COME TO JESUS

John 5:31–47

Key Verses: 5:39–40

“You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life.”

At the beginning of chapter 5 Jesus launches his main ministry to the Jews. He heals a man who’d been an invalid for 38 years. But because he does it on a Sabbath, the Jews persecute him. So in the middle of the chapter Jesus explains who he is and what he does. He is God’s Son, doing God’s work, the work of giving life. Now, at the end of the chapter Jesus lists some very credible witnesses about him. In light of these credible witnesses he wants us to “come to him” and have life. He also exposes the things in our hearts that keep us from doing so. His rebukes apply to everyone who studies the Bible regularly and goes to church. Today we want to learn what it really means to “come to Jesus.” Through this study may God help each of us to really come to Jesus personally.

Look at verse 31. Jesus had just made some huge statements about himself. He claimed to be equal with God (18), to give eternal life (24), to be the source of life (26), and to judge sin (27). Put together, these statements make it clear that Jesus wasn’t just a man—he’s the Son of God. As the Son of God he doesn’t need human testimony to prove who he is (34a). He existed eternally with God as the First Cause of the universe (1:1–3). But in addressing the Jews he speaks in language they could understand. According to Jewish law, truth had to be established by two or three witnesses (Dt17:6; 19:15). So even if Jesus’ claims were true, to the Jewish mind they needed to be validated by the witness of others. Jesus knew their minds were hardened and critical, but he humbled himself to their level to help them be saved (34b) and have life (40). Thus he introduces witnesses to verify the truth of who he is.

Many people think that to believe, we have to turn off our minds, get emotional, or be forced to take a blind leap of faith. But that’s not true. God gave us our intellect and respects our free will. Though we’re sick with sin, God wants to reason with us (Isa1:18). He’s given us credible testimony so that our faith can have a solid foundation. So, contrary to popular opinion, faith isn’t irrational or emotional, but very reasonable. On the surface, people who don’t believe seem to have intellectual issues with religion. But actually, in light of all the credible testimony about Jesus it’s unbelief that’s irrational. Unbelief is stubborn refusal. John’s Gospel depicts unbelief as a moral problem, a love of darkness (3:19).

Look at verses 32–33. Here Jesus stands John the Baptist as his first witness. He says John the Baptist “testified to the truth.” What does it mean? He told people the truth that they needed to repent, but he also told the truth about Jesus. In his day John was popular and powerful. But he said, “He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me” (1:15). He testified that he was not the Messiah (1:20); he even said he wasn’t worthy to untie the straps of Jesus’ sandals (1:26). And when he first met Jesus in person, he exclaimed, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (1:29b) Through seeing God’s Spirit light on Jesus, John testified that Jesus is God’s Chosen One (1:32–34). In those dark times John was a lamp that burned and gave light, and people enjoyed him for a time (35). John’s testimony was “weighty” (36a) because of his well-known authentic ministry and integrity.

Look at verse 36. Here Jesus says that his own works were weightier testimony than John’s. His works were like hard, cold facts in a court case—even better than the testimony of eyewitnesses. Jesus’ identity was never a matter of mere talk. His works were clear and undeniable historical facts, witnessed by many people. According to Luke the historian, Jesus was known as “a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people” (Lk24:19). Everyone knew that God “had anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him” (Ac10:38). Later even the non-Christian historian Josephus would describe Jesus’ deeds as “wonderful works.” In Cana Jesus had turned water into wine and healed the sick. Just recently in Jerusalem he had healed the lame. No mere mortal could do the works of Jesus; only God could. His works were what the Old Testament prophets had said the Messiah would one day do (e.g. Isa35:5–6). He gave life to people who were seemingly impossible to change, people like Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman. Look at verse 36 again. Jesus wants us to believe in him based on the works he did, because they help us understand that the Father was in him, and he in the Father (10:37–38). Jesus’ works help us see that God the Father sent him (36b).

Look at the first part of verse 37. Here Jesus adds an even more credible witness; God the Father himself had also personally testified concerning Jesus. How so? Perhaps this refers to Jesus’ baptism by John, when heaven opened, and a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased” (Mt3:16–17). But the Father had testified concerning Jesus mainly through the Scriptures that he himself inspired (2Ti3:15–16; 2Pe1:20–21). Read verse 39. The entire Old Testament Scriptures are full of all kinds of prophecies of Jesus. Someone counted 351 prophecies of Jesus in the Scriptures. During his life and ministry Jesus fulfilled not just one or two but all of them. It’s amazing. In John’s Gospel Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament tabernacle because he’s the Word who became flesh and made his dwelling among us (1:14). Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament sacrificing of lambs and shedding their blood for forgiveness because he’s the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (1:29). Jesus fulfilled the prophecy that God would raise up a prophet like Moses from among the people (Dt18:15,18; Jn1:21b). Like Moses, Jesus performed many signs and wonders among the people, which resulted in unbelief (12:37). John’s Gospel tells us that the prophet Isaiah saw Jesus’ glory, spoke about him, and even predicted the Jews’ unbelief (12:38–41).

