God's witness (part 1): the voice who prepares the way for the Lord

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[0:00] Well, good afternoon, everybody. It's wonderful to see you all here this afternoon, and you're very welcome, especially if you're new to the Tron Lunchtime Talk. Please do turn in your Bibles to the Gospel of John, and you'll find that on page 886 of our Church Bibles.

And as you turn to that, let me just remind you that today, after the talk, there's going to be a training session for about half an hour, where Mark Campbell, who's seated over there, is going to be running a training session.
For anyone who's interested, it's optional. You don't have to stay if you don't want to. But I'd really recommend it to get instructions about how to use these notes. Fantastic notes. Go through the Gospel of John verse by verse. And if you feel like you're not an evangelist, well, this does all the work for you.
If you can read, well, thankfully, you can use these notes. So I can use them. So that's good. But Mark's going to be doing that later, so do stick around if you can. Well, we've been working through this opening prologue of the Gospel of John, these first 18 verses, that really contain all of the major themes of the whole Gospel.
And today we'll be thinking a bit about John the Baptist and his ministry. But before we come to God's Word, let's bow our heads and we'll pray together. Let's pray. Gracious God, Heavenly Father, we praise you that you have not left us to play desperate guessing games about who you are and what you're like.
[1:29] For you have so graciously made yourself known to this world in the person of your Son. And we thank you that we can read these words of eyewitness testimony and freedom today, and we can get to know your Son better and better.

So please help us this day to have ears that will listen and hearts that are open and ready to receive what you have to say to us this day. Please help us to see Jesus.
We pray this in his precious name. Amen. Well, let's read together and we're going to read a few different verses. And like I say, just focusing on John the Baptist.
So please look at verse 6. 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. Now please look down to verse 15, speaking about the same John. 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.
[2:48] And then please look down to verse 19, where we have the beginning of the public ministry of John the Baptist. It says this, And this was the testimony, or literally translated, the witness of John.

When the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, Who are you? He confessed and did not deny, but confessed, I am not the Christ.
And he asked him, What then? Are you Elijah? He said, I am not. Are you the prophet? And he answered, No. So they said to him, Who are you?
We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself? He said, I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness.
Make straight the way of the Lord, as the prophet Isaiah said. Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. They asked him, Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?

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[3:53] John answered them, I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know. Even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie.

These things took place in Bethany, across the Jordan, where John was baptizing. The other day, I was playing a game of hide and seek, with my boy Benjamin.
And he's three years old, and I'm very proud of him. I love him very much. But let me tell you, he's probably the worst player of hide and seek, in the history of players of hide and seek. He gets me to count in the kitchen, and then he runs into the living room, and he hides in exactly the same place every time.
Behind the curtain in the living room. And when you come into the living room, I've got to pretend I can't see him, but it's obvious he's there, because there's a big bulge in the curtain. And he's got these wee feet poking out from underneath the curtain, and he's giggling.
He's giggling behind the curtain. And I wind him up. I can see him there, but I say, oh, I wonder where Benjamin is. Is he behind the sofa? No, he's not behind the sofa.
[5:01] And then giggles erupt behind the curtain. I repeat this all the way around the room, until eventually my son just can't take it anymore. And he bursts out of the curtain and goes, Daddy, here I am.

Look at me. Look at me. Here I am. He cannot wait to reveal himself. And friends, the glorious message of the Bible is that the true and living God is a God who loves to reveal himself.
He's not a God who's hidden himself away, desperately trying to avoid us coming to him and approaching him. He's not a shy God. The opposite is the case. The God of the Bible, the true God, declares to us, here I am.
He stepped out from behind the curtain and made himself known. And that's been the way really throughout history. Read the whole of the Bible, just as verse 17 says. Read the law of Moses, and you will see the God of grace reaching out time and again to messed up people like you and me, revealing himself, saying, come and know me.
Come and have a relationship with me. And in the person of Jesus Christ, God has spoken the ultimate word of revelation to the world. For Jesus himself is none other than the eternal God in the flesh.
[6:18] He's unlike anyone else who's ever walked the face of the earth. He's fully God and fully man in one person. And that is the momentous claim that John the Apostle has been declaring to us, his readers, throughout these 18 verses of his gospel account.

