

## Mt. 3:13-17; 17:1-8; Lk. 2:8-14

### Heavenly Testimonies

*This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased* – Mt. 3:17

The three portions of Scripture we have read have something in common – they each focus on Christ and they each contain testimonies from heaven. Except for the book of Revelation, much of which takes place in heaven, it isn't often in the New Testament that we hear voices from heaven. And the very fact that we have the record of such voices certainly indicates to us that such testimonies ought to be carefully considered. Testimonies that come from earth-bound men, especially earth-bound sinners may be tainted and untrustworthy. But testimonies coming from heaven come from a much more pure source where holiness reigns, thus making them much more trustworthy.

In the first two passages we just read we hear the voice of God the Father from heaven. His testimony is the same in each instance *This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased*. The third passage contains the voice of angels from heaven and opens to us the glory of heaven and affords us a look into what heavenly worship looks like. These angels bear testimony to the truth that the child born in Bethlehem was the Messiah. *For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord* – Lk. 2:11.

In two out of three of these instances you could say that apart from these heavenly testimonies there would have been nothing perceivable to the fleshly eye to suggest that Jesus was the Messiah. In one instance, the instance of his baptism, Christ would have appeared simply as one in a crowd – one of many who had been drawn to John to be baptized. In the instance of his birth he would have appeared to be nothing more than a baby born to poor parents that found themselves in desperate circumstances.

It is true that by the time of his transfiguration he had demonstrated himself to be the Messiah by many miracles. It is also true that the time of his transfiguration follows Peter's confession that Jesus was the Messiah. But the gospels show us how often the faith of his disciples wavered. In one instance they're affirming their belief in Christ. In the next instance they show doubts. So in the mount of transfiguration Peter, James, and John are given a double dose as it were of evidence to vindicate the person of Christ. They behold him in his glory and they hear the voice of God the Father testifying again that this was his beloved Son with whom he was well pleased.

I believe the purpose behind these heavenly testimonies is the same for you and me as it was for those who heard them first hand. However men may scoff and mock and deny Christ, God would have us know that this same Jesus has been given the stamp of approval from heaven. You could say that Christ's identity has been certified by the highest authorities in all the universe.

I call your attention to these heavenly testimonies this morning because each of them considered in their particular historical settings, has bearing upon the way we should

remember Christ. May the Lord grant us, then, ears to hear and hearts to heed these heavenly testimonies. If I could give the message a title this morning it would be this:

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| The Substance, Settings, and Significance Of Heaven's Testimony Concerning Christ. |
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## I. The Substance of Heaven's Testimony

At the baptism of Christ and on the mount of transfiguration we hear the testimony from God himself that Jesus is his Son. *This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.* Such a testimony certifies that Jesus of Nazareth is no ordinary person. He was and is a man. Indeed one of his favorite designations for himself was *the Son of man*. The account of his birth that we've already referenced in Luke's gospel indicates that he was a man and that he possessed a true body and a reasonable soul. But he was and is also the Son of God.

Our salvation depends on him being both the Son of man and the Son of God. We saw some time ago in our studies of Hebrews that it was essential for Christ to be a man. *For every high priest taken from among men is ordained for men in things pertaining to God* (Heb. 5:1). In order to represent men as a priest, he must be a man himself. By the same token – in order to accomplish the work that was given him to do he must be God. This is especially true with regard to the sacrifice he would make of himself.

No mere man could endure what Christ would endure. Heaven's justice and Hell's cruelty would combine together to unleash upon him a force that would crush a mere mortal. The imagery of God's wrath unleashed upon him is given to us in the words of Zech. 13:7 *Awake, O sword, against my shepherd, and against the man that is my fellow, saith the LORD of hosts.* Here is the sword of God's justice being unleashed upon his fellow or his Son. This, combined with the forces of hell that become evident by the cruelty of his hell-inspired rejecters, are unleashed upon him during the time of his passion. And his ability to outlive and outlast these forces until at last he would yield himself to death following his announcement that his work was finished – this is what accomplished our salvation.

