

WITNESSES

by Steve Zeisler

Last week we began a study of Jesus' discourse in John 5. In that section Jesus made some staggering claims about himself, forcing his enemies to face the fact that he was actually making himself equal with God. Let us look again at some of the statements he made. John 5:21-23

For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son also gives life to whom He wishes. For not even the Father judges any one, but He has given all judgment to the Son, in order that all may honor the Son, even as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent Him."

Now to me one of the remarkable things about these statements is that Jesus evidently expected them to be believed. He does not make any apologetic or parenthetical remarks such as, "I know it must be hard for you to believe all this, but..." There is no time for questions or explanations or anything else. Jesus believed that his statements could be understood and accepted.

But surely he must be wrong in that, we think. Isn't it our experience that the things Jesus says about himself and about us, the claims he makes on our lives, etc., are often very hard to believe? As we read them we shake our heads, crying and struggling as we grow toward belief. Very few of us readily, with open hearts, accept everything Jesus said. How can he be that naive, one wonders?

Well, he addresses the question of the believability of these claims, and why we ought to believe them, in the section immediately following the one we looked at last week. John 5:30-32:

I can do nothing on My own initiative. As I hear, I judge; and My judgment is just, because I do not seek My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me. If I alone bear witness of Myself, My testimony is not true. There Is another who hears witness of Me; and I know that the testimony which He bears of Me is true.

Jesus recognizes that two critical issues need to be settled for any real communication to take place. First, there must be trust in the motives of the one who is speaking. If you think he is trying to deceive you, or advantage of you, then you are not likely to listen very carefully. Second, the person speaking must present evidence to back up what he is saying.

Now Jesus addresses those two issues right from the beginning in explaining why he thinks his message is believable. First, he says, "I do not seek my own will" (John:5-30). This statement is very similar to one in John:8 where he says, "I do not seek my glory" (John 8:50). "I'm not saying any of these things because I'm building an empire, because my ego needs stroking, or because they are self-serving," Jesus is saying. "Isn't it remarkable that you hardly ever meet anyone who questions the motives of Jesus?" To his enemies he could say, "Which one of you convicts me of sin?" and leave them dumbfounded. They could not point out any duplicity on his part. They could not say that he was saying one thing and living another. I have never heard anyone say that Jesus was an evil man who said things out of selfish motives. Occasionally someone will write a book saying that Jesus was duped, that he was a good man who was fooled by his circumstances. More frequently, though, we hear that Jesus was a wonderful person but his followers were jerks; they messed everything up when they wrote it down later. So there is almost universal agreement that Jesus' motives were right; that he was not making these claims to serve himself.

Now second, Jesus says the evidence to back up these claims is abundant. He will goon to tell us about the hosts of witnesses to the fact that he is the Christ. His motives are right, the evidence is convincing, so why do we struggle to believe it? Why do we not agree with Jesus that his statements are believable? We ought to embrace them. Why don't we?

Here is a quote from an article by Philip Yancey, about a conversation he had with a young woman:

"Like so many others, she had grown up in a warm Christian family, then trashed it all for a pilgrimage full of so much pain the wonder is she survived until she was ready for redemption. She had tried on lovers like new clothes, played with drugs of all shapes and colors, and tumbled headfirst into a mystery religion that amalgamated esoteric Hinduism and psychobabble. Somehow, her long and tortuous journey had led her back to a starting place in the shelter of God's grace. Now, however, she was trying to figure out Christians. 'Do they believe what they say—that people truly are lost, damned to hell? Do they have the slightest notion of what it means to be lost? To be terrified for 24 hours a day, to be shut off from God?' And still the bitterness against God smoldered. 'Why couldn't he be clear? I know, I know, all that stuff about human freedom; but why did I have to go through hell? My unbelieving friends are so sincere—why couldn't he give them more clues? What right does he have to run the world in this incomprehensible way?"

God is incomprehensible in the way he runs this world. There are so few clues to his existence and the truth of his statements. Why doesn't he make it easier for us to believe? How can Jesus expect that his claim to be Messiah is readily believable? Let us look at what he goes on to say. John 5:31-40:

If I alone bear witness of Myself, My testimony is not true. There is another who bears witness of Me; and I know that the testimony which He hears of Me is true. You have sent to John, and he has borne witness to the truth. But the witness which I receive is not from me; but I say these things, that you may be saved. He was the lamp that was burning and was shining and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light. But the witness which I have is greater than that of John; for the works which the Father has given Me to accomplish, the very works that I do, bear witness of Me, that the Father has sent Me. And the Father who sent Me, He has borne witness of Me. You have neither heard His voice at any time, nor seen His form. And you do not have His word abiding in you, for you do not believe Him whom He sent. You search the Scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is these that hear witness of Me; and you are unwilling to come to Me, that you may have life."

