

John the Witness

John 1:19-28

As we return to the word of God I would invite you to take your Bible and turn with me to John 1 for this message entitled, "John the Witness." Our text for today is John 1:19-28 where we are introduced to the star witness in this courtroom drama where the Apostle John is setting forth his case to prove that the Messiah is Jesus.

History is filled with well-known legal cases and courtroom dramas. You can go back to 399 BC when Socrates was accused and found guilty of corrupting the youth with his philosophies and challenging the gods of the state. His sentence? Death by drinking poison.

Galileo Galilei went on trial in 1633 for having the audacity to claim—contrary to the Roman Catholic Church—that the earth revolved around the sun. He was condemned and given a life sentence of house arrest. In 1961 Adolf Eichmann was captured and tried for his role in orchestrating the Holocaust. He was condemned and executed by hanging.

More recently, in 1995, there was the famous trial of OJ Simpson. I remember one of my 7th grade teachers letting us listen to the trial as it was broadcast on the radio. Many of us remember the trial of Saddam Hussein in 2005 which was broadcast around the world.

These days courtroom dramas take up much of the news cycle and serve as source material for books, television, and movies. Because of that, there are many dynamics in the courtroom we're all familiar with. You have the prosecuting and defense attorneys, the jury, the judge, and the evidence. And of course, there is the witness stand occupied along the way by various kinds of witnesses who are questioned and cross examined. But not all witnesses are created equal.

In many cases there is what we call the star witness. The star witness is often the witness on whom the case turns. A star witness can shatter the case of the prosecution or demolish the case of the defense. The star witness usually has a unique perspective due to their relationship to the defendant or their role in the matters at hand. They may be an eye-witness to the alleged crimes or even a co-conspirator who has agreed to testify against the defendant.

The star witness sometimes becomes the star witness only after their testimony is given and it is shown to be significant. But in our media age, the star witness is often known in advance. Today, a lot of speculation gets printed and talked about

regarding what a star witness might say, such that when they take the stand, there's a lot of excitement and anticipation. Sometimes, the testimony of the star witness becomes the most enduring memory of the case, and the witness becomes nearly as well known as the defendant. Strangely, this is not the case with our star witness.

If you read virtually any book or article today that seeks to defend the deity of Christ or defend his role as the Messiah, you will almost never hear the testimony of John the Baptist. But when God Himself, through the Apostle John, wants to make a compelling and incontrovertible case that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, He starts with the star witness, John the Baptist.

In our text for today we're going to have day one of the testimony of John the Baptist, who we're calling John the Witness. Then we'll recess until next week when John will take the stand again and give his most complete testimony as to the identity of the Messiah.

When we walked through vs. 1-18 we heard the Apostle John's opening arguments where he introduced to us the ideas and themes he will explore throughout the case. And in those opening arguments he revealed who his star witness would be. There will be other witnesses and much evidence brought to bear on this case, but John is the star witness whose testimony comes with particular significance because he himself is the fulfillment of prophecy related to the coming of the Messiah. So if anyone wants to understand who Jesus is, you can do no better than to start with the testimony of the star witness: John the Baptist.

Let's read the text and then we'll walk through this first day of testimony. Follow along as I read John 1:19-28. . . .

As John takes the witness stand, what we have in this passage is the first part of any witness testimony—personal identity and credibility. In vs. 19-23 we start with the identity of John the Witness, and in vs. 24-28 we hear what establishes his credibility. There is a great irony in the life of John the Witness. He is relatively unknown and given very little attention in the Scripture, and yet Jesus said that John is the greatest of all those born of women—which is to say, everyone. In other words, Jesus described John as the greatest human being who ever lived.

What made John the greatest human being, second only to Jesus Himself? Simply this: he was a prophet, but not just any prophet. His prophetic role was to prepare the people of Israel for the arrival of the Messiah. He had the unique and distinct privilege of softening the minds and hearts of the people, calling them to repentance, so that when the Messiah arrived, they would be ready to receive him.

