

The Trial

It seemed like any other day when I got my notice to report for jury duty. Fifty bucks a day wasn't even going to cover my expenses for lost time. Besides, everything was backing up. It would take me weeks to recover and get my life back on track. I was NOT a happy camper. This case was too bizarre to be true. What the plaintiffs were asking for was insane – beyond reality. I resented the fact, the *absurdity*, that we'd been summoned to determine whether their claim was valid. It seems that someone named Jesus had died two thousand years ago and he left an inheritance to his "flock" – that's what these people claimed to be: his "sheep." It was like some kind of, cult thing. We were supposed to figure out if this guy was a nut case, a liar, or the "Son of God," whatever that means. And we had to figure out if he had left anything of value to these plaintiffs. Like I said, it was too bizarre to be true.

Even so, I sat there staring at this one line in the manuscript the Judge had given us. "*But these things 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.*" His instruction to us concerning the case and what we were to determine about the issues was pretty explicit. One thing was clear. The *Judge*, for one, took the claim very seriously:

You must find, based on the evidence presented to you in this case, that the plaintiffs have their spiritual and eternal life through this man, Jesus of Nazareth *because* you have found that he is the Christ, the Son of God. This abundant life includes the plaintiffs' life of grace, which is defined as unwarranted and unmerited favor from God. It includes their justification, which means that the plaintiffs have been declared perfectly righteous, not based on their own perfectly lived life, but based on his. His righteousness is considered by God to be theirs because he is their surety, their representative and agent. It includes their progressive sanctification or cleansing from sin which they receive from him through his Spirit. It includes their communion with him, truly with him and with the Father, by the Spirit. It includes the support and maintenance of their spiritual life, along with all its comforts. It includes their life of glory, or eternal life, which they have through or in his name. But you must find that he is indeed the Son of God, or God incarnate.

All of these things the plaintiffs plead for lie in the person of Jesus Christ. They come to the plaintiffs through Jesus as the procuring cause of them. It is for his sake alone that these things are bestowed on them. If you find that he is who he claims to be, then you must also find that it is in his hands to give these things to them, and that he does give this life to all those who believe in him. Believing is not the cause of their enjoyment of this life, nor is it their title to it. Rather, it is the name, person, blood, and righteousness of Christ that causes them to be, and which grants the plaintiffs title to it. However, this faith or belief is the necessary, indeed the *only* way and means by which they may enjoy it. Therefore you must find that these signs and commandments, as described by this witness John, are true and accurate, even if they are not complete. And thus you must determine that John was an eyewitness to them. If you find that they are, then this will be sufficient to prove the plaintiffs' cause. You may additionally find that John wrote them down to encourage this faith in Christ, which is used in the enjoyment of the plaintiff's life, in, through, and from Jesus of Nazareth, who is called Christ.¹

Yeah, right. Anyway, this manuscript contained the testimony of one of his followers named John – no last name. It was like a freak show with the most outrageous things I'd ever heard. I kept looking at the Judge, sitting there high and mighty on his throne, expecting him to burst out laughing any moment. I kept wondering what law school he went to that he allowed the plaintiffs' case to be heard, much less considered. What were these people on, anyway? I wasn't comfortable with any of it. I kept glancing at the clock, but the hands never seemed to move, like I'd entered the Twilight Zone and was never coming out.

So the plaintiffs offered this signed manuscript into evidence. The guy who wrote it sounded like an otherwise rational, lucid old man. I don't know how to explain the conviction I heard in it, or the contagious peace it exuded. John wasn't ranting and raving in what he wrote. Quite the opposite. He laid out fact

¹ Adapted from John Gill's commentary on John 20:31.

after fact, observation after observation, pulling out events, conversations, and circumstances to prove his point that this man Jesus was the Son of God; that he was actually God in the flesh, if you can believe that. But he organized them in such a way, and explained them in such a way, as to drive home his point that this man Jesus bestowed his entire estate to those who believed he was actually who he claimed to be. Jesus actually died to obtain – I feel silly even using this phrase – he died to obtain eternal life and an inheritance that will not fade for those who believe in him.

I had this growing uneasiness all during the case that this man John was not a lunatic. He was a reasonable person who simply related his own experiences and knowledge. The man he spoke about, this benefactor Jesus, was as real and interesting as anyone I'd ever read about in history or literature. It was more than that. He seemed larger than life, and more real than any person who ever lived. It was the most intriguing and fascinating story I'd ever heard – I felt like I was getting pulled into this delusion. I struggled to maintain a rational footing.

