

Make Way For Jesus

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[0 : 0 0] Well folks do have that passage open in front of you. So critical that we have the Lord's word open in front of us so you can make sure that what I'm saying is what the passage is saying. So with John chapter 1 open in front of you I want to tell you about my friend Terry. Okay Terry, I first met him when I was doing the Cornhill course in Glasgow.

So Terry is a brilliant little guy. Terry is the founder of a charity that's called Hope for Glasgow. And what they do is they work to see people get off the streets, get clean from substance abuse and get connected to a local church where they will be loved, cared for and where they will be nurtured to come to see Jesus. And the reason Terry's heart is burdened for this work is that he spent a large part of his time, previous season of his life, on the streets in Glasgow. He was a self-confessed addict. And God in his kindness brought people into Terry's life who helped him recover and who introduced him to Christ.

And Terry says as he looks back on that season of his life, he says this. He says, I had to get clean in order to see how dirty I really was. Now take that in for just a minute what he's saying. So once he got his mind back, he was confronted with the depths of his heart.

Right? His shame, his guilt, his selfishness, his anger, his deep-seated and rooted bitterness. As it worked itself out in his life, both horizontally and most importantly, vertically, as he considered himself in light of this holy God who he just heard about. I had to get clean in order to see just how dirty I really was. And I find that a fascinating admission for two reasons. Firstly, because it's not how our culture would finish that sentence. I had to get clean to realize my full potential. I had to get clean in order to realize just how great I was. I had to get clean to realize that I'm worth it. You know that slogan from L'Oreal? I was reading this week that since it was introduced in 1971, it's been translated into over 40 different languages.

Pretty good, isn't it? But why? Because it doesn't matter where you are in the world. We love hearing that we're worth it. And yet, here's what writer Rebecca McLaughlin points out in her brilliant book, *Confronting Jesus*. And she's a writer, if you've not read her, she's just a brilliant apologist for the Christian faith. There's a QR code there. Don't get distracted by it, but feel free to click it and you can check it out later, okay? She says this in this book that I'm reading just now. She says, isn't it striking that the people who are most drawn to Jesus, as you read about him graciously welcoming and transforming people in the gospels, isn't it striking that it's those people that believe about themselves the exact opposite? Which takes us to the second thing that's striking about Terry's comment? That he would be the first to tell you that him owning it proved to be for him not the gateway to despair. It proved to be for him the doorway to life.

[3 : 4 1] And if we're wondering to ourselves how on earth that works, which I take it, whatever is going on in our lives and whatever we think about the God of the Bible, we are, then this passage wonderfully tells us the answer. Primarily because it shows us what God has done to deal with our dirt.

Now, if you've got the passage there today, you'll see John the gospel writer introduces us to two men. And the first man is at verses 19 to 28, and he's a servant who's in the business of pointing away. So his name is John, right? Not to be confused with John the author. This is John the Baptist. John the Baptist, at this point in time, is the new kid on the block in Galilee.

If he was around today, he'd be trending on Twitter. His words would be getting shares on Facebook. His photos would be getting liked on Instagram. John the Baptist is big news in Galilee.

And I think he's big news because he's not your average guy. Everything about John the Baptist, as you read about him in the gospels, is strange. Okay? Strange dress sense. A garment of camel's hair and a leather belt. Not going to see that one in Milan anytime soon, are we? Strange dress sense.

Strange eating habits. Locusts and wild honey. Again, not going to be on the menu at the Shuma anytime soon, is it? Locusts and wild honey. And strange practices. So John the Baptist, it's in the name.

[5 : 17] What has he been doing? He's been baptizing. That's why he's making the headlines. Now, religious washings would appear to have been around at this time in the religious world, but there's clearly something striking and different as to the notch that John the Baptist is upping it to and his message that goes alongside it. Now, if you're in the text, verse 19, come with me.

The religious authorities of the day send Levites and priests on a scouting mission. Do you see it? They send them to find out who this man really is. Simple question, verse 21. It's probably the one that we're all asking this morning. Three words. Who are you? Candidates, do you see them in the text?

