

January 16, 2011

Living Out The Gospel In Real Life

As Many as Receive Him

John 1:1 – 13

This gospel is all about Jesus Christ. John's intent was to show that the very Jesus who walked this earth with John was the Son of God in human flesh. And so he begins his gospel so radically different than Matthew, Mark and Luke because he sets the stage in eternity – *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being.* John 1:1-3 John has a very simple theme and that is to present Jesus Christ as the Son of God – to show the gift of salvation that He offers, and how men ought to respond to Him. We find that in chapter 21 where John says: *but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God ; and that believing you may have life in His name.* John 20:30-31 So that is John's objective – to present Christ, the salvation that He offers, and then talk about how men either received that testimony or rejected it. And we will see that some, a few, received – but many rejected the very God made flesh.

After identifying Jesus as the incarnate Word of God, who was with God and through whom all things were made, John says: *In Him was life, and the life was the Light of men.* John 1:4 We need to note here that the gospel of John is all about life – the life of God. It is a book of life – what is life, where we find life, how to have life. Because the biggest problem we face as humans is that we think we're alive, but we're really dead. Fifty-four times in this gospel John writes about life – and primarily he uses the word **zoe**, as he does here. There are three words in the New Testament that talk about life – **zoe**, **bios**, and **psuche**. **Bios** is used to indicate biological life – the life of the body. **Psuche** is used to talk about the life of the inner being – the mind, emotion and will of man. But **zoe** is primarily used to describe the life of God.

What dead men need is not better behavior, or a moral guide – what they need is life. Ephesians 2 tells us: *'And you were dead in your trespasses and sins...'* Ephesians 2:1 We need life – life for dead people, dead in sin, insensitive to God, insensible to the life of God. If you go back to the beginning, when Adam sinned and through Adam all the rest of mankind, the sentence was death. 'If you eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you shall surely die' God said. And we surely did. If you think about it, the history of mankind has been a history of dead men walking. And the history of redemption has been to bring dead men to life. When Christ came, He came as the Life-Giver – in fact that is one of His titles: *"The first man, Adam, became a living soul. The last Adam became a life-giving spirit."* 1 Corinthians 15:45

This life, John says was the Light of men. And there are a couple of points to make here. One is the obvious. When we by faith receive the gospel and believe in Jesus, we get the very life of God, and **in that life, is revelatory light**. Before Christ we thought the universe revolved around us. After coming to Christ we understood that the universe was all about God. Life in general finally made sense. Our blind eyes were opened to see the glory of God in the face of Christ. Where once we walked in darkness, now we are walking in the light of the Son of God, and the Bible calls us 'children of the light'.

But one of the other things this says is that there is light that all men know because of Christ. **That is, this light is sufficient to hold all men accountable to God.** Not that all men know Him, but all men see the effects of His creative life power in the world. That is to say, all men have, at least to begin with, a sense of morality, an innate sense of right and wrong that the Word who made all things put there. Every man has at least some light that shines in the darkness to give him to know what is right and what is wrong. Paul said in Romans that all men *'...show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them...'* Romans 2:15 It is a light that gives all men a general revelation of who God is and that they are accountable to Him.

Paul tells us that all men have this general revelation about God: *that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse. For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened.* Romans 1:19-21

So John says, *The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.* John 1:5 The eternal light of Christ was in the world even before the Word became flesh in the fulness of time. Men knew that there was a God to whom they were accountable, but they rejected that knowledge and their hearts were darkened. However the Light still shines, and no matter how dark the darkness, it can never overcome the light. That is what the last part of that verse says - *and the darkness did not comprehend it.* The word translated **comprehend** here means to *take over, to seize, to grasp, to perceive*, mentally as an idea, and although it can mean to *overcome* or *overtake*, as in chapter 12 of this gospel, I believe the primary sense here is that the darkness cannot understand anything about the light. That is, there is no common ground for understanding between light and dark.