After listening to the testimony, we gathered together in the jury room. The deliberations were heated at times as we reviewed the manuscript. The conversation was dominated by four of the jurors that I'll just call Cynical, Emotional, Trustful, and Gullible. Cynical argued against everything and doubted everything. Emotional identified with everything as if she was going through it all herself. Trustful believed everything, but not blindly. And Gullible was, well, gullible. He accepted everything without question. Everyone else seemed indifferent. I just sat back and listened to see who presented the most reasonable argument. I figured I'd take that one instead of trying to develop my own. It should have been a breeze – if everyone could agree that the whole thing was absurd. We began to examine the manuscript. Trustful picked an excerpt:

JESUS' CLAIMS ABOUT HIMSELF

Jn 10:24-25 So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly." Jesus answered them, "I told you, and you do not believe.

"Well, that says it all for me," Cynical interrupted. "That's the crux of it. This Jesus fella may have said it, but I don't believe it, any of it! And when did he tell them *anything* straight out?"

"Now wait just a minute!" Trustful retorted. "You seem to be admitting that the testimony these witnesses gave was true and factual. But you're also saying that the evidence they presented isn't persuasive for you. Is that what I hear you saying?"

"*Whoa!* Slow down guys," I said. "Let's keep it civil, OK?" Trustful said, "I quoted that section because Jesus is making the claim of his identity for himself, and John has written it down. I'm breaking this testimony down into three parts. All the places where Jesus makes claims for himself. All the places where others make claims about him. And all the events that tend to support those claims. Here's another place where he makes the claim for himself."

Jn 11:25-27 Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?" She said to him, "Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world."

Cynical interrupts him: "*Wait!* See? That's hearsay, right? It's John who's telling us what Jesus said. How do we know he actually said it? And he's talking about Martha's belief, not his own. How is that valid testimony? How can John know what Martha believed?"

Emotional chimed in, "But he sounds so sincere and accurate in what he's saying here. I feel like it's *true*." She was fairly gushing.

Cynical was clearly frustrated by her comment. "Listen, how you feel about it has nothing to do with whether it's true. We're not interested in your impressions or your emotional reactions. All we want is the *facts!*" Tears began to well up in Emotional's eyes.

"Hey! Back off." Gullible rushed to her defense. She's entitled to her opinion, just like the rest of us. I feel like flying saucers are real. I don't need to see them for myself. I found plenty of evidence on the Internet to convince me that they're out there right now..."

Trustful smiled. "Let's not get off track here. John was not testifying to the truth of what Martha was saying. He wasn't trying to prove that what she said was in fact true. But John was an eye-witness to the fact that she said it, and to the fact that Jesus said it. And that's not hearsay. You can ask the Judge if you don't believe me. John is offering into evidence what he himself saw and heard. And what he heard was the *fact* that Martha declared her belief in Jesus as the Christ."

"Good point," I said. "Can we continue now? Give us a couple more examples of Jesus' claims about himself."

"NO! Not yet!" Cynical wasn't going to let it go. He refused to accept John's account as eyewitness testimony. He wanted to impeach the plaintiffs' witness. "Who is this guy John anyway? I mean, who's to say he didn't make this all up to make himself a buck? You've got guys like Mohammed and that Mormon guy, Joseph Smith. They gave their own "testimonies" of the truth, didn't they? What makes this guy John any different? These folks show up all the time with their wild claims."

That was too much for Gullible to take. "Why can't they all be true? It's kind o' like that dimensional thing with string theory where we all live in our own reality, our little dimension sort of. Truth is whatever we believe, isn't it? So John's truth, from his point of view, is true. And if I choose to accept it, then it's true from my point of view as well. See?"

Three of us had puzzled looks on our faces. But Emotional agreed with Gullible. "I just love the idea of that; then we wouldn't have to fight about it. We could learn to love one another for who we are; we could affirm each other. We could try to see everything from the other person's point of view, just like Gullible is describing it. We need to be more tolerant and see things the way others see them. Can't we continue with that in mind?" She smiled that winsome smile of hers, with that puppy-dog look that we didn't have the heart to challenge.

Trustful was the first to speak. "Well, I guess the idea is nice. But truth is an exclusive thing. If I say something is completely black and someone else says it's completely white, then one or the other of us is wrong, or maybe one of us is mistaken. We all agree that black means one thing and white means another. Something has to match our definition of black, or else it isn't black. So either John is describing what happened, or he isn't. If he was hallucinating, I suppose it may have been accurate from his standpoint, but then no one else would have seen or heard what John saw and heard. And that's what we're trying to get at."

Cynical lit up. "Yeah! That's it! Truth isn't whatever we think it is. It exists independently of our perception of it." Gullible's eyes glazed over.

