

Message #2

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John

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JOHN THE BAPTIST AND INTRODUCTION TO THE LIGHT

JOHN 1:6-13

I.

There came a man sent from God--- fifteen centuries after John the Baptist--- whose name was Martin Luther. He was a remarkable man. Among his many talents was musical ability. He wrote words and music for a number of hymns, including the hymn that we just sang, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God." Luther also promoted congregational singing in the national language of Germany, rather than in Latin.

Martin Luther was born in 1483. His father was a miner. Martin was a smart kid, and he was able to go to law school. But when he was a law student, he was caught one day in a thunderstorm. He was knocked to the ground by a bolt of lightning. Terrified that he was going to die, he cried out to the patroness saint of miners, "**St. Anne, save me, and I'll become a monk.**"

Martin Luther survived that experience, and, true to his word, two weeks later he entered an Augustinian monastery. He took his new religious life very seriously. He later wrote, "**I kept the rule so strictly that I may say that if ever a monk got to heaven by his sheer monkery, it was I. If I had kept on any longer, I should have killed myself with vigils, prayers, reading and other work.**" In these early years Luther was driven by a profound sense of guilt in dealing with a holy God.

He was appointed to be chairman of the department of Biblical studies at a new university in Wittenburg, Germany. (PROJECTOR ON--- WITTENBERG-WORMS) He soon began to teach the New Testament Book of Romans. As a result of his study, he began to grasp the Biblical truth that righteousness is obtained by grace through faith in Jesus, not by works. This contradicted much of what he had been taught by the Church. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Luther began to see other problems in the teaching and practice of the Church. In 1515 Pope Leo X decided that he needed some additional funding for the construction of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. So he offered a special indulgence whereby people could be forgiven of even serious sins like adultery and theft by giving money to the church. They, or their relatives and friends, could get time off from purgatory with this indulgence. In Germany a priest by the name of Johann Tetzel was commissioned to sell these indulgences in parts of what we know today as Germany. The saying that he promoted was "When a coin into the coffer rings, a soul from purgatory springs."

This was just too much for Martin Luther. He prepared a list of 95 theses--- points of contention--- that expressed his objections to teaching and practices of the Catholic Church. Tradition says that he nailed them to the door of the church in Wittenberg (PROJECTOR ON--- WITTENBERG CHURCH DOOR) on October 31, 1517, exactly 500 years ago this coming Tuesday. This is how the doors appear today. The original wood doors of this church burned in 1760. We know that on October 31 he sent these 95 theses to his bishop and archbishop. From there they were passed along all the way to the pope.

This sparked the Protestant Reformation. Out of Martin Luther's teaching emerged five points of Protestant doctrine that have become known as the "Five Solas." "Sola" is Latin for "alone." The five points of doctrine are referred to in English as Christ alone, Scripture alone, grace alone, faith alone and glory to God alone.

Martin Luther was a witness for Jesus Christ and for the truths that the Bible teaches about Him. The passage before us today describes another witness for Jesus Christ. We are going to see what the Apostle John has to say about him and what the implications are for us.

Last week we began our study of John's gospel. I pointed out that this biography of Jesus was written after the other three gospels. John chose to describe different events in the life of Jesus than are recorded in the other gospels. I also pointed out that John, one of the twelve apostles, made his purpose in writing this book very clear.

In #20 vv. 30 & 31 (PROJECTOR ON--- JOHN 20:30) he wrote, "**Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; (JOHN 20:31) but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.**" John organizes his gospel around seven of these signs, or miracles.

The first 18 verses of the book are regarded as a prologue, or forward. (PROJECTOR OFF) We looked at the first five verses last Sunday. We saw that John described Jesus Christ as the divine Word. His language hints at the doctrine of the Trinity. John's claim is that the Son of God is eternal and that He is the agent for the creation of the universe. He is also described as the life and light of the world. Now John will introduce the man who will introduce the divine Word.

II.

In vv. 6-8 we find that **JOHN'S JOB, AND OUR JOB, IS TO BE A WITNESS FOR CHRIST.** (PROJECTOR ON--- II. JOHN'S JOB, AND OUR JOB...) John writes in v. 6 of #1, "**There was a man sent from God, whose name was John.**" We might naturally ask about what John the author is talking about. In the other three

gospels this John is described as John the Baptist. This John gets no such qualifier in this gospel. The reason appears to be that this is the only John named in this book. The Apostle John, who seems to be the author of this gospel, never mentions himself by name.

