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…”

“Can you believe it?” We say this as an exclamation when something incredible happens. Like during a freak-of-nature event. Or when an unlikely person finally has a change of heart. And we say, “Can you believe it?” Often, skeptical people say, “No! I can’t believe it!” In the first five verses John has told us some incredible things about Jesus. But for these things to have any effect on us, we have to believe. In 21 chapters of John the author repeats the word “believe” almost 100 times. So in this part of his prologue he introduces us to how God helps us believe, and how only those who believe can become children of God. May God open our hearts and speak to us through his living word today.

Look at verses 6,7. This “John” was John the Baptist. It says he was sent from God. What does that mean? It means many things: God called him, God spoke to him, God prepared him, God gave him a mission, God empowered him. But most of all, it means that John was a reliable witness. Later Jesus would say, “Whoever speaks on their own does so to gain personal glory, but he who seeks the glory of the one who sent him is a man of truth; there is nothing false about him” (7:18). Through John’s life and ministry people could clearly see that he came from God. In court trials today they still need witnesses. The problem is, there are many kinds of witnesses. Some witnesses are paid by rich people to say what they want them to say. Some witnesses are unstable characters. Some testify for their own agenda, like getting revenge or some personal benefit. But John the Baptist was a witness who was sent from God. He came to give us God’s message, to tell us God’s truth, for God’s glory alone. Look at verse 7 again. It says that John came “to testify concerning that light.” What light? It’s the light of Jesus. As verse 4 says, “In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind.” And as verse 5 says, “The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not overcome it.” Jesus is the light of all mankind. Jesus’ light is still shining in this dark world. But people living in darkness don’t like the light. They want to put it out. They don’t understand it. It’s just too bright for them. So God sent a reliable witness, John the Baptist, to tell people about Jesus the light. We’re going to see John’s testimony about Jesus later, in verse 15, and especially in verses 19–34. But here in verse 7 it simply says that “through him all might believe.” Because John was so credible a witness, God was helping us to believe in Jesus. It tells us something about God. God doesn’t demand blind faith from us. He’s not trying to make things too hard. He’s not exclusive. He wants to help all people believe. He wants to make faith accessible to everyone. So he sent John the Baptist as a credible witness. God still sends witnesses today to help people believe. John the Baptist is a model for all Christians. Every true Christian is a witness of Jesus. When we come to believe in Jesus, God wants to use us to help others believe, too. When we have a genuine faith that we actually live by, we become a credible witness of Jesus. It tells us what we should be doing and what we should be praying for. There are so many good things we should be doing, so many good things we should be praying for. But mainly we should be helping people believe in Jesus, praying for them to believe in Jesus. If we miss this, we’ve lost our point.

Look at verse 8. Why was it necessary for the author to write this? It was because people were so impressed with John the Baptist. Later, even Jesus said of him, “John was a lamp that burned and gave light, and you chose for a time to enjoy his light” (5:35). Many people enjoyed the light of John the Baptist. In what sense was he a light? It was because he spoke the truth (5:32,33). Truth is always like a light in this dark world. As a witness finally speaking truth, John was so attractive. People really enjoyed his passion, his charisma, his preaching. But they needed to be paying attention not to the witness, but to the One he was pointing to. It’s like having a good road map. Instead of using it to get to our destination, what if we just keep looking at the road map and admiring it and praising it. How weird would that be? It tells us that to be a real witness of Jesus, we can’t make it about us in any way. We can’t be drawing attention to ourselves. We’ve always got to keep the focus on Jesus. People trying to gain personal glory and honor through ministry are trying to steal God’s glory from Jesus. We may try to excuse it, but it’s a grave sin. They’re a hindrance and useless to God.

Read verse 9. Here Jesus is called “the true light.” Why is Jesus “the true light”? Verse 9b says it’s because he “gives light to everyone.” “Everyone” means people all over the world, in every time and every generation. Some people are a light for their own people of their own time. Later, they become outdated. They can’t be a help for those living in a different time and place, in different circumstances. But Jesus is a light for all people of all times; Jesus never gets outdated. He can give light to people today, right now, people living in any kind of moral or spiritual confusion, any kind of deception or sin. He can give light to the rich and successful, as well as to the poor and defeated. Jesus’ light can help anyone, no matter how far away from God or how hopeless they may seem. To be his witnesses, we need this conviction, that Jesus is the true light.