Trustful explained it more carefully. "Cynical is right. For example, color exists regardless of our perception of it. Each color of the rainbow has a unique wavelength. And that wavelength exists even if a blind man cannot physically see it. If he is told that something is red by someone who is not color-blind, then he must trust that what he is being told is true, that the color being described is accurate. Someone other than himself is literally giving him eyewitness testimony. That's what John is doing. We can't be where John was, and certainly not *when* he was there; but he recorded what he saw so we'd know."

Cynic continued his campaign. "Right. That's true. But what I'm saying is that we need corroborating testimony. We can't just take John's word for it. Maybe he was mistaken, like you said. Maybe he was just

telling a good story that somebody else thought was real; you know, like that *War of the Worlds* thing on the radio in the 30's that freaked everybody out because they thought it was true..."

He had a point. "This manuscript isn't the only testimony we have," Emotional said, bringing up her own point. "Remember the historian they put on the stand?" Cynical said the guy bored him to tears, so he stopped listening. I could identify with that. I had a hard time staying awake myself.

Emotional remembered what the historian said. She was fascinated by it all, and could have listened to him for days. He had those wonderful eyes, she said, and such a deep soothing voice. She recalled that John was only one of twelve followers of Christ. The one who betrayed Jesus at the end committed suicide out of guilt. "Can you imagine??" she asked. Ten others were martyred for refusing to deny the events or the identity of Christ. John himself had been imprisoned, *boiled in oil* – and he still *lived!* "Isn't that just the most remarkable thing? And then that emperor Nerva let him off the island of Patmos to write his memoirs. What a nice gesture."

We all agreed that it was unlikely that these men went to their graves for a lie, or that John suffered as he did for a fictitious tale. More than that, there were testimonies by three other followers that largely matched John's. If anything, they were more detailed, but with fewer explanations. So even Cynical conceded that John's account was probably trustworthy. But he wanted to know whether the evidence was sufficient to prove the claims? We returned to Jesus' claims for himself. We found that he referred to God as his father 37 times. There were 8 direct references to fulfilling prophecy, and at least 6 indirect ones. Then there were the outlandish claims he made as to why he came, and what he'd do. He said he testified about himself, and had his Father's testimony to back it up; He claimed the Bible was written about him, and the prophets spoke of him.

Trustful recited a number of them:

Jn 4:13-14, 25-26 Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty forever. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life." The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ). When he comes, he will tell us all things." Jesus said to her, "I who speak to you am he."

Joh 5:17, 21-23 But Jesus answered them, "My Father is working until now, and I am working." For as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom he will. The Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son, just as they honor the Father.

Jn 5:36 But the testimony that I have is greater than that of John. For the works that the Father has given me to accomplish, the very works that I am doing, bear witness about me that the Father has sent me.

Jn 5:39-40 You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life.

Jn 6:35-40 Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst. But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe. All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out. For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me: that I should lose none of all he has given me, but raise them up on the last day. For this is the will of my Father: that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day."

Jn 6:44 No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day.

Jn 7:16-17 So Jesus answered them, “My teaching is not mine, but his who sent me. If anyone’s will is to do God’s will, he will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own authority.

Jn 8:18 I am the one who bears witness about myself, and the Father who sent me bears witness about me.”

Jn 10:14-15 I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep.

Jn 10:17-18 For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father.”

Jn 10:27-30 My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand. I and the Father are one.”

Joh 14:7-9 “If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.” Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us.” Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’?”

Joh 14:20 In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.

Joh 18:33, 36, 37 So Pilate entered his headquarters again and called Jesus and said to him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world.” Then Pilate said to him, “So you are a king?” Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.”

“Do I need to go on? It seems abundantly clear that Jesus considered himself to be the Son of God with all these references to his Father. He also claimed to be one with the Father, and to have authority to raise people from the dead, including himself. He calls himself the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep.

Cynical, as usual, objected that Jesus might have been deluded. “Even if Jesus said all these things, it doesn’t make them true.”

Trustful asked, “But what if they *are* true? What if he wasn’t delusional? What if the prophecies that John cited were in fact fulfilled by Jesus? What are the odds of that happening? Most of that stuff was out of his control. He couldn’t possibly have manufactured the timing, events, and circumstances of those prophecies, could he?”

Gullible was hooked. “Wow! I never considered that. It’s like the impossible odds that Kennedy was assassinated by a lone gunman.” Emotional smiled patiently.

Cynical whined that coincidence doesn’t equate to truth, and mathematical probabilities don’t prove anything.