Think about that. Has any other figure in history had someone sent by God in advance to prepare the world for their arrival? Is there anyone you can think of who understood the purpose of their life to be clearing the road for someone else's arrival?

Certainly from the perspective of the world in general and our culture in particular, John the Witness is unknown. And yet he is an undeniable historical figure whose very life points to the truth of Jesus' identity as the Messiah, the Son of God. So what we read here is of no little importance.

In building a case for Jesus as Messiah, the Apostle John starts with one of his strongest arguments. If you're sitting here and you have not believed that Jesus is the Savior of the world, pay careful attention to what the word of God says here and in the next section because if you want to deal honestly with truth, you have to grapple with the testimony of this key witness.

Let's begin by considering the identity of the star witness in vs. 19-23.

We're clued in that the identity of John is the theme of these verses by the question at the end of vs. 19, "Who are you?" This question was asked by priests and Levites sent by the Jews in Jerusalem. The Jews in Jerusalem is a reference to the religious leaders—likely the Sanhedrin, the religious rulers of Israel made up of Sadducees and Pharisees. Rome had their government which more or less ruled over civil matters, and the Jews had their own government which more or less ruled over religious matters—though in Judaism civil and religious life often overlapped.

The Apostle John gives us very little information here about John the Baptist's life and ministry, but the other Gospel writers tell us a great deal about this man who was asked, "Who are you?" The truth is, they were not asking John to identify himself in terms of his name or parentage or occupation. When they asked, "Who are you?" what they wanted to know was who did he consider himself to be in God's redemptive plan.

If they wanted to know his personal identity he could simply have said, "I am John, son of Zechariah and Elizabeth, of the tribe of Levi." If he wanted to take it up a notch he could note that his birth was a miracle on the same level as the birth of Isaac, having been revealed to Zechariah by an angel as he stood burning incense in the holy place just outside the holy of holies in the temple.

But that's not the kind of information these priests and Levites were asking. They may well have known his family. The story of Zechariah and Elizabeth's miraculous son some 25 years earlier no doubt would have been spread around. And the fact that John left home at a young age to wander in the wilderness would have stirred

interest in their family since his son didn't follow in the footsteps of his renowned father.

Whether they knew his background or not, his name, John, was certainly well known because when he began his prophetic ministry, the Scripture says that "all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins."

Thousands and tens of thousands of people were making their way from the beautiful hill country of Judah, through the wilderness, down to the valley, and across the Jordan to hear the preaching of John and be baptized by him. There's no doubt that as these priests and Levites made the 2- or 3-day journey of 40-60 miles from Jerusalem to where John was baptizing, they encountered many others who were making this pilgrimage and there would have been discussion about this prophet named John.

That unprecedented level of religious activity more than piqued the interest of the religious leaders of Israel. They had reason to be concerned. Over the last two centuries there had been many self-proclaimed Messiah's who stirred up the people and created revolts that the Romans violently put down. If the leaders of the people let yet another revolt take place, the Romans might take away their right to rule.

But there was also a heightened Messianic expectation among the people. Perhaps it was the talk of the miraculous birth of John by an old priestly couple some 25 years before, or the miraculous birth of Jesus by a virgin of the tribe of Judah very soon after that heightened expectations. Perhaps it was the oppressive rule of the Romans that agitated the people and made them long for the coming Messiah. Whatever it was, there were expectations. And those expectations led to this question, "Who are you?"

Notice vs. 2. . . . the Apostle John doesn't just relate to us the answer, he emphasizes the force of the answer. Whether they asked him if he was the Messiah or John understood what they were really asking, he clearly and without equivocation declared, "I am not the Christ." Which is to say, "I am not the Messiah." Remember that "Messiah" in Hebrew and Aramaic and "Christ" in Greek means "the anointed one," and it is the title for the promised one from God who would finally and forever deliver His people. John's answer in the Greek is emphatic—"I am not the Christ." It's as if he's said, I know you're wondering if I'm either the true Messiah or in the long line of false and troublesome messiahs, but no, I am not the Messiah.

