

John 1:6-8

Introduction

Two weeks ago, now, we saw how John moves from the eternal Word active in creation to that same eternal Word active in our redemption. Since it's through the *Word* that God both creates and redeems we can see that Creation is God's own self-revelation and redemption, too, is supremely God's own self-revelation. So, in the "miracles" of creation and of redemption we have revealed to us not just God, but God's desire that we should know Him, and that in truly and really knowing Him we should have the light of life – life eternal.

As we look back over the first five verses, you could say we've been soaring at a very high altitude. This doesn't mean that it's not been practical or concrete. The creation in which we live is very concrete. All we have to do is open our eyes and look around us. The basic truths about God which are being constantly revealed to us in the physical creation are very concrete. And yet when it comes to redemption John has so far contented himself with the view from orbit, as it were. "The life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."

The light has been shining not just in the creation but also in a redemption that's equally concrete and that God has been progressively working out within the context of this creation. We've seen this from way up high, and yet so far we haven't yet, as it were, really landed. We haven't yet put feet on the ground to see this wonderful mystery of how the life was the light *of men*, and how the darkness *did not* overcome the light. That all begins to change in verse six. Suddenly, after all we've heard of God, and the Word, and the life, and the light, and the darkness, we read in verse six:

I. John 1:6a — There came a man sent from God, whose name was John.

So with those words, we've "touched down," as it were. We've come down, now, to that which is physical, and touchable, and seeable, and hearable, with human hands, and eyes, and ears (cf. 1 John 1:1-3). With these words we begin to see how the life and light that is in the eternal Word is actually working out a salvation and redemption in our space and time – within the real, nitty-gritty history of this creation.

The word for "*there came a man*" is the same word that's already been used three times in verse three: "All things *came into being* through Him, and without him not a single thing *came into being* that has *come into being*." The idea here in verse six, however, is not that this man came into being (though obviously he did), but rather that he came or entered onto the stage of the history of this world (cf. Beasley Murray). In verse four, we heard how "the life was the light *of men*," but now we have very specifically one *individual man*. This man is singled out from all the rest because he entered into this world as **a man sent by God**. The Bible has already told us of others who were also sent by God. We can think of Moses:

➤ Exodus 3:14 (cf. 3:10-15) — God said to Moses... "Say this to the people of Israel: 'I AM has sent me to you.'"

Or we can think of Isaiah:

- Isaiah 6:8 — I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” Then I said, “Here I am! Send me.”

Or there’s Jeremiah:

- Jeremiah 1:4–7 — The word of the LORD came to me, saying, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you... Do not say, ‘I am only a youth’; for to all to whom I send you, you shall go, and whatever I command you, you shall speak.”

The Bible tells us that these men were sent by God specifically with redemptive revelation – with the revelation of God’s law, of the terrors of His judgements, of the promises of His salvation. In the ministry of all these men, there was a light that was shining, and yet the true light itself had not yet come into the world (cf. Jn. 1:9). But *now*, after all we’ve just read in the first five verses, what can it mean when we come down, as it were, out of orbit, and read these words: “There came [onto the stage of the history of this world] a man sent from God”? Surely, after an introduction like we’ve just had, there must be something about this man that sets him apart from Jeremiah, and Isaiah, and even from Moses. So what *part* will this man play in the progress of God’s own self-revelation in our salvation and redemption?

II. John 1:6b — There came a man sent from God, **whose name was John.**

Once again, what ought to strike us (after the first five verses) is the seeable, touchable, hearable, documentable *historicity* of this *man* – “whose name was John.” And then there’s the meaning of that name: “Yahweh is gracious.” The thrill of those words is that we know what we’re seeing here is the eternal Word—who is life and light—working out a salvation in our space and time, within the real history of this creation, for real flesh and blood people like you and me. And so we ask again: What *part* will this man play in the *progress* of God’s own self-revelation in salvation and redemption? We read in verses 7-8:

III. John 1:7–8 — This [man] came for [the sake of] witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but [came] in order to bear witness about the light.