“Fine,” I said. “Let’s look at what other people claimed about him.”

OTHER PEOPLE’S CLAIMS ABOUT JESUS’ IDENTITY

Cynical leaped out of his chair. “What good will *this* do?? If his claims about himself don’t hold water, then what difference does it make that he managed to hoodwink a bunch of ignorant people into believing all that hooey about being God and Savior?”

Emotional quietly answered, “Most people can spot a phony. I’d like to think that if a number of people admired and listened to him, and believed in him, that is a positive reflection of his true character.”

“Jim Jones got hundreds of people to admire and listen to him,” Cynical rebutted angrily, “— *and* to drink his poisoned Kool-Aid. David Koresh did the same thing and got a bunch of people killed in Waco. They were both interesting and charismatic men. How does that prove they were sent from God, or that this Jesus was sent from God, or was God?”

Trustful said, “We aren’t talking about blind followers or folks getting hoodwinked here. He’s not taking their money or building himself a following or an empire. Quite the opposite. They wanted to make him king and he withdrew from them. He left everything and everyone he knew to fulfill his intercessory role. I can’t see this being an ego trip for him. These people had waited generations for the Messiah. They weren’t going to accept the first one to come along who claimed to be him. There was something exceptional about him, about what he knew, the things he said, and the things he did. I want to review what these cynical Jews thought about this man who challenged everything they believed in.”

Gullible agreed. “He was challenging the Religious System, man. He was like that secret agent guy on TV – the Prisoner, yeah, that was it.” Gullible started to hum the tune, “They’ve given you a number, and taken away your name... dum dah dum, da-da, dum dah dum, Secret – Agent man, secret...”

“That’s enough, Gullible.” Trustful said. “I think we get your point. Here’s a quick list I jotted down of some people John provides as additional testimony:”

- John himself calls Jesus the Word of God, the Creator, the only-begotten Son of God who existed before the foundations of the earth, who became flesh and dwelt among us.
- John the Baptist called him the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.
- Andrew (1:41) “We have found the Messiah!”
- Philip (1:45) “We have found the one Moses and the prophets wrote of”
- and Nathaniel (v49) “You are the Son of God, the King of Israel.”
- Peter says that only Jesus has the words of eternal life (6:68).
- The woman at the well asks, “Can this be the Christ?”
- The blind man says, “One thing I know: I was blind, but now I see.” “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” “Lord, I believe.”

Cynical, listening intently, says “There! The blind man believes in the Son of Man, not the Son of God. He doesn’t acknowledge him as the Christ.”

Trustful offers this tidbit: “That’s true, but you have to understand who the Son of Man actually is. John uses the term 12 times. In Joh 5:27 John relates this comment of Jesus: ‘*And [God] has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man.*’ What is it about the title *Son of Man* that conveys the authority to execute judgment on God’s behalf? It’s from the book of Ezekiel. Jesus is identifying himself as the prophet sent from God to prophesy against the shepherds of Israel. (Ez 34:2), and to prophesy that the breath of God will breathe on the slain that they might live (Ez 37:9-11). He is calling himself Messiah when he refers to himself as the Son of Man. He stands in our shoes, representing us to God – and when he represents God to us, he is the Son of God. He is both at the same time: fully God and fully Man.”

Emotional begins to sob quietly and turns away from us. “What’s up? What’s troubling you?” I asked. “He knew all the time that he would die for us,” she said in a whisper. “And he was rejected or abandoned by everyone he knew, even his disciples. And still he went to the cross for us! Why would he do that? Why

would he bother about us? What does he see in us that we cannot see? It's too wonderful to conceive of – *isn't it.*"

EVENTS AFFIRMING HIS AUTHORITY AND IDENTITY

We all went silent. Trustful said, "Let's move on to his works, folks. The miracles he performed testify to a power beyond anything we can understand. If they are true, and John says that they are, then they are clear indicators of his power and authority – one must assume such ability comes from God, as if to certify him to us. He said himself, John 10:38 "But if I do it, even though you do not believe me, believe the miracles, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me, and I in the Father."

- He turned water into wine and it instilled faith in his disciples.
- He healed the nobleman's son at Cana.
- He healed the lame man at the Pool of Bethesda.
- He walked on water,
- He fed the 5000 with five loaves and two fish.
- He healed the blind man.
- He raised Lazarus from the dead.
- He himself was raised from the dead.

"What more could be said about his power and authority?" asked Trustful.

"Well," said Cynical, "If you look at John 10:25-26, it says that even though he did miracles, there are those who still did not believe. In John 12:37, John writes, 'Even after Jesus had done all these miraculous signs in their presence, they still would not believe in him.' So the miracles didn't convince anybody on their own. Only those who were his sheep would accept them, and they were the very ones who didn't need to accept them."

