

The Testimony of John the Baptist

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[0 : 00] Okay, well turn with me then please to John chapter 3, the end of John chapter 3. Matthew's Gospel is the manifesto of the kingdom of heaven. It tells you what its policy is and how it will work and what the future is.

Luke wrote the life of Jesus of Nazareth. Mark wrote a kind of executive summary, of course everything's in a hurry in Mark.

A sketchbook of Christ as it's been described. But John's Gospel, which is somewhat different from the others, is, well he explains to us at the end of the Gospel why he wrote it.

John chapter 20 verse 31 says the following. These things are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

In all the encounters with people that we read in John's Gospel, and a lot of John's Gospel is encounters with particular people, John is building his case.

[1 : 17] So in the previous section he recourse Jesus' discussion with Nicodemus, who was a prominent Jewish teacher, of course. Jesus told him that you must be born again. And after the passage we're looking at today, we find an entirely different kind of witness.

A Samaritan woman, a very dubious reputation. And Jesus is going to bring to her the water of life. But in between these two, we have not actually a meeting between Jesus and somebody else, but nevertheless a recorded testimony about Jesus.

And that's the testimony of John the Baptist. Now, to avoid confusion over the name John, I'll try and refer to John the Baptist as the Baptist, and to the Apostle, who of course wrote the Gospel as either the Apostle or the Evangelist, but I don't claim to do it entirely consistently, but I'll try and avoid confusion that way.

Now, the testimony of the Baptist was of some importance, because he was a well-known figure, even of some political importance. And certainly among godly Jews, he was a well-respected prophet.

And so what he had to say would certainly be worth listening to. And so John the Apostle certainly thinks it's worth recording the Baptist teaching.

[2 : 44] Now, there is an issue here of interpretation. Exactly which words are those of John the Baptist? Clearly, verses 27 to 30 are the words of John the Baptist.

It says, John replied, and finishes with, he must become greater, I must become less. Now, in fact, traditionally, the rest of the chapter, verses 31 to 36, were also taken as the words of the Baptist. Wired, in his expository thoughts, takes this view. And even Hendrickson takes this view. But more recent commentators have pointed out that, in fact, it perhaps makes more sense if you take verses 31 to 36 to be the reflection by the Apostle John.

And perhaps most significantly, Don Carson, in his commentary, presents this conclusion as pretty much certain. He only qualifies his opinion by saying these appear to be the words of the evangelist.

But other than that, he more or less takes it as clear that, actually, these words are the words of the evangelist. The style does seem more that of the gospel writer than the down-to-earth prophet. But even if these are the words of the Baptist, it's clear that the evangelist has put them there for a reason, because the themes are closely related to those of Nicodemus and indeed the woman in the world in the next chapter.

[4 : 11] So we can't be entirely sure where the quotation ends, as you have an NIV, the footnote suggests. I would claim to go with the more recent view of Carson and others, that verses 31 to 36 are the reflection on the words of John by John the Baptist.

Sorry, by the evangelist. But let me remind you, anyway, it really doesn't matter all that much. Either way, they're still words of Scripture, and so they're still words of authority.

So we're going to unpack this passage under three headings. There's a lot going on, actually, a lot in this very short passage. And so we'll look at it under three headings to try and get our heads around what it actually says.

So these are the three headings I'd like to look at. First of all, it's three questions, actually.

Secondly, who washes cleanest? Secondly, who is the groom and who is the best man?

And thirdly, who is it that truly gives life? So let's look, first of all, at verses 22 to 26.

[5 : 24] You see that these verses revolve around the issue of water and washing. Water, in fact, is quite important in John's Gospel. It's already been mentioned in this chapter in verse 5.

In chapter 4, of course, when Jesus has this discussion with the Samaritan woman, it revolves around a well. It takes place at a well. And the whole discussion, really, is about who provides the true water of life.

So water is important to John the evangelist. In our passage today, topics for discussion, in fact, are baptism and washing. And whose baptism is best, is the question that's raised.

Is the one to go with the baptism of John? Or is it Jesus, who started baptizing, or more specifically, he tells us later, actually, his disciples, but Jesus' disciples have started baptizing?

But, of course, there's also this mention of disputes with a certain Jewish rabbi, whether Jewish ceremonial washing was the way to go.

[6 : 37] So who is it that washes cleanest? All the protagonists, of course, are agreed about one thing. We're not talking about personal hygiene here.

What we're talking about is spiritual washing, spiritual cleansing. And remember, baptism is not only a sign of washing. We're reminded it's also a sign of burial and rebirth, as is suggested in verse 7 about new birth, earlier in the chapter.

What is the source of this new birth? And so we have a debate here about whose baptism is best. But you'll notice this isn't exactly a calm academic discussion.

