

John Was Not the Light, but a Witness to the Light

by John Piper

John's witness was a great necessity, but it was also a great not, emphasizing that his witness was not about himself, but about Jesus, and that he was willing to decrease himself and point to Jesus.

Duration: 43:05

Scripture: Matthew 6:33, John 1:5-9, John 1:29, John 1:36

Topics: "Christian Witness", "Faith Testimony"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher focuses on the importance of being a witness for God. He emphasizes that the world is waiting for a human witness and that faith comes through hearing a witness. The preacher warns against making oneself the center of attention and highlights the necessity of being a humble witness. He also mentions that God is actively working in the world and encourages the congregation to be receptive and attentive to His word. The sermon concludes with a reminder that belief in Christ comes through the testimony of human witnesses.

Transcript

The following message is by Pastor John Piper. More information from Desiring God is available at www.desiringgod.org The sermon text for tonight's preaching is in the Gospel of John chapter 1. John chapter 1, verse 6. There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness to bear witness about the light that all might believe through him.

He was not the light but came to bear witness about the light. The true light which enlightens everyone was coming into the world. He was in the world and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him.

He came to his own and his own people did not receive him, but to all who did receive him, who believed in his name. He gave the right to become children of God, who were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory.

Glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. John bore witness about him and cried out, This was he of whom I said, He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me.

And from his fullness we have all received grace upon grace.

For the law was given through Moses, grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God, the only God who was at the Father's side. He has made him known.

And this is the testimony 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? He said, I am not. Are you the prophet? And he answered, No.

So they said to him, Who are you? Now we need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself? He said, I am the voice of the one crying out in the wilderness. Make straight the way of the Lord, as the prophet Isaiah said.

Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. They asked him, Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ nor Elijah nor the prophet? John answered them, I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know, even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie. These things took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

The next day he 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 the 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.

The next day again John was standing with two of his disciples, and he looked at Jesus as he walked by and said, Behold the Lamb of God. Before I pray and ask the Lord's help, I just want to welcome all of you who are at the South Campus and the North Campus, and a very special welcome to those of you who, even tonight, are joining us from the North Campus. Thank you so much for being here.

Let's pray together. Father in heaven, if I go wrong, it hurts me, but if I get your word wrong, it hurts everybody. And so I pray that there would be a protection for me, that I would speak only the truth, and that I would be faithful to what John the Evangelist has written here in this gospel.

And I pray for all who are within the sound of my voice, I believe you have appointed several things to happen tonight. I believe people are going to be moved at a couple of points in this sermon in ways they had not expected. And I'm just going to pray for those few, Lord, who would hear that word.

Just make us receptive and attentive and expectant so that your name is exalted. I pray now and in the centuries to come. In Jesus' name, Amen.

So now we return to verses 6 to 8 that we skipped last time. They are surprising because they break into the flow. They seem to break into the flow of the text.

They seem sudden. They seem jarring. If you left them out, it would seem to work really well.

Look at verse 5. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it. The true light, just referred to in verse 5, which lightens every man, is coming into the world. That works well.

In between those two statements, verse 5 and verse 9, John inserts verses 6 to 8 about John the Baptist, who is never called John the Baptist in this gospel. If there were any label that we would put on John, it would be John the witness. Fourteen times in this gospel, the word witness as a noun or a verb is attached to his name.

So let's look at verses 6 and 7. There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness to bear witness about the light. It seems to jump in out of the blue.

Same thing in verse 15. The ESV feels the awkwardness of this insertion so much it puts it in parentheses. Those parentheses aren't in the original.

They're just there because it looks like it needs it. In verse 14, the word became flesh and dwelt among us. We've seen his glory.

Glory is of the only son from the Father, full of grace and truth. And you drop to verse 16. And from this fullness, just referred to in verse 14, we've all received grace upon grace.

And stuck in there between 14 and 16 is John. Bore witness about him and cried out, This was he of whom I said, He who comes after me ranks before me because he was before me. So verses 6 to 8 and verse 15 are pressed into the flow of the thought in verses 1 to the following, at the beginning of this gospel, and almost everybody feels them as jarring.

So, I conclude, John felt them as jarring, too. We're not smart and him dumb. If they feel jarring to us, they probably felt jarring to him.

I'm assuming that. And I assume that he knew what he was doing when he put them in there. And I'm assuming he had reasons for doing what he did.

Now those three assumptions, you want a fancy title? That's called the hermeneutic of the golden rule. Meaning, do unto authors as you would have them do unto you. And if I were writing this, that's the way I wanted them to feel about me.

He knew what he was doing, did it by plan, didn't slip up, didn't blow it, not a bumbler. I think when you read the Bible, you should have a hermeneutic of the golden rule and treat the authors the way you'd like to be treated. Our job in reading John is not to improve on his literary art, as so many commentators shamefully think, by telling him the way he should have written more smoothly.

