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John 5:31-47

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## WITNESS FOR THE DEFENSE

Wallace Stegner raises this thought-provoking question about writers in his book *Crossing to Safety*: “Are writers reporters, prophets, crazies, entertainers, preachers, judges, what? Who appoints them as mouthpieces? If they appoint themselves, as they clearly do, how valid is the commission?”<sup>1</sup> How do we test the reliability of what we read in books and newspapers, or what we hear in speeches and sermons? How do we validate God’s words in the Bible, or the claims of Jesus? Usually we look for a corroborating witness or testimony.

In chapter 5 of John’s gospel Jesus heals a man who had been lame for 38 years. The healing was one thing; the timing was another. Jesus healed this man on the Sabbath and in doing so ignited the opposition of the Jewish religious authorities. They accused Jesus of breaking the Sabbath and making himself equal to God. Jesus answered this charge by describing his relationship with his Father, making some extraordinary claims in the process (5:19-30).

Another accusation against Jesus was that his claim was self-made, when he said, “The Father is working and therefore I am working too.” The authorities wanted to know if Jesus had anything to back up his amazing claims. Was he merely a self-appointed mouthpiece? What were his credentials? How could his claims be validated? To that charge Jesus now brings three witnesses to testify for him. These witnesses cannot prove Jesus’ claims, but they give testimony to them. Bearing witness is very important in John’s gospel. He knows that if people are going to believe his story he must clearly present testimony to the person and claims of Jesus – the very witnesses that Jesus himself called to his defense.

Jesus begins by discounting his own witness.

**“If I alone testify about Myself, My testimony is not true. There is another who testifies of Me, and I know that the testimony which He gives about Me is true.” (John 5:31-32 NASB)**

Jesus says that if he is bearing witness concerning himself, his witness is not true. He is not saying that what he would say about himself was false. He raises one of two possibilities. First, he might be saying that his witness would not be admissible or legally valid. The Torah states clearly that one cannot be put to death on the evidence of a single witness. Two or three witnesses are required. This is consistent with today’s legal system. It is not beneficial to base your accusation or defense solely on your own testimony. (This argument is used against Jesus in chapter 8.)

Or second, Jesus might be saying that he doesn’t say or do anything of himself, but only what he sees the Father doing or hears him saying. This was his statement in verse 30. If Jesus says anything, therefore, it is the Father’s words and the Father’s witness. If he gives testimony to himself, that would be false. The word “another” in verse 32 is a reference to the Father. Jesus might be saying that his testimony is simply the testimony of the Father, which indeed is true, but it is not his own testimony. Both options are true. Here, Jesus is not offering his Father as an independent witness.

This is a great word for church leadership. Oftentimes decisions are made and divisions created because people rely on someone’s testimony, with no witnesses. Being Christ-like means that we do not rely on our own witness in a matter. If there is no supporting testimony, it is better to be patient and let God sort it out.

After discounting his own testimony, Jesus calls his first witness, John the Baptist.

**“You have sent to John, and he has testified to the truth. But the testimony which I receive is not from man, but I say these things so 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.” (5:33-35)**

John the Baptist had given testimony to the delegation sent to him in chapter 1. He had pointed out Jesus as the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, and declared Jesus as the one who anoints with the Spirit. John had acknowledged that Jesus was superior to himself. He must decrease, while Jesus must increase. Jesus was not dependent on John’s witness or on any human testimony. His identity came from his intimate relationship with the Father. John’s testimony could not add to what the Father had revealed to him.

But Jesus accepts the witness of John for other people so that they might be saved. If John helps them to believe, then so be it. The reason John is helpful is because he was the lamp or the lamp-bearer. His purpose was to illuminate the light. Remember what John wrote in the prologue. John the Baptist was not the true light. However, he was the lamp, illuminating and pointing the way to the light.