With the clarity of that answer, they go to the next possibility. LOOK at vs. 21. . . .

Elijah is one of two men in the Bible who never died, the other being Enoch. Elijah was taken up to heaven in a chariot of fire while his successor, Elisha looked on. With that in mind, listen to the closing words of the Old Testament—the final inspired words of God before the 400 years of silence, Malachi 4:5-6, “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 fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.” Can you see how that promise combined with Elijah being taken into heaven led the Jews to believe that Elijah himself would descend from heaven and serve the Lord on earth again?

Elijah served the Lord nearly 900 years before John, and no one had a picture of him, so there was no way to recognize Elijah. Well, that’s not quite true. There was one possible way to recognize him—by his clothing. 2 Kings 1:8 says that Elijah wore a garment of hair and a leather belt around his waist. This may have been the common style of all prophets, but Elijah is the only one in the Old Testament explicitly described as wearing this. And Matthew 3:4 tells us that John wore a garment made of camel hair wrapped with a leather belt. So there’s at least some possibility in their minds that John might be Elijah.

So they ask, “Are you Elijah?” This time the answer is short and curt—“I am not.” Now we have to think about this because some of you are wondering how this relates to Jesus’ declaration in Matthew 11:14 when he said, “if you are willing to accept it, he—John the Baptist—is Elijah who is to come.” So Jesus says that John is Elijah and John denies being Elijah. Did John not know who he was? Or is this a contradiction in Scripture? Neither.

As I said, the Jews were expecting the Elijah of old to come down from heaven before the great day of the Lord. Jesus identified John as Elijah in the same sense that the angel Gabriel predicted would be true of him before his birth. When John’s father Zechariah received word from Gabriel that he and Elizabeth would have a son, the angel said of this child, “And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before him [that is, the Messiah] in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.” So John was not Elijah come in the flesh, but he was a prophet who came in the spirit and power of Elijah, which is to say at the very least that John would have the same boldness of Elijah.

So when asked, “Are you Elijah?” John was right to say, “I am not.” And Jesus was right to say that John was Elijah. Well, having ruled out that John is the Christ and that John is Elijah come from heaven, they ask about one more figure they were looking for. LOOK at the end of vs. 21. . .

Notice that they don't ask him, "Are you a prophet?" but rather "Are you the Prophet?" There's some debate about who this expected prophet was and what in the Old Testament created this expectation, but the clearest passage that speaks of a coming prophet is Deuteronomy 18. Deuteronomy is the second giving the Law which Moses gave before his death. And in Deuteronomy 18 he says this, "The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen."

Moses spoke the word of God to the people. After the death of Moses, Joshua became the new leader of Israel, but he was not a prophet and he did not speak on behalf of God. And while there were prophets throughout Israel's history, this promise from the Lord hung in the air and created expectations of a unique prophet who bore resemblance to Moses in terms of his unique relationship to God and his prolific miracles. John's ministry did not bear any resemblance to that of Moses' ministry, but it was the only other name on their list, so they had to ask.

In answer to the question, "Are you the Prophet?" John the Witness simply says, "No." For whatever reason John chooses not to go out of his way to identify himself, he just answers each of their questions directly, simply, and in the negative.

Having crossed off the names on their list, and with some degree of frustration that he isn't very forthcoming, vs. 22 says. . . .

These priests and Levites were sent by the Jewish leaders to come back with a report on the identity of John, and they couldn't go back with a non-answer. So they asked him the open-ended question, "What do you say about yourself? Who are you?" His answer is remarkable. LOOK at vs. 23. . . .

