

"WORDS OF LIFE"

In the preceding paragraph in chapter 5, the focus was upon what it means to have faith in Christ. If you look back at that passage in your Bibles you will see that that paragraph is bracketed by statements about believing in Christ: in verse 1, John said that those who believe that Jesus is the Christ have been born of God; and in verse 5, he said that those who believe that Jesus is the Son of God have overcome the world, particularly with respect to the way the world stands opposed to the commandments of God. As we noted last week, even though John places a heavy emphasis upon the importance of Christian love and obedience in this letter, there is no doubt that he sees faith in Christ as the foundation upon which the Christian life is based. The victory that overcomes the world is our faith.

In today's passage, John shows us where Christian faith comes from. Faith is not something that we produce from within ourselves. It depends upon something that is external to us. It depends upon testimony. As the apostle Paul puts it in his letter to the Romans, "So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ." [Rom. 10:17] This point is emphasized in today's sermon text by the repeated use of the terms "testify" and "testimony." In the original Greek, there are ten occurrences of these two words in the span of these

seven verses. Clearly, the notion of "testimony" is at the heart of this passage. In these verses John tells us that *God has given a threefold testimony about Christ, and those who receive this testimony have God's gift of eternal life.*

The first part of this passage needs some explaining. What does John mean when he says that Jesus "came by water and blood"? This way of speaking is more than a bit mysterious to us, and it has been interpreted in a variety of ways down through the years. Some, including Augustine of Hippo, have thought that John was referring to the issue of water and blood that came from Jesus's side when he was pierced by a soldier's spear while hanging on the cross. The problem with this interpretation, however, is that John says that Jesus came by water and blood, not that water and blood came out of him. Others, including Martin Luther, have suggested that water and blood are references to the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper. But this interpretation faces a difficulty as well: while the sacraments certainly testify to Jesus's coming and have been appointed by him as means of grace, it is difficult to understand why John would say that Jesus "came by" them.

Most interpreters today agree with an interpretation that was first put forth by the second century theologian Tertullian, who said that the water refers to Jesus's baptism and the blood refers to Jesus's death. This interpretation makes

good sense when we take into account that Jesus's baptism and death are the two events that bracket his entire ministry. In addition, it is easy to see how each of these events testifies to his person and his work.

How does Jesus's baptism testify to him? Well, remember what baptism is. It is a sign of cleansing from sin. In the Gospel of Mark, John the Baptist's baptism is described as "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." Jesus himself did not have any sin from which he needed to be cleansed. Nevertheless, he submitted himself to baptism "to fulfill all righteousness." [Mt. 3:15] By doing this, Jesus was acknowledging that God's judgment stands against us, and he was declaring his intention to endure that judgment on our behalf. This is why Jesus would later refer to his coming death on the cross as a kind of baptism. [see Mk. 10:38; Lk. 12:50] In his baptism, Jesus was saying that he would endure the wrath of God that stood against us. His baptism served as his public acceptance of the role that God had ordained for him as the representative of all of God's elect. In addition, his baptism was accompanied by the gift of the Holy Spirit to empower him for his ministry and God the Father's public proclamation that Jesus is his well-loved Son. In all of these ways, Jesus's baptism testified to his identity as the unique Son of God and to his role as the only Mediator between God and man.

What about Jesus's death? In what sense does it testify to him? It does so because it was the climactic element of the work for which he had been sent into the world. As Jesus himself said, "For the works that the Father has given me to accomplish, the very works that I am doing, bear witness about me that the Father has sent me." [Jn. 5:36] It was on the cross that Jesus finished the work for which the Father had sent him. The cross of Christ shows that Jesus is the one and only Savior of the world, because it was on the cross that he offered himself up as the spotless Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

John's way of speaking here may seem a bit odd to us. It probably would not occur to us to talk about Jesus as the one who came by water and blood. But we need to remember that John was confronting a Christological heresy in this letter, a heresy that had to do with what people should believe about Jesus. Early sources tell us that the false teachers who were troubling these churches were saying that Jesus was an ordinary man at his birth and that the divine Christ came upon him at his baptism and then left him before his death on the cross. And the reason why these false teachers taught this was because they rejected the notion that the Son of God could suffer on the cross. In other words, these false teachers accepted the testimony of water, Jesus's baptism, but rejected the

testimony of blood, Jesus's death. John confronts this by saying that Jesus came "not by the water only but by the water and the blood."

Take note of what this says about the importance of theological precision.

Theology is not considered to be very important by most contemporary Christians. What matters for Christians today is personal experience. For many, theology is at best optional for genuine spirituality, and at worst a barrier to it. It was not so for the apostle John. For him, theology was a matter of spiritual life and death. If a person believes the wrong things about Jesus, that person cannot have the life that is found in Jesus. Recall what John said back in chapter 2: "No one who denies the Son has the Father." Sound doctrine is necessary because saving faith consists in believing what God has told us in his Word. Christian experience is important, but if it is to be authentic Christian experience it needs to be based upon the truth that is proclaimed to us in the gospel.

In addition to the water and the blood, there is a third witness that testifies to Christ: the Holy Spirit. And John says that the Spirit's testimony is in perfect agreement with the testimony of the water and the blood. By setting forth this threefold testimony, John may be alluding to the fact that the Mosaic law required that a charge be established by two or three witnesses in order to be admissible in court. [see Deut. 19:15] The fact that there are three witnesses, and

that these witnesses are in perfect agreement with one another, underscores the reliability of God's testimony concerning his Son.