The Jews rejoiced in the lamp for a while. The word means to experience a state of great joy and gladness, often involving verbal expression and appropriate body movement. People rocked in the presence of John the Baptist! Many were drawn to him and his announcement that the coming One

was near. If the religious authorities could remember how they embraced John, then they would embrace Jesus. The psalmist looked forward to the day when the light and the lamp would arrive, bringing great joy:

**Her priests also I will clothe with salvation,  
And her godly ones will sing aloud for joy.  
There I will cause the horn of David to spring forth;  
I have prepared a lamp for Mine anointed. (Ps 132:16-17)**

Clearly, God wants us to have great joy as we gather to worship our salvation in Jesus who is the true light, illuminated by the lamp of John.

The second witness is the works of the Father,

**“But the testimony which I have is greater than the testimony of John; for the works which the Father has given Me to accomplish—the very works that I do—testify about Me, that the Father has sent Me.” (5:36)**

It’s interesting that Jesus does not say his works but “the works which the Father has given Me to accomplish.” These works, the ones which Jesus had seen his Father doing and was now doing himself, bear witness to him – a witness far greater and weightier than the witness of John. These would include the signs that Jesus was doing – turning water into wine and healing paralytics – but they might also include the climactic work: his cross and exaltation. The works of Jesus are not some mere demonstration that he is a notable human being, perhaps even a prophet. His work is divine work. Jesus will complete or finish the work that the Father had given to him. This word “accomplish” points to the fact that what Jesus did accomplished the end of God’s work of redemption. The cross was the final touch.

The third witness is the Scriptures.

**“And the Father who sent Me, He has testified of Me. You have neither heard His voice at any time nor seen His form. 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; it is these that testify about Me; and you are unwilling to come to Me so that you may have life.” (5:37-40)**

The text states that the Father bears witness. Jesus could be referring to the voice from heaven that spoke at his baptism. But John does not include that event in his gospel. Most likely Jesus is referring to the Scriptures, even though he does not mention them until verse 39. The OT contains many illusions and promises that refer to Jesus – water, manna, light, the feasts, the son of man, and the suffering servant. Jesus may not be pointing to a particular verse but to the fact that everything in the OT points to him. The Jews had not seen God, heard his voice or remained in the word, but God had spoken to them.

Jesus points out their flawed understanding, in three ways:

The Jews had never heard the voice of God, but Moses had: “Thus the LORD used to speak to Moses face to face, just as a man speaks to his friend” (Exod 33:11). Jesus speaks the words

of God, but the Jews do not recognize God’s voice in him. Therefore, it’s clear that they are not true followers of Moses, and Moses will end up being their accuser.

The Jews had never seen God’s form or face, but Jacob had: “So Jacob named the place Peniel, for he said, ‘I have seen God face to face, yet my life has been preserved.’ Now the sun rose upon him just as he crossed over Penuel, and he was limping on his thigh” (Gen 32:30-31). Jesus is the very manifestation of God, but the Jews did not see God in Jesus and so they are not true Israelites.

The Jews did not have God’s word abiding in them, unlike Joshua, or the psalmist: “This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it; for then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have success” (Josh 1:8). “Your word I have treasured in my heart, That I may not sin against You” (Ps 119:11). Jesus was the very word of God, but the Jews had no time for him. They did not share in either the experience or the blessings bestowed upon Joshua and the psalmist.

The Jews rejected Jesus because they had not really grasped the import of what the OT was pointing to. God had spoken to the Fathers “at many times and in various ways.” (Heb 1:1). All of this was in anticipation of the Messiah, God’s final word. But they had not heard his voice, they had not seen him, and they did not have the word abiding in them. The evidence of this was that they did not believe in the One who was sent. Had the Jews believed in Jesus then they would have heard and seen and had the word abiding in them.

The Jews searched the Scriptures but they had failed to understand or obey them. That had always been their problem. They had grown up with the witness of the OT, but they had a hard time obeying and believing. They imagined that by having the Scriptures they had eternal life. But they did not come to Jesus, so they did not have life. The Scriptures had not benefited them or led them to the truth.

