

WITNESSES TO CHRIST

John 5:31-38

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“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).

Any responsible legal system is based on the validity of witnesses. When Elijah Baptist was convicted for murdering Sam Blue outside his Chicago grocery store, it was on the testimony of just one eye-witness, Leo Carter. Because he was such a credible witness that was enough, and Elijah was sentenced to life in jail. Leo was credible because of his clean record and because, playing basketball with a friend right beside the store, he saw it all. He was even more credible because the murderer had tracked him down and put a bullet into his head just as he did to the other witness. Leo survived, with terrible wounds. It was more than high drama when he sat in the courtroom, looked directly at Elijah Baptist with his scarred face and its missing eye, raised his finger, and slowly said, “That’s him.” That was enough to secure a quick guilty verdict.¹

Long ago, there was another court case, with Jesus of Nazareth on trial for the charge of blasphemy. No one denied that he claimed to be the Son of God; indeed, he affirmed it right in the courtroom. We can imagine scornful looks on the faces of the priests and other rulers sitting in judgment, ready to convict him and have him stoned to death. But, in the finest legal style, Jesus announced witnesses to support his claims. He acknowledged that Jewish legal procedures required independent witnesses: “If I alone bear witness about myself,

¹ Leo Strobel, *The Case for Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 19-20.

my testimony is not deemed true” (Jn. 5:31). Anyone can claim to be divine; in fact many false Messiahs had done so. But Jesus was different: “There is another,” he declared, “who bears witness about me, and I know that the testimony that he bears about me is true” (Jn. 5:32). To the dismay of the prosecution, Jesus produced a surprise witness – the witness of God – whose testimony demanded not just his acquittal but our faith in him as divine Son and Savior.

Christian faith is anything but blind. Courtrooms often feature an image of a blindfolded lady, representing a justice that treats all alike. But Christians should never cover their eyes or close their minds. We have reasons for believing in Jesus. On trial before the Sanhedrin, Jesus presented three witnesses, each of which was arranged by God himself – the witness of John the Baptist, the witness of his miracles, and the witness of God’s Word – which more than suffice to prove his claims and morally oblige us to believe.

JOHN THE BAPTIST’S WITNESS TO CHRIST

Jesus’ first witness is a human one, although one commissioned by God. “You sent to John,” Jesus said, reminding them that John the Baptist’s powerful ministry had impressed them enough to send a delegation to him. When the religious leaders asked who and what he was, John told them, “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord’” (Jn. 1:23). The Jewish leaders could not – and did not – deny that John was a prophet (see also Mk. 11:30-32), and John identified Jesus as the Messiah. It was the very next day after the Jewish leaders’ visit that John spied Jesus walking along the Jordan and gave the testimony for which he was born: “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (Jn. 1:29). Like the key witness in a courtroom drama, John looked to Jesus, raised his finger, and cried, “That’s him!”

John the Baptist’s witness ought to weigh on our minds today. No doubt the clear memory of John’s recent ministry made this a powerful witness in Jesus’ time. But we, too, must reckon with the reality that prior to the coming of Jesus, a prophetic figure arose in Israel the like of whom had not been seen for 400 years, and this witness identified Jesus as the Messiah sent from God.

Jesus made two comments about John the Baptist, the first of which has to do with the nature of his witness. Jesus said, “He was a burning and shining lamp” (Jn. 5:35). This reminds us of what John 1:8 says of John: “He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light.” A true witness does not shine its own light, but carries the light of Christ. Not only was Jesus erecting an eternal memorial to the witness of John the Baptist, but he reminds us what a true witness should be. This is what our world needs today – witnesses who shine with the light of truth and burn with a passion for souls and for the glory of Christ. Surely it is in large part due to the dim light and lukewarm commitment of so many worldly Christians and churches, that so few people pay attention to the gospel today. It has always been believers who shined and burned for Christ who gain the world’s notice.

