

THE CREDENTIALS OF JESUS

by Ray C. Stedman

In the fifth chapter of John's gospel Jesus makes amazing claims about himself. He claims to be "the Son of God," "the One sent by the Father," "the Source of all life" (physical and spiritual), "the Judge of all the world" (all history is heading toward a confrontation with him), and "the Raiser of the dead," the One who one day will empty all the cemeteries of the earth.

People listened with open-mouthed amazement as Jesus made these claims. Many of them asked, "How do we know he is telling the truth? What evidence does he give?" Knowing their minds and hearts, Jesus proceeds to give them his credentials. Beginning with Verse 31 of Chapter 5, he reveals the witnesses -- three of them -- who back up his claims. This, of course, was in line with the Law. Moses had said, "Out of the mouths of two or three witnesses let every word be established," {cf, Deut 19:15}. Because we live in a fallen age, when people claim many things for themselves, we do not know whether to believe them or not. Because we cannot trust everybody -- it would be naive to do so -- the Law prescribes that there must be witnesses, people who will corroborate another's testimony. This is what our Lord is doing for these people who are listening to him, and also for us in our day.

The first witness is Jesus himself. His comment about that is found in Verse 31:

"If I bear witness to myself, my testimony is not true; there is another who bears witness to me, and I know that the testimony which he bears to me is true." {John 5:31 RSV}

When our Lord says his testimony is not true, he does not mean it is false; he means it was not true in their eyes, necessarily, i.e., it was not a valid testimony.

In Chapter 8, Jesus makes the claim, "Even if I do bear witness to myself, my testimony is true, for I know whence I have come," {John 8:14a RSV}. But here he is recognizing the fact that in order to be accepted by the general public his testimony must be backed by two or three others.

I have noted a strange phenomenon over the years. People can hear the truth right out of the Scriptures for years and years and never seem to believe it, until they hear it from another voice. That is why it is a good thing to have other speakers come to a church. Oftentimes I have had other speakers preach the same truth I had been preaching for years, and seen people's faces light up at the revelation they had just heard. Afterwards they say, "I never saw that before!" I always want to ask them. "Where have you been! I have been preaching that for ten years!"

After the first service this morning, a couple who had been in this congregation for years told me they had gone away to another city and had heard some great truth. They recognized that they had been hearing it here for years, but this time it got through and had changed their lives. I have learned to rejoice in that, because that is the way God works. I have found that we in turn are often the ones who are a confirming word for others. We must not get upset when people do not believe what we say, for God has ordained that "out of the mouths of two or three witnesses let every word be established," {cf, Matt 18:16 KJV}.

Jesus says that there is "another who bears testimony to [him]" and this does have a profound effect on him. He is not referring to John the Baptist, although he is mentioned in the next verse, as Verse 36 makes clear. Jesus infers that when he hears the corroborating evidence of this "other witness" he himself is strengthened: "I know that the testimony which he bears is true." The word for "know" means "to know inwardly, instinctively." This is what accounts for Jesus' boldness. If you have an inner consciousness that what you are saying is true, you tend to speak boldly and confidently. This is what Jesus feels as he speaks about himself. He is supported by that witness. But though John is not the witness that Jesus refers to, he is a credible

witness. We shall learn the identity of the other witness in a moment, but Jesus now refers to John as a second voice in his support.

"You sent to John, and he has borne witness to the truth. Not that the testimony which I receive is from man; but I say this that you may be saved. He was a burning and shining lamp, and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light." {John 5:33-35 RSV}

John the Baptist had said four specific things about Jesus:

First, he announced him to be the long-expected, long-predicted Messiah, the One of whom the prophets wrote. John even quoted the word of Isaiah concerning himself, "I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord'" {John 1:23 RSV}, but Jesus was that coming Lord.

Secondly, John announced Jesus to be "the Lamb of God." To his own disciples he said, "Behold the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world," {cf, John 1:29}. Jesus is the innocent Substitute who will one day stand in our place and take our sins upon himself and thus free the love of God to give us all the riches in Christ.

