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John 5:16-47

One God and Five Witnesses

Whenever I study the Bible or teach it, the primary question that I ask of myself and those I am teaching is, “What does this text tell me about God?” I start with that question because it orients me to the purpose of studying and reading Scripture. It’s not about giving me a spiritual boost in the morning, or what I can get from it; it’s about meeting God, learning about him, and learning to orient myself to *him* rather than orienting *him* to me.

As we read through this passage in John today, I want to invite you to slowly ponder these words. Meditate on them. Chew on them. When we read Scripture, we encounter the God who is revealed on the pages, but only if we take the time to meet him there. Throughout the sermon, I will have a Scripture reader slowly and contemplatively read passages before I talk about them. This passage in John, particularly, is not meant to be read quickly. It is meant to be savoured and lingered on. You may follow along on your Bibles or from the screen. And so, we begin our reading today in John 5:16.

‘So, because Jesus was doing these things on the Sabbath, the Jewish leaders began to persecute him. In his defense Jesus said to them, “My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I too am working.” For this reason, they tried all the more to kill him; not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God.’¹

This claim, that Jesus calls God his own Father and makes himself equal with God, is the root of all Jesus’ problems. If Jesus had made these claims to the Romans, it wouldn’t have shocked anyone; they had many gods, and many of these gods had come to earth and had sons with human women, creating demigods. All new gods were accepted into the pantheon under the rule of Caesar, who self-proclaimed the title, “Son of God.”

But Jesus made these claims to the Jews, who believed in only *one* God, and they had a problem with this claim, for good reason. Abandoning true worship of Yahweh, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, was why they had ended up in Babylon and Assyria in the first place. When they came back to Judah and rebuilt the temple, there was renewed faith and religious fervour as they established a faith rooted in deep study of Scripture, especially the words of Moses. They took to heart the words of Deuteronomy 6:

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.⁵ Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.⁶ These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts.⁷ Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.⁸ Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads.⁹ Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.

¹ John 5:16-19, NIV

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This passage is called the *Shema*, which is a Hebrew word that means to ‘hear’ or ‘listen,’ and it became a daily prayer for ancient Jews and is still a prayer for modern Jews today. It was a reminder to the people of God that they served only *one* God, as opposed to the practices of the nations around them. When Jesus claims equality with God, he directly defies the first commandment to “have no other gods before [the One God].”² At least, that’s how it looks to the Jews.

In John 1, we discussed how God became flesh. God, in all his glory, became human so that humans might know him through his humanity. Here, in John 5, the Son makes direct claims to *deity*. He is human, but he is *God*. He directly overturns the Jews’ carefully ordered doctrines about the oneness of God; there is a Son, he says, who is himself God and does all that the Father commands. This Son has the exact authority of the Father, including the power to judge evil and to raise life from the dead. He is not *another god* claiming to be of equal standing with God; he *is God*. Let’s hear from John 5:19-23.

¹⁹ Jesus gave them this answer: “Very truly I tell you, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does. ²⁰ For the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does. Yes, and he will show him even greater works than these, so that you will be amazed. ²¹ For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it. ²² Moreover, the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son, ²³ that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father. Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father, who sent him.

The Holy Trinity is a Christian concept that is hard to explain (that’s an understatement!). The Son is God. The Father is God. The Spirit is God. It is *one God in perfect community and unity*, worthy of honour as *one God*.

This is a concept large enough to break the brains of the Jewish religious leaders; they can’t comprehend it as truth, only as a false claim, and they seek to kill him for it. The assumptions they held about who they thought God was are flipped upside down. I think Jesus knew exactly how inflammatory his words were. “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.” Jesus reinterprets the *Shema*, placing himself in the center of it.

Now, this word *shema*, can simply mean to *listen* or to *hear*, but it can also mean to ‘pay attention to’ or ‘focus on,’³ or can mean ‘responding to what you hear.’⁴ To *shema* means to

² Ex. 20:2

³ Ex. 19:5

⁴ Ps. 27:7

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listen *and obey*. To hear and believe.⁵ And then to *do good*.⁶ This is the entire Old Testament concept of *listening*; it always includes obedience. You can't passively listen and *not act*; listening requires action. Now, listen to the words of John as we continue our reading.

24 “*Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life.* **25** *Very truly I tell you, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live.* **26** *For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself.* **27** *And he has given him authority to judge because he is the Son of Man.* **28** *Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice* **29** *and come out—those who have done what is good will rise to live, and those who have done what is evil will rise to be condemned.* **30** *By myself I can do nothing; I judge only as I hear, and my judgment is just, for I seek not to please myself but him who sent me.*”

Hear my words and what? *Believe!* For *in him* is eternal, resurrection life. Deuteronomy 6 describes a land with large, flourishing cities filled with good things. This is the new creation that God's people are invited into. The call is the same in the Old Testament as it was in Jesus' time as it is for us today—to *listen and obey*, to “fear the Lord your God and serve him only,”⁷ which leads to life with Jesus now and in the life to come.