So heaven testifies that he is the Son of God. This testimony would be vindicated as well by his resurrection from the dead. So Paul writes in Rom. 1:4 that he was *declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead.* The evidence of who he is and what he's accomplished in satisfying God's justice is declared by his resurrection.

But would you notice also from these testimonies from heaven that Jesus was not only God's Son but he was *his beloved Son in whom God was well pleased.* Such a testimony from heaven magnifies the grace of God in our salvation. It reveals to us, you see, the satisfaction that God the Father has always had in his Son. The design behind salvation was never to satisfy a need that God felt in his own heart. God would be none the poorer without us. Especially would he be none the poorer in allowing sinful rebels to receive

their just due. He would be no less loving either, for he has always had his Son and his Son has always been sufficient as the reciprocal object of his love. But in order to magnify the glory of his grace he sent his Son to die for our sins.

So heaven testifies that he is the Son of God. Heaven testifies that he is God's beloved Son. We may note as well that heaven testified to the truth of his perfect obedience. From the day of his birth to the day of his baptism he rendered perfect obedience to the law of his Father so much so that this voice from heaven could say *this is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased*.

And from the time of his baptism to the time of his transfiguration, nearly three years later he continued to render perfect obedience to his Father. Only now his obedience is even more impressive for its rendered in the midst of many trials and temptations and provocations. In the midst of the many attempts to trip him up in his words he continued to render perfect obedience. When his work was attributed to the devil he continued to obey his Father. And when his own disciples would sorely try his patience by their slowness to believe he would, nevertheless, continue to obey. And so his Father would say again in the mount of transfiguration that *This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased*.

And from the time of the transfiguration to the time of his death up to and including his death he would render perfect obedience – so much so that the grave would not be able to keep him but he would rise from the dead and thus declare by his resurrection that his life had been sinless and that he was the Son of God.

So we have the testimony of his Father in heaven that he is the Son of God in whom God is well pleased. What a blessed thing to remember around the Lord's table and what a glorious truth to think upon that God is still pleased with his Son and thus pleased with you and with me as he sees us joined to his Son.

But let's turn for a moment before leaving this point to the testimony of the angels from heaven for they too add to the substance of heaven's testimony. You'll notice in Lk. 2:11 that they bear witness to the truth that Jesus is the Messiah – *Unto you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior, which is Christ the Lord*. The term *Christ* is a designation which means *one who is anointed*. The term *Messiah* means one who is anointed.

But not only was he born the Messiah, but in that connection he was born a Savior. Indeed, the very name *Jesus* was given to him because the name *Jesus* means *Jehovah saves*. And so the angel instructs Joseph in Mt. 1:21 *Thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins*.

What wonderful truths to contemplate around the Lord's table this morning. The Messiah has come. He has been identified by God himself and his mission has been announced by angels. We're entering into the Christmas season when many of the Lord's people give special attention to the birth of Christ. Sometimes the question is asked (often for the wrong reasons) – *why can't every day be Christmas?* There's a sense in which Christmas comes once a month. What do we think upon when we partake of the bread? We certainly meditate on the glorious truth that *Unto us a child is born, unto us a Son is given* (Isa. 9:6).

And the testimony of heaven is that this Son is God's Son and he was born a Savior, one who would save us from our sins. So we have the substance of heaven's testimony. Would you consider with me next:

## II. The Settings for Heaven's Testimony

We have in the verses we're considering 3 very distinct settings in which heaven's testimony is given. We have the baptism of Christ, the transfiguration of Christ and the birth of Christ. Each of these settings conveys to us things to remember about Christ.

Think with me first on the baptism of Christ. This is indeed something of a mystery. Why would Christ be baptized by John? – especially when John's baptism was characterized as a baptism of repentance. Christ had no need to repent. Christ had never sinned. Why then this baptism?

I like the explanation put forward by various commentators and theologians that Christ's baptism constituted his official identification with the people he would represent. You've heard me draw the analogy between Christ's baptism and a wedding vow. In his baptism Christ solemnly and officially takes his people to himself. It's as if he's saying *I do* with regard to being joined to his people.

