

## The Context of the Christ

John 1:19-28 (ESV)

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Let us pray:

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Context helps to give understanding. A night light is much easier to see shining when the room is dark than when there is sunlight shining. A single piano key played is easier to hear in a quiet room than within an orchestra piece. Context helps too to understand our Lord Jesus Christ, to understand his person and work. The third and fourth weeks of Advent is especially focused on this context because we hear a lot from John the Baptist. John the Baptist plays a vital part in the story of our Lord's advent. If we want to know more of Jesus we have to join in the questioning John received. We have to ask, "Who are you, John?"

John, are you the prophet? You certainly look the part. You have dressed yourself up in the proper clothing. Your words and your speech certainly carry the weight of a prophet. What is a prophet of God there to do? God promised to Moses that he would **“raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen”**. Since the days of Moses, men have been called to receive the Word of God and proclaim it to man, whether it's proclaimed to God's people or it's proclaimed to the nations. A big chunk of the Bible is the writings of these prophets (Isaiah through Malachi). Moses was the greatest of the prophets. He didn't just receive dreams or visions of God's Word, no he spoke with God face-to-face (so much so that his face was shining light afterwards). While God's promise to Moses meant many prophets arose to lead his people, it ultimately pointed to one prophet, the greatest of prophets.

John, you are not the prophet. Your preaching of repentance, your rebuke of the hypocrites, your zeal for godly living, these are all impressive. You were faithful to the mission of which God sent you. You are the greatest of men born of women; greater than all the other prophets. Yet, this does not make you the prophet. You prepare the way for the true prophet. We hear of this prophet in the God-man Jesus. The voice of the Father during Jesus' Transfiguration testified, **“This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.”** This is the man, raised up from the people of Israel, to whom we should listen to. His are the words of authority. His are the words which amaze people for their power and weight.

John, are you Elijah? Elijah the prophet was unique among the prophets of God. He was known for his amazing miracles. His prayer caused a famine over the northern kingdom of Israel to last for 3 and a half years. He helped a widow and her son live off of

a meager ration of flour and oil for days upon days. He even later raised from the dead that widow's son. More than these amazing feats of power was his staunch defense of the true worship of the one, living God. He challenged the prophets of the false god Baal to a contest to show everyone which was the true God. Elijah showed to all that compared to the true God of Israel, Baal was a worthless idol. For this defense of the true God, Elijah faced the threat of death. Even though Elijah desired for God to kill him and end his misery, God strengthened Elijah for the completion of his ministry. In fact, Elijah is one of two men to never die. Elijah was taken up into heaven without facing death, by riding on the flaming chariots of the heavenly armies of God.

Why would John the Baptist be asked if he was Elijah? What does Elijah have anything to do with him? Well, because of specific promises of God, the people of Israel had connected the arrival of the Christ with Elijah. The very end of the book of Malachi ends with this, **“Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes.”** Elijah would return. But what was this for? It was to prepare the people of Israel for the arrival of their God. The verse continues: **“And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.”** This return was to be a warning for the people of Israel so that they would not miss the day of the Lord, so that they might prepare their hearts by confessing their sins and receiving forgiveness through the promises of the coming Lord.

John, are you not Elijah? Your work is exactly what is described by these passages. Truly, even our Lord Jesus affirms that these passages are about you. Our Lord says, **“And if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come.”** Why the hesitation, John? John was not contradicting Jesus. John is the Elijah who is to come. He is the one who comes in the spirit and the power, in the office and duties, of Elijah. No, he wasn't a re-incarnation of the prior Elijah. John denied his role as Elijah because of all the confusion, all of the wrong expectations, concerning this returning Elijah. You could wander down a long rabbit trail of different views and opinions from God's people at (and before) the time of Jesus. There is some weird stuff there. John deflects this, and instead wants the ones investigating him to learn whose way he was preparing. The focus should not be on the one preparing the way, but on the one who is coming.

John, are you the Christ? You are attracting crowds and crowds of people. Your speech is very convincing and you are baptizing people - something we would only expect of the promised Christ. John's baptisms were a marker for the people that he was doing something new, but doing something that was expected. There was no express command to perform baptism within the Old Testament. The major sign and entrance into the promises of God was (for males) circumcision. Yet, washing things was still significant. When the Israelites received the words of God from Mt. Sinai, they were asked by God to wash their garments in preparation. Because of this, when the Christ

appeared the Israelites expected washing to appear alongside his presence. The Christ was supposed to bring as big of an event as when the Israelites first heard God speak from the top of the mountain. This new event meant a new washing, a new preparation.

So, when John appeared preaching and baptizing Israelites, this caught the attention of the religious leaders. They asked John, **“Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?”** It doesn’t add up for these religious leaders, those asking questions of John the Baptist. “If you are baptizing, then you must be one of these important figures.” What John knows is that his baptism cannot compare to the Baptism of the Christ. While John is bringing renewal, bringing repentance, it will not compare to what the Christ will bring. John is just washing with water. The Christ will come washing with water and the Holy Spirit. John says, **“I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know, even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie...He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.”** John explains to these listeners that they are correct in expecting an important event and ceremony such as a baptism, but there is a greater baptism to come, a baptism instituted by our Lord Jesus.

No, John, you are not the Christ. Even though you preach a similar message, even though you prepare the hearts of the people of God, even though you proclaim the presence of God’s kingdom, your work cannot compare to the true Christ. For, the Christ will not only preach about the kingdom but he will also *establish* the kingdom. The Christ will not only be an important prophet who did many amazing miracles but he will be the very Word of God come down, producing miracles and healings no one has ever heard of. There is really no comparison between you John and the real Christ.

So then John, who are you? This is his answer, **“I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’ as the prophet Isaiah said.”** John did come to fulfill a specific promise: the preparation of the Lord’s way. He came to fulfill what Isaiah promised about the coming of the Lord, the true God of Israel. The emphasis is not on the voice crying out loud, but on the Lord who is coming. This Lord is arriving to bring comfort through his majestic presence. The comfort for God’s people is from the removal of warfare, from the coming victory. The image Isaiah paints is the Lord processing in with a victorious army. The Lord has defeated his enemies. For his people that means he has covered their sins, he has pardoned their transgressions. For this heroic envoy of the Lord, for this way he is coming, there needs to be a proper preparation. The Lord needs to arrive in the right place. So, the Lord’s servants go on ahead of him, making sure the rough roads are smoothed out: the potholes are filled, the asphalt is freshly laid, the wide lanes are put in place. John is one of these servants. Instead of physically making sure the roads which Jesus walks on are nice and smooth, he is preparing the roads of human hearts. He was preaching God’s Law and showing the people their sin and their need for a Savior. He

was also pointing to that Savior. He was proclaiming for all to hear, “**Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.**”

This voice of John the Baptist was not only for early 1st century Jewish people living in Palestine. No, this voice proclaims for all people. All should prepare the way of the Lord. All should prepare until that final coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. If we are to know better who this Jesus is, we compare him to what was promised about him. When others thought John the Baptist to be the Christ or to be the prophet or to be Elijah, his testimony (what he said or what he did) helps to shine the light on the true Christ, the true prophet, to whom the true Elijah pointed. He is the one we await to greet at the manger. He is the one we await coming in glory, riding on the clouds with his angels. Amen.

Now may the peace of God which surpasses all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.