It's not a group of theologians sitting down around the dinner table discussing the nature of baptism. There's a lot of spiritual jealousy and competition at work here.

The Baptist disciples are particularly concerned that John the Baptist is missing out. See that in verse 26, don't we?

[7 : 43] He says, That man who was with you on the other side of the Jordan, the one who you testified about, well, he's baptizing and everyone is going to him. They even appear to be blaming John for a tactical mistake in associating with Jesus in the first place.

Saying, you testified about him and now they're all following him. And these disciples, they've attached themselves to John the Baptist's star and that star now seems to be in decline.

And they're wondering whether they've made a wrong choice, perhaps. Of course, what they didn't know at the time was it was about to get a whole lot worse because John the Baptist was shortly to be arrested and ultimately, of course, executed by King Herod, as we're reminded in verse 24.

At this time, John was still getting plenty of action himself. We see that in verse 23. John also was baptizing near Salim, where there was plenty of water.

But the disciples could see the way things were moving and it was a direction they didn't like. John, they say, do something before it's too late, before everybody's left here and gone on to this new teacher.

[8 : 59] So what will the Baptist do? What has he got to say about this? Well, the first thing he does, of course, he starts by reminding them that they're all on the same team, or at least they ought to be.

So he says, forget the water for a moment. Water's just a symbol. It's not a matter of hitching your wagon to your favorite teacher.

It's rather one as, what task has God given us to do? All these tasks come from heaven, as he says in verse 27. A man can receive only what was given him from heaven.

Each one does the task he's been given, using the gifts he's been given to do them. Their job is to advance the kingdom of heaven, not to reinvent it to suit themselves.

And the Baptist reminds them in verse 28 that he'd never said anything different. So then, what is the task that John the Baptist was given?

[10:05] Well, he says, think of it as a wedding. Now, this idea, of course, is not something the prophet had made up. This idea of the Israel as the bride of God occurs frequently in the Old Testament.

Here's just one example in Hosea 2, verses 19 and 20. See, God says, I will betroth you to me forever. I will betroth you in righteousness and justice, in love and compassion. I will betroth you in faithfulness, and you will acknowledge the Lord. It was an idea that the people of God were wedded to God, was, say, an Old Testament one. And John picks this up. And so how does John the Baptist see his role at this wedding? Well, he's quite clear about that. He's not the bridegroom. He's the best man. He's quite clear that it isn't his party. Now, of course, you might get the wrong impression if you see the best man about his work, organising everything, making sure the, well, particularly in a Judean wedding, the friend of the groom was an important character.

[11:10] His job was to make sure all the arrangements were in place before the groom arrived. They did it the other way around then, but nowadays the groom is here and we wait for the bride to arrive, but in Judea they did it the other way around.

The bride would be ready there at the wedding, waiting for the groom to arrive. Seems like a much better proposal to me, actually. But there you go. But that's the way they did it. And, of course, the best man, the friend of the groom, was there representing the groom, making sure everything was ready for the feast, that everything was organised. And, of course, he'd pop up all over the place, checking the guests were there in time, that everyone understood the arrangements for the wedding feast, and generally making sure that every detail was in hand. So he had a prominent view, position, as it were, in these arrangements, but still it isn't his party. Once the groom arrives, the job of the best man is to fade into the background. But you might say, does that make it an anti-climax? Does the friend of the groom then sort of mope about, wishing the guests would talk to him instead of the bride and groom? Well, of course he doesn't.

[12:26] His satisfaction is that of a job completed, of a plan that's come together. And as he greets the groom, in verse 29, he finds joy in knowing that his job was well done.

His task is completed. And his joy is in having done the job that God had given him to do. And so if the ushers would go around promoting the cause of the best man, well, that's just absurd, isn't it? And that's what the disciples were trying to, John's disciples were trying to do. It's not his party. And just to put their matter beyond doubt, he says in verse 30, he must become greater, I must become less.

Anything else would be totally inappropriate. It's a wedding. It's all about the bride and the groom. And then, in verses 31 to 36, we have reflection on these words, and I'm going to suggest to you that it's probably the evangelist, the gospel writer, reflecting on these words, rather than John the Baptist himself.

But it doesn't matter too much anyway. So what's the evangelist make of this? Well, John was, after all, the great prophet. He spoke from the Spirit of God.

[13:50] These words need to be taken seriously. Certainly, the testimony of John the Baptist is important. So what should we make of it? How can we evaluate it?

And the apostle gives us, in fact, a number of insights to get the right perspective. And he does it, in fact, if you look closely, he does it by four comparisons. So look, first of all, at verse 31.

