God's witness (part 2): the voice who prepares the way for the Lord

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[0:00] Well, good afternoon, everybody. It's good to see you all. Good afternoon. Welcome to the Lunchtime Bible Talk. Please do grab a Bible and turn to the Gospel of John. John chapter 1. You'll find that on page 886 of our visitor's Bible.

And if you've been here over the past month, you'll know that we've been working through this opening chapter of John's Gospel. And today we continue to focus on the ministry and the testimony of John the Baptist as he prepares the world for the great revealing of the Son of God. So let's read together. And what we'll do is we'll recap the verses that we read last week. And I'll also read the next little section as well. So please look at verses 6 to 8.
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. And please look at verse 15. John bore witness about him.
[1:14] It's about the Christ, the Word who became flesh. And cried out, this was he of whom I said, he who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me.

And let's read now from verse 19 onwards, the beginning of John's ministry. And this is the testimony or 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 they asked him, what then? Are you Elijah? And 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.
[2:18] 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?

John answered them, I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know. Even who comes after me, the strap of his sandal I am not worthy to untie.
These things took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing. The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him and said, behold the Lamb of God.
God who takes away the sin of the world. This is he of whom I said, after me comes a man who ranks before me, because he was before me.
I myself did not know him, but for this purpose I came baptizing with water that he might be revealed to Israel. And John bore witness.
[3:21] I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, he on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.

And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God. Well, let's pray together before we come to look at that in more depth.
Heavenly Father, we praise you for the freedom that we have to gather here today to come and listen to your word of truth. We thank you that amid all the confusions and uncertainties of life, this gospel divine represents a sure word from on high to mankind.
We thank you, O God, that through all of the sin of our hearts, your gospel holds out unto us an incredible hope of deliverance, of renewal and rebirth.

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Lord, we want to know more deeply of this great mystery and this wonderful prospect. And so we pray that in the quietness of this afternoon, you would come to us and be our teacher.
[4:41] Please give us the grace of honesty as we're confronted by your word and help us to make our true response for the glory of your name and for our eternal good.

Through Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen. Well, I was catching up with some family members last night at a family birthday party and I got chatting with my mum and we were talking about our ancestors, our family line.
And we got talking for some reason about my great-grandfather. And I was shocked to learn of how my great-grandfather died. This was decades ago, but one day, one afternoon, he was walking from Colston Milton through to Bishop Briggs and he was going along a busy street and he tripped, stumbled over and fell and smacked his head on the pavement.
He was an old man at the time and he couldn't lift himself up anyway, never mind the fact that he had a head injury. And do you know, he lay there for, they reckon, about four hours on the road and nobody came to help him.
He was crying out for help and people just ignored him. They walked past him. My grandfather seemed to think that many people thought he was drunk, but he wasn't drunk.
[6:00] He was just injured in his head. And he lay on the cold ground. Eventually, he was taken to hospital. They don't know how he got there. But he died shortly after that because he contracted pneumonia.

No one came to his aid. Nobody cared. Everyone was disinterested. They were unwilling to offer the aid that he so desperately needed.
Well, friends, when we read John's gospel, we see just how wonderfully different God is to those people who walked past my great-grandfather. God doesn't ignore this world with all of its pain and all of its sorrow.
God doesn't look down at us and say, I'm not getting involved in that. I'm not coming to their aid. No. As we read the gospel, we see that the true God of the Bible is the God who graciously got involved with this world of darkness.
God has come personally into this world in order to rescue people like you and me from our biggest problem. Some 2,000 years ago, in the person of Jesus, the maker and sustainer of all life in the universe, left the glorious sapphire-paved courts of heaven.
[7:13] He humbled himself unlike any other. He took on flesh and came into this world to rescue us from the things that you and I cannot rescue ourselves from. That is what this book of Eyewitness Testimony tells us.

The gospel of John was written by the apostle John, one of Jesus' closest followers. And he has written this book to present you and I with the evidence that Jesus is who he claimed to be.
And so that we will read that evidence, be blown away by it, and that we will stake our lives and our eternal futures upon Jesus.
So that we will love him and live for him. And as we saw last week, the first major eyewitness who testifies at the identity of Jesus in this gospel is another man called John.
Not John the apostle who wrote the book, but John the Baptist. He was a divinely appointed witness sent by God to prepare the world for the coming of Jesus.
[8:12] So that the world would be completely clear about Jesus' identity. And we know from other gospel accounts that John the Baptist's ministry had a massive, enormous impact on the whole nation.