There is nothing intrinsically life-giving about possessing or studying the Scriptures if one fails to discern their true content. Jesus is saying that you will never understand the Scriptures if you insist on standing outside of and judging the word. If you look at Scriptures through your own lens you will not see Jesus. We cannot find life by reading the Scriptures, unless that reading causes us to come into the presence of Jesus in brokenness and humility. The Bible is neither a history book nor a grammar book. The Bible is about a Person.

So there are the three witnesses: John the Baptist, the works of the Father, and the Scriptures. But Jesus doesn’t stop there. As he proceeds, the accused becomes the accuser.

**“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 comes 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 about Me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe My words?" (5:41-47)**

Now Jesus takes the offense and turns the tables on the Jews. The idea of witness now turns to glory. The Jews have several problems with this.

1. They seek their own glory. They do not understand true glory. They worry about their reputation. They seek approval from others and not from God. As long as they do this they will not be able to believe. Jesus does not seek approval or glory. He obeys the Father and wants to please him. We behold the glory of God in Jesus, but Jesus does not seek to glorify himself.

Lesslie Newbigin has a good word for us here: "Here we come to the heart of the matter. It is a matter of true and false glory... The glory of God is present in Jesus precisely because he neither seeks nor receives glory from men, makes no claim for himself, but is the totally humble, obedient, self-effacing, and therefore transparent bearer of the glory of the Father in whose name alone he has come. As long as men and women seek to be something in the eyes of one another they are stopped from recognizing that the only true glory is to be found in total self-emptying."<sup>2</sup>

2. The Jews do not know much about either God's love for them or loving him in return. Grammatically, the phrase "love of God" could be taken either way. Jesus knows these people. He knows what is in the heart of man. He knows that they neither know God's love nor respond to him in love. They are immersed in duty, pride and self-exaltation.

3. They will not accept Jesus but will accept others who come in their own name. The Jews will embrace false Messiahs, but not Jesus. The historian Josephus recorded a string of messianic pretenders in the years before AD 70. Sixty years later, Bar Kochba led an unsuccessful revolt against Rome in AD 132. The great rabbi Akiba viewed this false messiah as the "star of Jacob" prophesied by Balaam (Num 24:17).

4. Moses will become their accuser. This is a fine piece of irony. Moses wrote about Jesus, a reference perhaps to Deut 18:15 and the prophet like Moses. The Jews looked to Moses for their security. He was their mediator for the Sinai covenant. However, the one in whom they set their hope will now accuse them. Moses and Jesus are linked. To believe in one is to believe in the other.

A couple of phrases in our text have been the basis of very serious reflection for me this past week. The first is in verse 42, which literally reads, "I have known you that you do not have the love of God in yourselves." As I stated earlier, this could refer to love from or to God. Initially I read this as love for God. This is consistent with the most fundamental commandment given to the Jews, "Thou shalt love the LORD thy

God." But then I remembered verse 20, which we looked at last week. Jesus says that the Father loves the Son. We saw that as the foundation and basis of their relationship, and that the cross was the outpouring of the reciprocal love between the Father and Son. Jesus could have never gone to the cross, never emptied himself, never given himself if he had not been grounded in his Father's love. Jesus sought to please the Father because of the Father's love for him. He obeyed his Father and loved him in return.

Knowing God's love is foundational in our lives also. The Scriptures are of no value to us if we do not encounter in them a living God who loves us and wants to save us. If we do not know the love of God, then we will rely on religion and rule-keeping. We will seek to exalt and glorify ourselves. We will not be able to take up our cross and die to ourselves for the sake of others. We will not be able to follow Jesus and be conformed to his image. We will not be able to grow into the sons and daughters that God has designed us to be. That is what happened to the Jews, and that is what will happen to us.

But if we know God's love and if that love is foundational to our lives, then we will love him in return. We will submit to him and obey him out of a heart of gratitude. We will seek his glory and not our own. We will be able to die to ourselves for the sake of others. We will become life-givers and not life-preservers. We will become a blessing to others. This is what Paul prayed in Ephesians 3: "that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God" (Eph 3:17-19).

