John the Baptist

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[0:00] Now, seeking God's help, we may turn again to the chapter that we read together, the first chapter in John's Gospel, reading at the sixth verse.

There was a man sent from God whose name was John. A man sent from God whose name was John.
And what I would like to do this evening is to look at this man, his life, his mission in life, and his message.
Three points easily to remember. The man, his mission, and then his message. And to link the sixth verse with the well-known and well-loved words of the 29th verse.
The message that he had for the people. Behold, he said, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. This book, the Gospel according to John, is said to be by those who are competent to judge works of literature.
[1:30] They tell us that this is the most wonderful book in all the world. That, of course, is not to detract from the other books in Scripture. The whole of Scripture is wonderful.

But they tell us that this book especially is quite unique. And it's so they say from three points of view.
First of all, they tell us that in this book you will find the most profound thought, the deepest thought, explained in the simplest language and in a way that's easily understood.
The mark of greatness is written across John's Gospel. When you think that he was an unschooled fisherman. Just look at the opening words in his book.
In the beginning, he says, in the beginning was the Word. It seems that in the original language, there isn't one word in that verse that contains more than five letters.
[2:50] And yet the profundity of thought, the deep thought, was expressed in just that verse alone. And John is very careful in the preposition that he uses when he opens his book.

He doesn't say, at the beginning was the Word. Neither does he say, from the beginning, but in the beginning.
And if you are to ask the question, how far back does that beginning go? There is but one answer to the question. As far back that it has no beginning.
A beginningless beginning. An unbegun beginning. Wary to use any other form of words, we could construe that Jesus Christ had a beginning.
But he didn't. John was very careful. And he was also careful in the way that he put down the first few words, and indeed all the words.
[3:56] He didn't say, God was the Word. Had he said that God was the Word, he would have tied the Trinity just to one person.

But God was not the Word. The Word was God. But the reverse is not true. And he goes on in these first five, in the prologue to his Gospel, he goes on to talk about the majesty of this person who is the Word, the Lord Jesus Christ.
And John's purpose in writing the Gospel is to hide himself and to exalt the Saviour. The backdrop for John is always Christ.
And he wishes to fade into insignificance. And in that is not unlike the other John, of whom we shall attempt to say a little. And the contrast between the first five verses and the sixth verse couldn't be greater.
Because the sixth verse opens like this, there was a man sent from God, whose name was John.
He had been speaking about the divinity of Christ.
[5:09] And he suddenly switches to talk about a human being, a mere human being. Who was John? Well, we know something about him.

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His parents were aged. His father was Zacharias. His mother was Elizabeth. They were childless. And to be childless, particularly at that time, was a reproach for women.
Elizabeth was barren. And Zacharias was a priest serving in the temple. And at this particular time, Zacharias has the business of using the incense in the temple.
And it wasn't, it was only permitted once in a lifetime. For the priest to be present with the incense. And some of them didn't even have that privilege and opportunity. But Zacharias did. And we know that he went in and that he failed to come out for a long time.
[6:18] And people wondered what had happened to him. And eventually he appears. And he is speechless. He has been struck dumb. And they perceive that John, that Zacharias had a vision.

And we know that an angel had been sent from heaven with a message to Zacharias. That a child would be given to them. And in process of time, that did take place.
We remember that when it was the sixth month with Elizabeth, Mary, her cousin, went to meet her in the hill country with the news that she was to be the mother of Messiahs.
And as she broke that news to her cousin Elizabeth, we read, I think it's in Luke's gospel, we read these words, that the babe leapt within Elizabeth's womb.
And some have described that leap as a leap of joy. The unborn John recognized the glad tidings that had just been spoken to his mother.
[7:27] And he is born, time passes, John is well taught. And if we can just pause for a moment at this point.

Children are God's heritage. The womb's fruit, the psalmist tells us, his reward. Elizabeth wasn't the only childless woman to be spoken of in scripture.
Think of Sarah and the longing for the son of her old age, the promised seed. You think of Hannah, who was reproached by her adversary.
She too was childless. And in process of time, these children were given to them. And how well they were taught. And as far as Moses' mother was concerned, she was just to have Moses for a little while.
And then he would be taken into the palace in Egypt with all the idolatry that's associated with Egypt. And so she made the best use of these years when he was on her knee.
[8:39] And for those who are parents and grandparents, and we have the privilege of being entrusted with children, our privilege is accompanied by responsibility.

