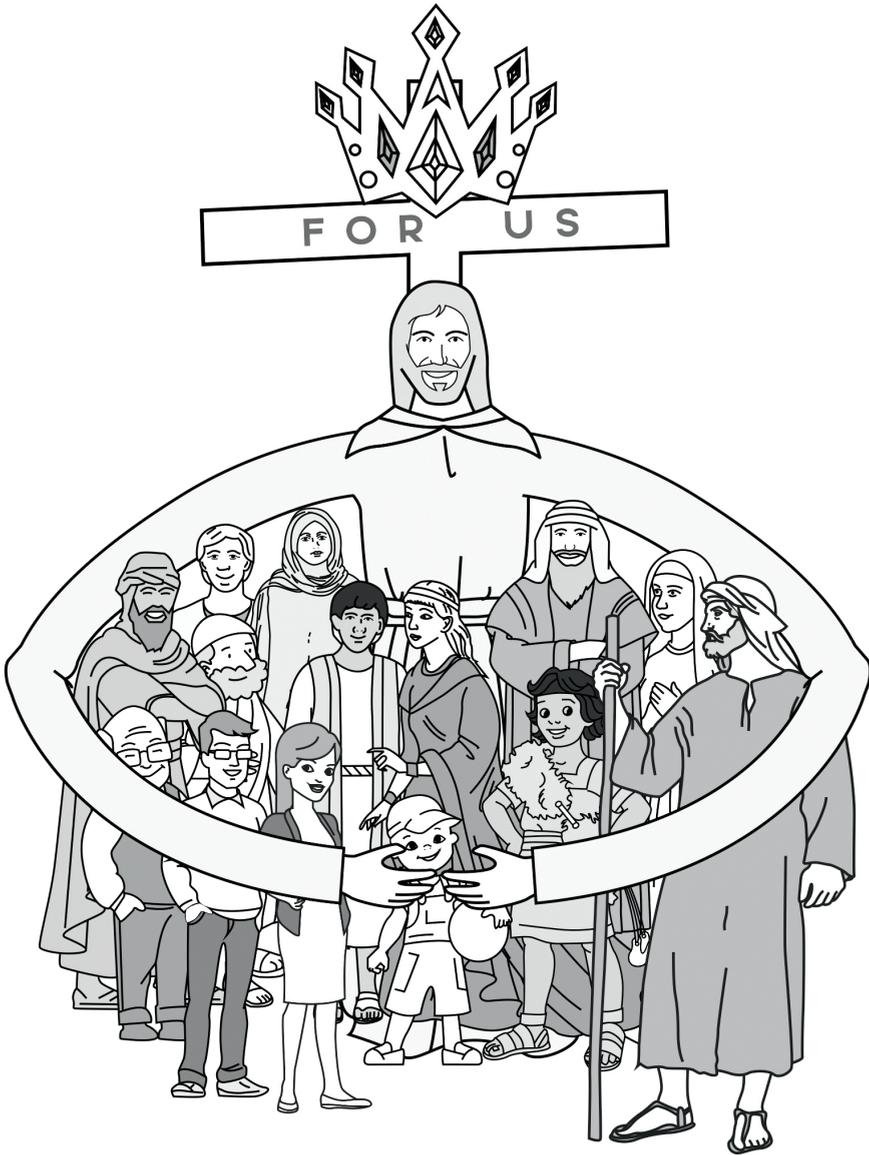


PLEASE, COME HOME



PLEASE, COME HOME

An Evangelical Study of the Gospel of John the Evangelist

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Editing: Annette LaPlaca

Book design: Yuet Chan

Cover design: Patrick Bickersteth

ISBN: 978-1-7751189-2-3

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Acknowledgments

As a lay Christian I look up to “professionals” whose expertise in the theology of our Scriptures and biblical topics is more extensive and deeper than mine. So I borrowed shamelessly from a number of commentary sources and live presentations. Consequently many will likely recognize their ideas or statements in this study. I did not keep track of all the books, Internet sites and sermons reflected in this study but I need to acknowledge my main go-to sources.

I offer immense gratitude for the cost-free availability of the Bible Hub, an online Bible study suite. Its comprehensive and multifaceted levels of biblical, theological, pastoral, devotional, patristic literature; its multilingual offerings; the multiplicity of Bible versions and concordances; verse-by-verse parallels of a variety of expositional and analytical sources including biblical Hebrew and Greek texts; its accessibility and user friendliness; and much more make this indispensable tool a hugely invaluable resource.

Online resources from Dr. Bob Utley, Chuck Missler, and Fr. Kenneth Bachofsky provided theological content, inspiration, and perspective. My indebtedness to these individuals and electronic services is unbounded. I thank them for directing me and opening my eyes to enriching truths.

Holy Spirit is my greatest hero, confidant, and teacher. I thank the Lord for prolonging my life and allowing me to offer this ministry of faith to the world to his glory. I offer overflowing gratitude to my Lord, Infallible Guide, All-Sufficient Provider, Preserver, and Maker.

Preface

The Gospel of Believing

The fourth Gospel, the fourth book of the New Testament, stands apart from the three synoptic Gospels that precede it. While Matthew seems to offer a description of *who* Jesus is, Mark chronicles *how* Jesus worked, and Luke seems to focus on simply recording *what* Jesus did, John's focus is *why*: Why did God through Jesus come into the world to die?

John also continually asks, "Do you believe this?" Believing is more than simply mentally adopting or accepting something as if it exists in the real world; it means to have confidence mentally and emotionally that the presentation of this person and these events are authentic. This kind of believing compels the reader, observer, or listener to agree!

