

4. THE SAVING WORK OF CHRIST (1:6-13)

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR STUDY

1. Without looking back in the notes, list and summarise the five doctrinal truths we have learned about the Word in verses 1 to 5.

EVERYONE IS A THEOLOGIAN

NOTE: This section is an additional study for those who struggle with the necessity to study the doctrinal truths in verses 1 to 18, and theology in general.

So far in our study we have looked at several doctrinal truths about Christ, and the next two studies are no different. In fact, we will continue to look at doctrine as we progress through the book. For some people, the mention of the words doctrine or theology, or any forms of those words, raises thoughts of fear and trepidation. Some consider the topic boring or unnecessary – they just want something to make them feel good or a to find a quick-fix solution to their problems.

Yes, doctrine can be boring and sometimes very technical, however, it's something that we need to deal with. It is very much a part of our faith. Because what you must remember is this – doctrine determines behaviour. In other words, what you believe forms the foundation for how you live your life. Even the statement, "I do not need doctrine", is a doctrinal statement that has life-changing effects.¹¹

Let me give you an example. Several years ago I was in a discussion with some pastor friends and one of them was a pentecostal pastor. The discussion went in the direction of talking about the person and work of Christ, and this pentecostal pastor made a very profound statement. He said, "We Pentecostals are excellent at preaching the work of Christ, but are very poor at preaching the person of Christ". In context he was referring to Jesus' miracles, that they are willing to preach about how Jesus healed many, but fail to talk about Him being God.

Now one of the consequences of this thinking that this pastor highlighted, is that people begin to think that because Jesus performed miracles when He was on earth, we can be sure that He will perform those same miracles today. Now He may do so, but not always. However, if you extend this doctrinal position to its inevitable conclusion, people will begin to expect Jesus to perform miracles all the time. This eventually leads to Word of Faith doctrine, also known as the Prosperity Gospel, and other cults such Christian Science. This doctrine causes people to live with the continual expectation that God is obliged to heal us without us doing the responsible thing of seeing a doctor.

But there is a second reason, and that is doctrine should lead to worship. Too often our worship of God is based solely on experiences or feelings. But what about when there is no experience? What about those times when it feels as though God is distant and we cannot think of anything to be thankful to Him for? What about when we just do not feel like worship? What then do we worship or thank God for? At those

¹¹ See the additional article from ??? 20?? edition of Joy Magazine entitled "Why Do I Need Theology?".

times, the only thing that provides us with any reason or content of our worship, is doctrine. As we study the Bible and learn more about God and His work, we have so much to worship Him for. Doctrine leads to worship.

Both of these consequences are clearly evident in the book of Romans. The first eleven chapters Paul teaches solid doctrine about Christ, sin, and salvation. But then Paul seems to break into song at the end of chapter 11 with a beautiful hymn (vv33-36). It is though he is so overwhelmed by the person and work of Christ that he cannot help but worship. But Paul does not leave it there, for chapters 12 to 16 are filled with practical applications of the theology from the previous eleven chapters. Doctrine should lead to worship and right living.

Based on the above, we can conclude that if we want to live and worship rightly, doctrine is important.¹² It is for this reason that we began by looking at the doctrinal truths contained in these opening verses. If we are to have a clear understanding of Jesus as presented by John, we need to consider the theology.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR STUDY

1. In what ways has theology, whether good or bad, influenced how you worship or how you live your life?
2. Read John 1:6-13. Have you ever met someone famous? How did you respond during and after the event? Did you keep your experience to yourself, or did you share it with everyone you know?

JESUS IS THE EXPECTED WORD (VV6-8)

In these verses we learn that John the Baptist is telling people that the Messiah had come. That the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, as he later describes Jesus in verse 29, was in their midst. I think if John the Baptist was on Facebook, this would have been plastered all over his account.

But John the Baptist's testimony about Jesus was to be expected as there are numerous prophecies throughout the Old Testament that declare that the Messiah was going to come. There are two key things to take note of in these three verses.

“Sent from God” (v6)

This is probably the most important aspect of John the Baptist's testimony and mission – he was divinely appointed. John was not spreading a rumour about the Messiah coming as if he and his cousin planned to deceive the people of Israel, nor did he spread the news of his own free will. No, he was specifically sent by God.

