

Exposition of the Gospel of John CHAPTER 4 CHRIST'S FORERUNNER

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Transcript

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CHAPTER 4

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John 1:19-34

Following our usual custom, we begin by submitting an Analysis of the passage which is to be before us. In it we have:— 1. The Jews' inquiry of John, and his answers, John 1:19-26, (1) "Who art thou?" Not the Christ: 19, 20. (2) "Art thou Elijah?" No: 21. (3) "Art thou that prophet?" No: 21. (4) "What sayest thou of thyself?" A "voice:" 22, 23. (5) "Why baptizeth thou?" To prepare the way for Christ: 24-26. 2. John's witness concerning Christ: John 1:27. 3. Location of the Conference, John 1:28. 4. John proclaims Christ as God's "Lamb," John 1:29. 5. The purpose of John's baptism, John 1:30-31. 6. John tells of the Spirit descending on Christ at His baptism, and foretells that Christ shall baptize with the Spirit, John 1:32, 33. 7. John owns Christ's Deity, John 1:34. Even a hurried reading of these verses will make it evident that the personage which stands out most conspicuously in them is John the Baptist. Moreover, we do not have to study this passage very closely to discover that, the person and the witness of the Lord's forerunner are brought before us here in a manner entirely different from what we find in the first three Gospels. No hint is given that his raiment was "of camel's hair," that he had "a leathern girdle about his loins," or that "his meat was locusts and wild honey." Nothing is recorded of his stem Call to Repentance, nor is anything said of his announcement that "the kingdom of heaven is at hand." These things were foreign to the design of the Holy Spirit in this fourth Gospel. Again; instead of referring to the Lord Jesus as the One "whose fan is in his hand," and of the One who "will thoroughly purge his floor, and gather his wheat into his garner, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire" (Matthew 3:12), he points to Him as "the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world." And this is most significant and blessed to those who have been divinely taught to rightly divide the Word of Truth. Without doubt John the Baptist is, in several respects, one of the most remarkable characters that is brought before us in the Bible. He was the subject of Old Testament prophecy (Isa. 40); his birth was due to the direct and miraculous intervention of God (Luke 1:7, 13); he was "filled with the Holy Spirit even from his mother's womb" (Luke 1:15); he was a man sent from God" (John 1:6); he was sent to prepare the way of the Lord (Matthew 3:3). Of him the Lord said, "Among them that are born of women there has not risen a greater than John the Baptist" (Matthew

