

WITNESSING FOR JESUS – R. 3477

— JOHN 1:18-34 —

1. What character qualities, lifestyle choices, and actions made John the Baptist unique? What motivated him in this regard? (Par 1-4)
2. Was John the Baptist “Elias” or not? Why did he deny being “Elias?” (Par 3-8)
3. What made John the Baptist’s work similar to the work of the true Church? What great lessons are hidden for us in John the Baptist’s example? (Par 5-11)
4. What important proclamations did John the Baptist make about Jesus, and why were these so remarkable? (Par 12-15)
5. What important lessons about doctrine and spirit are given in this lesson of John the Baptist? (Par 19-20)
6. Put yourself in the position of a religious leader who interacted with John the Baptist. How do you think that would you have reacted to him and his work? Why?

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—JOHN 1:18-34—JANUARY 8—

Golden Text:—“Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.”

1. JOHN THE BAPTIST had the great honor and distinction of being the first of God’s witnesses amongst men respecting God’s only begotten Son. John was a grand character, from whatever standpoint we view him, and all of the Lord’s people now seeking to witness faithfully may draw some valuable lessons from his course, in addition to which we shall show that he was a type of all the faithful witnesses of the Lord throughout this Gospel age. He was not an example to us in respect to his manner of speech or dress or general methods; nevertheless his peculiarities in these respects especially adapted him to the witnessing which the Lord designed him to do. Living in a time of increase of wealth and luxury, John was all the more attractive as the prophet of the Lord by reason of his peculiar disregard of the conventionalities of the time, and the evidences these gave of his complete separation from the world, his complete devotion to his special ministry. The people of Israel, as our Lord pointed out, carefully cherished the memories of their great prophets and garnished their sepulchers, although they were not sufficiently careful to heed their teachings. Amongst the ancient prophets Elijah was one of the most revered, and the fact that John the Baptist simulated him in his apparel and general demeanor and forceful teaching attracted the people much more than otherwise would have been the case.

2. Little is told us respecting John except that he was a cousin of Jesus and six months older, beginning his ministry at thirty years of age. Therefore he had been teaching and baptizing just six months before the Lord came to him for baptism. His ministry continued for a year after Jesus’ baptism; then he was shut up in prison for about a year before he was beheaded. Our lesson opens with a reference to John’s witnessing—calling upon the people to repent because God’s Kingdom was about ready to be established, urging them that they would not

be fit for a share in it unless their hearts were fully turned to the Lord and away from sin.

3. Other Scriptures show us that for some time the nation of Israel had been looking for Messiah and that false Messiahs had arisen from time to time, and one record is that “all men were in expectation of him.” Under these circumstances it is not surprising that the Jews urged the leaders of their nation, priests and Levites, to go to John and interview him and advise them respecting his message. Our lesson recounts the visit and the testimony John gave. Apparently it was the expectation of the questioners that John would claim to be the Messiah himself, and it was probably with surprise that they learned from his own lips that he made no such boast—“he confessed and denied not.” Their next question was, “Art thou Elias?” (the Greek form of the word Elijah), and he replied, “I am not.” Remembering the prophecy of Deuteronomy, “A prophet shall the Lord raise up unto you like unto me [Moses],” they next inquired whether or not John were that prophet, and he answered, No.

4. Surprised they then asked, “Who art thou, then? We must make some report respecting you.” Humbly and faithfully John declared that he was merely a nameless voice calling attention to the great Messiah, heralding his coming: he was like a voice in the wilderness declaring that a way must be prepared for the coming of the Kingdom, for which Israel had been hoping and longing and praying for centuries.

JOHN NOT THE ELIJAH

5. It will be noticed that John distinctly declared that he was not the Elijah, and some have felt perplexed over the matter because our Lord, on referring to John and in answer to the query of the disciples about Malachi’s testimony that Elijah must first come, declared of John, “This is the Elijah if ye will receive it.” The explanation already given we repeat: As Jesus in the flesh was the forerunner of the Messiah in glory and power, who will take his great power and reign in the opening of the Millennial age, and as the Apostle shows the Christ will be of many members, Jesus the Head and the

Church his body, in the Kingdom glory, so, similarly, John the Baptist was a forerunner to a greater one than himself, a more important witness composed of many members, witnessing over a period of nearly nineteen centuries, preparing the way for Messiah's Kingdom and announcing it. John in the flesh introduced Jesus in the flesh; but the greater than John, the Elijah of many members, will introduce the greater, the glorious Christ of many members.

6. The real Elijah, who for nineteen centuries has been fulfilling the predictions of Malachi, the prophet, has been composed of the many faithful witnesses for Christ throughout this Gospel age. Jesus himself in the flesh was the first of those who witnessed a good confession before Pilate and before the Jewish nation; the apostles witnessed similarly, and all down through the Gospel age the Lord's people in the flesh have witnessed—have witnessed against sin and in favor of righteousness, have witnessed the necessity for turning from sin to righteousness in order to be prepared for a share in the Kingdom, have witnessed that the Kingdom of the Lord is to be established in the hands of the glorified, and that it will bring in everlasting righteousness and fulfil the Lord's prayer, "Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is done in heaven."

