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John 1:5-9 - The Voice of One

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Thank you Erntz for sharing your story.

That story is so much like many of our stories - we follow Jesus by faith, and we expect a certain life as a result. We expect certain answers to our prayers, certain resolution to our problems, and especially this time of the year.

So we can feel this is not what Christmas is supposed to be, this is not what life is supposed to be. And like Erntz said, there is all kinds of doubt that can come as a result.

But during this Advent season, we are looking to Jesus - not to sentimental holiday cheer and false hopes of quick resolution and ease in this life. But to the one Sure Thing, the one who was in the beginning with God, who made all things, who became flesh to live among us and shines in darkness, and who is worthy of putting our hope in.

And in today's passage we'll look at a life lived in His service - and the tremendous peace that comes from knowing and following and pointing to Jesus, but we'll also look at the hard reality - that a life lived in His service isn't one without dark nights, deep valleys, and even seemingly meaningless suffering and loss along the way. It's one where doubt creeps in, and we'll see how we can deal with that as well.

So let's pray and read our passage today.

So we are in John 1, we'll read the passage from last week and for this week to give us some context:

John 1:1-9 "1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God. 3 All things were made through

him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. 4 In him was life, and the life was the light of men. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. 6 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. 7 He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. 8 He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light. 9 The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.”

The first five verses were all about Jesus - the one who always was, the one who was in the beginning, who made all things. He is the source of all life, and His light shines in darkness. John rightly opens up by celebrating Jesus and Cody walked us through that passage last week.

But then in verse 6 there’s what seems to be a huge shift in focus:

John 1:6 “There was a man sent from God, whose name was John.”

This is a big change of tone.

He says all of that and then says, “AND - there was a guy named John.” Kind of anti-climactic.

But by pointing to John the Baptist, John the author wasn’t ceasing to point to Jesus. He is now pointing to Jesus through John. He zeros in on this one life that was uniquely planned out to point the way to Jesus in John the Baptist.

A little later on, some religious leaders come to John to try to figure out who he is. Here’s what happens:

John 1:19-27 “19 And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" 20 He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ." 21 And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" And he answered, "No." 22 So they said to him, "Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" 23 He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said." 24 (Now they had been sent from the Pharisees.) 25 They asked him, "Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?" 26 John answered

them, "I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know, 27 even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie."

So in identifying himself, John quotes from a passage these religious leaders would have been familiar with. It was a passage in Isaiah where God was promising that his people would be brought back from captivity to their homeland. God had made his people this promise:

Isaiah 35:10 10 And the ransomed of the LORD shall return and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

And the promise went on in Isaiah 40:

Isaiah 40: 1 Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. 2 Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins. 3 A voice cries: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. 4 Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. 5 And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

So God had said that when it was time for his people to come back from captivity, He would send a voice to cry in the wilderness to prepare the highway for God. And John was that voice.

But here's the thing: that return from captivity had already happened 500 years before John the Baptist said this.

So when John says he is the voice that cries in the wilderness preparing the way for God to come and bring his people back from exile, it wouldn't have made sense to these religious leaders. This already happened.

But John is saying that it hasn't yet happened fully and truly. That even though they live in their land, God's people are still captive and that the true return from exile is about to happen. There was a double fulfillment of those promises - the near term, return from captivity fulfillment of the promise. And the ultimate fulfillment in Jesus.

So when John says that he is “the voice of one crying in the wilderness,” he’s saying something about who Jesus is.

Jesus is coming to restore His people and to give them superabundantly all of the promises of singing and joy and gladness, with sorrow and sighing fleeing away. Jesus is coming to fully and completely restore His people back to God from captivity.

Jesus was coming to lead his people to freedom and safety and joy. To lead them back home.

Our biggest problem is never external. We have real external problems, for sure. But our biggest problem is our enmity with God. John Stott calls it both our “tragedy and trauma.”

It’s our tragedy because we lost the connection with God who made us. And it’s our trauma because of the grief, and anguish, and displacement, and all of the consequences of our sin in a broken humanity.

Not being connected to God is our biggest problem.

And Jesus came to solve that. To go to the cross to pay for our sin. To rise again to conquer death. To reconcile all who would believe to God.

In the end, Jesus is the one who heals every bit of our tragedy and our trauma.