Are you Elijah? This Old Testament prophet who didn't die but was drawn up to heaven. Are you him? Come back. Are you the prophet of Deuteronomy 18? The man that Moses said that God would raise up after him who would speak to the people, the very words of God. Are you him? Who are you?

Well, whilst everything on the surface may appear strange with this guy, look behind the scenes and John's arrival is profoundly significant when you consider the bigger Bible story. Now, John the writer has already introduced us to John the Baptist at verses six to eight of chapter one. Glance there if you want. Okay. He wants us to know that this man is a witness. Now, if you include the word testify there, you'll notice that between those verses six to eight of chapter one and our verses today, that concept comes up six times. So John the author wants us to know that John the Baptist is a witness, right? What's he witnessing to? That's the question. He's a witness. But John, the author, also wants us to know that John the Baptist, he also wants John the Baptist to speak for himself. Verse 23, who are you, John the Baptist? He is the voice of one crying in the wilderness, makes straight the way of the Lord. Now, he's quoting, and John tells us there, he's quoting the Old Testament prophet Isaiah. And specifically, he's quoting chapter 40. Now, if we get this, and this is a little bit of mental work, if we get this, we will see why John the Baptist appearing is such brilliant news for us here today. Okay. Isaiah chapter 40, God has been making a promise to his people who are in exile in Babylon. Okay. They're away from their homeland.

Their enemies have defeated them. They're away over there, suffering under cruel impressors. God has made a promise to his people over there that he's going to come to them, he's going to rescue them, and he's going to lead them out to the place where he's prepared for them. And God is saying, you will know that that promise is about to kick in, that I've come to deal with your biggest problem.

[8 : 26] You'll know it's about to kick in when you hear a voice telling you to get ready. I'm going to send somebody up front, just out ahead, who's going to tell you that I'm coming.

And he's going to say, God's coming just over my shoulder. You've got to get ready. And do you know what? He's coming to save us. This is the voice that God is going to send. Right? Do you know, my brother sent a video last week on our family WhatsApp group? Okay. I love a family WhatsApp group. Brother lives in Stockbridge, just north of the city. And so last week, I forget which day it was. He goes up to Queen's Furry Roads and he goes up to see the Queen's Hearst coming into Edinburgh.

Right? And so he videos this thing. What an incredible thing to say that you've witnessed. And it was a five minute walk from his flat. Incredible. Right? One of those once in a lifetime moments. But he sends this video around. And what's striking about the video is that the first thing that you see is not the hearse. The first thing that you see and you hear are the flashing lights of the police motorbikes who've gone up ahead. And they've got one job. Their one job is to make sure what is clear.

The roads are clear. Right? People are off to the side. There's no bits of metal or anything in the road that's going to burst the tires. Everything has to be ready. Clear the way. Because the car's coming just behind me. And sure enough, as soon as the people in the video, we could see it. As soon as they saw the bikes, there they are with their cameras out. Because they know that the bikes tell them that the very thing that they're waiting on is just about to come. Friends, John the Baptist is the motorbike in this day. He's gone out ahead. He's getting people ready. He's saying, God is coming.

You need to get ready. His message is a moral one. Okay? He's saying, get your life in gear. Change your ways. Lift your eyes. Stop cheating. Stop lying. Clean up your act. Because our creator, our God, is coming. And boy, do people respond when you put it together with the other gospels. All strata of society respond to his message. Tax collectors respond. Roman soldiers respond. They say, what do we need to do? I imagine that they respond because they're people who know that their lives are those that need to get ready. But notice the attitude by which John does his baptizing. Verse 27.

[10:57] He says, the one who comes after me, the one I'm telling you is just about to come, I'm not even worthy to untie the straps of his sandals. Now listen, you might be here and see the thought of feet.

It gives you the heebie-jeebies, right? But just be thankful that you don't live in the first century where people's feet into the bargain are sweaty and dirty. Now you read around this and a pupil, is they sit under the teaching of a rabbi, right? There's many things that they would do to serve their rabbi, the one that they're learning from. But the one thing that was off bounds, the one thing is a no-go, the one thing that is not even a pupil should have to stoop down to is washing feet. And yet John considers the greatness of the one who's just coming behind him.

