before he and Elizabeth became pregnant with John. This is what the angel foretells about John: **“And he [John] will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before him [the Messiah] in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared” (Luke 1:16-17)**. So, John will minister in the “spirit and power” of Elijah...but he’s not actually going to be Elijah. There’s no second coming or “reincarnation” of Elijah here. But his ministry would have that same “feel” to it that Elijah’s did.

What we *do* get here about John, and we see playing out in his life, is that he is going to play second fiddle to Jesus, making sure the spotlight is on Jesus. He’s going to point people to Jesus and prepare the way for Jesus. That is John’s role. And John knows his role. His final answer to these guys about who he is, comes from Isaiah 40:3, “I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way for the Lord’” (John 1:23). He’s preparing the way for Jesus, through his preaching and his ministry of baptism.

And from verse 24, it’s clear that one of the things that got the attention of Jewish religious leaders was that John was baptizing – and not just baptizing people converting into Judaism, but was baptizing Jews. That was unusual, perhaps even unheard of. Matthew 3 makes it clear that people were coming from “Jerusalem and Judea and the whole region of the Jordan” to be baptized by him there in the Jordan river. In other words, these are Jews who are coming to be baptized. This got the attention of some higher-ups. And essentially John’s response is, “Look, if you’ve got issues with what I’m doing, wait until the one who I’m preparing the way for starts up *his* ministry. I’ve got *nothing* on him. I’m not even worthy to untie his sandals.” Only a servant would untie someone else’s sandals in their day. So, this is a strong statement about who Jesus is.

Then we're told that the next day John points people – we don't know who was there, but presumably a crowd – to Jesus. And John says that while his baptism ministry has a role in people's lives, the baptism that Jesus will bring is otherworldly. It's the baptism of the Spirit. And John has seen the Spirit descend on Jesus and alight on him – which is a reference to Jesus' baptism by John that the other gospels record but John the writer only alludes to here. And John clearly says, "This is the one I'm testifying about. He is God's chosen one."

The upshot of all this is that John knows his role. And his role is to sit in the second chair...or even lower than that. **Jesus' position, Jesus' role, is all that matters: Jesus is the Messiah.** He's the Chosen one. He's the CEO – the Chief of Eternity Officer. And John wants to make sure that he shines the light on Jesus while at the same time preaching a message and carrying out a ministry that will prepare people for Jesus.

Let me conclude with two points of application. **First, we are now the ones who are being prepared to welcome Jesus in.** Many of us have already done that...though the reality is we must continually welcome Jesus in; we must continually be prepared for what he's doing in our lives, because Jesus ain't finished with us yet. If you wake up in the morning and the obituary section of the paper doesn't include you in it, then Jesus isn't done with you yet. And so, there's a preparation in our own lives, even if you've been following Jesus for decades and decades.

But if you are *not* a follower of Jesus, then know that God is working in your life through the people he's put in your life, to prepare you to know Jesus. To be baptized by him, to follow him, to know him as the Messiah, or "the Christ" as it is in Greek...because he's the anointed one, the chosen one, the lamb of God who takes upon himself the sins of the world. That means very specifically: your sin and my sin. Our pride, selfishness, greed, lust, sexual immorality, hoarding, idolatry, evil thoughts, unforgiveness of others, unwillingness to seek forgiveness, all the brokenness and pain...the sins that tear apart marriages, families, businesses, communities, nations, and this world...Jesus bears all that. He bears your sin. And this isn't a random

metaphor that John comes up with, calling Jesus the Lamb of God. This has deep roots going back 1500 or 1800 years, as a part of Jewish worship where a lamb is sacrificed as atonement for sin, to make people right with God.

John is saying that Jesus is that sacrifice. And he's the last one. We need not do any more. Jesus' death on the cross is enough; we are invited to believe it.

So, John is preparing the way for people to understand this and receive it. And God still does that in our lives, opening our eyes up to the reality of our sin and the brokenness it causes with God and people...and that prepares the way to receive the solution: Jesus. If we don't see the problem, it's hard to see the need for a solution. So that preparation is important, and God works that in us, through Scripture and other "John the Baptists" in our lives.

Second, we take on the role that John the Baptist had: preparing the way for others to know Jesus. This doesn't mean you need to literally be like John as the other gospels say he was. So, no need to dress in camel's hair and eat wild honey and locusts while preaching a message of repentance on the beaches of Lake Washington and baptizing there as well. Although, come summer time I would gladly spend more time on the beach than I tend to. But when it comes to being like John as described there, our world today just isn't ready for that. There is way more preparation that's needed – especially for the shirt of camel's hair and eating locusts. In fact, I'm not sure anyone could *ever* be prepared for that today.

But we *are* called to point people to Jesus as the solution to the pain and brokenness in their lives that sin causes. Of course, most of the world doesn't see a lot of sin as sin...the world wants to bless it and call it something else...So, that's a challenge. But there are lots of people who still feel the effects of sin even if the cause is murky to them: loneliness, lack of satisfaction and fulfillment in life, broken relationships, and more. We all know people who struggle with these kinds of things, and so much more, and like John we can point people to Jesus, the Lamb of God, who is the answer for all that stuff. Instead of being Christ-like – which is what we often talk about in the church and it's biblical and right to aim to be like Jesus – God invites us to be John-like, preparing the way so people would be ready for

Jesus to move in their lives. Maybe being John-like actually feels a little more attainable, even. After all, John is just another regular human like us, not God in the flesh. So we are called to this same ministry that John had.

So, let me recap with a couple of questions I'd like to you to consider: **1. What kind of preparation work is God doing in your life?** Where is he working to help you see your need for Jesus, the lamb of God? And with regards to the second point: **2. Who has he put in your life that you might help prepare the way for Jesus to do something in their life?**

Whatever ways that God is moving and leading you, let's remember that we always sit in the second chair. It's not about us. We do our part and we do it to the best of our abilities...we point others to Jesus...we want to shine the spotlight on Jesus...we help prepare the way for him to move. But after that, we want to get out of the way and let him move, because Jesus, the Lamb of God, is the star of the show. Let's pray...Amen.