

Day 1: The New Creation

The Witness of John

John 1:19-28

- ¹⁹ And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?"
- ²⁰ He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ."
- ²¹ And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" And he answered, "No."
- ²² So they said to him, "Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?"
- ²³ He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said."
- ²⁴ (Now they had been sent from the Pharisees.)
- ²⁵ They asked him, "Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?"
- ²⁶ John answered them, "I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know,
- ²⁷ even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie."
- ²⁸ These things took place in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

THE START OF A NEW CREATION

The terrible thing about creation is that there was a fall. The great thing about the fall is that there is redemption.

History as understood by Christians has a purpose. It is not a meaningless series of random events. It is the unfolding of a great story. This story was written before the foundation of the world. It is told in these three stages: Creation, fall, redemption.

It is the *purpose* of history that gives meaning to life. If history is an accident, if events are unrelated, if our origins were the product of chance and the future is an undetermined question, then life is meaningless and without purpose. But if history is “going somewhere,” then life is meaningful. You can have hope despite all you see around you, despite all that is going on in your life. **Redemption** is where history is going for those who believe and trust the story of the Bible. Those who do not, well, history is still “going somewhere,” but that place is eventually very far away from the love of God.

The Gospels are not mere historical sketches. You don't read them to get pieces of trivia. They are not systematic theologies. They are not moral lessons. They are the unfolding of this story of redemption, and they are told with their own unique frameworks and designs. Their story is singularly tied to the person and work of Christ. The Apostle John begins his story in a unique way in the

next two chapters, by telling you about **the first week of Jesus public life**. This framework develops in the mind of the reader a theological point: Jesus ministry is the beginning of the “**new creation**.” John tells the story of redemption as that of a new creation.

A “new creation” is a theme spoken of directly by the NT. The Apostle Paul tell us that “**if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation**” (2 Cor 5:17). He says old distinctions no longer matter, “**neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation**” (Gal 6:15). If you want to think clearly about your salvation and the things God has done and is doing, you must learn to think about this as a new creation.

This new creation begins with a **new creation week**. At first, you do not notice this. The passage we are looking at specifically today (John 1:19-28) doesn't really even hint at it. But then, you read a rather unremarkable temporal announcement in vs. 29, “**The next day ...**” Then you see it again in vs. 35, “**The next day ...**” You read it a third time in vs. 43, “**The next day ...**” 2:1 then adds this interesting phrase, “**On the third day ...**” When you add these up you have seven days, with the seventh

culminating in a wedding feast and a glorious day of rest!
Leon Morris puts it like this,

If we are correct in thus seeing the happenings of one momentous week set forth at the beginning of this Gospel, we must go on to ask what significance is attached to this beginning. The parallel with the days of creation in Genesis 1 suggests itself, and is reinforced by the “In the beginning” that opens both chapters. Just as the opening words of this chapter recall Genesis 1, so it is with the framework. Jesus is to engage in a new creation. The framework unobtrusively suggests creative activity.¹

New Creation Week of Christ's Public Ministry		
Day 1	Testimony of John	John 1:19-28
Day 2	Baptism of Jesus	John 1:29-34
Day 3*	Calling of Andrew and Peter	John 1:35-42
Day 4	Calling of Philip and Nathanael	John 1:43-51
Day 7	The Wedding at Cana	John 2:1-11
* Morris sees the Andrew/Peter day as two, with them staying the night in an inn. Thus, my Day 4 would be his Day 5. See also Rainer Riesner, “Bethany Beyond The Jordan (John 1:28) Topography, Theology And History In The Fourth Gospel,” <i>Tyndale Bulletin</i> 38 (1987): 46 [29–63].		

¹ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995), 114.
TynB Tyndale Bulletin.

This idea of framing the beginning of Jesus' public ministry as a new creation week continues John's interest in the Genesis 1 story. Recall that **John 1:1** is the NT counterpart to **Genesis 1:1**. From here, John talked about all things being made, the light and darkness, and life. He has talked about creation. Now he is continuing Moses' framework of a seven day creation by telling us how the new creation finally got underway in its own unique week. This shows how history has a purpose for John. The long night that was the OT has suddenly given way to a new light. In Christ, the dawn has come, the morning star has risen, and the new creation anticipated for so long is finally becoming a reality.

