

John 1:19-37

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[0:00] Well, good morning to you all. Please take your copy of God's Word and join me in John chapter 1. The opening phrase of verse 19, and this is the testimony of John, lets us know that something new is happening.

We've spent some slow time so far, but our pace is going to pick up a bit as the narrative takes off. If your Bible translation is anything like mine, there is likely a subheading inserted here before verse 19.

So, the verses before us today tell us something of the testimony of John the Baptist. Let's not forget that the singular prominent aim of John the Apostle's gospel account, sometimes called John the Evangelist, is found in John chapter 20, verse 30 and 31.

There he writes, Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples which are not written in this book, but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

This entire book is the testimony of John the Apostle. A testimony is a spoken or written statement giving evidence of something that has occurred.

[1:56] Now today's text is not the first time that John the Apostle has mentioned the testimony of John the Baptist. In verses 6 through 12 of this very same chapter, He wrote, But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, He gave the right to become children of God.

The word translated witness in these verses is the same translated testimony in verse 19. It's the very same Greek word.

And then again, we'll see it translated witness in verses 32 and verse 34. So those two terms I may use interchangeably this morning as the translators of John do.

I think that John is doing here is he's placing an emphasis on the need for the gospel to be proclaimed by faithful witnesses in order that others might believe.

He's right at the outset speaking of faithful proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ, even as he's about to lay out his own proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ.

[3:37] Beloved, if we have been shown the grace of God in the person and work of Jesus Christ, if we have been given the right to become children of God, if we have life in his name, then a significant marker of our lives should be faithful proclamation of that very gospel that saved us.

It should characterize God's people that we share the good news of Jesus. We can learn something of what being a faithful witness looks like from the earlier account of John the Baptist in chapter 1 that I just read to you.

Notice, firstly, that a faithful witness is humble. John records of John the Baptist that he was not the light.

John the Baptist could save no one, but his job was to point people to the one who could save them. So a faithful witness, secondly, exalts the person and work of Jesus Christ.

John the Baptist was not the light, but he came to bear witness about the light. He goes on in verse 9, The true light which gives light to everyone was coming into the world.

[4:58] So John the Baptist, not the light. Jesus Christ, the true light. So a faithful witness exalts the person and work of Jesus Christ. And a faithful witness offers the means of salvation.

Good for us to talk about Jesus, who he is and what he has done. But we also must say to people, And this is how you can be saved.

Verse 7, John the Apostle records, John the Baptist, He came as a witness to bear witness about the light that all might believe through him.

And then verse 12, But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God. So there's this pattern that's established in verses 6 through 12 of the chapter.

And we're going to see this pattern repeated in today's text. As John the Apostle, once again, speaks of the testimony of John the Baptist.

[5:59] So again, John chapter 1, verses 19 through 37. Before I read it, let me remind you, beloved, this is God's word to us, written for his glory and our good, that we might believe its promises, obey its commands, and have affection for its author.

May we hear it and respond accordingly to it. And this is the testimony of John. When the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, Who are you?

He confessed and did not deny, but confessed, I am not the Christ. And they asked him, What then? Are you Elijah? He said, I am not.

Are you the prophet? And he answered, No. So they said to him, Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?

He said, I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord, as the prophet Isaiah said. Now they had been sent from the Pharisees.

[7:08] They asked him, Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the prophet? John answered them, 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. These things took place in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him and said, Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. This is he of whom I said, After me comes a man who ranks before me, because he was before me.

I myself did not know him, but for this purpose I came baptizing with water, that he might be revealed to Israel. And John bore witness.

I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.

[8:14] And I have seen and I have borne witness that this is the Son of God. The next day again, John was standing with two of his disciples, and he looked at Jesus as he walked by and said, Behold the Lamb of God.

The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. John the Apostle structures his narrative of John the Baptist's testimony concerning Jesus Christ around three successive days. John seems to be more concerned about chronology than the other gospel writers. We're going to see this phrase on the next day many, many times throughout this text.

