

## A Last Word from John the Baptist

*Hebrews 1:1-5; John 3:25-36*

This section of John's gospel opened at the end of chapter two in Jerusalem, some time after the wedding in Cana had culminated the first six days of John's gospel where John echoes the six day creation week Moses taught in Genesis. So, just like in Genesis, John's gospel had opened with the three words, "*In the beginning...*".

But from there John's six day story only indirectly echoed the six days that Moses had used to frame the creation of everything. For instance, the light God spoke into being on the First Day in Genesis, that light was metaphysical, not sunlight or moonlight but spiritual light to show right from wrong, good from evil.

But the light from John's First Day was personal, "...*the Word...*", John wrote, who was "*with God*" and who "*was God*." In other words, the light that lit up a dark stormy universe before there were sun, moon, and stars was, according to John, a person, God the Son, who would become "*flesh*" and dwell "*among us*".

And so the first six days in John's gospel weren't like Genesis with God opening a breathable room between sea and clouds, and God terraforming continents, and landscaping a breathtaking garden where creatures like us could live in his company. Because by the time God the Son appears in flesh and blood on God's green earth as the man Jesus, all those things were still there, still good.

So the six day creation story in John's gospel is a redemptive echo with Jesus restoring in people and among people the original goodness that used to belong to us before the Fall. So Day Two in John's account shows us Jesus between the water and the clouds with Holy Spirit, not just hovering like he did in Genesis, but actually lighting on Jesus and staying there, marking Jesus as the new gardener who will restore the atmospheric room into the sanctuary it had been before Adam and the woman had ruined it.

And on Day Three, Jesus supplied the sanctuary room with human rulers much as, in Genesis, God had supplied the heavens with celestial rulers, sun, moon and stars to mark out time and space. So in the same way the apostles Jesus chose would bind and loose, provide moral direction and spiritual boundaries, just as the orbits of the heavenly bodies would provide temporal and spatial boundaries and guidance for ancient navigators and farmers. So it's no accident that Simon gets renamed Peter, the man of rock, on John's Third Day, the first day he met Jesus and not years later as in Matthew.

And so, here in John's gospel, Jesus spent the first six days restoring people to what God had meant us to be right out to a sixth day wedding just like in Genesis. The wedding in Cana was a tiny little village affair, nothing like the grand royal wedding that God put on in Eden. Humanity had fallen a long way from that! But even as a humble village wedding, this thing was going to be a bust, except Jesus was there and at his mother's behest he redeemed a bust into a wine tasting session like no one had ever been to in Galilee. What the groom and bride lacked, wine, Jesus provided in an abundance and at a quality that none of them had ever seen.

So the wedding, as God might have put it, was "*very good*"! And so John's six day story moved on just like Moses and Genesis into a Seventh Day. And in both John and Genesis the 7th Day is open ended, it's the rest of the story. So there's no evening and morning for the 7th Day in Genesis or John, and the narrative turns in both books to a beautiful sanctuary garden from which there is a terrible fall and a violent, heartbreaking banishment. Now we won't rehearse again the original Fall in Genesis.

But, here in John, the Fall looks like this. Jesus makes his way to the Jerusalem temple only to find his path to the sanctuary, the Garden, blocked by a strip mall based on a religious theme. Sheep and goats and bulls and pigeons all for sale on a porch that was supposed to be a sanctuary for strangers and foreigners who only wanted to get within hailing distance of Israel's God. And that misuse of space sent Jesus into a fit of white, hot zeal. Jesus loved strangers and foreigners and he couldn't abide manure in anybody's worship space so he tore the place apart, chasing bankers and shop owners down the steps and out the square, twirling a rope whip much as the archangel twirled a flaming sword chasing Adam and Eve out the Garden back in Genesis.

And from there John's gospel again echoes Genesis, the same disappointment with human nature that Moses first expressed back in Genesis, chapter four. John shows us Jesus in Jerusalem, working wonders with the crowds in the city square where he found many fans but not a soul that he could trust.

John put it this way, he wrote this: "*While he was in Jerusalem for the Passover feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs he was doing. But Jesus for his own part did not entrust himself to them, for he knew all people and because he needed no one to testify concerning man, because he himself knew what was in a man.*"

So two themes emerge from Israel's Fall in the Jerusalem sanctuary and the Judgment Day Jesus acted out against them. The first is that God's people in Jesus' day were just as fallen as the descendants of Adam and Eve turned out to be back in Genesis, and the second theme is that John's gospel going out from here was going to be about testimony, But not so much men's testimony about themselves or about God.

Jesus had no need of that! But rather John's gospel would present the testimony of Jesus about himself and other evidence and witnesses supporting Jesus' case over and against the verdict old Israel had rendered against him. So after saying that Jesus needed "*no one to testify concerning man,*" John's gospel goes on in chapter 3, "*There was a man from the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews.*"

And the first witness on the docket, the man Nicodemus, attempted to render for Jesus a favorable verdict. Speaking for old Israel, Nicodemus said, "*We know you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs you do unless God is with him.*" And you'll remember that Jesus showed no interest in what old Israel made of him, but instead offered Nicodemus solemn testimony about how much trouble he and old Israel were in: "*Truly, truly I say to you, unless one is born from above, he cannot see the kingdom of God!*"

