

He Prepares Us For the Coming Light

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- [0 : 0 0] Well, friends, we're continuing our series here in the first 18 verses, known as the prologue of John's Gospel. This Gospel is unique amongst the four Gospels.
- For a start, it was written probably about maybe 30 years after the other three, after Matthew, Mark, and Luke. In fact, Mark was probably written first, because Matthew and Luke have drawn very heavily on Mark, even to the point where they've used the exact same words as Mark used.
- But John has taken a completely different approach. And we'll talk a wee bit more about that in a minute, as we think how it impacts on his relationship here to John the Baptist.
- So let's read these first 18 verses again, and just enjoy this, because you can't come away from these Scriptures with a small Jesus.
- This is a very, very powerful Lord that we're reading about here. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.
- [1 : 1 5] He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made.
- In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.
- 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. The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him.
- He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.
- [2 : 3 2] And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.
- John bore witness about him, and cried out, This was he of whom I said, He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me.
- For from his fullness, we have all received grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses, grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.
- No one has ever seen God. The only God who is at the Father's side, he has made him known. So we start with pure theology, with John saying, This is the one who is coming.
- And here's the reason he's come. He has come that people might know God. Now this sets our faith, apart from every other so-called faith on the planet, it sets us completely apart, because we have a God who communicates, and he communicates for the specific reason that he desires to be known by his worshippers.

[4 : 04] There is no other God that you could describe in that way. This God is a communicating God. In fact, to the people who spoke Greek in those days, in the beginning was the word, the word in Greek is the word logos, and logos to a Greek mind just meant a communication.

It just meant a message. Something that is being said. So they were familiar with this concept. Jews and Greeks.

The logos was a message. But what is happening here is that John is using the word quite differently for the first time. And he's saying, The thing that you think is just an impersonal force in the cosmos is a person.

God's word is a person. The word was God. And then he gets even more shocking and says, The word was made flesh.

So God becomes a human being. Now, I don't know if you noticed, maybe a sort of, almost like the flow of John's thought seemed to jar at one point.

[5 : 34] As though he was bringing in something that didn't quite fit with what he was saying before. Because if you read the first five verses, you end up with, your head is almost sore, trying to think yourself into what John is saying.

Because he's saying, In the beginning was the word. So he's saying, I want to introduce you to someone here who was, who was before there was ever a before.

You need to go so far back in time that you run out of time and this person was still there. He was there. He'd always been there. He's the uncreated creator of all things.

And your head begins to hurt with this enormity of it, the size of it. I mean, how do you get into this kind of theology without ending up with a headache, trying to get yourself around it?

But then he says that the purpose that the word came was because this amazing God wants to be known.

[6 : 45] And so you're drawn into these first five verses. The light shines in the darkness. The darkness has not overcome it. This is not just theology. This is victorious theology.

There's nothing the darkness can do about this. The darkness is impacted by the arrival of the light, but the light is not touched by the darkness.

So this is really big. And then all of a sudden, almost like apropos of nothing, he suddenly says, there was a man sent from God. His name was John.

And you think, how did we get to a mere man who was sent from God? How did we get to this bloke from this gigantic cosmic figure who created all things?

And without whom was nothing made that has been made. How did we get from verse five to verse six? It seems like a distraction almost, doesn't it?

[7 : 48] As though John's flow of thought has been interrupted and he suddenly loses connection with these great thoughts he's having and suddenly starts thinking about a mere man.

Well, actually, it's not a distraction. It's a diversion that's completely on course. Because, you see, the astonishing thing about John is that John has exactly the same, John the Baptist has exactly the same agenda as John the Gospel writer.

John the Baptist was a man who was seeking to, he was not the light. The Bible's very clear about that. And that's the most significant thing you can say about John the Baptist.

He was not the light. What he was not is the most significant thing about him. Because he came to be a witness to the light. And we'll see how that works out in due course.

But what John was not is what made John powerful. He was like the moon to the sun.