But this is how God did things throughout the Old Testament as He sent prophets to the people of Israel, to warn them of imminent danger or declare the promises and truths of God. More specifically, in the

¹² If you want to read more about the importance of doctrine, I recommend the book, *Everyone is a Theologian* by R.C. Sproul.

context of our passage, the nation was told many times that someone would come first to prepare the way. Let's briefly consider two of them:

1. **Isaiah 40:3.** The fact that this prophecy refers to John the Baptist is confirmed in Matthew 3:1-3.
2. **Malachi 3:1, 4:5.** It is because of these verses that during the Passover meal, Jews leave an empty seat at the table for Elijah to join them. It is also why during the meal that a young child goes to the door during the meal to see if Elijah may be waiting outside, and to invite him in.

After Malachi, there are four-hundred years of silence from God and His prophets. He gives no further spoken or written revelation of Himself or will. During this time, things become increasingly difficult for Israel. In the late fourth century BC the Greeks take control and then in the first century BC come the Romans. Because of the oppression and loss of control of their beloved Promised Land, the Jews expect the Messiah to arrive as a kind of political or warring hero, riding his white horse and with his heavenly army to slay the enemy. But that was not how God planned it to be. Instead, the Messiah comes not to liberate them from political oppression, but as a servant who will free them from spiritual oppression.

However, unknown to them, this expected Messiah has arrived. Not as a king born in a palace, but in the little town of Bethlehem, born to poor, working-class parents, and later forced into exile in Egypt because king Herod wanted to kill Him. Yet even in this, the important thing to remember, is that God continues to work out His plan of redemption that we read of in Genesis 3:15, the first promise of a Messiah or Deliverer in the Bible, known as the *Proto Evangelion* (from the Greek *Protos*, meaning first, and *euangelion* meaning Good News/Gospel). A promise that includes the prophets preparing the nation, and indeed the entire world, for what He was going to do. And in John 1 we see Him still doing it through John the Baptist. Because of this, the Jews have always looked forward to a Messiah.

But who was John the Baptist? Where did He come from?

John the Baptist

Luke chapter 1 records his birth in terms similar to that of Isaac (cf. Gen. 17). Zechariah, John's father, is a priest from the division of Abijah. Elizabeth, his mother, is a descendant of Aaron. One day, while Zechariah is serving in the temple, the angel Gabriel comes to him and tells him that he is going to father a son. Zechariah does not believe him, since both he and Elizabeth are old and she is barren. So for his disbelief, he is struck dumb and does not speak again until the day that John is named.

As an adult, John does not drink wine or strong drink, and survives on a diet of wild honey and locusts. Mark tells us, he lives in the wilderness dressed in clothes of camels hair and a leather belt, reminiscent of the clothes and belt that Elijah wore. There he remains, hidden until his sudden public appearance (again similar to Elijah) and declares the coming of the Messiah.

According to Luke, John begins his ministry in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, which is around AD 26 or 27. From various records in the gospels, we learn that John also has disciples whom he taught how to pray. John is also relentless in his confrontations of Herod. The Jewish historian, Josephus,

records that Herod Antipas has John arrested and executed because he fears that John might lead the people in an uprising against him. Although John is criticised by several people, Jesus says of him in Matthew 11:11 that he is the greatest of the prophets.

John is Jesus' cousin, older than Him by a mere six months. Whether or not John and Jesus actually interacted with one other before this, is unknown, but it is clear that he knows who Jesus is when he sees Him at the Jordan River. What is significant about John's words is that he does not acknowledge Jesus as his cousin, but as the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, a fact that is probably revealed to him by the Holy Spirit.

But why is John specifically sent by God? Why is a simple man, seemingly wild and of no apparent consequence, who lives in the wilderness, called by God? Well, there are a couple of reasons.

1. It has always been God's way to call the least likely person to do His work here on earth. When you look at the lives of those God called in the Old Testament, they were simple people with weaknesses: Moses is poor in speech, David is a shepherd boy, Esther is a slave girl, and Amos is a sycamore fig farmer.
2. John is from a priestly line. With his father being a priest and his mother related to Aaron, it puts John in the lineage of those who anoint Israel's prophets, priests and kings. So it is fitting for John to be the one to baptise Jesus at the beginning of His earthly ministry.

