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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Who Was Jesus Christ?

“Deity Testimony, part II”

TRANSCRIPT

[Message] This is the second of our series of studies entitled, Who Was Jesus Christ? Who was Jesus Christ? It is the timeless question, as fresh today as it was almost two thousand years ago. We sense its importance even when we do not understand precisely why. To a theologian the answer is easy, at least on paper. We realize that what he is, is basic to what he did, and does, for that matter. If he is truly God’s Son then what he did has immense significance for fathoming the purposes and concerns of God for men. In other words, what he did in securing the forgiveness of sins for his people is an open door into the college of the knowledge of God. And conversely, the exalted nature of his being lends infinite credibility and value to the work of the cross by which he secured such blessing for men. It is not an idle or groundless claim that men sense the importance of the question.

Hugh Anderson pointed out in one of his works on our Lord that even liberal theologians were so engrossed in the study of the life of Christ that they produced within the space of a few generations, sixty thousand biographies of the man from Nazareth. The Apostle John considered this the question of human life and he devoted his gospel to its answer. His conclusion, as we saw so plainly in our last study, was that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God and that one might have the knowledge of God and eternal life

through him. He wrote of Jesus Christ as the revelation of God in the words, “No man hath seen God at any time, the only begotten Son which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him” John 1:18. In fact, John rings the changes on this theme through his work. Among the passages that stress the Son as the revealer of the Father and his glory is John 1:14, “And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.” And then one thinks of the words spoken to Philip in answer to his timid request, “Lord show us the Father and it sufficeth us,” with an apparent bit of disappointment Jesus replied, “Have I been so long time with you and yet hast thou not known me Philip? He that hath seen me hath seen the Father and how sayest thou then, Show us the Father?” It was such texts as these that lend support to the comment of Bishop William Cannon of the Methodist church, “Jesus of Nazareth is all we know of God and yet all we need to know.” The statement is not all together correct, but it is not far wrong.

There is however a danger Christians must avoid. In their just defense of the deity of Christ they must not make of Christianity a Jesus cult. Our Lord constantly reminded his men that he was, through his mediation, bringing believers into union and communion with the Father. And as Augustine said, “It is through the man Christ that you proceed to the God Christ.” Throughout his work, Hoskins says of John’s gospel, “The writer is careful to emphasize that Christianity is not an independent cult of Jesus, but the revelation of the Father and the worship of God.”

Up to this point we’ve looked at some of the specific texts that teach that Jesus of Nazareth, in so far as one aspect of his being is concerned, is truly God. The texts are clear and plain. There is other Scriptural testimony however, that supports and elucidates the texts, giving us a combined testimony of great weight and credibility. It is to this type of testimony that we turn in the remainder of this study, and first of all we consider the testimony of the miracles that Jesus performed. The miracles that Christ performed witness to his deity. Now of course, it is a well known fact that prophets and apostles

performed miracles and deity is not claimed for them, but there is a sense in which our Lord’s miracles throw the activities of other men of God into the shade. Notice the following things about his work.

First, the impressiveness of his commands. He speaks to the leper in response to his request for healing in words of sovereign authority, “I will; be thou clean” Matthew 8:3. He performed the most difficult of miracles, nature miracles, saying to the raging waters of the storm on the Sea of Galilee, “Peace, be still” and immediately there came a great calm, Mark 4:39. And to the daughter of the ruler of the synagogue whose name was Jarius, it is the simple and direct, *Talitha cumi* or made arise. One is reminded of Genesis, “Let there be light and there was light.”

Even more impressive seeing the passages in which he conveys such power and authority to his men saying, “As ye go, preach, saying, The kingdom of heaven is at hand. Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out devils: freely ye have received freely give” Matthew 10:7 and 8. The power of others who performed works of healing was derivative entirely. Even Peter, the first pope in the minds of some, must call on the Lord for power. In Lydda, where he found a certain Aeneas sick of the palsy, Peter exclaimed, “Aeneas, Jesus Christ maketh thee whole: arise, and make thy bed” Acts 9:34. It might be said that he only did his works by the power of God. There is a genuine sense in which that is true, and I would not dispute it. The fact that he was able to have complete and continuous communion and dependence on his Father is itself a testimony to the fact that he, although truly man, is more than simply a man.

The miracles of our Lord however, frequently conveyed overwhelming impressions of the presence of God beyond that of the miracles of others. One is reminded of the stilling of the storm again, and the tremendous sense of the numinous that fell upon the men in the little skiff. Mark describes the sense of mystery in this way, “And they feared exceedingly and said one to another, What manner of man is this that even the wind and the sea obey him?” Mark 4:41. Again on the Sea of Galilee the scene

of so much of his work in ministry after a night of fruitless toil by Peter and his partners, Jesus performed the miracle of the mighty haul of fish. When the weight of the fish became so great that the boats began to sink there exploded within Peter the conviction that the Lord God of Israel was with him in the boat. He fell down at Jesus’ knees crying out, “Depart from me for I am a sinful man, oh Lord” Luke 5:8. So, I sum up this testimony with our Lord’s own words, uttered in the upper room discourse, namely, that he “did works among them which none other man did” John 15:24.

