

The First Witness

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[0 : 00] Well, I wonder, as we begin, if you can think of any great turning points in world history, something big or small that has changed the world for good. A big one, perhaps, we can think of the fall of the Berlin Wall. The world stood in shock as a wall that stood for decades of division and fear. Well, overnight it crumbled and turned to rubble and the world has never been the same.

Or something smaller, but no less significant, the invention of the light bulb. I saw a great film last year, perhaps you saw it too, called *The Current War*. It tells the story of the race between two men in the 1800s to find a way to supply electric lighting to every home in America. It's more exciting than it sounds because it's a story that has changed life in our world for good. Life, most of the time, is ordinary. Things just tick along. But sometimes something happens and it's the end of life as we know it. And this morning we're coming in our Bibles to one of those great turning points in history. From the old to the new, from the prophets to the apostles, from promise to reality. Because today we get to see the last prophet of the old covenant meeting the bringer of the new covenant. Last week we were introduced briefly to this prophet, John. John the Baptist, who came, we read, as a witness to testify about the light. And more importantly than that, we saw the light, the one who was with God in the beginning, who is God, and who became flesh and lived among us, the Lord Jesus Christ. His life is the light of the world. But he had a witness, someone who saw him and who spoke about him, and his name was John. And today we're coming to see and to hear what John saw and heard and spoke of. So last week we considered that this is a true and a trustworthy testimony, something that we can rest our faith on. And just to confirm that for us, John in here drops some hints for us. You notice in verse 28, he said, this all happened at Bethany on the other side of the Jordan. A real place on the map. And verse 39, Luke, when these men followed Jesus home, he says, it was about four in the afternoon. A very specific timestamp. Those are the kinds of details that you just wouldn't bother with unless you had been there to see it, unless you remembered.

John also shows us that as he writes, he's translating as he goes what people really said. See that in verse 38? Rabbi, which means teacher. Or verse 41, Messiah, that is the Christ. And those little translations, they would be pointless, wouldn't they, if John was inventing a story. But because he is recording what real people really said, well, sometimes he has to translate from the language that people spoke where Jesus was, Aramaic, into the language that people spoke everywhere, Greek. That's what he's doing. C.S. Lewis, who's famous for his children's books, lots of us have probably read them, and for his theology too. Well, he was actually a professor of literature. He studied books. And he made the observation that either John is reporting historical words or events, or else some unknown writer in the second century, without known predecessors or successes, suddenly anticipated the whole technique of modern, novelistic, realistic narrative.

In short, people just didn't write like this in the ancient world unless it was true and worth writing about. And so as we just go on to look at John's witness, let's not imagine that this belongs a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away, okay, in somebody else's reality. No, this is world history.

[4 : 42] World history. World history. And as we'll see, the importance of what John saw and what he said makes it world-changing history. The end of life as we know it. So firstly then, let us watch the witness at work. Let's watch the witness at work. Read with me, if you would, from verse 19.

Now, this was John's testimony when the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, I am not the Messiah. So we see John the Baptist was clearly causing a stir at Bethany because the religious leaders in Jerusalem sent a committee to launch a formal investigation into who on earth this guy was. Okay, they say, well, he's not one of us. He's not part of the religious establishment, but he's saying and doing religious things. So who is he? Well, look at John's reply. Who are you?

They say, I am not the Messiah, says John. It's like me asking you, well, tell me your name. And you say, well, I'm not Jesus. Okay, well, that's not necessarily what I'm asking, what I need to know, or is it just what I need to know? See, John knows that he is getting to be known. He's making a name for himself, but the very last thing he wants is for people to think that he is who they need, when really he is only there to make Christ known, to point to someone else. See, this is a great lesson for us as Christians, especially for Christian leaders. Your phrase that sadly become more common to hear in church is Messiah complex. They're describing a sense of self-importance or arrogance or pride that can grow up in our hearts when we are invested in serving in the church. [6 : 53] And it's sad, not because we hear it more, but because very often it's true. Now, let me say my brief time with you, I have not observed that this is something rife among us. Okay, that's not what I'm saying. In fact, quite the opposite. There is a real servant-hearted spirit in this family.

But the fact that it is so common more widely should warn us that in the mix of church life and service, the state of our hearts makes it possible, easy in fact, to forget that we are not the ones carrying the kingdom, but rather Jesus is. There's a church down south where it became common for people to begin to say to one another quite regularly, half tongue-in-cheek, I think, you know, brother, you know, sister, it's not all about you. It's not all about you. Now, as I say, I don't think that's necessary for us to start saying to one another. But it does illustrate how in the context of a loving church family, a dose of humility can be good for us and can bring us great relief.