In this respect one could argue that our baptism answers to Christ's baptism. Just as he has said *I do* with respect to taking his people so his people in their baptism say *I do* with regard to taking Christ. The thing to note in this setting of Christ's baptism is that it represents condescending grace and it represents a phase, if you will, of Christ's humiliation. He condescends so low as to identify and become one with those who had rebelled against him. The appearance of Christ in the flesh wouldn't strike anyone as unusual. And yet the contrast between Christ and those around him couldn't be greater.

He pleases his Father, while those around him store up wrath unto the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God (Rom. 2:5). Those around him must be baptized to signify their repentance from their sins but he is no need of repentance but quite the contrary, his baptism fulfills all righteousness.

So while physical appearances may be similar the moral contrasts are nevertheless profound. And the thing to note in this condescending action on Christ's part is that his Father is pleased with him in this particular setting. In other words his Father is pleased for him to formally identify with the sinners that he'll represent. And his Father is pleased with him as he takes on the obligation to represent those people.

Doesn't this show you quite plainly how Christ and his Father and the Holy Spirit who lights upon Christ as a dove are all joined together in manifesting love to such poor, vile, and guilty sinners as we are. God the Father is pleased with his Son undertaking such a mission and God the Spirit is pleased to anoint the Son with enabling power to live and die for sinners.

How this setting, therefore, should fill our hearts with praise and thanksgiving as we think on Christ with the approval of his Father condescending to identify with sinners.

But let's think for a moment on the second testimony from heaven. This is the testimony of the Father in the mount of transfiguration. There is a notable contrast here between this setting and the setting of Christ's baptism. At his baptism there was a display of condescension and humiliation. In the mount of transfiguration there is a display of radiant glory. *His face did shine as the sun, and his raiment was white as the light* Matthew writes. *His raiment became shining, exceeding white as snow; so as no fuller on earth can white them* Mark writes. *And as he prayed, the fashion of his countenance was altered, and his raiment was white and glistering* Luke writes.

There is a sense in which this revelation of Christ in his glory sets the aim for the people of God. This is where we are headed. This is how we will one day shine. So John writes in his first epistle 1Jn. 3:2 *Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is.* Certainly in Christ's transfiguration we gain a glimpse of what the glory of heaven will be like.

So these testimonies from heaven are found in the setting of humiliation and in the setting of exaltation or glorification. In both instances God is pleased with his Son. The final setting in which we hear the testimony of angels shows us what bridges the gap between humiliation and glory. This is the setting of Christ's birth.

*Fear not, the angel says to the frightened shepherds for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.*

Here is what takes lost and undone sinners from humiliation to glory – a Savior who has been born. I love the one instance in the gospel of John where we find Christ making reference to the purpose of his birth. In Jn. 18:37 Christ says to Pilate *Thou sayest that I am a king. To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth. Every one that is of the truth heareth my voice.*

Christ was born to bear witness to the truth he says to Pilate. And the truth he was at that moment bearing witness to was the truth of man's sinfulness. There he stood before Pilate, having endured a sleepless night. He had already been through a mock trial. He had already been spat upon and was buffeted and smitten by his enemies. Soon he would be scourged and mocked further with a crown of thorns being pressed into his brow until at last he would be led away and nailed to a cross.

What truth did he bear witness to? He certainly bore witness to the truth that sinners hate God. He also bore witness to the truth that the Son of God should first suffer before entering into glory. He bore witness to the same truth that had already been given from heaven – that he was the Messiah and that he was the Savior of sinners.

Here is the setting, then, that bridges the gap for you and me between humiliation and exaltation – Christ was born – Christ was born to bring glory to God in the salvation of those that would put their trust in him. What a wonderful truth to affirm this morning as we partake of the bread and the cup. This is our time to add our “amen” to heaven's

testimony concerning Christ. Just as God the Father affirms that he is the Son of God so do we make such an affirmation in our partaking of these communion elements. Just as God the Father testifies that he is pleased with Christ, indicating that he's satisfied with Christ so are we given the opportunity to pledge before God that we're satisfied with Christ and grateful that a Savior was born in the city of David that would bear testimony by his life and death to the truth that God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life.