- [9 : 04] There's a throwaway little phrase in Psalm 89 where the psalmist talks about the moon and says the moon is a faithful witness in the sky.
- The first time I read that I thought what on earth is it witnessing to? What does the moon witness to? It has no light of its own.
- It merely reflects the light that comes from the sun. And suddenly you begin to see how the moon functions as a witness.
- And John was not the light. but he came to bear witness to the light. John was the moon to Jesus' son.
- And there's another amazing thing about the moon. The moon the moon's orbit around the planet the moon orbits us roughly every 28 days which is where we get our monthly cycles from.
- [10 : 15] And as the moon goes round the earth it has a colossal impact gravitational impact on the tides of the oceans and the seas. And it pulls the oceans with it as it goes.
- Literally pulls them. And that's why you get these regular approximately two tides a low tide and a high tide every day. And have done for countless years.
- and the moon just draws all this great body of water with it. Fantastic power. Now if the moon was just a wee bit closer to the earth at any time in its orbit we would be overcome with tsunamis and terrible tidal waves.
- Or if it was a bit further away it wouldn't have a refreshing effect of the tides on the oceans. And so all life in the sea would die. The moon's a fair old piece of stuff isn't it really when you're thinking it.
- It's not an ordinary piece of rock in the sky at all. Our God is utterly amazing and everything is done for a purpose. And here's John he has no light of his own.
- [11 : 30] John the Baptist he's not the light but he bears witness to the light. He reflects the light. He points to the light. He's obsessed with the light. He's preoccupied with the light.
- And he makes sure that everybody else is preoccupied with the light. Because he's preparing them for the coming of the light. That's his whole task in life. John was born supernaturally.
- He was born to parents who were too elderly to expect a child. And his father was told that John would be great before the Lord.
- He was told amazing things about John. That John would go on before the Messiah in the spirit and power of Elijah. And he would turn the hearts of the children to the fathers and the fathers to the children.
- I've often wondered what that was but we'll come back to that in a minute. But John was prepared from birth. In fact he was filled with the Holy Spirit from birth.
- [12 : 38] And these are the six, seven and eight of the three verses in our chapter today that we're particularly concerned with. 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 he came to bear witness about the light. God our father never leaves himself without a witness in any age. Don't ever allow anyone to say to you without just being as gracious as you can but don't let anyone say to you that there are people who live in this world and die without ever having a chance of salvation.
- Because the living God has gone to such colossal lengths to make sure that people get opportunity to know the truth. There is such a thing, if people don't believe the Bible which is a special revelation from God, everybody's got access to the general revelation that's all around us.

The general revelation is vast. The heavens declare the glory of God, the skies proclaim his handiwork, a blade of grass has a question for you, where on earth did it come from?

Where did the first one come from? Where did the first seed come from? Where do we get conscience from?

[14 : 01] How do we know the difference between right and wrong? How does a baby know the difference between right and wrong when it's crawling along the carpet heading for the fireplace and you say no and it turns and gives you a look as if to say I know where the fences are and I'm going to try a wee bit harder to go further and so it does, it crawls a few more steps.

Where does a baby get a conscience from? It's not social conditioning, it's a gift of God. It's hell's best kept secret that every man, woman and child on the planet has a conscience that's in agreement with right and wrong.

So, let's think for a wee bit. John was not the light, but he was a faithful witness as the moon, is a faithful witness. And he was a witness in the sense that every true witness is.

A true witness draws attention to something or someone beyond themselves. They don't draw attention to themselves. If you were called to give witness testimony in a court of law and you went into the witness box and you said, thank you for this opportunity, your honour, actually I've got three grandchildren, I'm really proud of them.

The wee one, you wouldn't believe what she gets up to you, your honour. Oh, and as a matter of fact, I know you have an interest in philately, so I brought my stamp collection today to let you see.

[15 : 39] Do you think you'd last long in the witness box, you know? a witness doesn't draw attention to himself, a witness is there to draw attention to something beyond himself, someone beyond himself.

And John was very clear about that. He had not come to do his people good. He had come to point them to the one who had promised never to stop doing them good.

Where do I get that from? Well, just beyond the new covenant passage where Jeremiah prophesies that there will be a new covenant. The Lord God says this, Behold, this is after the times of exile, God is saying, Behold, I will gather them from all the countries to which I drove them in my anger and my wrath and in great indignation.

I will bring them back to this place and I will make them dwell in safety. And they shall be my people and I will be their God. I will give them one heart and one way that they may fear me forever for their own good and the good of their children after them.