Telling ourselves, I am not the Christ, takes the weight of the world off our shoulders. It means that we don't have to have all the answers. You and I don't have to fill every gap.

We don't have to be on good form when we come together or on a Sunday because you and I are not God's promised chosen rescuer and king. We are not the Christ. Striking, isn't it, in a gospel where we will hear Jesus say again and again, I am, I am, I am the bread of life, I am the light of the world, that we begin with John saying, I am not. So friends, we could do worse than to say at the start of the day, I am not the Christ and come instead to the one who is.

John only wants to be part of the story for one reason, and that is to make Christ known. I wonder, do we share his ambition? Is the part that we want to play in the story simply to point to him? John doesn't want to risk casting his shadow on the one true light who came into the world. In fact, look, he backs even further into the shadows. Notice that in verse 21, they asked him, who then are you? Are you Elijah? He said, I am not. Are you the prophet? He answered, no, he's not giving them anything to hold on to or to twist. You know, the committee from Jerusalem think he's probably someone important. You're someone like Elijah. Elijah was an important prophet in the past, but in Malachi chapter 4 verse 5, God promises, see, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. Elijah would come again in the last days, so is this him?

[10 : 15] I'm not him, says John. Of course, Jesus will later say that John actually did play that part in the story, but John is not in it for the glory. He's not in it for the fame. Or was he the prophet maybe?

They're speaking about the prophet that Moses speaks about in Deuteronomy chapter 18, the Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you. You must listen to him. So is John that prophet?

Well, no, says John. These guys came looking for a promised end times hero, someone to listen to. But when John finally tells them who he is, look how he puts it in verse 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.

Who am I? I'm a voice, he says. A voice. He doesn't even use his own words. He just borrows the words from another prophet. He's effectively writing himself out of the story, but for the one thing that he is there to do, to make Christ known. How close is John in importance compared with the one who is coming on the way? Well, he is the one who comes after me, says John, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. In the ancient world, it was the job, only the job of a slave to take off somebody else's shoes. It was the lowest, the most demeaning form of service. And John is saying, I am not even worthy of doing that for him. See, friends, our view of Jesus is not high enough if we think we are worthy of doing even the least thing for him. We have the honor of serving the Lord

Jesus only because he has graciously rescued us. He's brought us into his kingdom of light from a kingdom of darkness where we lived before. We have been saved into his service. And in his service, we are only a voice. A voice that says, don't look at me. It's not about me. Look at him. It is

all about him.

[12 : 46] So let us guard our hearts against arrogance. Let's guard our hearts against pride. Let's not be self-seeking or self-serving in the service of Christ. Not only in our areas of service in the church, but as we serve him in all of life, in our families at home, as a husband, as a wife, as a mom, as a dad, or as a child, as a brother, as a sister. Let us serve him at work, whether we are a manager or a worker, as we study as a tutor, as a student, with our friends, in the sight of our neighbors. Because this humility, not putting ourselves at the center of the story, but putting Jesus there, it just doesn't happen in the world. But it should define our life as a church.

And it should define our lives as Christians as we live in the world. Let us openly confess, I am not the Christ. And let us live instead to make the true Christ known.

Firstly, then, watch and learn from the witness at work. Watch and learn from the witness. And secondly, believe the words of the witness. Believe his words. Look with me at verse 29. The next day, John saw Jesus coming towards him and said, look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

What a wonderful way that is to describe the Lord Jesus. And in a moment, we're going to come back and reflect on those words. But to understand why John says it, we first need to kind of zoom out and look at the bigger picture of the Bible. So why did John baptize? Why did he come? It was obviously a question at the time they asked him in verse 25. Well, John, if you're not a promised end times hero, then why are you baptizing with water? See, the symbol of washing with water had to do with God's promise of a new covenant to come in the last days. This is what we thought about earlier with the children. Listen to Ezekiel in chapter 36, verse 25. I will sprinkle clean water on you and you'll be clean. I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you. I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh and I will put my spirit in you. These wonderful gifts from God being washed clean from sin, having a new soft heart, having his spirit live in us. That package of gifts was symbolized by sprinkling with water or by baptism.