Next, the author turns our attention to the responses to Jesus. Look at verse 10. This is written in understatement, but it was so tragic. To John the author, how amazing it was that “He was in the world.” It means, “He was right here!” When a great person is somewhere, people flock to see him or her. They want to touch them or get a piece of their clothing as a souvenir. The greatest person in the world had come, Jesus, the Eternal Creator God. In his first letter John writes, “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testified to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us” (1Jn1:1,2). His being in the world was the greatest thing that’s ever happened. But so often, when true greatness is there, people fail to recognize it. Abraham Lincoln is considered perhaps our greatest president. But while he was in office so many people considered him nothing but a joke. But in the case of Jesus, it was inexcusable. Why? John says in verse 10b, “…and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him.” Here, “the world” refers especially to all the people of the world. All people were made by the Creator God. So when he came into the world, people should have been able to recognize their Creator. Why? Because we’re all made in his image. To those made in his image, his coming should have been unmistakable. But people couldn’t recognize him. Why? It’s because they were blinded by sin. Later the author, quoting Isaiah’s prophecy, says, “He has blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts, so they can neither see with their eyes, nor understand with their hearts, nor turn—and I would heal them” (12:40; cf. Isa6:10). The true light is still shining, but people are too spiritually blind to see it.

And it gets even more tragic. Look at verse 11. Here, “his own” refers to the Jews. God had been revealing himself to them for centuries. They had his words in the Bible. They had so many prophets all pointing them to Jesus’ coming. But when he finally came, the one for whom they’d been waiting for so long, they refused to “receive” him. Why? There were many reasons. They judged him by mere appearances and by human standards (7:24; 8:15). They despised him because was from Nazareth, a small town in Galilee (1:46a; 7:41,42,52). Though he spoke God’s truth and did miracles only God could do, they still refused to believe in him. Why? It was an act of sheer rebellion against God. They had stubborn, unrepentant hearts (Ro2:5). The author is telling us something important about believing. Usually people say you can have reason, or, you can have faith; you have to choose which one. Such a scenario makes faith seems unreasonable. But actually, according to John’s Gospel, faith is very reasonable, whereas it’s unbelief that’s actually very unreasonable.

Despite all the poor responses, there were some who did respond well. Read verse 12. Who were these people? They were his true disciples, all those who held to his words and came to know the truth (8:31,32). Verse 12 says they “received him.” What does it mean to “receive” Jesus? The Greek word literally means to grab something or someone with our hands in order to use that thing or that person. It means to claim something for myself. In other words, to “receive” Jesus means to accept him very personally. The author uses a parallel phrase, “to those who believed in his name.” Jesus’ name means “Savior.” Believing in his name means believing he came to save me from my sins (Mt1:21b; Ac4:12).

It’s like being sick and having the right medicine in a bottle next to us. We can pretend like we’re not sick. Or we can keep trying to get better on our own. Or we can just look at the bottle next to us for a little while and then walk away. Or we can actually open the bottle and take the medicine. Or, it’s like drowning in a stormy sea and someone throwing us a lifesaver flotation device. We can either look at it but try to swim on our own, or we can grab hold of that lifesaver. Those who receive Jesus are those who realize they are helpless sinners who really need God’s salvation, who open their hearts to accept Jesus as their Savior. And it’s kind of an all-or-nothing proposition. To really receive Jesus, we can’t have “Plan B” or some other means of escape. We can’t rely on anything or anyone else to save us. This is real belief.

Verse 12 says that when we do so, God gives us “the right to become children of God.” In Greek the word “right” literally means “power” or “freedom.” We have no power within ourselves to live as God’s children. But when we receive Jesus, God gives us that power and that freedom. How? Read verse 13. It says we’re given power to become God’s children when we’re “born of God.” What does that mean? When we truly believe in Jesus, the Holy Spirit works in us powerfully. He does something in us that no one else could do for us, that we couldn’t do ourselves: he *changes* us. Before believing in Jesus, we were not children of God; we were slaves of sin. We may have some lofty views of ourselves based on our human background, appearance or abilities, yet spiritually speaking we belonged to the devil. But when we receive Jesus and are born of God by his Spirit, we belong to God as his precious children. In verse 13 John emphasizes that this can happen to anyone, regardless of their human or religious background. We don’t have to convert to Judaism to belong to God. We can’t force our children to belong to God. We can’t choose to make ourselves belong to God. We just need to humble ourselves, receive Jesus and depend on the Holy Spirit to change us. Then we receive the greatest blessing there is: God considers us his own children. He lavishes his great love on us (1Jn3:1).

Read verse 12. May God bless us to truly believe in Jesus and experience the power and freedom of his children. And may God use us as true witnesses.