



## BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

John 1:19 - 3:36

“The Messiah’s Year of Obscurity”

TRANSCRIPT

The theme of our series of studies is the New Testament Revelation of the Messiah. We have considered his birth, we have looked at his baptism, and then at his temptation, and now we are looking at that period of his life in which he begins his public ministry of the gospel. And our subject for today is The Messiah’s Year of Obscurity, and since most of the year of obscurity is found in the Gospel of John chapter 1, verse 19 through chapter 3, verse 36, we’re going to be looking in a rather broad fashion at this section of the New Testament.

The public ministry of the Messiah began at the conclusion of his temptation. According to many New Testament scholars it began in AD 27 and lasted for three years. By many of the same scholars, his death occurred in April of AD 30. His public ministry may be divided into three periods and they may be called the Year of Obscurity, the Year of Public Favor, and the Year of Opposition. There may be discerned a similarity between the life of our Lord and the life of many reformers. In the first period of life the new figure gains a measure of recognition. In the second period the person in his doctrine attain significant popularity, but the third period is often a period of reaction. The reformer is assailed by those whose interests and prejudices have been attacked by

him and his enemies have rallied sufficiently to gain the support of the crowds and to crush him.

One can see something of this in the West’s relationship to Alexander Solzhenitsyn. Those he rallied to his support and praise initially now seem to have lost their first love. Probably because it now appears that he stands for a view of moral law that is more than they can stomach. Israel was a decadent nation in John’s day and in Jesus’ day; stricken with spiritual blindness, moral degeneracy and political corruption. The Baptist’s preaching in Luke chapter 3, verse 1 through verse 20, and the Apostle John’s evaluation of the effects of Jesus’ ministry and John 12:37 through 50 make that very plain.

Words with plaintiff cry to the ghost of Milton, “Milton! Thou should’st be living at this hour: England hath need of thee: she is a fen of stagnant waters, would have found a confirming response in the day of Christ.” We turn now in our studies to a brief review of the Year of Obscurity, the first year of our Lord’s public ministry. And as we said earlier, the account of it is almost entirely found in John’s gospel.

The first division of our study is the testimony of John to the Messiah. John chapter 1, verse 19 through verse 34, and I hope you have your New Testaments handy and will be looking at them along with the study. After the delegation from Jerusalem had questioned John about his identity and were told by him directly, even curtly, that he was not the Messiah, only his heralding voice, John saw Jesus coming toward him, perhaps returning from the temptations forty days in the wilderness. The appearance of the Messiah provoked a testimony from the Baptist that is a beautiful backdrop from which to consider the person and work of Jesus Christ.

John’s words stress three of the great offices that belong to the Lord Jesus. First, his opening words, “Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world,” John 1:29, mark our Lord out as the suffering servant of Jehovah and the world’s penal substitutionary sacrifice. Many opinions have been held of the meaning of the phrase,

“The Lamb of God,” but it seems most likely that the biblical teaching on the lamb originated in Abraham’s experience of the sacrifice of Isaac. It was developed in the Passover ceremony and found its Old Testament climax in Isaiah’s final prophecy of the suffering servant of Jehovah in Isaiah chapter 53, in verse 7. We know the Baptist saw himself as the herald of Isaiah chapter 40, verse 3, and already familiar with the heavenly commission given our Lord at the baptism, which included the reference to the suffering servant, it seems reasonable to believe that he was identifying Jesus as the servant who would fulfill the task typified by the Passover lambs. That is, he would be the sacrifice whose death would provide deliverance for others. He would take away sin by bearing it himself.