He’s our joy. He’s the one who causes sorrow to cease. He’s the cause for our singing and gladness.

And according to Isaiah 40:5, when that return from captivity would happen, we would see God’s glory. God would shine most brightly to His people when He rescued them.

And later on in the gospel of John, we’re told:

John 1:14 And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

This whole passage is making the case that Jesus is the glory of God that we would see. He didn’t just point to the glory of God like the prophets, he is the glorious one. He is the

one they're pointing to. He's the One the world has been waiting for in sin and error pining.

Jesus came to do something incredible that all of our hearts are after - end our war against God, forgive our sin, and comfort us, and bring us the real peace we are after.

So if you've put your trust in everything else to make you whole, to ease your guilt, to give you hope, and all of those things have proven to be shifting sand, throw yourself on Jesus. Trust in Him. Worship Him.

So by saying he was the voice crying in the wilderness, John the Baptist was not saying, "Look at me, I'm a big deal in the story, Isaiah wrote about me too!" He was saying 'Jesus is a bigger deal than you think.'

In fact, throughout this passage John the writer and John the Baptist work very hard to deny that John the Baptist should be the center of attention. They draw all of the attention to Jesus.

A major part of John's ministry was making very clear that he was not the Christ.

Because he saw who Jesus was, He deliberately and repeatedly deflected the praise of anyone who wanted to make much of him so that Jesus could be made much of.

And this is essential for all of us.

We seek peace and fulfillment by looking inwardly.

We spend a lot of time focused on the self in ways that we would think are very Christian. We are very concerned about spiritual self-improvement, at looking at ourselves in the mirror and evaluating ourselves. We think that the Christian life is predominantly about navel gazing, self-contemplation.

We spend a lot of time looking at ourselves to make sure we're being good, we live a life of checking up on ourselves to make sure we are doing right, examining ourselves to see if our faith is strong. And there have been countless books written on Christian self-improvement and self-help that call us to focus inwardly and work on me, with Jesus to help me become a better me.

The biggest question we ask about our Christianity is “How am I doing?”

I focus primarily on my performance for Jesus, finding and following my purpose, becoming all I should become.

I can even obsess over my faith, and whether I really have it or whether it's strong enough. There is no limit to the number of opportunities for us to gaze inwardly to look for answers.

And while there is some place for self-examination in anybody's life, and even some commanded in scripture, it is this preoccupation with self that is often the enemy to a vital life of faith.

This preoccupation keeps us from growing in love for God and our neighbor, and leaves us feeling insecure and confused.

I remember as a new Christian endlessly praying the sinner's prayer because I wasn't convinced that it took last time and I was really a Christian. I didn't feel any different. I remember years of wrestling with assurance and wondering if I am really a child of God and trying to find my answers by looking into my heart.

I spent years trying to believe harder, not really having any idea what that would mean, trying to believe “really deep deep down in my heart”, really sincerely, really meaning it, but not knowing what that would even be like. I rededicated myself to Christ regularly, I did a lot of work on my faith directly. I looked at my faith a lot, questioned it, doubted it, tried to work it up. But it was all frustrating and vague, it was chasing after the wind. I didn't know what I was after and wouldn't know when I arrived.

But faith is the opposite of self-focus. We are actually self-defeating when we look inwardly to build faith. Faith doesn't spend a lot of time looking in the mirror, but looks outside itself to Jesus.

So we can learn to find peace by being like John here and saying “The answer isn't me!” It isn't in me. I AM NOT THE CHRIST!

And if there's one conclusion we can all take from all of our years of inward focus, it's probably, “I'm clearly not Jesus.” And there's a peace that comes from recognizing that. From recognizing who we are and who we aren't in the story.

We are often, without knowing it, on the age-old quest to be God.

You probably say, "Nobody here is claiming to be Jesus. The Kool-aid is totally safe to drink at Grace Road. This isn't our issue."

But this is our issue - and the risk we run all the time individually and collectively. Not just for us, but since the dawn of humanity.

If you'll remember, Adam and Eve were in the paradise garden on a paradise earth in Eden. They were told not to eat the fruit from one tree. But Satan, disguised as a serpent, comes and says, **"5 For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." (Genesis 3:5).**

One of the lies that ruined the world is that we can be like God. And we still tend to believe it today. It's more subtle than you might think.