So as we walk through the text and consider some details of it, I will lead us with perhaps the simplest three-point outline I have ever presented to you or ever will.

It is as follows. Number one, day one, verses 19 through 28. Number two, day two, verses 29 through 34.

[9:18] And number three, you probably know, day three, verses 35 through 37. As a joke, I thought about making that point really obscure and different, but I resisted.

Then, after we look at some of those details, I'm going to revisit those three characteristics of a faithful witness and highlight them in the text for you. So that's our plan as we work through the text together.

So, number one, let's look at day one. Remember, this is the testimony of John the Baptist recorded in three successive days. Day one, verses 19 through 28.

Before looking at the questions that were asked of John and his responses, let's deal with who it is that is asking these questions. Because there are four groups mentioned, and we could get a little lost if we don't understand who they are.

So you see in verse 19, this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites. So, number one group, Jews. Number two group, priests.

[10:21] Number three group, Levites, to ask these questions. And then we get the parenthetical that John puts in there in verse 24. Now, they had been sent from the Pharisees.

So there's the fourth group. So, lest we be confused. The Jews is a term that certainly can be used of any and all ethnic Hebrew people.

Like, any Israelite could be called a Jew. But John most regularly uses the word to refer to religious authorities who were hostile towards Jesus.

So it's this broad term that he's using, but to speak of a group of the Jews that were hostile towards Jesus. Most likely, he's referring to what he has in his mind is the Sanhedrin, which was the governing body of Israel that was allowed to function under Roman authority.

Whenever Rome would go and conquer a land, they would allow some of the government to stay intact, some of the culture to remain while they ultimately ruled over and above them.

[11:27] So that was the Sanhedrin that ruled as the Jewish governing authority. That's probably who John has in mind when he says the Jews. So it's the Jews, this group, this Sanhedrin, this council that sends priests, which were officiators of religious ceremonies, and they were the theological authorities of Israel.

They were the most qualified to come and ask theological questions. And we see that they're not sent alone. They're also sent with Levites. Levites were men from the tribe of Levi who assisted the priests with their duties.

Temple security consisted of Levites. So when we see the phrase priests and Levites, it is most likely a group of theological experts, those who were sent to ask questions, gather information, challenge, and they're bodyguards.

So think theological experts with bodyguards as well. And the last group we see are the Pharisees. The Sanhedrin was largely made up of Sadducees who were theologically liberal.

Religion for them was largely social and political. And the Pharisees, these two parties within the Sanhedrin, the Pharisees were theologically conservative.

[12:55] It is this minority group that would have been most watchful for the Messiah, which is the Hebrew word for the chosen one, this deliverer.

We also know the Greek word Christ, and we see that word used most often. They were the most watchful for the Messiah and most concerned about anyone who had a significant following as John the Baptist did.

So, what I'm gathering from that is it's most likely that this group, the Jews, the Sanhedrin, send the experts along with some guard, and those experts that they send are those that were most concerned about who this John the Baptist is.

They were watchful for the Christ. So, a delegation is sent to John the Baptist and sent to ask the question, who are you?

We see that in verse 19, and then in verse 21, what then are you Elijah, and are you the prophet, and who are you?

[14:01] We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself? Verse 22, and then why are you baptizing if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?

Verse 25. We're trying to sort out who this John the Baptist is. Who are you? Now, many false messiahs had come before the true messiah's arrival.

Jewish people had a gross misunderstanding of who the Christ was going to be. They were a conquered people. Don't lose sight of that, even though there's some structures in place of authority.

They were a conquered people, and they were oppressed under Roman rule. And as any conquered people will, they were looking for a way out of that oppression.

And they found in the Old Testament text this anointed one, this Christ, this deliverer, and they thought that he would come and he would rule militarily. They were looking for a temporal release from this oppression, and they were constantly looking for it, and there were men who constantly arose claiming to be this Christ, and were found not to be so.

