

The True God, and the Attesting Witness

Preached at Providence Chapel, Oakham, on Lord's Day
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"He that hath received his testimony hath set to his seal that
God is true." John 3:33

There are two ways, speaking generally, whereby we come to the knowledge of human events and circumstances. One is by what is called *ocular* evidence; that is, seeing a thing with our own eyes. For instance I know that there is a country called England and a town called Oakham, because I live in the one and often visit the other. This is an ocular evidence—the testimony of my eyes which I cannot disbelieve. But how do I know that there is a country called America, or a city named New York? I have never crossed the Atlantic. I know it therefore only by the testimony of others. Now ocular evidence is limited, there being comparatively few things which we can see with our eyes. The greater part of our knowledge is therefore based upon the testimony of others. It is in this way that the greater part of human knowledge is acquired. But when we pass from human to divine truth, we come into another atmosphere; we then require a different mode of instruction. Both ocular evidence and the testimony of others are here insufficient, for the things of God are what the eye hath not seen, nor ear heard; we can, therefore, have neither ocular evidence of the kingdom of God, nor can we learn it from report and tradition. Even if we could learn it so, it would not profit us. How many saw Christ expiring on the cross with their bodily eyes! But did that save them, or even soften their hearts? On the contrary, they only mocked his sufferings and agonies. And when he comes again a second time "every eye," we read, "shall see him, and they also which pierced him." But will that save them? No! For

"they will call upon the mountains and rocks to fall upon them, and hide them from the face of him that sitteth on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb." The only way, therefore, whereby wrath can attain to the knowledge of divine things is by the testimony of God. This is divine revelation, for in the Scripture God makes known divine truth; and when this is received by a spiritual faith, it is a receiving of God's testimony. The words before us were spoken by John the Baptist of the Lord Jesus. The blessed Jesus, we must bear in mind, was not only the great High Priest who offered himself as a sacrifice for sin, not only the King who reigns and rules in the hearts of his willing people, but a Prophet also, according to that ancient prediction, "The Lord thy God will raise up unto thee a Prophet from the midst of thee, of thy brethren, like unto me; unto him ye shall hearken." (Deut. 18:15.) The word "prophet" does not mean in its first sense a foreteller of future events, but one who speaks for God—God's mouthpiece. Thus the Lord Jesus Christ was a prophet, not merely as predicting future events, but primarily and chiefly proclaiming, as God's mouthpiece, the mind of God. What he thus spoke is called in Scripture his testimony; that is, the witness which he bare of God. This he did in the highest manner from personal knowledge. What the prophets spoke of they had not seen, except by the eye of faith. What Jesus testified of he had seen, because he was with the Father before the foundation of the world. Therefore "What he hath seen and heard, that he testifieth, and no man receiveth his testimony." This is true of men generally, but there are exceptions; for in the language of the text "He that hath received his testimony hath set to his seal that God is true."

In looking at these words I shall, with God's blessing, speak chiefly on three points.

I.—*First, Christ's testimony.*

II.—*Secondly, the receiving of Christ's testimony. And*

III.—*Thirdly, the setting to our seal that God is true.*

I.—But what is the meaning of "*testimony*?" The word means witness. But what is a witness? It is a person who, being well informed of certain circumstances by having seen them, comes forward and publicly declares he has seen the thing that he bears testimony to. This is of daily occurrence in courts of justice. Oral witness is the foundation of the whole proceedings. Without a witness, no man is condemned; without a witness, no man is acquitted. Testimony, then, is a declaration of one who is informed upon the point whereto he bears witness. In this sense the Lord Jesus is called in Scripture "the true and faithful witness," because he testifies of what he hath seen with the Father before the foundation of the world. His witness, therefore, is and must be of the highest kind; it is and must be infallible. Now God in Scripture is declared to bear testimony to Jesus. In three ways chiefly did God the Father bear testimony to his dear Son.

1. First, he bore testimony by the miracles which the Lord Jesus Christ wrought when he was here below. These were standing evidences that God sent his dear Son. And this Nicodemus felt when he said, "We know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles which thou doest except God be with him."

2. But, secondly, God, in order to make it more certain, spoke on three separate occasions with a voice from heaven, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." Peter speaking of this says, "For he received from God the Father

honour and glory, when there came such a voice to him from the excellent glory, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. And this voice which came from heaven we heard, when we were with him in the holy mount." (2 Peter 1:17, 18.)

3. But, thirdly, the most glorious testimony that God bore that the Lord Jesus was his only begotten Son was when he raised him from the dead; as the apostle speaks, "and declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead." (Romans 1:4.)

