
The Witness Testifies

John 1:19-34

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¹⁸ No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known.

¹⁹ And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?"

Courtroom setting in which witnesses are called to give testimony.

The setup from verse 18:

Not seen

Made known

And... the testimony of John

John uses the phrase, "the Jews" many times and in several ways. Sometimes it is just a way to identify his own people. Sometimes, it is used in a positive, historical sense. Then there is use like the one here. "The Jews" (v.19) = the Pharisees (v. 24) = the villains. When this is used negatively "the Jews" not only refuse to accept Jesus, but begin to actively oppose Him. John is not an anti-Semite; they are anti-Christ.

Can you see the scene? By the river paces John the Baptist, miracle born son of the Levite priest, Zechariah and Elizabeth - the rough, desert-desiccated, locust-eating prophet. His voice rings out over the crowds streaming along the old road towards him and gathered around him. Conspicuous in the crowd are a group of men with furrowed faces. The tassels of their brilliant white garments are long; the Scriptures tied to their wrists and foreheads are easily marked by the bright blue ribbons. They push through the crowds and stand, feet apart, hands on the hips – the interrogation is about to begin.

These men are the religious leaders of their day and time. They are in charge of God and God's people. Well, at least they liked to think so. Now, here is this renegade Levite who is out calling on people to believe, repent and be baptized. Who gave him permission to do this?

Who the Witnesses Are

(v. 19-28)

Remember that John is writing at a time and in a way that his readers are going to see themselves in John the Baptist. They are going to identify with John as witnesses, as those who are supposed to represent Jesus.

These religious leaders pose two important questions for those who testify to or about Jesus:

Who are you?

(v. 19-23)

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."

We must know who we are NOT**(v. 19-22)**

John is emphatic in his confession. There is no confusion in his own mind. The sense here is of a commendable self-view. It is a “confession”. It is a personal and doctrinal statement. John knows for sure that he is not the Messiah.

To us, this might sound like something really easy to say. But John knows what is up here. He is faced with the most powerful people except for the Roman occupiers. They are people he would have grown up around. He knows what they are like. He knows they love their power, place and prestige. He knows that what he is doing will strike at its root.

He also does not confuse himself with those whose ministry he fulfills. Now understand this. According to the Bible, John fulfills what the Scriptures say about the forerunner. He is not Elijah. Many expected Elijah to rise from the dead just before the Messiah’s coming. He is not the Prophet. Religious people of John’s day expected that Moses would come back to life just before the coming of the Messiah.

So, they are not just asking questions about identity, but also about authority. They have been sent to find out who he is representing. Who is using John to challenge their authority, their place, their prominence in the eyes of the people.

We must know who we are**(v. 22- 23)**

Well, if he is neither the Messiah nor the expected ones from the Old Testament then who is he? Can’t you see the half smile playing around his lips?

“I am the voice.” Now we always need to be careful when reading our Bibles. We can stop right there and make a big deal about the Baptist being the voice and Jesus being the Word. Except, that is not what either John the Baptist or John the Apostle are getting at.

This is a quote from Isaiah 40:3. It is meant to point the interrogators of that day and the readers of all times to the larger text. Let’s look at it together:

<p>¹ Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. ² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the LORD’s hand double for all her sins.</p>	<p><i>God commands to speak comforting words about forgiveness.</i></p>
<p>³ A voice cries: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. ⁴ Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain.</p>	<p><i>The voice then cries out to speak what has been commanded. Here is John the Baptist.</i></p>
<p>⁵ And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”</p>	<p><i>The result is that the glory of the Lord is revealed. Thus, John 1:1-14.</i></p>

⁶ A voice says, "Cry!"
And I said, "What shall I cry?"

*The voice says to others to cry out.
They ask, "What shall I cry."*

All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. ⁷ The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the LORD blows on it; surely the people are grass. ⁸ The grass withers, the flower fades,
but the word of our God will stand forever.

What should we cry out? The unfading Word of God.

⁹ Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good news; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good news; lift it up, fear not; say to the cities of Judah,

Here is the joint message of both John and us:

"Behold your God!" ¹⁰ Behold, the Lord GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him; behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him.

"Look, Jesus us God among us, our ruler our redeemer, our rewarder, who is our shepherd."

¹¹ He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young.

So John is a voice sent by God to cry out to God's people. This is true of both John the Baptist and John the Apostle. And so it is of us...

We must know what we say

John knows what his role and responsibility are. We join with him in pointing to Jesus who is the new Moses who will lead his people out of the captivity of sin. He is the new David who will rule over his people. The one we point to and witness to is the One who is all that Isaiah 40 and all the Old Testament promised.

Why are you doing this?

(v. 24-27)

Well, as much as that answer stirs our hearts with a joyful, "Amen" it sure frustrated the interrogators. You can hear their frustration and maybe, their fears.

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."

Bet you didn't expect this. Their big concern was a question around baptism. Why was he baptizing. It is not a question about the act of baptizing, but rather the authority to baptize. If he is not one of these epoch changing characters, then what right does he have *to introduce something new into Judaism?* Baptism upon repentance is not an Old Testament rite. There were ritual washings, yes, but not baptism.

Why does he do this? He baptizes with water because of someone who is right now present among them. They don't recognize Him. But He is so great that John the Baptist is not worthy to even serve as the lowliest servant in a household. The most humiliating job one could

have in a household was to be the person at the door who knelt down to untie the sandal laces and wash the feet of those entering the house.

