

The Testimony of God and Man

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Preacher: Andrew Reid

[0 : 0 0] Father God, we thank you for the wonders of your word that directs us towards the Lord Jesus Christ. We pray that as we examine this passage this morning that you would enlighten us, that you would direct us through your spirit toward your Son and toward the service of him.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Well, friends, it is impossible really to know whether God exists.

Impossible to know what God is like. It is impossible, that is, unless. Unless God himself takes the initiative, unless God himself reveals himself to humanity, unless he shows himself, we cannot know much, if anything, about God.

But if God does exist, if there is a being such as God, then it is fundamentally important, is it not, that we find out what we can about him. And so it is that men and women throughout history have searched the world to see if they can find any clues about God.

They've scanned history to see if God has left any clues about himself. And when they've done so, they have come across one clear clue. They've come across many others, but there is one particular clue that has astounded human beings.

[1 : 2 1] They've found this clue in a small village in Palestine, for on a particular day, almost 2,000 or over 2,000 years ago, a child was born in a stable. And even his birth was wondered at by many people.

It was feared by the reigning king, a man called Herod. And in his attempt to extinguish or squash this small child, he slaughtered a multitude of innocent people.

But the child, as we know, was not touched. Thirty years later, this child had become a man and appeared again in a short public ministry that lasted three years.

This man and his three-year ministry were destined to change the course of history. For the Jesus that came on the scene and preached was a dynamic person.

He spoke to ordinary people and people eagerly listened to him. But as they did, it became very apparent to those listening that he was making shocking, if not startling, statements about himself.

[2 : 2 1] He began to make claims that, really, when you think about it, no sane person could have made with any credibility. He began to ask people to make choices about who they thought he was and what they thought he was on about.

But not only this. God himself testified at one or two times through his life about this man. Other humans testified about Jesus. And the testimony of God and of humans was strong and bold.

Friends, today we are going to look at the first few days of the public ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. And I'm going to ask you, not only today, but in the weeks that follow, to evaluate what you hear.

Primarily, I want you to listen today to what God has to say. But I also want you to listen to what humans have to say. I want you to evaluate what you hear. What are these claims being made about this man?

What do they amount to? What do they tell us about him? What implications do they have for us? More than that. If we believe that God, what God and humans say in this passage, then what impact will it have upon you, upon me, and upon our congregational life, our life together as God's people?

[3 : 34] So to start off, I want to tell you a little bit about first century Palestine. You see, first century Palestine was a hotbed of political and theological reflection and action.

Everyone wanted to have a say about things political or things religious. And people were in great trouble. This is why they were looking at these things. They were surrounded by their enemies.

They were ruled over by tyrants. They were in trouble. And therefore, they began to look to the future. They began to look for something that was better than the situation they found themselves in.

And they longed for a rescuer. They waited for a person they called a Messiah. And the expectations of this Messiah were quite diverse. Some expected he would be a Davidic Messiah or king.

Others expected a priestly Messiah. Even others expected, well, look, a prophet will come. And that this prophet would be just like Moses had promised in Deuteronomy 18. And so when John the Baptist arrived on the scene, as he does in our passage here, he was a likely candidate for being a Messiah.

[4 : 40] He looked the part. He was the son of a priest. He looked like an Old Testament prophet, wore the same garb, ate the same food. He spoke like an Old Testament prophet.

It was fiery. He did some of the things that the prophets of old had predicted would be done by an end time figure. And so the Jews of Jerusalem, when they saw him and they understood and they watched, they did the natural thing.

Have a look at it. In John chapter 1 verse 19, they sent out the equivalent, I think, of perhaps the religious police to check him out. And in verse 19, they asked the question, the priests and the Levites from Jerusalem, they asked him, well, who are you?

Now, the question is obviously a question of identity, isn't it? It's a question about the Messiah. It's a question as to, is he really the Messiah? And John is very clear in his reply. Have a look at it there.

He's unequivocal in his testimony. He says, I am not the Christ. Or in other language, I am not the Messiah. Now, this wasn't enough, though, for these people.

[5 : 45] You see, if he was not the Christ, if he was not the Messiah, then perhaps he was some other figure associated particularly with the end time. For example, perhaps he's Elijah, spoken about in Malachi chapter 4 verse 5.

