

A Witness

John 1:6–8, 19–34

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Introduction

We have been working through the Gospel of John, and we have already seen some remarkable things. We have seen the uniqueness of God — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We have seen the uniqueness of Christ — the Word who dwelt among us. We have seen the uniqueness of the salvation he offers, and we have begun to grasp what John means when he says that in Jesus we behold the fullness of his glory: grace and truth.

Today we turn to a man we know as John the Baptist.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light.

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.) 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.’ And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God.”

— John 1:6–8, 19–34 (ESV)

Who Are You?

“Who are you?” Have you ever been asked that? *Can I have your name, please? May I ask who is calling? Do you have an appointment? What do you do for a living? Can I get your Social Security number? What is your credit score?* These are all ways that we are asked — sometimes politely, and sometimes not so politely — *who are you?*

In our text this morning, I imagine that when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask John the same question, it was decidedly the impolite form. This was not a curious inquiry. This was a challenge. *Who do you think you are?*

And John's answer, in verse 23, is that he is the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: *Make straight the way of the Lord*. He is telling them that he is the voice of Isaiah 40. And that, as we will see, is a very big deal.

The Background of Isaiah 40

To understand why John's answer matters so much, we need to go back about seven hundred years before Christ to the reign of Hezekiah — one of the great kings of Judah. Scripture describes Hezekiah as a king who sought to do what was right. He was a faithful man who lived in difficult times. He trusted the Lord and introduced sweeping reforms in the kingdom. He restored worship at the temple. He called the nation to observe one of the great Passovers described in all of Scripture. And when the Assyrian army surrounded Jerusalem, he trusted the Lord rather than his own strength.

He was a faithful king.

But at the end of Hezekiah's life, the prophet Isaiah delivered a sobering word to him. In Isaiah 39:5–7, Isaiah told the king that the day was coming when everything in his house — everything his fathers had stored up — would be carried away to Babylon, and nothing would be left. Now this exile was still more than a hundred years in the future, and like so many leaders throughout history who are content to leave hard problems for the next generation, Hezekiah heard the word and essentially said, *Well, at least there will be peace in my day* (Isaiah 39:8). He kicked the can down the road.

But I am sure there were many others who were not so calm about what Isaiah had said. *What do you mean, carried to Babylon? What do you mean, nothing will be left? Has the Lord deserted us?*

And it is into precisely that anxiety — that fear of abandonment, that dread of exile — that the page turns from the judgment of Isaiah 39 to one of the great passages of hope in all of Scripture. Isaiah 40 begins:

“Comfort, O comfort My people,” says your God. “Speak kindly to Jerusalem; and call out to her, that her warfare has ended, that her iniquity has been removed, that she has received of the LORD’S hand double for all her sins.” A voice is calling, “Clear the way for the LORD in the wilderness; make smooth in the desert a highway for our God. Let every valley be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; and let the rough ground become a plain, and the rugged terrain a broad valley; then the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all flesh will see it together; for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”

As you read through Isaiah 40, the promises accumulate: peace — the end of warfare; forgiveness — the removal of sins; the glory of God revealed; the word of God enduring when everything else fades; the presence of God coming with might and power; God among his people as a shepherd who gently gathers his flock; strength for the weary and tired. And the chapter closes on those famous words: *they who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint* (Isaiah 40:31).

Two hundred years after Isaiah prophesied, the people returned from exile. And no doubt some of them looked at Isaiah 40 and said, *See — the Lord has fulfilled his promise*. And indeed he had, in part. But I think there were many who looked at those words and said, *There is something yet to come. There is a greater promise here — peace, the forgiveness of sins, the revealing of God's glory, his presence among us, his power in us — that has not yet fully arrived*.

So when the priests and Levites come to John and demand to know who he is, and he answers that he is the voice in the wilderness of Isaiah 40, he is saying something enormous. He is saying: those promises of God — peace, forgiveness, the revealing of his glory, his presence among us, his power in us — are not fulfilled in me. They are fulfilled in another. Someone is coming, and I am here to point you to him.

This is why I am here — to point you to the One who is our peace, who forgives our sins, who is the fullness of God's glory, who is God among us and God's power in us.

The Witness We Need

I believe that the witness John the Baptist embodied — pointing people to Jesus — is as urgent today as it was two thousand years ago.

The promises of Isaiah 40 are exactly what the human soul longs for. Real peace — peace that is greater than any struggle or pain or loss we face. Real forgiveness — forgiveness that frees us to live new lives, away from the bondage and the penalty of sin. The glory of God revealed — the weightiness of his presence, the substance of his truth, the power of his will, the beauty of his holiness. Truth that does not shift or require constant revision. And the presence and power of God himself dwelling in us. These are not abstract theological categories. This is the reality of life lived through faith in Jesus Christ.

And it is a reality that people around us are desperate to find.

We live in an era of some of history's greatest achievements — in medicine, in food production, in technology that gives us capabilities our grandparents could not have imagined.

And yet we also live in a day of record suicide rates, staggering drug overdoses, and the unraveling of families. Why? Because people are searching to fill a soul-deep hunger for peace and righteousness and purpose and truth — and they are searching in the wrong places. In amusement, entertainment, materialism, self-indulgence. Things that make wonderful promises on the surface but lead, almost without exception, into the bondage of addiction, pornography, violence, and despair.

John came as a witness. He came to point people — to point us — to the Light of the world, to the One in whom all of Isaiah's promises find their fulfillment. And if you are a follower of Jesus, his witness has now become your witness. What John did for the people of his day is exactly what you and I are called to do for the people of our day. We are to point people to Jesus.

