

## Testimony to the True Light

John 1:6-13

Pastor Jason Van Bommel

*There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light.*

*The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. – John 1:6-13, ESV*

### Introduction: The Lighthouse Keeper

I've always been fascinated by the lives of lighthouse keepers. Maybe it's because I grew up with a mom who was a bit obsessed with lighthouses, but I've often thought about what life was like for the keepers of the light. Today, lighthouses operate on automatic systems and are unmanned or have been completely turned into tourist attractions. But there was a time, not so long ago, when people had to dedicate their lives to ensuring that the lighthouse would stay on throughout the night and in the severest storms. They knew that if the light went out, ships would crash and people would die.

John the Baptist was a kind of spiritual lighthouse keeper. He himself was not the light, but he worked hard to make sure people could see the light and be appropriately warned and saved. In this, he's an example to all of us of the role of a faithful witness to Christ before a watching world, a faithful lighthouse keeper in a dark and often stormy world.

### I. The Witness

*“There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light.” – vv. 6-8*

Verse 6 of John 1 comes almost as a blunt interruption of a lyrical introduction to the person and work of Jesus Christ. Verses 1-5 unfold the nature of Christ and His role in creation and revelation in tight, poetic prose. Then, verse 6 comes and abruptly shifts our attention away from the eternal word to a mere man, a witness.

#### A. John's Nature

John's nature is highlighted and emphasized almost as much for what he was not as for what he was. The contrast between the word and the witness is stark and clear:

- Jesus is the eternal word who was with God in the beginning and who is God. John is not the word with God, but a man sent from God. Though his birth was miraculous and his calling was remarkable, he was still just a man.
- Jesus is the light shining in the darkness, unconquerable and incomprehensible. John was emphatically not the light but merely a witness to the light.

Why did John the Gospel Writer feel the need to take time to draw such a contrast? Well, John the Baptist had been a very popular prophet who had developed quite a following, a following which continued even after his death. Many of John's disciples had become Christians and were now following and worshipping Jesus. But not all of them did. Some of John's disciples were guilty of either downplaying Christ's nature or making too much of John's. Discipleship can often turn to hero-worship after the death of the leader of the group. So John the Evangelist probably wanted to make sure that both Christians and the disciples of John fully understood the difference between John the Baptist and Jesus.

## **B. John's Mission**

John's nature was merely human, but his mission was a vital one. He came as a witness, to testify about the light, that all might believe through him. In describing John the Baptist's mission, John the Evangelist uses the term witness or testify three times. John comes as a witness to bear witness. The word used here is a legal one, used to describe testimony given in court. John uses this term "witness" almost twice as much as the other three Gospel-writers combined.

John the Evangelist's use of the term "witness" or "testimony" or "testify" reflects his own mission as a Gospel-writer. He himself is bearing witness to the truth about the person and work of Jesus, and in doing so, he is summoning other witnesses to testify along with him. This will be a major theme throughout this book, especially when we get to the end of chapter 5.

The mission of a witness is to tell the truth in support of a right outcome for a trial. If you are a witness and you choose to testify, it is because you know the truth and you care about doing your part to ensure that the outcome of the trial is right and that the truth is vindicated. This was John the Baptist's goal, too. He knew who Jesus was and he wanted to bear witness so that all might believe through his testimony.

## **II. The True Light**

*"The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world."* – v. 9

While John the Baptist was not the light, Jesus was and is the true light.

### **A. True Light**

John uses this term "true light" to emphasize Jesus as distinct from two other kinds of light – reflective light and false light. Other so-called lights may not be light at all. They may be darkness masquerading as light, such as false prophets and pretend messiahs. The Jewish people of the first century had certainly seen their share of these false lights, wolves in sheep's clothing. Some people thought Jesus was just another one of those, another failed pretend Messiah.

Many people in our day are fed up with religion. They have seen many false lights, self-seeking and manipulative egomaniacs who manipulate people into funding the expansion of their mansions. They have read of the child abuse scandals covered up by cowardly church leaders, of the adultery committed by pastors who preach against the immorality of the world, of the church accounting scandals and more. They have had it with false

lights. Religion seems to them like just another way for the rich to get richer and the poor to get taken for a ride.

