

THE WITNESS OF SCRIPTURE TO CHRIST

John 5:39-47

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“You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life” (Jn. 5:39-40).

When an attorney arranges witnesses for a court case, he or she carefully considers the order in which they will be presented. Usually, the star witness will appear last. James Boice explains, “Suppose a man is on trial for murder and the evidence for his conviction is being presented by the district attorney. The first witness comes forward and demonstrates that the accused had an opportunity to commit the crime... The second witness shows that he had a motive for committing the crime... The third witness proves that the accused had access to the murder weapon. Finally, the fourth witness was an eye witness of the murder itself and can identify the murderer.”¹ This seems to be the way Jesus arranged his witnesses when defending his claims to deity before the Jewish rulers. First, he mentioned John the Baptist, whose authority the rulers had acknowledged, and who identified Jesus as the Messiah. Jesus then added the testimony of his miracles, most of which were public knowledge. As one of the Pharisees’ own members, Nicodemus, had admitted, “No one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him” (Jn. 3:2). Finally, with his case already well developed, Jesus brings forth his star witness: God’s testimony through his Word: “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me” (Jn. 5:39).

¹ James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John*, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 2:415-416.

MISSING THE MESSAGE

The testimony of Scripture provided Jesus' most powerful evidence, in part because the religious leaders themselves acknowledged it as the highest authority. That they "searched the Scriptures" (Jn. 5:39) was their noblest claim, so by appealing to this witness Jesus exerted great leverage in their courtroom.

Likewise, an appeal to Scripture should be our main approach in persuading people to believe in Jesus, because it is through his Word that God exerts his saving power. Time and again, the most devoted unbelievers have been brought to faith by searching the Scriptures. An example is D. E. V. Rieu, one of the world's great classical scholars, whose English translation of Homer is published in the Penguin Classic Series. A lifelong agnostic, he was asked to provide a translation of the Gospels. When his son heard this, he commented, "It is going to be interesting to see what Father will make of the four Gospels. It will be even more interesting to see what the four Gospels make of Father." He was on to something, because while translating the Gospels, Rieu came to faith and became a committed Christian.²

This raises the question, "Why doesn't this happen to everyone who reads the Bible?" Since the scribes and Pharisees searched the Scriptures, why did they not accept Jesus in faith? This is an important question for us, because it shows that studying the Bible does not necessarily profit us for salvation. It matters how and why we approach the Scriptures. Having brought forth God's Word as his star witness, Jesus explains why these Bible scholars missed its message.

Jesus gave three reasons, starting with *attitude* of the scribes' and Pharisees' towards the Scriptures: they exalted Bible knowledge as an end in itself. This was Jesus' point in saying, "You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life" (Jn. 5:39). It was not the message of the Scriptures that they sought, but they commended the mere possession and study of the Scriptures as giving life. This comes through in numerous ancient Jewish writings. One of the most famed rabbis, Rabbi Hillel, put it this way: "More Torah, more life... Whoso hath gained the word of the Torah, hath

² Cited from R. Kent Hughes, *John: That You May Believe* (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 1999), 169.

gained for himself life in the world to come.”³ The Jews were practically obsessed with the Scriptures – that is, with the number of verses and words in each chapter, what was the middle verse of a book, and so on, but they failed to attend to the message it contained.

This is the attitude of many church-goers today who make a big show of their Bibles and even among some who study God’s Word daily. For them, the power of the Bible is in its mere possession or display, or in the mere exercise of reading it, as if it were a magic talisman. Any of us can fall prey to this attitude. We set aside time to study God’s Word and race through it. But if someone asked what the message and meaning of the passage was we could not answer. When I was teaching at a college, I remember once meeting an incoming freshman who illustrates this point. His parents hand-delivered him to the Christian fellowship in which my wife and I were ministering. He proudly informed me that he was the Bible memory champion of his state, having memorized the entire book of Hebrews. Impressed, I asked him what part of Hebrews’ message had most impacted his life. At this he was stumped; in fact, he knew nothing of the message of Hebrews, but had simply memorized all the words. I was not surprised when he showed little commitment to Christianity in college and soon fell away into worldliness.