We are to pray for them. We are to pray with them. We are to instruct them. And if we have no children of our own, there are young people and young children for whom we can intercede and pray and speak to.
And if I can just remind you, I hardly need to remind you, but just across the road here is the school teaming with young ones. Remember them. They are growing up in a dark and a very difficult day, faced with temptations that an older generation are unaware of.
If the church is one pillar in society, in a community, surely the school is the other pillar. And if these twin pillars are functioning well, it bodes well for society and for community.
Well, John was well taught. He was well loved by his aged parents. And it wasn't long before John was going to embark on a ministry. But first of all, he had to spend time in the wilderness.
[10:03] For anyone who is to be prepared for a great work, there must be preparatory training. Ask Moses what it must have been like.

To spend forty years in the backwoods of Midian as a shepherd. But the God, eternal God, had his eye on Moses. And Moses had a work to do.
Ask Elijah what it must have been like to be sidetracked seemingly for a while. Or the apostle Paul whose heart was burning to preach the gospel.
And Paul was there three years in the Arabian desert. But God was preparing him. And here John has been prepared as well. He is going to be the last of the prophets.
And later Jesus was to say of him, there hath arisen none greater than John the Baptist. Not one. And his particular work in in the economy of God's grace and God's purpose was to be the forerunner of the Savior.
[11:19] And he is now embarking on his life's mission. And he is the Baptist because he has preached a baptism of repentance. And those who have repented of their sins come to John and he baptizes them.

And then this remarkable day in John's experience. It dawns.

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John's sky is cloudless. His horizon is clear. And John's sea is calm. And as he is there in the Jordan baptizing, he sees one coming towards him.
And he exclaims these famous words, Behold the Lamb of God. It wasn't always to be so for John. Not long after this, the blue sky would be filled with dark, ominous clouds.
John would be cast into prison. And so it is with the Lord's people. Nowhere in Scripture are they guaranteed, as we commonly see, a smooth passage through life.
[12:31] there are trials and hardships. And when Christ is offered, as he must be in the preaching of the gospel freely, he must not be offered as the Christ who will ensure that all trouble and all difficulty will be removed from life.

It wasn't so in his old life. He was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. life. And he faced a trial that was quite unique.
No one ever before him or no one since will have to endure what the Savior did. The true presentation of the gospel will see to it that people are instructed with regard to the faith and with regard to what you expect in a fallen world.
But those who do come to Christ and trouble does come, they have one to whom they go in the day of trouble. Well, the day before John sees Jesus coming towards them and he exclaims the words, Behold the Lamb of God, the day before that, John was baptizing as well.
And messengers were sent from the Pharisees to John with a question. and the question was, who are you? They thought that perhaps he was the Messiah.
[14:02] And he denied and he said, no I am not. Are you Elijah or are you one of the prophets? And John said that he wasn't Elijah, neither was he Moses, and he certainly wasn't the Messiah.

Now that's a great question, perhaps the greatest question that can be asked concerning the Messiah. who are you? Jesus himself said shortly after this to his disciples as they met together, who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?
And then he asks this question, but who do you say that I am? And then Peter's famous words, thou art Christ, the Christ, the Son of the living God.
Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, said Jesus to him. Flesh and blood has not revealed that to you, but my Father who is in heaven. Now if I were to ask you that question, what is your estimate of Jesus Christ?
Is he just to you as he is to many in this world, one of the prophets? just a good man, just one sent as an example as to how we should live.
[15:26] Or do you confess hand on heart as Peter did, and as those who have come to know him do, that he is the Messiah. Who are you? Put your attention on this one.

