

THE CREDENTIALS OF JESUS

By Ray C. Stedman

During the days of his flesh Jesus made astonishing claims about himself which left his hearers gasping at his boldness and ambivalent over whether to stone him as a blasphemer or believe him as the Messiah. Many of them asked, "How do we know he is telling the truth? What evidence does he give?" In John's gospel the answer Jesus gives is recorded at chapter 5, beginning with verse 31.

He knew that the Law of Moses required two or three witnesses to establish truth. No one could be expected to accept his startling claims unless such witnesses could be found. To satisfy that requirement Jesus listed the evidence of his true identity.

He refers to two such witnesses in vs. 31-32:

"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."

Jesus himself is the first witness, but when he says that his testimony is not true he does not thereby imply that it is false; he simply means it would not be true in their eyes unless it was validated by another's word. In John 8:14 Jesus clearly states: "Even if I do bear witness to myself, my testimony is true, for I know whence I have come..." But in his earlier reference he is simply recognizing the fact that in order to be accepted by the general public his witness must be backed by at least two others.

There is a profound psychological principle involved in this need for more than one witness. I have long noticed in my ministry a strange phenomenon. It is possible for people to hear certain truth preached for years and they never seem to believe it. But let a visiting speaker utter the same truth and I have often seen people's faces light up with understanding and afterwards they will say, "I don't think I've ever heard that before." I want to ask them, "Where have you been, my friend. I have been preaching that truth to you for years." Other preachers and speakers record the same phenomenon. I have learned not to be upset by this but to rejoice that at last they have seen the light, for God has ordained that only out of the mouths of two or three witnesses shall the word be established.

Though Jesus states that another witness bears a true testimony to him, he does not name that witness at this point. He will do so in a moment. But he goes on to name the third witness, who is one well known to this crowd of Jewish listeners.

"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."

This is a clear reference to John the Baptist who had said four very specific things about Jesus. First, he announced Jesus as the long-expected, long-predicted Messiah, the one of whom the prophets had written. John identified himself as the forerunner of the Lord, quoting Isaiah's great word: "The voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord.'" Of that Lord, John declared, "the thong of his sandal I am not worthy to untie."

Second, John declared Jesus to be the Lamb who would be sacrificed for the sins of mankind. To his own disciples John said, "Behold the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world." Jesus was the innocent Substitute that would stand in every sinner's place, and taking our sins upon his own head would pour out his life's blood, thus permitting the Father to give us freely the riches of Christ.

Thirdly, John proclaimed Jesus to be the Baptizer with the Holy Spirit! He is the one who will send the Spirit to be a river of living water that will satisfy the thirst of men's hearts for life and truth. John baptized with water, as a symbol, but Jesus would baptize with the Spirit's reality.

Fourthly, John named Jesus as "the Son of God." He was the Word made flesh, God himself, Lord of heaven and earth, now become man. These Jews had accepted John as a prophet from God. They could not, therefore, consistently deny his witness concerning the Son. And in vs. 33 Jesus declares plainly, "he has borne witness to the truth." This was powerful evidence which the Jews had already partially received in recognizing John as a prophet.

It may sound strange to us to hear Jesus add, "Not that the testimony which I receive is from man; but I say this that you may be saved." He simply means he did not require testimony from anyone to know whom he was, but it may be of saving help to them since they had heard John. Again a strange phenomenon is involved. Men and women who pay no attention to the word of God directly will yet often listen attentively to someone who relates his own experience with God.

Recently I gathered with 650 other people to hear former Senator Harold Hughes, once Governor of Iowa, tell how God had drastically changed his life when he was a hopeless alcoholic. He had become so despairing that he was ready to take his own life but God met him and delivered him through much struggle and pain, and led him at last to a place of prominence and power. I watched people hanging on his every word, listening to a man describe what God could do. So Jesus says, "For your sake John has been sent, and I call attention to his witness in order that you might be saved." It is a marvelous insight into the compassionate heart of Jesus. He will use any approach that will cause people to listen to God.