The singular term “sin” may point to the sin of unbelief, the root of all sin in the infection of human nature and a favorite theme of this Gospel of John. The sin, John says, is of the world; that is, of both Jews and gentiles. This is not universalism; some do deign their sins as John the apostle will say later on, giving our Lord’s own words on the point. Nor universal atonement, for the work is effectual, he does take it away, but from God’s believing people alone. Further, John testifies that Jesus is the King Messiah. John formally had known him as the Messiah but now he testifies to his preexistence and the fact that the Spirit of God descended and remained on Jesus identified him as the Messiah, the suffering King. Isaiah chapter 42, and verse 1, and chapter 61, and verse 1, makes special reference to the fact that the Messiah would be anointed by the Spirit of God. And finally John testified to Jesus as the Son of God, John 1:34. This testimony is the climactic one since it is the gospel’s purpose to proclaim his Sonship, “Authentic tidings about God are found only in the Lord Jesus, the Son of God.”

The second of the divisions of our study is the call of the first disciples in John 1:35 through 51. It has been said that there are three steps in the life with God. Well all three are found here: first, testimony to Christ; then, contact with Christ, personal contact; and thirdly, fruitfulness through the Lord Jesus. Central is the firsthand experience of the

Lord and this, the choicest of John’s disciples found when John the Baptist introduced them to Jesus of Nazareth. Among the first may have been John the apostle but others of the Baptist’s disciples became our Lord’s also. They did not immediately give up their careers to follow him but the contact with our Lord decided their entire lives work.

Our Lord’s words to the two disciples of John who had asked, “Rabbi, where dwellest Thou?” where, “Come and see,” words of a convention form of invitation in rabbinical literature, drawing attention to something new, important, or difficult. And the word “foresee” is one that denotes spiritual perception. What followed transformed their lives for Christ’s spell fell upon them. Among them were Andrew, Peter, Philip, and Nathaniel.

The third of the divisions of our study is the marriage at Cana of Galilee. It’s described in John 2, verse 1 through verse 11. With his newly attached disciples, the Messiah went north to Galilee where at Cana he attended the marriage and displayed the miraculous powers recently given him. In Nathaniel’s village he turned water into wine, immeasurably enhancing the wedding’s joyous atmosphere. The incident, sometimes entitled Joy in Cana, points to him as the secret of spiritual joy for eternal redemption is found in him and in his saving work. The futility of the world’s ideas, principles and hopes, and providing such joy indicates the superiority of the Messiah’s provision. The critics at times have been unkind to the account, calling it a luxury miracle since it was hardly a miracle of mercy such as his healing miracles were. What was it that made it necessary for him to lavish the best of wines upon the wedding party, one might ask. What were the lasting benefits of such a display? I think Mr. Tasker is right, however, when he comments, “But these are the wrong questions to ask, for none of the miracles have Jesus were kind actions to alleviate human distress and nothing more. They were, as this gospel invariably calls them, signs displaying the glory of Jesus and the wonder of his redeeming love.” The natural significance of the sign aside from Jesus’ hallowing of

family life and his approval of festive times is at spotlight upon his creative power.

Written over the sign is the signature of divinity, as someone has said.

George Wreath has cited the ancient saying, “The conscious water saw its Lord and blushed.” Jesus is not a monk or the pale Galilean, but God manifest in the flesh who creates. There are typical significances in the sign, too. The reference to the six water pots used by the Jews in purifying may be designed to show the emptiness and inadequacy of Judaism to satisfy the guests. “They have no wine,” is a vivid reminder of the status of religion at that day. Jesus and his reply to Mary mentions his hour. That’s no whim of fancy, he makes it clear that what he does is related to the cross where he will pour out his blood for the salvation of men. This first miracle in four hundred years, a kind of frontispiece of the gospel says that the best wine is that of the new messianic age. Ultimately what he is to do will be celebrated in the Lord’s Supper, as his people eat the bread and drink the blood of grapes, the wine of eternal joy and salvation. This first sign begins the display of his glory as the Messiah, the Son of God, so John the apostle says.