However, those who refuse to listen, and obey have continued in evil and will experience judgment, just as God said in Deuteronomy: “For the LORD your God, who is among you, is a jealous God and his anger will burn against you, and he will destroy you from the face of the land.”⁸ This judgment happened to Jerusalem once and was liable to happen again, says Jesus, if they refuse to listen to and believe him. (And it did happen in AD 70.)

The Jewish leaders made assumptions about who they thought God was, and these assumptions blinded them to what God was doing in their midst—that he himself was standing before them! They accuse him of blasphemy, of making himself equal to God—a claim worthy of death.

And so, Jesus stands on trial before his doubters and accusers. The One who has been given absolute authority to judge is put on trial... what a display of the humility of Christ! He who has authority and power to judge puts himself at the disposal of the Jewish religious leaders, offering not one or two but *five* witnesses to the fact that he is *God* in human flesh. Let's continue reading from John 5:31 and see if you can pick out the five witnesses.

⁵ John 5:24, 25, 28; <https://bibleproject.com/articles/what-is-the-shema/>, <https://bibleproject.com/videos/shema-listen/>

⁶ John 5:29

⁷ Deut. 6:12, NIV

⁸ Deut. 6:15, NIV

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³¹ If I testify about myself, my testimony is not true. ³² There is another who testifies in my favor, and I know that his testimony about me is true. ³³ You have sent to John and he has testified to the truth. ³⁴ Not that I accept human testimony; but I mention it that you may be saved. ³⁵ John was a lamp that burned and gave light, and you chose for a time to enjoy his light.

³⁶ 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. ³⁷ And the Father who sent me has himself testified concerning me. You have never heard his voice nor seen his form, ³⁸ nor does his word dwell in you, for you do not believe the one he sent. ³⁹ You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, ⁴⁰ yet you refuse to come to me to have life.

⁴¹ I do not accept glory from human beings, ⁴² but I know you. I know that you do not have the love of God in your hearts. ⁴³ I have come in my Father's name, and you do not accept me; but if someone else comes in his own name, you will accept him. ⁴⁴ How can you believe since you accept glory from one another but do not seek the glory that comes from the only God? ⁴⁵ But do not think I will accuse you before the Father. Your accuser is Moses, on whom your hopes are set. ⁴⁶ If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me. ⁴⁷ But since you do not believe what he wrote, how are you going to believe what I say?"

In Jewish law, there needed to be at least two, preferably three, witnesses for a criminal trial.⁹ Being a false witness was a serious crime in Jewish law, punishable by the same punishment that they sought to cast on others.¹⁰ Here, Jesus presents not two or three, but *five* witnesses to his claim that he is God. 'You doubt that I am who I say I am? Well, here are five witnesses who testify to who I am.'

The first witness that Jesus calls forth is **John the Baptist**. John is the human witness to who Jesus is. Right off the bat in John 1, we read that there "was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light (Jesus), so that through him, all might believe."¹¹ John had prepared the hearts of the people to receive Jesus' presence and message; he was the first embodied witness to Jesus.

But human testimony is not enough, nor is it all. We know all about that, don't we? Simple anecdotes aren't enough to sway us. We hear anecdotes of great faith, people who have had incredible experiences with God, and we smile skeptically, and we say, 'Yeah, but is it really true? That's just a tall tale! I need to see it to believe it!'

⁹ Deut. 17:6, 19:15; two or three witnesses are required for a criminal trial.

¹⁰ Ex. 20:16, Ps. 27:12

¹¹ John 1:6-7, NIV

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Well, that's great, because **signs and miracles** are the second witness. You don't believe what was said about Jesus? How about when you heard about the water to wine at Cana? Or the healing of the official's son? Or the healing of the invalid by the pool on the Sabbath?

Or how about when I went to Sierra Leone at age 19, preached the first sermon I ever preached to a deep rural hospital of about thirty patients, and then found out the next day that *all the patients had gone home because they weren't sick anymore*. Is that enough to convince you that God does miracles and signs and that he walks on the earth?

But it's not just that Jesus did miraculous signs for the sake of doing something awesome; the signs and miracles are a *witness to Jesus*! These are supernatural events, unexplainable events that defy physics and biology; there is no other explanation than that *God is present and walking among us*.

Well, you might say, that's pretty cool, but how do I know that those signs and miracles came from God? Maybe they were illusions or grossly overstated rumours. Maybe there is a scientific explanation. Maybe they got the facts all wrong, and it wasn't wine that the water turned into (though the master of the ceremony had tasted it and was amazed) or the official's son wasn't healed (though he was near death and there was a very definite time of recovery) or the man wasn't actually healed (except he'd been an invalid for 38 years, so good luck explaining that one away). Maybe all the people in the Sierra Leonean hospital weren't actually healed (but then why did my team come back early the next day when there was no one at the hospital to preach to or pray with?).