JOHN AS WITNESS

But how did they know it had become a reality? How can you trust that redemptive history has really taken a new course? How can you know for sure that the new creation has begun? I mean, it's the same old earth as before. People are in the same old bodies. If it is all so "new," how can you be sure? John tells us it is on the testimony of the witness.

What is a witness? They are people that make legal oaths binding. You bring forth witnesses to a stand in a court of law. When marriage papers are signed, it is in the presence of witnesses. There is an oath in our text today. John the Baptist says, “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” (John 1:26-27). In vs. 29 there is another oath, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.” There is another oath in vs. 30, “After me comes a man who ranks before me, because he was before me.” The oath before us here is that Christ being the “firstborn,” the sacrifice for sin, and the Messiah. This is testified to by the witness.

Before I tell you about the “w”itness, let me tell you about the “W”itness. Revelation 1:5 (also written by the Apostle John) says, “From Jesus Christ the *faithful witness*, the *firstborn* of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth.” This verse is important because it shows you the preeminence of Christ testified to by our “w”itness. Christ is the firstborn. In a verse from Paul, he is called the “*firstborn of all creation*” (Col 1:15). Later in Revelation Jesus says to the church, “The words of the Amen, the

faithful and true *witness*, the beginning of God's *creation*" (Rev 3:14).

This is OT language. Christ is closely related to Wisdom in Proverbs (8:22-31), as Wisdom was with God in the beginning, a master workman. The word for a workman is *'amon* in Hebrew. Here, John has a play on that word by calling Jesus the *Amen*.² Jesus is Wisdom of the OT in its fullest manifestation. Another main OT idea here is the close relationship that Jesus has to creation. He is the *witness* of God's *creation*. We have seen how John 1 is all about making ties between creation and the new creation. What I want you to see is how in the original creation, Christ was a witness to it. It was one of the functions he served.

Now let's look at the "w"itness of John 1:19-28. It is John the Baptist. It says, "This is the testimony of John." You could translate it, this is the "witness" of John. It's the same word used for Jesus. The point is, John now plays a role similar to that of Christ at the original creation: Witness. John is the witness of the *new creation*. The witness of Christ at original creation is testified to on day

² For a fascinating discussion on the possible relationship of these words in Proverbs 8 and Revelation 3 see G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation : A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, Mich.; Carlisle, Cumbria: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 1999), 297-98.

one: “And God said.” This speaking, John already told us, was the Word of God now come down in the flesh (**John 1:1, 14**). Thus, the framework in the gospel for this witness of John is day 1 of the *new* creation.

John the Baptist appears in all four Gospel accounts. Why is John so important to the story of Jesus? In trying to answer this question, we are introduced to the main antagonists in John’s Gospel story. **John 1:19** tells us that “the Jews” sent **priests and Levites** from Jerusalem to John the Baptist. They wanted to know who he was. “**Who are you?**” they asked. John was obviously gaining a reputation throughout Israel as someone of great importance. At this early stage in the story, their question really seems quite innocent, though I doubt that it was. These “Jews” are not just Jewish *people*, but official leaders and rulers back in Jerusalem. They were charged with making sure no new religious movement would bring about revolt against Rome ... unless they could be certain that it was the “final” revolt led by their political Messiah who would usher in a millennial reign for them. So they sent liaisons to find out.

The Gospel does not preserve their exact question, but the Baptist infers their intent. He emphatically denies and

confesses “I am not the Christ” (John 1:20). This was John’s confession. Who was Christ? Where does this idea come from? “Christ” is the Greek word that translates the Hebrew word *mashiach* (see John 1:41). It means “anointed one.” Though there are anointed *mashiachs* in the OT, there was One that was prophesied as coming to save Israel. There were many ideas of what this person would be like. There was the political savior, deliverer from Rome. There was the King. There was the Suffering Servant. There was the God-man. John’s testimony is a strong denial of any and all interpretations. He is not here to lead a revolt. He is not here to save them. He is not their king. He is not the Christ.

Are you Elijah?