The second testimony is the testimony of our Lord as the supreme revealer of truth. There are many sayings of our Lord in which he appears as the supreme and unique revealer of truth. The greatest of the prophets of the Old Testament preface their words with, “Thus sayeth the Lord” but Jesus characteristically introduces his with, “Verily I say unto you.” The expression occurs thirty times in Matthew, thirteen times in Mark, six times in Luke, and twenty-five times in John, who characteristically doubles the word making it, “Verily, verily I say unto you.” As Professor Bruce Metzger of Princeton Theological Seminary has said, “This use of verily indicates a finality and an authority in his message that is unparalleled elsewhere.” And he adds, “The entire range of Jewish literature knows of no example of a scribe or rabbinical teacher prefacing his remarks with the expression, ‘Verily I say unto you.’” It is no wonder then that Matthew says the people who heard his Sermon on the Mount “were astonished at his doctrine: For he taught them as one having authority and not as the scribes” Matthew 7:28 and 29. And this accounts for the officer’s words on another occasion, “Never man spake like this man” John 7:46.

The third of the testimonies is the testimony to our Lord as sovereign over men’s affairs. There are sayings in which the Lord lays sovereign claims upon the lives and consciences of men. “Follow me” was the daily language of Jesus. There is nothing like it elsewhere. Arthur John Gossip contends concerning his claim to be the light of the world, “Buddha believed he had a marvelous and beneficent gospel to offer men, but for

himself he claimed to be only the rediscoverer of an old and forgotten path, and urged his followers not to think of him, but to concentrate upon the teaching. Confucius, with a winsome humility, declared that as often as he walked with others, three abreast he was sure to find a teacher and asked, ‘How dare I lay claim to holiness or love, a man of endless craving who never tires of teaching I might be called, but nothing more.’ Muhammad, with all his lofty claims, once covering his head cried out that unless God cast the cloak of his mercy over him there was no hope for him at all. This he said thrice, and indeed these mighty spirits have been in part left behind both in teaching and in conduct, have in places become out of date and obsolete, but Jesus Christ is still the light of the world and who so follows him does not walk in darkness but can see to find his way.” so Mr. Gossip. Furthermore, woe to that man who refused the call to follow him, for Jesus can say, “Whosoever therefore shall confess me before men him will I confess also before my Father which is in heaven, but whosoever shall deny me before men him will I also deny before my Father which is in heaven” Matthew 10:32 and 33.

The fourth of the testimonies to the deity of Christ is the testimony to his power to forgive sins. The Scriptures make it plain that the forgiveness of sins is the prerogative of God alone. One of the most striking cases of the exercise of that power by the Lord Jesus Christ is found in Mark 2:1-12. It had to do with the forgiveness of sins and the healing of the man with the palsy who had been brought to Jesus on a pallet by four other concerned friends. When Jesus saw the faith of the men he said to one who was sick of the palsy, “Son, thy sins be forgiven thee.” The scribes sitting there, and reasoning in their hearts, were very unhappy and after affirming the truth that only God could forgive sins, they accused Jesus of blaspheme. Our Lord’s reply to them is a model of empirical proof. One might pretend to forgive of course, because forgiveness belongs to a realm beyond the sphere of human observation. Jesus therefore said that he would do something within human observation and verification, which he could not do if he was capable of lying. God would not honor the word of a lying man. If then his word did

take effect in the visible sphere that would prove that it had truly taken affect in the invisible world. So he spoke to the scribes in this way,

“Why reason ye these things in your hearts? Whether is it easier to say to the sick of the palsy, Thy sins be forgiven thee; or to say, Arise, and take up thy bed, and walk? But that ye may know that the Son of man hath power on earth to forgive sins, (he saith to the sick of the palsy,) I say unto thee, Arise, and take up thy bed, and go thy way into thy house. (Mark 2:8-11, Mark records the triumphant conclusion) And immediately he arose, took up his bed, and went forth before them all; insomuch that they were all amazed, and glorified God, saying, We never saw it on this fashion (verse 12).”

Now in response to this magnificent demonstration of power it has been said that Jesus did not really imply supernatural power in his words for did he not subsequently empower the apostles to do the same thing? Obviously, however the forgiveness of sins by the apostles rested on his authority. It was purely declaratory and ministerial in their case. But it might be said that his forgiveness was nothing more than the declaration that God had forgiven. Jesus however, did not say this. He claimed he had power to forgive sins while he was on earth in his mediatorial ministry. And what is conclusive, he claimed he had the power even when accused of blaspheme, and might, by such an explanation and defense, have escaped the charge. As Stocker says, “The natural sense of his words undoubtedly is that the authority rested in his own person.”