We forget the place God has given us as only human. And we do it often in lots of ways:

We try to always being available for all of our friends (acting like we can be omnipresent) and help them in every way they ask.

We feel the need to control everything.

We operate prayerlessly in our own strength: serving others, teaching others, counseling others, fighting injustice, inviting people to church. But we ourselves are empty. Because we aren't going to a source. We're our own source, we act like we're the independent ones, and constantly run out of what we're trying to give others, because we don't believe what John 1 says about Jesus: in HIM was life (John 1:4).

If we think we are the answer, we eclipse the light of Jesus. John saw his place in this story as a pointer to Jesus who was coming, and our place in the story likewise is not to be the answer but to point to Him.

The answer is Christ. And the life we've been called to live is a life of pointing to Christ, not to ourselves.

Bernard of Clairvaux, an old French monk, said, *“I preached myself, the scholars came and praised me. I preached Christ, the sinners came and thanked me.”*

As Christians and as a church, we are usually strongest when we’re weakest. We’re better off with no fame to depend on, no money to rest in, nothing much going for us. That’s when we often know Jesus the best.

When we get to be a big deal in our own minds, it’s difficult to maintain our big vision of Jesus because we can quickly eclipse Him. We become the great one in the story.

But greatness is found in pointing away from ourselves and toward Christ.

Jesus said this about John in **Matthew 11:11** **“Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist.”**

He said John was legitimately a great person in the service of Christ. He wasn’t corrupted by being big and prominent in the story, but did what he was supposed to do with his position, which was point to Jesus.

He maintained humility and fulfilled his role..

Which is my prayer for us individually and our church in this new season - that we would be humble and keep pointing to Jesus.

I’ve been spending lots of time at the new building lately - we’re still looking good to be in on December 19th. And it is amazing.

For the half the cost of buying and building out a simple warehouse, this team has converted this majestic, historic, pantheon-esque space into a house for our worship, community life, and spreading of the Gospel. We would have been content with the built-out warehouse, but we get this place.

We are incredibly thankful for what God has provided. He has provided the resources for a debt-free purchase and construction. He has provided an incredibly devoted team and kept their spirits up through all the challenges of a project like this. Every day since this started in the spring they wake up, and there are problems and obstacles, and they just keep going.

And the results are spectacular.

And I have every hope that all of the work that the staff and volunteers and donors and contractors have put into that place will serve to draw our thoughts up to God, to enhance our worship, and to lead to thousands coming to faith in Christ.

What a great tool to point to Jesus.

And the risk, with all of God's gifts, is that we would use them to point to us. To move into that space and say, "Look how great Grace Road is - of course their church is strong, they have a place like this." That place is given to us to glorify Jesus with, to serve our community and each other with.

There was a time when Jesus went and ministered in the region where John used to baptize. And people inevitably compared Jesus to John. And this is what happened:

John 10:42-42 "40 He went away again across the Jordan to the place where John had been baptizing at first, and there he remained. 41 And many came to him. And they said, "John did no sign, but everything that John said about this man was true." 42 And many believed in him there.

They said, "John never did any miracles, but everything he said about Jesus was true, and they believed in Jesus."

How great would it be if that's what they said about Grace Road in the future. "They're not impressive, they're not a big deal, but everything they say about Jesus is true." And then, may verse 42 happen - many believed in him there!

Real peace, real fulfillment, real joy, real hope, real love - are all found in knowing Christ, and a life spent pointing to Christ.

So John was faithful, he lived like God wanted him to live. He was way more obedient than you or I will ever be. He was on the Varsity team when it comes to being a faithful Christian. And Jesus said, "among those born of women there's not one greater than John the Baptist."

Which makes what we are about to see remarkable.

In Matthew 11, John the Baptist went to prison. He had called out the king for illegally marrying his brother's wife. And things were different back then, politicians who were accused of sexual misconduct used to try to silence their accusers.

So he threw John in jail.

And jail for them was inhumane, it was indefinite. They didn't know if they'd get out (John never did.) They knew they could be put to death at the end of it.

In jail, your life was ruined.

So John's life had more conflict than he would have had he not been spending his life pointing to Jesus.

John had what one author called the brutal privilege of spending his life pointing people to Jesus.

Matthew 11: 2 Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples 3 and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?"