And this package of gifts was summed up in God's promise of a new covenant. Now covenant is kind of a churchy word, isn't it? But it just means relationship. Whenever we read about covenants in the Bible, we're reading about God's relationship with his people. But that relationship had become so bitter and broken by his people's sin that God comes to say through the prophets, I'm going to make a new covenant. Okay, not like the old one, because this new covenant is a relationship that you won't be able to break. It will be a sin-proof covenant. That's what Ezekiel's talking about, what all those gifts are for, sins washed away. A new soft heart in us, God's spirit dwelling in us. Gifts that come as part of the package of this new relationship with God. And so when John came baptizing or sprinkling with water, well, for the religious leaders, it would have set their new covenant alarm bells ringing, which is why they go and ask him, well, if you're not a big hero, if you're not bringing a new covenant, then why are you baptizing? And John says, because one greater than me is coming, who is bringing the new covenant. Notice those two things John says about Jesus. First, look, the Lamb of God who does what? Takes away the sins of the world. He takes away sins. And then second, verse 33, the man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is the one who will baptize with the Holy

[17 : 25] Spirit. This one takes away sins, and this one gives the Holy Spirit. John's saying those great promises are fulfilled by Jesus. He's the bringer of the new covenant. He's the one who creates this new relationship for us with God so that we might be right with God for good. He does that firstly by taking away our sin. That's why John calls him the Lamb of God. See, in the old covenant, you know, if I sinned, what I would bring to be sacrificed was a lamb. My sins would be symbolically placed on that lamb, and the lamb would bear my guilt and could then serve my sentence, take the punishment for me that I rightfully deserve. The lamb would take away my sins by dying for my sins in my place.

The word for that is substitutionary atonement. Those of you who take notes can write that down, substitutionary atonement. Okay, my place is swapped with the lamb, substitution, and through the lamb, I can be right again with God, atonement. I can be at one again with him because my sins have been taken away. But for all the countless millions of lambs that ever died for people's sins, they were only ever a holding place for the one true lamb who would come to take away sin once for all. As Hebrews tells us, the blood of bulls and goats could never take away sins, but he, Jesus, appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself.

Now, here he is, says John. Look there, the lamb of God, the sacrifice who will take away the sins of the world, Jesus Christ. Remember, we saw last week what the world is like. The word of God through whom the world was made came to his world and the world did not receive him. Now, says John, the one who the world rejected is the very same one who will take away the world's sin. He came to rescue rebels.

That helps us to see, I think, that when John talks about the world, he's not talking about number, but kind. He's not saying Jesus will take away the sin for every person without exception, but he takes away sin for sinners without distinction. He died for the sins of the world.

That means whoever we are, whatever baggage we come with this morning, we can come to the Lord Jesus and have our sins forgiven for good. And when we do that, we receive from Jesus the Holy Spirit.

[20 : 25] Jesus is the one, says John, who will baptize with the Holy Spirit. Remember what Ezekiel says, this is all part of the same package of the new covenant. Okay, the Holy Spirit is not an added extra for the super spiritual later on. If your trust is in Jesus, God, the Holy Spirit lives in you today.

We know that because, says John, when the Holy Spirit came and rested on Jesus, it confirmed for us that Jesus is the one who will give the Holy Spirit. You know, there's no sleight of hand with Jesus. There's no half promises. There's no small print. Jesus never takes away our sin without giving us the Holy Spirit because he came to bring us the complete package for this new right relationship with God. And so we can trust that he keeps nothing back from us when we come to him in faith. Believing in Jesus is belonging to God. That is what John the Baptist testifies to us. He saw it. Verse 32, I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. And so I have seen, he says, and I testify that this, this is God's chosen one.

And so the question for us this morning is, do you believe him? Do you believe him? Do you believe him? That the promised one has come? That the Christ is Jesus?

And that he came to bring us into a new, holy, unbreakable relationship with God? And that he is here for us to take hold of now? John saw it, he swears on it.

[22 : 20] And so we can have total confidence that Jesus is who John says he is, the Lamb of God who takes away our sins. So let's believe the witness's words. And finally, having believed his words, let us follow the one who saves. Let's follow the one who saves. Read with me from verse 35, if you would.

