

**JOHN 1:6–8, 19–28.** (EHV)

There was a man, sent from God, whose name was John. He came as an eyewitness to testify about the light so that everyone would believe through him. He was not the light, but he came to testify about the light. ... This is the testimony John gave when the Jews from Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him, "Who are you?" He confessed and did not deny. He confessed, "I am not the Christ." And they asked him, "Who are you then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" "No," he answered. Then they asked him, "Who are you? Tell us so we can give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord' [Isa. 40:3], just as Isaiah the prophet said." They had been sent from the Pharisees. So they asked John, "Why then do you baptize, if you are not the Christ, or Elijah, or the Prophet?" "I baptize with water," John answered. "Among you stands one you do not know. He is the one coming after me, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to untie." These things happened in Bethany beyond the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

Who is Jesus?

People often get the mistaken impression that the Athanasian Creed, which we use once or twice a year, was written by Athanasius. It wasn't. But it was written in his honor. Athanasius was elected the bishop of Alexandria in Egypt, along the coast of the Mediterranean Sea, around age 31. Even before he was elected bishop, he became familiar with a pastor named Arius, who had begun to introduce some heretical ideas about Jesus. Arius taught that Christ the Son of God was made by the Father and was therefore subordinate to the Father and not of one being with the Father. He summed up his views in the catchy phrase: "There was a time when he was not," namely, there was a time when Christ, God's Son, did not exist. Arius also wrote hymns to summarize and popularize his theological views.

Athanasius wrote and preached vigorously against Arius's views. He emphasized, as we now confess in the Nicene Creed, that Christ was and is "of one being with the Father." But Arius's views gained a lot of support in Alexandria, and as a result, Athanasius was exiled from his city five different times, not counting approximately six additional incidents when he had to flee the city to avoid people seeking to take his life. As a result of Athanasius's teaching about who Jesus is, he gained the nickname Athanasius contra Mundum—Athanasius against the World.

Athanasius is just one Christian out of many who showed us that how we answer the question, "Who is Jesus?" matters a great deal.

John the Baptist was another. He wanted people to know who Jesus was and is, and who they were in relation to him, so that they would appreciate who Jesus was and is and would give glory to God for who Jesus was and is.

## 1. Who Jesus Is

So who is Jesus?

The apostle John, who wrote this book, introduces John the Baptist's message about Jesus with these words: "There was a man, sent from God, whose name was John. He came as an eyewitness to testify about the light so that everyone would believe through him. He was not the light, but he came to testify about the light." John goes on to say, "The real light that shines on everyone, *or* gives light to everyone, was coming into the world," namely Jesus. So Jesus is the light, the light responsible for the faith of everyone who believes in him, the light who gives light to everyone. He is the ultimate knowledge, the ultimate wisdom. Everyone who wants to be truly knowledgeable and wise, who wants to be truly enlightened, must get their knowledge and wisdom from Jesus.

The apostle John then goes on to give specifics from John's preaching about who Jesus is. "This is the testimony John gave when the Jews from Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him, 'Who are you?' He confessed and did not deny. He confessed, 'I am not the Christ.' And they asked him, 'Who are you then? Are you Elijah?' He said, 'I am not.' 'Are you the Prophet?' 'No,' he answered." John not only made it clear that Jesus was the Christ, the deliverer promised throughout the Old Testament, but he also made it clear that neither he nor Jesus were some reincarnation of an Old Testament prophet. In other words, Jesus is not merely a godly man or a good example or a good moral teacher and preacher. He is much more and higher than that, which John makes clear as he goes on.

The priests and Levites then asked John point-blank who he was, and he said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord' [Isa. 40:3], just as Isaiah the prophet said." And later he said, "Among you stands one you do not know. He is the one coming after me, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to untie." John the Baptist says he is preparing the way for the Lord himself, and that the Lord himself stands among them. John is capturing both the human nature of Jesus—he stands among them—and the divine nature of Jesus—he is the Lord. And since he is the Lord himself, John says that he is not worthy to untie Jesus's sandal strap.

John had already spelled this out earlier, and he repeats it later, when he says, "This was the one I spoke about when I said, 'The one coming after me outranks me because he existed before me.'" Jesus is coming after him—he was six months younger than John and arrived on the scene to preach the good news after John had already begun preaching—and yet Jesus was before him, because he was also true God, begotten of the Father from eternity. It reminds us of what Jesus himself says about himself later in the Gospel of John: "Before Abraham was born, I am!" (John 8:58).

So yes, Jesus is created by the Father as to his humanity and is less than the Father as to his humanity, he is also equal to the Father and of one being with the Father as to his divinity. Jesus both has a birthday and is eternal. He is born of the virgin Mary in time, but also begotten of God the Father from eternity. He is 100% true man, but also 100% true God, so that everything that is true of God is also true of him.

## **2. Who We Are**

But why does this matter? It matters because John the Baptist also teaches us who we are. If John was not the light, then we are not the light. If Jesus is the real light that gives light to everyone and through whom everyone must come to faith in him, then we do not have light in

ourselves, but are by nature darkness and we need his light. The apostle Paul says that very thing in his letter to the Ephesian believers: “You were once darkness” (Eph. 5:8).

Or how about this? If John the Baptist says that he is not worthy to untie Jesus’s sandal strap, then what does that say about us? Jesus once said that, among those born of women, no one had ever arisen greater than John the Baptist (Matt. 11:11). So if John the Baptist himself says that he is not worthy to untie Jesus’s sandal strap, not worthy to be Jesus’s most menial servant, then what does that say about us?

It means that John is saying the same thing about us that David says about us in the psalms, that we are sinful from the time our mothers conceived us. It means that John is saying the same thing about us that Jesus himself says, that flesh gives birth to flesh and that only the Spirit can give birth to spirit. It means that John is saying the same thing about us that Peter later recognized about himself after the first miraculous catch of fish, when he fell at Jesus’s knees and said, “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!” It means that John is saying the same thing about us that the apostle Paul says about us, that the mindset of the flesh is death and is hostility toward God, that by nature we do not submit to God’s law and are not even able to do so, that we are by nature dead in trespasses and sins.

### **3. Why These Two Go Together**

Why do these two go together—who Jesus is and who we are? It’s because this is precisely who we need Jesus to be. We need him not just to be true man as our substitute under God’s law and able to pay the penalty we deserve. We also need him to be true God so that his life and death, his payment for sin, can actually count for others. We need him to be true God so that his life and death, his payment for sin, have infinite value and can actually count for us, for you and for me.

The Nicene Creed, which we’re about to confess, was actually written in response to Arius, the false teacher who claimed that Christ was made by God and was not of the same being as God and was therefore subordinate to God and not co-eternal with God. When you get to the Second Article today, focus especially carefully on those words: “the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one being with the Father, through whom all things were made.” Because then you will truly appreciate even more what follows: “For us and for our salvation, he came down from heaven, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary, and became truly human.”

The one who came down to heaven for us is exactly the one we needed, the only one who could actually save us. The one who is coming from heaven again at the end to judge the living and the dead is our divine Savior, who has made full payment and atonement for all of our sins, who has shone his light on us, who has imparted knowledge and wisdom to us through faith in him.

The teaching about who Christ is is indeed a teaching worth five exiles and six additional flights out of the city and much more. Yes, it is worth our very lives, because of how that teaching complements who we are, because of how it gives us miserable sinners righteousness, eternal hope, eternal life, through Jesus Christ. Amen.