I spent many years as a father doing things for my children. I thought that was the best thing a father could do. I tried to help them in school, encourage them in sports, discipline their behavior, and take them on ministry trips. But I have since realized that although these are all good things they are not the best thing. The most important thing I could do for my children is to communicate to them how deeply I loved them and that that love would never change. At various times I have written things for them so that they might always remember my love.

This is an essential question. Do you know the great love of God? Have you heard him shout it from the heavens? If Jesus needed to be grounded in that love in order for him to go to the cross, don't you think that we do as well? There is no formula to this kind of relationship with the Father. It is a matter of prayer and the word and honestly opening up our hearts to God.

A second reflection comes from verse 40, where Jesus says, "You do not want to come to me, in order that you might have life." The Jews refused to come to Jesus despite all of the testimony to his claims. He offered life, but they turned down the offer. The same thing happens today. People refuse to come to Jesus, despite all the evidence to support his claim that he

is the Son of God, the Messiah, the promised one who died a horrible death on a cross so that we could have life. Jesus says, "Believe in me and have life." Yet people turn him down.

Why don't they come to Jesus? Why don't you come to Jesus? One reason is pride. We think we don't need God, that our life is pretty good and we can manage on our own. Pride keeps us from admitting that we need help.

Another reason we don't come to Jesus is that we think we have messed things up too much, that God could never accept us with our past. But Jesus is not put off by a messy life. The people to whom he poured out his grace were sinners just like you and me.

Maybe we think that coming to Jesus is too costly, that the commitment is too difficult and we won't be able to do what is required. Jesus never asks us to do it; he just invites us to come.

Perhaps we don't come to Jesus because we don't need him right now. Many people wait until they are in a foxhole before they come to Jesus. We might have been pretty close a couple of weeks ago when the walls were caving in, but we are all right now.

Or maybe it's a matter of procrastination. We think we will have plenty of time when we get older, but right now while we are younger we want to live it up and get some things for ourselves before we come to Jesus. Then we will turn our life over to God and offer our possessions for his use. The problem is that we may run out of time. Remember what God said to the rich man: "You fool! This very night your soul is required of you; and now who will own what you have prepared?" (Luke 12:20).

Maybe you find yourself among the undecided. God's word to you is to believe the witness and believe in Jesus. Don't try and decide which religion offers the best perks. Don't base your decision of what you have seen from supposedly religious people. Don't wait until you get it all figured out. We

are conditioned to understand and investigate. We read all the information, do price comparisons, and evaluate warranties. Once we have all the proof we need, then we commit. God's kingdom is different. In God's kingdom we believe, and then we understand. Then we will know, we will see, we will hear, and the word will abide in us. Just come to Jesus.

Many of you would say that you have already done that. But I would contend that as we live this life in Jesus it's very easy to lose sight of Jesus as the main thing. The same reasons that keep us from him initially keep us isolated from him daily. It's easy for us to replace Jesus at the center with political causes, church politics, keeping the rules, religious pride, popularity or acceptance in the church community, even good deeds. Mother Teresa once said, "Pray for me that I not loosen my grip on the hands of Jesus even under the guise of ministering to the poor."

We need to come to Jesus every day, every hour, every minute. We need to come to the cross, to eat his flesh and drink his blood. We can never find life in our own strength or in religious activities. Only Jesus can give life, because life is found only in him, and to him we must come. What is keeping you from coming to Jesus today?

The main issue in John 5 is the Sabbath. And the Sabbath is about God giving life, celebrating, coming into wholeness, the climax of redemption, being healed, and finding rest. There is a new creation and now a new Sabbath.

*"Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light."* (Matt 11:28-30)

1. Wallace Stegner, *Crossing to Safety* (New York: Penguin Books, 1987), 55.

2. Lesslie Newbigin, *The Light Has Come* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 71.

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