The details about the background of John the Baptist are given in the first chapter of Luke's gospel. There we find that John's father Zacharias and his mother Elizabeth were old when they had John. Elizabeth had been unable to have children. But in his service in the temple in Jerusalem as a priest, Zacharias was told by the angel Gabriel that he was going to have a special child in his old age. Elizabeth was a relative of Mary, the mother of Jesus. The text of Luke 1 says that John was filled with the Holy Spirit when he was in his mother's womb. That is said about no one else in the Bible.

John was given the task of setting the stage for the public appearance of Jesus. He was the fulfillment of prophecy that was made in the Old Testament concerning the coming of the Messiah. We read in Isaiah #40 v. 3 (ISAIAH 40:3), **"A voice cries: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.'"**

A couple of centuries later Malachi appeared on the stage of history. He was to be the last prophet whose words were recorded in the Old Testament. In Malachi #3 v. 1 (MALACHI 3:1) the prophet declares, **"Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple, and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts."**

The other three gospels introduce the public ministry of Jesus with a description of John the Baptist and his preaching. Jesus Himself describes the significance of John and his message in #11 of the gospel of Matthew. (MATTHEW 11:11) In v. 11 he writes, **"Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist."** That is pretty high praise coming from our Lord. John is never recorded as having performed a miracle. Yet, after a silence of 400 years John becomes the last prophet of the Old Testament era.

(PROJECTOR OFF) Verse 6 of our passage says that this John literally "came into being." This is in contrast to the divine Word who "was" in the beginning with God. The focus upon John's role in the life of Jesus so early in the gospel has caused some scholars to suspect that the author was countering a few groups who were regarding John the Baptist as the Messiah himself. There is indication early in the church that there were a couple of different groups who made such claims about John the Baptist.

In v. 7 we have a description of the role that John actually played. **"He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him."** The key word here in Greek is *marturion*, from which we get our word "martyr." It was a legal term applied to individuals who had personal

experience, or observation, of evidence or people involved in legal cases. The author John will present seven witnesses in the course of his biography to testify that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. John is the first.

The object of testimony is described here as "the light." The light is Jesus. The other three gospels describe the content of John's message in terms of repentance. The author here follows his theme of believing. The ultimate purpose of John the Baptist's witness was to have people believe in Jesus. He wanted all to believe.

Verse 8 says, **"He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light."** The Apostle John is again countering those who might make more of John the Baptist than they should. Martin Luther was a prolific writer. A commentary on John was one of his literary works. He says in regard to this verse, **"All who preach the doctrines of men make man the light, lead men away from God to themselves and set themselves up in the place of the true Light, as the pope and his followers have done."**

In our day we could add other religious leaders who have had roots in Christianity but have led their followers to a wrong and/or inflated view of themselves. This could include Joseph Smith of Mormonism and Mary Baker Eddy of Christian Science fame and Ellen White of the Seventh Day Adventists. I suspect that even Martin Luther would be appalled today to know that there are churches named after him.

Arturo Toscanini was an Italian conductor who eventually led orchestras in this country. He conducted the Metropolitan Opera and the New York Philharmonic Orchestra. At one concert of classical music the audience responded enthusiastically, and the orchestra did a couple of encores. Still the audience cheered. Finally there was a lull. With his back to the audience Toscanini told the orchestra, **"I am nothing; you are nothing; but Beethoven is everything."** Such was the case with the witness of John the Baptist to Jesus Christ.

One of the chief purposes of our lives as Christians is to likewise be a witness for Jesus. This simply means telling what we know about Jesus to others, sharing our own experience with Christ. In Acts #1 v. 8 (PROJECTOR ON--- ACTS 1:8) Jesus told His followers, **"But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."** That statement was both a prediction and a charge to His followers. It is a responsibility that we have today.

Years ago the editor of a denominational magazine wrote this in his publication: **"The first century expansion of the church, with all of the odds against it, refused to be stamped out by the Roman Empire, but instead caught the hearts and imaginations of men from slaves to those of the emperor's**

household. This was the result of the contagious enthusiasm of rank and file Christians--- the ministry of the saints, not of an ordained priestly caste.

"The fastest growing churches in our day are not those with the greatest ecclesiastical organizations, the biggest overhead, the most executives and the best-trained clergy, but are rather what we call "sect churches"--- storefront, evangelistic groups where the functions of the ministry are carried on by the members of the congregation. ...

