



## International Bible Study Commentary

Verse-by-Verse Bible Lessons Thru the Bible

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### **John 1:15-23 Commentary New International Version**

**Questions for Discussion and Thinking Further** follow the verse-by-verse [International Bible Study Commentary](#). **Study Hints for Discussion and Thinking Further** will help with class preparation and in conducting class discussion: these hints are available on the *International Bible Study Commentary* website along with the *International Bible Lesson* that you may want to read to your class as part of your Bible study. You can discuss each week's commentary and lesson at the [International Bible Study Forum](#).

**(John 1:15) (John testified concerning him. He cried out, saying, “This is the one I spoke about when I said, ‘He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.’”)**

During the time John the Baptist preached in the wilderness, he did not know all that Jesus, the Word of God, would reveal about His nature, character, and purpose. Being filled with the Holy Spirit before he was born, the Holy Spirit inspired John to preach truthfully what people needed to know to prepare themselves for the coming of the Messiah (see Luke 1:15). The Holy Spirit also guided John when he needed to answer the questions of the authorities who came from Jerusalem to examine him and “inspect his credentials” for preaching and baptizing. The Holy Spirit inspired John to carefully declare that “the one who came after him,” without saying “the Messiah” (which would especially alert those who would become his and Jesus’ enemies), “ranks ahead of me.” John came to give the introduction speech for the Messiah, who did rank ahead of him. But most mysteriously of all, John openly declared that he ranked ahead of him “because he was before me.” John’s average listener would have assumed John meant that this person was born before John was, but that is not what John meant! The Holy Spirit moved John to say that Jesus existed

before he was born. In the beginning, “the Word was with God, and the Word was God” before He was born in human flesh and became Jesus of Nazareth six months after John the Baptist was born.

**(John 1:16) Out of his fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given.**

After referring to John the Baptist parenthetically, John returned to teaching about Jesus. The “we” refers to the apostles of Jesus Christ and “to all who received him, who believed in his name” (John 1:12). Jesus’ “fullness” may be interpreted to mean that in His nature and essence Jesus is fully God and fully man. “Grace” can be interpreted to mean “unmerited favor or goodwill” and “the power to live the Christian life.” As fully God and fully man, from Jesus’ fullness or completeness, all who have received Him as Lord and Savior have received the grace of the forgiveness of sins, the grace of cleansing from sin, the grace of freedom from slavery to sin, the grace of the power to live pleasing to God—the grace “to become children of God” (John 1:12). Every blessing that believers have received and continue to receive from Jesus daily are “grace upon grace.”

**(John 1:17) For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.**

The LORD (Yahweh) gave the Law of God to the Israelites through Moses. The Ten Commandments in the Law of God are universal laws for all people to obey—the Ten Commandments teach what is best for everyone to do based on our human nature as created in the image of God. The Law of God blessed the Hebrews because it taught these former slaves how to govern themselves as children of God. The Law of God gave them individual rights and responsibilities. The Law of God explained the blessings they would receive from their obedience and the punishments they would receive from disobedience. But the Law of God did not give them love for God, a heart to obey God, or the power to obey God. The Law of God convicted them of sin when they disobeyed God and showed them that they needed God’s forgiveness and a Savior. When Jesus Christ came, He did what the Law of God could not do. Jesus came as the Lamb of God. He offered grace to sinners, and by grace Jesus helped those who received Him and believed in

Him to become children of God. The Law of God was an expression of truth from God, but when Jesus Christ came into the world, He was The Truth of God (which John will explain more about throughout his gospel).

**(John 1:18) No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.**

No human being has ever seen God completely. Moses only saw the part of God that the LORD chose to reveal to him. How could any human being see completely the infinite personal God who is greater than the universe? “God the only Son,” Jesus, came into the world and made God known. During three years of ministry, Jesus could not make God completely known, but what Jesus revealed in word and deed truly revealed God, and the Bible truly reveals what Jesus did in word and deed. Jesus revealed enough truth and the Bible teaches enough truth for anyone with sound reason to receive Jesus and to believe in Jesus and become a child of God. Jesus “God the only Son” is close to God the Father’s heart because they love one another. Furthermore, as an expression of their grace, in John 3:16, John wrote: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”

**(John 1:19) Now this was John’s testimony when the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was.**

In John 1:16-18, the Apostle John has told us why Jesus “ranks ahead” of John the Baptist. When the religious leaders in Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to examine John (to potentially condemn John as a false prophet or false Messiah), under the leading of the Holy Spirit John wisely did not tell them all he knew. At that time, John the Baptist did not know all that John has taught us in the previous verses. Primarily, those sent from Jerusalem wanted to know if John was the long-expected Messiah.

**(John 1:20) He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, “I am not the Messiah.”**

John did not deny he was the Messiah in the sense of wanting to keep something secret about himself or unknown for the time being. A thief might deny being a thief. If his life were in danger, a Messianic pretender might deny he was the Messiah. Filled with the Holy Spirit, John never believed he was the Messiah; furthermore, he did not want anyone to mistake him for the Messiah. Rather, John confessed that he was not the Messiah. As a matter of legal testimony that these interrogators could take back to the council in Jerusalem, John declared that he was not the Messiah. Nor was he pretending to be the Messiah, as some had before him and as some would do after him. He told them that they would need to look for someone else.

**(John 1:21) They asked him, “Then who are you? Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.” “Are you the Prophet?” He answered, “No.”**

These interrogators wanted to put a label on John so they could know what to expect from him and how to handle him: not to prepare themselves to welcome the Messiah. They probably wanted to prepare themselves to deal with John when they needed to stop him from drawing large crowds (as they later tended to Jesus). John was preaching east of the Jordan River in a wilderness area where Elijah was taken to heaven in a chariot and from where some expected he might return (see 2 Kings 2:11). In Malachi 4:5, we read this prophecy, which gave these Jews a reason to ask their question: “Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes.” Imagine the consequences if John had answered “Yes” to this question and how they would cross examine him! John did not deny that he was the person God inspired Malachi to speak about, but he did deny that he was the same person as the Elijah who rode the chariot to heaven. Though we do not know exactly who they meant by “the prophet,” these questioners might have been thinking of Moses who wrote in Deuteronomy 18:15, “The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet.” Whoever they meant, John knew who he was, and he was not “Elijah” and he was not “the prophet,” though he was a prophet.

**(John 1:22) Finally they said, “Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about**

**yourself?”**

The investigating committee demanded that John tell them who he was. They wanted to know why he thought he was authorized to preach and baptize as he was doing. Though John was a Levite, and could have served as a priest, they thought he was doing what the religious authorities had not officially sanctioned. If John could not give them a good reason for his behavior, the authorities in Jerusalem would make every effort to stop him.

**(John 1:23) John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, “I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way for the Lord.’”**

John quoted from Isaiah 40:3. John was literally a voice “crying out” in the wilderness for people to hear, as an old-time crier might call out a headline to sell his papers on a street corner. Jesus was and is the Word of God who was soon to come publicly into the world as the long-expected Messiah. As the voice of God, John “cried out” this good news so people would prepare themselves for Jesus’ coming. The preparation John preached required repentance, a turning from the practice of sin and a preparing to receive and believe in Jesus the Messiah; for we read in Matthew 3:2-3, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.’ This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, ‘The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.””

### **Questions for Discussion and Thinking Further**

1. What did John the Baptist mean by “he was before me?”
2. Why is the law of God important?
3. What came through Jesus Christ? What does that mean to you?
4. What does “confess and did not deny it mean”?
5. What does the description “God the only Son” mean? Who is this?

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