He then says 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, not a light! A lamp bears the light, holds the light, but it is not the light itself. When an electric bulb is not burning, it does not shine either. The lamp is there, but there is no light. Sometimes people are like that. They are lamps and have a capacity to be lights, but they are not shining. Why? Because they do not burn! John was the kind of lamp which shone brightly. He told people clearly 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 till it begins to burn. When you understand from the Word what God proposes to do with a life that belongs to him, your heart will begin to burn, and when it burns you will start to shine. You have probably sung the little chorus:

"This little light of mine,
I'm gonna let it shine."

Here is how to do it. Burn!

Now Jesus comes to the witness whom he feels is the most important one; the one of whom he said earlier, "There is another who bears witness of me, and his witness is true."

"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."

With these words Jesus declares that the Invisible God himself, the Father of glory, is the truly formidable witness who corroborates the claims Jesus makes to be the Son of God, the Source of all life physical or spiritual, and the coming Judge of all the world.

That witness of the Father is given in three different ways. It was given when our Lord first came to earth and it is given yet today in the same three ways. It is the way the Father backs up unmistakably the words of the Son.

The first way is through the works which the Son does. Jesus refers specifically here to his healing of the impotent man at the pool of Bethesda. These people listening to Jesus had seen this man who had been ill for 38 years. They saw him no longer in the weakness of paralysis, but functioning now in strength and full normalcy. He was standing right before them so they could not deny the miracle. "These very works which I am doing," Jesus declares, "are the witness of the Father that He has sent me."

"But," you may say, "that was two thousand years ago. If God would only witness like that again today I could believe in him." Well, God does sometimes witness like that today. I have a letter received a few months ago from a prisoner in a California prison. This man found some of our Discovery Papers (printed messages) in a trash bin and, reading them, came to faith in Christ. He subsequently led many of his fellow-prisoners to the Lord. In this particular letter he says 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 and provided Kool-Aid and cookies, even graduation gowns and caps, and invited friends and relatives of the prisoners to attend.

At the festivities was a little eight-year-old girl, severely crippled, wearing heavy leg braces, and on crutches. She said to my friend, "My mother has left me so I can't get any cookies. Could you get some for me?" He immediately did so and sat down and began to talk to her about the love of Jesus and the way Jesus went about healing people and ministering to them. While he was speaking she interrupted and said, "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?" For a moment he was at a loss to answer, but then realized that though he could not heal, it was possible for Jesus to heal through him. Let me now read directly from his letter to describe what followed:

"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 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, 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 peoples' 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 by letter with this man since, and learned he has seen this little girl come back to the

prison with her mother and 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, whenever he so chooses.

Other miracles of this sort occur today from time to time. They are a witness from the Father of the truth about Jesus. But, it must be quickly added, there are many phony miracles too. So called faith-healers abound today who work upon people's psychological motivations to produce what look to many like real miracles. But God is still at work to deliver where he chooses. In the case of the man at the pool of Bethesda there was confirmation given that Jesus is truly who he claims to be.

But there is also another way the Father bears witness. It is indicated in the words, "And the Father who sent me has himself borne witness to me. His voice you have never heard, his form you have never seen." What is this invisible, voiceless witness which nevertheless confirms the words of the Son? It is what is frequently called today, "the conviction of the Spirit." It occurs within the conscience of men and women; an inner witness to truth, even sometimes when the mind is consciously denying that truth. Some years ago I talked with a highly intelligent electronics engineer---a man who prided himself on his high IQ. He listened to me and volubly argued against the need of salvation for himself. But, suddenly, as he was trying to maintain an intellectual argument, he dropped to his knees and began to plead with the Lord to enter his heart. C. S. Lewis writes 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 a way to escape while his heart and will were being captured by the witness of the Father through the Spirit within him.