This is how biblical faith took root in England. It was not when the biblical party seized the government that the people opened their hearts to the gospel. It was when persecuted men and women of God laid down their lives for the truth of Christ. Most brilliant was the witness of bishop Hugh Latimer when he was tied to the stake and set to flames for his refusal to abandon the gospel. Turning to his comrade, Nicholas Ridley, he called out before the people, “Be of good comfort Master Ridley, and play the man. We shall this day light such a candle by God’s grace in England as I trust shall never be put out!”² If we want to serve as mighty witnesses for Christ today, we too must be prepared to die for his gospel and for the salvation of souls – and that means we must be prepared to live for them as well.

A candle not only burns, but it offers itself to be consumed for the fire and light. The great American missionary martyr of the 20th century, Jim Elliot, said: “God, I pray Thee, light these idle sticks of my life and may I burn up for Thee. Consume my life, my God, for it is Thine.” He questioned in his journal, “Am I ignitable? God deliver me from the dread asbestos of ‘other things.’ Saturate me with the oil of the Spirit that I may be aflame.”³ Let each of us ask, “Am I ignitable?” And may God deliver us from the worldly things that dim our light and dampen our flame.

² Cited from Sir Marcus Loane, *Masters of the English Reformation* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2005), 165.

³ Elisabeth Elliot, *Shadow of the Almighty: The Life & Testament of Jim Elliot* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1958), 55, 58-59.

Jesus first comment on John the Baptist challenges Christians in their witness. But his second comment challenged the hearers who stood in judgment on him: “You were willing to rejoice for a while in his light” (Jn. 5:35). The word for “rejoice” (*agalliaomai*) means to revel, as one would at a party. William Barclay explains, “John was a pleasant sensation, to be listened to as long as he said the things they liked, and to be abandoned whenever he became awkward.”⁴ The Jews were like so many people in churches today who come only “to get something” from the worship. If they enjoy the sermon or the music, they stay. But when the enjoyment runs out, they go. Jesus said in contrast, “I say these things so that you may be saved” (Jn. 5:34). Churches and preachers need to have the same approach to ministry that John the Baptist and Jesus did. They ministered not to offer enjoyable spiritual experiences, but to save souls. For the Jews to enjoy John’s witness while refusing its goal – faith in Jesus Christ – was to condemn themselves before God.

THE MIRACLES’ WITNESS TO CHRIST

Powerful as was John the Baptist’s witness to Christ, Jesus mentions it mainly as an introduction to another witness that “is greater than that of John. 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). Jesus refers to his miracles, such as the healing that led to these accusations against him.

Jesus informs us that while his miracles expressed his compassion on the needy, their main purpose was to serve as signs of his divine power and glory. The writer of Hebrews confirms this, saying that “God also bore witness” to the gospel “by signs and wonders and various miracles” (Heb. 2:4). The purpose of a sign is to point to something else. James Boice says of Jesus’ miracles, “In every instance the sign draws attention to Jesus himself and in particular to his divine nature revealed in his works.”⁵

Jesus’ miracles were well-known facts that demanded an explanation. They were, for instance, what brought Nicodemus to seek a meeting

⁴ William Barclay, *The Gospel of John*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), I:196.

⁵ James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John*, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 2:410-411.

with Jesus (Jn. 3:2). That the Pharisees and priests merely accused him for healing on the Sabbath and did not investigate the miracle itself only proves the hardness of their hearts. Jesus' final miracle before entering Jerusalem for the last time – the raising of Lazarus from the dead – was so conclusive that the Pharisees decided to kill him rather than believe. Indeed, John tells us that they plotted to kill even Lazarus after he was raised “because on account of him many of the Jews were going away and believing in Jesus” (Jn. 12:10).

A similar reaction takes place today when liberal scholars seek to deny Jesus' miracles. Some of them question the validity of the Bible accounts and others reinterpret the miracles as delusions or frauds. But the Gospels were written by or under the supervision of the kind of eye-witnesses that honest courts are obliged to accept, and the miracles Jesus performed are not easily explained as exaggerations. No doubt, this is why Jesus allowed Lazarus to lie in the grave for four days, so no one could deny that he really had died. Moreover, the Gospels were written during the lives of many other eye-witnesses who could easily denounce frauds. Speaking of Jesus' greatest miracle, his own resurrection, Paul points out that he appeared afterwards “to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive” (1 Cor. 15:6). Furthermore, while the four Gospels present distinct perspectives of Jesus' life and miracles, as different eye-witnesses always do, they remarkably agree in their claims, and their eagerness to provide details suggests that they were not twisting the truth. The point is that a refusal to accept the Gospel-writers' testimony about the miracles of Christ is contrary to the manner in which even our legal system receives witnesses, and thus shows a perverse bias that underlies scholarly unbelief.