[15:18] So, they're rightly concerned. Anybody who's got a following going on, they want to know what's happening. And, not only do they genuinely want there to be a messiah who will deliver them, but often these false Christs would arise, and they would form a little insurrection, and Rome would have to come and crush that insurrection, and more oppression would come with it.

And so, they were concerned, rightly. They were trying to get out ahead of any possible wrongdoing, and if certainly John the Baptist was the messiah, they'd like to know this as well. So, this initial question that they ask, John knows exactly what they're asking, right? John the Apostle records in verse 20, he confessed and did not deny, which the Greek can just mean did not fail to confess.

They're saying emphatically, he confessed and he didn't fail to confess, but confessed, I am not the Christ. John the Baptist already knows this is what they're trying to get at as they come and ask this initial question of him, and he's very clear.

He wants there to be no misunderstanding. I am not the Christ. So, it follows. What then? Are you Elijah?

[16:40] And they would ask this question because of a prophecy found in Malachi, chapter 4, and verse 5. There we can read, Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes.

And so, the Jews understood that there was going to be Elijah and they thought it was going to be a returning from heaven, Elijah. Elijah himself that would come back.

And it's understandable why they may have thought that John the Baptist was that very Elijah because of his appearance. In Mark, chapter 1, and verse 6, we read, Now John was locusts and wild honey.

Elijah is described in 2 Kings, chapter 1, and verse 8 as wearing a garment of hair with a belt of leather about his waist.

So, they see one that appears like Elijah and his response to them is, I am not.

[17:52] Now, it could be a little bit of a confusion at this point because, as I'm going to show you in just a moment, John the Baptist was the fulfillment of the prophecy in Malachi, chapter 4, and verse 5.

And I'm going to confirm that for you here in a moment. When there that prophecy is made, behold, I will send you Elijah. It's not Elijah himself, but one like Elijah.

And we know that to be true. So, he's saying, I am not Elijah, but he is the fulfillment of that prophecy in Malachi 4, and verse 5. So, let me show you from Matthew, chapter 17.

This is verse 10. And I describe, say that first, Elijah must come. This is coming from Malachi, chapter 4, and verse 5.

Jesus says, Elijah does come, and he will restore all things, but I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they pleased.

[18:55] At this point in Matthew's narrative, John the Baptist has already been beheaded. So, also, Jesus goes on, the Son of Man will certainly suffer at their hands.

Then, verse 13, the disciples understood that he was speaking to them of John the Baptist. So, is John the Baptist this Elijah character in Malachi 4 or 5?

Yes, but he's answering the question most honestly because he is not Elijah. So, they go on. Are you the prophet? And this is coming from a prophecy made by Moses found in Deuteronomy 18 and verse 15.

There we can read, the Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers. It is to him you shall listen. And there's more to it in the context, but that's most narrowly there.

The prophet. They're looking for this one. Now, there's no consensus who the prophet was in Jesus' day. There's a lot of confusion about who the prophet was.

[20:01] Some thought another prophet like Jeremiah or Isaiah. Some rightly thought the prophet is the Christ. That's the right understanding of that text.

Both Peter in Acts chapter 3 and Stephen in Acts chapter 7 apply Deuteronomy 18:15 to Jesus. So, they're asking the question, it's really a repetition of their initial intention to see if he was the Christ, but there was a lot of misunderstanding about who the prophet may have been.

And so, John the Baptist rightly answers no. So, they say, who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. They can't go back empty-handed.

What do you say about yourself? So, after this string of denials, John speaks of himself in the affirmative. He says who he is in verse 23.

I'm the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, make straight the way of the Lord, as the prophet Isaiah said. John is here citing Isaiah chapter 40 and verse 3.

[21:08] A voice cries, in the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. all four gospels cite this verse in connection with John the Baptist.

But only in this gospel is John himself recorded as using it. And we're going to pick up his answer to this question and to the next back up in my concluding comments.