What does John mean when he speaks of the Spirit's testimony? How does the Spirit testify to Christ? John is talking about the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of God's elect, the testimony that convinces us that the gospel really is true. We know this because John's previous references to the Spirit in this letter have focused upon his work inside the hearts of God's people. Back in chapter 3 John said that we know that Christ abides in us "by the Spirit whom he has given us." [1 Jn. 3:24] Similarly, in chapter 4 he said, "By this we know that we abide in him and he is us, because he has given us of his Spirit." [1 Jn. 4:13] And here in our passage, in verse 10, John says, "Whoever believes in the Son of God has the testimony in himself." He says this because God's testimony about his Son is internalized in the hearts of believers when the Holy Spirit gives his testimony within us. In the words of our Westminster Confession of Faith, "our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority [of the Word of God], is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts." [WCF 1.5] Jesus spoke of this when he said to his disciples, "But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he

will bear witness about me." [Jn. 15:26] The Spirit bears witness to Christ in the hearts of God's people. This is the only reason why we respond to the gospel in faith. Many people hear the gospel message, but unless the Spirit of God testifies to the truth of the gospel in a person's heart, that person will not believe. In the words of Martin Luther, "No matter how much the Gospel is preached, no one accepts it unless the Spirit is present."

The perfection of God's threefold testimony to Christ is seen by the fact that it includes both external and internal aspects. The first two witnesses that John speaks of in this passage, the water and the blood, are witnesses that are external to us. They are historical, objective witnesses. But the third witness, the Holy Spirit, is an internal witness, an experiential and subjective witness. While the Spirit's testimony is in complete agreement with the testimony of the water and the blood, it takes place inside each believer. The Spirit of God inwardly convinces us of the truth of the gospel and leads us to respond to it in faith. And it is important to emphasize that these external and internal witnesses work together to testify to Christ. The subjective testimony of the Spirit is not independent of the objective testimony of the gospel. Rather, the Spirit bears witness to Christ by and with the Word.

In verse 9, John reminds us that the testimony that he is talking about here is of a divine nature. It is an authoritative testimony. If we are willing to accept the testimony of man, how much more should we accept the testimony of God? But there is a tragic irony here. The fact of the matter is that people are much more willing to accept the testimony of man than they are willing to accept the testimony of God. And the reason why this is so is because our fallen nature causes us to suppress God's truth and to replace it with lies of our own devising. As John points out, this is not only foolish, but blasphemous as well. When a person rejects the gospel, he is calling the God of truth a liar.

In verses 11-12, John tells us about the content of the testimony that he has been talking about. He writes, "And this is the testimony, that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son." I want to call your attention to two aspects of John's teaching here at the end of this passage. First, he says that eternal life is something that God "gave" us. It is a gift. It is not something that we can attain by our own efforts. This is what sets the gospel apart from all of the other religions of the world. It is what makes the gospel seem so very odd to people. Left to themselves, people will always think that the way to find acceptance with God is by their performance. And the reason why they think this way is because they have no idea of how lost they really are in their sin. We

are experts at self-justification. Even when directly confronted with the consequences of his sin, fallen man refuses to take full responsibility for it. He offers excuses. He blames others. He contends that nobody is perfect. He complains that people are just picking on him. And as long as he does these things, the gospel will seem utterly unnecessary in his eyes. What need does he have of an advocate with the Father when, as far as he is concerned, he can successfully argue his own case before God? What need does he have of propitiation for his sins when he does not think that God is really all that angry with him? The gospel will not seem like much of a gift to you unless you first come to see the utter helplessness and wretchedness of your condition. As John Calvin so eloquently puts it:

“For we will never have enough confidence in [Christ] unless we become deeply distrustful of ourselves; we will never lift up our hearts enough in him unless they be previously cast down in us; we will never have consolation enough in him unless we have already experienced desolation in ourselves.” [*Institutes*, 3.12.8]

Simply put, the gospel will not be good news to you unless you first come to understand the bad news about your standing before God apart from Christ.

The second thing that I want to point out about what John says in these last two verses is that God's gift of eternal life is found exclusively in Jesus Christ. John says, "Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life." And understand that the "life" that John is talking about here is not merely the future life of heaven. That is certainly one aspect of it, but it is not all that John is talking about. The life of which he is writing is the new life that is given to all who place their trust in Christ. It is a life that stands in sharp contrast to the life that we have as fallen creatures. It is a life that is so foreign to us in our sinful estate that it is identified with Christ himself.

Remember how John began this letter. He wrote,

"That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life - the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us" [1 Jn. 1:1-2]

Jesus is so closely identified with God's gift of eternal life that John actually calls him "the eternal life." This underscores the fact that the life that John is talking about here is a quality that we do not have in ourselves. Apart from Christ, we do not really have life. The life that John is talking about is something that we have to receive from outside of us. It is something that is only found in Jesus Christ.

How can we come to have this life? Verse 10 makes it clear that the only way a person can come to "have" Christ and the life that is found in him is by believing in him. The gift of eternal life is received by faith. But this raises another question, the question that is really at the heart of this passage: where does faith come from? The answer, as I said at the beginning of this sermon, is that faith depends upon testimony. Faith comes by hearing the gospel preached.

When we realize this, we begin to see that something very special is taking place when we hear God's Word being proclaimed. Preaching is God's appointed means for bringing his testimony about Christ to his people today. The threefold testimony of the water, the blood, and the Spirit comes to us through the preaching of the gospel. And because of this, true preaching is actually God's action, not the action of any man. You do not come to worship to

hear the words of a preacher, but to hear the Word of God. As the apostle Paul reminds us, those who preach the gospel are really just jars of clay. They are merely the receptacles through which the Lord brings us the treasure of his gospel. Preaching is not primarily about the conveying of information.

Preaching is God's principle means for delivering Christ to you. The way to receive fresh supplies of the life that is exclusively found in Jesus Christ is to come to worship each week with a heart that is eager to receive God's testimony about his Son.