

Jesus Calls Five Witnesses (John 5:31-47)

Expository Lessons from the Gospel of John

I. Review from Previous Lesson

- a. In **John 5:28-29** Jesus said, “The hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation.”
- b. We discussed the significance of what Jesus said.
 - i. There will be a physical resurrection of the dead; they will come out of their graves at the call of Jesus on the Last Day.
 - ii. God’s plan is to save our bodies as well as our souls.
 - iii. This is a foundational Christian doctrine with important implications for all Christians.
 - iv. This teaching about the resurrection was believed by many of the Jews (although not all; the Sadducees rejected it).
 - v. According to Jesus and Paul, this is a clear teaching in the Old Testament. We looked at several passages that early Christians referred to in defending this teaching.
- c. I encouraged everyone to study this out on their own from the New Testament and Old Testament, and then spread the teaching to their believing friends.

II. Jesus Calls Multiple Witnesses to His Defense

- a. Read **John 5:31-47**
- b. Overview of what Jesus is saying here: Jesus says that there are multiple witnesses on his behalf (that He is who He claims to be). According to Him, these witnesses include:
 - i. John the Baptist, “a burning and shining lamp”.
 - ii. The works that Jesus did (miracles He performed).
 - iii. Testimony of the Father Himself

iv. The Scriptures (Old Testament prophecies)

1. “You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me. But you are not willing to come to Me that you may have life.” (**John 5:39-40**, NKJV)

v. The one who will accuse Jesus’ opponents: Moses.

III. Why Did Jesus Need Multiple “Witnesses”? Is He on Trial?

- a. Recall that His opponents wanted to kill him for “working” on the Sabbath when he healed a man who had been crippled for 38 years.
 - i. “For this reason the Jews persecuted Jesus, and sought to kill Him, because He had done these things on the Sabbath. But Jesus answered them, ‘My Father has been working until now, and I have been working.’ Therefore the Jews sought all the more to kill Him, because He not only broke the Sabbath, but also said that God was His Father, making Himself equal with God.” (**John 5:16-18**, NKJV)
- b. When Jesus was accused of working on the Sabbath, He “doubled down” by stating:
 - i. His Father (God) was working on the Sabbath, and He was as well. This was placing Him on the same plane as the Father.
 - ii. Jesus says that the Father has entrusted all judgment into the hands of Himself, the Son.
 - iii. He reaffirmed that the dead will be raised bodily from their graves, but the He, Jesus would be the One who would be calling them out of their graves.
 1. “Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation.” (**John 5:28-29**, NKJV)
- iv. Recall that breaking the Sabbath was punishable by death, according to the Law of Moses.
 1. “You shall keep the Sabbath, therefore, for it is holy to you. Everyone who profanes it shall surely be put to death; for whoever does any work on it, that person shall be cut off from among his people. Work shall be done for six days, but the seventh is the Sabbath of rest, holy to the LORD. Whoever does

any work on the Sabbath day, he shall surely be put to death.”
(**Exodus 31:14–15**, NKJV)

- v. Also, Moses wrote that false prophets were to be put to death.
(**Deuteronomy 18:20**)
- c. Under the Law of Moses, in order to render judgment in the case of a serious crime (involving a correspondingly severe penalty) it was necessary to have more than one witness.
 - i. “Whoever is deserving of death shall be put to death on the testimony of two or three witnesses; he shall not be put to death on the testimony of one witness.” (**Deuteronomy 17:6**, NKJV)
 - ii. “One witness shall not rise against a man concerning any iniquity or any sin that he commits; by the mouth of two or three witnesses the matter shall be established.” (**Deuteronomy 19:15**, NKJV)
 - 1. The **Deuteronomy 17** passage was addressing the death penalty.
 - 2. However, it seems *based on the context of what is being discussed in Deuteronomy 19*, this second passage was addressing a wider range of crimes: including those that would merit lesser penalties.
 - 3. If this phrase seems familiar to us, it should. It was important in justice under the Law of Moses, the concept is retained regarding the church, in the New Testament. Examples:
 - a. “Do not receive an accusation against an elder except from two or three witnesses.” (**1 Timothy 5:19**, NKJV)
 - b. In **Matthew 18**, in dealing with a brother in the community who is in sin, the second step we are to take is based on this passage in **Deuteronomy 19**.
 - i. ““Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that ‘by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.’ And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector.” (**Matthew 18:15–17**, NKJV)

- d. I believe that Jesus, facing multiple charges involving the death penalty under the Law of Moses (should He be found guilty) *pre-empts his enemies*. He calls in multiple witnesses, in His own defense, to testify as to who He is.

