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John 1:19-51

Second Message

Gary Vanderet

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A WEEK OF WITNESS AND REVELATION

SERIES: THAT YOU MAY BELIEVE

The marvelous prologue to the gospel of John leaves the reader in awe. John explains how the mind of God became a human being: "The word became flesh." When God wanted to reveal his heart and mind, he didn't send a telegram from heaven, he didn't drop tracts from the sky: He sent his Son to communicate the message. God's plan hasn't gone out of date. Incarnation has always been his method for change. He still sends men and women, not techniques and strategies, to change the world. Jesus prayed to the Father once: "As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world." And, following his resurrection, the Lord told his disciples: "You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you and you shall be my witnesses . . ." Paul put it this way: "we are ambassadors for Christ, beseeching others to be reconciled to God."

"My witnesses": These words of Jesus shall be the focus of our thoughts this morning. We will meet two sets of witnesses. First, the witness of John the Baptist (19-34), and then the witness of those who became disciples of Jesus (verses 35-51). Their testimony will help us greatly in our own work of witnessing. John the Baptist was a remarkable man. He was the supreme witness of all time, and his message has essential elements of witnessing that will help us focus clearly on Christ, and thus make us more effective witnesses.

Mark presents his readers with a day in the life of Jesus. Here in John, in chapter 1 and the beginning of chapter 2, we are given a week in the life of Jesus. The question that concerns John, the writer, is, "Who is this John the Baptist?" This was the question that was on everyone's lips at this time, and this was the context into which Jesus came. John was the red hot issue of the day, as we will see.

John's life was focused on Christ even before John's birth. The Angel Gabriel appeared to Zacharias, the aged priest, and told him that the son who would be born to him and his wife Elizabeth would be filled with the Spirit—not only after his birth, but while he was still in his mother's womb. The angel said to them: "Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord" (Luke 1:16-17.) John's life, from his childhood up to the time when he began his public ministry, is summed up in this verse from Luke: "And the child grew and became strong in spirit; and he lived in the desert until he appeared publicly to Israel" (1:80.)

We pick up the gospel story today in John 1:19.

I. The Essentials of a Witness 1:19-34

(a) Essentials in the Messenger

And this is the witness of John, when the Jews sent to

him priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" And he confessed, and did not deny, and he confessed, "I am not the Christ." And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" And he said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" And he answered, "No." They said then to him, "Who are you, so that we may give an answer to those who sent us? What do you say about yourself?" He said, "I am a voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as Isaiah the prophet said." Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. And they asked him, and said to him, "Why then are you baptizing, if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?" John answered them saying, "I baptize in water, [but] among you stands One whom you do not know. "It is He who comes after me, the thong of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie." These things took place in Bethany beyond the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

John had been preaching for over a year and his ministry had changed the Palestinian world. At first, people came out by the dozens, then by the hundreds, and finally thousands left the cities of Judah and Galilee to hear this remarkable desert preacher and to be baptized by him. According to Matthew, even King Herod sought him—and he almost believed. The response to John's message was so staggering that even the religious establishment in Jerusalem had to take note. Thus they sent a delegation to investigate this remarkable preacher.

Toward the end of John the Baptist's year of preaching, Jesus visited him and asked to be baptized. John refused at first, but then deferred to his request. As he baptized Jesus, he saw the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove come upon him and rest on his shoulder. And from the heavens John heard the Father's words: "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased." Following his baptism, Jesus left immediately for that remarkable wilderness experience of forty days and nights of temptation by the devil. During those forty days John's world was a ferment as he preached with increasing fervor about the Messiah. When they could stand it no longer, the religious leaders in Jerusalem sent a delegation (a congressional fact-finding committee), to find out who John was and what he was saying; they wanted to evaluate his prophetic claims. One of the tasks of the Sanhedrin was to deal with anyone suspected of being a false prophet. This John the Baptist was doing the unheard of thing of baptizing Jews. Gentiles were baptized when they came into Judaism, but not Jews. Hadn't they arrived already and thus had no need for baptism? Yet here was this hairy prophet baptizing them in the Jordan, suggesting that Israel had not arrived and that a radical new start was needed.

"Who are you, John?" they asked him. "Are you the Messiah?" John's answer was a clear, "No!" "Are you Elijah,

then?" they demanded. There was anticipation that Elijah, who had left the earth in suspicious circumstances (in a chariot of fire), was going to come back (Mal.4:5). In a sense, John looked like Elijah; he came in the spirit and power of Elijah. But no, said John, he was not Elijah. Was he the promised prophet, like Moses, of Deuteronomy 18:15? Again, John replied, "No."