Thirdly, John announced Jesus to be the "Baptizer with the Holy Spirit," {cf, John 1:33}. He is the One who will pour out the river of living water that will satisfy the thirst of men's hearts for life and for truth.

Fourthly, John declared Jesus to be "the Son of God," {John 1:34}. He is the Word made flesh, God himself, Lord of heaven and earth, become man.

Here, in Verse 33, Jesus declares that all that John said about him is true!

Jesus then goes on to say something that sounds a little strange to us: "Not that the testimony which I receive is from man; but I say this that you may be saved." By this he means that though he does not need testimony from John for himself, it may be a saving help to those who heard John. It is a strange phenomenon, frequently seen, that men and women who pay no attention to the voice of God directly will often listen very interestedly to someone who tells what his experience with God has been.

Yesterday morning I gathered with about 650 other people to hear former Senator Harold Hughes, ex-Governor of Iowa, tell how God had drastically changed his life. When he was a hopeless alcoholic, wallowing in his own vomit, so despairing he was ready to take his own life, God met him and delivered him through much struggle and pain, and led him to a place of prominence and power. I sat on the platform watching people hanging on his every word, listening to a man describe what God could do.

The Bible, of course, is the Word of God. It is the most widely distributed book ever -- the perennial best seller -- having been translated into more languages than any other book. Thus it has always struck me as strange how few people ever open the Bible to see what God has said. But they will listen instead to what some man says about what God has said! That phenomenon is what Jesus is talking about here: "For your sake John has been sent. For your sake I call attention to the witness of John, in order that you might be saved." This is a marvelous insight into the compassionate heart of Jesus. He is willing to use any approach as long as people will listen to what God is saying.

Jesus goes on to say a very beautiful thing about John: "He was a burning and shining lamp, and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light." John was a lamp. He was not a light, he was a lamp. A lamp bears the light, but it is not the light itself.

Here in this auditorium is a lamp that is not burning and therefore it is not shining either. The lamp is there but there is no light. Many people are like that. They are lamps, they have the capacity to be lights, but they are not shining.

John was the kind of lamp who shone brightly. He was a witness who told people where they could see, hear and know the light.

Would you like to be a shining lamp? Let me tell you how to do it. Burn! Let the truth of God fuel your heart until it begins to burn. When you understand the amazing revelation of how God operates in this world your heart will begin to burn, and then you will start to shine. We often sing, "This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine." Here is how to do it: Burn!

Unfortunately, Jesus continues, people were attracted to this light for a while but then they grew tired of John. They listened for a while and then they went on to other things -- jogging, dieting, video games, whatever. John was just a passing fad. That is what truth about Christ is to many people today -- something that comes and goes, and when it has gone something else takes its place.

But now Jesus comes to the witness whom he feels is really the important one, the one of whom he spoke earlier in the words, "There is another who bears witness of me."

**"But the testimony which I have is greater than that of John; for the works which the Father has granted me to accomplish, these very works which I am doing, bear me witness that the Father has sent me. And the Father who sent me has himself borne witness to 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 him whom he has sent."
{John 5:36-38 RSV}**

In these words Jesus points out who the great witness truly is. The really powerful, corroborating word which backs up the claims of Jesus is from the Father himself. It is a witness which is invisible and universal.

That witness is given in three different ways. It was true when our Lord spoke, and it is still true today. This is the way the Father backs up the words of Jesus:

First, through the works Jesus does. Here Jesus is referring to the healing of the impotent man at the pool at Bethesda. The people listening to Jesus had seen this man rise out of weakness and paralysis into strength and functioning again. He was standing right before them so that they could not miss him. "That is a work of the Father in me," Jesus declares. "The works which the Father has granted me to accomplish, these very works which I am doing, bear me witness that the Father has sent me."