The answer behind John's question, *Why-did-Jesus-come?* is that the gospel (the good news) is actually a love story. The Lord himself will shed his light so you will understand the essential truths communicated by John about why Jesus came into the world. See whether you agree after going through this Commentary.

It probably needs to be clarified that the word "Evangelical" to describe this work is not a reference to any Evangelical Movement; rather it is used in the general sense of growing a faith in Jesus. You will want to keep a copy of the book of John close at hand as you work through this study, beginning each section of this guide by reading the passage from the Bible (also readily available online) first. For God's glory and your own enrichment, as you proceed respond to John's question: *Do you believe this?*

Introduction

Authentic Theological Biography

I affirm that the whole Book of Books (the Bible) is an integrated unity, with every word God-breathed and intended to determine, inform, and nurture my faith (2 Timothy 3:16). The sixty-six books of the Bible are all different, and John's Gospel is distinctively so.

Because of its marked differences from the three synoptic Gospels, the Gospel of John has sometimes been described as a "creative reinterpretation" of the original history of Christ's ministry. By God's grace, these arguments lack credibility to deprive Christians across the centuries of the spiritual value of John's teaching. This authentic, unique Gospel provides a captivating picture of God's boundless love that caused him to sacrifice His Son to bring about reconciliation with us.

Neither John nor the other Gospel writers went around with Jesus carrying recording devices! Naturally they would remember and record things differently when these New Testament books were written, most of them many years after the death of Jesus. John's Gospel was written in John's very old age probably about ninety years after Christ lived on earth and as many as fifty years later than the other Gospels were written. If John wrote the Gospel after his Patmos experience, described in the last Book in the Bible, when he received visions of Christ in heaven, this would account for the book's distinctive emphasis on the divinity and majesty of Christ and give the work its strong spiritual flavor. Just as the whole Bible is a theological rather than a secular history of God's love relationship with His creation, John's work is also a theological history. These religious accounts however are rooted in true historical events.

As such in recording his theological history, John organizes his teaching about Christ's life around theological points more than as a blow-by-blow, real-time chronology. Also it is to be noted that when John introduces a question or statement from "the people" or "the crowd" (as do the other Gospel writers) most likely, he is remembering and extrapolating typical comments and sentiments of the public reaction to Jesus' statements and actions.

Christians can depend on the historical authenticity of John's Gospel as a trustworthy, factual account of their Savior's life. Jesus *is* indeed the Son

of God who turned water into wine, who really brought back to life a man dead for four days, who actually fed at least 5000 people out of fives loaves of bread and two fish, and who gave sight to a man born blind. The truth of these accounts makes us understand and believe Paul when he writes: "... that same God Who gives life to the dead and calls non-existent things into being" (Romans 4:17).

Clearly St. John the Evangelist had a theological purpose for writing his Gospel: to convince readers that Jesus is the divine Son and Savior, a conviction that will lead them to a life with God (20:30-31). The Holy-Spirit-bound Evangelist undertook a task ordained by the triune God. As a full-time eye-witness who had a close relationship with Jesus and was present for almost all of the event's of Christ's ministry, John could have included inaccurate details in this story, for which he was a specifically picked messenger. But with the wisdom of age and by direct special revelation from the Holy Spirit, John was compelled to write his history of the Lord Jesus with a view to helping his readers *believe in the Savior*.

John the Evangelist told the historical and prophetic story of our salvation from start to finish. Undoubtedly he was pointedly commissioned, divinely equipped, and strategically positioned for historical authenticity, given his long life, closeness to Jesus for factual accuracy; and provided with deep spirituality. Moreover the works of the synoptic Gospel writers were also in circulation, which laid a foundation for John's selective account. These facts reveal a writer who couldn't invent a divine message. Therefore Saint John the Evangelist has left us with an authentic, excellent legacy of love, faith, and obedience direct from the Master!

The Prologue

John 1:1-18



For God's Glory and Our Salvation

John 1:1-18

John the Evangelist presents the essence of his whole Gospel in these first eighteen verses that make up a kind of prologue. He describes the path God laid out for the redemption of humanity through the Word, His Son, Jesus Christ, whose ministry was often rejected or reviled despite powerful evidence of his divinity.

This prologue affirms that this God-Man, who shares in his Father's divinity, accomplished the task of revealing his Father. His entire ministry on earth served to glorify both Father and Son in the simultaneous process of making salvation possible for believers and opening access to a life with God.

The Incarnation

In this theological Gospel, John focuses on what readers need to *believe* about Jesus. In keeping with that purpose, John does not begin with details of the birth of Jesus (as Matthew and Luke's Gospels do) but instead explains what Jesus' birth, the Incarnation, means as part of God's plan.

The word *incarnation* means taking on human flesh. God, who is Spirit, is "enfleshed" or embodied. In other words, God became a human being with a human body, the *Theanthropos*, or God-man. John describes Jesus as "the fullness of (completely) God and the fullness of (completely) man." When God took on flesh, he did not leave behind that which he was. Both parts of him are original, and the statement that he "humbled (or emptied) himself" or "made himself nothing" (Philippians 2:7) means he dispossessed himself of the right or power to exercise his divinity independently of God, preferring instead total obedience to God. The incarnation is one of the mysteries in the way God operates.

The incarnate Jesus became and is the basis of our salvation, the Messiah, the Anointed One, or the Christ ("Christ" is not like a family name but a title that means "Messiah"). God always intended to dwell with man; this was part of his plan from before creation but man allowed Satan to cause their estrangement by introducing sin.

The Origin of Time

The first words of John's Gospel *In the beginning* echo the first words of the book of Genesis, which goes on to describe how God created everything out of nothing. Those words "in the beginning" demonstrate that time itself began when God created it. Before that, there was no measurable space or time and as well intelligibility and meaning had no measure.