Simon Greenleaf, a founder of Harvard Law School, whose three volume *Treatise on the Law of Evidence* serves as the foundation for legal practice in America even today, set out to disprove Christianity by applying his rules for evidence to the four Gospels. He ended up not refuting Christianity but accepting the claims of Christ and becoming a Christian. He was especially persuaded by the way the disciples proclaimed to the entire ancient world the resurrection of Jesus – of which they claimed to be eye-witnesses – even at the cost of their own lives. Greenleaf explains his reasoning:

Their master had recently perished as a malefactor, by the sentence of a public tribunal... The laws of every country were against the teachings of the disciples. The interests and passions of all the rulers and great men in the world were against them. The fashion of the world was against them. Propagating this new faith, even in the most inoffensive and peaceful manner, they could expect nothing but contempt, opposition, revilings, bitter persecutions, stripes, imprisonments, torments, and cruel deaths. Yet this faith they zealously did propagate; and all these miseries they endured undismayed, nay, rejoicing... The annals of military warfare afford scarcely an example of the like heroic constancy, patience, and unblenching courage... It is therefore impossible that they could have persisted in affirming the truths they have narrated, had not Jesus actually risen from the dead, and had they not known this fact as certainly as they knew any other fact.⁶

Because of their overwhelming credibility as witnesses, the apostles' record of Jesus' miracles compel our belief in him, just as the miracles themselves offered compelling evidence during Jesus' own life.

Scholars have named the first half of John's Gospel *The Book of Signs*. In it, John records seven miracles, each of which gives testimony to Jesus' claim to deity. The first was the transforming of water into wine (2:1-11), which reveals Jesus as the bringer of supernatural joy. The second was his healing of the royal official's son (4:46-54), which signified his divine power to give and preserve life. The third miracle was the healing of the lame man who had lain by the pool for thirty-eight years. This displayed Jesus as the saving power this broken world has been seeking. Next is the feeding of the five thousand (6:1-15), when Jesus took a few small loaves and fish and fed the crowd with an abundance left over. This sign pointed to Jesus as the one who satisfies the hunger of the soul. He said, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry" (Jn. 6:35). In the fifth miracle, Jesus walked on water (6:16-21), revealing himself as the lord who exercises authority over the laws of nature. The sixth miracle, Jesus' healing of the man born blind (9:1-41), speaks of Jesus' power to give sight both physically and spiritually. The seventh miracle was Jesus' raising of Lazarus from the tomb.

⁶ Simon Greenleaf, *The Testimony of the Evangelists: The Gospels Examined by the Rules of Evidence* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1874, reprint, 1995), 31-32.

Jesus explained, “I am the resurrection and the life” (11:25), and his miracle displayed his divine authority over death itself.

In each miracle, Jesus intended not merely to display proofs of his deity, but also to inspire faith in those who saw the signs. No one can claim that unbelief is justified by a lack of evidence. If you are not willing to reckon seriously with the testimony of Jesus’ miracles you merely display the same hardness of heart as those who falsely accused him and put him to death on the cross.

GOD’S WITNESS TO CHRIST

Jesus concluded his evidence with God’s direct testimony to him as the divine Son and Messiah: “And the Father who sent me has himself borne witness about me. His voice you have never heard, his form you have never seen, and you do not have his word abiding in you, for you do not believe the one whom he has sent” (Jn. 5:37-38).

Jesus most likely refers to the occasions when God’s voice audibly hailed him as beloved Son. This happened at Jesus’ baptism, when “a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased’” (Mt. 3:17). But there were other similar instances of God audibly endorsing Jesus. One was on the Mount of Transfiguration, where in the presence of three of the disciples, including the writer of our Gospel, Jesus was transfigured into glory. “A bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, ‘This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him’” (Mt. 17:5).