Jesus says there is a witness to him, a powerful, undeniable witness whom he identifies in John 5:37: "The Father who sent Me has borne witness of Me." But before he identifies that witness he inserts parentheses. He says. "John the Baptist was a prophet, a spokesman of God, a burning and shining lamp.

What he said was clear. There was an attractive, unmistakable quality about his message, but after awhile you turned aside from his witness." God always has had prophetic spokesmen available. There are burning and shining lamps all over the world. God has not left us in ignorance of what he thinks, what he is committed to, or where our decisions will lead us. I have never been caught in a web of sin—self-righteousness, envy or whatever—without realizing that somebody told me ahead of time that that is exactly what would happen. For awhile I listened to a prophetic voice; I knew what was true, yet I turned aside and made choices which fouled things up.

Here Jesus is confronting his hearers with the fact that we do not hear; we do not listen to the voice of God. The problem in our communication with God, in our understanding of what he says and in our unwillingness to believe him is not with the transmitter, it is with the receiver. "Consider, if you will," Jesus is saying, "the ministry of John. You didn't like what he said so you stopped listening." Any protesting on our part that God has not done enough, that he is being unfair, that he is not clear or that he has not left enough clues around has to be placed side

by side with the question, "Why didn't you pay attention to the ones you had?"

Jesus goes on to talk about his "works" bearing witness. John 5:36:

But the witness which I have is greater than that of John; for the works which the Father has given Me to accomplish, the very works that I do, bear witness of Me, that the Father has sent Me.

Now he is not saying there that the works he did bore witness to the fact that he was God incarnate, the Messiah of Israel, the final Word spoken by God the Creator. He is saying that the least they should do was look at his works and deduce that God was behind them—at least that much. Remember the statement of Nicodemus the Pharisee, a member of the Sanhedrin, a member of the enemy party, when he came to Jesus at night? "Rabbi, we know that you have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him." "The works I do," Jesus says, "bear witness to that much at least. When confronted with something that is clearly of God, we should go to our Heavenly Father and ask him for an explanation. But that is not the critical problem," Jesus says, "because you do not have access to him anymore. God would clearly tell you who I am. He is utterly willing to make my deity, my Lordship known, but the problem is you do not have access anymore."

If we can imagine Adam, before the fall, looking at the Grand Canyon, or perhaps seeing the Northern Lights the first time, I think his response would have been, "This beauty, this grandeur, is of the Lord; this reminds me of my Heavenly Father. This evening, when we take our walk together, I am going to ask him about it. When I see something that God has done that excites me and I want to know more about it, I'll freely ask him to explain it."

But mankind after the fall does not have that access anymore. That is the devastating indictment Jesus makes in John 5:37-39;

And the Father who sent Me, He has borne witness of Me. You have neither heard His voice at any time, nor seen His form. And you do not have His word abiding in you, for you do not believe Him whom He sent. You search the Scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is these that bear witness of Me.

Do you see what he is saying? God's voice, his form, his abiding word and his written word, the Scripture, all testify to the Son, but you have missed them all. You no longer listen to God. You cannot ask him for help anymore because you are cut off from communicating with him.

The apostle Paul says the same thing in Romans 1:19:

...that which Is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse.

The Psalmist says (Ps. 19:1-2),

The heavens are telling of the glory of God; And the firmament is declaring the work of His hands. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night reveals knowledge.

The voice of God is everywhere speaking clearly, beautifully, unmistakably, honoring his Son. The form of God is discernible everywhere—in the moral character of the saints, in his actions in history. We see his form, if we have eyes to see. The abiding word of God, the interior voice of the Spirit which speaks to us, confirms truth to us and awakens truth in us, has never ceased to speak. The Scriptures too are utterly clear. If we would listen to the message of the Bible, we would be convinced of Christ, "But you don't listen to any of these things," Jesus says. The witness is overwhelming, the evidence is dramatic, and by our choices, by our condition, we have cut ourselves off from hearing any of them. That is why Jesus can be so confident that what he says is believable, because the whole universe believes it. The angels believe it, creation believes it. He said once that if his disciples

did not cry out, the rocks would cry out. Everything believes, but not us. We are cut off from hearing the abundant witness of God about his Son.