The word of God, who was eternally one with God the Father, the creator and sustainer of all life, humbled himself unlike any other. Some 2,000 years ago, he left the glory of heaven and he broke into this world of darkness to shine the radiance of the light of God's revelation to all around him.
Just look at verse 14. That's what it says. The word, who was with the Father in the beginning, became flesh and dwelt, tabernacled amongst us. And we have seen his glory.
Glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. I'll never forget having a conversation with one of my friends who's an atheist. I think I've told you about this before, but let me tell you again.
He said to me, Phil, have you ever seen God? And I replied to him, no, I wasn't born early enough. Because the historical eyewitness testimony that has been recorded for us here in John tells me that there was a time in history when the author of life walked around in the land of Israel in the flesh.
[7:40] You could see him right in front of your eyes as clearly as you can see me in front of you just now. It's just as we heard last week in verse 18. No one has ever seen God, but the only God who is at the Father's side has made him known.

And remember, folks, for all those who receive this word of God, all those who believe in Jesus, they believe these things. All those who believe these things who receive him will receive the greatest privilege of all.
Look at verse 12. Remember this? To all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God. And that is what Jesus offers all of us here today. The chance to become children of God.
Adopted into God's royal family. The greatest family of all. That is what is at stake here and what is on offer as you read this book and as you listen here this afternoon.

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Well, in our passage today, we're going to read about what happened just before Jesus started his public ministry. God sends out an official, divinely approved witness to prepare the world for the arrival of his son.
[8:50] And this witness will testify clearly that Jesus is the son, the eternal word. Please look at verse 6. There was a man sent from God whose name was John.

Now this John is not the John who wrote this gospel. The John who wrote this gospel is John the apostle, as I've said earlier. And because he was a humble man, he never actually mentions himself by name in this gospel account.
Whenever John the apostle refers to himself, he simply says, the disciple whom Jesus loved. So anytime you see John mentioned in this gospel, it's not referring to the apostle, but to the man that we know as John the Baptist.
And for the rest of this talk, whenever I say John, I mean John the Baptist. Okay, not the apostle. So John was sent from God to be a witness to Jesus' identity.
And just notice how often that word witness comes up again and again and again to drive home the point. Look at verse 7. He came as a witness to bear witness to the light.
[9:53] Verse 8. He was not the light, but he came to bear witness about the light. Verse 15. John bore witness about him. Verse 19. Literally translated says, this is the witness of John.

Look on to verse 32. John bore witness. Verse 34. John says, I have seen and I have borne witness.
Now it may be that you're here this afternoon and in all honesty, you would say that when it comes to Christianity, well, you're a skeptic. And if that is you, it's great to have you with us.
It's brilliant that you're here and we hope that you feel warmed and welcomed amongst us. And it may just be that you think that in order to become a Christian, it means that you have to step out in blind faith.
One of my good friends, he used to be a skeptic many years ago. And he used to have this preconceived idea that the Christian faith was based upon mere wishful thinking.
[10:56] It was myth. He thought that we Christians believed in Christ without any rational evidence at all. My friend thought that for ages until he read the Gospel of John.

And he read and he saw that actually his preconceived ideas were wrong. The Christian faith is not a blind faith. Neither is it based upon wishful thinking or myth.
It's based upon solid, trustworthy, historical, eyewitness testimony. It's truth. When my friend read that and understood actually what John was announcing here, it blew his mind.
And he read on, he read on, and again, he eventually was convinced it was the truth. He'd never read anything like this. It blew his mind.
And it seems to be that John the Baptist's ministry back in those days was blowing people's minds as well. That's no exaggeration. It's clear, it's hinted at in verse 19 here, but we know from elsewhere in the other gospel accounts that John was a national sensation.
[12:05] The whole country was deeply affected by his ministry. He would have been all over the news reports back then, all over social media, on the front pages, in big, bold letters, what he was saying to people.

And it's having such an impact that in verse 19, a delegation of religious leaders from Jerusalem are sent to interview John to find out who he is and what he was doing.
Verse 19, they come and they say, who are you? And in verse 20, John gives a very strange reply. He doesn't tell them who he is. Instead, he begins by saying who he isn't.
He says, I am not the Christ. Imagine today if I had a name badge on and if we were all wearing name badges and imagine if I bumped into you at the coffee table over there and I never met you before and you were keen to know who I was and you looked down at my name badge and my name badge said, I'm not Mark Campbell.
That would be bizarre, wouldn't it? You'd think, that's a strange thing to say. And that's how John introduces himself. He says, I am not the Christ. Well, why? Well, because back then, many people were expecting the arrival of the Christ, the arrival of God's King, the Messiah, his anointed one.
[13:25] And right from the very beginning, John wants to make it clear that his ministry is having such an impact, not because he is the Christ. He is not the Christ.

He is only there to prepare the way for the Christ. He doesn't want anyone to be confused. I am not the Messiah. Well, the religious leaders carry on grilling him in verse 21.

