

GOD IN THE DOCK

John 8:13-20

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“In your Law it is written that the testimony of two men is true. I am the one who bears witness about myself, and the Father who sent me bears witness about me” (Jn. 8:17-18).

The Gospel of John is well-known for its emphasis on the witness of the gospel; nowhere else do we find so many evangelistic appeals from the lips of Jesus. Because of this, no other book in the Bible provides so penetrating a study of unbelief. And it is with hardened unbelief that Jesus is faced after his great gospel appeal that began, “I am the light of the world” (Jn. 8:12).

As usual, Jesus’ opponents were Pharisees. These were the religious leaders most devoted to fulfilling the letter of the law, at least as understood through their own tradition. In many matters, the Pharisees stand out as exceptional men. But when it comes to unbelief, they aptly represent the entire human race in opposition to Jesus and his gospel. The Pharisees were sure that a true Messiah would be one who agreed with their point of view and fulfilled their own particular idea of salvation. From that perspective they stood in judgment on the Son of God so as to reject him.

A DISPLAY OF STUBBORN UNBELIEF

This passage provides a choice display of the stubborn unbelief in our world. Remember that the events of John 8 take place immediately after the Feast of Tabernacles. God instituted this feast to remind the people of how Israel had journeyed in the wilderness, and how God led them to the Promised Land with mighty works of power through Moses. Moses had promised another leader

like himself through whom God would reveal his truth and provide for his people. Jesus had revealed himself as that very Messiah, both through his teaching and his miracles, who fulfills the symbolism of the Jewish feasts.

John takes keen interest in Jesus' connection with Moses and the exodus. Jesus fed the five thousand with a few fish and loaves. Comparing himself to the manna God gave through Moses, he taught, "I am the bread of life" (Jn. 6:35). Then, at the Feast of Tabernacles, Jesus identified himself in terms of God's saving deeds in the exodus. "I am the light of the world," he declared. "Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (Jn. 8:12).

In these ways, Jesus revealed himself as the long-awaited Messiah. But in response, the leaders of Israel – those entrusted with keeping true faith alive – came to accuse and reject him. John recalls: "So the Pharisees said to him, 'You are bearing witness about yourself; your testimony is not true'" (Jn. 8:13).

This reminds us that unbelief never runs out of objections and never has sufficient proof. The Pharisees argued that since Jesus was not following established legal procedures, his testimony could not be valid. They referred to the Old Testament law that demanded that "only on the evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses shall a charge be established" (Dt. 19:15, see also Dt. 17:6).

This was disingenuous for two reasons. First, the requirement for two witnesses pertained to criminal cases in which capital punishment would result. But this was not a criminal case; it was not even a formal hearing such as Jesus endured in John 5. Had the Pharisees really wanted to follow the law they would have consulted the Old Testament requirements for testing a prophet, which followed a different procedure that Jesus fully met (see Dt. 13:1-5; 18:21-22). Secondly, the Pharisees had already received multiple witnesses. John the Baptist identified Jesus as the Messiah (see John 1:19-28). And the Pharisee Nicodemus admitted, "We know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him" (Jn. 3:2). In John 5, they received testimony from the lame man healed at the pool. There were many other witnesses, so if they merely sought legal propriety they had ample

proof. This is why their complaint against Jesus displayed stubborn unbelief.

Jesus explained their attitude: “You judge according to the flesh” (Jn. 8:15). There are many ways we might take this. In Scripture, “flesh” often refers to our sinful nature, and we see how sin motivated the Pharisees’ unbelief. It also may mean that since the Son of God appeared in a human body they could not perceive his deity. Moreover, it may speak to human limitations. Jesus said, “I know where I came from and where I am going, but you do not know where I come from or where I am going” (Jn. 8:14). But there is obviously more at work than this limitation, especially since the Pharisees had ample proof of Jesus in the Old Testament prophecies.

Ultimately, the Pharisees rejected Jesus because of their worldly agenda. We know this is true, because in the generations after Jesus there were false messiahs who did not fulfill the biblical requirements but who adopted the Pharisees’ platform, and these false messiahs received their endorsement. William Barclay laments, “The whole history of Israel was so designed that the Jews should have recognized the Son of God when He came; all their history was leading up to that coming. But they had become so involved with their own ideas, so intent on their own way, so sure of their own conception of what religion was that they had become blind to God.”¹ This same mistake has been repeated by countless Christian churches and we face the dire risk of this today, especially if we become devoted to political, social, or personal agendas that reflect our priorities rather than the Bible’s.