John doesn't identify himself by name or by title or by anything that would draw attention to his person. The only thing that pertains to himself, he says, is that he is a voice. A voice! A voice is not a person, a voice is not an identity, a voice is not an object, a voice is nothing more than a sound. And the sound that makes this voice worth listening to is not the tone or the pitch, but the content of the message. And the content of this message is this. . . .

This is a quote of the first half of Isaiah 40:3 which reads, "A voice cries: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.'" You can hear a slight difference between that and what John says. Isaiah says the place of preparation is in the wilderness, John says that the place of proclamation is in the wilderness. This difference is simply due to the difference between the Hebrew Old Testament and the Greek translation that John was familiar with. But the difference really doesn't change the meaning at all. In fact,

because both John's preaching and the baptizing is taking place far away from populated areas, Isaiah 40:3 is being fulfilled.

Isaiah 40 is written to a people in exile to give them hope that one day they will return to the land and then the Messiah would come to establish his kingdom. And just like today when city officials clean up a city and close roads to prepare for the arrival of a dignitary, Israel was to prepare for the arrival of the Messiah. But the preparation Isaiah called for was not literal, it was figurative. It's a metaphor for preparing hearts and minds, repenting of sins and anything that would hinder the reception of the Messiah by the people.

In giving this answer John points to the fact that his identity is of no importance whatsoever. What is important is that they prepare themselves for the coming Messiah. In reality, his answer to their question is simply to keep preaching his message. The report he wants them to take back to Jewish leaders is not who he is, but his proclamation to get ready for the Messiah.

Imagine Paul Revere riding through town after town, "The British are coming! The British are coming!" And someone stops him and says, "Who are you?" Do you know what he would say? He would shout, "The British are coming!" and then keep riding on. His identity is of no importance. The message is not strengthened or weakened by the person giving it. John's answer here is that all you need to know is that the Messiah is coming and you need to get ready.

We've seen here in vs. 19-23 that the identity of John the Witness is that he is like the town crier whose identity is of no importance compared to the message he brings. In vs. 24-28 we then see what gives John his credibility. LOOK at vs. 24. . . .

In vs. 19 the Apostle John told us that the Jews sent the priests and Levites, and here he notes that the Pharisees sent them. The Jews, as I said, is a general reference to the religious leaders, and here he gets more specific. And the reason he points this out is because the Pharisees were those particularly focused on religious life as opposed to the Sadducees who were focused on religious law. The Sadducees were the lawyers and the Pharisees were the priests. Since baptism was a religious ritual, the Pharisees had particular interest in John the Baptist's ministry. So John inserts this note to explain why they asked about baptism. LOOK at vs. 25. . . .

To understand their question I need to give you some background about baptism. Baptism is not a concept or practice in the Old Testament. There are ritual cleansings that took place, but that pertained to the laws of being ritually clean before the Lord. As with everything else in God's law, the biblical practice of cleansing grew into a far more elaborate practice of ritual washing.

One of the most recognizable features in ancient ruins in Israel is the Mikvah. A Mikvah is a small pool of just a few square feet where you would walk down a few steps and dip yourself into pool of water. This was solely for ritual cleansing, not actually taking a bath. You find Mikvahs all over the place, and in front of the ancient entrance to the temple, they've unearthed some 50 Mikvahs that would be used by those needing purification before entering the temple.

That kind of ritual cleansing was not a one-time act—it would be done repeatedly, as often as was necessary. Furthermore, it was a self-directed act. You would go by yourself into the water and dip yourself. So all around, the act of spiritual cleansing which was commonplace was a categorically different ritual than baptism.

Though it's not taught in the Old Testament, the Jews did develop a ritual of baptism, but it only applied to Gentiles who converted to Judaism. Because many religions then and now were not just a matter of who you worshipped, but a matter culture and heritage and social status and community involvement, to convert to Judaism was to effectively turn away from one's entire former life and start a new life.