But they go beyond that, right? After the answers with this, I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, make straight the way of the Lord to ask, then, why are you baptizing?

If you are neither the Christ nor Elijah nor the prophet. And we'll say some more about this in just a bit. But John answers them, I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know.

And it's unsure at this point, but it's suggested that perhaps Jesus is actually there as they're asking these questions, right? In the larger crowd, he's actually standing there.

[22:18] Even one who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie. So John gets grilled, right? Who are you?

And he gives a very clear denial of all the possible people they thought he may be, and a very clear message that he is one preparing the way.

for the Christ. Secondly, let's look at day two, beginning in verse 29. You'll notice that phrase, the next day.

This time his address is to the broader crowd. So before it was just to this group that was sent to him, this delegation now, to the broader crowd as he sees Jesus coming toward him and cries out, behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

On the second day, John is not being questioned, but he still gives a faithful witness to Christ in making this extraordinary declaration. Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

[23:28] This phrase is not found in this form in the Old Testament, but the idea is everywhere. Some examples, Genesis chapter 22, verse 7 and 8, and we know there that Abraham is given the command to go and sacrifice his son Isaac.

And Isaac says, Behold the fire and the wood, but where is the Lamb for a burnt offering? And Abraham replies to him, God will provide for himself the Lamb for a burnt offering.

my son. And then we see his hand stayed and in verse 13 God provides a substitutionary ram for Isaac which prefigures a greater sacrifice that will come.

We get the whole another place, Exodus chapter 29, 38 through 39, Leviticus chapter 23, just one example here, Exodus 29 verse 38, a command for the continual giving of Lamb for sin.

Lambs were part of daily, ongoing sacrifices for the sin of the people. Now this is what you shall offer on the altar, two lambs a year old by day, regularly.

[24:47] And if you back up, Exodus chapter 12 verses 3 through 13, if you look at verse 5, we hear this account of the Passover Lamb.

And the command is given, your Lamb shall be without blemish, a male a year old. And they were to slaughter that Lamb and spread the blood on the doorposts that the angel of death would pass over their homes.

So there's lots of imagery that tends in this direction, pushes us toward an understanding of what John is declaring when he cries out, Behold the Lamb of God.

I like to imagine, so hear me, this is an imagination piece, but that this declaration would have had a particular resonance because the Passover was going to be celebrated shortly.

As I spend a little more time on this, I might be able to tell you the exact number of days, but I at least know it's some days out. John chapter 2 verse 13, the Passover of the Jews was at hand.

[25:55] It's not too many days later that this is taking place. So, perhaps, lambs were being or had been recently herded past the place that John was baptizing.

It's very possible, right, that they were being brought from the fields outside and being brought to this great number, massive number of lambs that were sacrificed at the Passover.

And so, the image is fresh in everybody's mind of lambs being taken to slaughter. It's my imagination. It's possible. That is why the detail of his location is included in verse 28, about a two days journey from Jerusalem.

He cries out, Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. What stands in our place is the propitiation that takes God's wrath on our behalf.

Not a sacrifice that needs to go on and on and on, but a one-time sacrifice once for all. That anybody who believes in him has our sin taken away, punished in him, his righteousness granted to us.

[27:20] This idea of the Lamb of God is picked up, I think, in a way that's rather stark when you understand the geography of the land. John chapter 18 and verse 1.

This is just after the last supper, which was a Passover meal. There John records, when Jesus had spoken these words, he went out with his disciples across the brook Kidron, where there was a garden which he and his disciples entered.

So to get to the garden of Gethsemane, the place where we know that Jesus weeps and sweats blood, he's in great anguish because he knows of his coming crucifixion, bearing the wrath for all who would ever believe in him, he goes across the brook Kidron.

That's a significant thing. It's an important detail that all of the early readers would have totally understood and we just need a little help in order to do that.