The next day, John was there again with two of his disciples. When he saw Jesus passing by, he said, look, the Lamb of God. When the two disciples heard him say this, they followed Jesus. We can hear John's testimony, we can believe John's testimony, but ultimately John's testimony requires our response. And we see here that the response is to follow the one John points to, to follow Jesus. Notice that two of the guys who followed Jesus here are Andrew and Simon Peter. But we know from the other Gospels, they became Jesus' followers when Jesus called them. Remember, he walked down by the sea. These men were mending their nets, working on their boats, and Jesus called them and they followed him. But here they seem to go after Jesus when John points him out. So how does what we read here fit in with the other Gospel writers, with Matthew, Mark, and Luke? Well, the other Gospel writers, they tell us that when Jesus called these men, John had already been arrested. But this initial contact is clearly taking place before that, when John is still out and about, not in prison. So in a way, this helps to explain why Andrew and Simon,

James and John were so quick to follow Jesus despite the cost. Because John the Baptist had already pointed him out to them as the Lamb of God who takes away their sins. So John's point really is just that these guys first followed Jesus because of John the Baptist's words. But John, in the end, didn't get to see the fruit of his labors. By that time, he was in prison. So as a side note, brothers and sisters, let's not lose heart, let's not stop praying or give up sharing the good news if our witness doesn't seem to be doing anything. Perhaps it felt that way to John. But what John teaches us is that our witness is only the beginning of the story, not the end of the story.

What you say, what you share with a friend, a relative, somebody that you know, could in the end lead them to Jesus in a way that you don't ever get to see. Perhaps that you don't ever know about until eternity. Someone was telling me this past week about how they had come to follow Jesus because somebody they hardly knew gave them an invitation to Christianity Explored. That invitation sat on a desk. And then a few weeks later, they came along to the course and met Jesus

and followed him. And life was changed forever. Your simple word, an invitation, a gift led to sins forgiven. A new heart, the Holy Spirit taking up residence. John didn't ever get to see the end point of his witness when these guys left their lives behind to follow the one who he lived to make known. But his witness is what first sent them after Jesus to see where he was staying, to spend that day with him. And so friends, don't give up your witness. Keep sharing, keep taking those everyday opportunities, saying those everyday prayers that we might make Christ known. As Don Carson writes of

[26 : 22] Andrew, he became the first in a long line of successors who have discovered that the most common and effective Christian testimony is the witness of friend to friend, brother to brother.

And we see that it was that witness that brought the men to Jesus who we still listen to today. Look at verse 41. The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, we have found the Messiah, that is the Christ. And he brought him to Jesus. Jesus looked at him and said, you are Simon, son of John. You will be called Cephas, which when translated is Peter.

Peter. Peter, we heard from Peter last week, didn't we? He says he was an eyewitness of Jesus' majesty. Well, he is at the beginning seeing Jesus for the very first time. And what brought him was John's witness. So this is where we see, this is the hinge on which the Bible turns, on which history turns.

John stands in the Bible as the last in a long line of prophets from Moses, even further back from Abraham, even Adam, if he wanted. The prophets had looked forward to the day when the longed for Messiah would come. The messengers of the old covenant craned their necks, says Peter, trying to find out the time and the circumstances to which the spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of the Messiah and the glories that would follow. And John the Baptist got to see that day with his very own eyes. He had the honor of being the last prophet who could say, I myself did not know him. And the very first, you could say, I have seen that this is God's chosen one. The last prophet and the first witness. And the result of his witness is seen in the first of the apostles, the authoritative eyewitnesses of the life, death, and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. So we see this is indeed the great turning point in history, the change of the ages, because it marks the break between the prophets of old and the apostles of the new. Between those who look forward to the coming of Jesus with longing and those who have lived ever since in the confidence of the knowledge that Jesus has come. Between those who had broken their relationship with God and those who today enjoy an unbreakable relationship with him. For Jesus, the bringer of the new covenant, has come. And so I am sure, writes Paul, that neither death nor life, nor angels, angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord.

[29 : 32] For he has come. And so today we follow him, not by works, not by pride, but by faith in him and his finished work. So will you follow him? And following him, will you share in the witness of countless millions before us that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, so that many in our time might come to believe and to have life in his name? Let's pray together.

God, our Father, we recognize and bow before you as the King of history, the Lord of time.

We worship you as the God who is faithful, who keeps his promises. And we thank you above all for the promise of the promise of the Lord Jesus, that in him we have our sins forgiven, that in him we have the promised Holy Spirit, that in him we have a right heart towards you. Lord, help us to rejoice in these gifts. Lord, when life overshadows us, when our business in the world catches up with us, Lord, let us say together, I am not the Christ. Give us this heart of humility to come to him who is and to find rest. And dear Father, we pray that as we look at John and his gospel, that you would help us to reach out to those who are lost. Father, in this community and in the city and the places we live and work, please, by your spirit, would you be bringing men, women, and children to see Jesus and to follow him. For we pray in his great name. Amen.