Even the most strident opponents of the scriptural Christian claim that God created the universe and everything within it, seem to acknowledge that the universe has to have a beginning, from which earth began and time could be reckoned. Stephen Hawking, a leading proponent of the Big Bang theory, has argued: "Events before the Big Bang are simply not defined, because there's no way one could measure what happened at them." (Stephen Hawking website: <http://www.hawking.org.uk/the-beginning-of-time.html>) With these words Hawking is declaring science's inability to define events prior to the Big Bang because it cannot define anything it cannot observe and measure. In other words, what happened before scientific observation was possible lies beyond the scope of scientific inquiry. Christianity on the other hand asserts on the basis of faith that God who Himself is outside of time, created the universe and time along with it.

John's telling of the life story of Jesus conveys this crucial truth: that Jesus was God from the beginning of everything! He did not *become* God (divine) at some point in time. So the real starting point of the life story of Jesus is before the world even began! With those words "In the beginning," John ties together Jesus' Ministry with God's original plan, to create a people who will have everlasting life in God's Kingdom.

The Word

The Word (*logos* in Greek) is a divine title with special significance. In English, we think of the term *word* as a unit of language, consisting of spoken sounds or their written representation, used to express meaning. The Greek language has more terms that mean *word*. In this context, *logos* expresses the *principal* thought or expression and the One that reveals the intended, essential message. John presents Jesus as the *logos*, or the love message of the Father. As *logos*, Jesus reveals the essence of the Father. Through the life and words of Christ we learn who God is (John 14:9-13).

John makes sure his readers understand that God and Jesus co-existed from the beginning (1:2), and that both Jesus and the Father are God (Romans 9:5, Hebrews 1:8). Jesus was with God and he *was* God—this “was” is not past tense in Greek but an imperfect tense that signifies continuation. Jesus was and still is God! The Triune God is eternal (always there), and so is His Word.

Jesus was an integral part of the creation process (1:3). He was the means and the essence of God’s spoken Word that made creation occur. The apostle Paul reiterates this same truth (Colossians 1:16-17), adding that God also “sustains” creation (keeps it going; see also Hebrews 1:2-3).

Life

Because he has in himself the creative power of God, Jesus is life itself, the embodiment of life and of God, the source of all life (1:4). Jesus even describes himself as “life,” saying, “I am the resurrection and the life” (11:25, 14:6). “Life” (“zoay” in Greek) in John is both earthly, biological life and the spiritual Life or Eternal Life that God gives (11:25, 14:6).

Light

Scripture refers to Jesus as the Light of the World in more than one place, so it’s no surprise that John incorporates this important point here. Creation points out that God is the source of light. The sun, which God created, gives earth the possibility to sustain life (Psalm 19:6) and it is the source of all natural light. Jesus is Light, though Uncreated Light, with the purpose of sustaining our minds. Light is consistently associated with a characterization of God’s Presence—for example God’s Glory is portrayed as light in the burning bush (Exodus 3:2) and Moses’ face shone with the intensity of divine illumination after he met with God (Exodus 34:29). John portrays Christ as the constant and sufficient spiritual illuminant for humankind, by which God will implant wisdom in our minds to guide everything in life. John writes about Jesus as the Light again and again throughout this Gospel (3:19, 8:12, 9:5, 12:46; see also Matthew 5:15-16).

The Light penetrated (came into) our spiritually dark world, but the world did not comprehend or apprehend it (1:5). The Light still shines in a world that needs it desperately and for the most part continues to misunderstand

the purpose or even reality of the Light. John seems to say that God's intention for His new creation was to include everyone, even though many (including his own people, the Jews) would fail to recognize Jesus as the source of true and needed information (enlightenment) about God and therefore reject him. This aspect of the prologue also parallels the original Creation story, in which the ones God created rejected obedience to God. The Light will play its necessary and crucial role through to the end of the story. Because of the Light of Christ, the darkness of evil will not win (15:33).

Just as the first created people chose to obey God or not, all people can choose to seek the light or stay in darkness. All through his Gospel, John uses the images of Light and darkness to illustrate the tension or contrasting values between the limitations of what the world offers and the freedom of being under God's all-powerful and all-knowing direction and loving guidance. If only more people would seek the Light! And it's a choice anyone can make, even right now. Please get ready to choose to accept Christ. You have nothing to lose. Rejecting Him is risky beyond your present comprehension.

John the Baptist Prepares the Way

God knew we needed to be prepared to accept Jesus as the source of intimate knowledge about God and so sent John the Baptist ahead of Jesus to set the stage for Christ's work to begin (1:6). John the Baptist explained the nature of the work Jesus would come to perform and prepared the hearts of people to understand the type of Kingdom Jesus would establish. John the Baptist was a trustworthy, expert witness on Christ's behalf (1:7-8). We learn elsewhere he was so effective that the temple rulers grew afraid of the crowd who believed John's teaching about Christ (Matthew 21:25-26, Mark 11:30-32, Luke 20:4-6). Some who believed that John's message was authentic and divine still rejected the identical claim by Jesus himself. John was a truly committed witness, who stood by his testimony even in the face of death. He was a bold witness, brave enough to confront Herod the king about his sinful behavior (Matthew 14:1-5). Herod continued to live deeply in the dark, even though John showed the way to the True Light who would illuminate humankind. John faithfully presented Jesus, The True Light.

So John the Evangelist features John the Baptist that through him we might all *believe* (1:7). John keeps bringing his readers back to the point of his Gospel, which is that we might *believe* in the One whom God has sent.