Now you might have noticed, or maybe you didn't, I did not bring up with me this morning the program's progress, so I'm not planning on reading out of it. But I am going to quote Charles Spurgeon just so you all know I'm okay.

[28:38] No one's taken over my body, it's me, really. This is what Charles Spurgeon says of the brook Kidron. The brook Kidron was an insignificant but usually a most foul and filthy ditch outside the walls of Jerusalem.

If it was not, as some have called it, the open town sewer, yet there are reasons for believing that at least the filth of the temple ran into it. The scouring of the sacrificial places went by an under channel into this brook.

Let me pause there in the quote for just a moment. This means the Passover is taking place, these lambs have come in and they've been being slaughtered all day long.

The brook Kidron would have been flowing with blood from those lambs. It would have just been full of blood. They crossed over it.

It was a small stream. Maybe they hopped. They crossed over it on their way to Gethsemane.

Further, Spurgeon goes on. And we have one or two instances in Holy Writ where when houses were purged and cleansed, the filth was thrown in to the brook Kidron.

[29:56] So when the sinfulness of a home was purged, where did all of it go? They threw it into the brook Kidron. The passing therefore over that foul and black brook becomes the symbol of a time of deep sorrow and acute distress.

The king himself then passed over the brook Kidron. The royal road lies over the place of sorrow. The way even for kings is by the brook of grief and shame.

Behold, the lamb of God. The one who comes, the one who could come and die in our stead to take away the sin.

It's incredible. Verse 31, John says, I myself did not know him, but for this purpose I came baptizing with water that he might be revealed to Israel.

On day one, John is asked a question about baptism, which he answers. Here, he is clear why he is baptizing.

[31:10] The Jews were concerned about his baptism because he was baptizing Jewish people. You see, the Jews baptized proselytes, converts

to Judaism, but not Israelites, as they viewed Israelites, as already God's people.

John's baptism acknowledged that sin had placed all people outside of God's covenant, and therefore that all people need to repent and believe in Christ.

All of them were outside of the Mosaic covenant. Every single one of them had sin. None of them had kept God's law. And so everybody needs to repent and believe in Christ.

His baptism was a sign of repentance. And so it's unique, and that's the reason they're concerned about what it is that he is doing.

Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Unless you be mistaken at this point, I am not going to argue from this text for general atonement.

[32:26] We have to be very, very careful at this point. If you narrow it down, you ignore the rest of the teaching of Scripture, you would think that Jesus' death took away every sin of every person ever.

You become a universalist to be sure. John uses this word cosmos in a lot of different ways. Here he's saying not only does he take away the sin of Jews, but also of Gentiles.

This letter written to both. Anybody and everybody who would place their faith in Christ. And we'll unpack that more likely in John chapter 3.

everybody needs to repent and believe in Christ. Our very greatest of needs. And he goes on on the second day and John bore witness.

I saw the spirit descend from heaven like a dove and it remained on him. I myself did not know him but he who sent me to baptize with water said to him. So God the father said to him! He on whom you see the Mark records in Mark chapter 1 verse 9 through 11 in those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan and when he came up out of the water immediately he saw the heavens being torn open and the spirit descending on him like a dove and a voice came from heaven you are my beloved son with you I am well pleased!

[34:03] So we don't get the first hand account of it but we get John telling us that this very thing happened God the father told him that God the spirit would descend on God the son and confirm who he is and it's with that confidence of that confirmation in verse 34 John the Baptist says and I have seen and have borne witness!

that this is the son of God! thirdly day three very briefly some of this is going to roll into next week the calling of the disciples the next day again John was standing with his two disciples heard him say this and they followed Jesus so we've got this delegation that was sent to ask them the questions we have the broader crowd all together and then we see John with just two of his disciples and we'll learn more about them next week and he makes that declaration again and those two disciples in response to that faithful witness to Jesus' person and his work followed Christ so with that let me loop back to this three point outline of what a faithful witness is what he does a faithful witness number one is humble