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They ask him if he's two other people. Firstly, they ask, are you Elijah? Now, back then, there was a superstition amongst the Jews that the prophet Elijah himself would return and bring some sort of deliverance from the Romans.
It's probably a misunderstanding of Malachi chapter 4. You can read that later in your own time. But John replies, no, I'm not Elijah. Then they ask him, are you the prophet?
Meaning, are you the great prophet of the Lord that he promised to send to us back in the book of Deuteronomy? The prophet who will speak and rescue us like Moses did in the past?
[14:23] And again, John says, no, I am not that prophet. Well, in verse 22, the religious leaders, they seem to lose it. They lose patience and say, oh, come on, please, just tell us who you are.

We've got bosses to report back to, you know, the Pharisees. They sent us here to sush you out. We can't go back and just say, you're not these people. Well, in verse 23, John replies and tells him, tells them who he is.
Look at verse 23. He says, I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness. Make straight the way of the Lord as the prophet Isaiah said.
And again, you might think that's a strange answer. But actually, what John says here would have been very familiar to the Jewish leaders and very familiar to the Pharisees back in Jerusalem because he's quoting Old Testament prophecy as John says, Isaiah chapter 40.
Isaiah chapter 40 was written some 800 years before these events here in John. And at that time, the Lord is speaking to his people through the prophet Isaiah and the people themselves are facing a brutal future ahead of him.
[15:36] Dark days indeed where they will be carted off away from the promised land into captivity and exile. They will be living under covenant curse because of their sin and rebellion against the Lord.

But in Isaiah 40, the Lord promises that a day will come in the future beyond exile when he will come himself personally and rescue them.
A day when exile will be over, their sins will be forgiven, they will have peace with God, they will be reconciled to God, they will have a perfect relationship with them again, they will be fully pardoned, and Isaiah says, on that day the glory of the Lord will appear.
Does that ring any bells from John 1.18? Yes, I think it does. The glory of the Lord will appear, the nations will be affected by this appearing, the Lord himself will come, he will be unstoppable, he will wipe away everyone who tries to stand in his way, he will rescue his people, he will gather them up in his arms like a good shepherd and he will save them and they will live with him in his glory forever.
And Isaiah 40 says that before that day comes, before the Lord comes to carry out that momentous rescue, a voice will appear. An anonymous voice who will not attract attention to itself, a voice will appear in the wilderness announcing that the Lord is coming.
[17:00] Get ready. Do you see what John the Baptist is saying to the Jews in front of him? He's testifying to them that the time has come for Isaiah 40 to be fulfilled.

He's saying to them, do not focus on me, I'm just a voice. Don't get caught up in me, the one that you should really focus on is coming. In fact, he's right in amongst you just now, you don't know him, but he's going to be publicly revealed very soon.
He's about to burst onto the scene and begin his ministry. And of course, if you were to think of Isaiah 40, they must put two and two together and think, well, surely the one coming after John is none other than the Lord himself.
But just look at verse 25. I find this really surprising. In fact, I think the response of the Jewish delegation is actually shocking. Verse 25, they say this, they asked him, then why are you baptizing if you're neither the Christ nor the Elijah nor the prophet?
And their response they seem to completely ignore what John has just said to them in the testimony. You would think, having known their scriptures, they would put their two and two together and they would say, what do you mean?
[18:15] Do you mean the Lord is coming? Do you mean he's coming? He's actually coming? They don't say that. What do they start to do in verse 25? They start to tell John off for carrying out baptisms that haven't been approved by the Jerusalem religious leaders.

They're more wrapped up with religion than they are about the news of the coming Messiah. Isn't that alarming? Isn't that shocking? And as you read that, you think to yourself, well, if that's how the

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religious leaders are going to treat the forerunner to the Messiah, how are they going to respond to the Messiah himself when he comes?
We'll wait and see. Well, in verse 26, John just flat out ignores their question. And again, he graciously seeks to take their attention off of what he is doing and to focus their attention upon the one who's to come.
Verse 26, he said, I baptize with water. I can only get you wet. But among you stands one you do not know. Even he who comes after me, the strap of his sandal, I am not worthy to untie.
Now again, that would have been a shocking statement because back then in those days, the streets would have been covered in lots of muck and mess, all sorts of mess, animal dung and all sorts of horrible things.
[19:34] And walking around in sandals meant that one's feet would get covered in horrible things, caked in horrible things. You can use your imagination, I'm sure. But whenever a visitor went into someone's house, there was, the lowest of servants would be sent to the guest, would take the guest into a little side room and the lowest of all servants would be given the worst job of all, which was to go down on the knees, undo the sandals of the guest and wash the feet.