Let me see if I can illustrate what I mean. You have probably never met anyone as artistically backward as I am. I could listen to one of Bach's concertos and to one by some minor contemporary of his and both would sound like classical music to me, but I have no idea why one of them is brilliant and the other just ordinary. If you put before me a Rembrandt painting, and next to it a \$15 seascape by Fly-By-Night Artists, Inc., I'm not sure I could tell the difference! I have no sensibilities in those areas. (Now if you want to talk about the Super Bowl, I do have some sensibility there!) The problem is mine. I do not have the ability to listen with a sensitive ear or see with an appreciative eye. Either I have never learned to, or was not given the equipment to do so to begin with. In any case, it is not Bach's fault, nor is it Rembrandt's fault. It is not that great music or great art is less great because I am unable to appreciate it. That is the kind of thing Jesus is saying. Witness to Christ is everywhere. It cannot be clearer, it cannot be more believable, it cannot be made more obvious.

Now Jesus puts his finger on the problem in John 5:41:

I do not receive glory from men; but I know you, that you do not have the love of God in yourselves. I have come In My Father's name, and you do not receive Me; If another shall come In his own name, you will receive him. How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another, and you do not seek the glory that is from the one and only God? Do not think that I will accuse you before the Father; the one who accuses you is Moses, in whom you have set your hope. For 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?

The critical verse there is John 5:44: "How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another, and you do not seek the glory that is from the one and only God?" "How can you hear the voice of God when you are consumed with hearing the approval of those around you, when you hunger and thirst to be liked and respected and built up by the people around you?" Jesus says they would receive a man who came in his own name. We do this all the time: "Good afternoon. I'm an astronaut. Why don't you buy this car?" "Hi there, I'm a football player. Why don't you buy my shampoo?" The advertising industry expects that if you come In your own name announcing who you are—whether it has anything to do with what you go on to say or not—that people will receive you. But when Jesus talks to us about God we don't hear.

Who are those people whose approval you want, whose glory you thirst for, whose respect and appreciation you long to have so much so that the glory of God itself pales next to it? Your parents, your husband, your wife, the people you work with, your boss, the guys at the racquetball club? Who are they? Christians often appeal to the glory of men to get God's work done. So many of the money-raising campaigns for very good works are accomplished not only by letting the right hand know what the left hand is doing, but letting everybody else in the world know too. You will get a plaque or a certificate to display to show how generous you are. People will appreciate you for the good works you do,

How often do you find yourself rehearsing the prayer you are going to pray in public ahead of time, not because you think God will hear it better as a result, but because you want others to appreciate how spiritual you are. As a young man learning to preach and minister, I struggle in standing before a congregation like this. Now there are very good reasons for working hard at preaching, such as building up the saints for the work of the ministry, exposing people to the great truths of God, etc. But there are bad reasons too. In my case, one bad reason is that I really want to be respected and appreciated by the other men I work with here. I have found that I regularly observe where the different pastors and others sit, and I watch their faces. Paul Winslow almost always sits over there. He often has his eyes shut—deep in meditation I'm sure—so I can't always tell what he is thinking. Jack Crabtree always sits at the very back, too far away to read his face. Ray Stedman is inscrutable, sphinx-like; he never changes his expression. I know all this because I watch every week.

But if we seek the glory of men rather than God's glory, then all of the ringing evidence, all of the clear proclamation, all of the beautiful, abundant, powerful witness of God is lost to us. If we are struggling at any point

to believe what Jesus has said about himself, about the future, about the need to wait, about patience, prayer or persecution, it is probably because the world of the flesh which we live in looks so normal to us. If loving ourselves, seeking our pleasure and delighting in the approval of our peers is commendable and natural, then everything Jesus said sounds strange. But if we are willing to repent, to say that that is wickedness itself, then the fact that this dark world approves of us ought to be to our shame. If I really want God to honor us, if we genuinely care about what he thinks, then suddenly things are clear, and the truth is obvious.

The critical issue is deciding whether or not we will continue to love what the world has to offer, that is Jesus' point here. The Scriptures, the voice of God, the prophets are all speaking. The witness is clear, but we will hear it only if we will decide that what this world has to offer is not worth having. Because we resist repentance at this point, we very often find ourselves confused and saying, with this young woman I quoted earlier, "Why is God so incomprehensible? Why are there so few clues?" The greater, the deeper our repentance the more obvious is the truth, the more believable are the statements of Christ (Ps. 19:1-2):

The heavens are telling of the glory of God; And the firmament is declaring the work of His hands. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night reveals knowledge.

Prayer:

Thank you, Lord, for teaching us that when we repent of our love for the glory of man, and desire the glory of God, then the truth becomes clear and believable to us. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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