Donald Grey Barnhouse provides a helpful illustration about the right attitude towards the Bible. He imagines a person standing before a window high in a skyscraper overlooking the ocean. What would we say if the person talked only about the window itself – its dimensions, the kind of material in it and its construction? We would marvel that they made no mention of the ocean view! Likewise, Barnhouse comments, “The Bible is a window. The purpose of the Bible is that you may look through it and see Jesus Christ... The Bible is not a thing to be analyzed, criticized, outlined, and examined, just for it’s own sake... The Bible is not an end in itself any more than a window is an end in itself. The window allows us to see the beauty which lies beyond. The Bible is the way to life in Jesus Christ.”⁴

³ Pirke Aboth 2:8.

⁴ Donald Grey Barnhouse, *Illustrating the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Revell, 1973), 77-78.

The second reason the Jews missed the message of Scripture deals with their *interests*: Jesus said, “I have come in my Father's name, and you do not receive me. If another comes in his own name, you will receive him” (Jn. 5:43). Had Jesus announced the kind of earthly agenda the religious leaders were interested in – mainly, national pride and victory over the Romans – they would have appreciated him. Especially had he come in his own name – that is, on the basis of worldly credentials such as a degree from the school of the scribes or the recommendation of some Pharisaical power-broker – then Jesus would have been the kind of leader they could do business with. The record of history proves Jesus’ words: during the 1st and 2nd centuries A.D., numerous false Messiah’s appeared in their own name. A famous example is Simon bar Kochba, who in 132 A.D. claimed to be the Messiah and led a revolt against Roman power, with the full support of the Pharisees. The most eminent rabbi of the time, Akiba, hailed him as the “star of Jacob” foretold by Balaam in Numbers 24:17, until bar Kochba’s revolt led to his death and his followers’ ruin.

Most telling is Jesus’ statement, “I know that you do not have the love of God within you” (Jn. 5:42). What the Holy Spirit wants us to be interested in is God’s love for us and our love for God and for others. William Barclay’s assessment of the Pharisees is true of many: “They did not really love God; they loved their own ideas about him.”⁵ A Scriptural test of any religious leader is whether or not he reveals and shows God’s love to others. Paul wrote to Timothy, “The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith” (1 Tim. 1:5). Not only was the Pharisees’ message devoid of God’s love for man, but their worldly agenda ministered no love to others, as their reaction to the healing of the man by the pool in John 5:1-16 so clearly reveals.

The Jewish leaders’ study of the Bible failed to produce faith, first because of their mechanical attitude, second because of their worldly interests, and third, because of their *motive*. They searched the Scriptures to be exalted by other men: “How can you believe,” Jesus asked, “when you receive glory from one another and do not seek the

⁵ William Barclay, *The Gospel of John*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), I:198.

glory that comes from the only God?” (Jn. 5:44). Here is the ultimate reason for their wrong attitude to Scripture, and ultimately for their refusal to receive Jesus: they cherished glory from men, not from God. Here is a warning all of us need, and all the more as our knowledge of Scripture increases. Kent Hughes comments, “In the rabbinical schools the study of Scripture was a means to gain fame, to show off one’s intellectual prowess. Biblical scholars dressed in such a way that everyone would recognize them... They were given prominence and position.”⁶ But, for it all, they were lost because their prideful motives kept them from Christ.

Jesus’ ministry was not like the Pharisees’. He said, “I do not receive glory from people” (Jn. 5:41). Here is another test for any minister of the gospel, indeed for any servant of Christ: are we willing to be scorned by men in order to be praised by God? It is normally the case – and it is certainly the case today – that a minister or a church that does God’s work in God’s way for God’s glory is certain to lose out on the praise of men and will likely be scorned. But they may, by faith, achieve a higher praise – the praise of God – and the greatest reward, the salvation of their souls through faith in Christ.

Jesus pointed out the result of missing the Bible’s message because of a wrong attitude, worldly interests, and a motive that craves man’s praise. Such an approach to Scripture will have this dreadful effect: “You refuse to come to me that you may have life” (Jn. 5:40).

THE SCRIPTURES’ WITNESS TO JESUS CHRIST

When Jesus spoke of the Scriptures, he meant the Old Testament, since the New Testament had not yet been written.

It was of the Old Testament Scriptures that he said, “They bear witness about me” (Jn. 5:39). How is this?