"In fact, it says in John 12:38-40 This was to fulfill the word of Isaiah the prophet: 'Lord, who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?' For this reason they could not believe, because, as Isaiah says elsewhere: 'He has blinded their eyes and deadened their hearts, so they can neither see with their eyes, nor understand with their hearts, nor turn-and I would heal them.' So it looks to me", said Cynical, that if you're his, you believe, and if you're not, you don't. That begs the question, don't you think?"

I'd had enough. "Look," I said to them, "I'm convinced. I accept all the facts just as they were presented. Now let's take a vote, get this over with, and get out of here!"

Trustful was miffed at me. "This isn't a matter of acknowledging facts. It's not something you tack onto what you know, like agreeing that the sky is blue. What real difference does it make to you whether the sky is blue or green? What difference would it make to that blind man we were talking about?"

"His disciples didn't really believe he was the Son of God, despite all their affirmations to the contrary. They didn't understand what the cross was for. That's why everyone but John fled. Philip didn't grasp that Jesus was not just the Son, but the embodiment of the Father. He didn't see that God had come to abide with his people. None of them expected the resurrection, or they wouldn't have been shocked by Mary's claim that the tomb was empty. They didn't finally believe it, embrace it, or *act* on it, until Christ rose from the dead and personally appeared to them. That's why Jesus said to Thomas, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet have believed."

Trustful asked me pointedly, "How has any of this changed *your* life?" "There's only one way to prove your supposed conviction about the facts and the extent of your belief. It's in your visible response to them, your commitment to the person of Jesus Christ, your pledge of fidelity to him, and your reliance on his promises that were sealed on the cross, proven and applied to believers by his resurrection. What do *you* say? Who do *you* say he is? What do *you* believe? What do you offer in your own defense to the

charge of unbelief, the one thing that's keeping *you* from this same inheritance that the plaintiffs are asking for?"

As I sat there in bewilderment, I realized that this Jesus of Nazareth had never been on trial at all – I was the one who had been on trial, sitting in the "hot seat" under his steady gaze. My answer to this question of his identity would make all the difference to me. It would reveal my own identity in the end, and my answer would have eternal implications. This cry of my soul, deep calling to deep, would reach even to the Throne of God where either mercy or death awaited me. "**But who do you say I am?**" What shall I say to him? *How* shall I answer? What is it that I personally, *truly* believe?

I called for the Bailiff and asked to see the Judge. As I stood before him, I said, "I believe that I too am an heir, like these other plaintiffs, your Honor. May I join their suit and be relieved of jury duty?"

The Judge smiled: "You've been waiting for this moment all your life, haven't you son?"

"Yes, yes sir." I stammered, head bent – I had this curious mixture of shame and delight in my soul, of being completely despondent, and yet strangely free. I was filled with limitless hope. I looked up, and as I caught sight of the Judge's face, I began to grin.

"Then step forward my child. Before I relieve you of your jury duty, how do you find for the plaintiffs' cause?"

"I find that John's testimony is true and credible evidence, your honor. Jesus of Nazareth is who he claims to be: the Christ, the Son of God. He has the authority and the power to bestow on these plaintiffs all the rights for which they plead, and for which I plead as well. I believe that his atonement was sufficient to satisfy the justice of God, and to cover all my sins, freeing me of the penalty of death which I was obligated to pay. Jesus is my King, my Lord, my God, my Redeemer, my Savior, and my Friend. I pledge my life, my fortune, and my God-given graces to the cause of Christ, and to this ministry of reconciliation."

"Then," said the Judge, "I find in the case before me that you are now rightfully joined in this suit as a beneficiary and heir to the kingdom of God. You are a co-heir with Christ, with all the benefits that accrue to you in, by, and through Christ. You are hereby given the Spirit of Christ, without whom you have not Christ. You are forgiven and relieved of your debt. Therefore, go and sin no more.

"*Prove* this faith you have professed before God and men by the life you live, and by the witness you give. Proclaim this Gospel to the nations, discipling them in the name, authority, and power of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Teach them to obey all that Christ has commanded, and which he has exemplified to you, as evidenced by his Word alone. You are now free to leave; but understand that on those days and times of my choosing, I will call upon you to witness to what you have seen and heard here this day. Do you understand?"

"Yes your honor!" I couldn't stop grinning, and then I started to laugh with glee. I guess the fifty bucks a day and time away was worth it in the end, because nothing was ever going to be the same.