I mean, people would have been flocking from everywhere to hear this man teach. And he taught them. He said that they needed to get their hearts right before God.
They needed to repent. To turn away from living in life and rebellion against God. And to turn back in preparation for his coming. And the way to express that, according to John, was by baptism.
And John would have been all over the news, all over social media. He's causing such a stir. And in verse 19, remember we were told that he caused such a great stir that a delegation of Jewish leaders from the center, the religious center of the nation, Jerusalem, came.
And verse 24 tells us that this Jewish delegation came from the Pharisees. They'd been sent out to find out just who this John is claiming to be. Because there was such expectation that the Messiah was going to come.

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[9:16] And so they come to John and they say to John, are you the Christ? And John says, no. They say, are you Elijah? The one that was promised at the end of Malachi 4. He says, no. Are you the prophet?

The prophet who was going to be like Moses, who would lead God's people and speak to them like Moses did. And John says, no. No. It's not about me. I am, verse 23, a voice.
Crying out in the wilderness, make straight the way of the Lord, as the prophet Isaiah said. In other words, John declared to the Jews that the time had come for Isaiah 40 to reach its fulfillment.
He was the promised anonymous voice of Isaiah 40, announcing that the Lord God himself was going to appear publicly. The glory of God would appear and revealed in that land.
And the Lord himself would come and save and shepherd his people for all eternity, as was promised by that prophecy. And you'll remember the surprise and reaction of the Jewish leaders in verse 25.
[10:19] Instead of listening to John's testimony by faith and asking more about the coming of the Lord, they seem to just totally ignore what John has just said. And they're instead wrapped up with concerns about, John, why are you baptizing?

You have no authority. Verse 25 is not a positive reaction. They're saying, just who do you think you are, John, administering this baptism?
They seem more concerned with matters of religion than they are about the coming of the Lord and about his salvation plan. Let me just pause and say that. That is a very, very stark warning, that passage, for those of us who've been in church for years.
It's not enough to be religious. It's not enough to go to church to be wrapped up in all sorts of religion. You can go to church all you want, but if you never listen to John the Baptist's testimony and look to the one that he points us to, then I'm afraid you're in big trouble.
Well, let's listen to John then. In verses 19 to 24, he set the scene for the coming of the Lord. He's told the Jews in verse 26 that their Christ is currently walking amongst them.
[11:34] But soon he will burst out into the open and start his public ministry. And in our verses this afternoon, from verse 29 to 34, John finally reveals who the Christ is.

Look at verse 29. The next day, he saw Jesus coming toward him, and he said, Behold, here he is. Here is the one that I've been speaking of.
Here he is. Verse 30, here is the one of whom I said, After me comes a man who ranks before me, because he was before me. In other words, here is the Christ who is not just a man, but he is divine. He is someone who was alive well before he was even born. Here is the appearance of the glory of God. Here is the Lord of the Old Testament come to rescue his exiled people forever.
Here he is. His name is Jesus. And John, in this section, really says two things about Jesus' identity and about Jesus' mission.
[12:32] And I wanted to focus on them with the rest of our time this afternoon. Firstly, John says that Jesus is God's Lamb, the sin bearer. Jesus is God's Lamb, the sin bearer.

Please look again at verse 29. The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him and said, Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.
Now this is momentous news. It's gloriously good news. Because John is declaring to the world that Jesus has come to take care of our biggest problem. If you're anything like me, then your life will be full of problems.
My life is full of problems. And, well actually I'm willing to bet that all of your lives are full of problems as well. If your life isn't full of problems, well, then I don't think you're right in your mind probably, if that's the case.
But what is our biggest problem? What is our biggest problem? Well the Bible says it's sin. That's what John says here. Jesus came to rescue us from our biggest problem.
[13:40] What is sin? My wife and I, as you'll know, used to live down in England. We got pretty close to a neighbor of ours. She used to come around to our house frequently for afternoon tea.

