

You Are My Witnesses That I Am God

Great Cloud of Witnesses

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Several thoughts come to together in the concept of witness. John the Baptist bore witness to Christ, and those who benefit from the work of Christ become witnesses de facto, because they are blessed by what the Spirit enables the followers of Christ to produce. But the disciples who actually saw the resurrection have a special status as witnesses, like the direct signatories to a will. Either way, such testimony means martyrdom.

In the book of Revelation, the Greek word for witness is *martyrs*, and it is already taking on further significance even at the time of Christ.

Now the witnesses that testified to the saving death of Jesus, may seal that testimony with their own death, but this certainly would not be without meaning. Nevertheless, here is the essential question: what kind of witness are you?

Christians will agree that if God is truly the sovereign Creator God the Scriptures portray Him to be, then nothing in the world is without meaning. The stars have meaning, the animals have meaning, the events of history have meaning, everything has meaning and everything matters, as John Ritenbaugh has been teaching us.

It is true that we may not always see their meaning and not always understand their purposes, but they are there all the same and can teach us something.

If this is true of the creation and the events of history in general, as it obviously is, then it is certainly true of the events surrounding the arrest, trial, and crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

From a secular perspective these events may have been imagined to have fallen out at random as a product of the unpredictable interaction of the

leaders of Israel with their particular animosities toward Jesus and the character and desires of Pilate, but this it not the case.

It is true that the leaders of the people and Pilate did interact and that the events did flow from this interaction, but what resulted was no mere accident. Rather it was that which had been specifically predetermined and even foretold prophetically by God. Psalm 41:9 foretold that the Messiah would be betrayed by Judas. Isaiah 53:3 foretold that He would be rejected and scorned by His own people.

Specific prophecies include the use of false witnesses, Christ's silence before His accusers, His beatings, His being offered gall and vinegar to drink, His being crucified with thieves, His being pierced by a spear, and His burial in a tomb of a rich man. Each of these details teaches particular lessons about the work of Christ and the meaning of the atonement.

In the midst of these many predetermined, and theretofore meaningful, details there is a special story that is fascinating, not only for what it teaches about the death of Jesus, but also for the emphasis the gospels give to it.

It is unusual to find any given event from the life of Christ that is contained in all four gospels for the simple reason that these are not mere history, but are specific portraits of Christ, emphasizing one or more aspects of His ministry and life.

They are accounts of separate and individual witnesses. Yet the story of Barabbas is in all four gospels, and not only that, it occupies an important place in them, particularly in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. If we count carefully, we discover thirty-eight verses used to tell this story.

On the surface the story is simple enough, in fact it is so simple that John, who recounts it in the shortest space of all, uses only two verse to do so.

Now Barabbas had taken part in a rebellion and Pilate was in a quandary over this, trying to decide what to do with Christ at this point.

John 18:39-40 “But you have a custom that I should release someone to you at the Passover. Do you therefore want me to

release to you the King of the Jews?” Then they all cried again, saying, “Not this Man, but Barabbas!” Now Barabbas was a robber.

The basis of this story lies in Pilate’s desire to see Jesus released even though His accusers were clambering for His death. He could have insisted on Jesus’ release, but Pilate was trying to satisfy the crowds too, which is usually an impossible position to be in.

So he began to search for indirect ways to free Jesus. His first attempt had been to send Him to Herod, which he was able to do because Jesus had come from Galilee and thought to fall under the jurisdiction of the Galilean Tetrarch.

In a few moments he would have Christ flogged thinking that by that act he might evoke a measure of sympathy from the mob. But before this last expedient idea, he hit upon another idea, that at the time, must have struck him as accidental.

Pilate recalled a custom in Israel which served as a symbol of the mercy of God and as a reminder of their own historical deliverance out of bondage in Egypt. The people were permitted, at Passover, to ask for the liberation of some offender, who was at the moment in prison.

Now we can imagine that as Pilate remembered this, his face brightened and he grabbed the opportunity before him. Perhaps he could use this custom to secure the release of Jesus.

We can imagine that Pilate therefore searched through his mind to recall some infamous criminal that, were he to make the choice between this one and Jesus, the criminal would never be chosen by the people. He thought of Barabbas, who we are told in John 18:40; Mark 15:7 and in Luke 23:19, that he was a robber, insurrectionist, and a murderer. And in Matthew 27:16 Matthew says that he was a notorious prisoner and everyone knew of him and how bad he was.

Pilate thought, “Who would ever prefer this despicable rebel and murderer to the one whom he had found no fault at all?” It might have been with pride and smugness in the anticipated success of his plan that Pilate now went to

the rostrum to offer the people this choice. Continuing the story in verse 17, Pilate says:

Matthew 27:17 Therefore, when they had gathered together, Pilate said to them, “Whom do you want me to release to you? Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?”