Indeed, recent generations have provided numerous examples of “judging according to the flesh.” In the 19th and 20th centuries, so-called Christian humanism rejected the Jesus of the Bible because they argued that modern life had disproved the supernatural. Theirs was a scientific agenda, and they rejected Jesus from that perspective. The communists demanded a class-warfare Jesus. The capitalists demanded an free-market Jesus. The racists demanded an ethnocentric Jesus. The patriots demanded a nationalistic Jesus. Today, the worshipers of lifestyle demand a mystical Jesus who

¹ William Barclay, *The Gospel of John*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), 2:18.

makes no demands and teaches no doctrine. The problem is that the biblical Jesus gives offense to each of these earthly perspectives, which is why people with such agendas end up rejecting the true Jesus revealed in Scripture.

This prompts some reflections on unbelief. The first is that unbelief rejects Jesus because he never conforms to our party interest. Jesus did not look like the Pharisees. He did not dress like them or act like them. He did not treat people the way they did and did not promise the salvation they wanted. This is why their unbelief was so stubborn in the face of such overwhelming evidence. This warns us to be suspicious when the Jesus to whom we are attracted seems much like ourselves and perfectly suited to meet our felt needs. The true Savior does not embrace any fleshly agenda; this is what he meant by saying, "I judge no one" (Jn. 8:15). Jesus did not come to advance the agenda of the Pharisees or any other party, just as he does not embrace the Republican or the Democratic agenda today. Instead, he came to challenge, capture, and transform all earthly agendas under his rule as we surrender our values and priorities at his feet. But if we refuse to submit our agenda to his, no amount of evidence will ever persuade us to accept Jesus.

Secondly, these Pharisees remind us that at its heart, unbelief is not an intellectual matter. It is always a matter of the heart. The Pharisees were the great intellects of their day, with the finest educations and the most extensive knowledge of the Bible. But they were self-satisfied and proud, so they would not come to a Messiah who offered them forgiveness for sin. The same is true today.

A colleague once approached the brilliant physicist Sir Isaac Newton about his inability to believe in Jesus. Newton replied with a helpful analogy. He said, "Sometimes I come into my study and in my absent-mindedness I attempt to light my candle when the extinguisher is over it, and I fumble about trying to light it and cannot; but when I remove the extinguisher then I am able to light the candle. I am afraid the extinguisher in your case is the love of your sins; it is deliberate unbelief that is in you. Turn to God in repentance; be prepared to let the Spirit of God reveal His truth to you, and it will be His joy to show the glory of the grace of God shining in the face of

Jesus Christ.”² This is what the Pharisees lacked and so many like them lack today: a willingness to stand in the light of Christ, repent of their errors and sin, and surrender in faith to him as Savior and Lord.

AN ASSERTION OF DIVINE AUTHORITY

As Jesus went on to point out, the question is not how Jesus conforms to our preferences and expectations. The question concerns the truth of his claims. He said, “Even if I do bear witness about myself, my testimony is true” (Jn. 8:14).

Being the Son of God, Jesus and his claims are self-validating. Matthew Henry explains, “He is the light of the world, and it is the property of light to be self-evidencing.”³ Jesus therefore did not then, and does not now, subject himself to worldly standards of judgment. After all, when Moses came to the burning bush, God did not present arguments but burned with divine light. When the captain of the Lord’s army appeared to Joshua, he did not summon a council but issued commands. So it is for Jesus; he simply presents and declares himself: “I am the light of the world” (Jn. 8:12).

Remember that these Pharisees were standing in the presence of God the Son. Imagine someone hearing Pavarotti sing an opera and then demand to see his musical credentials. Imagine Albert Einstein being asked to present his college transcripts before lecturing on physics. We would laugh if someone demanded that Michael Jordan prove his right to speak on the subject of basketball. Far less should anyone stand before Jesus Christ and demand evidence to prove his divine teaching. To issue such a demand is merely to demonstrate one’s impudence. Jesus validates himself. “My testimony is true,” he declared. George Hutcheson writes, “The divine nature did so evidently shine in the Son that whosoever knew what a deity was might have seen it in him.”⁴

What is true of Jesus is also true of the Bible. Just as Jesus validated himself as God’s Son, the Bible validates itself as God’s Word. We are to believe it because it manifests the majesty and power of God.

² Cited from Harry A. Ironside, *2 Corinthians* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Bros, 1939), 102.

³ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 6 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, n.d.), 5:795.