He's approaching. Don't just look at him and blink and turn away. Not just a passing glance or a sideways look, but fix your attention firmly on him.
Why? Because there is no one like him. This is the greatest wonder that the world has ever seen, or ever shall, that the Messiah has come into the world.
The one of whom John has said, everything was made by, and everything was made by him, and without him was not anything made that was made. Here he is, in human form, the God man approaching the banks of the Jordan River to be baptized himself.
Behold him, there is wonder attached to him, the greatest wonder of all. There was never a birth like his birth, and there never shall.
[16:46] John says further down in this first chapter, we beheld, that is, the Apostle John, we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace, full of truth.

There is the wonder of the incarnation, his enfleshment, or his taking our form as a human being. and that wonder is unique.
It's unique to the Son of God, conceived in a miraculous way, in the womb of the Virgin Mary, and born of her, yet without sin.
But he was born for a purpose. Someone has said this, without the incarnation, incarnation, the atonement would be impossible.
And without the atonement, the incarnation would be meaningless. In other words, he was born to die. That was the reason why he came.
[17:55] He was incarnate in order to make atonement, and not just to set an example as many believe, although he did do that. Well, there was glory attached to him as well.

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not just the wonder and the uniqueness of the incarnation, there was glory attached to this man. And if we were to ask the question, what is glory?
Now, in any language, glory is the highest word, the greatest word that can be used to describe perfection.
Perfection, in his case, perfection brought to a flawless degree. No imperfection, no impurity, no flaw, absolutely perfect.
we speak in our own way of a day like today or last week, when the weather was really wonderful. We say, what glorious weather, and we know what we convey when we say that, and we look at the sun, although not just with a natural light, we look at the sun and we say, what a glorious day, and it's made glorious because of the sun, the sun shining in its sun is in the sky, and it sends out its light and its heat, and we bask in it, and we enjoy it, and we say, what a glorious day.
[19:30] But they tell us, those who study the sun and the stars, they tell us that even the sun, the face of the sun, has got spots in it, black spots, sun spots, that's the natural sun, there are no spots in the face of the sun of righteousness, God is light, John tells us in another letter, God is light, and in him is no darkness at all, so there's glory, unique glory, attached to this person who has come on the scene and is approaching John and those who are around.

What effect, what effect does a view of such glory have on people? Well, we know that Isaiah in his day, when he went into the temple, and he saw the Lord high and lifted up, and his train, the glory of the Lord filled the temple.
We know the effect that it had on Isaiah. He covered his face, and he said, woe is me, for I am undone. I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and there must always be that contrast between the glory of heaven and the sinfulness of earth.
man. We know too that Peter, Simon Peter, after the great catch of fish, and when he recognized that it was the Savior, he too exclaimed in a similar vein, depart from me, O Lord, for I am a sinful man.
He too had seen the glory of the Lord. So glory is attached, grace is attached to this man, so too is glory. And what's the connection between the two?
[21:42] Someone has described it in botanical terms, saying something like this, grace is glory in the bud, and glory is grace in full flower.

Small glory on the earth, great glory yet to come. in heaven. And here on this day, heaven has come to earth, in the person of the Son of God, the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, approaching John the Baptist, requesting baptism of him.
In all things, it behoved him to be made like unto his brethren. It's interesting to see the title that John gives him when he says behold him.
He says behold the Lamb of God. Now, throughout scripture, Jesus has many titles, but this one is the one that John uses, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.
And immediately, John connects the title with the work that he has to do. The Lamb is to take away sin.
[23:01] And that's his purpose. John knew what he was talking about. I said a while ago that he'd been well instructed. I'm quite sure that down through the era of the Old Testament, from generation to generation, the Lamb was prominent in discussion.

after all, when our first parents sinned in the garden, it was the Lord God himself who covered them with coats, with animal skins.
And it could very well have been, although we're not told, lamb skins. Certainly, when he came to Abraham, and to the faithful journey up Mount Moriah with Isaac, and when his strapping son turned to his aged father with a question, Father, I see the knife and I see the wood, but where is the lamb?
Now, in Abraham's heart, the fire was there, and he was going to sacrifice his son in perfect obedience to the request of heaven. And that sacrifice was to be a whole burnt offering.
Where is the lamb? And then the immortal answer, my son, God will provide himself a lamb. And then down to the Passover night in Egypt, when the lamb was slain, its blood sprinkled, on the doorpost and lentils, and the firstborn spared.
[24:41] And then down, quickly down to Isaiah, in the great 53rd chapter, he was led as a lamb to the slaughter. And as a sheep before a shearer is done, so he openeth not his mouth.