Jesus saw the same realities in the manipulate systems of man-made religion, and he confronted them. John the Baptist saw them and confronted them, too. While Jesus was and is the true light, John the Baptist was a reflecting light, which is what we can all be, too. We cannot be the true light of the world, but we can be positioned before Him as mirrors to catch His light and reflect it to the world. We can do what John did and show people the light of Jesus.

Jesus, as the true light, gives light to everyone. His life is the light of men, as verse 4 told us. But not everyone recognizes Him as the source of their enlightenment. Not everyone has been made as open to all of His light, the light of His special revelation as well as the light of His general revelation – that is, everyone has some of the light of creation from Him, but not everyone has the light of salvation from Him.

All of those who receive His light can reflect it to the world around them. In other words, everyone can be not only a recipient of common grace but a vessel of common grace to the lives of others – doctors who care for the sick, teachers who instruct the ignorant, leaders who govern with justice according to wisdom. But only those who know that He is the true light and who have the light of salvation can reflect His light fully and consciously to the world. Only those who know Him can tell others the full truth about Him.

## **B. Coming into the World**

But John’s mission as witness to the light was unique. He had the calling from God to be the witness who would testify that the true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. In other words. He was the forerunner, sent out ahead of Jesus to say to people, “He is coming! He is coming!” And he did this very well.

John prepared people for the coming of the true light into the world in two main ways, by calling the repent of their sins and by testifying to the king. He told people to repent and be baptized and he also told people, “*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, ESV

## **III. Rejection, Reception and Right**

From the strength of John the Baptist’s testimony in verses 6-9, we turn now to the sad reality of the world’s ignorance and rejection in verses 10-11:

*“He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him.”*

### **A. The World**

Jesus is the creator, the Word that framed the worlds. He is the light of men, the true light which enlightens everyone. Yet when He came into His world, that He had made, and spoke the truth to people whom He had created and enlightened with reason and truth and insight, the world simply did not know Him.

In John's Gospel, the reason for the world's ignorance of Jesus is clear: The world is in rebellion against its creator and is mired in sin. Thus, the ignorance of the world is not innocent. It's not like the world could say, "Oh, Jesus! We just didn't recognize you! Sorry!" The world does not know Him because the world does not know God but is in determined rebellion against God.

This brings to light the reality that people often don't know the truth because they don't want to know the truth. They choose to live in ignorance because they think it leaves them free to live as they please. Jesus will confront this attitude in chapter 8 when He will tell people that they are not free, that their rebellion is actually slavery, and that only the Son can set them free indeed.

## **B. His Own People**

From a general statement about the world, John focuses in on verse 11 to a specific statement about the Jewish people. The world did not know its creator, but Jesus' own people did not receive their long-awaited Messiah. John's condemnation of Jesus' own people is stronger than his statement about the world. The world did not know Him, but His own people did not receive Him.

The Jewish people should have known who Jesus was. They had the witness of the Scriptures. They had the public testimony of John the Baptist. They may have recognized or known who Jesus was, but they did not receive Him. They rejected Him, their Savior and King, the Son of David and promised Deliverer. And why did they reject Him? John's Gospels will make that clear in the first 11 chapters, but it came down to unmet expectations and an unwelcome salvation.

## **C. But . . .**

Thankfully, after the sad realities of verses 10-11, verse 12 begins with that most beautiful of all words in the Bible, "But . . ."

*But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. – vv. 12-13*

### **I. Receive**

"To all those who did receive him . . ." Not everyone rejected Jesus. Some did receive Him. Some received Him into their homes and others into their hearts and lives. Some left everything to follow Him, and some snuck out in the middle of the night to meet with Him. Some remained when the crowds scattered, saying, "Where else can we go, Lord? You alone have the words of eternal life . . ."