The fourth of the divisions of our study is the cleansing of the temple set out in John 2:12 through 22. Following the wedding Jesus spent a brief time in Capernaum where he would later carry on a large part of his ministry. The Passover being at hand he again went up to Jerusalem and there something happened that was in marked contrast to the wedding in Cana. What Jesus found in the temple has been called the bazaars of the sons of Annas, the high priest. Upon entering it as the Messiah, that reminds us of Malachi 3:1, he found it like a stockyard filled with the stench and filth, the bleating and lowing of the animals destined for sacrifice. There was, however, an even deeper stench there to him; the vendors and money changes were exploiting the people by requiring visitors to buy their sacrificial animals there and to buy them with money exchanged by them at a profit. It’s no wonder that Jesus said at the second cleansing that took place later on that they had made God’s house a den of thieves. One is reminded of the

activities in many Christian churches today: auctions, bingo, raffles, bazaars, and other inappropriate conduct.

Indignant at what he saw, Jesus drove the commercializing monopolists out of the temple with a whip made of rushes. The action was an exercise in messiahship. His use of the term, “My Father’s house,” in verse 16 asserts his divine Sonship, for Son of God is a messianic term. The same impression of majestic and irresistible holiness so terrifying to unholy men, even today, that had appalled the Baptist when Jesus sought baptism from him, forced the ignoble crew of merchandisers to quail before him like the kings and commoners trembled before the ancient prophets. Jesus’ reforming work had begun.

The fifth stage in our study is the ministry in Jerusalem, described just briefly in John 2:23 through 25. During his stay in Jerusalem for the Passover feast, Jesus performed a number of signs and many believed in his name as they saw the signs. Was this a saving faith? The usage of the Greek verb in the following phrase in John suggests it was, unless the clause when they saw the miracles which he did be taken as limiting the force of believed. In other words, they had faith in him as a miracle worker.

One commentator calls the faith of the persons neither stable nor adequate. Morris agrees, referring to Luther’s description of it as a milk faith. The following words about Jesus’ attitude to them, namely that he had no faith in their faith, tend to say that Jesus would not be dazzled by their commitment and in fact regarded it as inadequate. The sixth of the subjects that we’re dealing with is the conversation with Nicodemus, so well-known, so beloved by Christians, found in John 3, verse 1 through verse 21. There was one man of insufficient faith who nevertheless was so moved by Jesus’ signs that he found it necessary to seek further light on life, even if it meant a night visit. His name was Nicodemus and he was a ruler of the Jews. He thought well of our Lord but not well enough. And it was our Lord’s ministry that brought him from faith in Christ as a teacher to faith in him as a savior.

Nicodemus asked our Lord three questions. They are found implicitly in verse 2 and explicitly in verse 4 and verse 9. The first is unexpressed but implied in the words to our Lord, “Rabbi, we know that Thou art a teacher come from God, for no man can do these miracles that Thou doest except God be with him,” John 3:2. The cautious Pharisee leading up to the question intended to say something like, “Teach me about the Kingdom of God.” But Jesus interrupted Nicodemus with the words, “Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the Kingdom of God,” John 3:3. One needs more than renovation, reformation, or education. A dead man cannot assist in his own resurrection and we are dead in sin. Only God can create life in a dead man and he does that by the implantation of life through the word of God and the new life given by God hears the word and manifests itself in faith. The resurrection of Lazarus is John’s illustration of the new birth. Read John 11, verse 1 through verse 46.

The second question follows in verse 4, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter the second time into his mother's womb, and be born?” so Nicodemus asked, and again our Lord solemnly invites the Pharisees attention and says, “Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the Kingdom of God,” John 3:5. Essentially our Lord, using two figures of water and wind, for the word Spirit is used for both spirit and wind in the Greek language, says that the new birth only comes through the work of the cleansing of Spirit of God. That is confirmed by verse 8 where Jesus sums up his mind on the point with, “The wind blows where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit.” Human nature produces only human nature. Divine nature alone produces divine nature. The new birth is a sovereign operation of God’s Spirit, irresistible and incomprehensible, just like the wind. Those who offer life by a host of manmade, thoroughly analyzable human regulations, are clearly seen to be in error.

