

# The Witness

John 1:19-34

Call: Isa 52:7-10 (ESV)

Scripture: Isa 40:1-5 (ESV)

## I. Intro

Today, we are going to talk about John the Baptist, who is “The Witness.” This term “witness” is known in our time mostly as referring to someone who has seen an event, maybe an accident or a crime. The witness then can confirm or attest to the event by providing first-hand knowledge of whatever happened.

For example, a few years ago, I remember seeing a minor accident near the church. A young man was on his phone and he didn’t slow down at a stop light. He ran into the back of the car in front of him. I ended up pulling over and waiting until the police came. And, I gave my name as a witness to the accident.

There are two important points about being a witness. First of all, a witness doesn’t create the facts. The witness simply testifies to the facts, substantiating the truth of a matter. Secondly, a witness commits to the truth. In other words, a witness is not effective if they state their testimony, but don’t believe it. In my example, if I saw the accident and explain what I saw, but don’t believe it, I’m not an effective witness.

Now “Witness” is a key concept in the Gospel of John. John will use the word “witness” far more than anyone else in the New Testament. In fact, one way to approach John’s Gospel is through a lens of witness. In John’s Gospel, you can think of Jesus being on trial, and many witnesses will be called forward to testify to his nature, character, words and actions. And we, as readers of John’s Gospel, will listen to the testimonies and make our judgement. For we, each one of us, must pronounce a verdict for ourselves. We all must answer the question – who do I think this man Jesus is?

Today, John, the Gospel writer calls his first witness. John the Baptist, please come forward and take the stand. First of all, tell us about yourself, John 1, verse 19.

## II. John’s Witness About Himself (19-28)

*19 And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, “Who are you?” 20 He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, “I am not the Christ.” 21 And they asked him, “What then? Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.” “Are you the Prophet?” And he answered, “No.” 22 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?” 23 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.”*

*24 (Now they had been sent from the Pharisees.) 25 They asked him, "Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?" 26 John answered them, "I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know, 27 even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie." 28 These things took place in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing. (ESV)*

### **A. The Story Begins**

After that magnificent prologue, now the story begins in the midst of the heat and dirt and grime of real life at Bethany beyond the Jordan. These verses are John the Baptist's witness about himself. As I said last week, all four Gospels begin with the witness of John the Baptist. That tells you that this man is very important.

John is in Bethany, and according to the other Gospels, wearing camel-skinned levis with a leather belt around his waist, eating honey flavored grasshoppers. I'm sure he had really bad breath!

### **B. The First Day**

This is day one. And John, the Gospel writer, is going to take us through the first week of ministry for Jesus. He began his prologue with "in the beginning" which echoes the first day of the first week of creation from Genesis one. I think John wants us to make the connection that whereas Genesis one begins the week of the first creation, here we begin the first week that will launch the new creation. As God powerfully spoke the first creation into existence, we now get Jesus, the Word made flesh, powerfully beginning his creative activity in the world. The new age is beginning!

### **C. The "Jews"**

John's ministry must have created quite a stir because the text says that some important people come to him from Jerusalem. They are sent from "the Jews." Who is this group? John, the Gospel writer, uses this term 71 times in his Gospel, and for some people reading this Gospel, it sounds offensive. John will use the term in a variety of ways. Sometimes he will use this term to refer to the Religious leaders (like he does here) and sometimes to the geographic people the Jews. Sometimes he will use the term positively and sometimes negatively. Most of the time though, it is used negatively as the Religious leaders who oppose Jesus. But, as we'll see, not even all the Religious leaders oppose Jesus.

### **D. The Jerusalem Delegation**

So, the Religious leaders send an official delegation from Jerusalem out into the Judean wilderness to cross-examine this witness. After all, crowds were flocking to John and not to them.

And, they begin by questioning him. Are you the Christ? That's a legitimate question. People are eagerly awaiting the Messiah in the 1<sup>st</sup> century. But, John says he is not.

Are you Elijah? Why would they ask him if he is Elijah? Well, because, Malachi, the last prophet to speak 400 years ago, says this, *“Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes”* (Mal 4:5). *After 400 years, the people are getting anxious. Could John be Malachi’s Elijah, meaning the Lord is on his way?*

Are you Elijah, John? I am not. What is interesting is the other Gospels portray John as being Malachi’s Elijah. So, what’s going on? Maybe John wants to make the point that he’s not the Elijah this delegation is thinking of? In fact, according to some Jewish traditions, Malachi’s Elijah was supposed to show up and do much different stuff from what John the Baptist actually does (Watts). So, if that tradition is in the delegation’s minds, then John’s answer is “No, I am not your view of Elijah. But, if I am to be a precursor to God coming, then YES!”