I think that is why John tells us just a short while later that *He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him.* John 1:10-11 The world didn't know Him because they were lost in darkness. His own people didn't receive Him because they were lost in the same darkness. They just couldn't see – there was no mental perception that this was the Christ, the Savior of the world. This is why we pray for light when we preach the gospel. To know Christ as the Savior requires revelation. That is the whole point of Matthew 16 where Peter gets the revelation that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. Don't expect that apart from the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit that those to whom you preach the gospel will understand and grasp the saving knowledge of Christ. [ex. Lewie and Dave]

Into the middle of this great progression from the Word who was with God and was God and is life and light to men lost in darkness, John sort of drops this parenthetical thought: *There came a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to testify about the Light, so that all might believe through him. He was not the Light, but he came to testify about the Light.* John 1:6-8 If you read the text without these three verses, it flows rather nicely: *The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it. There was the true Light which, coming into the world, enlightens every man.* But obviously John the author did not compose it like that. Instead he takes the opportunity to interrupt the flow to point out some important things.

First of all he says that this man John, who is John the Baptist, by the way, not John the apostle, **was sent by God to testify about the Light.** He came as a witness, the text says. And the word for witness is *marturia*, or *martureo*, from which we get our English word martyr. John was a martyr for Christ, both literally and figuratively. Eventually he lost his head for the sake of the gospel. But what is interesting here is that John was sent by God so that he might testify about the Light – that is about Christ. Why is that so interesting you say? Well I find it interesting and even strange that the Light needed to be pointed out at all. Think about it. When you walk into a room and turn on the light, do you need a witness to say, 'Behold the light'?

I was in the Carlsbad Caverns years ago, and along the way on the 700 foot descent into the bowels of the earth, all the lights along the path were shut off and there was instant impenetrable darkness. After about a minute of that, the guide turned on his flashlight – and voila' – light! And no one had to say, 'Behold, the light!' **So why did the Light of the world need a witness?** Three reasons. **The first is that the minds of men are wrapped in deep, impenetrable darkness.** The gospel light is veiled to them. Listen to what Paul says, *And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.* 2 Corinthians 4:3-4 This is not some wispy little see-through veil – it is more like the veil that hid the glory of God from the people of Israel in the Temple. That veil was 60 feet high, 30 feet wide and at least four inches thick. It prevented anyone from seeing **into** and any light escaping **from** the Holy of Holies. So there is a veil on the minds of unregenerate men that prevent them from seeing the light.

And secondly, in case you missed it, the reason John had to come as a witness was **because the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving.** Not only is there a veil over their minds, they are blind as well. The only people you need to point out the light to are blind people, and even then they can't see the light unless someone takes away the veil of blindness. That's why John came. He came to bear witness of the light – saying, 'Here's the light of the world. I know you can't see Him, but by faith believe on Him and receive your sight'. I believe that is why the gospels are full of stories about blind men receiving their sight. Unbelievers need the veil of unbelief ripped away so that they might receive the light of the gospel and get their blind eyes opened to the glory of Christ.

The third reason the Light of the world needs a witness is **so that people will believe**. The last part of verse 7 says that John came as a witness of the Light, *so that all might believe through him*. When people believe the good news of the gospel, they believe **on** the Lord Jesus but they believe **through** the message of the preacher. God has so arranged it that the saving power of the gospel is to be trumpeted by those who have already believed. God could have ordained that the message of the gospel would be preached by angels, who probably would have done a better job. Or He could have spoken directly to each one He chose for salvation. But in His infinite wisdom He chose that the saving news of Jesus Christ would be preached by you and by me – verbally. What this says is that you and I have an awesome responsibility with respect to the gospel. That is, what are you doing about the gospel?

John goes on to make the point that this witness was: *not the Light, but he came to testify about the Light*. John 1:8 And You have to ask yourself why would John need to emphasize the fact that this guy was not the Light but only the witness of the light? I think to answer that we need to know a little about John the Baptist. For four hundred years there had been no genuine prophetic voice in Israel. From Malachi to Matthew represents four hundred years of silence from heaven. And now onto the scene of human history strides John, fully formed and fully armed as it were for the arena – filled with the Holy Spirit from his mothers womb, dressed in skins and eating grasshoppers and wild honey, and loudly proclaiming the coming of the Messiah.