How wise Pilate must have thought he was at this point, yet how foolish he acted. But to his immense surprise, the crowd, goaded by the rulers, immediately rejected Christ and chose Barabbas.

Matthew 27:22-23 Pilate said to them, “What then shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?” They all said to him, “Let Him be crucified!” Then the governor said, “Why, what evil has He done?” But they cried out all the more, saying, “Let Him be crucified!”

It was a disaster even from Pilate’s viewpoint. Jesus’ life is now no longer in Pilate’s hands. The majority of the multitude decides and he is obliged to abide by the decision. Because of how Pilate handled the situation, he now stands forever as a warning example of the consequence of endeavoring to try to satisfy both God who speaks with us and the world who speaks against us. This is a lesson for every single one of us. You cannot please both, so whose side are you on? Who are you a witness to?

Of course, it was the world and the decision of the mob was the world’s decision. The world will always choose a robber, insurrectionist, or a murderer over the guiltless Christ. Why?

Because Barabbas is of the world; he is one of them and however dangerous he may be, he is at least controllable. They think they can handle him, but on the flipside, how do handle Jesus Christ?

Consider what Barabbas was like and what his intentions were. There was Barabbas, the murdering rioter, who is going to destroy the establishment. He was even willing to burn them out, he wanted to kill them. Why would they want to free Barabbas? Simply because, if they let Barabbas go and he starts another riot you could always call out the law to control things and squash whatever he was up to.

Now how would you stop Jesus, a man who has no guns, tanks, no ammo, but yet is beginning to shake the whole Roman Empire? How do you stop a man, who, without firing a shot, is getting revolutionary results?

The Jewish leaders could see only one answer, which was to get rid of Him. They made the same mistake that people throughout history have made. They thought that you could get rid of the idea by getting rid of the Man from whom the idea comes from, so they said “let us get rid of Jesus and make sure that He can’t rule over us and interfere with out traditions.”

They knew that Barabbas would try to exploit them, but he would not *ask* to ruin their lives, he would just do it. As for Jesus, He asked them to change the way they have always lives and to repent of their sins, to give up their power, and that was the main problem. Men would rather be enslaved to tyranny than let Jesus rule their lives with liberty and they would rather be exploited than to let Christ determine their lives.

In a way this is the same kind of thing that the Democrats did when they said that they did not want God on their platform. They chose Barabbas!

The crimes of Barabbas were the same crime of which the Jewish leaders had falsely accused Jesus Christ of. Their position in Israel was certainly not enhanced by Barabbas’ release, but they chose him because their opposition to Jesus was far greater than to Barabbas.

We have looked at the story of Barabbas through two sets of eyes: those of Pilate and those of the leaders of the people. Each view contains great lessons about witnessing and how we react as human beings, yet the greatest lessons are seen through the eyes of Barabbas himself.

From this perspective, the story of Barabbas is the story of human stories, because it is the story of the sinner—salvation through Christ and His death.

We notice in the first place that the name Barabbas is an Aramaic word meaning “son of a father” (Bar-son; Abba-father). So the word itself

signifies that Barabbas is a representative type of all the sons of all the fathers who have ever been born into this world. He is the average human being.

The Roman soldiers had stopped the riot and had taken Barabbas. His blood guiltiness was established, and he was flung in his cell there to await the moment of his death. A man who is to be hanged has difficulty keeping his hands away from his throat where the rope is soon to choke the life out of him.

Now back during a time when criminals were put to death by gas, witnesses who were in attendance in a prison where men were executed in a gas chamber described that the condemned practiced long breathing and sometimes would hold their breath till it seemed their eyes would pop from their sockets. They knew that they were going to be put in the gas chamber and that they would hear a hissing sound of incoming death and that this would be their last breath they would ever know. So they would hold on to that breath until they were forced to take in the death that floated around them.

What do you think Barabbas might have thought if things had followed the subsequent events? He must have wondered how it would feel to have the nails ripping through his hands. He must have remembered scenes of crucifixions he had seen before and the slow agony of death for days before merciful death came to release them. Any sounds of a hammer must have startled him and his mind anticipated the sound of clanging hammers that would bring death near.

The sound of the crowd and murmuring probably caused fear as the guard comes in to unlock the chain that is bound around him, because the Bible tells us that he was bound. He must have thought that his time had come.

But the jailer takes him to the door and tells him that he is free! In his stupefied mental state, he moves toward the crowd. There is little welcome for him and he senses a deep preoccupation of the people. Then he hears a surging roar, "Crucify Him! Crucify Him!" Eventually he finds out that the roar is against Jesus and that he is to be crucified and that the crowd had cried out for the release of Barabbas.