"But," you say, "that was two thousand years ago. If God would only witness like that again today we could believe in him." Well, God does witness like that today. I have here a letter I received a few months ago from a prisoner in a California prison, a man from whose letters I have quoted to you before. This man found some of our Discovery Papers in a trash bin and, reading them, came to Christ. He subsequently led many of his fellow-prisoners to Christ. In this letter he tells how several of the prisoners, including himself, took a Bible correspondence course. When they finished the course the chaplain of the prison arranged a graduation exercise to encourage them. The prison authorities allowed them to have a special room, they provided Kool-Aid and cookies, etc., even a graduation gown and cap, and some of the friends and relatives of the prisoners attended the celebration.

This man writes that he was standing in line waiting to get some cookies, when he felt a tug on his gown. Looking down, he saw a little eight-year-old girl, very severely crippled, wearing heavy leg braces and on crutches. She said to him, "My mother has left me so I can't get any cookies and punch. Could you get some for me?" He immediately did do {this}, and sat down and began to talk to her about the love of Jesus and how Jesus went about feeding people, healing them, and ministering to them. While he was speaking, she looked up at him and said (I will now read directly from his letter):

"Mister, if Jesus healed all those sick people, and you say he still lives today, why can't he see that I am crippled and heal me?" "Oh Lord, what do I tell her," I thought. Then the Holy Spirit spoke to my inner heart to say, "Have you not been telling others that Luke 17:20 ("the kingdom of God is among you") is real, and if so don't you remember what it says in John 14:12"? Now I know what John 14:12 says, "The works I do you shall do also." I also know that if God speaks to me his word is such it's not me who will or could do anything, but Jesus doing it through me.

So, with over sixty people in that crowded room, I asked the child if she wanted me to pray for her that Jesus would touch her legs. She not only said, "Oh yes," but she began to remove the braces from her legs. It jolted me in one way, but jolted my faith on the other hand at the faith of this child. So I placed my hand on her head and began to pray. I felt the holy power of God there with us. And that child started praising God. She bolted out from under my hand on her head, left the chair running, without her braces. But as she left the chair she picked up her crutches, ran a ways, still giving glory to God, then held the crutches over her head in a cross, running around all over the visiting room. Praise God! What a witness to God's power!

Her mother thought something was wrong with her child, hearing her loud cries of praise and joy, and she came bursting into the visiting room from the outside visiting area. When she saw her little girl running about without crutches or even braces, she fainted dead away. Now, Brother Ray, I just wish you could have seen the people's faces. No one in all that crowd and commotion missed what had taken place. All they knew is this child had much difficulty to get around or move, let alone walk. She was seen by everyone as a poor, deeply crippled child, so it was an amazing miracle to suddenly see her just running all over that visiting room. And because of all that commotion they ordered the visiting area cleared and I slipped out and came back to my cell. Only then did the full impact of what had just happened hit me. God performed a miracle before my very eyes. He unleashed a little of his power for me to witness.

I have been in touch with this man since, by letter, and learned that he has seen this little girl come back to the prison with her mother, and she was walking normally. This prisoner has made no effort to capitalize on this incident or exploit it to his own glory. He is rejoicing that God's power can still be manifest today in this way.

That is a witness of the Father. Many miracles like this are happening in this day. But there are many phony miracles too. Many people claim they can do such things but they merely work upon people's psychological motivations to produce what look like miracles. But God is still at work. He is still delivering where he chooses. Here in the case of the man at the pool of Bethesda is an evidence of the witness of the Father that this is the truth of God, just as this incident that I have shared with you is such a witness in our day.

But Jesus declares there is also another way the Father bears witness.

"And the Father who sent me has himself borne witness to me. His voice you have never heard, his form you have never seen;" {John 5:37 RSV}

What is this witness which uses no voice and is never seen? Jesus refers to an inner, invisible conviction of the Spirit; that inner witness of the Father that one is listening to truth even though his mind may be denying it. Some years ago I witnessed to a very intelligent electronics engineer -- a man who prided himself on his high IQ -- and listened as he argued against the need of salvation. While we were talking, as he was still trying to maintain an intellectual argument, he suddenly dropped to his knees and invited the Lord into his heart.