The one who comes from heaven, comes from above, is above all. The one who is from the earth, belongs to the earth, and speaks as one from the earth. The one who comes from heaven, is above all.

John is making a contrast here between the Baptist and Jesus. The truth of the Baptist message, was indeed from heaven, came by the Spirit.

But still, he spoke as a man of the earth. The Greek word for earth here, in fact, is G. It's not cosmos here, it's G, from which we get our words like geography.

[14:59] It means the land, the ground you stand on. As distinguished from the heavens, or the sky. However godly John the Baptist is, his feet are still planted in the dust of this world.

He cannot be the Christ, the heavenly king, because he's not qualified by birth for the role. Only a heavenly king can be king of heaven. And this was the very point of the Baptist testimony.

See that in verse 28. That's exactly what he said. You myself testify that I said I am not the Christ. Well, actually, that's quite an extraordinary claim for John to make about somebody who was, after all, a relative.

They may even have been first cousins, John and Jesus. They were certainly related and knew each other. John knew Jesus well, and with his prophetic insight, John could see who Jesus really was.

It's not the same, for instance, as the other inhabitants of Nazareth. We read in Mark 6, 1 to 6, for instance, that they said, oh, hang on, this is the carpenter's son. He can't be anybody special. But John knew Jesus very well, and yet he could see who he was with the insight that God had given him.

[16:24] Yet even John, remember, wasn't immune from doubt. In fact, we read on in Matthew 11, verse 2, after John was put in prison, he actually sent messages to Jesus confirming that he really was the one who was to come.

Even John had his feet mired in the mud of this world. Only the one who actually comes from heaven can deliver the message with full authority.

Only he can put the matter beyond doubt because the sun is heavenly whereas the Baptist is earthly. And secondly, sorry, I've gone too far there, haven't I?

Go back one. No, I haven't. Sorry, that's right. Yeah, that's right. That's the second one. Yes, that's right. The evangelist then mentions this issue of testimony.

Verse 32, he testifies of what he's seen and heard but no one accepts his testimony. But the man who has accepted it has certified that God is truthful.

[17:37] Is it he there John the Baptist, Jesus, or John the Apostle? Probably Jesus, in fact, because he is talking about the one who came from heaven but all of them, in fact, all three of them testified to the work of God and all three of them found that their testimony was largely rejected.

But those who did accept it found that the message were the very words of God himself and convulsely those who did not accept it were accusing God of lying.

I think I've said before that Satan really only has one good line. The one we find in Genesis 3, verse 1 where he says, did God really say? That's all he ever does really is try and undermine the word of God to persuade people not to accept the testimony that comes from God.

To reject the words of the ambassador is to accuse the king of lying. And in fact, even by disputing what John the Baptist has said about the Christ, his disciples were actually accusing their rabbi of lying, weren't they?

Accusing not only of a tactical mistake but also of actually giving false testimony is what it amounted to. And if they were accusing their rabbi of lying, they were accusing God himself of lying.

[18:59] and yet John says, the one who does accept the testimony asserts that God is indeed truthful.

And if the disciples had accepted the testimony of their own prophet and rabbi, they indeed themselves would have been in seeking out the Christ. Christ. And thirdly, John points out that while a prophet is limited, the son is unlimited.

And this commentator's thing, I think is right, is what John is getting at in verse 36. The one who God has sent speaks the words of God for God gives the spirit without limit.

Probably there's an implied hymn here for God gives him, the one who comes from heaven, the spirit without limit. A prophet's knowledge is limited.

His authority is limited. In fact, even his ability to bear the full force of the Holy Spirit is limited. Remember that Moses was told that, wasn't he?

[20:14] He was warned that if he saw God face to face without any screen or barrier or veil, he will be burned up and destroyed. The human frame can only take so much.

But the one whom God sent speaks the very words of God for God gives him the spirit without limit. The father loves the son and has placed everything in his hands.

It's not the limited authority of a prophet or even of the lawgiver Moses, but the son, the father has placed everything in the son's hands.

The one who comes from God has the spirit without limit and carries the authority of God himself.

We could paraphrase this a bit by saying, the father said to the son, I want you to go and sort these humans out.

They can't handle it on their own. And you'll have all the resources of heaven behind you and I'm leaving it all in your hands. You have my every confidence as my beloved son.

[21 : 17] God has placed everything in the son's hands and given him full authority. And then finally, what's the conclusion of this matter then? Fourthly, the son gives life.

The fourth comparison is that the son gives life, whereas everything else is death. John 3, verse 36, whoever believes in the son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him.

So it was a warning to those disciples of John the Baptist who may have rejected the son, but it's a warning to everyone else as well. He says it follows that the son has the spirit without limit, but only in the son can we find life, eternal life.

