

The Man from Heaven asks us to Believe

John 5:31-47

The story is told of a young scientist who was giving a public lecture on astronomy. He spent an hour explaining to his audience how the sun is at the centre of the solar system and how the planets orbit the sun and how some planets have their own moons which have their own orbits, and how our sun is one of 100 billion stars in our own galaxy and how our galaxy is one of over 200 billion galaxies in the universe.

And the story goes that towards the end of his presentation an elderly lady stood up at the back of the hall and raised her voice:

“Young man, what you’ve just told us is complete rubbish!”

“Oh?” replied the startled young scientist, “how so?”

“The world is really a flat plate, supported on the back of a giant tortoise!”

On hearing this the scientist smiled and simply asked

“And what do you suppose the tortoise is standing on?”

“Very clever young man, very clever!” replied the lady,

“but it’s tortoises, all the way down!”

This story is told by Stephen Hawking at the beginning of his book, *A Brief History of Time*, and he uses the question to ask “Why do we believe what we believe?” Why would someone believe that the world is balanced on the back of a giant tortoise? But then again, why is it that anyone would believe anything different? Hawking’s book would then go on to show how the scientific discipline of theoretical physics can give us reasons to believe certain things about the nature of the universe.

We can find ourselves asking similar questions about our spiritual beliefs, can we? Why do we believe that God is the creator of the world we see? Why do we believe that there is a heaven and hell? Why do we believe that the difference between where we end up comes down to the work of the one figure, Jesus Christ?

If you listen to some of the voices in our culture, they’ll tell us why we believe what we believe. They’ll say it’s because we have a weakness and we need religion as a crutch. The German philosopher Karl Marx described religion as “the opiate of the masses”, as a kind of drug that makes us numb and happy. Maybe they’ll tell us that we believe because of our family background, or perhaps because of a lack of adequate experiences in the world. Some people will claim that a trust in Jesus Christ necessitates a rejection of evidence and reason; that Christian faith is blind faith. These are the assumptions that people make about us in the world today.

Well, in today’s passage we hear Jesus talking about evidence and belief. Why should we believe in Jesus as the Son of God? Well, Jesus has some reasons for us in John Chapter 5. But as we listen to Jesus we hear the answer to what I think is a more interesting question: why is it that people decide not to believe? Is it because the

evidence isn't actually that strong? Or is it the case that a more dishonorable reason might be at play?

The context here is that Jesus is talking to people who've decided to not believe. Take a look at chapter 5 verse 18. Jesus has just claimed that he is God's Son: For this reason John writes they [the Jewish leaders] tried all the more to kill him; not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God. Why such an aggressive response? We pick things up in verse 33 where Jesus rehearses the first bit of overlooked evidence, and it's a testimony we've come across already in this series: ³³ "You have sent to John and he has testified to the truth. ³⁴ Not that I accept human testimony; but I mention it that you may be saved. ³⁵ John was a lamp that burned and gave light, and you chose for a time to enjoy his light.

In these verses Jesus is referring to John the Baptist who was a very popular figure back in those days. He had lots of followers and wielded a lot of popular influence. And how did John respond when people asked him whether he was the Messiah? He said "I am not the Messiah, but I have seen the Spirit of God descend upon another man. When I was baptizing Him, the Spirit descended in the shape of a dove. Jesus is God's chosen one." It was a testimony that many people would have taken very seriously. But not the Jewish leaders; they didn't listen to John.

So what other evidence had the Jewish leaders ignored? Jesus continues in verse 36 I have testimony weightier than that of John. For the works that the Father has given me to finish—the very works that I am doing—testify that the Father has sent me. If people weren't going to be influenced by what John the Baptist said, then there was a whole other type of evidence they could consider: the miraculous works conducted by Jesus throughout his ministry.

We've considered a number of these miracles already in this series. When Jesus was at a wedding in Chapter 2, the reception ran out of wine and so, after his mothers prompting, Jesus ordered the servants to fill up some stone jars with water. When the water was drawn out of the jars and presented to the headwaiter, behold it had transformed into the finest of wines! And then in chapter 4, a royal official begs Jesus to heal his seriously ill son, and with just a few words Jesus says "Go, your son will live". The next day the official is approaching home and his servants greet him with the news that the boy had recovered. And when did he recover? At the exact time that Jesus dismissed the official with a promise of healing. Last week we heard about the man who had been an invalid for 38 years! But in an instant Jesus is able to heal him with the words "get up, pick up your mat and walk!" Now, it's not as if the Jewish leaders had simply missed seeing the evidence of these miracles. If you remember, they had a conversation with this healed man because they didn't like the fact that he was carrying his mat on the Sabbath. The evidence was there for everyone to see, but still, the Jewish leaders had made the decision to not believe.

So what might have convinced these leaders to believe in Jesus? If John the Baptist wasn't convincing enough and if the miracles of Jesus were not convincing enough,

then what *would* be convincing enough? Given Jesus is speaking to a group of religious leaders, then perhaps if they could find Jesus in their holy book, perhaps if they could find mention of Jesus in the pages of the OT, then perhaps that would be the type of testimony that would convince! It's this testimony of Scripture that's of particular importance to us because this is the testimony that's available in the present. None of us can say we've heard John the Baptist preach, none of us were present when Jesus performed his miracles, but we can read the same Scriptures that the Jewish leaders read. It's evidence that's been available to people across the ages.

Now, I admit that in our modern skeptical age people will have questions about the reliability of the Bible as a witness: questions about its origin, whether it contains any errors, about its bias. These are important questions to ask at some point, in fact, I'm planning a sermon series on the nature of the Bible for later in the year. But notice that here in John 5 nobody is asking this question; everyone agrees that the Bible ought to be listened to. What does Jesus say to these Jewish leaders in verse 39? You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. So the question we're asking today is not so much "is the Bible true?" but "What does the Bible actually say?"