So we've seen something of the substance of heaven's testimony. We've considered the settings in which heaven's testimony has been given. It remains for us to consider briefly:

### III. The Significance of Heaven's Testimony

And by "significance" I'm referring in particular to the applications that can be drawn from heaven's testimony concerning Christ.

In the case, then, of Christ's baptism, we can draw this application – we should identify with the One who has identified with us. We should identify with the One whose identity has been certified by God. I said earlier that there's a sense in which our baptism answers to Christ's baptism after the analogy of a wedding vow. There's a sense in which we renew those vows each time we gather around the Lord's table.

From the larger catechism question that we review each time we meet around the Lord's table we learn that among the things that are required of the Lord's people in the time of the administration of it is that we: *receive of His fulness, trust in His merits, rejoice in His love, give thanks for His grace and that we renew our covenant with God, and love to all the saints.*

Here, then, is our duty and privilege to say to Christ – *Lord, we thank thee for they love – we thank thee for taking us to thyself and representing us by thy love and thy death. We pledge ourselves to thee. We pledge that we believe the testimony that heaven has given concerning thee that thou art the Son of God and the Savior of sinners. We proclaim to thee and among ourselves that thou art our hope and peace – thou art our righteousness and most willingly to we confess that we belong to thee – that we are thy purchased possession and we are thy bride.*

What a glorious privilege the Lord thus gives to us to afford us this opportunity to renew our covenant with Christ. This is the significance, or application of heaven's testimony concerning Christ at his baptism.

The significance of heaven's testimony at Christ's transfiguration comes directly to us from God himself. Note again the words of Mt. 17:5 *This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; hear ye him.*

If God is pleased with Christ then we should hear Christ. If Christ is the Son of God and God's beloved Son then we should listen to him. We should go to his Word with minds and hearts that are ready and willing to hear and heed what he will say to us. And we should affirm that there is no higher authority than Christ. Oh that his words would so

reach our souls that we would find ourselves compelled to make the same confession that even his enemies were compelled to make when they said *never man spake like this man*. This was the confession of those that were sent to arrest him who instead found themselves arrested by his words. May this be our experience of him when we turn to his word. May we find ourselves captivated with wonder and awe when we hear him preach on things pertaining to the kingdom of heaven and when we hear him teach us of himself that he is the light of the world, and he is the bread of life, and he is the door through which we must enter into heaven and he is the way, the truth, and the life.

We're coming to the end of the year and will soon enter a new year. I hope that if you haven't been following a Bible reading schedule that you'll find one before the year ends and that you'll the new year with renewed determination to heed God's direct charge to you that you should hear his Son.

And then there's the significance of the testimony of the angels and how such a word from heaven ties directly into our time around the Lord's table. The angel says to the shepherds that *unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior which is Christ the Lord*.

Does this not correspond to Christ's own word that pertains to the communion table – *this is my body broken for you – this is my blood shed for you. Unto you a Savior is born –* or as Isaiah puts it *unto us a child is born, unto us a Son is given*.

And in the coming of Christ to earth the way has been made for peace and good will toward men. He is our peace. Being justified by faith we have peace with God, Paul writes in Rom. 5:1. He is our peace and the good tidings of the gospel of Christ we have found to be the cause of great joy. Indeed we have found the joy of salvation to be the source of our strength.

As we meet around his table, therefore, this morning, to remember Christ, his broken body and shed blood, let's keep in mind heaven's testimony concerning him. This one that we worship is God come in the flesh. He is the beloved Son of his Father and his Father is well pleased with him. And he is our Savior who has come to bear witness to the truth – the truth that we need him, the truth that he's willing to receive us, the truth that there is none other name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved.

May God bless us in our remembrance of the One who bears such compelling testimonies from heaven.