11:11); the reference being to his positional "greatness," as the forerunner of the Messiah: to him was accorded the high honor of baptizing the Lord Jesus. That Christ was referring to the positional "greatness" of John is clear from His next words, "notwithstanding he that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he." To have a place in the kingdom of heaven will be a more exalted position than to be heralding the King outside of it, as John was. This, we take it is the key to that word in John 14:28, where we find the Lord Jesus saying, "My Father is greater than I"—greater not in His person, but in His position; for, at the time the Savior uttered those words He was in the place of subjection, as God's "Servant." Our passage opens by telling of a deputation of priests and Levites being sent from Jerusalem to enquire of John as to who he was: "And this is the record of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, Who art thou?" (John 1:19). Nothing like this is found in the other Gospels, but it is in striking accord with the character and scope of the fourth Gospel, which deals with spiritual rather than dispensational relationships. The incident before us brings out the spiritual ignorance of the religious leaders among the Jews. In fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy, the Lord's forerunner had appeared in the wilderness, but, lacking in spiritual discernment, the leaders in Jerusalem knew not who he was. Accordingly, their messengers came and enquired of John, "Who art thou?" Multitudes of people were flocking to this strange preacher in the wilderness, and many had been baptized by him. A great stir had been made, so much so that "men mused in their hearts of John, whether he were Christ, or not" (Luke 3:15), and the religious leaders in Jerusalem were compelled to take note of it; therefore, did they send a deputation to wait upon John, to find out who he really was, and to enquire into his credentials. "And he confessed, and denied not; but confessed, I am not the Christ" (John 1:20). These words give plain intimation of the Spirit in which the priests and Levites must have approached John, as also of the design of "the Jews" who had sent them. To them the Baptist was an interloper. He was outside the religious systems of that day. He had not been trained in the schools of the Rabbins, he had held no position of honor in the temple ministrations, and he was not identified with either the Pharisees, the Sadducees, or the Herodians. From whence then had he received his authority? Who had commissioned him to go forth bidding men to "Repent." By what right did he baptize people? One can imagine the tone in which they said to John, "Who art thou?" No doubt they expected to intimidate him. This seems clear from the fact that we are here told, "and he confessed, and denied not." He boldly stood his ground. Neither the dignity of those who had sent this embassy to John, nor their threatening frowns, moved him at all. "He confessed, and denied not." May like courage be found in us when we are challenged with an "Who art thou?" "But confessed, I am not the Christ." Having taken the firm stand he had, did Satan now tempt him to go to the other extreme? Failing to intimidate him, did the enemy now seek to make him boastfully exaggerate? Christ had not then been openly manifested: John was the one before the public eye, as we read in Mark 1:5, "And there went out unto him all the land of Judea, and they of Jerusalem, and were all baptized of him in the river of Jordan" (Mark 1:5). Now that the multitudes were flocking to him, and many had become his disciples (cf. John 1:35), why not announce that he was the Messiah himself! But he instantly banished such wicked and presumptuous thoughts, if such were presented by Satan to his mind, as most likely they were, or, why tell us that he "confessed I am not the Christ?" May God deliver us from the evil spirit of boasting, and keep us from ever claiming to be anything more than what we really are—sinners saved by grace. "And they asked him, What then? Art thou Elijah? And he saith, I am not" (John 1:21). Why should they have asked John if he were Elijah? The answer is, Because there was a general expectation among the Jews at that time that Elijah would again appear on earth. That this was so, is dear from a number of passages in the Gospels. For instance, when the Lord asked His disciples, "Whom do men say that I the Son of man am?" they answered, "Some say that thou art John the Baptist (who had been slain in the interval), some Elijah, and others Jeremiah, or one of the prophets" (Matthew