Whatever the Bible does say, it speaks as an authority. Jesus introduces his appeal to the Bible as a witness with these words, verse 37: And the Father who sent me has himself testified concerning me. The testimony of Scripture is the testimony of God the Father himself. The other testimonies have their place but Scripture is a testimony which comes from the highest authority. I wonder whether you've ever punched some of your symptoms into google when you've felt a bit under the weather. It's an easy way to translate your symptoms into something life threatening! Once I found a spot on my arm which google convinced me was cancer! So I went to the doctor and what did he say? "That's a just a wart" he said. "Don't listen to Dr Google!" Who is the higher authority in that scenario? It's the Doctor, isn't it? And so it is with Scripture. We believe that this is the testimony not only of history, not only of godly men and women, but we believe this is the testimony of God himself, the highest authority!

And it's a book which is rich in testimony about Jesus. In the second half of verse 39: These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, Jesus says, and again in verse 46: If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me. What exactly did Moses say about Jesus? Well, traditionally the first five books of the Bible are attributed to Moses, and in those books we see a number of references to Jesus ahead of time. In Genesis ch 3 we read of a descendant of Eve who would come and crush the head of the serpent. That serpent I understand to be Satan, and Jesus did crush Satan's power by freeing men and women from their sins.

What else did Moses write about? In Genesis 49 there is a promise that one of Judah's descendants will rule as a king. Everyone would have known that Jesus was in fact descended from Judah. In Numbers 21, Moses lifts up a bronze snake on a pole through which the Israelites find miraculous healing. And in John 3, after Jesus

had started performing his own miraculous signs, Jesus interprets this snake as a foreshadowing of his own ministry. And finally in our first reading today, in Deuteronomy 18.15, we heard Moses saying to the Israelites that The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your fellow Israelites. You must listen to him.

What we have in the OT is a story that points beyond itself. You've probably had the experience where you've been reading a book when all of a sudden a light bulb goes on and you actually realize the story is operating on a deeper level. A famous example might be *the Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe* by CS Lewis. On one level it's a story about a land under the spell of a witch but then Aslan the lion comes along and brings salvation. Kids love reading that book, but eventually there comes a moment when you realize "It's actually a story about Jesus and the salvation he brings, with Aslan playing the Christ figure!" The OT is full of moment like that. Moments when you realize that the stories within it, while true and historical, are also foreshadowing the ministry of Jesus.

So the words of Moses in the OT should have prepared the Jewish leaders for a remarkable leader and prophet, and, together with the miracles and the testimony of people like John the Baptist, those words should have been enough to convince them that Jesus was in fact the Son of God. But even with all this evidence presented before them, what was the result? Verse 40, yet you refuse to come to me to have eternal life. Despite everything that transpired in front of them, they stubbornly refused to admit that Jesus was the Son of God.

There were a couple of exceptions though, people like Nicodemus who came to Jesus at night, like Joseph of Arimathea who asked to bury Jesus after his death. These men believed who Jesus was, but they were so fearful of what other people would think that they could only believe in secret, and that gives us some insight into why the other leaders were so stubborn in their refusal to come Jesus. Jesus knows all too well why, despite the evidence, people still resist him. Verse 43: I have come in my Father's name, and you do not accept me; but if someone else comes in his own name, you will accept him. ⁴⁴ How can you believe since you accept glory from one another but do not seek the glory that comes from the only God? In the end these men were more interested in accepting glory from one another than they were accepting glory from God; it was the desire for human affirmation that drove them away from Christ.

And this is still the case today isn't it? To accept Christ wholeheartedly is to look like a fool. It's ridiculous when people say Christian belief is about being comfortable. If you want to be comfortable, then give Christ a clear berth. Quite often our decision to not believe has got nothing to do with what's true, but everything to do with what is politically correct.

Sometimes people go for a half measure. Like the religious leaders of Jesus' day,

we'll believe the more convenient bits of the Bible, I've been hearing this recently when people have been saying "Well, I trust that Jesus is my savior, but I also believe he wants me to be happy, therefore I'm sure he'll give me permission to do x,y,z." and they'll fill in the gap with something that the Bible says is off limits: an unhealthy relationship; a sinful habit; a greedy decision.

But we're fooling ourselves, aren't we? Nor does his word dwell in you for you do not believe the one he has sent, Or, you only believe some things he says and not all of them. There are no half measures here. There's no place for lukewarm water, neither hot nor cold. Do you remember that image from the book of Revelation?

And the way to avoid that half measure is to ask a question, a question not so much about belief but about glory. The more accurate question is not "why do you believe" but "whose glory are you after? Whose approval do you seek?" Because any answer other than "God's approval" will lead you down dangerous paths.

I remember speaking with a Christian man who was attracted to other men, and this was a real battle within him. At one point I said to him "You need to decide whose man are you're going to be. Are you going to be a man who conforms to what the world wants from you? Are you going to be a man who gives in and remains captive to the desires that are fighting within you? Or are you going to be God's man, seeking the glory that comes from him. A glory which comes through accepting not only Christ's salvation but also his rule and authority in your life accepting the path of righteousness that he wants you to pursue." And with God's help this man continued to fight to be the person that God, and not the world, wanted him to be.

It's a fight that many of the Jewish leaders lost. Refusing to see the evidence for what it was, they turned Christ away and sought their affirmation from one another. Let's not make that mistake.

I'll lead us in prayer.