In the World

The Creator bridged the gap to his created people by giving Jesus the same humanity in this world, as us (1:10). John points out the great irony that though Christ's connection and likeness with us should be obvious, that natural link through Creation doesn't lead to immediate recognition. The world did not recognize him (*recognize* in the sense of "know," which in the Greek comes from *ginosko*, meaning to have knowledge from personal experience). The people didn't eagerly receive what he was offering because they did not know him (1:11). This is still true today of many around us and in the world at large.

John is again making clear the choice we have in the presence of God—to accept or reject him. All creation is always in the presence of God, but not everyone acknowledges or realizes that truth. So as we come to understand we are in the presence of God, even by only recognizing that God exists, we make a decision to accept or reject him. A decision to accept Him brings us into the Light; rejection of God already sets judgment in motion against us.

According to John the Evangelist, the world has already been judged for choosing to live in darkness, but God—graciously and by grace—reinstates the original parent-child status to *all* who rightfully acknowledge his status (believe in his name, 1:12). Jesus the Messiah re-establishes the originally intended relationship, of intimate communion between believers and their God.

Jesus enables this reunion of people with God, rekindling an intimacy that was always part of God's plan. It was and is to be a spiritual event (1:13). When we respond by believing the gospel, we don't suddenly acquire divine characteristics, however. We are and continue to be error-prone-works-in-progress. But the indwelling of God's Spirit brings us close to the divine presence as a result of our confession of faith in Christ because of Jesus' Work of reconciliation. And John the Baptist testified to that fact about Jesus and his role (1:29-34)

Through the Incarnation Jesus made it possible for humans to see God's glory again (1:14). The Old Testament tells of times when God's people glimpsed his glory--reflected on Moses' face, in the Tabernacle, and in the Temple, which is symbolic of his very presence. But John shows that Jesus is not a shadow-reflection of God or just another person; he is fully God while "tabernacled" with us on earth. In other words just as the tabernacle used to be how God lived among his people during their nomadic years so now, in

Jesus, he has “pitched” himself like a tabernacle-tent among the Jews. Jesus’ representation of God’s Glory is not like a copy of the original; he is the authentic and full version of which there can be the only one of its kind.

Full of Grace and Truth

When Jesus came to live among us he brought grace (salvation) and truth (trustworthy knowledge about God, which includes all forms of wisdom and knowledge). God came to live among us so we can learn who he is by experiencing him in person and intimately. Christ’s coming introduced a shattering new dimension in theological understanding! Throughout the histories of the Old Testament, up until John the Baptist’s introduction of Jesus, God was non-human and the One on whose face no one could look and survive. Jesus came, that baby born in Bethlehem, in full human form ready to embark on the task of our Salvation.

God intends the world to return to him by his grace alone. We are saved by grace (Ephesians 2:8-9) and empowered because of it (1Corinthians 15:10). Jesus the Messiah represents the moral character of God, shown most clearly in his total righteousness, which qualified him to be our Redeemer (grace-giver). From the moment of Jesus’ birth, he displayed God the Father’s grace and truth. In John’s words *grace* and *truth* (love and justice) residing in Jesus together with his being born a human being, capture the combination of the human nature and the divine nature co-existing in the Person of Christ. He goes beyond the birth stories of the other Gospels, which tell us what his birth signified to provide a theological narration of what was actually happening when Jesus was born. Though different in theological purpose John’s portrayal leaves no doubt that Jesus is the same Savior, Emmanuel, God with us, God promised he would send to his people (Matthew 1:23; Isaiah 7:14).

John the Baptist’s Testimony

The central importance of Jesus is at the forefront of John the Baptist’s testimony (1:15), which is both spiritual (based on prophecy) and contemporary (happening as he testifies. The Greek word *marturei* for “testify” is present tense). This testimony carries even more weight, as John the Baptist is Jesus’ first cousin, a close family relationship that (in the milieu of some readers who knew) would bring with it insider’s information. A question therefore

arises: Why then did John the Baptist send messengers from prison to Jesus? (Matthew 11:3; Luke 7:19) Though likely hearing a lot about his spiritually endowed cousin, John was raised in Judea while Jesus lived in Galilee and probably never saw Jesus for many years since they became of age; and recognized him at the Jordan baptism only by divine instruction.

From the text (Matthew 11:4-5; Luke 7:22) Jesus does not appear to react to John's questioning as doubting, especially if his response to Thomas is any indication. He answered John as someone needing clarification or assurance. Therefore it seems John is asking: "Are the stories about the person I heralded and baptized or is there a someone else yet to display the Messianic powers we expect?" Jesus' answer points to the actions John's disciples were actually witnessing as evidence of his fulfillment of Messianic Scripture. He seems to further encourage John (Matthew 11:6; Luke 7:23) to remember the blessing of not losing faith (probably because of his circumstances) if Jesus does not appear to be measuring up to expectations. The Lord encourages us too, today, to hold on to our faith despite apparent disappointments. He is indeed the biblical Messiah acting on our behalf whether or not we understand how.

The text however highlights Jesus as the only authentic source of information about God, being in the closest possible relationship with him and also being himself the Word of God (1:16-18). The law, given by Moses, was a temporary measure to prepare believers for the permanent and more typical or representative expression of God's grace, which Jesus Christ revealed (1:17). God brought grace and truth into the world through Jesus Christ because to have dealt with sin through truth alone meant none would have survived.



Your Response to God's Word

1. John writes that the world was created *by* or *through* the Word (Jesus). What do you think that means?
2. At Creation, God said, "Let there be light." Do you think this was simply material light, or also a metaphor for his moral character—a provision for others to "see" everything in the right way? How might that make his righteousness a starting point, or basis, for all created things? Explore this idea by reading John 1:4-5, Psalm 119:105, and Proverbs 6:23.
3. How would you characterize human "blindness" apart from God's light?