IV. The Five Witnesses Called by Jesus

- a. The first witness: John the Baptist
- i. “If I bear witness of Myself, My witness is not true. There is another who bears witness of Me, and I know that the witness which He witnesses of Me is true. You have sent to John, and he has borne witness to the truth. Yet I do not receive testimony from man, but I say these things that you may be saved. He was the burning and shining lamp, and you were willing for a time to rejoice in his light.” **(John 5:31–35, NKJV)**
 - ii. The mission and message of John the Baptist: to prepare the way for, and point to, the Christ.
 1. “There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. This man came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all through him might believe. He was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light. That was the true Light which gives light to every man coming into the world.” **(John 1:6–9, NKJV)**
 2. When John was a baby, his father Zecharias, filled with the Holy Spirit had said about him, “And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Highest; For you will go before the face of the Lord to prepare His ways, To give knowledge of salvation to His people By the remission of their sins, Through the tender mercy of our God, With which the Dayspring from on high has visited us; To give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, To guide our feet into the way of peace.” **(Luke 1:76–79, NKJV)**
 3. John came in the spirit and power of Elijah, to prepare the way for the Lord, as was prophesied in **Isaiah 40:3** and at the end of **Malachi**.
 4. John the Baptist identified Jesus as “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” **(John 1:29)**, images of the Suffering Servant who would be led like the sheep to the slaughter, who would give his life for the sins of many **(Isaiah 53)**, and foreshadowed by the Passover Lamb **(Exodus 12)**.

5. John the Baptist referred to Jesus as the Son of God (**John 1:34**), fulfilling the promises regarding God's Son from **2 Samuel 7** and **Psalm 2**.
- iii. Jesus uses a curious phrase here to describe John the Baptist: "He was *the* burning and shining *lamp*, and you were willing for a time to rejoice in his light." (**John 5:35**, NKJV)
 1. A small but I think significant point: some translations like NKJV and NASB render this, "*the* burning and shining lamp", while some others such as the NIV say, "*a* burning and shining lamp". If you check this out for yourself in an interlinear Greek Bible, you can see that it literally says, "*the* burning and shining lamp".
 2. *What is this lamp* that Jesus is referring to? John the Baptist is described as "the Elijah who was to come" (**Matthew 11:14**), who came "in the spirit and power of Elijah" (**Luke 1:17**), in fulfillment of the prophecy of **Malachi 4:4-5**.
 3. Is there somewhere else in the Old Testament that refers to *a lamp coming or being set up before the Christ*?
 4. Let's read **Psalm 132** (numbered **Psalm 131** if you are reading from an old Testament based on the Septuagint).
 - a. I stumbled onto this connection some time ago while I was exploring prophecies related to David, starting with the **2 Samuel 7 / 1 Chronicles 17** prophecy about the Christ coming from David's descendants.
 - b. This psalm mentions "we have heard it in Ephrathah" (*corresponding to Bethlehem*).
 - c. It recalls the promise made to David, that one of his descendants would be placed on the throne over the eternal kingdom.
 - d. In **Psalm 132:17** it says, "there *I prepared a lamp* for my anointed."
 - e. The word "Anointed" in the Septuagint, the Scriptures that Jesus and the apostles quote from, is the exact same word that is rendered "Christ" in the New Testament. Literally it says, "*there I prepared a lamp for my Christ*". An example to show you that this is the same exact Greek word:

- i. From **1 Corinthians 15:19** in the New Testament:
 - 1. “εἰ ἐν τῇ ζωῇ ταύτῃ ἐν Χριστῷ ἠλπικότες ἐσμέν μόνον”
 - 2. = “If only in this life we have hope in Christ...”
- ii. From **Psalm 132:17** in the Septuagint (there numbered **131:17**):
 - 1. “ἠτοίμασα λύχνον τῷ χριστῷ μου” (from Rahlfs-Hanhart LXX)
 - 2. = “I prepared a lamp for my anointed (or *my Anointed One, or my Christ*)”
- iii. (Please also note also that there was no distinction between capital and lower case Greek letters in the LXX and early New Testament manuscripts)
- f. When Jesus says that John was “the burning and shining lamp”, *is this what He was referring to?* Is Jesus saying that John the Baptist is the one shedding light, “the lamp” who comes before and reveals the Christ?
- 5. Tertullian, a Christian writer from Carthage, in North Africa, writing in the early 200’s
 - a. “John (*referring to the John the Baptist*) is called...a ‘lamp’ shining before Christ: for David predicts, ‘I have prepared the lamp for my Christ’ (*from Psalm 132:17*); and him Christ Himself, coming ‘to fulfill the prophets,’ called so to the Jews. ‘He was,’ He says, ‘the burning and shining lamp’ (*quoting Jesus from John 5:35*); as being he who not merely ‘prepared His ways in the desert,’ but withal, by pointing out ‘the Lamb of God,’ illumined the minds of men by his heralding, so that they understood Him to be that Lamb whom Moses was wont to announce as destined to suffer.” (Source: Tertullian, *An Answer to the Jews*, in ANF vol. 3, pp. 163–164)
- 6. If Tertullian is correct here, and it makes perfect sense, Jesus is stating that John the Baptist was the lamp prophesied in **Psalm 132**, who would be established before the Christ! Jesus, in

saying that John is “the lamp” is also saying that He is the Christ, the one who would sit on the eternal throne promised to his forefather David!

- b. The second witness: the works Jesus did
 - i. “I have testimony weightier than that of John. For the works that the Father has given me to finish—the very works that I am doing—testify that the Father has sent me.” (**John 5:36**, NIV)
 - ii. Jesus read from **Isaiah 61:1-2** in the synagogue, which spoke of miracles being performed by the one whom the Spirit of the Lord was upon, and said that He was fulfilling that prophecy (**Luke 4:16-22**)
 - iii. The miracles he performed, which included
 1. Water to wine
 2. Healing a man crippled 38 years
 3. Cleansing lepers
 4. Raising the dead, like Lazarus
 5. Walking on water
 6. Feeding thousands with bread from heaven
 7. Resurrected on the third day
 - iv. Recall that the apostles, eyewitness to what Jesus did, went all over the world proclaiming these things, and were tortured and killed for their testimony.
- c. The third witness: the Father
 - i. At the baptism of Jesus: “And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.” (**Matthew 3:17**, NIV)
 - ii. At the Mountain of Transfiguration: “While he (*Peter*) was still speaking, a bright cloud covered them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!” (**Matthew 17:5**, NIV)
- d. The fourth witness: Old Testament Scriptures that testify about Him
 - i. Scriptures already referenced thus far in **gospel of John** include:
 1. Lamb of God/ Suffering Servant (**John 1:29**, **Exodus 12**, **Isaiah 53**)

2. Son of God (**John 1:34, 1:49; 2 Samuel 7; Psalm 2**)
 3. Angels of God ascending and descending on the stairway/ladder connecting heaven and earth (**John 1:51, Genesis 28:12**)
 4. Serpent in the Wilderness (**John 3:14, Numbers 21:9**)
- ii. Throughout the **Book of Acts**, the apostles point to the fulfillment of Hebrew Scripture prophecies.
- e. The fifth witness: Moses himself
- i. “Do not think I shall accuse you to the Father; there is one who accuses you—Moses, in whom you trust. 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?” (**John 5:45-47, NKJV**)
 - ii. Where did Moses write about Jesus? Where did Moses accuse those who would not follow Him?
 1. Peter provides the answer.
 2. “For Moses truly said to the fathers, ‘The Lord your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your brethren. Him you shall hear in all things, whatever He says to you. And it shall be that every soul who will not hear that Prophet shall be utterly destroyed from among the people.’” (**Acts 3:22-23, NKJV**)
 - a. Peter makes the point in **Acts 3** that the Lord did, in fact literally fulfill this prophecy, in “raising up” Jesus from the dead!
 3. Peter quotes from **Deuteronomy 18:15-19** (written 1400 years before Christ), where Moses told the Jews that God would raise up a prophet “like him”; and that any of the people who refused to listen to that Prophet would be cut off.
 - a. Jesus’ life was foreshadowed by that of Moses’ life, in great detail.
 - b. We explained this in the second lesson in this series, in connection with the question John the Baptist was asked, “Are you the Prophet?” (**John 1:21**)
 - c. Eusebius (bishop of the church in Caesarea, Palestine, writing c. 320 AD) pointed out some examples of how