There is an argument that can get behind the mind; this is what Jesus speaks of. C. S. Lewis has written that on the night he was converted he was "the most dejected and reluctant convert in all of England." His mind was still trying to find an escape as his heart and will were being captured by the witness of the Father within.

Listening to Senator Hughes, I was again impressed by this phenomenon. He spoke of reaching a point in his life where his wife and children had left him and he had lost his work. He ended up drunk, sitting in a bathtub, with the barrel of a gun in his mouth and his finger on the trigger. He sensed within an agonizing cry of despair. Then he called out to God and immediately felt a spreading sense of peace within that delivered him from the crisis of the moment. Through much pain, heartache, and failure, God led him along until he was at last free from the grip of alcohol. He eventually became the governor of his state and a United States senator.

Such is the power of God to bear inner witness. When you are reading the Scriptures, listening to the voice of Jesus, you are not just playing games or dealing with some religious ideas. This is total reality; it is where the whole of life is explained and the answers are found.

Then our Lord turns to the third way the Father witnesses to us. He said to those listening to him,

"... you do not have his word abiding in you, for you do not believe him whom he has

sent. You search the scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness to me; yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life." {John 5:38-40 RSV}

What a strange paradox! These men were painstaking students of the Scripture, spending their whole lives counting the very words and memorizing great sections of it, committing themselves wholly to it, because they thought the knowledge of Scripture would give them life. There are many like that yet today, students and scholars who search the Bible but never find Jesus. Yet Jesus himself declares, "They [the Scriptures] bear witness to me."

Jesus is the main subject of the Old Testament! If you want to have an exciting experience with that book, start reading it with the object of looking for Jesus. You will find him on every page because he is there. The whole of the Old Testament, that dramatic record of a nation separated from the rest of the stream of humanity and set aside to be a peculiar people unto God, is filled with references to Jesus, appearing in type and shadow, in sacrifice and priesthood, and in clear and burning prophecy. What an amazing claim this is, "They bear witness to me."

If I said to you this morning, "I want to announce something to you: I have been reading through the Old Testament and I find that the whole book is talking about me: Ray Stedman is the subject of the Old Testament!" I'm sure most of you would get up and walk out. Some of you would probably phone for the men in white coats to come and get me! We would call anybody who made that claim, mad. Mohammed, the prophet of Islam, who studied the Old Testament, never dared to claim that it witnessed to him. Buddha knew some of the Old Testament, yet he never claimed it was a witness to him. Gandhi, the modern-day Buddha, never claimed that Scripture talked about him. But when Jesus makes that claim no one calls him mad. There is an acknowledgment of the justice of his claim, there is evidence in support of it.

The theologian Godet comments,

We see from this passage how Jesus beheld Himself in the mirror of the O. T. There, He recognized His own figure so clearly that He thought it impossible to study the book sincerely *and not come to Him* immediately.

As Jesus says, it is possible to study the Bible, to even give your whole life to it, and never see him. These people thought what many today think, that knowledge is power, education is life, and if you get a knowledge of what God does you will have life. Someone has well described the phenomenon this way,

Trained men's minds are spread so thin
They let all sorts of darkness in.
Whatever light they find they doubt it,
They love not light -- just talk about it.

What is the problem? How can people recognize truth and yet turn from the very One of whom it speaks? We Gentiles point to the Jews and say, "How can they read the New Testament and not see that it fulfills all the prophecies about Jesus? Why do the Jews reject the Messiah so clearly made evident in the Old?" What we fail to see, of course, is that millions of Gentiles are doing the same thing. We believe that Jesus is the Messiah, yet we still do not come to him. "You refuse to come to me," our Lord declares. The problem is the will.

Verse 40 should be translated, "Yet you will not to come to me." "You choose not to come to me that you may have life," he is saying. He clearly indicates that if they had come they would have had life, but they chose not to do so.

He goes on to tell us why.