In one of his accounts of Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances, Luke records an episode that is very instructive regarding the message of the Old Testament. Two unnamed disciples had witnessed the crucifixion and were departing Jerusalem in despair. Jesus came upon them without revealing his identity and pointed out that the

⁶ Hughes, 173.

death and resurrection of the Messiah had been foretold in the Scriptures. He went on to give them a mini-course in the message of God's Word. Luke records, "Beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself" (Lk. 24:37). Note his emphasis that "all the Scriptures" teach about Jesus. This shows us that the chief message of the Old Testament is the person and work of the Savior Jesus Christ. Jesus taught the disciples not just that an occasional verse predicted his coming, but that the message of all the Scriptures concerned him.

How is Christ spoken of in the Old Testament? A vast amount could be said of this, with much profitable study. But one way to organize the Old Testament's witness to Christ is in three categories: prophecies, types, and ceremonies.

First, the Old Testament contains a storehouse of prophecies that find their fulfillment in Jesus Christ. Some have to do with the details of his life, such as his birth by a virgin (Isa. 7:14) in the town of Bethlehem (Mic. 5:2). Others pertain to his ministry, such as 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." Above all are a great number of prophecies concerning Jesus' death, which Charles Simeon describes as "so detailed they could never have entered into the mind of an uninspired man, nor could possibly have been accomplished by any contrivance or conspiracy of men."⁷ An abbreviated list includes these prophecies: he would be sold for thirty pieces of silver (Zech. 11:12); he would be beaten on the face and spit upon (Isaiah 50:6); nails would pierce his hands and feet (Zech. 12:10, Ps. 22:16); he would agonize in thirst and be given gall to drink (Ps. 22:15; 69:21); despite the normal Roman practice, no bone of his would be broken (Ps. 34:20); and after death he would be buried in a rich man's grave (Isa. 53:9). The Old Testament also prophesies the purpose and significance of his death: "He was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed" (Isa. 53:5).

⁷ Charles Simeon, *Evangelical Preaching* (Portland: Multnomah, 1986), 197.

The Old Testament also teaches about the coming Messiah by means of *types*. These are persons, events, and institutions that *typify* something about Jesus Christ. Moses was a type of Christ as our deliverer from bondage. David was a type of Christ as the faithful king. Solomon typified Jesus' reign of peace and glory. The conquest of Jericho was a type of Christ's conquest over Satan. The tabernacle typified God dwelling among men through Christ. How important it is that we read the stories of these Old Testament people and events not just as interesting history or as moral fables, but to teach us about the person and work of the Savior who would come.

Third, the Old Testament *ceremonies* spoke powerfully of Jesus Christ. The Levitical priests anticipated Christ's ministry of reconciliation for sin, and the sacrifices showed forth his saving blood. A prominent example was the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16), in which the high priest would enter the Holy of Holies once a year to make a sacrifice for the sins of the people. The details were all significant. First, the high priest would put on clean and holy garments, signifying the Messiah's perfect righteousness to serve as priest before God. He then took two male goats from the people. These were also spotless, to show that the true sacrifice must be sinless. On one of these goats, the high priest laid his hands, signifying the transfer, or imputation, of the peoples' sins to this "scapegoat." That goat was then "sent away into the wilderness" (Lev. 16:10), far beyond the sight of the people, just as our sins are taken away by Christ. The other ram was killed as a sacrifice, and the high priest took its blood into the Holy of Holies. There, in the presence of the glory of God and before the tablets of the Ten Commandments, which presented God's law that the peoples' sin had broken, the high priest sprinkled the blood on the mercy seat, just as Christ died to present his own blood to atone for our transgressions.

The prophecies, types, and ceremonies are some of the main ways of seeing the Old Testament's teaching about Christ. Jesus himself honed in on the witness of Moses, since the Jewish leaders particularly revered him: "Do not think that I will accuse you to the Father. There is one who accuses you: Moses, on whom you have set your hope. If you believed Moses, you would believe me; for he

wrote of me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words?" (Jn. 5:45-47).