The questions continue. Are you *the* Prophet? No. John says he is not *the* prophet. He is *a* prophet but not *the* Prophet. Back in Deuteronomy, God says that a prophet like Moses will be raised up again to lead His people (Deut 18:15). By the first century, there was great expectation for this prophet. “John, are you *the* prophet?” No, I am not.

#### **E. The Voice**

All right John, who are you? *“I am a voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord.’”* John is a voice. John’s voice broke the 400 years of silence and awakened fresh hope in the people. This is a famous quote from the prophet Isaiah which we read in our Scripture reading today (Is 40:3). By the first century, this verse, Isaiah 40:3, had become one of the great texts of hope for the Jews. But the importance of a voice is not the voice itself, but rather what the voice says or maybe where the voice points. Notice this voice points toward the Lord. This Isaiah text is about the Creator of the Universe coming! This is about the presence of the living God coming again to his people! Isaiah was saying that someday God was going to come, but before he does, someone was going to come before Him to prepare the way. John the Baptist is that person.

#### **F. The Water Baptizer**

And, he is baptizing people in water. The delegation does not understand why John is baptizing. It is not because baptism was not done at that time. Baptism was common at that time, but it was only done for new converts. What was unusual was that John was baptizing Jews for repentance (from the other Gospels). The delegation doesn’t understand because in their system, Jews didn’t need to repent.

So, John is a voice and a water-baptizer. But, who is he preparing the way for? Verse 29.

### **III. John’s Witness About Jesus (29-34)**

*29 The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! 30 This is he of whom I said, ‘After me comes a man who ranks before me, because he was before me.’ 31 I myself did not know him, but for this purpose I came baptizing with water, that he might be revealed to Israel.” 32 And John bore witness: “I saw the*

*Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. 33 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.' 34 And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God." (ESV)*

### **A. The Three Key Descriptions**

We now come to day 2. And, in these short 6 verses, John, gives us the Gospel message in his three titles for Jesus. Jesus is the Spirit-baptizer, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world and the Son of God. We will look at Son of God next week. Today, I want to explore the other two titles, the Spirit Baptizer and the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

These two titles belong together and provide us with a beautiful picture of the Gospel. They give us both sides to the amazing work of Jesus, the Spirit-inserting side and the sin-removing side. John Stott summarizes it best, "We must never conceive of 'salvation' in purely negative terms, as if it consisted only in rescue from sin, guilt, wrath and death. We thank God that it is all these things. But it also includes the positive blessing of the Holy Spirit to regenerate, indwell, liberate and transform. What a truncated gospel we preach if we proclaim the one without the other! And what a glorious gospel we have to share when we are true to Scripture!" (Stott, 25). Jesus, the Word made flesh, comes to baptize us with the Spirit of God and comes to take away the sin of the world.

### **B. The Spirit Baptizer**

Let's explore Jesus as the Spirit-baptizer first. We do not get Jesus' baptism in John's Gospel as we do in the other Gospels. But, verse 32 refers to it. When John baptizes Jesus, he witnesses the Holy Spirit descend from heaven like a dove and remain on him. Why a dove? We don't really know. But, what is important is that the Spirit remained on Jesus, twice stated by John. Isaiah had also prophesied that the coming Messiah would receive a permanent indwelling of the Spirit of God (Isa 11:2, 61:1).

This ultimately means that history is reaching a climax point with Jesus. The new age *was* dawning. The fulfillment of the great promise from the prophet Joel was beginning. Joel 2:28 says this, *"And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit"* (Joel 2:28-29).

In Jesus, this great promise is coming to fulfillment. The Spirit remains on Jesus, which he will then pour out on all flesh at Pentecost. John baptized people in water, immersing them in the waters of the Jordan River. Jesus will baptize people with the Spirit, immersing them in the presence of the living God! And, the verb here is in the present tense, meaning it's a continuous, ongoing action. Jesus is the spirit-baptizer who graciously keeps giving and giving and giving his presence.

When we come to Jesus we are immersed in the Spirit of the Living God. Jesus inserts his Spirit into us and the transformation begins. This is “baptism in the Spirit.” And, the Spirit will never leave us.