Because that's what you do down in England. Have afternoon tea and scones and all that. But she was not a Christian. And she knew that my wife and I were Christians. And every time she came around to our house, eventually she would always bring the conversation around to Christianity. And every time we got chatting to her, she would say the same sort of thing back to me. She would say, Well, you know, I really admire your faith, but I just don't see why I need Jesus.

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I'm not really a bad person. I'm nice to other people. I'm certainly a lot like those monsters that you see on the TV that carry out all those crimes. Friends, my neighbor didn't understand what the Bible means by sin.
She thought sin as merely a thing on this way, relationships this way, that as long as you're nice to other people and don't hurt other people, well, then you're fine. You've done enough.
[14:43] And of course, when you compare yourself to some of the monsters you see on TV who've done all sorts of crimes and murders and war crimes, then you're always going to smell like roses in comparison, aren't you?

But that is not fundamentally what the Bible means by sin. Sin is fundamentally to do with relationships this way, yes, between us and God. Sin in the Bible is to not treat God the way he deserves to be treated.
with all of our love, obedience, adoration, thankfulness, gratitude. And anyway, anytime we sin against people this way, anytime I sin against someone who's been made in the image of God, it always is, at the end of the day, a rebellion against God himself.
Sin is another name for that hideous rebellion, that God defiance, the wretched opposition that crouches at the door of every fallen human heart. Sin is both a condition that we have inherited from the first man, Adam, and sin is an action that manifests itself in word and thought and deed. And when it is full-blown, it gives birth to death, says James 1. The simplest definition of sin, actually, in the Bible is lawlessness. God has made commandments, and when we break them, either knowingly, deliberately, or ignorantly, and unknowingly, we've committed sin.
[16:04] It's what Paul says in Romans 3.23, all have sinned and have fallen short of the glory of God. But of course, sin goes deeper than just missing the mark, breaking commandments.

Sin is also described as idolatry, worshipping things that aren't God. Colossians 3.5 says that. Whether these false deities are material things or immaterial things, you can worship an idol by holding to a false idolatry, ideology or belief system in your heart, for example.
Sin is also classified as a spiritual adultery when we whore after things that are not God. Sin is also described as a pervasive pollution that has marred every single part of who you are as a human being and every part of my humanity as well.
And when you look back to Genesis 3, to the very first sin that was committed, you see all sorts of things about sin that you maybe didn't even realize. The root of sin is a disregard and disbelief and rejection of the word of God.
Sin in its essence is pride. It is to think that you know better than God, you are more important than God, you have more power than God. Genesis 3 also teaches us that sin is a pursuit of illicit pleasure and a blatant disregard for the negative consequences of disobedience.
[17:27] Genesis 3 also teaches us that at the root of sin is the desire to define yourself apart from God. And we live in a culture that's full of people who want to define themselves on their own terms.

Well, Genesis 3 says that is actually at the heart of sin. The Heidelberg Catechism puts it rather bluntly like this. What is sin? Or what does it mean to sin?
Well, it is to say I have a natural tendency to hate God and my neighbor. That is sin. And friends, that is what you are like.
That is what I am like by nature. We are imprisoned to this. We are born guilty, sharing in Adam's sin. And we are born corrupted, sharing in Adam's twisted nature.
Sin is our biggest problem because if we carry on in sin without being rescued, without being brought to life by God Himself, we will end up in hell, forever paying the price for the rejecting God.
[18:34] It is our biggest problem. Friends, that is why verse 29 is such good news. It is the best news you will ever hear. J.C. Ryle says this of verse 29.

All stars in heaven are bright and beautiful, and yet one star exceedeth another star in glory. So also, texts of Scripture are inspired and profitable, all of them.
And yet some texts are richer than others. Of such texts, the 29th verse before us is preeminently one. And I think that is right. For John is declaring to us the momentous news that all us sinners need to hear desperately.
By calling Jesus the Lamb of God, John is testifying to the fact that Jesus will come to give His life to die in our place as the ultimate sacrifice.
He has come to die and take the punishment that we deserve from our sin so that we can be freed from sin's tyranny, so that we can be fully forgiven from all of the scummy things that we have ever

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done against God.
[19:40] Now, the word lamb is a theologically loaded term. And those listening to John back then who knew their Bibles, who knew the Scriptures, would have known about all the Old Testament texts where lambs were spoken of.