Again, listening to Senator Hughes, I was impressed anew by this phenomenon. He told 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. But he sensed within an agonizing cry of despair. He called out to God and immediately felt a spreading sense of peace that helped him through the crisis of the moment. God led him along until he was at last free from the grip of alcohol.

Such is the power of God to bear inner witness. You may be reading the Scriptures, or listening to a message by tape or in person, and suddenly you find you are not just playing games or toying with some religious ideas. You are faced with total reality. The Spirit nails you and you cannot escape. That, too, is the witness of the Father.

Then Jesus turns to the third way the Father bears testimony to him. He said to those listening:

"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."

What a strange paradox! These men were painstaking students of the scriptures, spending their whole lives counting the 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 today: students and scholars who search the Bible but never find Jesus. It is because, as Jesus declares, "They (the scriptures) bear witness to me." It is he who gives life, the scriptures point the way to him, but he alone can save.

The scriptures he referred to are what we call the Old Testament. Read that book with the object of looking for Jesus and you will find him on almost every page! He appears in type and shadow, in sacrifice and priesthood, and in clear, burning prophecy. The theologian, F. 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."

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

How can these people recognize truth and yet turn from the One of whom it speaks? We who are Gentiles point to the Jews and say, "How can you read the New Testament and not see that it fulfills all the prophecies about Jesus?" Sometimes we ask, "Why do the Jews reject the Messiah so clearly made evident in their own scriptures?" 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 many do not come to him. "You refuse to come to me," our Lord declares. The problem is the will. "You choose not to come to me, that you may have life," he is saying. If they had come they would have been given life--but they chose not to come.

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?"

Here Jesus puts his finger on the true reason for stubborn unbelief. Why would someone read the truth, know it to be truth, know that it speaks of Jesus and know him to be whom he claims to be--and still refuse to come to him? The answer is, Jesus says, because he wants the open praise of men and not the praise of God. He wants glory now, before men, and not glory in heaven some day. Prideful ambition is the deadly enemy of truth. Such a one seeks fame, recognition, prestige. He wants to be treated with respect and even 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 real problem.

There is a terrible danger in that, Jesus declares. "I have come in my Father's name (with the corroboration of the Father), and 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 feel that our Lord is here referring to the Antichrist who is to come. 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 these men would not receive him. Very well, Jesus is saying, there is coming another Christ, one who will make grandiloquent claims that he can do for you what you have always wanted done, and saying things you have always wanted to hear. And you will accept him--only to be betrayed by him!

That is the great danger of rejecting truth when you know it to be truth. You open yourself up to deceit and infinite loss. His words are very plain. How can one believe who looks only for his own advancement, is only out to please himself. When you are committed to such a philosophy, how can you follow Jesus? These mutually exclusive concepts are seen 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 his final words:

"Do not think that I shall accuse you to the Father; it is Moses who accuses you, on whom you set your hope."

The very one they thought they were obeying is the one who will finally tell them they have ignored his words about Jesus. Moses, whom they are using as their excuse to persecute Jesus, will instead become their accuser. Many are in the same place 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. So Jesus adds the clincher.

"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?"

That is a radical principle! We think that if someone does not believe something what he needs is more information. But Jesus declares that will not work. If you do not believe truth you 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 if further truth is given. That is what Jesus is saying. With that searching word he brings his public discourse to a close.

Where does this leave us? We have the witness of John the Baptist, the witness of the Father through miracles, the Spirit, and the word, as well as the witness of twenty centuries of testimony of the power of Jesus to free men and women from their chains, turn them around, heal them, and make them whole. Hundreds of thousands of voices bear witness to that fact. Where do we stand if we continue to pursue the empty voices of the world, and seek for positions of power and influence apart from the will and glory of God?

These are searching words from Jesus. I cannot make them easy words because Jesus did not make them easy. 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 your life? 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.

[The Ray Stedman Library Index](#)

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