THOSE WHO BELIEVE IN HIS NAME

John 1:6–13

Key Verse: 1:12

“Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God…”

In verses 1–5 we learned the astonishing true identity of Jesus. He's the Eternal Word, God the Son, the Creator of all. He's the source of life, both physical and spiritual, and it’s his life that gives light to all mankind. Though he was crucified by the power of darkness, he rose from the dead, and his light still shines in this dark world. This next section, verses 6–13, introduces us briefly to the unsettling events when Jesus actually came into our world. Today’s passage has two parts: verses 6–9 contrast John the Baptist and Jesus; verses 10–13 contrast the people who didn’t receive Jesus with those who did. In this study we want to learn more about Jesus and how we should respond to him. We especially want to learn what it means to receive him and believe in his name, and what happens when we do. May God open our hearts and speak to us personally through his word today.

Look at verses 6–7. This introduces us briefly to John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus. It says he was “sent from God.” It means John the Baptist wasn’t a phony; he was a real prophet of God, and he had spiritual authority from God. It also says he came as “a witness to testify.” We’re going study John the Baptist’s testimony about Jesus in detail later in this chapter, in verses 29–34. Suffice it to say here that God sent John the Baptist to tell the truth about Jesus. Surprisingly, in John’s Gospel, John the Baptist isn’t baptizing but testifying—testifying is repeated about him 8 times (1:7,15,19,32; 3:26,28; 5:33,36).

The last part of verse 7 tells us the purpose of John’s testimony: “…so that through him all might believe.” As we saw in the Introduction, the main theme of this Gospel is “believe.” The word “believe” is repeated 95 times in 21 chapters. In Greek, whenever he uses the words “believe” or “faith,” John intentionally doesn’t use the noun but the verb form. It means he’s emphasizing something: faith isn’t just head knowledge or mere mental assent; faith is intrinsically active, and, faith grows and matures. Is my faith growing? Many people today think believing is wishful thinking. They think that to believe, we have to turn off our minds. But John’s Gospel shows us that Christian faith isn’t “blind faith” or a “leap of faith”; our believing must be based on truth. Jesus’ light is the truth. After living in spiritual darkness for a long time, it’s hard for our eyes to adjust to the light of his truth. To help us believe the truth about Jesus, God sent a very credible witness, John the Baptist. And John is just the first of many others who also would become eyewitnesses, testifying to the truth about Jesus. John’s Gospel is written kind of like a courtroom drama, where there are many eyewitnesses and hard evidence of what Jesus actually said and did. And John’s Gospel often repeats a pattern: first, there’s a witness who testifies to something specific about Jesus; then, people act on that testimony and come to Jesus; then, they realize the truth about Jesus for themselves; finally, they, in turn, become witnesses. This process of belief leads to a realization of the truth, and it always starts through a witness. How precious a witness is! It tells us that God works not in a vacuum, but through witnesses, ordinary people who’ve come to personal faith in Jesus. By sending a living and breathing witness, God wants to show us that faith isn’t theoretical but real, and he wants to make that faith accessible to us.

Look at verse 8. Even though this was written some 60 years after his death, obviously many people were still focused on John the Baptist and his greatness. John’s ascetic lifestyle, his powerful message of repentance and water baptism were still popular with people all the way over in Asia Minor, where the Apostle John wrote this Gospel. Many even mistakenly thought John the Baptist was greater than Jesus. It wasn’t just an ancient problem; people today can still easily focus on a charismatic church leader rather than on Jesus himself. No matter how great a Christian person may seem, we need to learn to see him or her only as a witness, and put our focus on Jesus the light.

Read verse 9. John the Baptist was a lamp that burned and gave light for a time (5:35). But Jesus is “the true light.” He’s the true light because he lasts forever. He’s the true light because he gives light to everyone. He can help everyone solve their most fundamental problems—the problems of sin and death. Jesus is the true light because he brings us into an intimate relationship with our Creator God; he helps us really know God personally and gives us the living hope of his kingdom. It says in verse 9 that he gives light “to everyone.” It means to those of any ethnicity, language or culture, any human or social condition, any personality type, those who’ve succeeded or those who’ve failed. To illustrate, John’s Gospel shows how Jesus gave his light to both Nicodemus at the top of society and the Samaritan woman at the bottom. Because Jesus can give light to everyone in the world, there’s nobody we should write off; we should see each person as someone Jesus can give his light to.

Look at verse 10. Here John gets into the responses to Jesus, the true light. He starts with the exciting statement: “He was in the world…” How amazing it is that Jesus, the Eternal Word, God the Son, came into this world and lived for a while! But the response to him was a huge disappointment: “…and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him.” Here, “the world” refers to people in general. Because Jesus made them, they should have been able to recognize him. But tragically, they didn’t. According to verse 5, it’s because they were living in darkness, and the darkness doesn’t understand the light. The darkness even opposes the light.