Or perhaps he's the prophet that Moses had promised in Deuteronomy 18, that God would never leave his people without. So they put this question to John.

And in verse 21, he testifies in a strange way by denying them all. He says, no, no, no, I'm not Elijah. No, I'm not the prophet.

He's already said, I'm not the Messiah. But the delegates from Jerusalem, I can imagine them in their situation, they don't want to go home empty handed. And so they put some more things to him.

They ask him, well, you know, if you're not any of those things, then please tell us who you are. And Jesus replies using the words of Isaiah 40, which we read as our first Bible reading.

[6 : 43] And I want you to look at what he says in verse 23. He says this. Probably if you listen to that, you think, well, that's not really terribly good an answer, is it?

However, if you knew Isaiah, it might be. You see, let me explain a little bit about what is happening here. You see, chapters 40 to 66 of Isaiah are addressed to a particular context.

They are addressed to God's people in exile in Babylon because of sin. And what Isaiah 40 to 66 does is promises a metaphorical improvement to the road system between Babylon and back home.

That is level places. Your places will be leveled out. There'll be a leveling of hills and valleys, a straightening of the curves. You'll be able to go straight from Babylon straight across to Palestine.

And this will be in order to accomplish something, in order to accomplish the return of the covenant people from Babylon back to the promised land. But that's not all Isaiah prophesied, not all he saw.

[7 : 54] His prophecy goes on. And as he begins to talk about this return to Babylon, it becomes clear that this is just a picture of something even grander. For in Isaiah 52 and 53, he names a suffering servant of the Lord who will bring about something even greater than Babylon.

He will bring about what is prophesied in chapters 65 and 66. That is, the suffering servant will be the means by which God will bring about a whole new heaven and a new earth.

Not just a Babylon, not just a return to Palestine, but a whole new cosmos. Now let's go back to John and see if that makes sense. Can you see what John is saying when he says, the voice of one crying in the wilderness?

He's claiming, I am the one who is introducing all of this from Isaiah. I am the one who comes before the Messiah who will be the herald. Not just be the herald, but the one who causes this to be accomplished.

I am the one introducing all of this. Let's move now to verse 24. Our versions say that the people have been sent from the Pharisees.

[9 : 03] The original language probably implies that there were some Pharisees in their midst. Now the Pharisees, we're used to thinking of them as sort of scumbags. But really, they are not.

They are the spiritual descendants of God-fearing men who had resisted the cruel rule of the Greeks. They had stood as righteous men when the Greeks were there.

They were extremely scrupulous about observing every minute detail of the law of God as they understood it. And so the question they put to John is a natural one here for them to ask.

Look at it in verse 25. Why is it then that you are baptizing if you are neither the Messiah nor Elijah nor the prophet? You see, in Palestine in those days, nearly every baptismal ritual in Palestine was a self-administered one.

That is, you know, you went up, you found some place to go into the water, you went down into the water. And it was largely self-administered. Candidates, in other words, baptized themselves. And John was a bit different to this.

[10 : 06] You see, John did not administer baptism upon himself, but he administered it upon others. And perhaps it was this strange practice that made people think, well, perhaps he is some special end-time figure.

You know, perhaps he is one of those three or someone else. But what he has done is just deny that he is any of those end-time people. He is not the Messiah. He is not Elijah. He is not the prophet. Then how does he justify this thing that he is doing, dipping people in water?

Well, look at what he says in verse 26. He turns this question into an opportunity for witness or testimony to the Lord, to Jesus. He says to them, look, I baptize you in water.

In other words, yes, I do baptize people. But among you stands one you do not know. This one, the one who is coming after me, I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals.

Can you see what he is saying? In effect, he is saying this. Yes, I do baptize. And I have authority from God to do so. But I am absolutely nothing compared to the one to whom I bear witness.

[11 : 09] This one coming after me, well, I am not even worthy to stoop down and untie the thongs of his sandal. In John's day, a student was expected to do for his teacher whatever his slave would, except take off his shoes.

And John is saying, I'm not even worthy to take off the shoes of this one. In other words, this one that I'm speaking about is incredibly great in the purposes of God.

And so, as day one passes in the public ministry of Jesus, and day two comes, a new phase moves into existence. And on day two, John sees Jesus coming.