The five books of Moses, known as the Torah, or the Pentateuch, are filled with prophecies of Christ – such as those made to or by Adam and Eve, Noah, Abraham, Jacob, Isaac, Joseph, and Moses. Most of these people are either types of Christ or of faith in Christ. The ceremonies of the law that point to Christ were also given by God through Moses. That the scribes and Pharisees should fly the banner of Moses and so fail to comprehend his witness to Christ is nothing less than damning. This is why Moses himself, whose name they most prized, condemns them. Through the law he taught, which judges their sin, and the gospel he promised, which they refused by their opposition to Christ, Moses above all accuses these Old Testament scholars. That same law accuses each of us, unless, as Jesus said, we “come to me that you may have life” (Jn. 5:40). Let none of us look down on the scribes and the Pharisees, though their guilt was very great, but rather let us confess our own sin and come to Christ, to be saved by the gospel both he and Moses proclaimed.

HOW TO SEARCH THE SCRIPTURES PROFITABLY

Jesus began this final portion of his defense before the Jewish leaders with words that commend themselves to all of us: “You search the Scriptures” (Jn. 5:39). The wrong attitude of the scribes and Pharisees should not keep us from searching the Scriptures, but rather should teach us to study them rightly so as to possess Christ by faith. Let me conclude with some applications about how we may profitably search the Scriptures.

John Newton, the pastor and author of the hymn *Amazing Grace*, offers four principles for rightly approaching God’s Word. The first is we must study Scripture *with sincerity*. Newton explains, “I mean a real desire to be instructed by the Scripture, and to submit both our sentiments and our practices to be controlled and directed by what we read there.”⁸ We must come to the Scriptures with a teachable spirit, “desiring to learn from them the will and mind of God,” says Charles Simeon, “and determining through grace to obey them in every way

⁸ John Newton, *The Works of John Newton*, 6 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1820, reprint 1985), 2:322-323.

so that we receive implicitly whatever they declare, obeying without reservation what they command.”⁹

Second, we must study the Bible *with diligence*. Newton urges that we should come to Scripture like miners, who seek their treasures by digging and examining. Simeon argues that “a casual and cursory stroll through the Scriptures is of little use. Even a formal habit of reading such as the Psalms and lessons for the day will not do.”¹⁰ He does not mean to discourage daily Bible reading. But he means that the way to have little faith is to exert little effort in the Scriptures. I have observed over the years that the Christians whose lives are strongly influenced by God’s Word are not those who devote a few hurried minutes to a devotion and prayer, but those who hunger for knowledge of divine truth and study Scripture with a passion that befits its dignity and worth. They approach the Bible saying with David, “Make me to know your ways, O LORD; teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation” (Ps. 25:5-6).

Third, we must approach the Scriptures *with humility*. The right way to approach the Bible is as one who is aware of his many sins that need correcting, his weakness that needs strength, his folly that craves wisdom, and his tendency to error that needs instruction in truth. Newton advises, “Let us aim at a humble spirit: let us reflect much on the majesty and grandeur of the God we serve: let us adore his condescension in favouring us with a revelation of his will... in a word, let us study to know ourselves, our sinfulness and ignorance; then we shall no longer read the Scriptures with indifference or prepossession, but with the greatest reverence and attention, and with the most enlarged expectation.”¹¹

Fourth, we must open God’s Word *with prayer*. David prayed, “Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of your law” (Ps. 119:18). Martin Luther urged that when studying Scripture “your first duty is to begin to pray, and to pray to this effect that if it please God to accomplish something for His glory – not for yours or any other person’s – He may very graciously grant you a true

⁹ Simeon, 198.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Newton, 2:327-328.

understanding of His words. For no master of the divine words exists except the Author of these words, as He says: ‘They shall be all taught of God’ (Jn. 6:45).”¹²

To these four principles let me add just one more: we must study the Scriptures with the aim and purpose for which they were given by God: *to know Christ*. Not just to gain knowledge; not to be puffed up before men; and not just to gain tips for earthly happiness – let us come to the Bible to know Christ. Jesus prayed, “And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (Jn. 17:3). Simeon said, “It is the knowledge of Christ, and that alone, that conveys to our souls the blessing of salvation.”¹³ Therefore, Paul cried, “I want to know Christ” (Phil. 3:10). Jesus warned the scribes and Pharisees, “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life” (Jn. 5:39-40). Let us, then, above all else, ensure that through the witness of Scripture we see Christ and know Christ, and that by coming to Christ we gain eternal life.

¹² Martin Luther, *What Luther Says*, 1:77.

¹³ Simeon, 199.