And he says, I'm not even worthy to do that job. Such is the humility. Do you not love his humility? The one who's coming, don't look at me. I'm ducking out of the way. Don't look at me. Look at him who's coming.

There's a story told about Alexander the Great, the great leader of ancient Greece. A story told about how he proudly just parades into town on his horse, right?

Wants his people to see how great he is. And he goes up to an individual called Diogenes. He goes up to him, he puffs out his chest, gets down off the horse, and this big brute of a man goes over to Diogenes and says, what do you want me to do for you?

[12:36] And Diogenes cheekily replies, I just want you to move to the side because you're blocking the sun. Do you not love the humility here of John the Baptist?

I don't want to get in the way of the sun. And I take it evangelistically, that's a lesson for us as well, as we think about our life as disciples. We just want to get out of the way of the sun.

It's not about us. It's not about us. It's about him. The disciples of Jesus saying, don't look at me. Look at him.

He is the servant, John the Baptist, who's in the business of pointing away. And he's pointing away secondly, verse 29 to 34, to the king who's in the business of taking away.

So back in the text, you see the next day John saw Jesus coming. And notice the description of who John says that Jesus is. And remember, John, the writer, is recording all this for a reason.

[13 : 43] You don't waste ink in this day. You don't waste thoughts. It's not kind of tweeting or blogging or Facebook posts. There's a lot of effort goes into documenting this. So you want people to know this.

Who does John know that Jesus is? He is the one who existed before me. He's the one who is greater than me. The reason I came baptizing. And at last, John answers the question.

Verse 31. Here's the reason I came. I came that he might be revealed to Israel. Who is he? Just notice the two titles that John gives Jesus here.

He is the lamb who's come to take away the sin of the world. And here's what I reckon, John, knowing who he is, what he thinks, as he looks at Jesus.

And at this point in the narrative, do you see his clock dies on Jesus. Here's what I reckon is going through John's mind. Isaiah 40. God declares to his people who are in exile, I'm coming to rescue you and take you out.

[14 : 46] But right at the beginning of Isaiah chapter 40, the only reason that God can do that is because he's dealt with our iniquity. The only reason it's possible that God can say he's coming to save is because your iniquity, your sin that caused me to send you into exile in the first place.

That sin, I have dealt with it, is pardoned, is not swept under the carpet, is not written off as a bad debt. This God, he's coming to deal with it.

Now what kind of God would he be if that's how he treated and viewed all the wrongs in the world? That he swept them under the carpet, that he wrote them off as a bad debt? No, this God and remember who he is, the one who knows the end from the beginning as he considered the lamb who was slain before the foundation of the world.

This God says not I will deal with it, this God says I've dealt with it. But you're still reading it and you're asking how?

How have you dealt with it? Remember that? Your math teacher at school, remember what they said you got marks for? Not so much the answer although that definitely helped. What did you get marks for?

[16 : 04] Showing you're working, right? So what's happened to that iniquity that God said has been pardoned? Isaiah chapter 40, you go on a few chapters to Isaiah 53 and you read about God's saviour who will be a man of sorrows acquainted with grief who will be like a sacrificial lamb and who God will take and lead to the slaughter and who on whom God will lay like straw all the iniquity of his people.

He will lay it all on him. This is how God is going to pardon his people's iniquity. He is going to lay it all on the sacrificial lamb. How will God deal with the iniquity of his people?

He'll lay it on the lamb. The lamb will die instead of the people and the people will live instead of the lamb. And in that context you see what this does?

As John sees Jesus, God come to save, God coming over my shoulder, he says, Behold the lamb of God. Because this lamb has come to bear our iniquity on himself.

words that will be fulfilled as Jesus goes to the cross, silently endures unjust torture and death, bearing the punishment, the iniquity of his people on himself.

[17 : 34] He bears their dirt. And if your trust is in him today, no matter how weak you think your faith is, if you're looking to him, know that the lamb took your iniquity on himself.

You need not pay for it anymore because the lamb died in your place. The iniquities, all of our iniquities were on him laid.

And that's why Christians down the centuries have rejoiced in this chapter of Isaiah 53. We all like sheep have gone astray, each one to his own way, but the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of his all.