And in my mind's eye, I can imagine him doing the equivalent of what you might do in Palestine, what we would do. That is pointing. And I can imagine him saying, doing it and saying, look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

Now, what he's saying is he's summarizing some of the greatest Old Testament ideas. He's claiming that Jesus is the one slain for the sins of others. He's the one who will wage war on evil and crush it underfoot.

[12 : 22] He's the one who fulfills what Jews have been waiting for. And then in verse 30, he even pushes on. He points to Jesus and he makes sure that people understand that he's the one that had spoken about the day before and said, you know, watch out for this one.

This is the one who has provided the whole reason for living for John the Baptist. He is the focus of his life. And he does what he was designed to do.

He points to this man. He says, look at that. This is he who takes away the sin of the world. He is the one who existed long before me, even perhaps before Abraham, before Adam, before the foundation of the world.

This is the one for whom the whole world has been waiting. And then he tells us how he knows. He says that God had told him that the one on whom the spirit came and remained was God's own son.

And John has seen it happen. And he's convinced. He thinks and knows that Jesus, the Messiah, is the Messiah. Jesus of Nazareth is this prophet like Moses.

[13 : 35] He is God's coming one. He is the son of God. He is he who will deal with the rebellion of this world order. He will radically take away the sin of the world.

He will be the replacement of every priest, Passover, temple, animal sacrifice. He will be it. No wonder, he says, look, look, here is the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

Friends, let's see what we can make of this passage for us. You see, what is it about in the end? Well, the first thing to do is to check it out within the whole of John's gospel.

And so I want you to, in your Bibles, flip to the end of John's gospel. John's really helpful in that what John does is when he's writing, he tells us what exactly his purpose is. Now, not all authors do this.

But John does. He tells us why he's been writing all of this. Have a look at the end of John chapter 20. He says this. Now, Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book.

[14 : 43] But these are written so that you might come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the son of God. And that through believing, you may have life in his name.

Can you see what he's saying? He's saying, look, I selected a whole lot of things that have happened in the life of Jesus. And I've selected them with a purpose in mind. I've selected them so that you might believe that this Jesus who performed these signs is the Messiah, the son of God.

And that not only you might do that, but you might believe and have life in his name. It's very clear what he's doing. And he's even talking to us. He's saying, I write these things for you, that you might come to believe what I believe, that this Jesus is the Messiah, the son of God.

And through believing, I want you to have life in his name. Now, with that in mind, I want you to turn back to chapter 1. And look at verse 34.

Look at what it says. John the Baptist says, And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the son of God. Can you hear the language?

[15 : 52] Can you hear the same language, isn't it? That's John chapter 20. No wonder John the writer tells this story about John the baptizer. He tells it because when he sees John, he's a model of his own witness.

He's a model of what he wants to accomplish in his own book. John testifies to Jesus. And he testifies that Jesus is the son of God. That's what John the writer wants us to know.

So when he finds someone doing it, he pinpoints him. He says, look at this one. He's got it right. And he wants us to know because he knows that life is found in this Jesus. He wants us to hear John the Baptist's testimony.

And he wants us to believe in what he testifies to. This Jesus is the son of God. And this Jesus is the means to life. So he's saying, listen to John the Baptist.

Now that's the first thing we learn from this passage. We learn that John the writer of this gospel and John the Baptist recognizes John the Baptist as the model disciple of Jesus.

[16 : 56] He looks at this Jesus and he tells what he sees. He testifies of Jesus. And the things that he testifies to are striking and life changing. Not only is this man the son of God.

Not only is he the Messiah and the Christ. He is also the one who has preexisted from all eternity. Remember we saw that last week in John 1, 1 to 18.

As John says though in verse 30, he is the one who comes before John. And not only this. He is the Lamb of God. The one who takes away the sin of the world. This is the testimony of John the Baptist.

This Jesus who appears in history is no ordinary man. He's the man to whom all history up till this point looks. And from which all history to come after will gravitate.

He is the man whose identity and work will determine human destiny before God. So John is a moral witness to Jesus. He testifies to whom Jesus is.

[18 : 00] But he does more than that. Did you notice that as we go through? You see, John the Baptist not only tells us what it is to be a witness to Jesus. He tells us what a witness to Jesus looks like. You see, the testifier to Jesus shows us how to live before Jesus and before God.