I will make with them an everlasting covenant that I will not turn away from doing good to them. Here's God promising he will never cease doing good to the children of Israel.

[17 : 04] And I will put the fear of me in their hearts that they may not turn from me. I will rejoice in doing them good and I will plant them in this land in faithfulness with all my heart and with all my soul.

That's the only place I know of in scripture where God says he's going to do anything with all his heart and all his soul. And it relates to making sure that Israel is a nation in perpetuity and nothing can prevent that happening.

God's God's baptism was not in the business of saying come to me and I'll do you good. He's saying come back to God because he has promised never to stop doing you good.

John's baptism was a baptism of repentance. And what is repentance? Essentially it's coming back to God. what was John doing then?

Actually if we put it around this way he was fulfilling the prophecy that had been made about him himself. He was doing exactly what Malachi had said.

[18 : 13] And this is let me see if I can just give me a sec. The very last this is John you need you need to understand John is speaking prophetically with a prophetic voice for the very first time in 400 years.

There has never been a prophet in Israel for four centuries. And this is John and this is what was said 400 years previously by Malachi the prophet.

He said behold I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes and he will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.

John the Baptist is actually fulfilling this prophecy. In fact he's even an Elijah look alike. Now when he's asked if he's Elijah he says no I'm not.

I'm not the Christ. I'm not Elijah. I'm not the prophet that Moses said was going to come and he said well who are you? He said I'm just a voice. I'm just a voice.

[19 : 28] I'm just the voice crying in the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord. I'm here to help prepare for the coming of the light. That's me.

I'm just a voice says John. But in doing so in calling for repentance you know Matthew tells us that people came from Jerusalem and Judea and from all over.

Crowds of thousands came to John and they were baptized in the river Jordan confessing their sins. Now you might think oh that's nice.

John's in the middle of a rip-roaring revival. That sounds good. Actually it was far far deeper than that. It was far more astonishing than that because in those days baptism was almost exclusively reserved for Gentiles not Jews.

If Gentiles were proselytes and they wanted to join Judaism and become Jewish in their religion they had to go through a process of initiation and part of that process was baptism.

[20 : 36] They had to be baptized to say that they were joining the Jewish people. So it was normal to see Gentiles being baptized.

It was not normal to see Jews being baptized. So when Jews said it's time to repent it's time for us to come to God and confess our sins.

Can you imagine how difficult that was for Jews to do? Because Jews hated Gentiles and Gentiles hated Jews and for Jews to say we have effectively been living like Gentiles and we now need to be baptized as though we're rejoining the faith that we abandoned.

Brothers and sisters that's an amazing admission from these Jewish people. Thousands of them admitting that they've been behaving like Gentiles.

Admitting that they had left the family of God and developed lifestyles where they were living as though they had no fear of God. As though they were just like the pagan nations round about.

[21 : 47] And then suddenly they have to swallow their pride and go down into the water and apologize to God. What John is actually doing is reparenting rebellious children.

He's doing exactly what Malachi said would be done when a man would come in the spirit and power of Elijah to turn the hearts of the children to the fathers.

Who are the fathers that are being talked about here? Is this just a problem between dads and lads in ancient Judea? It's not a dads and lads problem we're talking about here.

That's not the parenting that I'm talking about. It's not what John was concerned about. The fathers who are distanced from the children, the children have separated themselves from the fathers are Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

They're the fathers of the nation. And Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had covenant relationship with God. A completely unconditional covenant relationship with God.

[22 : 53] God's covenant with Abraham did not require anything of Abraham. It was simply God promising what he would do. I will make you the father of many nations. I will give to your descendants this land.

God's but you see subsequent generations down the line just abandoned all that. They turned away and you see it throughout Israel's history.

You see it in the time of Solomon. Solomon dies and the wisdom that he's been given by God is pretty well disregarded and disrespected by his son who is his immediate successor.

Rehoboam comes to the throne and Rehoboam behaves like a prince on Facebook. He behaves as though all he needs really to be able to be a good prince is to get enough likes from all his young mates.

And so he gets advice from the older men in the kingdom. And he thinks, I don't like the sound of that. They're telling me to go and eat a bit of humble pie and bring the people along with me.

