

Week of December 14th – John 1:6-8, 19-28

- Read each daily Devotional Reading using the SOAP method and Daily Devotional to help you reflect.
- Read the article below prior to group
- Think through the small group and accountability questions after the article

Devotional Readings

Sunday	Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11
Monday	Psalms 126
Tuesday	1 Thessalonians 5:16-24
Wednesday	John 1:6-8, 19-28
Thursday	Romans 11
Friday	Isaiah 42
Saturday	Psalms 2

Article: The Evidence of John - John 1:6-8, 19-28

by N.T. Wright from *John for everyone, Part 1* (England: London : SPCK, 2002.), 06-09.

‘I want to make it quite clear that I’m not a candidate.’

You hear that said over and over as politicians jostle for position before a major election. No, they aren’t going to stand. No, they have no intention of running for office. No, they are going to sit this one out. And then — surprise, surprise — suddenly they make a speech saying that friends have advised them, that pressure has been put on them, that for the good of the country they now intend. . . to run after all. And we have become quite cynical about it all.

But here we have a story about a man pushing himself forward in the public eye, gaining a large following, and then refusing to claim any of the offices they were eager to ascribe to him. John, the writer of this gospel, assumes that we know a certain amount about the ‘offices’ or leadership characters that many Jews were expecting at the time. The Messiah: well, of course. The king from the house of David. The king who would overthrow all injustice and rule over Israel, and perhaps the world too. But John denies quite firmly that he is the Messiah, and seems to mean it. He isn’t doing messianic things.

But what about Elijah and ‘the Prophet’?

For centuries the Jews had read in the Bible that the great prophet, Elijah, would return before the great and terrible ‘day of the Lord’ (Malachi 4.5). Elijah, it seemed, hadn’t died in the ordinary way, but had been taken up to heaven directly (2 Kings 2). Now, many believed, he would return to herald God’s new day. Indeed, many Christians, and most likely Jesus as well, believed that John was in fact Elijah, even if he didn’t think so — a puzzle to which the New Testament offers no solution (see, e.g., Mark 9.13). But, anyway, John clearly didn’t want anyone thinking he was Elijah.

Elijah wasn’t the only great prophet. Most in Jesus’ day would have ranked him second to Moses himself. In Deuteronomy 18.15—18 God promises that he will raise up a prophet like Moses to lead the people. This figure, a yet-to-come ‘prophet like Moses’ was expected in Jesus’ day (see 6.14), though most people probably didn’t distinguish sharply between the different ‘figures’ they had heard or read about. Enough to know that someone would come, and preferably soon, to sort out the mess they were in.

But John refused all such titles. A group of priests and Levites — Temple functionaries — came to check him out, sent by the Pharisees who were one of the leading pressure groups of the time. They had their own reasons for wanting to keep tabs on people. If someone was behaving in a strange new way, announcing a message from God, they wanted to know about it. And John was indeed behaving strangely. Israel’s scriptures hadn’t spoken of a prophet who would come and plunge people into water. Why was he doing it?

John’s answer, here and in what follows, is that he is getting people ready for someone else. The one claim he makes — apart from his belief that Israel’s God has commanded him to baptize

people in water — is that he is a ‘voice Or rather, the voice, the voice spoken of by Isaiah, in the same passage where he speaks of the grass withering but the Word of God standing forever (40.1—8). John wants us to make the connection with verses 1—18. And what the voice commands is to get the road straightened out. The master is coming; the way must be prepared.

I live near a busy city street, and several times a day I hear sirens blaring as a police car, or a fire engine, or an ambulance, tries to make its way through heavy traffic to yet another emergency. That’s the sort of task John claims to have: sounding his siren to clear a path for the one who’s coming behind him. Already, in the Prologue (the great opening section in verses 1—18), we have seen this picture of John: he wasn’t the light, but came to give evidence about it (1.8). He is of secondary importance to the Messiah, although he comes before him in temporal sequence. The reason he comes before him, of course, is that he has to, in order to clear the way ahead.