“Witness” (v7)

What is more important than why John is chosen is the reason for which he is sent, to be a “witness”, as he is described in verse 7. This is legal language. Like a witness in a court of law, John's purpose is to make a declaration of truth about Jesus. To testify about the Light.

As we learned last time, Light is a reference to God's holiness. This is what John is pointing to. He is not merely saying that Jesus is a better way. Nor is he simply making a suggestion that they should follow Jesus. No. Rather he is declaring that the righteous, holy God spoken of in the Scriptures, who they expect will come, their Messiah, is here, walking amongst them. And this is not just so that they can know their Messiah is there, as if it is just a bit of trivia or general knowledge, but so that they will believe in Jesus.

The Apostle John is also careful to make it clear that John the Baptist is not the Light, but only a witness that has come to testify about the Light. However, even after his execution, people follow the teachings of John without fully knowing about Christ or the Holy Spirit. For example, in Acts 18 and 19 we read of Apollos and the twelve disciples of John in Ephesus who only know of the baptism of John, and not that of the Holy Spirit.

There is a lesson in this for us: It is so easy to follow the wrong man, even if what he teaches is true. Christ can be easily neglected due to the misguided attention to one of His servants. It is so easy to put a teacher on a pedestal at the expense of Christ. Even John the Baptist recognises this possibility in his

own ministry (cf. John 3:30). Faithful ministers of God are to serve as signs, to point people to Christ, and not themselves. This is exactly what John the Baptist is, a sign who points people to the Lamb of God. The Apostle John makes this point very clear in verse 8, “*He was not the light, but came to bear witness about [or be a sign pointing to] the light*”. Jesus is already amongst the people and the time has come for them to see Him. John is sent by God to be the sign to turn peoples attention to the Messiah.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR STUDY

1. We have seen that from the day Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden, it was God’s plan to send the Saviour. What comfort does this give you knowing that God put a plan in place and has remained faithful in carrying it out?
2. John the Baptist was a man like you and me, unknown and with flaws, yet God used Him to fulfil His plan. What lessons can you learn from this about your life, work, and even ministry? How does John’s frailty and role as a sign pointing to Christ challenge your perception of ministry, particularly in the task of evangelism?

JESUS IS THE ENLIGHTENING WORD (V9)

Not only is Jesus the Light, he is also the “*true light*”, that is, the genuine or real light. Not only is John not the light, nor was or is any other man. This is important for John to make clear, because in those days, just as with today, there were many self-declared messiahs and those falsely called Christ or Messiah by others (cf. Mat. 24:5, 23; 1 John 2:18). So John emphatically declares that Jesus is the true Light.

But the Light coming into the world has a greater purpose than what they expect. He did not come to rid them of the Roman oppression or to provide good health and prosperity. Rather He came to redeem His people from the yolk of slavery. However, redemption cannot happen unless people are aware that they need redemption. Hence John claiming that by Jesus coming into the world, He “*enlightens everyone*”. This is one of those tricky phrases that needs a little clarity as it has been interpreted in at least five different ways:

1. The first interpretation is that Christ as the light grants special illumination in the highest and fullest sense, to every human being on earth, without exception, leading to salvation. This cannot be true because it would imply universalism, the teaching that every person will be saved. Based on the teachings of the New Testament, this cannot be the case. Salvation will not happen for every person as the Bible clearly speaks of people being sent to hell for eternity.
2. The second interpretation is that Christ grants special illumination, which renews both heart and mind, to every child of the new covenant, but some lose it. This again is a form of universalism in that all people can know Christ, but differs somewhat in that some can lose the enlightenment. Or that one can lose their salvation. This implies that what God gives can be lost in some way or another. This also goes against what is taught in other places in the New Testament – we cannot lose our salvation.