[24 : 07] No, I don't like that. So his mates say to him, now you go to the people and you tell them that if they thought it was tough under your dad, it's going to be worse under you.

Just show them what you're made of. And so this guy, he's got all the likes he wants from his mates on Facebook. And so he goes ahead on that basis and destroys Israel and turns it into two separate nations, north and south, that end up warring with each other.

And civil war becomes normal in Israelite life. So that was Rehoboam. The heart of the father and the heart of the son were at totally different places.

And it happened again and again and again through Israel's history. Hezekiah was a righteous king and then he has a son called Manasseh. And Manasseh, it's M for Manasseh and M for monster, basically.

Manasseh was really bad news. For 55 solid years, he led Israel in the most blatant paganism and filled Jerusalem from end to end with innocent blood.

[25 : 25] And then his own son took over from him two years later, by which time Manasseh had actually repented. But the son, Ammon, only reigned for two years because the people assassinated him.

No more of this. And he reigned for two years. And then Ammon's son took over King Josiah and he took the nation to new heights of spirituality and respect for the living God.

And so you see Israel's graph going up and down like that. Peaks and troughs all over the place. The hearts of the children turned away from the fathers. And the hearts of the fathers turned away from the children.

And you end up with a curse on the land. The nation in complete chaos. So what's John doing?

He's doing what was prophesied that would happen. He's turning the hearts of the fathers and the children back toward each other. He's saying to the people of Israel, he's saying you need to repent of your Gentile ways.

[26 : 31] And you need to come back to the faith of your fathers. Now Jesus said the same thing of his critics. They said, what are you telling us that the truth will set us free for?

We don't need to be set free. We're not slaves of anyone. We are Abraham's children. And Jesus said if you were Abraham's children you would live as Abraham lived. You might have Abraham's surgery but you don't have Abraham's faith.

And Paul said a Jew is not one who is only one outwardly because circumcision is not a matter of the flesh but of the heart. So John is busy in the business of reparenting rebellious children, turning the children back to the fathers, to the true faith of their fathers.

And John's attitude to Jesus who's coming, John's attitude is astonishing. John actually says of this one who's coming, he says, you know, in terms of comparison, I'm not worthy to untie his sandals.

Now the one who untied the sandals in a household in those days was the lowest of the lowest of the lowest of slaves. He got to clean out the latrines, and he got to unsandal the guests as they came in and washed their dirty feet.

[28 : 09] And John says, no, no, in relation to the one who's coming, I'm not even worthy to do that for him. I can't exaggerate my lowness and my meanness because I can't exaggerate his greatness.

I couldn't exaggerate the greatness of the one who is coming after me. This is the one I said was before me because he was before me. So what were the Jews doing?

They were repenting of their Gentile ways, and in their repentance, they were getting ready for the coming of the light. brothers and sisters, as we come up towards Christmas, I just wonder if maybe some of us or all of us are being called to repent of our ways.

Maybe just a bit too much of the world is our normal way of living and thinking. Maybe it's time to ask the Lord and say to him, search me, O God, and try me.

Know my thoughts. See if there be any wicked way in me and lead me in the way everlasting. Maybe we need to pray that prayer. You know, God is merciful.

[29 : 33] God is so good. He is so kind. There is time and again, there is opportunity for repentance. Jesus told the parable of the prodigal son.

It's actually really a parable of the father. It's really all about the father. The prodigal son just serves to show what kind of father he is.

But here is this prodigal son. He is mumbling all the way back and saying, oh, here I am. I have been living on, I have been wanting to eat what the pigs are eating because I am so hungry and my father's servants have got more than enough to eat.

I know what I will do. I will go back home and we will just, we can tweak the roles a bit. You know, he doesn't have to be my father anymore and I don't have to be his son. He can just be my employer and I will just be his employee.

And I am sure that will work out and at least I will have a roof over my head and something to eat. And even as he is going back towards his father, even as he is taking the road home, he is still living in complete and utter ignorance of this father that he left.

[30 : 42] He didn't know the father before he left and he doesn't know him any better now that he is returning. He really just doesn't know him because he doesn't realize that the father has no intentions of not being father.