Now, it is a remarkable circumstance, and you can verify it if you like for yourselves, that there is not a single sermon in the Acts, recorded as preached by any one of the apostles, in which the resurrection of Christ is not specially named and mainly dwelt upon. The reason of this is, that it was the grand standing testimony which God gave to the divinity of his dear Son.

But not only did God the Father testify in this threefold manner of the Son of his love, but the blessed Spirit also testified of Jesus. And this he did, not only when he sojourned here below, but now also wherever he makes Christ known to the soul he bears his testimony to the Son of God and his finished work. "But when the Comforter is come whom will I send unto you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, which proceedeth from the Father, he shall testify of me." (John 15:26.)

But not only do God the Father and the blessed Spirit bear testimony to the Lord Jesus, but he testifies also of himself. This testimony is here spoken of.

Let us, then, with God's blessing, examine a little more closely the testimony that the Lord Jesus Christ bore, because this forms the foundation of the whole text.

i. The Lord Jesus bore testimony first to the very *being* and *existence* of God. He himself is God's representative, for in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily. We therefore read of "the glory of God in the face (or person) of Jesus Christ." When Christ was upon earth, God, so to speak, walked upon earth in the likeness of Jesus. We find, therefore, the Lord thus speaking to Philip in the language of tender reproach, "have I been so long time with you, and yet hast thou not known me, Philip? He that hath seen me hath seen the Father; and how sayest thou then, Shew us the Father?" (John 14:9.) Thus Jesus bore testimony to God by his presence upon earth, and by the majesty and glory that shone forth in him; as we read, "and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth." (John 1:14.) Those who had eyes of faith given them saw Deity shining forth in the Person of the God-Man, and thus received him as the Christ of God.

ii. But Jesus testified, secondly, to the *character* of God. Thus he testified that God is a *Spirit*, and as such, seeks spiritual worshippers and requires spiritual worship; that he is not to be satisfied with mere form and ceremony, but demands the regenerate heart. He testifies also to the holiness of God. How solemnly and touchingly does he address him as "Holy Father" and "Righteous Father" in that wondrous prayer recorded in John 17.

iii. But, again, how the Lord Jesus testified to the spirituality, extent, and requisitions of God's *holy law*. Read the Sermon upon the Mount, and see what an exposition it is of the law given by Moses, and how it applies its threatening

condemnation to the very thought and intents of the heart. He declares that an unclean look is adultery; and "he that calleth his brother a fool is in danger of hell fire." How too, he declares that "one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law till all be fulfilled."

iv. But Jesus testified also to the *unspeakable worth of the immortal soul*. O! what words are those, where he says, "for what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?" (Matt. 16:26.)

v. But not to enlarge, for I must be brief in this part of my discourse, the Lord Jesus testified also to the nature and the necessity of *the new birth*. In that remarkable conversation with Nicodemus how emphatically he declares, "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." (John 3:3.) And how, in setting this forth in the Sermon on the Mount, he says, "Strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it." The Lord sets the gate of regeneration at the head of the way, and shows that none can enter into the kingdom of heaven unless they be partakers of the new birth, and pass through the strait and narrow gate of regenerating grace.

vi. But again the Lord sets forth especially his *mission*, and the work which he came to do. How he speaks of the Son of man coming "to seek and to save that which was lost," that "he came not to call the righteous but sinners to repentance;" and that it was not "the whole who needed a physician, but they that were sick."

vii. How also the Lord pointed out the *character* of those for whom he came to die, as "poor and needy," as "mourners," as "hungering and thirsting" after Jesus, as "weary and

heavy laden," as "bruised reeds and smoking flax."

viii. What a testimony also did the Lord Jesus bear to his own *intrinsic Deity and Godhead*, when he said of himself, "I and my Father are one."

ix. How continually also he appealed to the *miracles* he wrought as so many proofs that he was the Son of God.

x. How he speaks also of his *blood* and of his *flesh* as "drink indeed" and as "meat indeed." What a testimony too did Jesus give to the solemn truths of the holy gospel. What promises, what invitations, what consolations fell from his gracious lips. All these are parts of the testimony that Christ gave in the days of his flesh.

And when we pass on to consider what Jesus is now at the right hand of the Father, we see him bearing testimony still, but in a larger manner. His testimony on earth was to a certain extent limited. He speaks but scantily of his death and resurrection, because they were things to come. Now, however, that he is at God's right hand, what a testimony does he still bear to the grand truths of the gospel, as they are revealed in Scripture and applied to the souls of those who fear God, by continually blessing those truths with a divine and saving power. We see, then, how extensive is the testimony of Christ.