And John says, behold, the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Brothers and sisters, if you are struggling with guilt and shame today, if you are struggling with your dirt, look to the lamb.

He never ceases to be a lamb who was slain. Yes, he is king in glory, but what is described in Revelation? At the throne is a lamb who was slain.

[18 : 49] He's died for our iniquity. My sin put him there. Some of you might know Rembrandt famously painted the crucifixion scene. What you might not know is that Rembrandt painted himself into that crucifixion scene.

He painted himself into the scene as one of the men who was crucifying Jesus, as if to say, in one sense, I wasn't there that day. But in another sense, I absolutely was.

It was my sin that put him there. It was my iniquity that he died for. Behold, the Lamb of God, the words of the old hymn, 't'was I that shed the sacred blood.

I nailed him to the tree. I crucified the Christ of God. I joined the mockery. It was our sin that he took. It was my sin that put him there.

Don Carson, I think, New Testament commentator, helpfully clarifies the meaning of the word world here. The Lamb of God takes away the sin of the world. That is to all human beings without distinction, though not to all without exception.

[20 : 03] I was reading an article this week in the Telegraph that reflected on the events of the last ten days and it was reflecting on the fact that subconsciously, and I think this is true, we kind of all believed the Queen was going to live forever.

She was just always there. How many people have you heard reflect on the fact that our whole life she was just always there? And how this week we've all been reminded of our own mortality.

Everyone dies. Here then is an invitation to all the world to trust in Jesus and by faith know the truth that there is forgiveness in the Lamb who takes away our sin.

And let me just lovingly say by implication, all those who don't trust in the Lamb, the math says that that iniquity still sits on you.

We're all going to have to give an account in the end before our righteous and just creator. How we've lived before him. And in light, friends, of who we all are, do see the good news that the Lamb of God has come to take away the sin of the world.

[21 : 17] He is the Lamb of God and he is the Lamb, verse 33, who gives the spirit. As Jesus is baptized, and I think that's what John is reflecting on here.

Jesus baptized, and be clear on this, not to repent of his own sin, but to associate himself with the very people that he's come to save.

The Holy Spirit comes down, do you notice in the text, in the form of a dove? Right? Likely a, I don't fall out, maybe disagree over this, but likely a symbolic presence of God's peace.

Okay, just as in the days of Noah, the dove returns, symbolizing that peace between God and man was here. I think similarly, the ultimate peace between God and man that that no episode points us to will be what Jesus is.

Death and resurrection will accomplish for all who believe, peace with God. But John's emphasis here is that that dove, the spirit, remains on Jesus.

[22 : 24] So the word remains, I think, with the emphasis is he remains on Christ. You see, in the Old Testament, the spirit came on an individual, empowered them for a God-given task. But in those instances, the spirit empowering was temporary.

So it's striking here then that John wants us to know that the spirit, as the spirit falls on Jesus, remains. Right? Enabling him to live the perfect life, I take it enabling him to know the love of his father.

John's baptism could only really instruct somebody externally. It could only really encourage somebody morally. But Jesus is baptism.

Not the baptism as anything special. But understand, it's what it symbolizes. As our lives become wholly bound to his, that's what we're doing as we go under the water and come back up. The shape of Jesus' life is the shape of our lives now.

If you haven't been baptized, you've got to do it. Come and do it. Make it happen. That baptism is Jesus gives us the spirit, the very presence of God coming to live inside of us.

[23 : 33] That baptism doesn't change us externally. It changes us internally. As the very presence of God takes up residence in the life's of his people.

And he transforms us from the inside out. That's what John's baptism couldn't do. That this is what Jesus' baptism will do. And so the question is, as we respond to this this morning, are we living our every day in light of the Lamb?

You know, just as we close, and maybe to help us think about it, friends, let me tell you about the car that we drove in America. John and Kelsey generously lent us their car when we were over there.

Olin, who's here, drove it down to Chicago, we picked it up there. Incredibly generous of them. But the minute I stepped into this car, I realised that things were different.