7. Hence we see that the words of Jesus and the words of John the Baptist are in full accord; John was not the Elijah mentioned by the Prophet, and yet he did a work of Elijah to those amongst the Jews who received his message. As it is the work of the greater Elijah to draw attention to the great Christ and the great work to be accomplished by him, so it was the mission of John in the Jewish nation to call attention to Jesus in the flesh, and in this sense of the word he was the Elijah to those who received it because to them he did the work of Elijah. From this standpoint we see a grand antitypical Elijah, the Church in the flesh, doing a great work of witnessing throughout this Gospel age, and preparing for the establishment of the Kingdom in the end of the age; and we see the great work of Messiah, Head and body, Bridegroom and Bride, which will immediately follow this testimony.

8. The Prophet Malachi declared that one of two things would follow the work of the true Elijah, either it would turn the hearts of the fathers to the children and of the children to the fathers—that is, bring into full accord and loving harmony the people—or else it would result in the bringing of a great curse upon the people and great tribulation. The world must be made ready for Messiah's Kingdom either by repentance and true conversion to the Lord or by judgments of the Lord. Malachi does not state which way the results will be accomplished, but other Scriptures clearly indicate that the work of the antitypical Elijah would not succeed, would not convert the world, and that as a result the establishment of Messiah's Kingdom would come in connection with a time of trouble such as was not since there was a nation—the curse mentioned by Malachi, the great tribulation mentioned by our Lord.

9. From this standpoint, recognizing John the Baptist as a part of the typical Elijah and the Church in the flesh as the antitypical, we must draw lessons of humility as well as of zeal and faithfulness from John's course: not only did he make the preaching of the Gospel the chief object of life, to the extent of carelessness respecting all interests of this life, but additionally he boasted nothing of himself. His main mission in life was to prepare the people for the Messiah and to point them to him; and our success as members of the antitypical Elijah will be in proportion as self is ignored and Christ is made the theme of our discourses, the center of our teachings.

"WHY BAPTIZEST THOU, THEN?"

10. It is the worldly idea and the nominal Church idea that all associated with religious teaching should make some great boast or claim respecting themselves—that they are wonderful prophets, or reverend, or doctors of divinity, or something else above the ordinary: no wonder then that the Priests and Levites, accustomed to this sort of thing, were surprised to find John making no such boasts and basing his preaching upon no such claims. They inquired what right, then, he had to be baptizing at all, if he were merely a servant, not a lord over God's heritage. The same thought prevails today; and unless

some boastful title or position or authority is claimed, the right to preach, the right to witness for the Lord in public, is called in question by many. Let us who have followed carefully the scriptural proprieties in such matters boast nothing, but rather as John and, later, Jesus did, let our boasts be that we are merely servants, not lords; merely witnesses, not great or honorable or reverend, not priests. By and by, when the Master's views of matters shall be expressed, he will show that those who sought to exalt themselves failed of his approval, while those who humbled themselves, seeking only the privilege of service, have his approval. Directing their minds away from himself to Jesus, John declared, "There standeth one in your midst whom you do not recognize: him I declare, him I introduce as so great, so honorable, that I am not worthy even to be his servant, to loose the strings of his shoes." Similarly humble feelings should pervade the hearts and testimonies of all who are true members of the antitypical Elijah, witnessing to the Lord of glory, who is about to establish his Kingdom. Alas, that self love and self-pride should at times hinder the testimony. Alas, that some seem to draw attention to themselves rather than to the King. Let us, dear brethren and sisters, in proportion as we have opportunity for witnessing, be careful, be faithful. Our faithfulness in witnessing to the Lord shall be the test of our worthiness to be members of his glorified Body.

WATER BAPTISM VS. HOLY SPIRIT BAPTISM

11. In bearing witness John called attention to the fact that what he did in the way of water baptism was insignificant, unimportant in comparison to the work of Messiah and his baptism of the holy Spirit. Jesus baptized none with the holy Spirit during his ministry. The baptism taking place at Pentecost, after he had died for our sins and ascended up on high, had appropriated a portion of the merit of his sacrifice to the credit of believers—then the latter received the baptism of the holy Spirit. There is a similarity between the work of John and that of the Church in the flesh in respect to this feature also. We can witness to the Lord and perform the symbol of baptism into his death, but further than

this we cannot go. Our glorified Head must give the great blessing by bringing the consecrated under the blessing and favor of the holy Spirit; and later on, when all the present witnessing has been finished and when the Atonement Day sacrificing shall all have been accomplished, the glorified Christ shall pour out his Spirit upon all flesh, as during this Gospel age he pours it out upon his special servants and handmaidens.