"But we need not be afraid of their competition, because as they grow big enough to get better organized, they generally settle down, put more of the ministry in the hands of better-trained clergymen, develop a bureaucracy and become as respectable as the rest of us. Then God must raise up another group to challenge us to minister, rather than to be ministered to. Any so-called church that cannot entrust to its members the job of communicating the faith is not really a church at all--- that is, a company of disciples--- but is a mission field in need of an evangelist to come in and win a few converts so that those equipped as saints will do the work of the ministry." The editor who wrote those words was replaced three weeks later. John's job, and our job, is to be a witness for Christ.

III.

In vv. 9-13 we find that THE MESSAGE OF THE WITNESS IS TO RECEIVE CHRIST BY BELIEVING IN HIS NAME. (PROJECTOR ON--- III. THE MESSAGE OF THE WITNESS...) According to v. 9, "**The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world.**" The light is Jesus Christ. The light came into the world in the incarnation, when the Son of God became a human being.

He was the true light in that he was the genuine item. Some commentators argue that the original word has a nuance of "the ultimate light." There were dimmer lights like the prophets, like John the Baptist, who came with true revelation about the God who is really there. Jesus was the full light who brought the greatest enlightenment to the world about God and His purposes.

There are different ideas about the meaning of this true light giving light to everyone. The Quakers understood this verse to be saying that every person has a spark of divinity within him or her. Thus the need of people is to spend time in quiet meditation to understand what God within them is saying to them.

More likely, the sense that John was conveying was that Jesus Christ in coming into the world shed light upon all people. We will find in this gospel that when Jesus encounters people, He reveals their real character. He shows the hypocrisy of religious leaders. He reveals the faith of Gentiles. He shows His disciples their weaknesses and how they need to grow in faith. He shows people their need for a Savior.

In this gospel everyone seems to have some kind of reaction to Jesus. Some turn away from Him. Some turn toward Him. He still gets that kind of reaction today.

Verse 10 continues to describe Jesus, the divine light: **"He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him."** The word "world," which is *kosmos* in Greek, first appears in v. 9. Here it appears three times. John uses it 78 times in this book. It can have various specific meanings. In v. 9 and in the first two appearances in v. 10 it can refer to the created universe. But its last usage in v. 10, "the world did not know him," is the one that will prevail in the rest of the book. The reference is to fallen humanity. It is the world system that tends to oppose Jesus Christ and His purposes.

Although He was the Creator, the world He entered did not recognize Him. The author John will show in this book that the cause was spiritual blindness. It was love of sin. It was religious legalism that had constructed its own system into which Jesus did not fit.

In a similar way, if Martin Luther showed up in Germany today, the people would not know him either. There are 500th anniversary celebrations taking place in Germany. There is a state church in Germany that pays homage to Martin Luther. But polls show that 42% of the Germans have no belief in God at all, let alone the God that Martin Luther worshiped.

Verse 11: **"He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him."** The first "own" is neuter in gender in the original Greek, implying something like His own things, or His own home, or His own nation. This same form is used in #19 when the author says that he took the mother of Jesus into His "own," suggesting "own home." The second "own" is masculine in gender, suggesting that it was His "own" people who did not receive Him.

Clearly the author is talking about the Jewish people. Jesus was born as a Jew. He would fulfill the Old Testament promises that were made about Him. Yet for the most part He would be rejected, especially by the religious leaders. They would eventually have Him killed.

Martin Luther knew the pain of rejection. He brought divine light to the Catholic Church in his day. The Church leadership began speaking out against his views. But Luther continued to study and to recognize that what the church taught about sin and salvation and the sacraments and authority did not match up with Biblical teaching. Luther took advantage of the printing press and published the results of his study. Some German nobles and some priests and some teachers and some common people bought into his views, but most of the religious hierarchy opposed him.

In 1520 Pope Leo X branded him a heretic. In 1521 Luther was called upon to defend his views before a council of Catholic scholars presided over by the emperor of the Holy Roman Empire. This was known as the Diet of Worms, because it was held in Worms, Germany. (WITTENBERG-WORMS) At this several day conference Luther debated his views before scholars of the church. He was finally called upon to recant his views. His famous reply was this: **"My conscience is captive to the Word of God. I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither honest nor safe. Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise. God help me. Amen."**

Luther had been granted a safe conduct pass to the conference. But Emperor Charles V branded him an outlaw. On his way back to Wittenberg a friendly German noble intercepted him (WARTBURG MAP) and took him to his town and his castle to keep him safe. There he would spend the next year. (WARBURG CASTLE) In this castle, which still stands today, Luther would continue to study and write. Also during this time he translated the New Testament into German. Later he would translate the Old Testament. (PROJECTOR OFF) Luther's translation is still widely used today. It is to the Germans what the King James Version is to English speaking people.