Automatic, steering wheel on the other side, driving on the right side of the road. That is a royal flush of differences. for the first few days, all I heard in the car was beep, beep, beep, beep, beep, beep, beep.

[25 : 02] No idea what this noise is. Beep, beep, beep, beep, beep, beep, beep. Okay, that's getting annoying. Beep, beep, beep, beep, beep, beep, beep. This is a four-hour journey, and I'm going to follow up with someone if I don't find out what this noise is.

Beep, beep, beep, beep, beep, beep. Do you know what telling me that I was drifting? And beep, beep, beep, beep, beep was code for get yourself back to the center.

Friends, what we've looked at this morning, the lamb who takes away the sin of the world, the gospel, is the center of Christianity. It is the wondrous heartbeat of God, the center of our faith, and the question is, friends, is it the center of our lives?

And as we think about our lives in response to this passage today, here's an observation. How easy is it to drift? How easy is it to think to myself as I go about my day every day, do I really need the lamb?

Do I really need him? Does he make any difference to my life? Do you know how I see myself drifting? Two ways. It's when my default reaction to my sin is one of two things.

[26 : 34] Firstly, it's that I try and cover up. When I get it wrong, it's just to write it off. It's not really that big a deal, my sin. I try and justify it to myself that I only thought that or said that because it was the other person's fault.

they're the ones that got me riled up. It's their sin. No, it's not. It's my sin. It's my sin. Friends, let me just ask you, when was the last time you said sorry?

When was the last time you got clean and said a costly, I got it wrong, to your spouse, to your children?

Most importantly, our children, I say this all the time, listen, daddy needs Jesus just as much as you do. Oh, friends, to your colleagues, to your flatmates, how easy is it to cover up our sin?

Or secondly, I try and cover up, secondly, I try and make up. I think to myself, tomorrow is going to be a better day, tomorrow I'm going to get up at five o'clock and read my Bible, tomorrow I'm going to try harder.

[27 : 45] Well, friends, covering up and making up, not only are they exhausting ways to live, but they are deeply anti-gospel, anti-Lamb ways of living that rob us of knowing the sweetness of Jesus' forgiveness and grace.

And the liberating news here, because the Lamb has paid for my sin, my past sin, my present sin, my future sin, as I contemplate my dirt, the news is that I don't need to pretend that I'm sorted.

This liberates me to hold my hands up and say, here is a sinner who's also in need of God's grace. Not a once-in-a-lifetime decision, it's a lifetime.

John Calvin called the Christian life a lifetime of repentance. It's why we do what we do every Sunday. Let me just say, have you ever clocked that? There's a lot of effort goes into picking the readings and the songs and everything else that goes on here.

Why? Because all of us drift. What do we need as we come in here on a Sunday? And let me just say, this is why church membership is so important. What do we do to one another when we gather on a Sunday?

[29 : 00] What do we remind ourselves of? What do we read about? What do we celebrate? What do we sing? We sing about the center. we sing about the lamb who was slain before the foundation of the world.

We sing about the lamb who was slain for the sins of the world. We sing about the lamb who has come to deal with the dirt of his people. We sing about the lamb who takes away the sin of the world.

So brothers and sisters, as we close, is this the center? Have you drifted this morning? Have you drifted? come back to him. Isn't it amazing that Jesus is here?

The lamb who has come to take away the sin of the world. Let's pray. So father, we just thank you this morning for John's gospel.

We thank you, Lord, that we have it in our language. We thank you, father, that we can understand it. We thank you most of all that you are a God who has revealed yourself and done something to save us from our deepest problem.

[30 : 11] Father, would you help us this morning as a local church, as a family, oh, Lord, to help one another, keep each other's eyes on the lamb. Thank you that our lives are caught up with him.

Thank you that his death is our death. Thank you that his life is our life. Father, I pray that if there's any here this morning who don't know the lamb, oh, Father, by your spirit, you would open their eyes to see the grace and truth that are to be found in Jesus Christ.

Father, we thank you for this morning. Be with us, Lord, as we sing, as we close, and as we spend time together. Oh, Father, may we know just a sweet time of knowing your peace and your greatness together.

Father, in Jesus' name we ask. Amen. Amen.