Our job is to penetrate his literary purpose, which gives us then an insight into his theological purpose, and his missionary purpose, and his spiritual purpose. That's our job. So that by penetrating to his inspired purpose, we might believe on Jesus Christ and have eternal life.

We're not playing literary games here. One of the great pitfalls of all scholarship is that it becomes an end in itself, and you just start playing games. Literary gamesmanship.

And you forget damnation and salvation hang on understanding what he intended to say. That's what chapter 20 verse 31 says. These things are written that you might believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and believing has life.

You can't play games with this word. What I found in thinking about verses 6 to 8 and 15, and why they're inserted there by John knowingly, is I spent hours pondering, what are you doing? What are you trying to say? Why do you do it this way? What I saw proved for me, and I hope for you to be amazingly relevant to my life. Sobering, in fact, to my life.

Frightening to my preacher life. I hope it has that effect on you. It has to do with the way pastors and evangelists and religious leaders and TV preachers and conference speakers and Christian musicians and any other public Christians represent Christ and represent themselves.

It was the second one of these that was so sobering to me. How do we present ourselves as we are presenting Jesus? That's what I saw, and it was very sobering. If you're bothered by the seemingly self-serving, self-excusing, self-protecting, self-exalting words of public Christian figures, you should be, and you will be all the more when we're done here.

I hope that one of the effects of this message will be, for me first, a humbling effect, then on you and then anybody else who happens to listen in, a humbling effect on us as we bear witness to Jesus. In other words, what I think John is doing, among many other things, is getting at how Christ is to be made much of in a witness and how the witness is to be made little of in the witness. I think that's what's going on here.

Now, here's the way we're going to go about it. I'm going to hang everything I have to say on two pegs, and you can take one word for each peg to remember them, and I don't think they'll be hard to remember, but I'll put them in a sentence and then you'll see the two words that you can hang everything on. Peg number one will be the first half and peg number two the second, and peg number one is this.

Our witness is a great necessity. Peg number two, our witness is a great not. Now, that second one doesn't make sense because we don't talk like that, but just like John, I think that way of not fitting into your brain so squarely might just help you.

You'll go away and maybe in a week or two, maybe a year, you'll remember, that was the not sermon. That was the not sermon. And I hope besides that you'll remember something of what I said.

Two pegs, our witness is a great necessity, our witness is a great not. Okay, here we go. The first one, verses 6 to 8. There was a man sent from God whose name was John.

He came as a witness, John the witness, to bear witness, repeating himself, to bear witness about the light that all might believe through him. Verse 8, he was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light. Now, notice several things.

First, John was a man, a human. He was a man, he was a man. Now, this is important.

Here's why. Up till now, verses 1 to 5, you've got the Word. And the Word was with God.

This Jesus Christ was with God and he was God. He made everything. And in him was life, and that life was the light of man.

And if you stop there, you'd say, not a problem. When God as life and light comes into the world, it's like lightning and everything becomes bright. Why wouldn't you infer that? And what John does immediately by saying, there was a human being named John who came to witness to the light.

You say, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa. This light doesn't need a witness any more than at night when lightning strikes, it needs a candle to help light up the dark. And what he's saying is, it ain't gonna be like that.

And he says it immediately. This light, this life, this Word is gonna spread not like lightning, but by a million cold, dead torches being ignited by the oxygen of the gospel and this mystery of internal combustion called the new birth. That's the way the darkness will give way.

With a witness, a human witness. There was a man, there was a man, a person. John presses it into the gospel right after saying all these magnificent, glorious, irresistible things about Jesus, the Word.

Our witness is necessary. The witness of human beings is a necessity. Let's read further, verse 6. There was a man sent from God.

Now the point of saying a human witness is needed does not result in making God dependent on human initiative. Because God is in charge, and when he wants a human witness, he sends a human witness. So, don't infer from my word, our witness is a necessity? That somehow God is waiting, wondering, will it ever happen in Minneapolis? Or in the unreached peoples of the world, or in your family.

When he wants a witness, he sends a witness. John chapter 20, verse 21. As Jesus is leaving to go back to heaven, he says to his disciples and to us, As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you.

In Matthew chapter 9, verse 38, Jesus said to us, Pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send laborers into his harvest. Paul, Acts chapter 22, verse 21. Jesus says to him, Go, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles.

Our witness, human being witness to the thunderbolt of God's grace is necessary. But God doesn't leave that mission to human initiative. We serve a saving God, an ascending God.

He provides the foundation for our salvation, and he provides the means of salvation. Namely, witnesses. Nobody on the planet is saved without a witness that's human.