And so began, in the darkened doorway, a confrontation where Jesus testified to the old rabbi about water baptism and birth in the Spirit, starting life over, sailing in an invisible wind sent from God. And the old man, "*the teacher of Israel*", was reduced to throwing his hands in the air and asking, "*How can these things be?*"

And Jesus answered in so many words that Christ himself was the key to the puzzle that Nicodemus was missing, "*No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man!*" The point being that Jesus was far more than just another "*teacher sent from God*". And he reminded the old rabbi of a story he knew well. Israel, snakebitten in the wilderness, people in the camp dying in a plague of snakes and Moses raising up a bronze serpent on a crossbeam, and Jesus said, "*...so must the Son of Man be lifted up that whoever believes in him may have eternal life!*"

Jesus' words were an altar call to old Israel and the Apostle doesn't let us know how Nicodemus responds until much later in his gospel. Instead, the next morning found Jesus and his disciples headed out "*into the Judean countryside*" where Christ would find himself confronted by yet another man from old Israel who would offer a different sort of testimony than what we heard from Nicodemus in the darkened doorway. The issue that brought John the Baptist to the witness stand was purification, forgiveness.

In old Israel, the ritual of bathing and washing and prerogative of declaring forgiveness to sinners belonged to priests, and we know from Luke's gospel that John the Baptist was the son of a priest. But here in John's gospel was Jesus, the stepson of a carpenter, preaching a gospel and baptizing and pronouncing forgiveness entirely outside the procedure taught by Moses in Leviticus 14 and 15.

The Baptist might have thrown his hands in the air and declared along with Nicodemus, “*How can these things be?*” But his years in the desert and away from the halls of power had taught John, old Israel’s last prophet, a humility that Nicodemus had yet to learn. “*A man*” John said, “*cannot have a single thing unless it is given him from heaven. You, yourselves, bear me witness that I said, ‘I am not the Christ...’*”.

And then John went on to invoke the memory of those mere men from ages past, Friends of the Bridegroom, who had journeyed near and far and labored their whole lives to secure a bride for God’s chosen Bridegroom, a people for God’s chosen Savior, men like Eliezer of Damascus who brought Rebekah home to her husband Isaac, or Samuel who introduced Israel to her savior David, or Mordecai who counseled Esther to love and trust Xerxes, the man who would save Israel in exile in Persia.

These were sweet stories, love stories, and they all looked forward to John the Baptist introducing old Israel to Christ, God’s chosen Bridegroom who would love and save, cleanse and forgive, not only old Israel, but strangers and foreigners, fallen men and women from everywhere who would come to the light, face and turn from their sins and entrust their lives to the care of a Savior and the power of the Spirit he would send their way. And the trick for old Israel was to understand that the rituals and symbols of Moses’ law were earthly pictures given to God’s earthly servants to point toward Christ.

John put it like this: “*He who comes from heaven is over all. He who is from the earth is of the earth and speaks as from the earth. He who comes from heaven...this one testifies to what he has seen and heard, yet no one receives his testimony...*” . The point being that everyone before now, Moses and Elijah, David and Solomon and the Baptist himself, every man until Christ was from the earth and of the earth. And there is an inherent limit to what any fallen human prophet can understand and teach about God.

But Jesus, flesh and blood though he was, was not from the earth or of the earth. He had come “*from heaven*” And the gospel Jesus taught was what he had “*seen*” and “*heard*” in heaven, in “*the bosom of the Father*” John wrote in chapter one. The point being that what Moses taught about good and evil, life and limb, love and marriage was introductory, based on a glimpse God gave Moses atop Mt. Sinai. But what Jesus taught was the language and culture of heaven straight from Someone who had been a native in heaven, really the Crown Prince of heaven from all eternity past.

Small wonder then, the Baptist tells us that “*...no one receives his testimony.*” The purity and honesty and loyalty and humility and compassion that exists in heaven, that has existed between Father and Son and Spirit from all eternity past, to and through the present, is beyond the reach

and comprehension of fallen men and women unless God's Spirit brings it to life in our hearts. So the Baptist tells us, "*He who receives his testimony has set his seal to this, that God is true.*"

What John means is that the fundamental principle that unleashes gospel power in our hearts is for us to confess that "*God is true*" and that those notions that live in our hearts, those patterns we indulge in our lives that are in rebellion against what God commands are false. God does not expect us to entirely understand or absolutely practice the full body of heavenly truth in this moment or the next, or necessarily the moment after that. But what God absolutely commands is that we bow to his truth, obey his commands moment by moment to the best of our understanding and ability as he teaches and empowers us over time to make heaven's ways our own.

The Baptist goes on: "*For he whom God has sent utters the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure.*" The point being that Jesus has given us both heaven's truth about life, and the Spirit's power to live out what we learn. It's important to understand that learning and living out God's truth is less a matter of self indoctrination and self discipline and more a matter of our becoming attached and accountable to God as we seek him in our own daily lives and our common worship and service. God has designed us to learn and change in relationships.

It follows that our destiny depends less on what percentage of heaven's truth we can incorporate into our thoughts and behavior and more on the quality of the love relationships we maintain with Christ and with each other day in and day out.

John put it this way, he said, "*The Father loves the Son and has put all things into his hand. He who believes in the Son has eternal life, he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.*" The point being that love and obedience are intertwined. It is our love for Christ and our openness to the Spirit's power that tames our hearts to bow to heaven's truth and live by heaven's ways. Only love from and for God can teach us obedience, and obedience is the path that genuine love will lead us to take in the end.