Pray

- Acknowledge God in Christ as the Creator of everything created, to whom you are grateful for your life and for making you his spiritual child. Thank him for creating time and meaning out of nothing.
- Thank God for the special grace of his Light, which allows us to see the truth about him.
- Ask God to help you receive his grace and truth, as evidenced in the Word, Jesus, his Son.

The Book of Signs

John 1:19–12:51



Come and See

John 1:19-51

John lays out his most important point in his Prologue—that Jesus is God, the Son of God, and Savior. In keeping with his purpose of helping his readers to believe that Jesus is the full representation of God’s grace and truth, meant to be the one to re-establish intimacy between God and his people, John begins to elaborate and lay out convincing proofs.

This section of John’s Gospel is called the Book of Signs because John, unlike the other Gospel writers, includes only seven examples of Jesus’ miracles—ones that convey the theological implications he considers most important for those who need to receive God’s grace and truth by believing.

There were those, from the start, who opposed Jesus’ ministry, beginning with the Jewish authorities who became suspicious about John the Baptist’s message (1:19-24). When John writes about “the Jews”, he usually means the Jewish leaders who were opponents of Jesus—those who were particularly offended when Jesus identified himself as the Messiah.

Messiah

The Jews had been waiting for the Messiah, but they did not recognize Jesus when he came.

The concept of Messiah is first encountered in the Old Testament. Based on an accepted notion that God intended a special representative, one after his own heart, to rule over his people. God’s people (the Jews) were told the Messiah, or *Christ*, would be a prophet like Moses (Deuteronomy 18:17-19), part of the eternal priesthood of Melchizedek (Genesis 14:18-20; Hebrews 5:10), and holding the everlasting kingship as a descendant of David (2 Samuel 7:12-13). *Messiah* means “the anointed one”; and recipients of anointing are prophets, priests, and kings in the Old Testament (for example Exodus 30:30-33, 40:12-16, 1 Samuel 10:1; 2 Samuel; 1:13-14; 1 Kings 1:32-35, 19:15-16).

God’s chosen Messiah would look after his people and bring them salvation (Isaiah 9:6-7, Jeremiah 23:5-6, Micah 5:2). Messianic activities were sometimes seen as the result of God’s direct involvement, for example the

coming of good times when Israel will enjoy prosperity and total safety (Ezekiel 34).

In the books of the New Testament, Jesus is identified as this Messiah. Simeon and Anna expected and recognized the baby Jesus as the Messiah (Luke 2:25-38). And Jesus confirms these prophecies in his highly symbolic Triumphal Entry, foreshadowed in Psalm 118:25-27, Zachariah 9:9 and predicted in Daniel 9:25. As reliable interpretations have concluded, the Messiah in Daniel's prediction, was to be revealed (a reference to this occasion of Jesus' Triumphal Entry) a short while before He would be executed. Following this the temple would be destroyed and then He would come back to life to rule – an exact sequence of the actual events predicted about 500 years before Christ! Remarkable! It is even claimed that this prophecy accurately dated the time Jesus would be riding the donkey into Jerusalem.

In this Gospel, John the Evangelist takes care to present the statements and actions of Jesus that will help his readers recognize that he is God's Son and Messiah, who shares a divine identity with his Father (1:18).

John shows the Jewish religious leaders as relentless in their opposition to Jesus for making such a claim. In their official capacity as caretakers of the religious status quo, they were expected to give answers for many theological situations. So they took a keen interest in the growing popularity of the teaching of John the Baptist— whose teaching focused on the coming of the Messiah.

These religious leaders knew the scriptures. The book of Malachi mentions that God would send Elijah before the coming of the Messiah (Malachi 4:5). The description of Elijah (2 Kings 1:8) was similar to that of John the Baptist (Matthew 3:4; Mark. 1:6). The prophet Elijah preached about repentance and the need to return to God despite the obvious power of evil rulers Jezebel and Ahab over the practice of their faith. The people seemed to have no savior, and their God seemed all but silent or powerless against the tyranny of Baal zealots. But Elijah called the people of Israel back to God in an inspirational revival. Elijah was taken up into heaven without actually dying (2 Kings 2:11), so the Jews believed that this Elijah would someday return to herald the coming of the Messiah.

With that well-known prophecy that Elijah was to precede the coming Messiah, it's no wonder people associated John the Baptist with Elijah when he entered the scene with an inspirational message of an imminent Messianic age. But John the Baptist rightly, and with humility, denied that he was the actual Elijah (1:20).

Though he knew, of course, that he was not Elijah, the Baptist did identify himself with Isaiah's prophecy (Isaiah 40:3), which refers to a voice crying out in the wilderness to "prepare the way of the Lord". And though John does not identify himself with Elijah, Jesus *does*, confirming that John was the Elijah predicted in the Scriptures (Matthew 11:10, 14). Before the birth of John the Baptist, an angel told John's father, priest Zacharias, about John that "he shall go before Him in the spirit and power of Elias, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just; to make ready a people prepared for the Lord" (Luke 1:17). This prophecy indicated that John the Baptist would be endowed with the same spirit God had put in Elijah to accomplish the ushering in of God's rule. John the Baptist was a kind of re-invented Elijah, not a reborn one.