After all that the evangelist has just said in verses 1-5 this man, John, might feel to us like a terribly disappointing anticlimax. After everything we’ve just read about the eternal Word in whom was life, and how the life was the light of men, and how the light shines in the darkness, and how the darkness did not overcome the light, we might have expected the light itself. But no, the evangelist says, “*he was not the light.*” So at this point we might be asking, “What’s the big deal about John? What do *we* really care about John?”

According to the evangelist, the big deal about John is that he came for the sake of *witness* (testimony; *martyria*). The big deal about John is that even though he himself was not the light

he came to *bear witness about*—or to give testimony (*martyreo*) *about*—the light. This word for witness is repeated three times just in these two verses. But can't we skip the "testimony" and come right away to the light? In this ultimate climactic moment of redemptive history, can't we skip the "witness" and come right away to the light that shines in the darkness? Are we really that interested, at this point, in John? On the one hand, maybe we can excuse the anticipation. On the other hand, we really need to see just how misguided this kind of thinking is.

Shouldn't it be an amazing thing to us that God would send *a man* to *bear witness about* the light? After all, does the light really need any man to bear witness about Him? Does the eternal Word who was with God and who was God really need any human being to bear witness about Him? Isn't the answer self-evident? Obviously not. And yet there is still this reality: Because the true light, which gives light to every person, *was coming into the world* (cf. Jn. 1:9), it was actually possible for the light to receive this testimony from men. Because the eternal Word *was coming into this world*, it was actually possible for this Word to receive testimony from men. In other words, the simple fact of John and his "witness" is already revealing to us the wonderful condescension of God – the God who stoops all the way down to us to make Himself known to us. Not only was the light coming into this world (cf. Jn. 1:9), but God sent a man whose name was John to bear witness about that light "so that all [the people] might believe through him [through his testimony and because of his witness]."

This theme of "testimony" and "witness" is a major theme in this fourth Gospel. Some form of the Greek word for "witness" (*martyr*, *martyria*, *martyreo*) appears only 32 times in Matthew, Mark, and Luke combined, but in the fourth Gospel alone it appears 47 times. Historical events and people ought to be historically verifiable. Otherwise, why should we believe that the people existed, or that the events ever happened? But, of course, when it comes to Jesus we're not just talking about "verifying" that He existed. We're talking about "verifying" *who* He was: the eternal Word who is the true light of the world. So what kind of testimony and witness do you need for this? At the end of the day, the only testimony that will do is the testimony of God Himself. What other lesser testimony would possibly suffice? So what we see in the fourth Gospel is that it's the Father who has borne witness about Jesus in and through the mighty works that He sent Jesus to accomplish (the signs accompanied by their explanation; word and deed). Jesus said:

- John 10:25 — The works that I do in my Father's name **bear witness** about me.
- John 5:36 — The works that the Father has given me to accomplish, the very works that I am doing, **bear witness** about me that the Father has sent me.

The Father also bears witness in the Old Testament Scriptures which announced beforehand the coming of Jesus and which are all fulfilled in Jesus.

- John 5:39, 46 — You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that **bear witness** about me... If you believed Moses, you would believe me; for he wrote of me.

In the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), we even hear God bearing witness at the baptism and the transfiguration of Jesus when a voice from heaven proclaimed: "This is my

beloved Son, listen to Him” (Mat. 3:17; 17:5). Added to this testimony and witness of God the Father is the testimony of Jesus Himself. We read in John chapter eight:

- John 8:13–14 — The Pharisees said to [Jesus], “You are **bearing witness** about yourself; your **testimony** is not true.” Jesus answered, “Even if I do **bear witness** about myself, my **testimony** is true, for I know where I came from and where I am going, but you do not know where I come from or where I am going.

Just a few verses later, Jesus goes on to say:

- John 8:17–18 — In your Law it is written that the **testimony** of two people is true. I am the one who **bears witness** about myself, and the Father who sent me **bears witness** about me.

Upon what lesser testimony that the testimony of the Father and the Son could we ever be expected to believe that Jesus is the Son of God? Is there any other kind of witness or authority that could ever be sufficient?