So a proselyte, as they were called, would be baptized as a symbol of dying to their old life and starting a new life as a Jewish convert. This baptism is very similar to what we celebrated last week and how we conceive of baptism today as taught in the New Testament. But understand this: proselyte baptism could only be done to a Gentile who wanted to become a Jew. It would be nonsensical, even offensive, for a Jew to be baptized.

The problem with John's ministry is he wasn't baptizing Gentiles. He was baptizing Jews! So this delegation from the Pharisees, concerned with religious practice, wanted to understand why he was doing such a thing. Notice, though, that they specifically asked. . .

We don't know for sure, but it seems they may have thought that these expected figures might practice baptism. And the likely basis for that is the first element of the New Covenant in Ezekiel 36 which says this: "I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you." This New Covenant promise may have created an expectation that the coming Messiah would do some kind of ritual cleansing of God's people. But if John isn't the Christ or Elijah or the Prophet, why is he baptizing?

In essence, what they are asking is, "What is this new ritual you are introducing? Why should we listen to you and do what you say? Why should the people be baptized? What credibility do you have?" His answer once again deflects from himself and points to the Christ. LOOK at vs. 26-27. . . .

We'll see next time in vs. 33 that they very next day he contrasts his baptism of water with the baptism of the Holy Spirit accomplished by Jesus. But for now he doesn't get into that. To a group he knows is not really in search of the truth but are antagonistic toward true worship, he refuses to satisfy their curiosity.

In saying, "I baptize with water," it's like he's minimizing the significance of what he's doing. I'm just getting people wet. Getting in the water like this isn't anything for you and the Jews in Jerusalem to be concerned about. But I'll tell you what you should be concerned about, he says.

When he says there in vs. 26, "Among you stands one you do not know," he didn't mean that Jesus was actually standing right there among them as if they could turn around and see him. This is a figure of speech to say that the Christ is already on the scene. He's on the earth and he's in Israel and he's about to be revealed. As you see there in vs. 29, the very next day John will see and point out who the Christ is.

But for now, instead of giving them a report of who he is and the basis of his baptism; instead of justifying his ministry or elevating himself; he really says nothing about himself except that he is of no consequence. Now he really is of great consequence in God's redemptive plan—but his answer to these priests and Levites is consistent with his mission from God—to point the people of Israel to the Messiah.

Notice how he does this in vs. 27. . . . Untying another person's sandal was the task of the lowest slave. Remember that their roads were dirt roads shared by people and animals. Horses, livestock, and all other animals walked the same paths and animals did not—and still don't—concern themselves with being kind to those who walk behind them. Imagine coming home every day from being out on the town, and every day you not only have dirt caked on your feet, but dung as well. Depending on your city or town, it could be crowded enough that it was pointless to try to avoid the manure that was trampled and spread around the road. So to untie sandals was to get your hands dirty with the filth of animals. Not the most pleasant task in a soap-less society.

The Rabbi's had a rule that the disciples of a Rabbi had to do anything and everything the Rabbi asked of them—except untie his sandals. That was too indecent a task for a respectable person to do. It was only left for the lowest, most despised slaves.

So when John the Witness says here, "the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie," he lowers himself below the lowest slave in relationship to the Christ. Here we see the credibility of John the witness—it is his humility. John does not elevate himself in importance. He does not place himself to the right or to the left of Jesus

the Messiah. He does not speak to his unique and remarkable privilege of being the forerunner of the Christ. In no way does he try to make a name for himself or his ministry.

He does not do what all the false messiahs and false teachers do—promote himself. If the forerunner were to direct the spotlight on himself or try to share the limelight, he would lose credibility because he would be acting contrary to his purpose. But John's credibility as the star witness for the Messiah is that he does one and only one thing—proclaim the coming of the Messiah and point to him.

All eyes should be directed on John only long enough to see where he is pointing, and then we should redirect our gaze in that direction. John is a much underappreciated figure in biblical history, and the irony is, that is precisely how it should be. He is the star witness in the case that proves Jesus is the Christ and that makes him significant.