How shall they call upon him whom they've not believed? And how shall they believe in him of whom they haven't heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach unless they betell me? You don't know that. How shall they preach unless they be sent? They will be. Now, this is one of those moments in the service, the sermon that I was praying about a minute ago.

I got so moved at this point in my preparation because I felt God's presence in this way. I felt him say, John, I'm so active in this world. If you could see it, you wouldn't believe it.

I didn't just do a thing 2,000 years ago, magnificent as it is. I'm doing a thing tonight, this morning. I'm doing a thing in this room.

I'm sending. So I'm going to stop and pray. Father, I plead with you that not only in the years to come will a few look back and remember, that was the not sermon.

There are a few here in these services who are going to look back in 20 years and say, that was the sending sermon. I had walked in there wondering. And I told the Lord, I don't know.

I need a word from you. This is it. You're sent.

Make it plain, Lord, I pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Verse 7. He came as a witness to bear witness about the light that all might believe through him.

Now, there's John's main identity in the gospel. A witness. He came as a witness to bear witness.

He's introduced suddenly, jarringly, as a witness. A human sent by God, witness. Why? And he tells us why.

That all might believe. Meaning, belief happens from a witness. Belief doesn't come out of nowhere.

It comes through a human witness. You're on the planet to open your mouth and live a life that says right and true things about Christ. That's why you're here.

We are witnesses. Because we want people to believe. Because we want them to be saved.

And they can't be saved if they don't believe. And they can't believe if they don't hear a witness about the gospel. It's believing the gospel that saves people.

The gospel doesn't come through the air. It comes through mouths, written emails, voice messages, if they're not home. This is the first reference to believing in the gospel.

There will be 97 more. The noun belief never occurs in this gospel. The word faith never occurs in this gospel.

The verb believe occurs 98 times. Think on that. And witness is everywhere.

You're everywhere. He came as a witness. I'm in verse 7. He came as a witness to bear witness to the light that all might believe through him.

Believing only happens through a witness. That's the end of my first peg. Our witness is a great necessity.

Now, peg number 2. Our witness is a great not. Verse 8. He was not the light but came to bear witness about the light. Now that verse seems, if you like economy, superfluous.

You said that already. Clearly in verse 7. He came as a witness. And then you repeated it.

To bear witness. We got it. He's a witness.

Why do you say in verse 8? He was not the light. He came to bear witness. Why do you write like this, John? He writes like this because he's up to something.

That's why. It's our business to figure out what he's up to when he negates the obvious. You're a witness to the light? You're not the light.

Why are you saying that? I would have passed over it, probably. No big deal. Don't draw attention to that.

This is going to be a sermon about not. Except that it happens over and over and over and over four more times. Verse 19.

This is the testimony 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.

Now we've got the words of John, not the words of the other John. We got the words of John, the witness, not the words of John, the evangelist. But John, the evangelist said he's not the light.

Now, John, the witnesses, I'm not the Christ. What's going on here? This is the testimony of John. I am not the Christ.

This is the great not of John's witness. This is what I meant when I said our witness is a great not. Not only is he not the Christ, he says, or not the light, he's not the Christ.

It's part of his witness. In fact, John, the evangelist, the writer of the gospel here, is so bent on making us feel the force of this not that he piles on negatives almost to the point of unintelligibility. You might have missed it the first time over.

Let me read it again. Verse 19. This is the testimony of John.

Now, what's the testimony? What's the content of the testimony? This is the testimony of John. When the Jews sent the priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, who are you? He confessed and did not deny, but confessed. Now, what did he not deny? He did not deny that he was not the Christ.

That's weird. Why do you write like that? Why do you write like that? What are you doing to this preacher, man? Part of his testimony was that he would not deny that he was not the Christ, but affirm that he was not the Christ. That's part of his testimony.

I'm not it. Why would John stress this? He's not done. Verse 21.

When they asked him, what then are you? Elijah, he said, I am not. Are you the prophet? He said, no. Of course, he was Elijah.

In some sense, he came in the spirit and power of Elijah. He just wasn't the physical reincarnation of the Elijah who went to heaven, remember, in a chariot and didn't die. Like some expect him to come back like that, and he's no.

He's still not done. Verses 26 and 27. John answered them.

I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know. Even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie. There is a great knot in our witness.

I am not the light. I am not the Christ. I am not Elijah.

I am not the prophet. I am not worthy to untie his sandals. And if you want a beautiful statement, if it isn't already feeling beautiful to you, this is very beautiful to me.

I'm getting close to the second thing that I felt very moved by. This is beautiful to me. You know, I haven't figured this one out yet, but I'm going to throw it out right here, and you can think with me over the next weeks.

The Gospel of John does not report the death of John the Baptist. He just disappears. So think on that one.

All the other Gospels report the death. And John, you'd think, yeah, that would help. That would make the point.