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And then Philip, in the New Testament after this, on the lonely road to Gaza, meeting the Ethiopian who had come up to Jerusalem and was returning disappointed, and reading the scroll, Philip caught up to him, caught up with him, and asked him, do you understand what you're reading? How can I, he said, unless someone explained to me? And Philip began that same scripture, and preached to him Jesus.
This is the crux of the whole matter. This is the kernel of the gospel, Jesus Christ, and him crucified. All else is at the periphery, he is at the center.
He is the lamb to take away the sin of the world, and we know what it cost him in terms of suffering, ultimately, it cost him his life.
[25:56] And the question is often raised, could there be no other way? Could the father not have spared his son?

After all, if God is omnipotent, surely there is nothing too hard for the Lord to do, to accomplish. Well, in terms of power, there isn't.
In terms of power, the Almighty is omnipotent, he brought the world into being, and nothing is too hard for him to accomplish in these terms.
But speaking with all reverence, there are things that he cannot do. power, God, cannot tell a lie. Neither can he deny himself.
He cannot break his promise. And he cannot press, so to speak, he cannot press the delete button and say that there is no sin.
[27:02] He cannot, because of his nature, overlook sin. it's an impossibility. And in this connection, impossibility can be defined as that which is inconsistent with the divine nature.

God cannot do it, because it's contrary to his nature. And he couldn't just say, let there be no sin. He said at the beginning of the physical creation, let there be light, and there was light, and the darkness fled.
Light and darkness cannot abide in each other. One must go, one must disappear. And if we can think of it like this, sin, because of sin, of transgression of the law, we are guilty.
And because we're guilty, we're liable to misery and to punishment. And these three are always linked. They cannot be divorced.
Sin, guilt, punishment. It's so in the natural life. Once we offend, once we break the law, we're guilty.
[28:30] And because we're guilty, we're liable to the punishment that the law demands. And it is equally so in the spiritual realm. Sin, guilt, punishment.

Now the question that confronted the divine mind in eternity was this. how, how can we find a way whereby the sinner, the guilty one, can be made innocent?
And there was but one answer, and that answer arose within the divine mind. And then we hear the response, here am I, send me.
Here am I, send me. And so he came, the second person came as the Messiah of God, in the fullness of time, to be the sin bearer.
And we know what that involved. Every step of his journey took him closer and closer to the cross, and to the final suffering, and the greatest act of love that the world has ever or else see.
[29:52] Well, then the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. When he takes it away, exactly where does he put it?

Because if you take something from one place, he must inevitably take it to another place. And if he takes sin away from the sinner, where does he take it to?
And some say this, he takes it and he casts it into the ocean of his forgetfulness. I know it's a form of words, but strictly speaking, there's a fallacy there.
Wherever he takes it, it's not into the ocean of his forgetfulness. We may forget and we do oftentimes. forgetfulness. He never forgets.
Forgetfulness is a weakness. There is no weakness with God. Where then does he take it? Well, the psalm tells us he takes it as far as east is distant from the west.
[31:06] We'll sing that in conclusion in a few minutes. So far hath he removed from us in his love all our iniquities. Now the language there is remarkable.

He doesn't say as far as north is from the south. Had he said that, then those who are troubled by their sins would be forever more troubled by them.

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Had he taken their sins to the north and left them there or buried them there, the north can be located with great precision. So too can the south. No one has ever yet found the east neither shall they find the west.
There is no east point and there is no west point. No matter how far east you go, there is a place further east. That's where he takes our sins. He takes them as far away as is possible so that he remembers them not again forever.
Now remembering not again is not the same as forgetting. As Thomas said remember not my sins against me. And by that of course he meant mark them not against me.
[32:22] Because if God was to mark our sins against us who would stand? Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

Now does that mean the sin of everybody who ever lived? God the scripture does not say that there is universal salvation.
Clearly not. When Judas Iscariot went out that dark night with that evil deed in his heart he went out to commit the blackest deed that the world has ever known.
He betrayed innocent blood and we read that Judas went to his own place. What then is meant by the world when he takes away the sin of the world?
Well he takes away the sin of high and low rich and poor black and white young and old Jew and Gentile.
[33:27] He takes away the sin of all who come to him. And nowhere in scripture do we read that one came to him and he couldn't take away their sin.