16:13, 14). Again; as the Lord Jesus and His disciples came down from the Mount of Transfiguration, He said unto them, "Tell the vision to no man until the Son of man be raised from the dead." Then, we read, "His disciples asked him, saying, Why then say the scribes that Elijah must first come?" (Matthew 17:9, 10). The expectation of the Jews had a scriptural foundation, for the last verses of the Old Testament say, "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord: And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse" (Mal. 4:5, 6). This prophecy has reference to the return to earth of Elijah, to perform a ministry just before the second advent of Christ, similar in character to that of John the Baptist before the first public appearing of Christ. When asked, "Art thou Elijah?" John replied, emphatically, "I am not." John had much in common with the Tishbite, and his work was very similar in character to the yet future work of Elijah; nevertheless, he was not Elijah himself. He went before Christ "in the spirit and power of Elijah" (Luke 1:17), because he came "to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." Next, John's interrogators asked him, "Art thou that prophet?" (John 1:21). What "prophet?" we may well enquire. And the answer is, The "prophet" predicted through Moses. The prediction is recorded in Deuteronomy 18:15, 18: "The Lord thy God will raise up unto thee a prophet from the midst of thee, of thy brethren, like unto me; unto him ye shall hearken... I will raise them up a prophet from among their brethren, like unto thee, and will put my words in his mouth; and he shall speak unto them all that I shall command him." This was one of the many Messianic prophecies given in the Old Testament times, which received its fulfillment in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. "Art thou that prophet?" John was asked; and, again, he answered, "No." "Then said they unto him, Who art thou? that we may give an answer to them that sent us. What sayest thou of thyself?" (John 1:22). Searching questions were these—"Who art thou?"; "what sayest thou of thyself?" John might have answered, and answered truthfully, "I am the son of Zacharias the priest. I am one who has been filled with the Holy Spirit from my birth." Or, he might have replied, "I am the most remarkable character ever raised up by God and sent unto Israel." "What sayest thou of thyself?" Ah! that was indeed a searching question, and both writer and reader may well learn a lesson from John's reply, and seek grace to emulate his lovely modesty—a lesson much needed in these days of Laodicean boasting. "He said, I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord, as said the prophet Isaiah" (John 1:23). Here was John's answer. "What sayest thou of thyself?" "I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness," he said. Becoming humility was this. Humility is of great price in the sight of God, and has had a prominent place in the men whom He has used. Paul, the greatest of the apostles, confessed himself "less than the least of all saints" (Eph. 3:8). And John here confesses much the same thing, when he referred to himself as "the voice of one crying in the wilderness." Reader, what reply would you make to such a query—"What sayest thou of thyself?" Surely you would not answer, "I am an eminent saint of God: I am living on a very exalted plane of spirituality: I am one who has been much used of God." Such self-exaltation would show you had learned little from Him who was "meek and lowly in heart," and would evidence a spirit far from that which should cause us to own that, after all, we are only "unprofitable servants" (Luke 17:10). When John referred to himself as "the voice," he employed the very term which the Holy Spirit had used of him seven hundred years previously, when speaking through Isaiah the prophet—"The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God" (Isa. 40:3). And we cannot but believe this appellation was selected with Divine discrimination. In a former chapter, when commenting upon the titles of the Lord Jesus, found in John 1:7—"The light"—we called attention to the fact that Christ referred to His forerunner (in evident contrast from Himself as "the light") as "the lamp that burneth and shineth" (John 5:35, R.V.). And so here, we are satisfied that another contrast is pointed. Christ is "the Word;" John was but "the voice." What, then, are the thoughts suggested by this figurative title? In the first place, the word

exists (in the mind) before the voice articulates it. Such was the relation between Christ and His forerunner. It is true that John was the first to appear before the public eye; yet, as the "Word," Christ had existed from all eternity. Second, the voice is simply the vehicle or medium by which the word is expressed or made known. Such was John. The object of his mission and the purpose of his ministry was to bear witness to "the Word." Again, the voice is simply heard but not seen. John was not seeking to display himself. His work was to get men to listen to his God-given message in order that they might behold "the Lamb." May the Lord today make more of His servants John-like; just "voices," heard but not seen! Finally, we may add, that the word endures after the voice is silent. The voice of John has long since been stilled by death, but "the Word" abideth forever. Appropriately, then, was the one who introduced the Messiah to Israel, termed the "voice." What wonderful depths there are in the Scriptures! How much is contained in a single word! And how this calls for prolonged meditation and humble prayer! "The voice of one crying in the wilderness." What a position for the Messiah's forerunner to occupy! Surely his place was in Jerusalem. Why then did not John cry in the temple? Why, because Jehovah was no more there in the temple. Judaism was but a hollow shell: outward form there was, but no life within. It was to a nation of legalists, Pharisee ridden, who neither manifested Abraham's faith nor produced his works, that John came. God would not own the self-righteous formalism of the Jews. Therefore, the one "sent of God" appeared outside the religious systems and circles of that day. But why did John preach "in the wilderness?" Because the "wilderness" symbolized the spiritual barrenness of the Jewish nation. John could only mourn over that which was not of God, and everything about him was in keeping with this: his food was that which he found in the wilderness, and his prophet's garment testified to the failure that was evident on every hand. "And they which were sent were of the Pharisees. And they asked him, and said unto him, Why baptizest thou then, if thou be not that Christ, nor Elias, neither that prophet?" (John 1:24, 25). This final question put to John by the embassy from Jerusalem confirms what we have said upon verse 20. The religious leaders among the Jews were disputing John's right to preach, and challenging his authority to baptize. He had received no commission from the Sanhedrin, hence "why baptizest thou?" John does not appear to have answered the last question directly, instead, he turns to them and speaks of Christ. "John answered them, saying, I baptize with water: but there standeth one among you, whom ye know not" (John 1:26). John continued to stand his ground: he would not deny that he baptized with water, or more correctly, in water, but he sought to get them occupied with something of greater importance than a symbolical rite. There is much to be learned from John's answer here. These men were raising questions about baptism, while as yet they were utter strangers to Christ Himself—how like many today! Of what use was it to discuss with these Pharisee—commissioned "priests and Levites" the "why" of baptism, when they were yet in their sins? Well would it be for the Lord's servants and those engaged in personal work for Christ, to carefully heed what is before us here. People are willing to argue about side issues, while the vital and central Issue remains undecided! And only too often the Christian worker follows them into "By-path meadow." What is needed is for us to ignore all irrelevant quibbles, and press upon the lost the claims of Christ and their need of accepting Him as their Lord and Savior. "There standeth one among you, whom ye know not." How this exposed Israel's[1] condition! How this revealed their spiritual ignorance! And how tragically true, in principle, is this today. Even in this so-called Christian land, while many have heard about Christ, yet in how many circles, yes, and in religious circles too, we may say, "there standeth one among you, whom ye know not!" O the spiritual blindness of the natural man. Christ, by His Spirit, stands in the midst of many a congregation, unseen and unknown. "He it is, who coming after me is preferred before me, whose shoe's latchet I am not worthy to unloose" (John 1:27). What a noble testimony was this! How these words of John bring out the Divine glory of the One he heralded! Remember who he was. No ordinary man was John the Baptist. The subject of Old Testament