⁴ George Hutcheson, *Exposition of the Gospel of John* (Lafayette, IN: Sovereign Grace Publishers, 2001), 164.

This is why those earnestly seeking truth should always be directed to the Word of God itself, for it is by the voice of God speaking in Scripture that we are born again to saving faith. This was Peter's point when he argued the value of Holy Scripture even above the audible divine voice that he and the other disciples heard. He reminds his readers that he was an eye-witness to the glory of Christ, probably referring to the Mount of Transfiguration (2 Pet. 1:16-18). But he then says, "We have something more sure, the prophetic word, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts" (2 Pet. 1:19). "Thus says the Lord," thunders Holy Scripture. And if we are not moved – if like the Pharisees as they stood before Jesus we stand untouched by the testimony of God's Word – it is we who are condemned and not it.

To this, Jesus adds a second reason why his testimony is true: "Even if I do judge, my judgment is true, for it is not I alone who judge, but I and the Father who sent me" (Jn. 8:16). Gordon Keddie explains, "He is one with the Father – and from eternity to eternity – and judges in perfect conformity to the Father's will (5:30).⁵ In the spy movies, it is the secret agent who knows his identity and mission – others may have opinions, but he knows – because he received the sealed instructions. Because of the mission given to him by the Father, Jesus is the one who knows himself. But Jesus was not a secret agent: he freely declares who and what he is, and his testimony overrules every contrary opinion.

C. S. Lewis wrote a famous essay that addresses the issue of this encounter between Jesus and the Pharisees. The essay was titled "God in the Dock." He was referring to the place where the plaintiff stands in a legal proceeding: the judge sits in the bench and the accused stands in the dock. Lewis was writing to describe the main barriers to faith in Christ that he had encountered. First, he observed what we have already seen in the Pharisees – a lack of humility and an absence of a sense of sin that cries for a savior. But his last observation aptly describes the Pharisees' problem as they considered the evidence of Jesus Christ. Lewis writes:

⁵ Gordon J. Keddie, *A Study Commentary on John*, 2 vols. (location: Evangelical Press,), I:327.

The ancient man approached God (or even the gods) as the accused person approaches his judge. For the modern man the roles are reversed. He is the judge: God is in the dock. He is quite a kindly judge: if God should have a reasonable defence for being the god who permits war, poverty and disease, he is ready to listen to it. The trial may even end in God's acquittal. But the important thing is that Man is on the Bench and God in the Dock.⁶

That is the arrangement Jesus rejected then, just as he does now. Jesus is the Lord of glory, not a beggar in the courtroom of our minds. To insist that Jesus stand trial before our reason and sensibilities is to ensure that the only Jesus we will accept – if any – is not the true Jesus who alone can save. He comes as Lord, right from the start. And while we may have doubts, questions, and concerns – which he is kindly generous to answer – we first must bend the knee and worship him as Lord and God.

“I judge no one,” Jesus said (Jn. 8:15). He meant that he did not come to play the Pharisees’ game, and perhaps he also meant that his first coming was to redeem us from sin and not to condemn. But in the end, he does judge, and when he returns at the end of the age, the plow of the gospel will be replaced with the sword of divine wrath. “Even if I do judge,” he pointed out, “my judgment is true” (Jn. 8:16). Knowing that we will stand in the piercing light of that judgment, let us humble ourselves before God’s Son, confess the truth of our sin, and receive from him through faith the salvation of our souls.

A CHALLENGE TO HARDENED HEARTS

Lastly, Jesus turns the situation on his hearers’ heads. They had demanded at least two witnesses before they would entertain Jesus’ claims. He replied, “In your Law it is written that the testimony of two men is true. I am the one who bears witness about myself, and the Father who sent me bears witness about me” (Jn. 8:17-18).

Two words stand out. The first is *your* Law. These were men who spoke constantly about the Old Testament law, though they had largely corrupted it with their own traditions. Fine, Jesus said, I will take you on your own terms. And when I show that even by your

⁶ C.S. Lewis: *God in the Dock* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 244.

own standards my testimony is true, you must accept me or stand exposed as hypocrites.

The second word is *men*. Jesus argues from the lesser to the greater. The law required that in capital cases, two *men*'s testimony must be accepted as valid. But here is the testimony of two divine persons! Jesus stands forth as the Son of God and God the Father stands beside him. If they accept the joint testimony of mere men, they must surely accept this combined divine testimony.