"BEHOLD THE LAMB OF GOD!"

12. This was the first formal proclamation of Jesus by John to his disciples and to the public. It occurred at least forty-two days after our Lord's baptism, for immediately following that he was forty days in the wilderness being tested. After the wilderness temptation, probably very soon, he returned to John's company at Jordan. Shortly after this proclamation by John, our Lord departed from his vicinity, so that a simultaneous work by John and by Jesus was for a time in progress in different localities, for we read that Jesus and his disciples baptized more than did John and his disciples—though Jesus himself baptized not.

13. Our Lord was variously represented in the sacrifices of the Jews at their festivals: for instance he was typified by the peaceful lamb at their spring festival, and he was the antitype of the bullock of their Atonement Day sacrifices. It was with full propriety, therefore, that John announced Jesus as the "Lamb of God"—meek, gentle, patient, unassuming, the passover sacrifice for Israel and for the whole world. In the ears of the unregenerate such a title as lamb would not sound very dignified: amongst the coats of arms of chivalry, wolves' heads, bullocks' heads, lions' heads, serpents' heads, etc., are freely used to represent the strength and the prowess of the families, but where will we find anyone taking a lamb as a symbol of dignity? To the Lord's consecrated people, however, the lamblike quality of our dear Redeemer and his patient and willing sacrifice on our behalf are beautifully represented in this symbol of a lamb—the Lamb of God, God's Lamb, provided by him as the sacrifice for our sins, as the price of our redemption from the curse or sentence of

death. This must be our witness, too, "Behold the Lamb of God." The world must be pointed to the great sacrifice for sins, and not to Christ as the great Teacher. After they have received him as the Lamb, acknowledging their sins and need of his precious blood, then they will be ready to hear his words, to be taught of him; but no instruction can be rightly received until first our Lord is accepted as the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world.

14. It is worthy of note that although our Lord's sacrifice had begun at this time, John did not say the Lamb of God which *took* away the sin of the world. The entire sacrifice of Christ was necessary as the offset price to justice for the sin of Adam and his race. That price must be laid down before any of the sins of the world could be cancelled. And we remember, too, that it was necessary that our Lord should be raised from the dead and should ascend up on high, there to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. After his resurrection as the great High Priest he appropriated of the merit of his sacrifice "on our behalf," but not yet on behalf of the world. Only believers are included in the appropriation of the precious blood already made.

15. Our Lord is the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world and not merely the sin of the Church, but his work is not yet finished. It begins with the appropriation which clears believers; it will reach its full accomplishment after the glorification of the Church, when the sins of the whole world will be cancelled. The merit or value of the entire transaction was in the sacrifice of our dear Redeemer, but in the divine plan the arrangement was made as it is, so that we who are now justified in advance of the world might have fellowship with our Lord and share in his sufferings, share in his sacrifice and share also in his glory by and by, and in the dispensing of the blessings incidental to the taking away of the sins of the world. None should overlook the fact that it is the divine intention not to stop in taking away the sins of the Church and the household of faith, typified by the Priests and Levites, but that ultimately our Lord's sacrifice shall be appropriated to bringing

blessings unto all the families of the earth.

"THIS IS THE SON OF GOD"

16. Proceeding, John explained that Jesus was the one to whom he had previously referred in his preaching—the one who would come later and take the more honorable place because of his being so much the greater. John's statement that he knew him not should not be understood to signify that he did not know that Jesus was his own cousin nor that he was unacquainted with him previously, but that he knew him not as the Messiah previously. John then explains that when he was himself commissioned to preach and to baptize the Lord informed him that he would see a better witness to the Son of God, the Messiah, and that he would know him by a certain sign by seeing the holy Spirit descend upon him like a dove, remaining upon him. John says that he did see this sign in Jesus' case just following his baptism, and that he was, therefore, fully qualified to give this witness that he was the Son of God.

17. So it must be with us, dear fellow-witnesses: We must see for ourselves that Jesus is the Son of God, the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world, before we can be God's witnesses respecting him. Alas, that it must be said that many of those who today in prominent pulpits are claiming to be God's witnesses are thoroughly unqualified to give the witness, since, according to their own confession, they know not Jesus as the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world. The higher criticism and evolution doctrines have so undermined the faith of the majority of those who claim to be ministers and ambassadors and witnesses for God and for Christ that they cannot give the forceful witness such as alone will carry weight on this subject. We who have seen, we who have tasted, we who have to some extent appreciated the merit that is in the Lamb of God, may well rejoice in our privilege of being his witnesses; and it is to these faithful witnesses in the flesh, begotten of the holy Spirit, that the blessed privilege shall shortly be granted of being sharers with the Lord in his Kingdom and glory and work.