Nowhere. What a gospel has been left with us. He is able to take away the sin of the whole world and that means of all who come to him.
And when he takes it away the guilt is removed. By taking the sin away he assumed their guilt and he experienced their punishment and they are set free.
What greater news could there be than that? And yet people strive and attempt by their so-called good works to make their own way to heaven by living a good life.
Now if you were to stop and think about it, what an affront that is to the Son of God. You saying to him, I'll make it my way.
[34:37] I'll not do this or this or this. And I'll keep on this side of the law. And I'll live as good a life as I can. And I'm better than my neighbor. And at the last, in the balances, my good works will outweigh the other works.

And you'll accept me. no greater affront could be offered to the Son of God. Think about it. He has, whether to be another way, God would have found it.
There was no other way. This is the only way. And this must always be the challenge of the Gospel.
And here I must draw things to a conclusion.
And I've said this often before, if preaching is one thing, it's exposition followed by application. And it's one thing to meditate on a passage or a verse of Scripture and to think about it together and to have our minds enlightened and our knowledge increased.
That's one thing and that's good in and of itself. But it's not everything. Application must be made.
And this same John, the Gospel writer, at the end of his Gospel, he tells us the purpose for which he wrote the book.
[35:57] And in these words, he says this, many other signs Jesus did. And he said, I suppose that if they were all written, the world itself could not contain the books.

But these are written that ye might know, that ye might believe, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, and believing you might have life in his name.
That's why John wrote his Gospel. That's why the Bible is left with us, that we might believe. That's the center, that's the focal point of it all.
That's the purpose, or it ought to be, why we meet here Sabbath morning, Sabbath evening, Sabbath after Sabbath, year after year, that we might believe.
and those who believe have life. That's what he offers. And those who do not believe have not life, or put positively, have Jews death.
[37:06] Moses, in his day, didn't leave the matter hanging in the air. Moses too, and every other one who has a right-thinking mind, presses the point.

Moses said something like this, I have set before you, he said this day, life and death, good and evil. But he didn't stop there. I have set before you life and death, good and evil.

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Therefore, he said, choose life. Choose life. So it comes down to choice. It comes down to that act of the will. And whenever we choose something, inevitably, we have to refuse the other.
choice and refusal always go side by side. They must do. If you're given an invitation to a wedding or whatever, there's but just one of two responses.
You choose, you accept the invitation, or for whatever reason, you refuse the invitation. It's exactly the same with the gospel. Choice and refusal go side by side.
[38:13] God has spared you tonight as he has spared me to hear the gospel once more. We don't know how much longer he will leave us to hear the message again if ever.

And I'm going to close with this one. I've said that several times, but years ago, the great American evangelist, D.L. Moody, he was greatly used of God in his day.
Moody was a sole winner. He had a very difficult upbringing. He was the sixth child of a family of nine, born to an alcoholic father.
At the age of 16, Moody was converted and he became a preacher. And one evening, preaching in Chicago on the words, what think you of Christ?
He said this, I want you to go home, he said, and think about what I've said and come back next week and tell me what you think of Christ.
[39:22] Afterwards, Moody was heard to reflect on what he had said. And he said, I wish, I don't know what overcame me that night in the pulpit. I should never have said that.

that very night, fire swept through Chicago. And many of Moody's hearers perished in the fire. Not only did they not have a week to consider, they didn't even have a day.
That was to be their last night on the earth. And so the point is pressed and it's an urgent point. What think ye of Christ? Not go home and think about it.
And I'm sure there's much engaging in your mind as to what you can do tomorrow and the plans that you have for life. This is the most important of all. What will it profit a man if he gains everything in the world and loses his soul?
Well, here is the offer of life. And he asks you to come to take of it freely, without money, and without price. May he enable you to or more than

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