In John 5:37, Jesus speaks of God’s voice, using the Greek word *phone*, but in 5:38 he adds, “And you do not have his word abiding in you.” Here, the word is *logos*, which indicates God’s teaching and likely refers to the Scriptures. In the verses that follow, Jesus will expand on the Bible’s teaching about himself, which we will consider more extensively in our next study. His point, for now, is that God himself gave direct evidence about Jesus as his divine Son and testified to him in the whole witness of the Scriptures. This constitutes an even greater witness than that of John the Baptist or the miracles and demands his acceptance as the Son of God and Messiah.

All through the Bible the mark of God's true servants is that they hear God's voice, see his visible form, and have his Word abiding in them. This was true of Noah, Abraham, Moses, Samuel, and Elijah. At Mount Sinai, all Israel saw the visible display of God and heard his thundering voice. That similar things had happened in Jesus' time, and that his accusers had not experienced them, indicates their own alienation from God. Why had they not been present for these great events, and why did God's Word not abide in them? Jesus said it was because "you do not believe the one whom he has sent" (Jn. 5:38). D. A. Carson comments, "Since Jesus speaks the words of God (3:34, 17:8), and the Jews do not hear God's voice in Jesus... [and] since Jesus is the very manifestation of God (1:18, 14:9), and the Jews do not see God in Jesus, it follows that they are not true Israelites."⁷

This makes an important point about God's revelation to man. On the one hand, it is through God's Word that we come to faith. Paul observed that "faith comes by hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ" (Rom. 10:17). Yet, at the same time, it is only by believing the Bible's testimony to Jesus Christ that anyone really encounters God. It is only the humble believer who sees "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6). And just as it was only those disciples who trusted and followed Jesus who heard God's voice and saw his glory at the river and on the mountain, so also today it is only believers in Christ who have God's Word abiding in their hearts.

What a tragedy that these religious leaders who devoted themselves to the study of Scripture did not hear God's voice or take in his Word! Why did it happen? Because they did not humble themselves and receive God's truth in faith. The same happens today when people study the Bible or listen to sermons, or even achieve advanced degrees in theology, but have no real meeting with God and gain no true light for the soul. But that tragedy also reveals an opportunity. If you consider the teaching of Scripture in its radical claims about Jesus, and open your heart in faith, God's voice will speak in your spirit, you will see God in the face of Christ, and, as Jesus put it, "you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (Jn. 8:32).

⁷ D.A. Carson, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 262.

THE ULTIMATE ISSUE: BELIEVING IN CHRIST

Jesus presents himself to us today, just as the Jewish leaders received in person his claims to deity. It was true for them then, as it is true for us now, that questions or concerns about John the Baptist, about miracles, or about divine revelation matter little compared to him. What ultimately matters is simply this: What do we make of Jesus Christ? This is the ultimate issue in life and in death; everything else pales before it. Do we dismiss him in pride? Do we turn away to avoid the truth? Do we hold him off in willful unbelief, not even giving serious attention to the evidence he presents? Or do we bow our knee before his obvious majesty, open our minds to his matchless truth, and warm our hearts to his wonderful love?

Let me speak a word to those earnestly considering faith and salvation. It all begins with Jesus himself. You may have unresolved doubts or questions about many things. But the decisive issue is this: what of Jesus himself? Nothing else will be resolved until you decide about him. If you come believing in him, he promises you eternal life, in which you receive the light that reveals truth and the flame that gives power. Decide, as the first step to truth and life, to commit to Jesus. “Whoever hears my word,” he said, “and believes him who sent me has eternal life” (Jn. 5:24).

But, as Jesus’ presentation of evidence ends in a warning of judgment, so must I. Believing in Jesus is the ultimate issue not just in salvation but also in judgment. Jesus says that the reason you do not hear God’s voice or see his form or receive his Word is that you do not believe in him. There can be no greater cause for judgment than to reject God’s own Son when he has presented himself to you. To turn your back on Jesus is to turn your back on life, which God freely gives, with forgiveness of sin, only to those who believe on his beloved Son.