prophecy, the son of a priest, born as the result of the direct intervention of God's power, filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb, engaged in a ministry which drew great multitudes unto him, and yet he looked up to Christ as standing on a plane infinitely higher than the one he occupied, as a Being from another world, as One before whom he was not worthy to stoop down and unloose His shoes. He could find no expression strong enough to define the difference which separated him from the One who was "preferred before" him. Again we say, How these words of John bring out the Divine glory of the One he heralded! "These things were done in Bethabara beyond Jordan, where John was baptizing" (John 1:28). There is, of course, some good reason why the Holy Spirit has been pleased to tell us where this conference took place, whether we are able to discover it or not. Doubtless, the key to its significance is found in the meaning of the proper nouns here recorded. Unfortunately, there is some variation in the spelling of "Bethabara" in the Greek manuscripts; but with Gesenius, the renowned Hebrew scholar, we are firmly inclined to believe this place is identical with "Bethbarah" mentioned in Judges 7:24, and which signifies "House of Passage," which was so named to memorialize the crossing of the Jordan in the days of Joshua. It was here, then, (apparently) at a place whose name signified "house of passage," beyond Jordan, the symbol of death, that John was baptizing as the forerunner of Christ. The meaning of this should not be hard to find. The significance of these names correspond closely with the religious position that John himself occupied, and with the character of his mission. Separated as he was from Judaism, those who responded to his call to repent, and were baptized of him confessing their sins, passed out of the apostate Jewish system, and took their place with the little remnant who were "prepared for the Lord" (Luke 1:17). Well, then, was the place where John was baptizing named "Bethbarah"—House of Passage. "The next day John seeth Jesus coming unto him, and saith, Behold, the lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). "Behold the lamb of God:" the connection in which these words are found should be carefully noted. It was the day following the meeting between John and the Jerusalem delegation, a meeting which evidently occurred in the presence of others also, for John continues "this is he of whom I said, after me cometh a man which is preferred before me," which is a word for word reference to what he had said to those who had interrogated him on the previous day—see verse 27; when he had also declared to those priests and Levites "which were sent of the Pharisees" (verse 24), "there standeth one among you, whom ye know not." "Behold the lamb of God." The force of this Call was deeply significant when viewed in the light of its setting. The Pharisees were looking for a "prophet," and they desired a "king" who should deliver them from the Roman yoke, but they had no yearnings for a Savior-priest. The questions asked of John betrayed the hearts of those who put them. They appeared to be in doubt as to whether or not the Baptist was the long promised Messiah, so they asked him, "Art thou Elijah? Art thou that prophet?" But, be it noted, no enquiry was made as to whether he was the one who should deliver them "from the wrath to come!" One would have naturally expected these priests and Levites to have asked about the sacrifice, but no; apparently they had no sense of sin! It was under these circumstances that the forerunner of Christ announced Him as "the lamb of God," not as "the word of God," not as "the Christ of God," but as THE LAMB. It was the Spirit of God presenting the Lord Jesus to Israel in the very office and character in which they stood in deepest need of Him. They would have welcomed Him on the throne, but they must first accept Him on the altar. And is it any different today? Christ as an Elijah—a Social Reformer—will be tolerated; and Christ as a Prophet, as a Teacher of ethics, will receive respect. But what the world needs first and foremost is the Christ of the Cross, where the Lamb of God offered Himself as a sacrifice for sin. "Behold the lamb of God." There before John stood the One whom all the sacrifices of Old Testament times had foreshadowed. It is exceedingly striking to observe the progressive order followed by God in the teaching of Scripture concerning "the lamb." First, in Genesis 4, we have the Lamb typified in the firstlings of the flock slain by Abel in sacrifice. Second, we