And what John is saying here is, look, one is coming, one is coming after me and he is so great, I'm not even worthy to serve him in that capacity. I'm not even worthy enough to hold the lowest of all places in his household.
He is that great, the one who comes after me. The Lord was about to appear to save and shepherd his people and friends, in the next section from verse 29 to 34, John, he stops speaking in vague terms and he starts to get explicit because in that section he sees Jesus coming towards him and he says, behold, there's the one that I'm speaking of.
And if you want to find out what he says about him, come back next week when we look at that together. But before we close, let me just mention two things and there's lots to learn from this passage but time's against us.
Let me just say two things. Firstly, if you're here this afternoon and again, if you're a skeptic, it's great that you're here. But please remember what I said earlier. The Christian faith is not based upon wishful thinking or myth.
[21:23] It is rooted upon factual, historical, eyewitness testimony. John the Baptist was one such eyewitness. He was sent from God to declare to the world that Jesus really is who he claimed to be.

None other than the Son of God. The only one who can bring you to a saving knowledge of the Father. And my challenge to you if you're a skeptic is this, will you read on? Will you read on? Please don't be closed in your mind. Will you read on? And investigate things further. Secondly, if you're here this afternoon and if you're a Christian, let me just say this and this I think is a secondary application from the passage but I'm going to say it anyway because I think it's true.
As I think as Christians, there's lots we can learn from John's pattern of ministry here from his example. Good evangelism will be focused upon Jesus and not upon the one doing the evangelism. Yes? Whenever we seek to reach out to our non-Christian friends, we might be tempted to focus upon ourselves giving our own testimony about how much our lives have changed since we've come to know Jesus.
[22:35] I know that's certainly true. I can think back over the years to many, many people that I've tried desperately to evangelize and I look back with regret. It wasn't a total disaster but I could have done much better.

Why? Because I spent most of the time talking about me instead of talking about Jesus. Well, if we follow John the Baptist's pattern of ministry here, I think we'll be all the more careful to make Jesus the main focus of our conversations.
Nothing wrong with a bit of personal testimony. Absolutely. The Bible's full of people. I think of Paul in the book of Acts. Uses his personal testimony when reaching out to people. But I think if we really want to be effective, then we'll follow John's pattern that he did all those years ago.
Listen to J.C. Ryle on this passage. He says this, John claims honour not for himself but for Christ. To exalt Christ was his mission and to that mission he steadfastly adheres.
The greatest of saints in every age of the church have always been men of John the Baptist's spirit in gifts and knowledge and general character.
[23:46] They have often differed widely but in one respect they've always been alike. They've been clothed with humility. They have not sought their own honour.

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They have thought little of themselves. They have been willing to decrease if Christ might only increase. To be nothing if Christ might be all.
And friends, one way, if you're nervous about that, one way actually that you can ensure that your evangelism is like John the Baptist's in putting Jesus first and having him as the main focus is actually to use this.
Yes? You'll see there's a repeated theme every week as you come. But it's true. If you're to open this up with a non-Christian friend then you're never going to be in danger of putting yourself first, are you?
Because you're going to be focused on Jesus in these notes which is the word of God. It's all for you to think about there. Using these notes will help you follow John's pattern of evangelism here.
[24:49] Well friends, do come back next week for more evidence, more eyewitness testimony that declares Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God.

And why don't we just bow our heads now and take a moment of quiet to respond to God's words and then I'll pray for us. Oh gracious God, we thank you and praise you again for revealing yourself to us perfectly in the person of your Son.
Gracious God, when we look at our lives we know that we do not deserve such a thing. We know that our natural tendency has always been to shun you, to ignore you, to not treat you the way you deserve to be treated.
But we thank you that you are the God who has kept speaking to humanity throughout history despite our sin and you have spoken to us fully in your ultimate word to us, the Lord Jesus.
You have given us evidence in this book of John's Gospel that leads to belief and if we believe you promise to give us life in all its fullness.
[26:13] That is eternal life with you in glory forever. We thank you, Father, for the way in which you've given us also a model to follow John the Baptist. Please help us to reach out to others who do not know you but help us not to focus upon ourselves and instead to keep Jesus, your son, as the central focus in our conversations for he is the only one who can save and shepherd us.

We thank you once again for the freedom we have to meet today and help us not to become complacent and we pray, Lord, that you would bless us and help us as we come with Mark in a few minutes' time.
Help us to think carefully, strategically about how we can use this great resource for the advance of the gospel in Glasgow. We pray these things in Jesus' precious name.
Amen.

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