They ask him **two more questions**, trying to figure out if he thought that Messiah was coming soon. “**What then? Are you Elijah?**” (vs. 21). Who was Elijah? Elijah was probably the greatest miracle working prophet in the OT (though Elisha may be). Now, John was not doing miracles, so it is strange that they would ask him if he was Elijah. Where would they get this idea from? Along with

only one other figure in the OT, Elijah is unique of all people. Elijah never died. Rather, he was taken up to heaven on chariots of fire in the sight of his protégé Elisha. God took Elijah and he was no more.

Along with Enoch (who also never died), stories began to circulate about how Elijah might have a future return to the earth. The prophecy of Malachi led the way for such speculations. Malachi is the last of the writing prophets of the OT. He writes, "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes" (Mal 4:5). What might this mean? Many people were expecting that Elijah would return bodily to the earth. When asked if he was Elijah, John denies it. "I am not" (John 1:21).

Yet, just here we have a strange thing we have to think about. For on one occasion, Jesus was talking about John the Baptist to his disciples. He asked them, "What did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet ... and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come" (Matt 11:9, 14). Some have proposed that John just didn't realize that he was Elijah, thus there is no contradiction between what John says and what Jesus says. I think a better solution comes from what Luke says of the

Baptist, “He will be great before the Lord ... he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb ... and he will go before the Lord in the *spirit* and power of *Elijah*” (Luke 1:15, 17).

There is a real problem taking John as the literal physical “reincarnation” of Elijah. I remember going down to Pearl Street Mall one time and there was a Bah’ai festival set up on the courthouse lawn. I went in to see what these people believed, and one of the first things I read was that they believed John was the reincarnation of Elijah, thus the Bible proves reincarnation. Big problem! Elijah never died. To be reincarnated, you must first die. There is another problem, which is that since Elijah never died. He was an adult when he was translated to heaven. Yet, John the Baptist was conceived in the womb of his mother and was born as an infant. How could Elijah the man be born in the belly of a woman? That would be a miracle akin to the incarnation. Thus, Luke solves the problem for us by telling us that Elijah to come would be a spiritual thing, in the power of Elijah, as he is indwelt by the same Holy Spirit who indwelt Elijah. This is what I believe Jesus had in mind in calling John Elijah.

The question still remains whether or not Malachi's prophecy refers to a still future coming of Elijah from heaven as many Dispensationalists teach about the Two Witnesses who will supposedly come during the Great Tribulation. Revelation says of these witnesses that they are "Two lampstands that stand before the Lord of the earth. If anyone would harm them, fire pours from their mouth and consumes their foes" (Rev 11:4-5). It is curious that the Jews spoke of Elijah saying, "Then Elijah arose, a prophet like fire, and his word burned like a torch" (Sirach 48:1). It is also curious that Jesus says of John the Baptist "He was a burning and shining lamp, and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light" (John 5:35). The point seems to be that these two witnesses in Revelation are patterned after these two OT figures of fire: Elijah and John. These two witnesses are probably not to be taken literally (fire does not literally come out of human beings' mouths). Rather, they are probably representative of the church throughout the age that constantly brings forth the burning witness that Christ is the Messiah, in the pattern of John the Baptist.³ This witness is a burning fire that consumes the enemies of God.

³ See Beale, 573-74.

Are you the Prophet?

Having not confessed to being Elijah, the priests and Levites next ask the Baptist if he is **the Prophet**. Who is this prophet? This refers to a prophecy in **Deuteronomy 18:15-18**.

The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers--it is to him you shall listen-- ¹⁶ just as you desired of the LORD your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly, when you said, 'Let me not hear again the voice of the LORD my God or see this great fire any more, lest I die.' ¹⁷ And the LORD said to me, 'They are right in what they have spoken. ¹⁸ I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him.

The NT Apostles understand that the Prophet and the Messiah are the same person (cf., **Acts 3:22**). But before this, the Jews were divided. **John 7:40-41** tells us what the people were thinking about Jesus. “Some of the people said, ‘This really is the Prophet.’ Others said, ‘This is the Christ/Messiah.’” In other words, some of the Jews saw

these two figures as different future individuals. The reason for asking John if he is the Prophet may be a trick to get him to admit that he really is the Messiah. Or, it may be that they expected this prophet to be some kind of forerunner to Messiah. It is not known with certainty.