The Scriptures are very powerful testimony about Jesus. There was a Jewish young man who grew up in Poland just before World War II. His mother sent him to an orphanage so that people wouldn’t find out he was Jewish. The Nazis beat and scarred him for life. Later he emigrated to Israel and happened to find a copy of the Old Testament. He began to read it and it helped him start believing in God and praying. Then someone gave him a little black copy of the New Testament. He was amazed at the stories about Jesus. He carried it around with him until a Jewish person saw it and told him Jews were not supposed to read that book. He couldn’t believe it because all the stories of Jesus fit so perfectly with the Old Testament. The Scriptures, read without prejudice, led this Jewish man to believe in Jesus (*Zvi: The Miraculous Story of Triumph Over the Holocaust:* Friends of Israel Ministries, 2000).

Read verse 39 again. Jesus acknowledges the Jews’ diligence. From childhood they read, memorized and researched the Scriptures. But he rebukes them for doing it with the wrong idea. They thought that just knowing the Scriptures would win them eternal life. They thought it was their diligence that won them eternal life. They were making the same mistake we often make. They were wrapped up in the process but missing the main point—Jesus. In verse 38a he rebuked them: “. . . nor does his word dwell in you.” They did study the Bible, but the word didn’t dwell in them. Jesus said in chapter 8, “You have no room for my word” (8:37b). Then what does it mean to have God’s word “dwell” in us, or to “have room” for his word? It means to hold God’s word in our hearts. When we study the Bible only with our minds, it “goes in one ear and out the other.” It can’t “dwell” in us. When the Jews rejected Jesus, it was evidence that God’s word was not in their hearts (38b); it was only in their heads. Bible study only with our minds doesn’t really help us. We need to accept God’s word from our hearts. This is why we write reflections on our Bible studies, so that we can really accept God’s word and hold onto it. To live as Jesus’ disciples we need to hold his teachings (8:31–32). But we need to get the main point. What’s the point of Bible study? Read verses 39–40. If, after studying the Bible, we don’t come to Jesus, we’ve missed the point. Then what does it mean to “come to Jesus”?

**First**, it means to realize our sinfulness. Some people study the Bible to justify themselves, or to find fault with others. But when we study the Bible with the right spirit, it exposes how sinful we are and how much we need Jesus (Ro7:7–25). People refuse to come to Jesus because, frankly, they’re too proud to admit this. Through Bible study we need to grow in the awareness of what kind of sinner we are. When we realize how helpless in sin we are, we’ll really come to Jesus.

**Second**, it means to strive to live in close fellowship with Jesus. We can’t come to Jesus just once in our lives. We need to live in close fellowship with him. But how can we? It certainly isn’t with our own effort or willpower. We can be close to Jesus when we come into his light through regular Bible study. We need to let his light shine on us every day and expose our sins. Then we need to repent, accept his cleansing blood (1Jn1:5–10) and invite his Spirit to come in. Thus, our coming to Jesus isn’t based on our righteousness, but on his grace.

Why don’t people come to Jesus? In verses 41–44 Jesus addresses this. The Jewish leaders studied Scripture to gain each other’s praise. In verse 43 Jesus rebukes them, “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.” They were worldly. Their main problem was that they weren’t focused on God. Verse 42 explains that the right motive in Scripture study is love for God. We love God when we’ve received his love personally (1Jn4:19). When we love God, we want to please him more than anything or anyone else. In verses 45–47 Jesus shatters their false confidence in being followers of Moses. He said they didn’t even believe what Moses wrote. It meant they didn’t pay attention to Moses’ prophecies of his coming (Ge3:15; 12:3; 49:10; Ex12:7,13; Nu24:17; Dt18:15).

In this passage we learned of many credible witnesses about Jesus. We mainly learned that when we study the Bible, we should come to Jesus personally. It means to acknowledge our helplessness in sin, and to build a close relationship with him based on his grace. May God bless us to come to Jesus.