But once he steps down from the witness stand and his testimony is over, there is no reason to follow him further. John himself will encourage that later in this chapter as well as in chapter 3.

To close out this section, vs. 28 tells us where this took place. LOOK at it. . . . This is not the Bethany near Jerusalem which was the home of Mary and Martha and Lazarus. We actually don't know where this Bethany is—and some wonder if this is a misspelling of one of the places we do know about. It's likely further north closer to the Sea of Galilee because Jesus will travel from this place to Galilee in one day as it indicates in vs. 43. I think John's point is that this is far away from Jerusalem—far away from the temple—which may be a hint that God's purposes for his people are not centered around the corrupt Judaism of the day.

Now our witness not done with his testimony at this point. Having established his identity and his credibility, next week we'll hear his testimony about Jesus. But before we step away from this today, what we have here is a powerful lesson for us. Two, in fact.

In this passage John the Witness models for us at least two principles we can apply to our lives. First, he models faithfulness. His mission from the Lord was unique. The Lord called him to live and preach in the wilderness where few people lived. He didn't have a captive audience—they had to come to him. On the surface it seemed like a ministry doomed to failure. But he did what God called him to do, and the Lord caused the word to spread and the people came.

He was faithful to his task and didn't concern himself with the outcome. That's an important lesson for all of us to learn. When we serve the Lord, we can only

concern ourselves with the responsibility entrusted to us, and we let the Lord determine the results. John models faithfulness.

Second, John models humility. He was the first prophet in 400 years. His birth was a miracle proclaimed by an angel. He is a relative to the Messiah. He is the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy in being the forerunner to the Messiah.

There's a lot of potential there for personal pride and self-importance. But John has none of it. He is nothing more and nothing less than a servant of the Lord, and he sees himself as such a lowly servant that he's not worthy to untie the sandals of Christ. In this is a lesson for how we ought to view ourselves and how we ought view others.

We all know that we live in a celebrity culture. Music stars, movie stars, sports stars, media personalities, social media influencers, and the like are household names. Not only does the world have its celebrities, but so does the church. Musicians, preachers, and authors make up the A-list of Christian celebrities. It may be more prominent today than ever because of media, but this isn't new.

Among the many problems in the Corinthian church is they had celebrity pastors. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 1:12, "each one of you says, "I follow Paul," or "I follow Apollos," or "I follow Cephas," or "I follow Christ."

Scripture teaches that the Holy Spirit grants to each believer spiritual gifts for the benefit of the body of Christ—that's true for each one of us—you and me. But what we sometimes do is we look at certain spiritual gifts—particularly teaching and preaching—and we elevate the men and women who have 10 talents worth of those gifts such that we begin to follow the person, not the truth.

On the flip side, we devalue our role in the kingdom of God because we perceive ourselves as only having 1 talent worth of gifting. We don't have the gifts and the platform those people have, so we conclude that we're insignificant and we may we as well let other more gifted people do the work. Do you remember the message from two weeks ago on the parable of the talents?

You and I are nothing more and nothing less than entrusted servants of our kind and generous Master. Whatever gifts He gives us are a liberal expression of His grace. Rather than elevating ourselves above others, or devaluing ourselves below others, we must view ourselves rightly as humble servants of the king and be faithful with what's given us.

And no matter what gift or what role or what responsibility we've been given, our ultimate aim is to point people to Christ. Do you work in the nursery? Your privilege

is to show Christ-like humility and gentleness to the parents. Do you work on the facility? Your privilege is to exhibit Christ-like service and excellence. Do teach in some capacity? Your joy is to faithfully proclaim Christ. Do you play an instrument or sing? You have the ability to sound forth the beauty of Christ. In whatever you and I do, we can demonstrate the character of Christ and we point people to Christ.

Your identity and value and purpose and credibility is not found in you—it's found in the Christ you serve. This we learn from John the Witness in this text.