The Voice in the Wilderness

Whatever the case, these Jews were not getting any answers from John. But they were sent from Jerusalem and so they had to return with some news to tell their superiors, the Pharisees (John 1:24), a fundamentalists sect within Judaism that saw itself as the guardians of torah, protectors of God's law from any who would seek to eradicate it. So they ask him again, "Who are you? We need to give an answer ... What do you say about yourself?" (22). So, John tells them in one of the few OT verses quoted in all four Gospels. "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord'" (23). This comes from Isaiah 40:3. Though he denies being Christ, Elijah, or the Prophet, he does see himself as being foretold about in the OT.

This is a prophecy about the coming of the LORD, of Yahweh. It uses figurative language which suggests that when He comes, He will come down a road. Behind him, the valleys will be lifted up, the mountains will be made low, the uneven ground will become level, and the rough places will become smooth. In other words, God's coming will be gloriously peaceful and peacemaking. All obstacles will be torn down. All difficulties will be overcome.

The prophecy says that this coming of the LORD, of Yahweh, will be **announced by a voice in the wilderness**. This is why the Gospels all make such a big deal of John baptizing and prophesying and preaching *in the wilderness*. That is literally where he was. This prophecy would be an announcement of the coming of the LORD, of Yahweh. Yet, catch the subtlety of the language. It says, **“Make straight the way of the Lord.”** **What is the way of Yahweh?**

I want to suggest that the road Isaiah predicted and the way that John announced is actually the **person of Christ**. This seems to be how Jesus himself took it when he said, **“I am *the Way*, the truth, and the life”** (**John 14:6**). Jesus uses the same Greek word (*hodos*) as John (and the LXX of **Isaiah 40:3**). Later, Christians seemed to equate this with Jesus too calling themselves followers of **“The Way”** (**Acts 9:2**;

19:9, 23; 24:14, 22). In other words, Yahweh comes to the people through the Way, through the person of Christ. Christ is his intercessor. Christ is Yahweh, come to them as the Way. Personifying an idea is, as we have seen, very common for John and the Jews (logos/word, light, life, glory, name etc).

John's Authority and his Trustworthy Witness

As the voice that prepares the way, John serves a prophetic function, yet he is **not The Prophet**. As witness, John serves a creational function, yet he is **not the Messiah**. Rather, his prophetic function and function **as witness** are to testify about the Messiah who is even now right in their midst. The Jews were confused by what John said in quoting Isaiah to them. So they ask him, “**Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet**” (**John 1:25**). Before we can understand John's answer, we need to first ask about baptism. Why were these people concerned *that* John was baptizing?

From the text, the best we can gather is that the kind of baptism John undertook needed a certain authority. This proves that baptism was not a new invention of John. The

fact that they are asking him all of these questions tells us that he does not have *their* authority, the authority from the Order of the Temple. John was a priest, and the priests did baptize in Jerusalem at the temple in the basins of water. This is a practice that goes all the way back to the tabernacle in the days of Moses. But John was not at the temple and he does not have the sanction of the priests in Jerusalem.

At that time, there were also ritual baptisms that people would undergo themselves, that is they would baptize themselves. But John was baptizing others, not just himself. Furthermore, John was baptizing Jews and these proselyte baptisms were only performed on Gentiles. This would have been very offensive to the Pharisees. So, they wanted to know what his authority was. Presumably, Messiah would have this authority. The Prophet would too.

His answer reveals his true authority to them, though they were blind to it. John's baptism pointed to Christ's coming, and as this was predicted by Isaiah, his authority is from God himself. He doesn't need the permission of the Jews to do what he is doing, for he is a lone voice, calling in the wilderness. Hence, his witness, "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” (John 1:26-27). While the other Gospels focus here on the baptism Jesus will perform, John’s Gospel skips that part, because what is of more interest to him is the witness of God at this first instance of new creation.

The witness of the man from the wilderness will be to make way in the desert a place of new habitation. Barren places will become plentiful, waste places will become fertile. It is all about a new creation, signaled here by the witness of day one. Just as in original creation the waste and void becomes a fertile garden, so in new creation the wilderness becomes a fertile land of bounty and plenty. This is only hinted at here, but given the framework of creation, the mention of the prophecy of the wilderness, and perhaps even the location of this baptism in the larger context of John’s Gospel, we can say this definitively.