The fifth of the testimonies is the testimony of the reception of worship. For the sake of time and space, only a brief reference to other indirect testimony to the deity of Christ is appropriate. But we must note that Jesus received and accepted the worship of men and women. It is ultimately inconceivable that Jesus should accept such worship if he were not in reality worthy of it. And while scholars may debate quite legitimately the matter of the universal usage of the term, in the context of the Scriptures it cannot be

doubted that it has the sense of to render homage due a deity. One sees this dramatically in the Book of Revelation in the chapters in which the magnificent vision of the throne of God the Father and of the lion of the tribe of Judah the Lamb of God reaches its climax with the declaration that the Lamb has finished the work of redemption that restores world dominion to him and his redeemed people. All heaven, it seems, the four beasts, the twenty-four elders, myriads of angels, in fact every creature in heaven, earth and under the earth, excluding only the Father in the Spirit, proclaim the praises of the Lamb. And John concludes the account with the words, “And the four beasts said, Amen. And the four and twenty elders fell down and worshiped him that liveth for ever and ever” Revelation 5:1-14. Almost at the end of the book, when the angel comes to the conclusion of the revelation, John is overwhelmed. He describes his response in this way,

“And I John saw these things, and heard them. And when I heard I had heard and seen, I fell down to worship before the feet of the angel which shewed me these things. Then saith he unto me, See thou do it not: for I am thy fellow servant, and of thy brethren the prophets, and of them which keep the sayings of this book: worship God (Revelation 22:8 and 9).”

Now is it not striking that the angel tells John not to worship him, but to worship God? But in the account of the vision of chapters 4 and 5, which I just referred to, the angels who tell John not to worship them but worship God, worship the Lamb of God, the Lord Jesus Christ. The implication is obvious. They tell John to worship only God, and they worship the Lamb.

The sixth of the testimonies we may call the testimony to varied divine prerogatives. One is almost bewildered to read,

“Thou art Peter and upon this rock I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. And I will give unto thee the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven (Matthew 16:18 and 19).”

With such fantastic claims in every line here, it's no wonder that some deny authenticity to the statement, but they're exalted in magnificent assurance fit Jesus Christ well. Or, what shall we make of this statement, made when Mary of Bethany had anointed his head with the ointment of spikenard very precious, “Verily I say unto you, wherever this gospel shall be preached throughout the whole world, this also that she hath done shall be spoken of for a memorial of her” Mark 14:9. He assumes with divine certainty that his death is not the end of his movement. And of Matthew 28:18-20, in which we have such mighty claims as, “all power is given unto me in heaven and in earth, and lo I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.” As Stocker says of these words, “Many attempts have been made to define and confine these extraordinary words, but like Samson's strength, they burst the [indistinct] of definition, and those only know what they mean who in prayer with their fellow Christians have felt the personal nearness of him whom having not seen they love.”

Horace Bushnell once said, “Take the range if you will of all the great philosophers and saints and choose out one that is most competent, or if perchance someone of you may imagine that he is himself about upon a level with Jesus, let him come forward in this trial and say, ‘Follow me, be worthy of me, I am the light of the world. Ye are from beneath, I am from above. Behold a greater than Solomon is here.’ Take all these transcendent assumptions and see how soon your glory will be sifted out of you by the detective gaze and darkened by the contempt of man kind. Why not? Is not the challenge fair? Do you not tell us that you can say as divine things as he?”

And incidentally, at this point I'd like to interject and say, it is common for New Testament scholars to say that what we have in our gospels today is largely due to the church, the later church, the early church, rather than to the Lord Jesus Christ himself and that we do not have a true record of what he said. These words that Bushnell said apply to those who say these things. The church could never say these things of herself.

Listen to what Bushnell goes on to say, “Is it not in you too of course to do what is human? Are you not in the front rank of human developments? Do you not rejoice in the power to rectify many mistakes and errors in the words of Jesus? Give us then this one experiment and see if it does not prove to you a truth that is of some consequence, that you are a man and that Jesus Christ is more.”

So, we come to the conclusion of this study. We come again to that with which we began. John, the apostle, makes the profound and prodigious claim that the knowledge of Jesus the Messiah is the knowledge of God, the only begotten Son, eternally resting upon the bosom of the Father, in closest communion, John says, had made him known. Only God can make God known. Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch in the 2nd Century, in custody on his way to martyrdom in Rome, just a few years after John's Gospel was written, spoke of Christ as “the word which came forth out of silence.” The idea originated in Judaism, being linked with Genesis 1:3 where we read, “And God said, Let there be light and there was light.” The Rabbis asked, “What was there before God spoke?” Their answer was, “God's silence.” Silence became a token of God's inexpressible majesty. Even in the Hellenistic world silence became a symbol of the highest deity. Do you know there is even a prayer to silence in a 4th Century papyrus? Part of it goes like this, “Silence, silence, silence, take me under thy wings, silence.” In the ancient world God is silence, hidden, speechless, distant. Into that world the message of the Lord and his apostles rang out. God is not silent,

“He has spoken in a divine Son whom he appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds, who being the brightness of his glory in the express image of his person, and upholding all things by the word of his power when he had by himself purged our sins, sat down on the right hand of the majesty on high (Hebrews chapter 1, verses 2 and 3).”

What a marvelous statement, “when he had by himself purged our sins, sat down on the right hand of the majesty on high.” And so, my dear friend listening to me today, come to him, God’s supreme word to us and rest in his atoning death, for the forgiveness of sins.