So John, the greatest man ever after Jesus, the miracle baby, who heard God's voice, who recognized Jesus before anyone, who announced Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, is in prison. And he is having major doubts about Jesus.

So if John, who is far closer to God than us, is having a major time of darkness and doubt, it is reasonable to assume that we will too. We are not greater than John the Baptist, but here he is in prison, not sure about Jesus.

We like to maintain this image of believers with air tight faith that never wavers, but even this guy who Jesus said was not shaken by the wind started wondering.

Now if you've spent a lot of time in phony religious circles, everybody pretends they don't have doubts. And this can make you feel very lonely. You wonder, "Do these people NEVER pray and not feel like anyone is hearing them? Do these people not hear the snide remarks by comedians or the wisdom of the philosophers and scientists or read the

cynical tweets and wonder? Do they ever wonder if they got it wrong? Do they ever think they should maybe be living for something else?

John the Baptist came to a low place of darkness and doubt.

Which is understandable. **He's in jail. His life just isn't making sense right now, and it just hasn't gone well.**

He was supposed to prepare the way for Jesus, Jesus was supposed to come to power, and John, you would think, would probably have some kind of decent spot in his administration and be a ruler in the new kingdom.

But instead, John is in a dungeon. Which is depressing by itself. But this turn of events doesn't make sense.

Because we think, "If I'm really faithful, I do lots of good things, then sometime in my life God rewards me. You wonder if John is thinking, "This camel hair clothes thing is getting old, and I don't even like wild honey, and I'm preaching like crazy, the nation is repenting. So soon I get a reward from God. I'm doing a really good job here, so I should have a raise coming!" But instead he gets thrown into jail.

So life has taken a turn for the worse, he doesn't see his reward, and it doesn't make sense that the one who is all powerful, Jesus, has allowed this to happen to his most faithful messenger.

Life is not what he had planned, it is not what it was supposed to be, it didn't feel blessed and prosperous, God wasn't answering, there was no end in sight, and for John life never did get better.

So He sends to Jesus and says, "What am I missing here?" ARE you the one?

Remember when I said you were greater than me, the lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world? Was I right about that?

Remember when I decided to follow you because you're God among us, and because you're good and full of grace and truth? Then why am I here?

Who doesn't doubt when life turns like that?

We can go through that and have those circumstances drive a wedge between us and God.

But look how John handles those doubts. Even in his doubts here he is an example to us:

(1) Notice he doesn't say, "Are you the One, or should we just give up on the idea that there's a Savior? Are you the one or is there not "A One"?"

No, he understands that not looking for a savior is not an option for a human.

If Jesus isn't our God, we will make something else our God. We always look for another. We always have someone or something that rules us, that drives us, that dominates us. If Jesus isn't your savior, you'll look for another one. Someone or something or some idea to live for. Something to make you happy. Someone to save you from loneliness. You will have an ultimate hope. You will turn something into your Jesus.

The problem is that all other hopes disappoint. None will love us like Jesus.

(2) He doesn't put God to the test.

John just asks, "Are you the one."

He doesn't say, "If you're the one, then why is my life going so badly."

We usually go about our doubts differently in our arrogance. John doesn't say to Jesus, "If you're the one, spring me outa this joint!" He knows that if Jesus is who he claims to be, then he can't claim to know better than Jesus whether his life should be going this way. And if Jesus is a liar, he can't help him anyways.

So he just asks, "Are you the one? I'm struggling with doubt. I'm confused. I'm isolated. I'm depressed. I'm lonely. I don't see where this is headed. Can you give me any hope here? If you're the one, whatever you ask of me is OK – what ever you decide is right and wise and practical."

3) He brings his doubts to Jesus.

He doesn't just allow them to fester, he doesn't assume his doubts are right - he sends for Jesus.

And Jesus answers him. Jesus doesn't jump through our hoops, but does answer genuine questions and respond to weakness and doubt:

Matthew 11:4 And Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: 5 the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. 6 And blessed is the one who is not offended by me."

Jesus answers by telling these messengers to just go to John and tell them what you see and what you hear I've done: blind guys healed, lame guys walking, lepers healed, deaf people hearing, dead people raised to life.

So he is doing all of these things that "The One" is supposed to do. These messengers see some of it and hear about the rest.