A curious verse is the last of the morning. “These things took place in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing” (John 1:28). This verse serves to firmly root the baptism of John in a geographical location well known to his readers. This event really happened, and here is where it happened. But where is this exactly?

Since the times of **Origen** (184 -254 AD), there has been vigorous debate over this location, because he travelled to the area and could find no such place called Bethany on the east side of the Jordan (the Bethany where Jesus raised Lazarus is right near Jerusalem). Hence the question, where is this place? Many proposals have been suggested. One that is **not** possible is that this is the **Bethany just outside Jerusalem**.⁴ I bring up this Bethany because Jesus public ministry is framed by these two Bethanys in John's Gospel. Jesus is baptized in one Bethany and he raises Lazarus from the dead in the other Bethany. At the first Bethany, John announces, "**The Lamb of God, who takes away in the sin of the world**" (**John 1:29**). At the last Bethany there is an announcement of Jesus' need to die on the cross for sin as a sacrifice (**John 11:45-53**).⁵

The best proposal for the location of this first Bethany is probably that this is an alternate spelling of, not a city, but a region. That region is **Bashan**. Bashan is the country

⁴ Subsequent to this sermon I became aware of two interesting suggestions. The first is that Lazarus is the author of this anonymous Gospel. See Ben Witherington, "Was Jesus the Beloved Disciple?" Monday, Jan 29, 2007 blogpost, <http://benwitherington.blogspot.com/2007/01/was-lazarus-beloved-disciple.html>. See also The Disciple Whom Jesus Loved, J. Phillips, at http://www.thedisciplewhomjesusloved.com/printable_bible_study_john/printerfriendly.pdf. The second is that Bethany is the same Bethany where Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. Parker, P. 1955. Bethany Beyond Jordan. *JBL* 74:257-61. Available online: http://img2.timg.co.il/forums/1_129732377.pdf. These ideas parallel one another closely though they are independent lines of thought. I believe both to be quite plausible.

⁵ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, Mich.: InterVarsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans, 1991), 147.

north and east of the Sea of Galilee. Galilee is the region where the events of the next few days will take place, and so it makes a lot of sense to see this as the “Bethany” John has in mind here.⁶ When you go to Bashan, it really can be said of a lot of it that it is a wilderness and a waste. Moving back to the Bethany near Jerusalem, You move from a barren place to one of roads and highways.

Many people do not know what to do with the Baptist, and so **they moralize him**. They turn him into a great teacher, a fiery preacher, a person who was consumed with the law of God. Be like John. Be a good Christian. I don’t know about you, but I wasn’t singled out in a prophecy in the OT. I *can’t* be like John. But as one commentator says, **“John’s real function was not to teach ethics, but to point people to Jesus. ‘Make straight the way for the Lord’ is a call to be ready, for the coming of the Messiah is near.”**⁷ This as a clarion call to the Pharisees and Jews of his day. It is a trumpet signalling to you that these things have occurred. And what has occurred? Jesus has begun a new

⁶ This has become the popular location in modern commentaries. Cf. Rainer Riesner, “Bethany Beyond The Jordan (John 1:28) Topography, Theology And History In The Fourth Gospel,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 38 (1987): 29–63; D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans, 1991), 146–47; C. S. Keener, *The Gospel of John*. 2 vols. Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson, 450; Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John*, Baker exegetical commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2004), 65. I comment on this in my book on Giants as Bashan is the ancient home of the giants, the demons he interacts with in this very area later in his ministry.

⁷ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995), 121.

creation. The witness has testified to it. Other witnesses all say the same thing. The old has gone. The new has come. A new world of redemption, restoration, forgiveness, reconciliation, and new life has begun. It comes through the Way, through the Lamb of God who died that sin might be taken away so that people might be reconciled to a holy God.

That is the announcement on day 1 of the new creation. Will you trust it by faith? If you will, God will take that which is old in you and make it new, that which is rough and make it smooth, that which is barren and make it fruitful. This begins at the moment of faith, and will be completed on the day you see Christ face to face.