have the Lamb prophesied in Genesis 22:8 where Abraham said to Isaac, "God will provide himself a lamb." Third, in Exodus 12, we have the Lamb slain and its blood applied. Fourth, in Isaiah 53:7, we have the Lamb personified: here for the first time we learn that the Lamb would be a Man. Fifth, in John 1:29, we have the Lamb identified, learning who He was. Sixth, in Revelation 5, we have the Lamb magnified by the hosts of heaven. Seventh, in the last chapter of the Bible we have the Lamb glorified, seated upon the eternal throne of God, Revelation 22:1. Once more; mark the orderly development in the scope of the sacrifices. In Genesis 4 sacrifice is offered for the individual—Abel. In Exodus 12 the sacrifice avails for the whole household. In Leviticus 16, on the annual Day of Atonement, the sacrifice was efficacious for the entire nation. But here in John 1:29 it is "Behold the lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world"—Gentiles are embraced as well as Jews! "Behold the lamb of God." What are the thoughts suggested by this title? It points to His moral perfections, His sinlessness, for He was the "lamb without blemish and without spot" (1 Pet. 1:19). It tells of His gentleness, His voluntary offering Himself to God on our behalf—He was "led" (not driven) as "a lamb to the slaughter" (Acts 8:32, R.V.). But, more especially, and particularly, this title of our Lord speaks of sacrifice—He was "the lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world," and this could only be through death, for "without shedding of blood is no remission." There was only one way by which sin could be taken away, and that was by death. "Sin" here signifies guilt (condemnation) as in Hebrews 9:26; and "the world" refers to the world of believers, for it is only those who are in Christ for whom there is now "no condemnation" (Rom. 8:1); it is the world of believers, as contrasted from "the world of the ungodly" (2 Pet. 2:5). "This is he of whom I said, After me cometh a man which is preferred before me, for he was before me. And I knew him not: but that he should be made manifest to Israel, therefore am I come baptizing with water" (John 1:30, 31). Here for the third time John declares that Christ was "preferred before him"—(see verses 15, 27, 30). It affirmed His pre-existence: it was a witness to His eternity. Then John tells of the purpose of his baptism. It was to make Christ "manifest" to Israel. It was to prepare a people for Him. This people was prepared by them taking the place of sinners before God (Mark 1:5), and that is why John baptized in Jordan, the river of death; for, being baptized in Jordan, they acknowledged that death was their due. In this, John's baptism differs from Christian baptism. In Christian baptism the believer does not confess that death is his due, but he shows forth the fact that he has already died, died to sin, died with Christ (Rom. 6:3, 4). "And John bare record, saying, I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it abode upon him" (John 1:32). This has reference, of course, to the occasion when Christ Himself was baptized of John in the Jordan, when the Father testified to His pleasure, in the Son, and when the Spirit descended upon Him as a dove. It manifested the character of the One on whom He came. The "dove" is the bird of love and sorrow: apt symbol, then, of Christ. The love expressed the sorrow, and the sorrow told out the depths of His love. Thus did the heavenly Dove bear witness to Christ. When the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples on the Day of Pentecost, we read "there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them" (Acts 2:3). "Fire," uniformly signifies Divine judgment. There was that in the disciples which needed to be judged—the evil nature still remained within them. But, there was nothing in the Holy One of God that needed judging; hence, did the Holy Spirit descend upon Him like a dove! "And I knew him not: but he that sent me to baptize with water, the same said unto me, Upon whom thou shalt see the Spirit descending and remaining on him, the same is he which baptizeth with the Holy Spirit" (John 1:33). The word "remaining" is rendered "abiding" in the R.V., and this is one of the characteristic words of the fourth Gospel. The other three Gospels all make mention of the Lord Jesus being anointed by the Holy Spirit, but John is the only one that says the Spirit "abode" upon Him. The Holy Spirit did not come upon Him, and then leave again, as with the prophets of old—He "abode" on Christ. This term has to do with the Divine side of things, and speaks of fellowship. We have the same word again in John 14:10, "Believest thou not