However, we can quench and grieve the Spirit through sin and disobedience. Sin and disobedience turn us away from Christ, which necessitates repenting and turning back to him to receive a fresh filling of the Spirit. Paul, in Ephesians, encourages believers to be filled with the Spirit (Eph 5:18). So, the terminology is as John Stott says, “One baptism, many fillings” (Stott, 88).

So, when we come to Christ, we are immersed in the Spirit into abundant and eternal LIFE. And, as our journey of faith continues, he continually fills us with fresh empowerment and new spiritual awareness.

In other words, Jesus graciously gives his presence to us continually! So, as his followers, we should pray for, and expect new and fresh experiences from Him. We should expect new fillings and new burnings and new spiritual awareness in our lives. Because this is what Jesus delights to do for us.

### **C. The Lamb of God**

Well, John also calls Jesus “the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” Bernard also has this image in our window at PBCC. It’s a breath-taking title, and after studying it, I think it is now my favorite title for Jesus. It captures so much in one phrase. My friend Darrell Johnson likes to read this phrase backwards. It is interesting how that works. “The world’s sin takes away the lamb of God” (Johnson, 14). It actually works.

We are going to explore this title by looking at each word separately. And, we will look at them in reverse order so that we will finish with lamb of God.

#### **1. World**

What does world mean here? The Greek word is “cosmos.” Well, there are two main points to be made for this word. First of all, world points to the cosmic scope of Jesus’ work. Jesus’ mission as the lamb of God will be for the entire world, not just for Jews, not just for Romans, not just for Americans, but the entire world! He has come to take away the sin of the entire cosmos for all time! Secondly, it is recognized by most commentators that the word “cosmos” in John is nuanced. In John, this word generally stands for “human society organizing itself without God” (Johnson, 14). That, of course, speaks to God’s amazing grace. Listen to John 3:16 in the light of this definition: “For God so loved the “society organizing itself without him,” that he gave his only begotten son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”

#### **2. Sin**

The lamb of God who takes away the *sin* of the world. Sin is singular in this instance. John is referring to the basic and all-encompassing opposition to *God being God* in our

lives. One way to describe sin is as a deadly infection that has contaminated everyone. We talk a lot about infection these days with the coronavirus. Well, sin was there first and infected all of us, every part of everyone. Every single cell of our body urges us to be our own god. That's sin. That's the hopeless condition we are all in. And, it inevitably results in death for all of us.

### 3. Takes away

The lamb of God who *takes away* the sin of the world. "Takes away," one word in the Greek, is a common word in this Gospel, and it means "to remove" or "destroy" (Klink, 133). John points at Jesus and says, "Here is the lamb of God who will remove the deadly infection of the world, who will remove our hopeless condition." We now have hope in the face of sin and death because of the Lamb of God!

### 4. Lamb

Ok, how about the lamb.? What does John the Baptist mean by lamb? John calls Jesus a lamb. What a strange and unusual thing to call someone. A lamb. As Lisa said, we don't usually call people barnyard animals. Beyond that, no one is quite sure *exactly* what John is thinking here. From what I have read, there are at least nine possibilities for what John might mean by lamb (Morris, loc 2294). We don't have time this morning to look at all of them, so let's explore four likely candidates.

- a. The Passover lamb: Is John thinking of the Passover lamb: If you are familiar with the story of Israel, you'll know the story of the Passover. Israel was in slavery in Egypt, and God tells Moses that the final act of judgment against Egypt will be the Angel of Death killing the firstborn in every household. God tells Moses to instruct the Israelites to kill a lamb and spread the blood on the doorposts of their houses. He then tells Moses, "*When I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague will befall you to destroy you, when I strike the land of Egypt*" (Ex 12:7-13). The blood of the Passover lamb delivered the Israelites from slavery and death.

Does John the Baptist see Jesus as the fulfillment of the Passover lamb?

- b. The suffering lamb: Is John thinking of the suffering lamb of Isaiah 53: Isaiah 53 is one of those famous passages typically read leading up to Good Friday. It says this: *5 he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities;... 7 He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth*" (Isa 53:5, 7).

Does John see Jesus as the suffering servant of Isaiah, who as a helpless lamb voluntarily bears the sin of the world?

- c. The apocalyptic lamb: Is John thinking of the apocalyptic lamb of Revelation: This lamb was a symbol of power and conquest. In fact, one writer says, *"In Jewish apocalyptic literature, there is the figure of a conquering lamb who will destroy evil in the world"* (Brown, 59).

Does John see Jesus as this lamb who does battle with the evil of the world and conquers it completely?