So just think of Isaiah 53, verse 7. Listen to this. Isaiah the prophet says this, He, the servant, was oppressed and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth like a lamb.
that has led to the slaughter and like a sheep that is silent before its shearers, so he opened not his mouth. Don't be put off by the past tense there. Old Testament prophets often spoke about future events in the past tense to try and communicate the certainty that they actually will happen.
The Lord will deliver on what He's promised in the future. And the Lord in those verses was promising to send a servant who would come who would live a perfect life and yet would suffer the death that sinners deserve.
And Isaiah says explicitly, this suffering servant, the Lord is going to lay upon him the iniquity of us all. He will be pierced for our transgressions. He will be like a lamb going to the slaughter.
[20:54] When John looked at Jesus, he said, Behold, here is the lamb that was promised. He has come to die for our sins. Another key Old Testament text that speaks of a lamb is Exodus 12.

Remember? When God's people were in bondage as slaves in Egypt, suffering under the satanic rule of Pharaoh, the Lord came to rescue His people and redeem them out of bondage.
And in Exodus 12, at the heart of that rescue came the Passover night. And the Passover night is also referred to again and again through John's Gospel.
Look out for it as we work through it in the weeks ahead. But anyway, on the first Passover night, the angel of death passed through the land of Egypt and killed the firstborn of every household because Pharaoh would not let the Israelites leave.
God was judging Pharaoh's sin. And God told His people that there was only one way to escape this judgment. They were to take the blood of a spotless and unblemished lamb.
[21:54] They were to take it and sprinkle the blood of this lamb across the doorposts. A lamb that has lived with the family in the house for at least four days so that particularly the eldest son in the household could bond with the lamb and therefore the family would know that the lamb died in His place.

And again, when Jesus looked at, John looked at Jesus and said, behold the lamb of God, He was saying to us, behold the Passover lamb, the one who came to die in the place of all of God's people so that they could escape the ultimate and final judgment of God on this world.
So Jesus has come to be God's lamb, the sin bearer. All those who trust in Him, they won't be partly forgiven. They will be fully forgiven for all time.
And notice who this offer of forgiveness goes out to in verse 29. The whole world. Everyone. That is, the offer of forgiveness through Christ's blood is made to people everywhere from whatever background, not just the Jews.
He has come to be the Savior of the world and everyone who trusts in Him will be set free and fully pardoned. Well, that's the first point.
[23:09] Jesus is God's lamb, the sin bearer. Here's the second point that John declares to us much more briefly. Jesus is the giver of life, the spirit baptizer.

Jesus is the giver of life, the spirit baptizer. Back in verse 26, when the Jewish religious delegates asked John, why are you baptizing? John pretty much just ignored them.
He just acts as though they've never asked a question. He carries on instead pointing them to the one who was to come after him. Well, in verse 31, John finally gives them an answer to their question.
He says, this is why I was sent to baptize. Verse 31, I myself did not know him, but for this purpose, I came baptizing with water that he might be revealed to Israel.
So again, we know from the other gospels that John was baptizing people in order to prepare their hearts and to turn them in repentance to the Lord. But ultimately, John's baptism ministry was set up by God the Father so that God the Father could clearly declare to John who the Christ is, who his son is.
[24:21] And that is what John says in verse 32 to 33. Look at that, please. Verse 32, and John bore witness. I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove and it remained on him.

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I myself did not know him, but he who sent me, that's the Father, he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, he on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.
So John says, I was told by God the Father to set up this baptizing ministry so that it would be plain to me who the Christ is. And one day, as I was baptizing people, I was baptizing person after person after person, one ordinary looking man came towards me and as I baptized him, the Spirit descended upon him from heaven in the form of a dove and remained on him just as the Father said it would.
And this man is Jesus. Now throughout the Old Testament, there's a repeated pattern. Whenever God appointed a leader, he would often publicly declare the leader to be legit by sending the Spirit to come upon the leader in a very publicly invisible way.
And then the leader who'd been anointed by the Spirit would be sent out to do some sort of an act of salvation for God's people. Well here, John saw that pattern repeated in Jesus.
[25:45] The Spirit comes down upon Jesus and thus confirms that Jesus really is God's appointed leader. But the difference here compared to Old Testament leaders is the Spirit remained on Jesus.