He was obviously a very charismatic figure, thousands went out into the wilderness to hear him preach his message of repentance and be baptized. He was a breath of fresh air for those who were struggling under the weight and guilt of the law they couldn't keep. He was a bold and outspoken critic not only of the religious hypocrites who presumed to know and keep the law of God, but also of those political figures like Herod who flaunted their immorality shamelessly. And Jesus Himself testified of John *Truly I say to you, among those born of women there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist!* Matthew 11:11 And so, inevitably a cult grew up around him. In fact, in Acts 19 we read of his disciples who had not even heard about the baptism into Christ, they just knew the baptism of John – which was a baptism of repentance that was supposed to point to Christ.

As great a figure as John was, his ministry was only supposed to point to Christ. **We exist to make much of Christ in the world**, and that is where both John the apostle, and John the Baptist is pointing. And even though Jesus said that John the Baptist was the greatest among men, He concluded that thought by adding, *Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he*. Matthew 11:11 It is so easy to focus our attention on the witness rather than the one to whom the witness is pointing. John the Baptist's testimony of his own importance was this: *He must increase, but I must decrease* John 3:30 And this is the testimony of every follower of Christ. If we are looking for prominence, if we are looking for fame, if we are looking for the limelight, we've signed up for the wrong program.

So John was not the Light, but he bore witness of the Light: *There was the true Light which, coming into the world, enlightens every man*. John 1:9 This verse poses a couple of questions for me. My first question on reading this is to ask, what of those who preceeded the true Light coming into the world? How could they be saved? I am thinking Old Testament here, and all the way up to the death and resurrection of Christ. And the answer really is very simple. They were saved the same way we today are saved – by believing in the One who was greater than John and existed before John – the Lamb of God, *slain from the foundation of the world* as He is revealed in the book of the Revelation.

Before the historical act of atonement at Calvary, people were saved by looking ahead to the One who would bear their sins in His body on the cross; and after Calvary, we are saved by looking back to that same saving grace. And John the Baptist was calling people to recognize their sin and rebellion before a holy God, recognizing that there was One who was coming whose perfect sacrifice would atone for their sins, and that if they trusted in Him and what He was to do they would be saved. **They were saved by looking ahead to the cross in the same way we are saved by looking behind to the cross**. On either side of the cross it is still the gospel of grace.

The other question that this raises for me is what does John the apostle mean by the true Light enlightening every man? Because it is plain that not every man is enlightened. It is possible that there are two good explanations here. One is that the word enlighten means to bring to light the contrast between good and evil, and John occasionally uses it that way. But I think a better understanding is that we should understand this to mean that everyone who is enlightened is enlightened through Christ. Many claim to be enlightened, but the true test of that is whether or not Christ is glorified by their enlightening.

Martin Luther argued this way: *'There is only one light that lighteth all men, and no man comes into the world who can possibly be illumined by any other light.'* He argues his case from Romans 5:18 where Paul says that all men are justified through Christ, but Paul means that all men who **are** justified are justified through Christ. Luther says, *'Although all men are not justified through Christ He is nevertheless the only man through whom justification comes'*.

And this true Light broke into the darkness of the world one day: *He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him.* John 1:10 What a remarkable statement! That the very people God created did not recognize their Creator when He appeared. And the very hands that He had formed out of dust, one day picked up hammers and drove nails into their Creator's hands. It was His world, His people, His tree, His hill, and when He came they didn't know who He was. And the very people God had chosen out of all the people on the earth would not receive Him: *He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him.* John 1:11 This is why we should not be surprised that the gospel presentation is so often met with jeering, and scorn and abuse and even death.

But thankfully, the offer today is the same as it has been since time began: *But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name,* John 1:12 This is the simple offer of the gospel – receive Christ by believing in His name. Simple yet profound. What those few words imply is huge. When we believe in His name we are saying that we recognize our sinfulness before a holy Creator, we repent of our rebellion against His Lordship, and we receive by faith His saving, justifying work on Calvary and turn all of our life over to His rule and reign. **We must respond by believing.**

But wait, that's not the whole story. Let's finish the sentence: *who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.* John 1:13 As profound as the first clause of this sentence is, the second is even more so. What John is saying is that those who believe in His name and are called His children are those who have been born again. In other words, being born again precedes believing in His name. New birth precedes new faith which precedes belief in His name. And if you think about it, how can those who are dead in sin and trespasses ever believe? Something has to happen first for dead men to do anything. And that something is new birth. And how does that happen? Do we, as dead men, make the first move?