II.—But we pass on to consider our second and main point, the *receiving* of this testimony. There were those who would not and did not receive this testimony, and they paid the penalty of it; for they died in their sins, and "the wrath of God abideth on them." There were those, however, who did receive the testimony: "But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God." And they

received Christ when they received the testimony of Christ.

Now was there not a broad line of distinction between those who received his testimony and those who received it not? And what made the distinction? We read of some that "they could not believe." Now why could they not believe? God had hardened their hearts; as we find John speaking, "Therefore they could not believe, because that Esaias said again, He hath blinded their eyes, and hardened their heart; that they should not see with their eyes, nor understand with their heart, and be converted and I should heal them." (John 12:39, 40.) Now this is the most fearful of all cases. This is what is called *judicial blindness*. When God, according to his own divine purpose, because of man's wickedness gives him up to judicial blindness, and sends him awful delusions to believe a lie, it is the most fearful judgment which he can inflict.

But the main reason why man did not then and will not now receive Christ's testimony, is because there is a "*veil upon the heart*." This veil consists mainly of three folds; that is, a three-fold veil. The first fold is *ignorance and darkness*; according to those words, "Men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil." Another fold of this veil is *unbelief*. The third fold is *enmity*. Thus, when we look at man's case and see some given up to judicial blindness, and others, comprehending the great mass of mankind, with a threefold veil over their heart, we see why no man receiveth Christ's testimony except those in whom the Spirit of God works, and from whose eyes he removes the veil. Now, we may preach the plainest truths of the gospel (and who could preach like the Lord Jesus?), but mere preaching will not convert souls. Except God is pleased to own the word by the application of his own Spirit, it falls powerless to the ground. We may admonish and warn men, as indeed we should do,

and may speak the plainest things in their ears, but it will be all unfruitful and useless as long as there is a veil over their hearts. Go up, on this beautiful day, to the summit of some lofty hill, say Burley for instance, and put a blanket over your face, what can you then see of the prospect? So of what avail are all the glorious prospects of eternal realities revealed in the Scripture, as long as there is a blanket over a man's heart? I use the word "blanket" because the veil spoken of in Scripture is not such a veil as ladies now wear, of a light, thin material, but more resembling a thick cloak or coverlet. How evident, then, it is that unless the Lord take away the folds of darkness which a man has over his heart, there is no seeing truth; till he take away the fold of unbelief, there is no believing truth; and till he take away the fold of enmity, there is no loving truth. If a man, then, neither see, believe, or love it, how can he receive Christ's testimony? Here, then, we come to the grand distinguishing line between "the living and the dead," "the sheep and the goats," "the chaff and the wheat," and "the saved and the lost." Those that are lost receive not the testimony; those who are saved do receive the testimony. Now is not this enough, if you have any life in your soul, to make you examine yourself on which side of the line you stand?

But let me see if I can point out some features by which you may be able to tell whether you have received Christ's testimony.

1. First, we cannot receive Christ's testimony until *light* has shone into our souls; for we only see light in God's light. This is, as the Scripture speaks, having "the eyes of our understanding enlightened." Now when the light of God shines into the soul, it takes away the first fold of the dark veil; it shines through and, as it were, dissolves ignorance. You then begin to see, though it may be at first faintly and

dimly, like him of old, who saw men as trees walking. This is as the prophet speaks, "seeing out of obscurity and darkness." Such have but feeble and dim views of the Lord Jesus. The disciples in the days of Christ had very dim views of their divine master; yet they beheld his glory and saw enough of it to transform them unto the same likeness.

So it is, for the most part with us when the Lord is first pleased to open our eyes and cause a beam of sacred light to shine into the soul. We see truth, and in those days often wonder that other people cannot see it too. It all seems so clear to us, and carries with it such an evidence of the Spirit and power, that we are almost angry with people because they cannot see it. We try perhaps to explain it to them, and lay it down with the utmost possible clearness, but we can never get through the dark fold of ignorance so as to make them see it with the same light and power which have come into our own soul. In these attempts we almost seem to forget that it is the express work of God to enlighten the understanding. The light which thus shines into the soul is not a dry nor a dead light. It is not twilight nor a glow-worm twinkling, or a phosphoric gleam from rotten evidences. But it is sun light; and yet only like the sun in its first dawning beams.