Stunned he walks near the center of the scene and he sees the man who is to die in his place. Finally the procession begins toward the place of a skull, called in Hebrew, Golgotha. He follows and sees Jesus fall under the weight of the cross. He sees Simon of Cyrene pressed by the soldiers to fall in line and carry the cross and finally they arrive.

What do you think his thoughts might have been? He hears the echoing blows of the hammers striking the nails and looks down at his hands thinking that this would have been him. He thought that this would be his day of suffering. He had thought that the nails would tear his flesh, and now he is breathing in fresh air and looking at the dark cloud that is gathering in the sky. Now we do not know that Barabbas followed to it, but supposing that this was the case, is this what he would have been thinking?

The cross is lifted up and he sees the silhouette against the sky and the sun grows dark. He hears the voices that comes to him like thunder, "Father forgive them for they know not what they do." The centurion passes by him and says, "Truly this was is the Son of God." Barabbas looks with amazement and wonder at the man who is dying for him. And there comes a cry, "It is finished."

What might have gone through Barabbas' mind. Guilt or sorrow? Or did he just feel lucky? This is the condition of every man and woman personally before God calls them.

Jesus Christ took our place and paid the penalty of death that each and every one of us had brought upon our own heads personally, and it was you and I that deserved to die. Jesus was delivered up for our offenses and He was handed over for judgment because of our sins. And so we keep Passover every year as a reminder and a memorial of what He did for us.

Do you just feel lucky, or do you see the purpose and plan and meaning in all of this? The scriptural key to the scene is found in the words of Paul in II Corinthians 5.

II Corinthians 5:21 For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

Now Jesus died that we might live, and He was bound that we, who have been subject to the bondage of sin, might be set free.

We have imagined in the previous scenario how Barabbas undoubtedly received the blessing of an unexpected reprieve. We have supposed that he left the prison and returned to freedom. What kind of witness was Barabbas? What kind of witness are we?

Let us shift gears here as we go onto John 19. Chapters 18 and 19 of John's gospel deal with the trials of Jesus of Nazareth, beginning with His arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane and culminating in His crucifixion in John 19:30.

But strictly speaking, what we have in the first part of chapter 19 is not a trial, in fact there has not been a trial in any strict sense since Pilate's initial verdict of acquittal in John 18:38. At this time Jesus is still in the hands of the Roman procurator.

The word that He was to be delivered over to be crucified have not been spoken, but the trial actually ended earlier when Pilate said, "I find no basis for any charge against Him." He acquitted Him, he found Him not guilty.

Now what appears in the interval between the formal verdict of acquittal in John 18:38, and the execution of Jesus in John 19:16-30 is a series of attempts by Pilate to escape the people's pressuring, some of which we have already seen.

He knew that Jesus was innocent of the charges brought against Him, but since the rulers wanted Jesus crucified, Pilate first sent Jesus to Herod hoping that he would solve his dilemma. Second, Pilate attempted to release Jesus insisted of Barabbas in honor of Jewish custom. And third, he caused Jesus to be beaten hoping by this means to invoke pity from the leaders and the mob.

None of these strategies worked, but each one exposes a lot about the character of human nature and its sins, as well as God's plan for the redemption of the human race through Jesus' crucifixion.

Each event is packed with meaning because never in the entirety of the history of the world has so much been done in so short a time and been so significant. Men asked on an earlier occasion, when Jesus had calmed the wind and the waves in the sea of Galilee,

Matthew 8:27 (ESV) And the men marveled, saying, “What sort of man is this, that even winds and sea obey him?”

Now we may well ask the same question as we see Him brought forth by Pilate after the merciless scourging by the soldiers of Rome. Here is One who, though He had been beaten unjustly, nevertheless carried Himself with such dignity that the invitation of Pilate to “behold the Man,” is to see clearly that which overwhelms us. Now let us see that in its context here in John 19.

John 19:1-5 So then Pilate took Jesus and scourged Him. And the soldiers twisted a crown of thorns and put it on His head, and they put on Him a purple robe. Then they said, “Hail, King of the Jews!” And they struck Him with their hands. Pilate then went out again, and said to them, “Behold, I am bringing Him out to you, that you may know that I find no fault in Him.” Then Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. And Pilate said to them, “Behold the Man!”

As he spoke those words, there was a respect that he had, a sense of awe. Imagine that you were a witness to this and you hear the invitation, “behold the Man!” You look and conclude never in all the history of all the world has there been one like Jesus.

Let me challenge you to behold Him. Behold Him first before Pilate and ask who is this One who stands before Pilate, beaten to the point of death, wearing a purple robe, crowned with thorns, ridiculed as the carnival king of the Jews?