This is why John makes it clear that God is the author of salvation. Those who believe in His name are first born *not of blood.* That is **there is no genetic predisposition to salvation.** Just because your parents are Christians does not guarantee that you will be. The chances are much higher of course, but this salvation thing is not passed down from father to son, from mother to daughter. There is no salvation gene. Secondly those who are born of God are **not born by any effort of their will: nor of the will of the flesh.** You didn't get up one morning and decide to follow Jesus on your own. No one, left to themselves, will follow Christ. Everything in unregenerate man is hostile toward God and doesn't want anything to do with Him. The Bible says that *'There is none righteous, not even one. There is none who understands. There is none who seeks God.* Roman 3:10-11 Some people will argue and say that there are lots of people seeking God. But the truth is they're only seeking the god made in their own image – not the God of the universe.

And John finishes here by saying that new birth is not *nor of the will of man.* That is it **does not come about through the well-meaning effort of friends** or family or by the persuasive powers of the preacher. Our new birth is from first to last a divine work of God: *'...who were born... of God.'* What we have here in these last two verses is really the tension of the gospel. We must believe to be saved, yet we cannot believe because we're dead, incapable of moving one step God-ward. Verse 12 says believe and receive, and verse 13 says that receiving and believing is rooted in God first giving us new life to do so. If we could come to Christ through any self effort, any faint whisper of will on our part, then we would be, at the very least, co-saviors with Christ. And the pride that doomed us to ruin at the beginning would once again leave us far from God.

This was the revelation of Jonah in the belly of the fish: **Salvation belongs to the LORD!** Jonah 2:9 He was sent as a witness to the people of Ninevah and he didn't want to go, because he knew if he went and preached the message of repentance, the people would turn from their sin and God would not destroy the hated Assyrians like He should. And yet he had to go, he had to preach and they had to repent. Salvation belongs to the Lord, and receiving belongs to you. And so we see the two sides of salvation: verse 12, **we must believe;** verse 13, **God must grant new life.** It is as D.L. Moody once observed: *'When we get to those heavenly gates, we will read on this side the words: 'Whosoever will'. And when we enter and turn around we will read: 'Chosen before the foundation.'*

Years ago, an Africa Inland Mission worker shared the story of a testimony he heard while ministering in a little village in Africa. During the meeting woman stood and said **“I had heard of the gospel by the hearing of the ear, but one day it went in and sat down in my heart.”** Well, that was her way of describing new birth giving rise to new faith. “One day the gospel came in and sat down in my heart.” That’s something given by God. She said she had heard the gospel many times, but one day it came in and sat down in her heart. In other words, God gave birth to faith and she responded.

The invitation this morning is to respond to the Living Word. The Scriptures teach that if a man flees to Christ he’ll find reception, and so I invite you in your inability to come to the Lord Jesus Christ crying for mercy and you will find a reception there. May God speak to your heart. May you recognize your lost and unable condition and may you flee to Christ and find the forgiveness of sins and find new birth in the family of God as a child of God, a born one of God. May the gospel come in and sit down in your heart. *But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name,* John 1:12

Our gracious and holy Father,

We thank You for the divine initiative that sought us out and brought us to Christ, that gave birth to new life and faith within us, and made us Your children. This is grace, marvelous grace that penetrated our cold, darkened, dead hearts and made us alive in You forever. What can we say but 'Thank You Father!' I pray for those who are here today, who have perhaps heard the gospel truth many times, and yet remain untouched by that truth, that today would be the day of salvation – that today it would come in and sit down in their hearts. I pray that Your word would awaken new life and faith and that they would respond to the invitation. Come Lord Jesus, Light of the world, and enlighten those who are wandering in darkness to the glory of God and let us as instruments of Your grace in the world live to spread the light of Christ through the gospel to all people we pray, in the precious, life-giving name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.