Now, of course, there is a different level of testimony that’s still essential for us to believe. We still need the historical testimony of those who witnessed the things that Jesus did and said.

- John 4:39 — Many Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman’s **testimony [witness]**, “He told me all that I ever did.”
- John 12:17 — The crowd that had been with him when he called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to **bear witness**.
- John 15:26–27 (cf. Acts 1:8) — You also will **bear witness**, because you have been with me from the beginning.
- John 19:35–37 — He who saw it has **borne witness**—his **testimony** is true, and he knows that he is telling the truth—that you also may believe.
- John 21:24 — This is the disciple who is **bearing witness** about these things, and who has written these things, and we know that his **testimony** is true.

So on the one hand we have that ultimate witness and testimony of God Himself and even the witness of the eternal Word. On the other hand, we have the secondary witness of those who were with Jesus from the beginning and who testified to the things that they saw Him do and heard Him say. And then there’s John. Where does John fit?

On the one hand, John fits into the second category as a *human* witness: “There came a *man*... whose name was John.” On the other hand, isn’t it obvious that there’s something *different* about the witness of John? “There came a man *sent from God*, whose name was John” (cf. 3:28). The only other one in this fourth Gospel who is repeatedly said to be sent from God is Jesus Himself (cf. 3:17, 34; 5:36, 38; 6:29, 57; 7:29; 8:42; 10:36; 11:42; 17:3, 8, 18, 21, 23, 25; 20:21). So we learn in the Gospel of Luke that John was born to elderly and previously barren parents through God’s miraculous intervention and that he was filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother’s womb (Lk. 1:5-25, 39-44; cf. Ryle). We learn how his father, Zechariah, was mute until John was born (because of his doubting) and then, upon the naming of his son, “his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God” (Lk. 1:57-64). We read in Luke chapter one:

- Luke 1:65–66, 80 — And fear came on all their neighbors. And all these things were talked about through all the hill country of Judea, and all who heard them laid them up in their hearts, saying, “*What then will this child be?*” For the hand of the Lord was with him... And the child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel.

Clearly, there is to be something unique and wonderful about this man who was “sent from God.” “What then will this child be?” And the author of this fourth Gospel answers:

“This [man] **came for [the sake of] witness, to bear witness** about the light... He was not the light, but [**came**] **in order to bear witness** about the light.” There’s something about the witness of John that’s different from the witness of all the Apostles who came later. One commentator writes: “The verb ‘[to bear witness],’... is in the aorist. The meaning is... that [John] accomplished a finished work. He bore his witness to the Word, and there was nothing more that he could do” (Morris; cf. Lenski). The calling of the Apostles was to witness and testify continuously until their death. Theirs was a task that had no expiration date. The calling of John, however, was to bear witness until his witness was no longer appropriate and then, once his testimony was no longer appropriate, to pass from the scene. John’s calling was to come, and then to go; to come before and then to give way to that one who came after him. So we’ll read later on in John chapter three:

- John 3:26–30 (Lk. 1:76) — [the disciples of John] came to John and said to him, “Rabbi, he who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you **bore witness**—look, he is baptizing, and all are going to him.” John answered, “A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven. You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, ‘**I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.**’ The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom’s voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete. **He must increase, but [now] I must decrease.**”

John isn’t just talking about an attitude of humility here. He’s talking about an objective redemptive-historical fact that his mission as a witness was almost finished. The uniqueness of John’s witness was that he was a herald, announcing beforehand the arrival of the light and then identifying for the people Him who was the light – the very light that would ultimately render his own ministry obsolete. *Before* Jesus preached, John preached. *Before* Jesus proclaimed who He was, John proclaimed who Jesus was.

And yet even the witness of John didn’t just appear out of nowhere. John’s witness comes as the culmination of thousands of years of the gradual progress of God’s redemptive plan in history. John’s witness comes in the larger context of a redemptive-historical development that began all the way back in Genesis chapter three.