More Germans in the north of the country bought into Luther's views. After a year, he was able to return to Wittenberg. There he continued to write and preach and to spread his views. (MARTIN LUTHER) Martin Luther married and had a family. Other European leaders would pick up on his writing and develop their own views directly from the Scriptures. Men like Ulrich Zwingli and Menno Simons and John Calvin would become leaders of the Protestant Reformation.

But as was true of Jesus Christ who was crucified, and John the Baptist who was beheaded, Martin Luther experienced rejection. (PROJECTOR OFF) That will be our experience also if we are faithful to be witnesses for Christ. Some will reject us and our message. But there will be some who will respond positively.

Thus in v. 12 we read, **"But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God..."** The "him" is the true light, the divine Word, Jesus Christ. The word for "receive" was used of Joseph taking Mary into his home to be his wife after the angel Gabriel appeared to him. It involves the idea of welcome and acceptance.

This receiving of Christ is equated with believing in His name. This ties in with the purpose of John's gospel. (PROJECTOR ON--- JOHN 20:31) For in #20 v. 31 John explains, **"...but these [signs--- these miracles] are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."**

The author is not talking about just an intellectual assent. For the demons recognize that Jesus is the Christ. He is talking about a trusting belief, a willingness to give ourselves to Him, to welcome Him into our lives as our Savior. The result of this is life. It is spiritual life. It is eternal life that begins at the moment that we place our trust in Him.

According to v. 12 in our passage it also means becoming His children. This analogy points to the spiritual reality that God becomes our Father. As a perfect Father, He loves us unconditionally. He provides for us. He directs us. He disciplines us. We also have relationships with fellow Christians as brothers and sisters.

In both #20 v. 31 and v. 12 in our passage belief is associated with "his name." The name is Jesus Christ. The author is not talking about some magical use of this name. For in the Bible and in ancient culture one's name was associated with the person behind that name, with his or her character and position. The required object of belief is Jesus Christ.

This offer still stands today: To all who receive Jesus Christ, who believe in His name, He gives the right to become children of God. As a result, we will have eternal life. (PROJECTOR OFF) Our responsibility is to recognize that we are sinners separated from a holy God by our sin. We must recognize that Jesus Christ was the Son of God who became a human being and died on the cross to pay the penalty for our sin. He rose again from the dead to show that He really was and is God. If we will welcome Him into our lives, if we will embrace Him as our Savior, we will truly become a Christian.

The last verse in our passage, v. 13, continues the thought begun in v. 12, speaking about children of God who have received Jesus, "**...who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.**" Becoming a child of God is described as a birth, a spiritual birth. The idea of spiritual birth will be taken up again by the Apostle John in Chapter 3. We also have again this pattern of a positive statement followed by a negative clarification that we have already seen several times in this chapter. Spiritual birth, according to v. 12, happens as a result of receiving and believing in Jesus. The negative clarification is that this spiritual birth is not the result of human planning.

The first phrase is literally "not of bloods." The idea in some parts of antiquity was that birth involved the mixing of blood. The "will of the flesh" seems to refer to the physical act that produces babies. "Man" in "the will of the man" is specifically "male" in Greek. The clear implication is that God is behind this spiritual birth. He is not just the author of this spiritual process in general, but God the Father is the initiator of the process for any individual who comes to faith in Christ.

Our job is to be a witness for Christ. The message of the witness is to receive Christ by believing in His name. We may never realize this side of heaven the impact that our witness to one individual can have.

Edward Kimball was a Sunday School teacher in Boston. One day this rough young teenager showed up in his class. On April 21, 1855, Edward Kimball went to the place where this young man was working and explained the gospel to him.

Dwight Moody responded and put his faith in Christ. He went on to become an evangelist and the founder of both Moody Church in Chicago and the Moody Bible Institute. Frederick Meyer came to faith through the ministry of Dwight Moody. Myer became a leader in the YMCA, which in its early years was a solidly Christian organization.

Through Meyer's YMCA work Meyer, J. Wilbur Chapman came to faith in Christ. Chapman became an evangelist. An alcoholic baseball player by the name of Billy Sunday came to one of his meetings. Billy Sunday was saved and became a traveling evangelist. He led to Christ Mordecai Ham, who also became an evangelist. At a tent meeting in Charlotte, North Carolina, he preached the gospel to a young man who responded to the invitation. This young man went on to preach the gospel to more people than anyone else in history. He was Billy Graham. His spiritual ancestor was a Sunday school teacher who took the time to reach out to be a witness to one young man. The Lord simply wants us to be a witness for Jesus.