Thankfully, Jesus doesn't give up in the face of our skepticism. He invokes a third witness, the **Father** himself. Who better to know a Son than a Father? Parents know their children. This God, who is formless and unseen, sent his Son—who is God, remember—to embody all that is God within all that is human. He sees his Son walking upon the earth.

'Yes,' Jesus says, 'I and the Father are One; the God whom you Jews knew who had delivered you from Egypt and Babylon, this God testifies to me and calls me his Son.' There will be more on this in the weeks to come, so don't worry if you still have questions that aren't answered here. We'll get to it later.

But wait, you might say. How do I know if God said that at all? We only have the Scriptures to tell us what God thinks and commands us to do, and, well, Jesus, you kind of broke a bunch of his laws already, so we're not too sure about you.

Excellent! Jesus says, *the fourth witness is Scripture*. The Jews knew God through **tradition and Scripture**. Studying and debating Scripture was the highest form of piety and faithfulness in Jesus' time. *If you elevate Scripture so highly, Jesus says, then you should know that they point to me.*

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Instead, they viewed Scripture as their most sacred rules to follow. They worshipped Scripture rather than worshipping the *God* of Scripture. They became upset with Jesus when he healed a man on the Sabbath; the Sabbath rules must be upheld! But they missed the point of Scripture—that it is firstly a *witness* to God’s presence and power in the world.

We are people who love Scripture, don’t we? We love to dig in deep and ask, “What does it say? What does it mean?” But *why* do we love the Scriptures? Is it enough to say, “The Bible told me so”?

No! The Bible is not a rulebook meant to be followed to the letter. The Bible is not a manual for life or a textbook to describe how the world was created. We worship *God*, not Scripture. The Bible tells us *about God*. We don’t go to the Bible to have it tell us what to do, but to *listen* to it tell us about *God* and to *obey* him. It is a witness to *him*. We worship *God, this God who was made human*, not Scripture.

But, but! You might protest (or at least you would if you were a first century Jew). *But Moses wrote the Law! Moses was the greatest prophet who ever lived, who talked with God face to face! Surely that means that we ought to elevate his words above anything else.*

“Your accuser is Moses,” says Jesus. “If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me. But since you do not believe what he wrote, how are you going to believe what I say?”¹² They had elevated Moses and the Scriptures even above God himself, for when God showed up among them, *they did not recognize him*. To them, Jesus’ claims were absolutely mad. They would rather worship the words of a historically great prophet and preacher than listen to the words of God being spoken to them in the flesh.

What does this text tell me about God? Jesus knocks down each one of the Jews’ objections to him. Tick, tick, tick, tick, tick. He knocks down each one of *our* objections to him. There are not one, not two, but *five* witnesses that testify that Jesus is the Son of God, that Jesus is *God* come to earth. Fully human, fully God.

What assumptions have we made about who this God is? What boxes have we put him in? Which witness do you question, wrestle with, or doubt?

When others tell you what Jesus has done in their lives, do you doubt?

When you witness miracles and signs before your very eyes, are you willing to have the carefully ordered box blown to bits, as it did for me when I went to Sierra Leone?

¹² John 5:46-47, NIV

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When you have a personal encounter with God who speaks to you gently or loudly, calling you to himself, do you brush it off as an ‘emotional experience’ or spiritual weirdness?

When you read Scripture, do you read because you ‘have to’ to be a good Christian, or is it to meet Jesus within its pages?

Are the voices of pastors, preachers, celebrities, or influencers louder than Jesus’ voice?

There are four ways in which we encounter God and deepen our faith: through **Scripture** as it tells us about him, through our **experiences** as we meet God face to face or soul to soul, through the **traditions and practices** that have been passed down to us by those who have gone before us, and through the **reasoning of our mind** as we wrestle with questions and doubts.

I call this the **Four-Legged Stool of Faith**. There are more theological terms for it, but ‘Four-Legged Stool’ is easier to remember than “Wesleyan Quadrilateral.” We need each leg of the stool, or else it falls over. We need Scripture. We need intellect and reason. We need tradition, the passing on of a legacy of faith. We need personal experiences with God. But each on their own is not the entirety of faith. They point us to Jesus and help us when we get stuck. So that we can *listen* and *obey*, orienting our hearts and lives to him every single day.

Let’s pray.

Jesus, thank you that you came to show us the Father. Thank you that you are God. May we meet with you, here, at home, at work, and at school. May we learn from you and learn to hear your voice. Give us the courage to listen and obey. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Benediction:

“The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace.”