- Genesis 3:14–15 — The LORD God said to the serpent, “Because you have done this, cursed are you above all livestock and above all beasts of the field; on your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. I will put enmity between you and the woman, and

between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.”

In fact, this witness of John had already been foretold over 700 years earlier by the prophet Isaiah. So we read a little later in chapter one:

- John 1:19–20, 23 (cf. Isa. 40:3) — And this is the **testimony [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.**” ... 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.”

Are you getting the picture? The true greatness of John is most clearly seen in who he was *not*. He himself was not the light; and yet he came to bear witness about the light. The greatness of John is most clearly seen in the greatness of that one to whom he pointed and before whom he ultimately faded away. “The true light, which gives light to every man, was coming into the world.” With the arrival of Jesus on the scene and the testimony of his own words and deeds, there would no longer remain any need for the witness of John.

Why, then, the witness of John? “This [man] came for [the sake of] witness... *that all [the people] might believe through him.*” That’s the whole point of all witness and testimony, isn’t it?—To publicly establish the truth of a matter so that the truth might be believed. Even today, it’s through the witness and testimony of John that we ourselves can come to believe—not in John, but in that one to whom he bore witness. So let’s listen, now, to the testimony of John:

- John 1:15 — John **bore witness** about [Jesus], and cried out, “This was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me.’”
- John 1:29–34 — [John] saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, “Behold, the Lamb of 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**: “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.”

We know that the light didn’t need any man to bear witness about Him. The eternal Word who was with God and who was God was not dependent on the testimony of any man. And yet in spite of these things “there came a man sent from God whose name was John” precisely for the sake of witness, **so that through his unique testimony and witness we might believe**—so that through his testimony and witness we might come to believe that *far greater* testimony and witness of the true light Himself, which is accompanied by the testimony and witness of God the Father, and which has, in turn, been preserved for us by the inscripturated testimony and witness of those who were with Him from the beginning, all of which comes to us not only in the context of the witness of this creation (cf. Jn. 1:1-4; Acts 14:17), but the witness of a redemptive history that began all the way back at the fall in Genesis chapter 3 (cf. Jn. 1:5). Maybe now we can fully appreciate what the Apostle John writes, as he bears witness to what Jesus said:

- John 5:19, 33–36a — Jesus said to them... “You sent to John, and he has **borne witness** to the truth. Not that the **testimony** that I receive is from man, *but I say these things so that you may be saved*. He was a burning and shining lamp, and you were willing to rejoice for a while *in his light*. But the **testimony** that I have is greater than that of John.”

Conclusion

When we “touch down,” as it were, after the first five verses, it’s not the Light that we see at first—at least not directly—but rather the Light via the witness and the testimony of a man sent from God, whose name was John. Why this witness and testimony? So that we might believe. Biblical faith is not a blind leap in the dark; it’s not believing in the absence of credible witness and testimony. Instead, biblical faith is grounded entirely, from beginning to end, in witness and testimony—an entire complex of witness and testimony—that is unimpeachable and irrefutable. Why is this? Why is this witness and testimony unimpeachable and irrefutable? Because ultimately it is all from beginning to end the witness and the testimony of God Himself. This is the sure foundation of our faith. The ground of our faith is not in us – the ground of our faith is never something subjective or some feeling we have. The ground of our faith is in the witness and the testimony that God has borne concerning His Son – *even in and through a man, sent from God*, whose name was John. The Apostle John writes:

- 1 John 5:9–12 — If we receive the testimony of men [and we do!], the testimony of God is greater, for this is the testimony of God that he has borne concerning his Son. Whoever believes in the Son of God has the testimony in himself. Whoever does not believe God has made him a liar, because he has not believed in the testimony that God has borne concerning his Son. And this is the testimony, that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.

Have we humbled ourselves before this witness and testimony that God has borne concerning His Son? Are we rejoicing and exulting in this witness and testimony that God has borne concerning His Son? ***On the ground of this witness and testimony***, have we believed? Indeed, how grounded is our faith? There should be nothing in all the world more practical or more pressing to us than answering these questions, and answering them daily.