I just want to draw your attention back up into the text a bit to observe the humility of John the Baptist he thought very little of himself he could save no one right he was just there as a messenger sent a herald of news his whole intention was to point to the one who could save right point to Christ he's so clear verse 20 he confessed and did not fail to confess but confessed I am not the Christ he said I am not to the question of he's Elijah he said no to the question of is he the prophet right and then he says I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness you cannot look to a voice a voice just declares a message make straight the way of the

Lord point people to send people toward right the Christ is coming what a privilege John had to be a herald of the coming of Christ beloved we have the very same privilege we get to declare the good news of Jesus to be his witnesses!

in the world in which we live if it's not on our hearts if it's not a great desire of ours to declare what God has done for us in Christ something is amiss something is wrong we either never have experienced the grace of God to us in Christ or our hearts need some serious tuning we have to want to regularly talk about what Jesus has done for us humble it starts with humility we can save no one I'm so grateful as a pastor to have a big God theology to believe that God has a people that he's saving for his purpose because oh if it depended on me it would be crushing I wouldn't be doing this anymore I would have already thrown in the towel too much work too hard too much pressure I just get to be a let the lion out of the cage as

[38:01] Spurgeon said and God does saving work he uses the message of Jesus Christ to draw people to himself lift Christ high he'll say later and God will draw people to him he says John answered I baptize with water but among you stand ones you do not know even he who comes after me the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie the lowliest of servant positions in a home the removal of shoes and the washing of feet John the Baptist says I'm not even worthy of that position when it comes to my Lord verse 30 this is he of whom I said after me comes a man who ranks before me because he was before me right Christ was preexistent and deserves exaltation and therefore we ought to be humble so a faithful witness is going to be humble

John the Baptist models that for us secondly a faithful witness exalts the person and work of Jesus Christ right who he is and what he accomplished both things are important so just really fast he points to Jesus as the Lord verse 23 he says he's going to send the spirit to come and indwell them he says he's the lamb of God in verse 29 who takes away the sins of the world he's exalting his person he's talking about his work all amidst this what a wonderful place for us to start our gospel proclamation to talk about the person of work that he came to accomplish this gospel proclamation is a great privilege that's given to God's people and it must be proclaimed you may have heard it said at one point preach the gospel at all times and when necessary use words it's always necessary to use words whether written or said our good works adorn the gospel right our good works are apologetics for the gospel it's a foundation people see us and they see us as different they see that we hope in something else they see our lives ordered properly all of those things I'm not negating any of that at all but just merely being nice to somebody is not sharing the gospel with them right you got to open your mouth and you have to speak! he done on your behalf it must be done it must be proclaimed a faithful witness I just want to insert a Christian a Christian exalts the person and work of Jesus Christ and proclaims that to others and thirdly a faithful witness offers the means of salvation it's so good to talk about Christ and it's so good to talk about his work but we also must!

call people to believe turn from their sins! place their faith in Christ we we have yet to share the gospel if we haven't quite gotten there and I know sometimes that takes a series of conversations but we want to drive to that point to say to people this is true and it's the thing you're most needful of and it's the kind of truth that demands a response you have to respond to it one way the! you have to reject it wholeheartedly or you have to accept it wholeheartedly you only have two choices now I've got to stretch a little out of our text but I just want you to see the pattern here the means of salvation he says verse 33 that he baptizes and it was said to him he on whom you see the spirit descend and remain this is he who baptizes with the spirit of christ comes into us makes us new causes us to believe go back to earlier in the chapter where there john the apostle says of john the baptist he came as a witness to bear witness about the light that all might believe through him verse 12 but who did receive him he just spoke his name he gave the right to become children of God so

[42:37] Jesus is the Christ the anointed one of God the lamb of God the son of God who takes away the sin of the world and if we are in Christ this morning then we have been called to be proclaimers faithful witnesses to the personal work of that Christ to call people to repentance and faith may it be so let's pray to that end as