We may see John's role of "preparing the way of the Lord" as similar to the job of those who went ahead along the road that royalty would travel, smoothing it for the king. In response to the Jewish leaders' question (1:22), John the Baptist explains his role using Scripture to reference God's plan of salvation. John the Evangelist includes this in his Gospel because God's plan for salvation is part of his evidence that Jesus is the Christ. John was baptizing in keeping with the Old Testament teaching that the Israelites would need to be cleansed through baptism to qualify to enter into God's Kingdom (1:25, Ezekiel 36:25, Zechariah 13:1). The Jewish leaders questioned John the Baptist's authority to baptize, which at that time was mainly for people who were converting to Judaism. If John the Baptist wasn't the Messiah himself, or Elijah, or the prophet like Moses, by what Scriptural authority was he baptizing?

True to his role of pointing others to Jesus, John immediately points to the baptism that would come through his Master, humbly comparing himself to the class of lowly servants who take off the sandals of important guests to wash their feet (1:26-27). When John refers to Jesus as one standing "among you" whom "you don't know", he means that these leaders have not yet encountered the true Messiah who was already present.

The Lamb of God

The role of the sacrificial lamb in Israelite religious history began when God provided a ram for Abraham to sacrifice to Him instead of killing his son Isaac. Abraham called that place "Jehovah Jireh," which means "God who

provides.” It seems that Golgotha, where centuries later God would provide the ultimate substitute sacrifice for sin, is the same location.

The Jewish people escaped from Egypt when the Angel of Death passed over all of Egypt, killing all firstborn children as punishment for Pharaoh not letting them go. God instructed his people to daub the blood of a lamb on the top of the doorposts so the Angel of Death would pass over those dwellings, sparing their children. Celebrating this deliverance became a yearly feast, the Passover Feast, when lambs were sacrificed for the sins of the people.

God gave John the Baptist a prophetic understanding that Jesus would die a sacrificial death. John testifies to the miraculous event that followed his baptism of Jesus, when the Spirit descended from heaven. When he sees Jesus coming, he says, “Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.” The depiction of the Messiah led like a lamb to slaughter comes from the prophet Isaiah (53:7).

Jesus was here to take the place of the Passover Lamb. Jesus was the Messiah whose blood would be spilled for the forgiveness of sin, just as in Egypt the Passover Lamb’s was the means of delivering the firstborns from death. Jesus’ blood reconciles us with God or “atones” for all sin (makes amends for all acts of disobedience, every kind of wrongdoing).

It was at the time of Jesus’ baptism when John, who knew Jesus as his cousin, came to understand that Jesus was God’s long-promised Messiah (1:31). John had been preaching: “a baptism of repentance for the remission (forgiveness) of sins” (Mark. 1:4, Luke. 3:3). This water baptism prepared the way for Jesus’ more thorough or complete redemption. John the Baptist testifies that God told him the Spirit would descend on and remain on the Messiah, who would baptize with the Holy Spirit.

John the Evangelist includes this important scene as part of his agenda to help his readers believe in Jesus as the One whom God has sent. At this scene of Jesus’ baptism, the Trinity is present and active—with the Father speaking, the Holy Spirit coming to rest on His Son, Jesus. The Gospel writer provides the Baptist’s eyewitness evidence of God’s endorsement of Jesus as the Son of God. John makes sure his readers cannot miss the divine identity of Jesus. Perhaps to tell the Jewish leaders by what authority he baptizes, preaches and testifies to the Messiah, John the Baptist asserts that God is the one “who sent me” (1:33). In other words God gave him this truth about Jesus’ identity as the Messiah. The Evangelist could not have chosen a more authentic and powerful witness.

The Earliest Believers

John the Evangelist has prepared his Gospel with a focus on persuading his readers to believe. Right away he begins to record those who believed John the Baptist's testimony about Jesus and sought to follow the Messiah. Two of John the Baptist's disciples (providing the two or three witnesses required by law to confirm eyewitness testimony [Deuteronomy 17:6; 2 Corinthians 13:1]) immediately take the Baptist's word for it raising his single testimony to three. When they hear him say, "Behold, the Lamb of God," they begin to follow Jesus (1:35-37). John seems to emphasize the historical, experiential interaction of these believers with the person of Jesus. Their belief wasn't merely intellectual, but experiential. We are also being called upon to become disciples from our own experience with the Messiah.

John the Evangelist was very likely one of these first two who had been following John the Baptist until Jesus appeared. His testimony includes the time of day when he and Andrew left after spending their first day with Jesus (1:39). Here he may be reporting on the origin of his close relationship with Jesus. From this beginning, John spent close, intimate time with Jesus. Right from this start, these early believers identified Jesus as the Messiah. Andrew tells his brother to come and meet the Messiah (1:41). Soon after this, Jesus asks Philip to follow him and sends him to find Nathaniel. Philip tells Nathaniel that Jesus is the Messiah, the one who will fulfill the scriptural prophecies (1:45). Philip says Jesus is the one Moses wrote about (Deuteronomy 18:15). The news is out! It begins to travel and influence and draw people to Jesus. Eventually, Jesus' disciples would include two sets of brothers (Andrew and Peter, James and the Evangelist, John). Many of them were recruited in Judea, though they were from Galilee, and seven of the disciples were fishermen.

The fact that Jesus' ministry was taking root in the area of Galilee also fulfilled the prophetic prediction that Galilee would be the place to bless the world with the Messiah (Isaiah 9:1-7). Though born in Bethlehem of Judea, Jesus was actually from Nazareth, and Nathaniel (Bartholomew) immediately questions the worthiness of Nazareth as a place for the Messiah to be born. John the Evangelist, having started with Jesus' divine origin and nature, isn't afraid to record Jesus' human heritage. Nazareth was not famous and even had an unsavory ("ungodworthy") reputation. Nathaniel's doubt probably expressed a well-known bias and a stumbling block for Jewish believers to see Jesus as credible in the role of Messiah. But Philip tells Nathaniel, "Come

and see.” These early eyewitnesses came to know and believe from personal experience that Jesus was the Messiah.