First of all, He is an innocent Man. No crime has been proven against Him, and not only has He been pronounced innocent by Pilate, He is to be pronounced seven more times. It was the verdict of all who had dealings with Him in these hours.

Judas declared,

Matthew 27:4 “I have sinned betraying innocent blood.”

Pilate’s wife, sent to the Roman procurator said,

Matthew 27:19 “Have nothing to do with that just Man, for I have suffered many things today in a dream because of Him.”

Pilate himself declared Christ innocent,

John 18:38 “I find no fault in Him at all.”

Herod found Christ blameless because Pilate reported of Herod’s verdict,

Luke 23:15 “No, neither did Herod, for I sent you back to him; and indeed nothing deserving of death has been done by Him.”

The dying thief objected,

Luke 23:41 “We indeed justly for we receive the due reward of our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.”

The centurion in charge of the crucifixion said,

Luke 23:47 “Certainly this was a righteous Man!”

The crowds at the cross seeing the earthquake and the other supernatural signs accompanying His death exclaimed,

Matthew 27:54 “Truly this was the Son of God!”

So this is the verdict of all who had looked at Jesus closely. It is the verdict of God and man, friend and foe, ancient and modern. These are eyewitness accounts.

As we look at Jesus before Pilate we also notice that He was a brave man. He had been beaten mercilessly, yet there is nothing cringing or compromising about His bearing. We have never seen a scourging, so it is hard for us to imagine the suffering involved in it.

We should remember that the victim was stripped of clothing and tied to a post in a way that fully exposed the back. Being struck with a long leather thong into which shards of lead, bone, and rock had been inserted, literally tearing the person's back into strips. Besides the beating was so prolonged that few remained conscious throughout the ordeal and some even died.

Jesus bore this and it was after His suffering that Pilate led Him forth and called the people to "behold the Man." One wonders if Pilate had some admiration of Him after all this.

William Barclay writes: "It must have been Pilate's first intention to awaken the pity of the Jews. 'Look!' he said. 'Look at this poor, bruised, bleeding creature! Look at this wretchedness! Can you possibly wish to hound a creature like this to an utterly unnecessary death? 'But even as he said it, we can almost hear the tone of Pilate's voice change and see the wonder dawn in his eyes. And instead of saying it half-contemptuously, to awaken pity, he says it with a dawning wonder and an admiration that will not be repressed."

In wartime, soldiers will frequently admire the bravery of a defeated enemy, wondering how they themselves might bear up under similar circumstances or sufferings were the roles reversed. Did Pilate, an old soldier, perhaps inwardly respect Christ's fortitude?

But it is not only bravery that we see in the Man before Pilate. There is also majesty, and such majesty as befits the Son of God. "Behold the Man?" Yes! But "Behold the King," too! And not merely the mock-king of the soldiers' devising.

This is the true King; the King of kings, whose dignity and grace shone through even in the moment of His greatest physical humiliation. This was a great man. But this was also the Son of God, as the resurrection was soon to prove. Paul writes,

Romans 1:3-4 concerning His Son Jesus Christ our Lord, who was born of the seed of David according to the flesh, and declared to be the Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead.

Now I challenge you secondly to challenge “Behold the Man,” Jesus, not only as He appeared before Pilate, but also as He appeared before the crowds that day.

This seems to be Pilate’s reason for the scourging. Because with the stage presence and sense of audience psychology, that is characteristic of a great trial lawyer. Pilate first seemed to pronounce Him innocent and then suddenly produced Him to have the crowd see Him in His beaten and humiliated state. What a contradiction that was!

It seems that Pilate expected an upsurge of pity from the fickle mob. But Pilate miscalculated, because there broke forth a new round of hatred and hostility against Jesus.

Why was this? Why did the presence of Jesus incite such violent hatred? Some writers have suggested that it was an easily understood pattern of psychological reaction. The people saw mirrored in the beaten and disfigured Jesus the moral deformity that they saw, or feared to discover, in themselves.

It would be similar to that distaste that so many show for the poor, the deformed, or the dead. There is fear that they will be like them. But this is not the real explanation of the crowd’s increasing opposition to and hatred of Jesus. They had gone far beyond that. Their hatred was so great and so deep in their hearts that it was not a matter of seeing themselves in this man who they thought was so awful.

The thing that bothered them about Jesus on this occasion was what had bothered them all along and that was His sinlessness, the awareness of which was heightened by the entirely unwarranted scourging of Jesus and their culpability in that injustice.

None care to admit it, but there is, in the unconverted person's heart, that which leads people to oppose true righteousness. In John 15, Jesus told His followers,

John 15:18 "If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you."

The natural man hates God's holiness and will do anything rather than allow the light of Christ to penetrate the unconverted person's own deep darkness. This enmity is buried deep within the human heart and is instigated by Satan, who is the epitome of hatred.