- d. The substitute lamb: Is John thinking of the lamb provided by God in the binding of Isaac in Gen 22. If you remember, we covered that scene in our studies last fall. God commanded Abraham to take Isaac up the mountain and sacrifice him there. Abraham obeys this monstrous command, but on the way up the mountain, Isaac asks the question that has been haunting him the entire trip. *"Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?"* To which Abraham famously replies, *"God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son."* (Gen 22:7-8). What an amazing statement by Abraham? "God will provide himself – the lamb – My Son. In fact, for a 1<sup>st</sup>-century Jew, every lamb sacrifice pointed back to this lamb.

So, is John thinking of Jesus as this lamb, God's lamb, provided as a substitute.

So, which one is it? At least these four options might be in John's mind. Answer: Yes. I think it's yes to all of them, plus even the ones I didn't mention. And, hints can be found to all of them throughout the Gospel. Jesus, the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world fulfills all of them.

He is the Passover lamb who rescues the world from the slavery of sin and death. He is the suffering lamb of Isaiah 53 who humbly bears the sin of the entire world. He is the apocalyptic warrior lamb who crushes evil and death forever. And, he is the substitute lamb provided by God in exchange for sinful humanity.

Yes, "he is the one great final sacrifice, who fulfills *all* that is foreshadowed in *all* the sacrifices... Jesus accomplished the perfect sacrifice which completely removed the sin of the world" (Morris, loc 2333, italics my own).

*"Behold, the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the [entire] world."*

## IV. Implications

So, what are the implications of this amazing text for us? Well, I have two this morning.

1. **Just come (and see) as you are:** If you are new to Scripture, new to Jesus or new to the Christian faith, I want to invite you to reflect this week on "the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." What it means is you can approach Jesus just as you are. It

is safe to come to Jesus just as you are. You don't have to fix yourself up to come to him. Just come.

I grew up in the church that sang one hymn by Charlotte Elliott quite often. It was called, "Just as I Am." One verse sticks out to me from this famous hymn –

*Just as I am, though tossed about  
With many a conflict, many a doubt;  
Fightings within, and fears without,  
O Lamb of God, I come, I come!*

The invitation has been extended to you. And, you can come to Jesus just as you are.

2. **Bear Witness.** This picture that was on the front of the Worship Guide this week is of John the Baptist. He has an extremely long finger pointing at Jesus on the cross. With kids possibly watching this sermon, I didn't want to show the entire picture as Jesus on the cross is hard to look at for a reason. Matthias Grunewald painted the image during an epidemic in the 16<sup>th</sup> century (the plague), and he painted Christ with plague-type sores all over him, in order to show patients with the plague that Jesus understood and shared in their afflictions. You can find the full picture [here](#). Karl Barth felt like this picture was for all Christians. Like John the Baptist, we are to take our entire lives and point them at Jesus.

For those of us who have come and believed, we have first-hand knowledge of Jesus' love and grace and mercy. We have first-hand knowledge of His "lamb-ness" and his Spirit "inserting-ness." Like John, we didn't create the facts, we simply witness to them. And, like John, we commit to them. We believe them. And, we have his Spirit in us.

As Lisa said in the children's message, it's a bit like "show and tell." The world is asking who this Jesus is and we, the church, are to "show" them and "tell" them. Jesus has no body here on earth but ours. Theresa of Avila said that 500 years ago. Here's the entire quote.

"Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours."

So, how might Jesus be asking you to be his body, to "show and tell" your neighbors, family, friends and colleagues about him and his way of life today? Even though we are sheltering in place, there are still many opportunities to show and tell Christ to others.

- A phone call to check in on someone.
- Offering to buy groceries for the vulnerable.

- Simply waving to people as they walk by.
- Maybe even painting a smiley face on your face mask.

I invite you to pray this week that the Lord would give you creativity, wisdom and courage to be a faithful “show and tell” witness this week.

Amen.

### **Benediction**

Now receive this benediction:

The lamb of God has taken away your sin

And, he has given you his presence

To powerfully be his witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and Cupertino, Saratoga, Sunnyvale, San Jose, Campbell and to the very ends of the earth.

Amen.

Have a great week!

### **Resources**

Brown, Raymond, *The Gospel According to John* (Anchor Bible Series)

Johnson, Darrell, *Who is Jesus?*

Johnson, Darrell, *Preaching John* (Regent MP3)

Klink, Edward, *John* (Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the NT)

Morris, Leon, *Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* (kindle)

Stott, John, *Baptism and fullness*

Watts, Rikk, *For the Life of the World* (Regent MP3)