After John's negative reply to these queries, the delegation asks, in v. 22: "Who are you, so that we may give an answer to those who sent us? What do you say about yourself?" In John's answer we find the first essential of a witness: "He said, 'I am a voice of one crying in the wilderness, "Make straight the way of the Lord,"' as Isaiah the prophet said." "I am not the Word," says John, "I am merely a voice—the voice of God that has been silent for 400 years. I am not the message, I am the communicator. I am not the road, I am a workman on the road." He quotes Isaiah 40:3: "Make straight the way of the Lord." Eastern roads were not paved; they were merely tracks in the dust. When a king traveled, a "human bulldozer" went ahead of him to straighten and smooth the way. John knew his role—it was to prepare the way for someone much greater than himself.

And this was what he did throughout his ministry: John always deflected the spotlight from himself to Jesus. He tells the delegation, in v. 27: "[It is] He who comes after me, the thong of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie." John gives Jesus a place so exalted that ordinary people like himself were unworthy to perform even a task that was relegated to the lowest slave. And yet Jesus said of John, in Matthew 11:11: "I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist." That is quite a universal statement. It leaves only one person: Adam.

What an amazing figure is this John the Baptist! A Nazarene by birth, he was filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb. He could have boasted about his near-miraculous birth, or about the rigors of his solitary life of self-denial in the wilderness, but he didn't. He could have written a book about his devotional regimen, he could have held seminars on discipline for those who wanted to follow God, but he never gave into any of those temptations. There was no self-aggrandizement in this man. John's greatness lay not in his ability to perform miracles (he didn't perform any); or to write books (like the prophecy of Isaiah); or his ability to rule over a people (he was never a king); he wasn't a high priest (he never offered a sacrifice). He was a desert preacher, a voice in the wilderness. John the Baptist is the greatest of all witnesses because of one simple fact: With great clarity he pointed out Jesus. What a model for Christians! A witness must never obscure or detract from the one about whom he witnesses. The servant of Christ never exalts himself. He knows he is but a third-level rower in the galley.

Having clarified his own role, John now goes on to fulfill the major work for which he came: to identify Jesus.

(b) Essentials in the Message

In the witness of John we are presented with magnificent truth as to the identity of Jesus. I want to point out two powerful statements that John makes about him. Each statement reveals something of the supreme wonder of Christ, and helps us understand our message as we assume the role of witnesses. The first statement is revealed in verses

29-31.

(1) *Jesus is the Lamb of God who removes the world's sin*

The next day he saw Jesus coming to him, and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is He on behalf of whom I said, 'After me comes a Man who has a higher rank than I, for He existed before me.' And I did not recognize Him, but in order that He might be manifested to Israel, I came baptizing in water."

There is the essence of the Christian message. It is difficult for us to appreciate the power of John's words, but they are extremely significant. On hearing these words, since Passover was approaching, John's audience would have thought of the Passover Lamb of Exodus 12—and of blood applied to doorposts. They might have thought of the temple sacrifice. Every morning and evening, a lamb was offered in the temple for the sins of the people (Ex. 29). Perhaps these beautiful words from Isaiah 53 would have come to mind: "We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth." John was saying that Jesus was to be the sacrifice for their sins—God's provision for their deepest need. Now at last there was an answer to the cry of Isaac as his father Abraham was taking him up the mountain to offer him as a sacrifice: "Father, where is the lamb?" "God will provide a lamb," replied Abraham. Centuries later, as John sees Jesus coming toward him, knowing who he is because he had baptized him six weeks earlier, John says to the crowd: "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" Here was the one who would fulfill all the promises of the sacrifices of the Old Testament.

We must understand, as John did, that the first problem that people must settle with God is the problem of sin. The only access to the living God is through the doorway of forgiveness. God's love comes first only as forgiveness. When we are ready to deal with our sin and bring it to God, then we have an open door to the kingdom of God. Our message must be the same as John's. We may think it unnecessary to have to be reminded to focus on the Lamb of God, but it's easy to shy away from the cross and the atonement, to abandon the central truth that we sing:

*There is a fountain filled with blood
Drawn from Immanuel's veins,
And sinners plunged beneath that flood
Lose all their guilty stains.*

Do not be ashamed of the cross! Hold fast to the cross! We will never find Jesus until we know him as the "Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."

It's interesting to note that John says he did not "recognize" Jesus. He is not saying he did not recognize him as the Messiah. These men were cousins. They grew up together; they played together. John knew who Jesus was all right, but he didn't know what he was until he baptized him and the heavens opened. Then he knew why he was baptizing this man: It was to identify Jesus.

Secondly, we are told (verses 32-34):

(2) *Jesus is the Son of God who baptizes with the Spirit*

In the Old Testament, we sense a deep feeling of unsatisfied longing. We find men and women longing to be better

Jesus. The other three are Peter, Philip, and Nathanael. Encounter was all that Andrew and John needed. They met Jesus at 4:00 p.m. and spent the rest of the day with him. They were captivated by him.