2. But with this light there will always be *life*; therefore called "the light of life." When, then, light comes into a man's understanding and life comes into his conscience, it removes the second fold of the dark veil which I said was *unbelief*. The quickening power of God's Spirit, giving life and authority to God's word, not only dissolves and takes away the fold of unbelief, but raises up the spiritual faith whereby he credits God's testimony. Then he truly, savingly, and eternally believes. How was it with the eunuch when Philip said to him "If thou believest with all thine heart thou

mayest?" He answered "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God." How faith was raised up at that moment in his soul to believe that Jesus Christ was the Son of God! It was thus that he received the testimony of Christ.

The Scripture employs two very beautiful figures to illustrate the reception of the divine testimony. One is the committing of the seed to the ground, as in the parable of the sower. The husbandman scatters the seed in the bosom of the earth, and the ground having been previously ploughed and reduced to a beautiful tilth opens its bosom to receive the grain. After a little time the seed begins to germinate, to strike a root downward, and shoot a germ upward; as the Lord speaks, "first the blade, then the ear, then the full corn in the ear." This emblem beautifully represents how the testimony of Jesus Christ finds an entrance to the soul, takes root downward and carries a shoot upward. The root downward is into the depths of a tender conscience, and the shoot upward is the aspiration, breathing, and longing of the soul for the living God. The other scriptural figure is that of grafting. "Receive," says James, "with meekness the engrafted word which is able to save your souls." Now when a scion is first put into the stock, after a little time sap begins to flow out of the stock into the scion, and this sap unites the two together. So it is spiritually when the soul receives the testimony of Christ. The testimony of Christ is received into a broken heart, as the scion is inserted into and received by the stock. As, then, life flows out of the stock into the scion, it creates and cements a sweet and blessed union with God's word and him of whom the word testifies. Thus it grows up into a living bough, which brings forth blossoms of hope, leaves of a consistent profession, and fruit of a godly life.

3. But there is a third way still in which this testimony is received, and that is in *love and affection*. We read of some

that "they received not the love of the truth." Now love is the grand distinguishing feature of a child of God; and by its being shed abroad in the heart takes away the third fold, which is *enmity*.

If you recollect, I shewed you that the veil had three folds: darkness, unbelief, and enmity. Now the coming of light takes away the fold of darkness; the coming of living faith takes away the fold of unbelief; and the coming in of love takes away the last fold, that of enmity. When, then, the truth is commended to the soul by the power of God, and watered by the sweet dew of the Spirit, it is embraced in love and is felt to be truly precious. The heart therefore closes round it and holds it fast. We know what a firm grasp earthly love can take of earthly objects.

In this three-fold way, then, do we receive Christ's testimony; first, into our understanding, so as to see light in God's light; secondly, into our consciences, so as to believe it with the faith of God's operation; and thirdly, into the heart and affections, whereby we love it, enjoy it, feed upon it, and find it sweet and precious.

Now if you have never received the testimony of Christ thus into your soul, you cannot have accomplished the third thing spoken of in our text, which I shall now attempt to unfold, and that is

III.—The *setting to our seal that God is true*. The Apostle says, "Let God be true, but every man a liar." God is and ever must be true. Every word, therefore, which he spoke must be fulfilled. But there is a setting to our seal that God is true; that is, there is an experiencing an inward witness and confirming testimony whereby we can seal it with the stamp of our own witness and approbation. The figure is taken from

human custom. A deed, we know, until sealed is of no value. In order to pass current and to be valid, a seal is attached on which a person puts his finger, saying at the same time, I deliver this as my act and deed. This, indeed, is an innovation upon the old custom, which was for the person himself to have fixed the seal. So in the things of God. There is a setting to our seal that God is true; that is, a personal, individual ratifying it. When a person has thoroughly read over and well examined a deed or legal document, he puts to it his seal, which in fact says, 'I hereby give my full assent and consent to what I have just read, and in testimony thereof I here affix my seal.'

So in the things of God. The "testimony" of Christ is that which the Lord Jesus Christ spoke in the days of his flesh; and not only so, but what he, as the great Prophet of the church, has in the word of God spoken by his prophets and apostles. When, then, this testimony comes from heaven into the soul with light, life, and demonstration of the Spirit and power, and is thus accompanied with a divine unction, the willing heart of the believer puts his own solemn approbation upon it, and he, so to speak, comes forward with all the power of his soul, and says, 'I believe it from my very heart to be true; and not only so, but I give it the full approbation of my soul, for I feel an inward certainty that it is the very truth of God. I can therefore set my seal to this point, that God in declaring these things has spoken them by his own Spirit as "words of eternal truth."' "

Observe, now, how positively and plainly the Apostle speaks in reference to such a reception of God's word. "He" (that is every one) "that hath received his testimony hath set to his seal that God is true."