What was Jesus' testimony to himself? Surely, he refers to the claims he has been making. "I am the bread of life," he said (Jn. 6:36). "Whoever is thirsty, let him come to me and drink," he cried (Jn. 7:37). "I am the light of the world" (Jn. 8:12). These were plain declarations that Jesus is the divine Messiah. God the Son spoke from the holy temple. John said, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth" (Jn. 1:14). That was the testimony of Jesus and it was powerful and clear. In fact, Jesus' words in verse 18 include his famous "I Am" formula: "'I am' who bears witness about myself." In the flesh, the Lord of heaven declared himself the true and divine "I Am."

What was the Father's testimony? There were Jesus' miraculous works, which were the mighty deeds of God done by and through Jesus. There was the testimony of John the Baptist, the prophet like Elijah whom the Father sent to prepare the way for his Son. Finally, there was the testimony of the Old Testament Scriptures, including that of the Pharisees' own beloved Moses. "If you believed Moses, you would believe me," Jesus had said; "for he wrote of me" (Jn. 5:46).

The point is that the Pharisees were morally obliged to believe on Jesus. Their unbelief was culpable, and it would be judged as such before the throne of God. They were willing to accept the testimony of men. But, as John argues in his first epistle, "If we receive the testimony of men, the testimony of God is greater, for this is the testimony of God that he has born concerning his Son" (1 Jn. 5:9).

Faced with the same claims of Jesus, our obligation today is the same. Any reverent, serious, and open consideration of the evidence for

Jesus Christ will lead to his acceptance as Savior and Lord. If we are determined to play the role of jury, then we must realize that jurors are required to form fair judgments on the basis of clear testimony or else be judged themselves. God has given you the testimony of his Holy Scriptures, which point conclusively to Jesus Christ as Savior. They include scores of prophecies that could only be fulfilled in his life, death and resurrection. The resurrection itself offers public proof that Jesus is God's Son. Paul wrote that Jesus "was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead" (Rom. 1:4). The witness of Christ's light in the church and of the changed lives of his believers likewise compels the observer to believe or face judgment. If you honestly doubt the validity of this testimony, then seek these things sincerely. But realize that the testimony of truth carries with it a moral obligation to belief.

The Pharisees' response reveals the hardness of their hearts. They stood in the presence of the divine Son, with the mighty testimony of heaven beside him. He offered the witness of God the Father, but they scoffed: "Where is your Father?" (Jn. 8:19). If Jesus has a father to testify, he should produce him, they argued.

This demonstrates that their rejection of Jesus stemmed from their attitude to God himself. God is not in the dock and we are not his judge. They began by placing themselves in the judge's seat, when in reality the only way to come to faith is to stand in the dock and see yourself as a guilty sinner. They looked for every opportunity to put Jesus down, when the only way to know him is to sit at his feet. Jesus responded by condemning their fitness to judge: "You know neither me nor my Father. If you knew me, you would know my Father also" (Jn. 8:19). The problem, as always is the case with hardened unbelief, was not the quality of the evidence for Jesus, but the hearts of proud unbelief that scorned both his truth and the truth of God the Father.

PROOF IN THE PUDDING

John 8:20 concludes the encounter with a detail that may at first seem to be mere window dressing: "These words he spoke in the treasury, as he taught in the temple; but no one arrested him,

because his hour had not yet come.”

The treasury was the place where freewill offerings were made in the Court of Women, near the meeting place of the Sanhedrin. There, Jesus’ confrontation with the Pharisees seemed to conclude in a stand-off. But John informs us that nothing of the kind was true, for with all their worldly power the Pharisees were not able to lay hold of Jesus: “No one arrested him, because the hour had not yet come.”

The Pharisees could harden their hearts to Jesus, but they could not stop him. He was and is the Son of God, so for all their power they could not master him. It was not yet the hour, so they could not kill him. And when that hour came and it pleased God the Father to offer his own Son to die for the sins of those who believe, they could not silence the testimony of heaven. When Pilate wrote the sign for his cross, “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews,” they could not stop him (Jn. 19:19-21). When the time came for Jesus to rise from the grave, three days later, they could not keep the stone in place. Today, no amount of scholarly scorn, government persecution, or public indifference will stop the spread of his gospel. And when Jesus returns again in glory, with the sword of divine justice in his hand, unbelievers will not withstand the stroke of his eternal condemnation.

Jesus is the Lord. His testimony manifests truth. He said, “Unless you believe that I am he you will die in your sins” (Jn. 8:24). But to all with eyes to see and hearts to believe, he promises, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (Jn. 8:12).