3. The interpretation favoured by many is that Christ has bestowed on every individual, without exception, the light of reason and conscience. Now this may sound right, but unfortunately it does not fit the context of John's Gospel as a whole. John uses light to refer to Christ's holiness and never in terms of reason or conscience. So despite it being a popular interpretation, it does not fit the context.
4. Christ gives enlightenment to everyone who is saved, in the sense that no one who is saved receives it from any other source. This is better, but it is not quite there yet, it is incomplete. You will see why as we consider the fifth interpretation.
5. Christ enlightens every man who hears the Gospel, to which everyone will then respond. Although many will respond favourably in repentance and faith, the majority, however, will not. Though many see the light, they prefer the darkness. Others, however, receive the Word with the right attitude and are saved.

This interpretation fits the immediate context the best and is illustrated in our text. Verse 9 begins by saying that Jesus has come into the world, but then, in verses 11 and 12 you see that there are some who respond favourably, and there are some that do not.

Another reason why this is more favourable is because it is in harmony with Jesus' words later in the gospel (see 3:19 and 12:46).

Jesus, the Expected Word, comes into the world and enlightens every man who hears the Gospel. And all who hear will respond in one of two ways. These responses are seen in the next two doctrinal truths.

JESUS IS THE REJECTED WORD (VV10-11)

In verse 10 John essentially repeats what he says in verse 9, that Jesus is in the world, and verse 3, that everything was created through Him. But the key here is found at the end of the verse, "*the world did not know him*". "*Know*" refers to a personal and intimate relationship. John is using irony here. He's saying that although Jesus created the world and the very people He is now standing before, His people do not recognise Him. Generally the world is able to recognise holiness, even in the person of Christ, even though they may not recognise Him as God. But because they do not recognise Him, they do not enter into a relationship with Him – instead they reject Him.

But why? Why do they not enter into a relationship? The answer is given in verse 11, "*His own people did not receive Him*". Or more literally, they "*did not accept Him*". Jesus is in the midst of those whom He created. And in terms of Israel itself, the people He was with at the time, they were the people He set apart through Abraham to be His chosen nation.

This is quite scandalous, even in terms of Jewish tradition. Isaiah and Jeremiah both refer to the New Covenant and the one who would come to proclaim it. The Jews were encouraged to accept this revelation. However, Jesus comes declaring the law of the New Covenant, yet they do not receive (accept) Him.

And the same is true today. There are millions who have not received Him, but instead have consciously rejected Christ. There are even some who think that they have accepted Him, but their lives say the opposite. Even though many call themselves Christian, many live as though they are of the darkness rather than the light. However, it is not all bad news.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR STUDY

1. We all know people who reject Jesus and the salvation that He provides. How does the fact that Jesus is the rejected Word comfort or challenge you when you consider those close to you who choose to remain in darkness?

JESUS IS THE REGENERATING WORD (VV12-13)

“But to all who did receive Him”. *“But”.* This is such a powerful word. It introduces a contrast and can change the meaning or perspective of something that may otherwise have a negative meaning. *“But”* is a word that gives hope and light to an otherwise dark situation. This is exactly what John is doing.

His own did not receive Him, ... but ... to all who did receive Him, He gave the right to become children of God. *“To all who”* is an Aramaic idiom that is best rendered as *“whosoever”*. There are many who reject Christ, but *“whosoever”* receives (accepts) Him, they have received the right to become children of God.

In English we miss the intensity of John’s word. He is using legal language, because to receive the right means that whoever receives Jesus has the legal authority to be called a child of God. What an honour to be called a child of the Creator. To be called a child of the most holy God. And this is open to *“whosoever”* receives Christ.

But this leads to the question, what does it mean to receive Christ? Well John gives us the answer in the little phrase *“who believed in His name”*. The Greek word for *“believe”*, also translated as trust or faith, is used 78 times throughout John’s gospel – it is the theme that ties the entire gospel together. Let’s explore what the word means.

Believe

“Believe” as used in John implies more than just a mental assent to something. Knowing it in your head, but that is where it stays. Rather it implies full trust or faith. It implies total submission. An example of how you display belief on a daily basis is in the act of sitting on a chair. Usually we simply sit on a chair without looking at its structure – we take it for granted that we can put our full weight upon it. We would be fools to say we believe that a chair can support our weight, yet never sit on one.

The same with faith in Christ. To receive Christ means to trust Him with your entire life. Not just to say that you believe in Him like you would say that you believe a chair can hold you, but that you are willing to risk it all for His sake.