### **2. Believe**

Those who received Him were those “who believed in His name.” This is more specific terminology than “received.” To believe in the name of Jesus is to fully recognize Him for who He is, as God-in-the-flesh, the eternal Word incarnate. It is also to believe that He who is the eternal word came to be our Savior. “Jesus” means “Yahweh saves” or even simply “He saves” and so to believe in His name is to believe in Him for salvation.

The way we express “believe in His name” in the Westminster Shorter Catechism is in Question #86:

*“86. What is faith in Jesus Christ?”*

A. Faith in Jesus Christ is a saving grace, whereby we receive and rest upon him alone for salvation, as he is offered to us in the gospel.”

### **3. Children of God**

To such people – to those who receive and believe – God gives a very special right – the right to become children of God, to be adopted into God’s own family, to become the younger brothers and sisters of the eternal Son of God and to be co-heirs of God with Christ.

Such a right is greater than all the rights the world could ever offer. It is the right of calling the Eternal, Almighty God “Our Father” and of being granted the access and security only a child can have with his father. The believer may be rejected and ridiculed by the world – just like Jesus was – but our identity and hope and security and treasure all rest securely with our Heavenly Father.

### **4. Born of God**

Such a right does not come by mere human will. Those who receive Jesus, those who believe in His name, are those who have been born of God. John emphasizes in very strong language just how different this kind of birth is from any ordinary human earthly birth. In Greek, the word order emphasizes this contrast even more strongly. It says: “who – not of blood nor out of the will of the flesh nor out of the will of man/husband – but of God were born.”

Human birth in Jesus’ day comes about by a husband’s decision, usually a fleshly decision made in passion, and the bloodline of the father who made the decision would determine the privileges of the child so born. But if God is the author of the new birth, it is not a matter of free will or a mere choice, but of the will of God, the will of the one who gives this new life. And the privileges of those so born do not depend on their bloodline, their heritage, but again are wholly dependent on the God who has granted new life and who has become our Father by His gracious will.

### **Conclusion: Can I Get a Witness?**

So let me ask you, have you need born of God? Do you have this new life and the access and security and hope of being given the right to become a child of God? How can you know? Well, have you received Him? Do you believe in His name?

In a few minutes we're going to sing "My Hope is Built on Nothing Less," one of my favorite hymns. The opening lines of that hymn really say it all: "My hope of built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness. I dare not trust the sweetest frame but wholly lean on Jesus name." If you understand and can sing those lines sincerely from your hearts, then you have received Him and are believing in His name and you are a child of God.

Nothing less than the blood of Jesus can wash away your sin. Nothing less than the perfect righteousness of Jesus can clothe you and make you fully acceptable in the eyes of a Holy God. Any amount of human effort, human desire, works of charity and righteousness, will be totally inadequate to cleanse and cover you. Association with other names – being a part of your family or a part of this church, being an American or a faithful Harford County loyalist – none of these names can save you. Only the name of Jesus - the God who saves, the eternal word made flesh to rescue us – can save you!

If you are a child of God, then you need to ask yourself this question: Does your life look like the life of John the Baptist? Are you a faithful witness, holding out the light in the darkness and through the storms of this world? Being a witness is not easy. It cost John his life. The Greek word for witness is *marturion* as a noun and *martureo* as a verb. It's the source of our word martyr for a very good reason. Very often throughout church history, those who have shone the brightest have received the world's rejection, even unto death.

But Tertullian, the early church father, famously said, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church."

On October 16, 1555, Hugh Latimer and Nicholas Ridley were two such witnesses, and as they went to be burned at the stake for their faithfulness to King Jesus, Latimer turned to his friend and fellow bishop and said, "*Be of good cheer, Master Ridley, and play the man, for we shall this day light such a candle in England as I trust by God's grace shall never be put out.*" They were not the true light, but they were able to reflect Him, even unto death, and their reflection did become a light for many centuries, fueling one of the greatest reformations and, later, one of the most powerful missionary movements in the history of the church.

So perhaps today, King Jesus is asking us, "Can I get a witness?"