Now let us run over a few particulars, that you may see how

far you have been enabled to do this so as to bring out your seal and set it to one gospel truth after another.

i. First, have you received into your soul the grand doctrine of regeneration? in other words, that a man must be born again before he can see or enter into the kingdom of heaven. Do you know this by an inward realization of it, so that you can say, 'I am sure we must be born again, for I have felt in my soul the efficacious power of regenerating grace?' This is putting your seal to this truth, that God is true.

ii. So with the spirituality of God's law. Unless you have experienced the spirituality of that commandment, and fallen under its curse and condemnation, you cannot set to your seal that God is true, where he says, "cursed is every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them."

iii. So with respect to the Sonship of the Lord Jesus Christ. How can we set to our seal that God is true, in receiving Christ's testimony, if we have not seen by the eye of faith the glorious person of the Son of God? But if we have seen by the eye of faith the Person of the Son of God, and beheld his glory, then we can set to our seal that he spoke true when he said he was the Son of God. No one can say the sun does not shine when he sees it brightly beaming in the sky. So when the Sun of Righteousness shines into his soul, he by seeing the light, feeling the heat, and basking in the genial warmth of his beams, can set to his seal that God is true in declaring that Jesus is the Sun of Righteousness.

iv. So, again, when he feels the evils of his heart, and mourns and sighs beneath a body of sin and death, he can set to his seal that God spoke true when he declared that "the heart is deceitful above all things and desperately

wicked."

v. Again, when the Lord said "My flesh is meat indeed and my blood is drink indeed," you can set to your seal that his testimony is true when you eat his flesh and drink his blood by faith. So with the promises.

vi. How can you set to your seal that God spoke truly when he said, "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest?" Why, by coming to him labouring and heavy laden, and finding rest. Then you can set to your seal that Christ was true when he uttered that encouraging word of promise.

vii. So, how can you set to your seal that those are blessed who hunger and thirst after righteousness, unless you so hunger and thirst?

viii. Or how can you know that "all things work together for good to those that love God," or that the way to heaven is through tribulation, unless by a personal experience of it?

We can only, therefore, set to our seal that God is true in any one point of doctrine, experience, or precept when we receive that testimony, and feel an inward witness that God indeed has declared it. Thus, upon every manifestation of God's goodness to the soul, every application of Christ's blood to the conscience, and every revelation of God's distinguishing grace, it is only as we receive Christ's testimony, experience the inward approbation of it, and feel its sweetness and blessedness that we can set to our seal that God is true. This we may be well assured, is the only way to know the power and reality of true religion, to understand the Scriptures, and enjoy a convincing testimony that God is your God, Christ your Saviour, the Holy Ghost

your Teacher, heaven your eternal home, and that your soul is saved in the Lord Jesus Christ with an everlasting salvation.

And with what divine certainty can such a soul sometimes speak. Sometimes, indeed, we cannot believe anything; it seems as if there were nothing in God's word that we could set our seal to. All seems a mass of confusion, and our ignorance appears so great that we cannot set our seal to any vital truth. But, on the other hand, when the blessed Spirit is pleased to testify of the things of God, and we, receiving the testimony of Jesus Christ, walk in the light of that testimony, then there is a holy certainty of and heavenly acquiescence with God's truth. This divine faith will bring you through all your trials and sorrows, and though you may be dragged through a very hell of temptation, yet will you know God is true.

Here, then, is the grand trial of faith; first to receive Christ's testimony, and then to hang upon that testimony in spite of all opposition from within and without, from feeling its weight, power, and sweetness. Bunyan has one expression on this point which I think is very sweet, though he was one who knew more than most men what the infidelity of the human heart was. He says, in his "Grace Abounding," that the doctrine of life by Christ without works was sealed with such power and divine evidence upon his own soul, that he could not be contented with saying he was sure, but that he was more than sure, that those things were true.

Now, without our setting to our seal in this way, what is the truth to us? You come here to hear me and give me your attention. And I speak unto you, as the Lord enables me, words of truth and soberness. You listen to those words; but how many of you can set to your seal from real heart-felt

experience to their truth so as to be able to say, "God is true; I feel its weight and power in my soul, and have an inward testimony in my own conscience that these things are true?"

Amen.