Jesus was like Moses (from *Proof of the Gospel*, Book 3, chapter 2):

- i. Jesus and Moses each brought in a new system of laws, a new covenant. Note that all the other prophets just called people to follow the Law of Moses; they did not introduce new laws.
 1. See **Exodus 20-24, 34** for Moses.
 2. See **Matthew 5-7, Hebrews 8:7-13** for Jesus.
- ii. Both delivered God's people out of slavery.
 1. See **Exodus 3:7-10, 6:1-9** for Moses.
 2. See **John 8:31-36, Romans 6:16-23** for Jesus.
- iii. Both fasted 40 days.
 1. See **Exodus 34:28** for Moses.
 2. See **Matthew 4:2** for Jesus.
- iv. Both fed thousands miraculously, with bread from heaven.
 1. See **Exodus 16** for Moses.
 2. See **John 6:1-14** for Jesus.
- v. Both miraculously crossed a sea, with others (Jesus brought Peter upon the Sea of Galilee; Moses led nation of Israel across the Red Sea)
 1. See **Exodus 14** for Moses.
 2. See **Matthew 14:22-33** for Jesus.
- vi. Both demonstrated power over the wind and the waves.
 1. See **Exodus 14:21** for Moses.
 2. See **Matthew 8:23-27** for Jesus.
- vii. Both met with God on a mountain, and had a radiant face following that encounter with their Lord.

1. See **Exodus 34:29-35** for Moses.
 2. See **Matthew 17:1-8** for Jesus.
- viii. Both healed leprosy. (Moses healed his sister Miriam; Jesus healed many.)
1. See **Exodus 4:6-7** and **Numbers 12** for Moses.
 2. See **Luke 17:11-19** for Jesus.
- ix. Both sent out the 12, and the 70.
1. See **Numbers 13** regarding the twelve sent out by Moses.
 2. See **Matthew 10** regarding the twelve sent out by Jesus.
 3. See **Exodus 24:9-12** regarding the seventy of Moses.
 4. See **Luke 10:1-17** regarding the seventy (Majority Text) sent out by Jesus.
- d. Eusebius notes that these are just some of the ways in which Moses was like Jesus. *He bid us to find the other parallels "at our leisure"!* Two that immediately come to my mind, from the beginning and the end of the life of Moses, are:
- i. From **Exodus chapters 1-2**, Moses (like Jesus, in **Matthew chapter 2**) is opposed by an evil king who kills many innocent male babies; however, he himself is spared and escapes that fate.
 - ii. After Moses dies, **Deuteronomy 34** notes that Moses' followers were unable to find his body (compare with Jesus' followers, in **Luke 24:1-13**).
- f. Moses *did* write about Jesus, very specifically, in **Deuteronomy 18**. He said that the great Prophet like him would come in the future, that He would be "raised up" by God, and that anyone who would not heed His words would be called to account.
- i. This passage in **John 5** was the launching point I used in a lesson I taught recently to Christians in a Muslim country, asking "Where did Moses write about Jesus?" and then explaining the **Deuteronomy 18**

prophecy (showing that the Prophet to come, promised by Moses, was in fact Jesus, not Mohammad).

- ii. May we all take Moses at his word, whether we are Jews or God-fearing Gentiles, and do exactly what the Prophet (Jesus) said!

V. Conclusion

- a. Jesus made some extraordinary claims; his detractors wanted to kill him for violating the Law of Moses.
- b. If he was a false witness about God, he should have been stoned. Either He was telling the truth, or He wasn't.
- c. He points to multiple witnesses in His defense:
 - i. John the Baptist, "*the* burning and shining lamp".
 - ii. The miracles Jesus performed. (The apostles, who saw these things first-hand, endured torture and death testifying these things to be true.)
 - iii. The Father
 - iv. The Scriptures, and
 - v. Moses himself
 1. Moses promised that someone would come "like him"
 2. God would "raise him up"
 3. Everyone must listen to what he says, *or they will be cut off (destroyed, as Peter points out in Acts 3:22-23)*.