According to Carson, the word reject here more literally means disobeys. Those who disobey the son will not see life. The message of the Baptist alone isn't enough.

He can preach repentance, but he can't grant life. Of course, he's a man of earth with his orientation towards death and decay. He's as much a slave to mortality as the rest of us.

[22 : 39] In fact, as we know, not long after these events, the Baptist will be executed by Herod. At least as far as this world is concerned, that's the last we hear of John the Baptist.

Only the son cannot be held by death because he has life in himself. John tells us the son grants life to those who believe.

We were thinking about this this morning, weren't we, the resurrection. But another slightly different slant on it here. Because the son has life in himself, death could not hang on to him.

We think of it as a work of the father and of course it was in a sense. And yet there's also the fact that the son himself has the life from heaven. And so death was just incapable of hanging on to him. That's what John is saying here. And yet he says the son can grant that eternal life to those who believe. So what are we to make of this?

[23 : 40] Does it have anything to tell us because we're not John's disciples? And yet I think we all have a touch don't we of that party spirit within us. We have a loyalty don't we to places and traditions which we think are important.

And maybe to some extent they are important. And the reaction of John's disciples is a very human one isn't it? When we run into problems and things don't seem to be going as well as we expected we react just as they did.

And I think there are two aspects to this reaction. First of all they start to envy others and feel sorry for themselves. Why are we struggling when that big church down the road seems to be so rich and successful?

And if that church is not one in our own tradition we get even more upset don't we? And we say look like the disciples everyone's going to him. And secondly like those disciples we start to apportion blame.

Whose fault is it? If only you hadn't given him some street cred by talking about him and welcoming him you know that this Jesus wouldn't be catching on.

[24 : 57] we start to blame somebody for what seems to have gone wrong. And if we don't say it out loud at our church meetings we say it so often in our heart don't we?

Why us and whose fault is it? That's a natural human reaction I guess. But what's the Baptist response to this?

Well it's one of hope and encouragement isn't it? We've just purchased the freehold of our building and we're looking to the future. And yet in one sense the future has no absolute guarantee of success does it?

As far as we as an organisation are concerned. Revelation warns the churches that the candlestick can be taken away and we only you know we can look around us and see empty churches around us.

If Calvary Church Brighton should go into terminal decline. It doesn't matter all that much in the grand scheme of things but on the other hand it does matter to us doesn't it? We do have a natural loyalty to place and tradition and history and so we pray for a better outcome and we remind God of the work that's been done in our places in the past.

[26 : 17] That's why we have a plaque to Mrs. Gates up on the wall and various other plaques not because we you know we don't treat them as saints to be prayed to as perhaps we do in some churches ones in Venice of course where we've been visiting have pictures of saints everywhere.

We don't pray to Mrs. Gates to intercede for us and yet we do revere her memory because the work that was done through her and we ask if that work was in vain and we ask what would the world make of it if our doors are shut and our buildings are sold off for a housing development.

Has the glory departed? Will the world say that out there God is no longer able to save? So we need don't we like John's disciples we need a vision of hope a vision for the future.

The Baptist and the Apostle are both dead and yet their message lives on. They remind us that hope is not found in place and tradition and history.

But hope is rather found in the presence of the bridegroom of God with us and that's why I've been singing hymns about Emmanuel and we're going to sing another one at the end. Hope is in the presence of the bridegroom that God is with us.

[27 : 35] John reminds us that the son has it all under control. He's the one who has all the resources of heaven at his disposal. He's the one who has the spirit without all the limitations of earth.

life. And it's in him, in Jesus, that life is found. That's life as individuals but also the life for our churches. What was the occasion for the Baptist joy?

It was that his task was completed because he'd heard the bridegroom's voice. And so that same apostle who recorded the words of John the Baptist was the same one who recorded the words of the risen Christ in Revelation chapter 3.

And we think of this as a gospel text but actually it isn't. It's a warning to a church that is struggling or not a warning, no not a warning, it's a promise to a church that's struggling.

Revelation chapter 3 verses 20 to 22 says the following, here I am, this is Jesus speaking, here I am, I stand at the door and knock.

[28 : 41] If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him and he with me. To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne just as I overcame and sat down with my father on his throne.

He who has an ear, let him hear what the spirit says to the churches. So let's remind ourselves not to put our faith in traditions and history, we can revere them and respect them and I think that's good.

good, but that's not where our faith is to be placed. Our faith is to be placed in the presence of the bridegroom and he invites us to open the door and ask him in.

And that he says if we ask him, he will indeed come in and eat with him or we can, I will come in and eat with him and he with me.

So let's close our time this evening by singing. him. Thank you.