Then there is Peter. Perhaps he was lying in bed in the morning when Andrew, his brother, arrived with an irresistible invitation: "Come and see! We have just found the one about whom all the prophets speak!" Knowing Peter, he probably wasn't immediately convinced by his brother's words. But all it took was an encounter. Peter, the best known of all the disciples, suffered from hoof-in-mouth disease. It is significant that Jesus immediately gives Simon a new name. In one sentence he summarizes Peter's life: "You are Simon, son of John [Simon means, "listener, one who hears."] You shall be called Cephas." Cephas is Aramaic, the language that Jesus and his disciples spoke, which is very close to Hebrew. It means "rock." John translates it here, using the Greek word, Peter. "You shall be called 'Rocky!'"

Jesus is telling Peter: "Now you are a listener. You are tuned in to everything around you. You are easily affected by everyone's opinions and attitudes. You are impetuous and impulsive. But one day you will be a rock, an immovable foundation upon which others will build, a steadying influence on those around you." From the wavering Simon he made a stable and rock-like Cephas. "You are . . . but you shall be." Skepticism shrivels in the face of encounter. Jesus sees not only what we are, but what we will become. This is what captured Peter. Here is a man who instantly read his weakness, but who also gave him hope and possibility. If you have never met him, this is what Jesus will do for you today.

Next we meet Nathanael, cynical, hardboiled Nathanael, sitting under his fig tree (an idiom for meditating). Who knows, he could have been reading Genesis 28. If we are to judge by Jesus' response, this is a possibility. "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" is Nathaniel's skeptical response before he encounters Jesus. But meeting him changes all that. Jesus makes an immediate pronouncement about Nathanael's character. It is because he knows what is in men. And Nathanael responds in a way that confirms his character, uttering the dramatic statement: "Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel."

Jesus responds to this statement by saying, in verse 50: "Because I said to you that I saw you under the fig tree, do you believe? You shall see greater things than these." It is what Jesus says next that makes me think Nathanael was reading Genesis 28: "And He said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you shall see the heavens opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man." This is a reference to a dream that Jacob had centuries earlier. Jacob had left his home, fleeing from his brother Esau. Lonely and frightened, he lay down and fell asleep. And he had a dream. He dreamed he saw a ladder reaching up to heaven, and on it the angels of God were ascending and descending. Jesus said to Nathaniel: "You are going to learn about that dream as you learn more about me. You will understand that this ladder is now no dream; it is a Person."

Jesus is the one who joins earth to heaven. He is the ultimate disclosure of God, the one who comes down to us and takes us up with him. He is both the ladder of revelation and the ladder of rescue. In the face of this encounter Nathaniel's skepticism turns to awe. "Come and see" is a wonderful word for Christian witnesses. This is all we need to say.

There is a third thing here.

(c) Witnessing is learning to see the glory of the ordinary

There was nothing unique about these men whom Jesus chose. They were not unusually intelligent. They were just like us. Jesus could have called his disciples from any group and they would have been successful apostles, just as he made these men to be. The secret behind their ultimate greatness is found not in them but in the Lord who understands men and makes them into what he wants them to be.

If you are going to have a significant ministry in people's lives, then you must have an unshakable belief in God's ability to change people. I pray that God will give us eyes to see people not only for what they are but also for what they can become—to see the glory and significance of everyday people.

In his book *The Weight of Glory*, C.S. Lewis wrote:

It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and corruption such as you now meet, only in a nightmare. . . . There are no ordinary people. You have never met a mere mortal . . . But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit— immortal horrors or everlasting splendors.

My final observation is this.

(d) We are not to attach people to ourselves, but to point them to Jesus

We have already mentioned this, but it is a good point to close with. Part of the greatness of John the Baptist is the statement that is made of him in verse 37: "they heard him speak and they followed Jesus." What a wonderful thing to say about a Christian! It would have been easy for John, the Billy Graham of his day, to say something in order to keep a corner on the market. But he wasn't interested in establishing a following for himself. One way we can gauge a church is to discern whether they are building the Kingdom of God or building their own church. If they are into church building, they are probably not into Kingdom building. Whether you choose to associate with our church or with some other church is immaterial. We are not to attach people to ourselves, but to point them to Jesus. If John, the greatest of men did that, then surely that must be our goal as well.

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than they are; longing to be free from evil within; longing after righteousness. Have you ever felt that way? I have. Never in my life have I felt that desire so strongly. At times, I wish I could have a surgical operation to remove my tendency to be critical and caustic toward the people I love. When I see the hurt it causes I long to be able to stop doing those things. That longing has been in the human heart since the fall of man: the longing for the beauty of godly character.