He is not prepared to be a mere employer. And when he gets his son back, he gets his son back. He doesn't get a steward or a waiter or a factor to look after the land.

He doesn't get someone who is a mere employee. He gets his son back. This my son was dead and is alive. He was lost and is found.

Let's have a party. You see, it's repentance prepares us for the coming of the light.

And I believe that the church today, and I don't see, I'm not talking about Bells Hill Baptist Church, I'm talking about the church as a whole in this land is giving God a bad name.

[32 : 01] I think God is getting a bad name. Because for a start, people out there don't know what we're doing in here. And we kind of more or less expect folks to come and join us.

We think if we put on this event or that event, they'll come and join us. Or if we do this that might be interesting for them, they'll come and see about it and all the rest of it.

Jesus didn't say, wait for them to come. He said, go. He said, go. He said, you need to leave your comfort zone.

It's not comfortable to go. It's comfortable to sit and wait for people to come and join you. It's not comfortable to go. And Jesus ignores our comfort and says, go.

And that's only one respect in which I think the church is giving God a bad name. Another way in which the church is doing it is by signaling to the world, oh, right, so, okay.

[33 : 10] So you disagree with God about homosexuality. You disagree with God about sex outside of marriage.

You disagree with God about gender ideology and things like that. And the church says, well, that's fine. We agree with you on all those things. There is something out there called the church that is agreeing with the world on all these issues.

And as far as the world is concerned, it's quite happy to have a church that doesn't disagree with it. But you know, brothers and sisters, if we truly love people in the name of Jesus, we're going to have to disagree with an awful lot of people.

We don't have to be obnoxious about it. We don't have to be abrasive about it. We don't have to upset people right, left, and center. We just have to stand firm on the truth of God's word and say, sorry, it's not negotiable.

It's not up for grabs. God is not going to raise up Sodom and Gomorrah and apologize to them because he's now changed his mind. So, brothers and sisters, we need to think about how all of this with John the Baptist and his call to repentance applies to us today.

[34 : 33] There really isn't any point in studying the ministry of John the Baptist unless we see the application to our own day and age. Holy church? Are we holy?

Are we a church? Our word church comes from the German word kirche, and kirche comes from the Greek word kuriakē, which means belonging to the Lord.

Belonging to the Lord. Does the church truly belong to the Lord? I had a bunch of elders in front of me once in a previous situation and I said, whose is this church?

Who does it belong to? And they said, well, it's our church. I said, wrong answer. Wrong answer. Kuriakē, kirche, kirche, church.

It belongs to him. It's not ours to do with as we please. Are we holy? John was effectively preaching holiness.

[35 : 38] John the Baptist was actually saying to his people, you have been called to be a holy people, and you need to repent because you've become just like the world around you.

You're indistinguishable from all the people around about you. You believe the same things they do. You practice the same things they do. You're just as unkind as they are. You're just as self-seeking as they are.

You don't look like a holy people, and because you don't look holy, nobody can see God. Because God wants to be visible in his children. If we're not holy, we don't have a witness.

However much we may practice evangelism, if we're not holy, we don't have a witness. Because holiness is witness. Holiness is testimony to the living God.

Let's pray. living God, our Father, we bless you. Lord, it's amazing sometimes that you have patience with us.

[36 : 52] I don't think, Lord, that we could guess how we try your patience. but your grace, Lord, that your grace comes upon grace, upon grace, upon grace, an endless river of kindness toward us.

And you have begun a good work in us, and you're carrying on that good work, and you will complete that good work at the day of Jesus Christ. And so we refuse to go from here today with our heads down in despair and depression, because there really is now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus.

we bless and thank you that this is your goodness to us. This is why our hope will not disappoint us.

But it does not mean that there is nothing in our lives that needs putting right in your eyes. It does not mean that our witness to you is not compromised.

And we ask in Jesus' name, Lord, help us to be children who really mean business with their Father. Help us go home today and let the Holy Spirit search us and show us in the light of Scripture where we need to renounce things that have been carried forward in our lives for far too long.

[38 : 16] Father, help us in Jesus' name. to bear such likeness to your Son that the light shines in the darkness, for the darkness has not overcome it and never will.

May we be that people for your name's sake. In Jesus' name. Amen.