But the sentence I'm about to give you is what he substitutes, I think. So I'm going to read with you. You can go there with me if you'd like.

John chapter 3, verses 28 to 30. You yourselves bear witness that I said. This is John talking.

John the Baptist. John the witness. That I said, I'm not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.

The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, he just stands and hears him and rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. Therefore, this joy of mine is now complete.

He must increase and I must decrease. That's the meaning of all of these knots. I'm not the bridegroom.

I don't expect the bride to come to me. And when she shows up and she turns right to him and I'm just left out there on the porch. Having brought everybody together and just out on the porch now while they're celebrating.

My joy is full. That's beautiful. Don't you want a preacher like that? Don't you wish you had one? This is the great knot of our witness.

We will not begrudge. All attention turning to Christ. We will not begrudge all attention turning to the bridegroom.

Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to your name, give glory for the sake of your steadfast love and your faithfulness. Psalm 115. This is the great knot of our witness.

We must decrease. He must increase. We must make much of him.

We must not make much of ourselves. So it was with Paul. Remember? I planted.

Apollos watered. God gave the growth. So he plants and he waters is not anything.

That's Paul talking. Or 2nd Corinthians chapter 4 verse 5. We preach Jesus Christ as Lord and not ourselves. Beautiful.

What then was John? What does he say about himself? John's witness is necessary. And he's not the Christ. How does he describe himself? I love this.

We're back to verse 22. In chapter 1. 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? They're pushing him on this.

And he said. I'm a voice. That's it.

That's not great. I'm a voice. I'm just a voice.

A voice is just a voice. It's not an end in itself. It's got content.

It belongs to another. It's pointing to another. A voice is just a voice.

I'm a voice. Crying in the wilderness. Make straight the way of another.

The Lord. The voice is filled with Christ exalting truth. Verse 15.

He who comes after me. This is what the voice says. He who comes after me ranks before me because he was before me.

Verse 34. I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God. Verse 29 and 36.

Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. I almost preached the whole sermon on the word behold. Maybe I will.

Because he bore witness to the light. So that people might believe. How do you bear witness to a light? But that's another sermon.

You say. Behold. Look.

Look. That's what you do. That's what a voice does.

That's what a witness does. Now here's the closing lesson. We must be witnesses.

It's a great necessity. Peg 1. A great necessity. The world is waiting for a human witness.

Faith comes by hearing and hearing by a witness. But in this witness, we must not make much of ourselves. Beware of the witness that needs attention for himself.

Beware of the preacher who constantly angles to put himself in a good light. And returns again and again to his own ministry and his own achievements. Beware.

Beware of the preacher's subtle preoccupation with himself. Even when he's speaking of his flaws. Beware of your own bent.

Toward the love of the praise of man. Remember. Therefore.

That from the very beginning of John's Gospel. Awkwardly, suddenly, jarringly as it seems. He would make clear.

There's going to be a witness. The witness is going to be a man. It's going to be necessary to lead people to believe.

And it's not going to be the light. Our witness is a great necessity. And our witness is a great not.

This is beautiful. I hope you'll pray for me. Let's pray.

Gracious Father. I love John the witness. I have probably been more moved by the beheading of John the Baptist than any other event in the Bible from time to time.

John leaves it out. Instead, he just says these most beautiful of all words. He must increase.

And I must decrease. That's an understatement. Lord, I just pray earnestly for myself and for my brothers and sisters here.

Who want to be like this with me. They want to be done with self-exaltation and self-protection and self-enhancement and self, self, self. Self, we're just sick of it.

We want to be done. We want heaven. We don't want to even think about ourselves.

So, God, I ask now not only that that moment about sending would be remembered and effectual in this sermon, but this moment about decreasing would be powerful. And that the proud among us would be humbled deeply. It's like we sang earlier.

Break our hearts, O God. Break our hearts. You know this message and how it's needed.

There are a thousand different ways in these rooms that this message is needed. Apply it by your spirit. I pray in Jesus' name.

Amen. Thank you for listening to this message by John Piper, pastor for preaching at Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Feel free to make copies of this message to give to others, but please do not charge for those copies or alter the content in any way without permission.

We invite you to visit Desiring God online at www.desiringgod.org. There you'll find hundreds of sermons, articles, radio broadcasts, and much more all available to you at no charge. Our online store carries all of Pastor John's books, audio, and video resources. You can also stay up to date on what's new at Desiring God.

Again, our website is www.desiringgod.org or call us toll free at 1-888-346-4700. Our mailing address is Desiring God, 2601 East Franklin Avenue, Minneapolis, Minnesota 55406. Desiring God exists to help you make God your treasure because God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him.

Audio: <https://sermonindex1.b-cdn.net/17/SID17716.mp3>

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/john-piper/john-was-not-the-light-but-a-witness-to-the-light/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net