The third challenge I have is to "Behold the Man," Jesus, as He appears before the masses today in our time. It is the same man, the same Jesus Christ. But while it is true that some do hate Him and openly seek to destroy His influence and even His good name, most in our day simply ignore Him and thus add insult to injury, suggesting by their neglect that He is not worthy of attention.

Those who work on the campuses of our country think this is the case. Most of these institutions and their faculty are openly hostile to Christianity. They ban the Bible from their classes, but bring out the Koran, the Muslim book. Their students ridicule the Bible and those who believe it. God is simply ignored at other schools. And if this is true on the campuses, it is even more true for the government and of the nation at large, especially of the media.

Most people will talk about anything but Christianity. And if we were to judge matters by the secular press and other media, we would be hard pressed to know that Jesus even existed, let alone discover anything accurate or significant about Him.

Notice that in the media they talk about Christianity or they will talk about God, but they will avoid the name Jesus Christ. I just find that rather telling.

Mark 8:36 "For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?"

Yet this is precisely what most people do. They are lost and do not even know they are lost until the end, when the reality of God's judgment comes grimly upon them.

Jesus spoke of this shortly before His crucifixion. In the sermon given on the Mount of Olives in the middle of His last week in Jerusalem, Jesus used three gripping parables to teach what God's judgment would be like for such people.

Now let us think about the Parable of the Ten Virgins who were invited to a wedding banquet. Five were wise and five were foolish. The five wise virgins prepared for the banquet by buying oil for their lamps. The five foolish virgins did not. As they waited in the long evening hours all the attendants fell asleep. Suddenly a cry went forth, "Behold the bridegroom is coming; go out to meet him." They rose, but the five foolish virgins had no oil for their lamps.

On the advice of the wise they set out to buy some. But while they were getting their oil the bridegroom came and the wedding party followed Him into the house and the door was shut. Later the five foolish virgins returned and called at the door, "Lord, Lord, open to us." We will pick up the story in,

Matthew 25:12-13 But he answered and said, 'Assuredly, I say to you, I do not know you.' "Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming."

So we see here that the major difference between the wise and the foolish is found in their attitudes. Their foolish attitude is spiritually poor, blind, and naked because it has no true vision of the future, even though God and His Son have plainly set into motion Their wonderful plan of salvation.

It is a sad thing for a person not to have vision of the future and only live for today. How can you be a Christian and not live God's way of life if you do not have that vision and are not planning? In planning you realize your need to overcome sin and improve yourself with God's help.

The second parable, the Parable of the Talents, is about three servants. Their master was to go on a journey, so he called the servants to him and gave each

money: to the first, five talents; to the second, two talents; and to the third, one talent, each according to his ability. Then he went away, and the servants who had received five talents and two talents respectively invested the money while the third servant hid his talent in the ground. After a long time the master returned and asked for an accounting.

The man who had received five talents produced those talents plus five more. The servant who had received two talents produced two talents plus two more. But the one who had been given only one talent returned only that one to the Lord, saying,

Matthew 25:24-25 “Then he who had received the one talent came and said, ‘Lord, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you have not sown, and gathering where you have not scattered seed. And I was afraid, and went and hid your talent in the ground. Look, there you have what is yours.’ [So the master condemned that servant, taking away his talent.]

Matthew 25:29-30 ‘For to everyone who has, more will be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who does not have, even what he has will be taken away. And cast the unprofitable servant into the outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’

The trading that the servants are expected to do during their master's absence is referring to the faithful use of spiritual gifts and opportunities for service, growth, and spiritual character that Jesus' disciples are expected to practice.

This parable teaches us several things. God gives people differing gifts. Work well done is rewarded with still more work to do. And the person who uses his gifts will be given more, while the person who does not will lose even what he has. The only way to keep a spiritual gift is to use it in the service of God and one another. Simply put, if you do not use it, you lose it.

Similar to the foolish virgins suffering because they neglected to prepare, the third servant in this parable suffers because he did *nothing* with his talent.

We must not hide our light under a basket. Spiritual gifts must be used in service to Christ for the glory of God, for the joy and honor of Him who is the giver of every good gift.

The third parable that Jesus told is the Parable of the (separation of the) Sheep and the Goats. The goats are the lost, and they are condemned because they neglected to feed the Lord when he was hungry, give Him drink when he was thirsty, welcome Him when He was a stranger, clothe Him when He was naked, visit Him when He was sick, and comfort Him when He was cast in prison. They say, “But when did we see You hungry or thirsty or lonely or naked or sick?” He replies,

Matthew 25:45 “Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did not do it to the least of these [my brothers], you did not do for Me.”