Nicodemus’s third question, “How can these things be?” in John 3:9, creates astonishment in our Lord to a certain extent. Astonished that a teacher of Israel should be

ignorant of these things and he goes on to locate life in his cross, typified by the lifting up of the brazen serpent in Israel’s wilderness history, described in Numbers chapter 21, and verse 4 through verse 9. The great text of John 3:16, called by some, “Everybody’s text,” and by Luther, “The miniature gospel,” which in his dying moments he repeated three times in Latin, climaxes our Lord’s words. It reminds Nicodemus and us of the greatest fact, God’s love for the world of gentiles, as well as of Jews, and of the greatest result, the gift of a suffering savior, and of the greatest purpose, that believers might have eternal life. Not six months life nor life until we sin, but eternal life.

Nicodemus’s response to Jesus’ ministry promised hope for the future and, of course, we know that the interview led to his faith, John 7 and John 19 certainly seem to support that. But Nicodemus was the only one on whose heart our Lord’s first signs produced a deep impression.

Our final section of study has to do with John the Baptist’s testimony to the Messiah found in John 3:22 through 36. The obscurity of our Lord’s first year of public ministry is evident at this point for after such a beginning the next eight months are empty of information about him. We learn nothing more than that he carried on a baptizing ministry in Judea through his disciples and that in fact his ministry had grown to be larger than John’s, John 3:22 through 26. When John is questioned about it he displays the humility that caused our Lord to speak of him as the greatest of those born of women, acknowledging the general principle that everything comes to men by the sovereign disposition of God. He utters his great concluding statement, “He must increase but I must decrease.” It’s a magnificent utterance indicating that John knows Jesus’ place, “He must increase,” and that he knows John’s place, “I must decrease.” And also that he knows John’s disciples’ place, “They are those who stand and listen and make him known.”

Here is the secret of Joy, it’s found in what Henry Drummond used to call, “Other reason,” and is displayed often on the plaque that graces the home of many Christians all

over the world which contains the words, “The secret of joy: God first, others next, self last.” I’ve often seen those words in the homes in which I visited as a visiting preacher over the United States and in fact in Great Britain as well. The secret of joy: God first, others next, self last.

The final words of John chapter 3, probably from John, give impressive testimony to the heavenly origin and preeminent glory of the Lord Jesus Christ. Now notice, he says in verse 31, “He that cometh from above is above all: he that is of the earth is earthly, and speaketh of the earth: he that cometh from heaven is above all.” Twice he says that the Lord Jesus comes from above, from heaven, and is above all.

Now John the Baptist was a faithful, believing Jewish man. He must often have recited the shema Israel, the fundamental text on the unity of God found in Deuteronomy chapter 6 in verse 4, “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord.” Now here the Baptist, a Jewish, faithful, pious man says of the Lord Jesus Christ, “He that cometh from above is above all, he that cometh from heaven is above all.” He that cited the shema Israel found no difficulty in saying that Jesus the Messiah was from heaven and above all. The emergence of the completed doctrine of the trinity was no problem for John the Baptist. That which was hinted at in the Old Testament gradually unfolded, reaches its climax in the New Testament and the faithful, pious Jewish believer acknowledges the supreme position of the Lord Jesus Christ as, “Very God, a very God.” He thought of Jesus as celestial, and of himself as terrestrial.

And in his final words locate the possession of eternal life in the possession of the Son. “He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life,” John claimed. As Rolland Hill used to say, “Hath, h-a-t-h, that spells ‘got it’.” So let me, in the few moments that remain ask you who are listening to me, do you have it? Do you have that everlasting life? If, by God’s grace, you’ve come to understand that the Lord Jesus has come to die for sinners, has offered an atoning sacrifice on Calvary’s cross and offers eternal life and you have come to see yourself as a sinner and needing forgiveness of sins and you have leaned

upon him in a personal decision of faith, made in your heart, you have everlasting life. Not six months life, not life until you sin, but everlasting life. As an ambassador of the Lord Jesus, I invite you to come to him, trust in him, rest upon him. As John says, “Believe on the Son and enjoy the possession of everlasting life.” Come to Christ, believe on him right now.

Next week we continue our series of studies in the revelation of the Messiah in the New Testament...

**[RECORDING ENDS ABRUPTLY]**