John is doing what he is doing because he is simply a lowly servant doing what the master wants. And the master of the house is standing right among them (possibly even in the crowd listening to this dialog). Yet they don't recognize him. So here they are interrogating the lowly servant just doing his job while the unrecognized great person, the Messiah, is standing right there.

One evening the great conductor Arturo Toscanini conducted Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*. It was a brilliant performance, at the end of which the audience went absolutely wild! They clapped, whistled, and stamped their feet, absolutely caught up in the greatness of that performance. As Toscanini stood there, he bowed and bowed and bowed, then acknowledged his orchestra. When the ovation finally began to subside, Toscanini turned and looked intently at his musicians. He was almost out of control as he whispered, "Gentlemen! Gentlemen!" The orchestra leaned forward to listen. In a fiercely enunciated whisper Toscanini said, "Gentlemen, I am nothing." That was an extraordinary admission since Toscanini was blessed with an enormous ego. He added, "Gentlemen, you are nothing." They had heard that same message before the rehearsal. "But Beethoven," said Toscanini in a tone of adoration, "is everything, everything, everything!" This is the attitude we need toward ourselves and toward the Lord Jesus Christ. I am nothing, you are nothing, but he is everything! That was John's attitude, and it is the attitude of every authentic messenger of Christ. [quoted from Kent Hughes, *Preaching the Word – John.*]

An interesting location

(v. 28)

²⁸ These things took place in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

Why say this now at this point to Christians? Is it largely for clarification? There are two Bethany's in the gospel of John.

There this Bethany, across the Jordon. It is on the east side of the Jordon in the wilderness but just south of the province of Galilee.

There is Bethany, near Jerusalem. That is the home of some Jesus' dear friends whom we will meet later. Mary and Martha and their brother Lazarus, are from the Bethany near Jerusalem.

To get from one to the other meant crossing through the Jordon - from the wilderness to land. But to identify with John and be baptized, one had to cross back to the wilderness being identified with God's rebellious people. Who is this John, the Baptist? He is the voice of one crying out in the wilderness...

What the Witnesses Say

(v. 29-34)

What the witness says is keyed on the three statements:

The Lamb of God

(v. 29-30)

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"

Jesus is the Lamb of God. This invokes all the Old Testament language of sacrifice for sins. This is the One who has come to be the final sacrificial lamb. The long bloody procession, day after day, Sabbath after Sabbath, Day of Atonement after Day after Atonement, has now come to an end with this man, the Word of God in flesh. This tabernacle of glory-revealing grace and truth is also a lamb for sinners slain.

There is also a connection to Abraham's sacrificing of Isaac in Genesis 22. Abraham was commanded by God to take his one and only son up to Mount Mariah and to sacrifice him there. By faith that God would raise his son, Abraham obeyed God. Just as he was ready to carry it through, the angel of the Lord interrupted and pointed him to a ram, a lamb that was caught in the brambles nearby. Thus, the lamb was a substitute for the son. Now, the son of God comes and is the final lamb. Abraham called that mountain, the mount of God's provision for "on the mountain of the Lord it shall be provided" (Genesis 22:14).

This is what witnesses say, "Behold, Jesus is the sacrifice for your sins". Do you believe this?

The Anointed One

(v. 31-33)

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.'

Jesus is the promised one who is authorized by the Spirit's descent.

First, consider the significance of the Spirit. The descent of the Holy Spirit confirms that Jesus is who John says he is. John, even though they likely knew each other as kids, did not know that He was the Messiah until He approached John for baptism and the Spirit descended. Here, John is simply saying that in the same way that those who were recognized, appointed and authorized in the Old Testament by the anointing of oil, Jesus has been anointed by the Spirit when John baptized Him. So, Jesus is now the final prophet and the final king.

Second, Jesus is one who is now immersing His people in this Spirit. This means that the age of the New Covenant has begun. The Messiah has come. He is bringing and giving the Spirit. His people, all of them, are now immersed in the Holy Spirit and are now to walk in the Spirit.

Finally note the difference between John and Jesus. John brings the symbol - water. Jesus brings the reality - the Spirit. Now, we as witnesses, baptize by water because Jesus has already come and given the Spirit to His people.

This is what witnesses say, "Jesus is the one sent and authorized by God to fulfill all His promises." Do you believe this?

The Son of God

(v. 34)

³⁴ And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God."

John's summary affirmation as the witness is, "Jesus is the Son of God." The writer has told us that this book is designed to bring us to believe in Jesus. But not just to believe in a man named Jesus who lived over 2000 years ago. Rather, Jesus, that man who was the Messiah, the fulfillment of all the Old Testament promises and prophecies. More than that, we are to believe that this Jesus, the Messiah, is the Son of God. This title simply means that He is deity, He is God.

This is what witnesses say, "Jesus is Divine, the Son of God, the Lord of the Universe." Do you believe this?

Reflect and Respond

We also are voices, witnesses of what we know and have experienced. We carry on the task of pointing the world to Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God, the Lamb slain for our sins.

"The Lamb is our eternal message. Abraham and Isaac *prophesied* his sacrifice. The Passover *applied* the principles of his sacrifice. Isaiah 53 *personified* his sacrifice. John 1 *identified* the sacrifice. And it is *magnified* in Revelation 5:9-14. The sacrificial death of Christ—this is the essence of our message." [Hughes, p. 46]

Will you leave the wilderness and wasteland of your sin? Will you follow Jesus, our Redeemer and Ruler? Believe in Him today.