On the other hand, He welcomes those who did these things for His brethren.

Each of these parables, though quite different from the others in detail, is nevertheless one with them in its essential features. In each case, there is a sudden return of the Lord which demands an accounting; there are some who are prepared for His coming and others who are not; and there are rewards and judgments.

Most remarkable of all, is that in each case those who are lost are totally amazed, surprised, shocked at the outcome. The foolish virgins are astounded that the bridegroom will not open the door to them. The wicked and lazy servant clearly expected the master to be pleased with his zero-growth performance. And the goats cannot believe that they have actually rejected Jesus.

Thus it will be with our generation. We have more opportunities to learn about Christ in our day than ever before in human history. But look how we squander it! All of the distractions of the world, the wealth that we have had, and so on has really distracted us greatly.

The call has gone forth, “Behold the Man!” Look to this One for salvation. He loves you. He died for you. He rose again. But many go on with life not thinking and will be overwhelmed in the day of God’s accounting. So I ask again, what kind of witness are you and I?

Now let us shift gears again as we continue with the account in John 19.

John 19:6-7 Therefore, when the chief priests and officers saw Him, they cried out, saying, “Crucify Him, crucify Him!” Pilate said to them, “You take Him and crucify Him, for I find no fault in Him.” The Jews answered him, “We have a law, and according to our law He ought to die, because He made Himself the Son of God.”

So the question is, who is He, who is Jesus Christ? The events surrounding the crucifixion of Jesus are moving ahead quickly here in John 19, and before long the teacher of Israel will be crucified. Who is this One soon to give His life?

This question is important because the value of His death depends entirely upon who He was. If He was a criminal and deserved to die, His death means nothing, at least no more than the death of any one of the thousands of other criminals who have been executed down through the long centuries of human history.

If He was an innocent man, His death speaks to us merely of the miscarriage of justice and His manner shows only how a strong man can bravely bear mistreatment. On the other hand, if He was God, as He claimed to be, His death has monumental significance.

We see how inescapable the question of “Who He is” in the verses to follow, because although the real charge against Jesus had been veiled in the Jews’ previous dealings with Pilate, it now flows forth in a flood of sudden fury.

No less than six separate charges had been brought against him and let me list them here:

- 1) Matthew 26:61 tells us He had been charged with: threatening to destroy the Jewish temple.
- 2) John 18:30 says that He was accused of being an evildoer.
- 3) Luke 23:2 informs us that He was charged with perverting the nation.
- 4) Luke 23:2 also records that it was said that He had forbidden Jews to pay taxes to Caesar.
- 5) Luke 23:2 also says that He was cited for having made Himself a king.
- 6) Luke 23:5 informs us that He was said to have stirred up the people to insurrection.

Here were six serious accusations, but these charges were not the real reason for the hatred of the Jewish leaders for Jesus or their prosecution of the case against Him before Pilate. The real accusation is that He had claimed to be the unique Son of God, which they judged as blasphemy.

A seventh and central charge comes to the foreground now. Of course, it had been there from the beginning. The very first accusation against Jesus was that He had claimed He was “able to destroy the temple of God and rebuild it in three days.”

On the surface this seemed to be only the irrational ravings of a madman. But Christ was not mad, and the leaders of Israel undoubtedly read into His words precisely what He intended. What He was actually saying was that He was God and that, although He would permit the leaders of the nation to kill Him, He would rise again in three days.

Only this explains the striking repetition of the phrase “in three days” in each of the four gospels and the later concern of the leaders to seal and guard Christ’s tomb.

Matthew 27:62-66 On the next day, which followed the Day of Preparation, the chief priests and Pharisees gathered together to Pilate, saying, “Sir, we remember, while He was still alive, how

that deceiver said, ‘After three days I will rise. Therefore command that the tomb be made secure until the third day, lest His disciples come by night and steal Him away, and say to the people, ‘He has risen from the dead.’ So the last deception will be worse than the first.” Pilate said to them, “You have a guard; go your way, make it as secure as you know how.” So they went and made the tomb secure, sealing the stone and setting the guard.

Why were the other charges raised then? They were raised in the Jewish court because, at first, the leaders of the Sanhedrin were unable to secure adequate evidence to convict Jesus of the charge of blasphemy.

They were raised in the Roman court because the enemies of the Lord rightly believed that Pilate would never consent to convict Christ on the religious question. Before Pilate, Jesus had to be accused of being an insurrectionist and thus a threat to Caesar.

It was on the ground of insurrection that Pilate conducted the trial. Imagine His surprise then when, after having acquitted Jesus of the charge of insurrection, he suddenly hears the real charge mentioned. The people were flipping on him.