And Jesus quotes in part from Isaiah 61

Isaiah 61 1 The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound;

There is an answer to John's question here: I'm doing just what the one is supposed to do, so yes I'm the one. But notice the part of the Isaiah passage that Jesus leaves out. "The opening of the prison to those who are bound."

He may be dropping John a hint here: Yes I'm the one, I'm doing all of these other things, but you're not going to be getting out of prison.

Jesus answers his doubts with solid evidence that Jesus is who he claims to be, and perhaps a warning that that doesn't mean John is going to get out of this one.

But notice that Jesus isn't offended by John's questioning. John asks a genuine question and desperately needs hope, he needs his belief refreshed, so he goes to Jesus with this and gets a genuine, faith-building answer.

And I believe Jesus does this for us too. We can pray and confess to him doubts and unbelief. We can look to the Bible and look to great people through the ages who have wrestled with the big doubts we have, and Jesus will restore faith and give hope.

One reason we stay in doubt and confusion is because we don't ask a genuine question, we give orders and threats. I would be interested in believing in you if you spring me from prison. If you get me a spouse. If you make me a great pastor. You're not asking for info, you're giving an order, you're saying, "I'll have a relationship with you if you do what I want."

It's one thing to search for Jesus and ask real questions. It's another to set up tests and make demands, and he never answers stuff like that.

But if you genuinely seek for him, you will find him if you search for him with all your heart.

So how do we handle doubt?

(1) Realize that peace with God doesn't mean we will have a life free from hardship, sin, or doubt.

(2) Bring those doubts to Jesus, but we don't try to manipulate God with doubts and get him to jump through hoops.

(3) Build our faith consistently so we're ready for the jail experience - so we can be ready for tragedy or the times when doubt takes hold.

(4) And in the tragedy, in the confusion, go to Jesus. He's there to meet you.

Even if you're not sure you believe He's there.

And when you go to Him, you will find grace.

In a moment we will invite those of you who believe to take the Lord's supper with us.

And this supper is a reminder that we don't approach God only once we've achieved perfect faith.

It's a reminder that we approach God because of the death of His Son. This is not a supper for the perfect, it's a feast for sinners. Who say I've sinned, I'm weary, I'm despairing, I'm doubting - I don't have enough good in me to ever come to God.

But when we eat the bread, we are saying that the body of Christ was crucified for our sin.

When we drink the cup we are saying that His blood paid the price.

And if we come to Him broken, weary, but confessing and clinging to Jesus, than this supper will be one more way God builds our faith and points to Christ.

If we take this supper proud, without confessing sin, trusting ourselves as righteous - it will be worse than not taking it at all. So if you have not yet believed in Him, I'd encourage you to not take this supper. If you say you've believed but you have sin you won't confess or let go of, again, don't eat this supper. But if with the weakest of all faith you say "I believe my only hope is that Jesus died and rose for me," and you confess your sin, then take this boldly.

Take this as a feast for your soul.

Let what Jesus did be a cause for huge relief to you today. A source of gladness and joy, not for the self-righteous, but for those with nothing but Jesus. Let this supper refresh your faith so that your soul is reminded that Jesus is the One who was to come, we can stop looking for another.

Let's pray in silence for a minute, then I'll close in prayer, and if you'd like you can take this supper as we continue to worship.

Prayer of Confession

Father we confess to you that we're tired and weary. But we aren't just weak, we're also sinful. Our lives lack peace, so we often look within, assuming without saying it that "I am the answer."

So forgive us for that spiritual self-reliance that alienates us from you.

Jesus, we thank you that you came as the source, the light, the life. All we have we have in you. Thank you that because of your death, your perfect reliance on the Father is counted as ours.

Spirit, fill us up. Let us be refreshed by the gospel as we take this supper. Remind us of what we know, refresh our faith, and give us peace and joy, not in circumstances, but in Christ.

Discussion Questions:

- 1) Why is the introduction of John the Baptist in John 1 so tied together with the introduction of Jesus?
- 2) How was John's role a huge privilege? How was it difficult? How is your life pointing to Jesus a privilege? How is it difficult?
- 3) Is there a way to have peace in the midst of sorrow? How is it developed?
- 4) How did John handle his doubts? How do we handle them?
- 5) How do we prepare for tragedy so that our faith can thrive in it?
- 6) How is the message of the prosperity gospel a lie?