John the Baptist occupies a position like this in all the gospels, and indeed within the early Christian proclamation as a whole. The movement looked back to John as its launch pad. At the same time, there were some groups of John’s followers who, for whatever reason, never made the transition to following Jesus. It’s possible that the writer, aware of such groups, is wanting to emphasize that John the Baptist insisted that people should follow Jesus, not himself. And he really meant it.

One of the many points to ponder about the strange character of John the Baptist is the way in which all Christian preachers are called to the same attitude that John had. We don’t preach ourselves, as Paul said, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for his sake (2 Corinthians 4.5). Or, as John put it, ‘I’m only a voice.’ There is his humility, and his true greatness.

About the author: N.T. Wright is Bishop of Durham (Church of England) and was formerly Canon Theologian of Westminster Abbey and dean of Lichfield Cathedral. A graduate of Oxford University, he previously taught at Cambridge, McGill, and Oxford Universities. Wright’s *The New Testament and the People of God* (1992), *Jesus and the Victory of God* (1996), and *The Resurrection and the Son of God* (2003) are the first three volumes of his projected six-volume series entitled *Christian Origins and the Question of God* (SPCK/ Fortress Press). Among his many other published works are *The Original Jesus* (1996), *What Saint Paul Really Said* (1997), and *The Climax of the Covenant* (1992). He is the author of the For Everyone commentary series.

Small Group Questions

Accountability

Nurturing Relationships - How are you developing nurturing relationships? Are you showing up? How are you making community and teamwork important to your life? How’s your commitment to small group and worship going? Are you reaching your group and individual goals in this area?

Open / Scripture

1. Who was your best and worst boss? Describe what made them the best or worst?
2. It has been said that power corrupts and that absolute power corrupts, absolutely. How did the bosses, that you just described, handle the power entrusted to them?

Observation

1. What was the purpose and what was the goal of John’s ministry? (John 1:6-9)
2. What three identities do the Priests and Levites ask John to identify with? (John 1:19-22)
3. Read Malachi 4. Why would they think he might be Elijah?
4. In John 1:21, John the Baptist says that he is not Elijah, yet in Matt 11:14; 17:1-13; Mark 9:2-13; Luke 9:28-36, Jesus says that he is. Is this a contradiction? What might this say about John’s own self understanding?
5. Read Deut 18:15-22. John denies that he is the prophet. What does Deut 18:15-19 tell us about this prophet?
6. Read Acts 3:19-26, whom does Peter identify as this promised prophet?

7. John has already denied all three roles or identities, what does he say that he is? Having denied all of these other roles, what does his simple answer say about his own self understanding and focus?
8. Once he identifies himself, what do they ask him? Does he answer their question as you would expect? How does his statement of the one coming after him tie in with the question of why he is baptizing?

Apply

1. John seems to have a specific focus to his ministry and a clear understanding of parts of what he is doing. Later in John 1:33, He says that he also didn't recognize the Christ apart from what God did through his practice of baptizing the people of Israel. Even later, while in prison, John sent some of his own disciples to ask if Jesus really was the Christ. Jesus wasn't acting in ways that matched John's expectations. Jesus says in Mat 11:7-11 that John was the greatest of prophets, yet John doesn't seem to understand the whole picture. He seems to have known well only the parts that he was supposed to do. What might that say for us today? Are we making excuses for not doing what God has revealed for us to do based on a desire to have all knowledge? Juxtapose John's limited understanding with the parable of the talents. Are there any insights to be grasped from his obedience?
2. John centers his whole self understanding as being "the voice of one shouting in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way for the Lord'", and that this one Lord, who is coming after him, is greater than him. He centers his focus on preparing people to recognize and obey this coming Lord, and then for him to get out of the way. How are we preparing people around us to recognize and obey the ruler of the entire world? Are we drawing people after ourselves and our way of seeing things or are we drawing them to Jesus and getting out of the way?
3. The fact that the Pharisees sent Priests and Levites out to question John, means that his ministry was very popular and influential. This influence and popularity didn't affect or alter John's desire to fulfill the purpose that God gave him. The gospel writers tell us that John did full the ministry that God gave him, yet it ended in his imprisonment and death at the hands of King Herod. How might our perceived success or failure be affecting our focus in serving the King Jesus?