Pilate had said, “I find no basis for a charge against Him”. Now Jesus’ accusers reply, “We have a law, and according to that law He must die, because He claimed to be the Son of God”. So Pilate thought the issue was over but then they threw another issue in his face.

Up till now Pilate had been conducting the trial as if Jesus were only a man and the issues merely human issues. The crux of the matter was in Pilate’s challenge to “Behold the Man!” Now the ground is shifted entirely, and Pilate must face the entirely new question as to whether Jesus is actually the Son of God.

Was Jesus’ claim to be the Son of God factual? I ask the question in this way because it is not only Pilate who is forced to face this question. We have to confront this vital question too before we can accept Christ as our Savior at baptism.

Who died on the stake? The issue is not merely a matter of saying that the man who was killed was Jesus of Nazareth, because there is no question about that. The question is: Who was Jesus? Was He only a man, or was He more? Was He really God? The most important witness to any fact is God Himself. So, although there are many witnesses to be considered, we rightly begin here. Does God Almighty bear witness to Christ's deity?

We will forego the numerous Old Testament prophecies concerning the Messiah and the question of whether, on the basis of His words and deeds, Jesus may be declared to be that One. Instead we turn to the testimony of God rendered during the days of Christ's earthly ministry. We turn to the moment of Christ's baptism. Here we see the Holy Spirit of God descending upon Jesus Christ, like a dove from heaven. We hear God speak.

Matthew 3:17 And suddenly a voice came from heaven, saying, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."

Has such a testimony ever been rendered to another? We do not know of any. Abraham was called God's friend, and David was called a man after God's own heart. But these were nevertheless still men and here is One called God's Son. The testimony is very weighty.

This was at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, before the temptation, the public acclaim, the rejection, and the disappointments. What about later, after these things? Perhaps the One in whom God was "pleased" at the beginning will not be so pleasing at the end, after He has rubbed shoulders with the world and sin.

We turn to that moment toward the end of Christ's ministry when Jesus stood on the Mount and, in vision, was changed from His earthly into His heavenly appearance. In this moment He was clothed with light as with a garment, and in the hearing of Peter, James, and John, God Almighty spoke again from heaven, saying,

Matthew 17:5 While he was still speaking, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them; and suddenly a voice came out of the cloud, saying, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Hear Him!"

God the Father testifies to Christ's deity, in the beginning of His ministry and at the end of it.

The second witness to be summoned is Jesus of Nazareth. Any court should be willing to hear a man's testimony about himself, even in today's courts, seeing that it is only fair.

Earlier Jesus gave them a testimony which they would have no doubt remembered. On one occasion the leaders of Israel challenged Him to give an accounting of Himself, and He did this so clearly that they immediately took up stones to throw at Him.

John 8:58-59 Jesus said to them, "Most assuredly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM." Then they took up stones to throw at Him; but Jesus hid Himself and went out of the temple, going through the midst of them, and so passed by.

On another occasion, recorded in John 10, Jesus taught the people in Solomon's porch, and He said to them:

John 10:30 "I and My Father are one."

In Jesus' final moments together with His disciples in John 14, He answered a question raised by Philip, saying,

John 14:9 Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you so long, and yet you have not known Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father [directly equating Himself to the Father in that way]; so how can you say, 'Show us the Father'?"

The high priest asked Jesus the question, 'Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?' and He replied as recorded in,

Mark 14:61-62 But He kept silent and answered nothing. Again the high priest asked Him, saying to Him, "Are You the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?" Jesus said, "I am. And you will see the Son of

Man sitting at the right hand of the Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven.”

The testimonies of God Almighty and of Jesus of Nazareth agree.

Now are there other supernatural witnesses from whom we should hear? There are angels of heaven. What do they say? We hear their voice in the events which surround the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. The archangel Gabriel is one of them. He appeared to Mary before the birth saying,

Luke 1:30-35 Then the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end.” Then Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I do not know a man?” And the angel answered and said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God.”

Now later in the story the angels appear to the shepherds in the fields of Bethlehem.

Luke 2:10-11 Then the angel said to them [that is the shepherds], “Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.”

Now what of the demons? These were the unrighteous angels, so to speak. They know the truth about Jesus even though they are opposed to His rule. What is their opinion of the one who now appears before Pilate?

We remember that on one occasion Christ healed a man who had been possessed by many demons. He was about to cast them out when they replied in,

Matthew 8:29 And suddenly they [the demons] cried out, saying, “What have we to do with You, Jesus, You Son of God? Have You come here to torment us before the time?”

On another occasion, as recorded in Mark 3, the demons fell down before Him, saying,

Mark 3:11 And the unclean spirits, whenever they saw Him, fell down before Him and cried out, saying, “You are the Son of God.”