Do you notice that? The key word remained on Jesus. Why is that there? Well again, the answer is found in the Old Testament promises of God. Isaiah 42, when he introduces his suffering servant before he goes on to that passage about the suffering servant's death in chapter 53.
In 42 verse 1, the Lord says, my spirit will, my son, my, sorry, suffering servant will come. I'm getting mixed up with my S's. My suffering servant will come and my spirit will remain on him.
And then at the end of Isaiah, in Isaiah 61, we read of the suffering servant himself who by this time in the prophecy has gone through death, has been raised. He then declares to the world, I am the one who's going to pour out that spirit upon everyone.
The Spirit's remained on me. I've carried out my suffering. I've been vindicated. And now I'm going to pour out my spirit upon everyone. Well again, John is declaring to the world that that prophecy, it finds it's yes and it's amen.
[27:04] And this Jesus, he is the one who will baptize God's people, not with water. John says, well, if I baptize you today, all I can do is get you wet.

It's an external thing. But here's the one who can change your heart forever. He can baptize you with the living presence of God, fill you with the living presence of God forever and ever and ever.
And all those who trust in Jesus, they will be baptized with the Spirit, says John. So friends, Jesus is God's lamb, the sin bearer, and Jesus is the giver of life, the Spirit baptizer.
He is the one who will save you from sin's penalty and sin's power, and he is also the one who will bring you into eternal life. That is, he will bring you into union and communion with the living God forever and ever.
Well, let me just close by laying out the two possible responses that you can have to this evidence. Here's response number one. You can reject this.
[28:14] You can reject this today, but John would plead with you not to. Because all those who reject Jesus, those who refuse to believe in the Baptist's testimony, they will not receive the great blessings of salvation that I've described here.

Those who reject Jesus will carry on in deadness, in their sin. They will not receive forgiveness. They will not know the joy of a clear conscience before God in this life.
They will not know the joy of having the sure and certain relationship with God as Father. Instead, life will be bad and things will only get worse for them after they die physically.
That's response number one. But here's response number two. And it's this, that all those who receive Jesus, all those who believe what John has said here about him, they will be fully pardoned and forgiven forever.
It doesn't matter how deep you have sunk down into sin. It doesn't matter how far off you may feel you are from God. This invitation is open to you and to all people.
[29:22] If you turn to Jesus and if you trust him, then you are someone who has had their sin removed by the Lamb's blood. And more than that, you have received the spirit of life.

And that is, we're told from elsewhere in Scripture, the down payment the guarantee that you will share an eternal glory with God forever and ever. Things will only get better for you after you die physically if you trust in this Lamb.

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Well friends, that is the evidence. And how will you respond? John pleads with you to believe so that you will receive life through Jesus the Christ, the Son of God.
well let's be quiet for a moment, bow our heads and then I'll pray for us. Heavenly Father, we bless your holy name for him who is an uttermost savior and redeemer.
For him who came to rescue us. For him who breaks the power of cancelled sin and sets the prisoner free. who delivers people like us from the darkness and the despair and the brokenness of life.
[30:40] From the guilt of sin. From its corrupting and terrifying power. We praise you for the name of your Son, Jesus. And for the glory of the gospel that bears his name.

Father, we thank you that you've given us this book of John's gospel, this eyewitness testimony. And we would ask that this afternoon you would help us not to harden our hearts to what you've been teaching us this day.
And Father, we pray that you would help us, those of us who've already put our trust in Jesus, to keep on putting our trust in him. Not to turn to anywhere else for forgiveness. For there's no other place where we can be forgiven.
There's no other place where we can go to receive your spirit. Only in him. So please help us to stand firm in him. Help us to encourage each other with these words.
And please bless our conversations now as some of us meet for lunch together to chat. Help us to minister these words of truth to our hearts so that we will follow Jesus together and persevere to the very end.
[31:47] We pray all these things in his precious name. Amen.

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