It didn’t take long for Nathaniel to believe. Nathaniel responds to one indication of Jesus’ deity: omniscience (his knowledge that Philip had found Nathaniel under a fig tree). He does so with a strong, open affirmation that Jesus is the Son of God (1:49). Along with Nathaniel, we also recognize we are in the presence of the Son of God. Jesus is here to establish his divine Kingship. In recording this interaction the Evangelist confirms Jesus as the Son of God, Messiah, prophet and King of Israel. Later, a crowd tried to make Nathaniel’s declaration a political reality, which was not the divine plan (6:15f). Jesus presented himself as King (12:12f) and he affirmed Pilate’s conferment of Kingship on him (18:33-37), but his Kingdom was not the one that many expected.

Jesus promises Nathaniel that he will be an eyewitness, experiencing even stronger proofs that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God (1:50-51). His words about “angels of God ascending and descending” recall Jacob’s dream (Genesis 28:12). These angels will ascend and descend “upon the Son of Man.” John hints with a sense of mystery that we will learn that Jesus is the only way to Heaven (14:6).



Respond to God's Word

1. Consider all the ways the Holy Spirit was in action in this Chapter.
2. If Jesus is God do you think his baptism needed a special confirmation? If not why do you think it happened?
3. What information in this Chapter convinces you the most that Jesus is divine?

Pray

- Acknowledge God in Christ Who works in our lives through the Holy Spirit.
- Thank God for Jesus, whose ministry of Truth helps us see the true God and whose Grace gives us Eternal Life.
- Thank God for early eyewitnesses and all those who proclaim Christ as the divinely appointed Savior of the world. Ask for the strong desire and courage to testify to these truths in whatever way he directs you.
- Ask the Father to continue making you into a more authentic disciple and witness.

Jesus Acts with Authority

John 2

The synoptic Gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—tend to depict Jesus as the wonder-working Son of God, demonstrating the power of God by performing many miracles. John’s approach is much more theological, and he may realize that these other Gospels have already listed and delineated all the miracles of Jesus, so his readers would know about them. Instead, John uses only seven miracles as examples (not all of them found in the synoptic Gospels), and takes care to explain their meaning. Beyond demonstrating that Jesus exercised the power of God, these miracles served as important indicators, pointers toward Jesus’ identity as truly the Son and full representative of that powerful God.

Why did John choose only seven? It is likely because the number seven represents perfection in Jewish tradition.

According to John this miracle marks the beginning of the trail of evidence (or signs) that revealed Jesus’ divinity—at a wedding feast in Cana. Only the Gospel of John narrates this story, which is told in intimate, eye-witness detail.

The Importance of a Wedding

The text has recently described Jesus as leaving for Galilee (1:43). Three days later, Jesus is attending a wedding there (2:1-2). John uses the words *the third day*, which call to mind the story of Creation. The prologue had eloquently echoed the Creation story (“In the beginning”), and it’s probably not far-fetched that John the Evangelist, who continually incorporates symbolism and theology, is indicating to the reader that Jesus’ creation of wine is a noteworthy parallel to the original creation of vegetation on “the third day”.

In John’s narrative, Nathaniel has just declared that Jesus is the Son of God. Jesus had immediately affirmed the truth of Nathaniel’s words and predicted that Nathaniel would see greater proofs of Jesus’ divinity. Three days later, the miracles begin: “This beginning of miracles did Jesus in Cana of Galilee, and manifested forth his glory; and his disciples believed on him” (2:11).

With his purpose of helping readers believe, John begins to build his case

that Jesus is the Son of God who is to reveal God's glory on the cross—a time when the phrase *the third day* will again have significance. Even his use of the word *hour* (2:4) may be a subtle heads-up foreshadowing that pre-ordained occasion on the Cross, which forms the crux of his Gospel.

A wedding banquet was a major, seven-day feasting affair, a time of celebration and joy. Weddings were of great importance in Jewish culture, and this story seems to present the unmistakable significance of the biblical metaphor for the intimate relationship between God and his people. Many Old Testament narratives depict God as the groom, with Israel as his bride. Jesus uses the wedding symbol to address a variety of issues, and Paul uses it to represent Christ as the groom, with the Church becoming the “new Israel,” the bride. As recorded in the book of Revelation, John the Evangelist is instructed to write the actual words from God: “Blessed are they which are called unto (invited to) the marriage supper of the Lamb” (Revelation 1:19).

At this particular wedding, the wine has run out (2:3). The Jewish reader would recognize the allusion to prophecy, which according to Amos 9:13 states: “The days are coming,” during the era of the Messiah when there would be no shortage of wine. Wine symbolized the richness and sweetness of God's wisdom. This event at Cana is both historically actual (wedding guests without wine and the shame of it!) and symbolic (humankind in moral distress, lacking the richness and sweetness of God's wisdom). Jesus' first act of provision for God's people is in response to all these needs.

A Mother-and-Son Moment

Jesus' mother, Mary, is the one who brings the problem to the attention of her son. The Eastern Orthodox tradition extrapolates from this instance that, because of her position as the mother of God, Mary holds a special power of intercession with Christ on our behalf. In Orthodox and Catholic traditions, believers are therefore encouraged to pray to Mary to intercede with Jesus on their behalf.

Jesus' response to his mother's intervention, “My hour has not yet come,” indicates that she knew who Jesus was (God's son) and understood that he could command the elements of Creation. So she does not query Jesus' “protest”. The Gospel of Luke describes Mary as spiritually insightful, having “preserved the memory of all these things, and pondered them in her heart”

(Luke 2:19). She would not be surprised by her Son's powers. Accordingly in this intimate mother-son exchange, Mary addresses her son, knowing he can supply their need.