It is not only supernatural witnesses that attest to Christ’s deity. There are also many human witnesses, among them those who knew Him best. What of these? What of the writers of the Gospels?

These men are the historians of Christ’s life. We can rightly suppose they have carefully investigated the things that were being told about Him. They had seen things with their own eyes and also completely investigated all the surrounding facts. Some lived with Him and they were eyewitnesses of what they describe. What do these men think of the One who stands before Pilate?

Matthew wrote the first of the Gospels. He was a Jew, and the Jews confess one God. He was not likely to ascribe divinity to any man without overwhelming evidence. If we were able to ask him, he might reply, “I believe that Jesus is the divine Savior of whom the Old Testament speaks. I have said so. I said that His birth was in fulfillment of that great prophecy of Isaiah, which says,

Matthew 1:23 “Behold, the virgin will be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel,” which is translated, “God with us.”

Mark traveled with Peter and received firsthand information from him. What does he think? Mark introduced his gospel with these words:

Mark 1:1 The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

What about Luke? Luke was a physician. He was not inclined to fables or exaggeration. He has given us the most scientific of the four Gospels. Yet Luke favorably records some of the most exalted titles ever given to Jesus: “Son of the Most High,” “Son of God,” and “Christ the Lord” are some of the phrases he uses.

What about John? John tells us that he has written the most explicit words of all. John starts his gospel with:

John 1:1-4 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made. In Him was life, and the life was the light of men.

Now John begins the conclusion of his gospel with:

John 20:30-31 And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.

Are there other human witnesses? Yes, there is John the Baptist, who was a first cousin of Jesus, and he testified in John 1.

John 1:34 “I have seen and testified that this is the Son of God.”

There is Martha, in whose home Jesus and His disciples often stayed, who testified in John 11.

John 11:27 She said to Him, “Yes, Lord, I believe that You are the Christ, the Son of God, who is to come into the world.”

Jesus once asked the disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” Peter, speaking for the rest, declared as recorded in Matthew 16,

Matthew 16:16 Simon Peter answered and said, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

Did Jesus recoil from that confession? If there was ever an opportunity in which He could have corrected this “mistaken” notion of who He was, it was then. He could have said, “You’re wrong, Peter. I’m not God’s Son. I’m just a man, as you are.” But that is not what He said. Instead He replied in verse 17,

Matthew 16:17 Jesus answered and said to him, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven.”

So the earthly witnesses and the heavenly witnesses agree. We know what kind of witnesses they were, so again I ask, what kind of witness are you and I?

It is said that the way in which a man dies throws much light upon who he is and how he lived. It is of interest to know how Christ died and what those who witnessed His death thought of Him in His dying moments.

The two who were present and died with Him were thieves. One thief was hardened and railed against Jesus, according to Luke’s testimony. He sarcastically said, “If You are the Christ, save Yourself and us.” The other thief replied to him in Luke 23:40, “Do not you even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong.” Then said to Jesus, “Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom.”

The centurion was in charge of the execution party. He is a sober man and has seen many die. What was the centurion’s witness?

Luke 23:46-47 And when Jesus had cried out with a loud voice, He said, “Father, ‘into Your hands I commit My spirit.’ Having said this, He breathed His last. So when the centurion saw what had

happened, he glorified God, saying, “Certainly this was a righteous Man!”

Now does God rule in your life? What kind of witness are you? What is our verdict? We have not seen Him in the days of His flesh, but He is proclaimed to us in Scripture, in His holy written Word and the Holy Spirit bears witness with our spirit and to countless other Christians. What do we say, is He the Son of God?

Here is our testimony. We have looked within our hearts, and we confess that there was little or nothing within us to draw us to Him, apart from the indwelling of God’s Spirit. Left to ourselves we would find a lifetime of other pursuits to keep us busy and distracted.

We could be as skeptical as Thomas, or as hostile as the apostle Paul before his conversion. But Jesus spoke to us. He spoke through the Word of God, declaring who He is and what He has done. Our hearts went out to Him, and we confess that He is indeed the Son of God and our Savior.

Isaiah 43:10-12 [speaking of us] “You are My witnesses,” says the Lord, “and My servant whom I have chosen, that you may know and believe Me, and understand that I am He. Before Me there was no God formed, nor shall there be after Me. I, even I, am the Lord, and besides Me there is no savior. I have declared and saved, I have proclaimed, and there was no foreign god among you; therefore you are My witnesses,” says the Lord, “that I am God.”

The strange thing about this case is that the decision you make will not determine the destiny of the defendant, but rather it will determine the future of yourself.

Hebrews 12:1-2 Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

It should be our lifelong goal to be a member of this great cloud of witnesses! Remember the Eternal's words in Isaiah: "Therefore you are My witnesses," says the Lord, "that I am God."