"I do not receive glory from men. But I know that you have not the love of God within you. I have come in my Father's name, and you do not receive me; if another comes in his own name, him you will receive. How can you believe, who receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the only God?" {John 5:41-44 RSV}

Here Jesus puts his finger on the true reason for stubborn unbelief. Why would a man read the truth, know it to be truth, know that it speaks of Jesus, know him to be who he claims to be, and still refuse to come to him? Jesus says the answer is because what he really wants is the praise of men, right now. Ambition, the deadly enemy of truth! Such a one wants glory now, not in heaven some day. He seeks fame, recognition, prestige. He wants to be treated with respect and reverence now. He loves the praise of men so much he is unwilling to set it aside to receive the glory of God. That is the problem, Jesus declares.

Our Lord adds there is a terrible danger in that: "I have come in my Father's name (with the witness of the Father to back me up and all this amazing corroborating evidence), yet you do not receive me. All right, another is coming in his own name (without any evidence other than his own claims), and you will receive him." Most scholars rightly feel that our Lord is here referring to the Antichrist. Jesus is saying that he came backed by the evidence of the Word, of the Spirit, and of the Father -- visible evidence. He came with the proper introduction -- John the Baptist opened the door, as it was predicted he would do -- yet they would not receive him. Very well, Jesus says, there is coming another Christ, making grandiloquent claims that he can do things for you that you have always wanted done, saying things you have always wanted to hear, and you will accept him, only to be betrayed by him. That is the danger of rejecting truth when you know it to be truth -- you open yourself up as a sitting duck for the next con man who comes along! Jesus is speaking prophetically here to Israel.

His words are very plain: How can you believe when you are looking for your own advancement, when you are out to please yourself, when you are falling in with the philosophy of the world that is flung at you all the time, "Look out for yourself; stand up for yourself"? That philosophy is a denial that you have a Father who loves you, that Someone else is ready to work on your behalf if you will walk in his way. When you are committed to such a philosophy, how can you follow Jesus? These mutually exclusive concepts are apparent all through Scripture: you cannot love the world and love the Father; you cannot follow the Lord and the devil; you cannot drink the cup of God and the cup of demons. You cannot have it both ways.

Now Jesus comes to the final end:

"Do not think I shall accuse you to the Father; it is Moses who accuses you, on whom you set your hope." {John 5:45 RSV}

It is amazing that the very one they said they were obeying -- and thus denying what Jesus was claiming -- is the one who will finally tell them they have ignored his words about Christ. Moses, whom they are using as their excuse to persecute Jesus, will instead become their accuser.

Many are in the same boat today. I have heard people say, "When I stand before God I will have a lot of things to say to him. I don't think he has treated me very well. I've had a bad deal in life and I'm going to tell him so." But on that day they will stand absolutely mute before God, their own memories testifying that he is right and they are wrong.

Listen to these words:

"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?" {John 5:46-47 RSV}

I submit that is a very radical principle. Most people think that if someone does not believe something, what he needs is more light on it. If a little information does not do the trick, we want to give more information. But Jesus declares that will not work. If you do not believe truth you now know, you will not believe greater truth when you hear it. If you do not respond to what you know to be true now, you will not respond when you hear further truth. That is what Jesus is saying. With that radical statement, Jesus brings his public discourse to a close.

Where does that leave us? We have the witness of the Father, the witness of John the Baptist, the witness of twenty centuries of testimony about the power of Jesus to deliver men and women, to free them from their chains, turn them around, heal them and make them whole people. Hundreds of thousands of voices bear

witness to that fact.

Where does that leave us, if we continue to pursue the empty voices of the world and seek for positions of power and influence apart from the will and the glory of God?

These are searching words. I cannot make them easy words because Jesus did not make them easy. But they are words that force us to face ourselves in the light of reality. Where are you going in life? What are you doing with it? This is a critical hour in history. No more critical hour has ever come.

Let us face the choice which Jesus demands, and submit ourselves to His loving Lordship.

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