that I am in the Father, and the Father in me? The words that I say unto you, I speak not from myself, but the Father abiding in me doeth his works" (R.V.). So, in John 15, where the Lord Jesus speaks of the fundamental requirement in spiritual fruit-bearing—fellowship with Himself—He says, "He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same beareth much fruit" (John 15:5 R.V.). That Christ shall "baptize with (or 'in') the Holy Spirit" was another proof of His Godhood. "And I saw, and bare record that this is the Son of God" (John 1:34). Here the witness of John the Baptist to the person of Christ terminates. It is to be noted that the forerunner bore a seven-fold witness to the excellency of the One he heralded. First, he testified to His pre-existence—"He was before me," verse 15. Second, He testified to His Lordship, verse 23. Third, he testified to His immeasurable superiority—"I am not worthy to unloose" His "shoe's latchet," verse 27. Fourth, he testified to His sacrificial work—"Behold the lamb," verse 29. Fifth, he testified to His moral perfections—"I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it abode upon him," verse 32. Sixth, he testified to His Divine right to baptize with the Holy Spirit, verse 33. Seventh, he testified to His Divine Sonship, verse 34. The questions below concern the passage which we shall expound in the next chapter, namely, John 1:35-51, and to prepare our readers for it we ask them to give these questions their prayerful and careful study:— 1. Why did Christ ask the two disciples of John, "What seek ye?" John 1:38. 2. What is signified by their reply, "Where dwellest thou?" John 1:38. 3. What important practical truth is incorporated in John 1:40, 41? 4. What blessed truth is illustrated by "findeth" in John 1:43? 5. What is meant by, "in whom is no guile?" John 1:47. 6. What attribute of Christ does John 1:48 demonstrate? 7. To what does Christ refer in John 1:51? ENDNOTES:

[1] "We must not, however, limit this picture to Israel, for it is equally applicable and pertinent to sinners of the Gentiles too. Israel in the flesh was only a sample of fallen man as such. What we have here is a pointed and solemn delineation of human depravity . . . its normal application is to the whole of Adam's fallen race. Let every reader see here a portrait of what he or she is by nature. The picture is not a flattering one we know. No, it is drawn by one who searches the innermost recesses of the human heart, and is presented here to humble us." (A.W.P.). And so all through.

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