Scripture declares that only God himself is competent to do this. It is the work of the Spirit of God. John says that his work was dealing with mere externals. "I baptize with water," he said. In other words, "Mine is a baptism of repentance, of dealing with people's change of mind as to what they want to be. That is as far as I can go. But when I baptized Jesus I saw the Spirit coming down like a dove and resting on his shoulder. And the one who sent me to baptize had said to me, 'When you see that happening, that is the one who will not only change men outside, but he will change them from the inside, by the baptism of the Holy Spirit.'"

Every Christian has been baptized by the Holy Spirit! Paul says in 1 Corinthians: "For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink." Baptism of the Spirit effects a deep change within our humanity: God himself breaks us loose from the family of Adam and places us into his family. And Jesus said this would happen to all who received him. You cannot be a Christian, therefore, and not be baptized by the Holy Spirit. John knew that his ministry was limited, that he could only go so far. He could express in some symbolic fashion, through a baptism of repentance, the changed desire of a heart that wanted to be right, but he could not change hearts. That had to be the work of Jesus. And this is the work that Jesus wants to do in each of us—not change the externals, but change us from the inside out, fulfilling our deep desire to be righteous.

Next, we see the effect of John's witness. John knew that once the Messiah, whom he had been sent to announce, appeared, his own ministry would fade. He has already gathered a band of men around him as his disciples, and now he indicates to them that the time has come for them to follow the Messiah.

II. The Effect of a Witness 1:35-51

Again the next day John was standing with two of his disciples, and he looked upon Jesus as He walked, and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God!" And the two disciples heard him speak, and they followed Jesus. And Jesus turned, and beheld them following, and said to them, "What do you seek?" And they said to Him, "Rabbi (which translated means Teacher), where are You staying?" He said to them, "Come, and you will see." They came therefore and saw where He was staying; and they stayed with Him that day, for it was about the tenth hour. One of the two who heard John [speak,] and followed Him, was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. He found first his own brother Simon, and said to him, "We have found the Messiah" (which translated means Christ). He brought him to Jesus. Jesus looked at him, and said, "You are Simon the son of John; you shall be called Cephas" (which is translated Peter). The next day He purposed to go forth into Galilee, and He found

Philip. And Jesus said to him, "Follow Me."

Now Philip was from Bethsaida, of the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found Him of whom Moses in the Law and [also] the Prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph." And Nathanael said to him, "Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see." Jesus saw Nathanael coming to Him, and said of him, "Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile!" Nathanael said to Him, "How do You know me?" Jesus answered and said to him, "Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you." Nathanael answered Him, "Rabbi, You are the Son of God; You are the King of Israel." Jesus answered and said to him, "Because I said to you that I saw you under the fig tree, do you believe? You shall see greater things than these." And He said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you shall see the heavens opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man."

As we focus on witnessing, observing the effect of the powerful witnesses in these verses, I would like to make four personal observations that I hope will assist us in our own evangelism.

Here is the first observation.

(a) Witnessing is the natural result of discovery

Notice that in this passage all of these men find Jesus in response to a witness or testimony—John himself (verse 35), and then Andrew and Philip find him. I'm sure this is not accidental. Right in the beginning of the book, John points out that Jesus is encountered by testimony. Once they discovered who Jesus was, John, Andrew, Philip and Nathanael all bear witness. And that was not accidental either. John knew it in his own experience. You probably know it in yours.

That is why the best evangelists are new converts. They can't keep quiet about Jesus! They go around chattering to their non-Christian friends about him. If you have stopped chattering about Jesus, maybe it is because you have stopped discovering. Jesus put it this way: "He who is forgiven much loves much." You can't be a channel of God's love until you receive God's love. If you find yourself not talking about Jesus these days, perhaps you should spend time alone with him.

And secondly,

(b) Skepticism shrivels in the face of encounter

I believe that behind this story John is saying, "You skeptical Jews and Greeks who are reading this gospel: It is as you meet Jesus that your doubts will disappear." People who have done much sharing of their faith know that it's possible to argue the day away and get nowhere, but when someone is willing to say, "Lord, if you are real, show yourself to me," then he begins to see.

Throughout this chapter, the phrase, "Come and see," is repeated. This is an invitation, not an argument. God does not defend his own existence. He has no need to. If you want to know God, then, God says, meet my Son.

In these verses we are told about five men who begin to follow Jesus. First, two of John's disciples, Andrew, and the other one who is not named. This gives us a clue as to who this is. John the apostle, the author of the book, never mentions his own name. Most scholars agree that it is John who is the other disciple. John even gives the time of day he met