With that in mind, I want to spend the rest of our time this morning looking at John the Baptist as an example — a model — for what it means to be a witness.

What Is a Witness?

1. A Witness Is Someone Who Is Sent

Verse 6 tells us: *There was a man sent from God, whose name was John.* This is no small thing. Throughout Scripture, being sent by God carries authority. Moses was sent to the Israelites in slavery. Isaiah was sent to the people of Judah. Jesus the Son was sent by the Father. The Holy Spirit was sent by God. When someone is sent by God, there is an authority and a power that accompanies that sending.

Think of it this way: our country has a president, and one of the things a president does is send ambassadors — people who go out as his voice to the world. John was God's ambassador, sent to bear witness about the light of the world. As verse 8 puts it plainly, *he was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light.*

2. A Witness Is Someone Whose Heart and Humility Point to Jesus

I want to say something carefully here, because I think it matters.

The Greek word translated *witness* in this passage is *martyr* — from which we get our English word *martyr*. That connection is not accidental. In the early church, those who bore witness to Jesus were so often put to death for it that the words *witness* and *martyr* became synonymous. A martyr is someone who loses his life because of his witness to Jesus. A witness is someone who surrenders his life *for* Jesus.

Notice that in verses 6–8 alone, the word *witness* appears three times. I think that is deliberate. John the Baptist is both witness and martyr. Yes, he will eventually be killed by Herod — but we can already see his martyrdom in this passage, in the way he subordinates himself entirely to Christ so that Jesus is exalted and he himself is not.

When the delegation asks, *Are you the Christ? Are you Elijah? Are you the Prophet?* — John says no, no, no, no. *Who are you then?* I am nobody. I am not even worthy to be a servant — I am not worthy to untie his sandals. I baptize with water; he baptizes with the Holy Spirit. I am just a voice, a sound, pointing you to the One.

There are skilled teachers, gifted preachers, and effective evangelists whose ministries are as much about themselves as they are about Christ. There is very little martyrdom in that kind of ministry — very little of that losing of self. But a true witness for Christ gets himself out of the way. Throughout this passage we hear John saying, again and again: *It is not about me — it is about him. It is not for me — it is for him. I cannot meet the deep needs of people; only he can. I am not the light; he is. People are not to look at me; they are to look at him. His purposes and his glory outweigh my needs, my privileges, my rights, my ambitions.*

A witness is someone whose heart and humility point to Jesus — not to themselves.

3. A Witness Is Someone Whose Words Point to Jesus

Look at the three things John gives witness about in this passage.

First, he tells us *who Jesus is*. He is the Son of God — the preexistent One who was before John, before everything: *After me comes a man who ranks before me, because he was before me* (v. 30). He is the one the Spirit descended upon and remained upon. He is the Messiah, revealed to Israel.

Second, John tells us *what Jesus has come to do*. In verse 29, as Jesus is walking toward him, John says: *Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!* Not just who he is, but what he has come to accomplish — to be the sacrifice that removes our sin, to be the place where grace and truth meet together. This is the fulfillment of Isaiah 53.

Third, John tells people *how to respond*. That word *Behold* is not a polite suggestion. It is a command — an imperative. *Look. See. Know. Trust. Pay attention. There he is.* If there is one word that captures what we are to do with Jesus, it may be that one: behold him.

4. A Witness Is Someone Whose Actions Point to Jesus

When the Pharisees' delegation presses John — *Why are you baptizing, if you are not the Christ, not Elijah, not the Prophet?* — notice how John answers. He doesn't defend his practice on its own terms. He immediately turns the question toward Jesus: *I baptize with water. He*

baptizes with the Holy Spirit. What I do is merely a pale reflection of what God does. You want to talk about my baptism? It is nothing compared to his.

I love this. John's actions — even his signature practice — exist not to call attention to himself but to point beyond himself. And I want to suggest that this is a model for all of us, whatever it is that we do.

If you are a food server, you can think of yourself as someone who brings people bread — or you can know that you serve a God who is the Bread of Life, and let that meaning fill what you do. If you are a teacher, you can know that you point people toward the greatest teacher who ever lived. If you are a physician, you serve the Great Healer — the one who heals more than bodies. If you wash dishes, you can know that you work alongside a God who washes away the sins of the world.

Do you see your life as a living reflection of what God does — sent by God, imbued with meaning and purpose, bearing witness to Jesus through everything you put your hands to?

5. The Goal: That All May Believe

John's goal is woven through this entire passage, but verse 7 states it plainly: *He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him.* That was John's goal. Everything he did, everything he said, the way he lived, the way he saw himself — all of it was in service to that one aim: *that all might believe.*

How Is Your Witness?

So let me close with the question that I think this passage puts to every one of us: *How is your witness?*

Have you been sent by God? If you are a follower of Jesus Christ, the answer is yes. Jesus said plainly: *As the Father has sent me, I am sending you* (John 20:21). And Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5:20: *We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God.* You have been sent, with authority and purpose, to bear witness to him.

Does your heart — who you are, the posture of your life — point to Jesus? Or have ego, pride, comfort, and self-interest gotten in the way? Have you surrendered yourself to Christ in the way John did? Is it genuinely not about you, but about him?

Do your words point to Jesus — telling people who he is, what he has done, and how to respond?

Do your actions point to Jesus — not just in avoiding hypocrisy, but in living in such a way that what you do becomes a reflection of what God does, and a doorway through which people can see him?

And is your goal — the thing that drives you — that all might believe?

John the Baptist came as a witness. He pointed to the One who is our peace, our forgiveness, our life, our light. That witness is now ours to carry. So I ask you again: how is your witness?