Look at verse 11. Here, “his own” are the Jews. God had promised them that he would send them the Messiah, the Savior King, and they’d been waiting for centuries for this promise to be fulfilled. But when God’s promised one finally came they didn’t receive him. It was outrageous. John is going to devote much time in this Gospel, chapters 5–12, to show how hard Jesus tried to help his own people, the Jews, and how they stubbornly, irrationally refused to believe, despite all the evidence. Why didn’t they receive him? Partly it was because Jesus didn’t fit their idea of what the Messiah should be. They wanted an earthly messiah who would give them power and glory now. But Jesus was from Nazareth in Galilee, a despised place, and he didn’t do the things they expected of him, healing sick people and talking about love, so they despised and rejected him (Isa53:3). Mainly they rejected Jesus because they loved darkness (3:19–20), and they loved human praise more than praise from God (12:42–43).

Jesus was so wonderful, and the response to him was such a letdown, but there were those who *did* receive him (12a). Who were they? Mainly they were his disciples (17:6–8). They were also a motley crew of people: a royal official, a man born blind, Mary and Martha, Mary Magdalene, and others. In the eyes of the world they were weird people, nobodies, but to God they were truly wise people; they became his precious children, and eventually, heirs of his kingdom.

Jesus’ own people, the Jews, thought that because they were physical descendants of Abraham, *they* were the children of God. But according to this prologue, that’s not true. This teaching agrees with what Jesus said in the other Gospels and what Apostle Paul also wrote in his various letters (e.g. Mt8:11; Lk13:28–30; Ro9:7–8; Gal3:7–9,14). Then who are God’s *true* children? Let’s read verse 13. Here, “human decision” seems to refer to those who try to clean up their own lives morally (Ro10:3). “A husband’s will” is a metaphor for those who really want to help others, who try hard and even push them to become Christians (Ro9:16). But being born of Christian parents, even missionaries, faithfully attending church, knowing all the right things, deciding to clean up our lives, being pushed by others—none of these can really make us God’s children. The only way we become God’s child is when we personally repent of our sins, believe in Jesus and receive the Holy Spirit (Ac2:38). Each Christian is a miraculous work of God’s Spirit. It’s not something anyone can control; we’re actually “born of God”—it’s God’s work (13b;3:3,8).

Let’s read verse 12. Here the important phrases are “receive him” and “believe in his name.” What does it mean to “receive him”? In Greek the word “receive” literally means to “hold hands.” Jesus is offering us his gracious, loving hand; to receive him means to take hold of his hand by faith. The word “receive” also can mean to “make my own.” When we receive Jesus, we accept that he’s not just the Savior of the world; he’s “my” Savior; he died and rose for *me* personally. Finally, the word “receive” can mean to “choose.” Though *he* chooses *us* (Jn15:16), to “receive” Jesus means to choose him and his saving grace, to choose to stand on his side, regardless of how much others are rejecting him. To receive Jesus, we’ve got to humble ourselves. In the context of verses 10–13 it means to despair of depending on anything or anyone else, to surrender all to Jesus, to truly welcome him into our hearts and lives as our Lord (Col2:6).

It also says to “believe in his name.” What does that mean? The Bible says that Jesus’ name is the only name given under heaven by which anyone can be saved (Ac4:12). Many ancient people thought a name had power in it. If you knew somebody’s or some spirit’s name, you could have power over that person or spirit. But Jesus’ name is not a superstition, nor do we gain power over him. Jesus’ name actually means “the Lord saves.” To believe in his name means to believe that God sent him to be my Savior, to save me from my sins (Mt1:21b). To believe in his name means to believe his power to save even a wretched, chronic sinner like me. It means to put our trust in him and depend fully on him, not on ourselves (1Pe2:6).

Read verse 12 once more. No matter who we are or what we’ve done, when we receive Jesus and believe in his name, we become God’s children. What amazing grace! How pathetic we are when we're not really excited about that! But what does it really mean to become a child of God? Mainly it means to come into a deep, personal love relationship with God (1Jn3: 1a). It also means to be set free from fear, to led by his Spirit, and ultimately, to become heirs of his kingdom (Ro8:14–17). The word “right” is better translated as “power.” When we believe in Jesus, we don’t just receive some special, privileged knowledge; we receive the power to actually live as God’s children. Mainly we receive the power to love as Jesus loved. This is why we need to keep on believing in Jesus, depending on him every day, moment by moment.

Today we saw that regardless of what others are doing, we need to receive Jesus, take hold of his hand, and believe in his name. May God bless us through the study of John’s Gospel to receive Jesus and believe in his name, that we may truly live as his children and grow as his witnesses in our time.