John is like this. Did you notice it in the passage? I wonder if you noticed as we go through. He humbly waits for God's instruction and God's time. He's open to it.

He listens to it. He's obedient to it. He is the moral witness to Jesus. Humble, open, obedient, listening.

One who humbly, openly and obediently declares what he has heard and seen. Friends, the model of John the Baptist is salutary in our world.

Where even preachers direct people toward themselves. But not John. John is not here for his own glory.

[19 : 01] He is here for the glory of the one he serves. And he gloriously accepts this lowly task. Within a chapter or two, he'll say these wonderful words. The friend of the bridegroom sees the bridegroom and rejoices.

He must become greater and I must become less. It's a wonderful testimony of what a disciple of Jesus does. He is here for the glory of the one he serves.

You see, this John the Baptist is not one who lives in great cities amidst the glory of clamoring disciples and large churches. No, he resides in the wilderness.

He wanders around the deserts. He eats strange things. He directs people away from himself, insisting that they do not mistake who he is.

He is not the Messiah. They should look elsewhere and they should look away from him and toward the true Messiah. It is toward this pre-existent Son of God who is at the same time the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

[20 : 09] This is the testimony of John the Baptist. But the chapter contains not only the testimony of John. Did you notice that it's a bit camouflaged? But there's also the testimony of God.

Did you see it there in verse 32? You see, John directs us to God himself and he declares that God himself has been doing some testimony about Jesus. He has testified in a visible, tangible manner.

He's testified by sending his spirit to descend and remain on him and John's recognized that. Friends, this is a remarkable passage. Usually I've preached on in the past from verse 19 all the way through to 52.

But I thought we had to stop a bit short of that because there's so much here. It shows you what it is to be a witness of Jesus, to Jesus. Now, last year at the AGM, I flagged that I wanted to see a change with us here at Holy Trinity.

I want our culture here at Holy Trinity to just undergo a little shift. You see, I think there's been a tendency, but it's not been uniform by any means.

[21 : 12] And we've done some great work in this area in the past. But perhaps there's been somewhat of a little tendency to wait for the world to come to us. I want to do much more of going to the world.

That is, I want us to go to the world that exists outside of our congregation, to tell the world what we have seen and heard, to be John the Baptists in our world, to be witnesses or testifiers to Jesus like John the writer is.

And John the writer, John the Baptist, they tell us how to go about the task. And really, it's not that hard. We are to be people who listen to the Word of God. For us, this means that we are to be people who soak ourselves in the Scriptures, making sure that we seek the Scriptures' witness to Jesus.

And friends, I know that we are good at doing that here. We love the Scriptures. We are to do more of that. Like John the Baptist, listen to God. Humbly be open to His Word.

Humbly submit to that Word. And then obediently take what we hear to our world. We must not stop with just being consumers of the Word of God, receivers alone.

[22 : 26] We must take it to the world. And as we do, we are to direct people away from ourselves. There must be no hint of, look at me or look at us. It must be, look at Him, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

This is the one who has existed before all eternity. Look at this Lamb of God who takes away not just my sins, but your sins and the sins of this whole rebellious world order.

Look at this one whom God has identified by causing His Spirit to descend upon Him and remain upon Him. Look at Him who is the Son of God.

Friends, can you see what I'm saying? Will you join John the writer? Will you join John the Baptist? Will you join God Himself? Because their fingers are all pointing in the same direction.

Will you strive and pray for us to be this sort of people and this sort of church. A church that testifies that Jesus is the Son of God.

[23 : 35] Will you do this? So that around us people might come to believe and through believing that they might have life in His name. So let's pray.

Amen. Father, we thank you for the example of John the Baptist. Thank you for John the writer.

Thank you, Father, for your own testimony concerning your Son. Father, please help us to strive and pray to be witnesses of this sort.

May we be a church and may we be people that constantly testify, not only amongst ourselves but outside in the world, that Jesus is the Son of God.

Father, please make us like this so that people might come to believe, that our suburb around us might come to believe, and that through believing they might have life in His name.

[24 : 35] We pray this in the glorious name of your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Sahque, the Lord.

Amen. God bless you. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.