It also implies believing everything that the Bible tells you about Him. Not just the nice things or the things that you like, but everything. Why do I say that? Because John says it is about believing in His name. Name not in the sense of the title by which a person is referred to, but in terms of the Jewish understanding of the word. Names carry so much significance in the Bible. They were not given to people simply because their parents liked the sound of it, but rather because of something deeper. To the Jews, “*name*” represents something of the history, character, and authority of a person, or the person that one is most influenced by.

For example: Rachel named her last-born son Ben-Oni, meaning son of my sorrow (Gen. 35:18). Rachel went through a very difficult pregnancy which caused her much pain. The birth itself eventually took her life. For Rachel it really was a time of sorrow. But later Jacob renamed him Benjamin, which means Son of My Right Hand. Rachel was the woman that Jacob loved the most. He had worked for Laban for 14 years to earn her hand in marriage. She was his true “*right hand*”, and he honoured her by naming their last son together with the name that fit their relationship.

So to believe in the name of Jesus is to believe everything about Him: His history, character, and authority. As you read the Bible you learn that He is loving, merciful and full of grace. But you also learn that He is just, holy, angry, and judge of all mankind. You learn that He created all and gives life, but you also learn that He destroys and takes away life. To believe in his name means that you have to believe in all of those things. Trust in all of those things. And accept all of those things. This is difficult to do at times, especially with the seemingly negative, not so nice stuff. But this is your role in the saving work of Christ.

However, there is another side: God’s. And it is God’s part that makes your part possible. Without God doing what he does in this process one cannot have any hope that one can be saved.

Born of God (v12)

Being born of God is the key here. Think about that imagery for a moment. When a baby is born, who is responsible for him being born in the first place? The mother and the father right. Together they conceive the child, then for nine months that baby develops in the mother’s womb. When the time is right, the baby is born.

But did the baby have any say in the matter? No. When the baby was conceived, he had no will of his own to come into existence. He had no brain or desire to do so. That was completely in the hands of someone else. The parents, and ultimately God.

The same is true of our salvation. Though we cannot fully understand it, it is entirely in the hands of God. Our being born as His children is His doing. Yes, we have to respond to Him by accepting and believing in Him, but the birth is ultimately under His control.

And to make sure that his readers mouths are stopped, that they can not argue, John begins to defend his position by refuting the three popular ways by which people think they are saved. Note the three objections in verse 13:

1. **Born not of blood:** In other words, one cannot say one is Christian because one's parents are Christian. Unlike with what is taught in Islam, Hinduism, and even Roman Catholicism, salvation is not something you inherit. You are not a Christian because you live in a Christian country or home. No matter what it may say on your birth certificate, it does not come by natural descent.
2. **Born not of the will of the flesh:** This is a reference to human works. There is nothing that anyone can do to earn the right to be called a child of God. Works are not going to make you God's child. As Paul says in Ephesians 2, *"For by grace you have been saved, through faith. And this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast"* (vv8-9).
3. **Born not of the will of man:** If it were left up to you, being a child of God is not something you would desire. Remember Paul's words in Romans 3, *"No one is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one"* (vv10b-12). It is not in the heart or power of man to become a child of God.

NOTE: These three rebuttals are dealt with later in the book in the various teachings of Jesus (esp. 3:1-15), so they will be handled more extensively when we reach them.

Therefore, after briefly refuting these three popular myths on how one can be saved, at a point where people are maybe feeling hopeless, believing that it is impossible to become a child of God, John gives us another great but. *"But of God"*.

Salvation is only possible because of Him. If there is any desire in your heart to serve Him, it is because He has put it there. If you have responded to the call to become a child of God, it is because He drew you in the first place. He caused it to happen. Yes, you have to respond, that is your responsibility, yet even in that, it is only possible because God is work in you, causing you to respond (see Phil. 1:6; 2:13). The work of salvation is entirely in God's hands and all is accomplished in you through Christ.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR STUDY

1. How do the facts concerning salvation discussed above compare or conflict with what you have traditionally been taught? How does the fact that salvation is all a work of God provide comfort in your walk with the Lord?
2. How would you apply the truths of this lesson to your life?