John the Evangelist does not show Mary acting with parental authority but in simple faith toward her divine Son by preparing the servants (God's servants, us) to receive God's gift. Her reminder to the servants to "do whatever he [Jesus] tells you to do" (2:5) also serves as a reminder to us, as Christ's servants. Jesus is not being rude or disrespectful but more likely light-hearted by using the term *Woman* to address his mother. He may be speaking in much the same way a grown son today would say, "Mother," with a slight inflection, as if to say, "Okay, if *you* say so." The angels used this same term for *woman* (in Greek, *gynai*) with Mary Magdalene at the tomb (20:13), and by Jesus after he was raised (20:15). Jesus uses the term on the cross, when he speaks to his mother and to his best friend John about adopting each other. He also calls the prostitute at Jacob's Well "Woman". It is a non-formal word that lends itself to a variety of social contexts.

The Bountiful Provider

Jesus remarks that his "hour" has not yet come, meaning it wasn't yet the moment for his role to change from wedding guest to being Messiah in charge. In other places in this Gospel, John the Evangelist uses this word "hour" or "time", in a number of theologically meaningful contexts in relation to Jesus (2:4; 4:21, 23; 5:25, 28; 7:30; 8:20; 12:23, 27; 13:1 and 17:1), often referring to times when he would be glorified (13:1; 17:1), which will come about through his suffering, death, resurrection, and ascension. Jesus understood his mother was asking him to save the occasion, but the saving hour for ultimate self-manifestation was not yet.

With the specificity of an eyewitness account, John mentions the number and capacity of the jars. Symbolism may be present here that the Judaic ceremony of purification for which the jars were used was incomplete or that as a process it was imperfect (that is, one short of the perfect number seven). Jesus would offer a new means of purification for acceptance into the Kingdom of God, so these jars would no longer be needed for that purpose. So the role of the jars at this banquet could be a way of also demonstrating God's provisional intent. For now these actual huge jars full of wine also represent a measure of divine largesse in the new Kingdom. Jesus represents a Bountiful

Provider, greater than the human host at this wedding event, and his action could be pointing to God the Redeemer-husband (Isaiah 54:5). The New Testament will also describe Jesus as the New Wine, the Wisdom of God, who is, and will teach, the truth about God. The feasts in John show Jesus as a fulfillment and replacement of the Old Testament festivals. As noted earlier the coming Messianic era symbolized by plentiful new wine would be a well-known predicted expectation (Amos 9:13; Jeremiah 31:12). The rich significance of this miracle did not escape his disciples. In awestruck response, John sums up this story with the comment that God chose Cana as the place to start demonstrating his plan for saving the world through Jesus' life and death. Because John interpreted this event within the motif of Jesus' Messianic glorification (2:11), we therefore have strong grounds for applying the symbols we perceive in the story.

The wine Jesus miraculously provided was of the best quality, the “good wine” (*kalon oinon*; 2:10). Though it was more common for inferior wine to be served later during the party, when the revelers' sense of taste may be less discriminating, Jesus' wine was served after the guests were already drunk.

We need to remember that John is telling a story of Jesus' first act of divine revelation and not about the virtue or vice in drinking wine. The Bible does mention wine in many places—as a gift of God (Psalm 104:14-15, Ecclesiastes 2:24; 3:12-13; 8:15; 9:7), as a part of the sacrificial system (Exodus 29:40; Leviticus 23:13; Numbers 15:1-10), as a social harm in excess (Genesis 9:20-21, Genesis 19:30-38; Proverbs 23:20-21), as a religious taboo (Leviticus 10:8-11), with warnings against drunkenness (Proverbs 20:1; 21:17; 23:29-35; 31:4-5, tongue in cheek, vss. 6-7; Romans 13:13; Galatians 5:19-21; Ephesians 5:18). Scriptures show Jesus providing and drinking wine (John 2:1-12; Matthew 11:19; Luke 7:34). The apostle Paul advocates responsibility rather than total abstinence (Romans 14:21; Ephesians 5:18; 1 Timothy 3:2-3, 8; 5:23, Titus 1:7; 2:3). So John isn't writing about the Messiah condoning excessive drunkenness, unconcerned about the warnings against it in scripture (see Warnings above and Isaiah 5:22; Habakkuk 2:4-5, 15); he mentions the timing (“till now”) to demonstrate that the wine Jesus provided was of such exquisite quality that even deadened palates at that late point could tell it was superior quality.

Clearly, drinking alcohol was not the issue; rather John's whole point in including the story of this miracle is that through it Jesus “*revealed his glory*” and that the disciples “*believed in him*” (2:11), which are the two main pillars of his Gospel Ministry. In secular language “glorify” means to honor with

praise, acclamation, admiration; to worship. In this Gospel, glorification is about Jesus revealing himself as God, our Savior, through specific actions, statements and events that will lead in the end to full revelation on the cross. This first miracle at the wedding in Cana caused his disciples to begin to put their faith in Jesus. Shouldn't we too begin to experience awestruck faith? Undoubtedly that is the reaction the Evangelist is expecting.

John finishes the story about the wedding at Cana, which demonstrated so clearly the power of Christ's divine nature, with a contrast of scenes showing Jesus' humanity. Jesus visits with his mother and brothers in ordinary family interaction (2:12), though this event was not a whim. The Greek word used (*diatribó*) means to rub hard, rub away; that is, to spend time – doing something on purpose, with a goal. John is writing a history of real-life events that did happen.

Jesus Cleanses the Temple

John moves on to describe Jesus' visit to Jerusalem during the Jewish festival of Passover. All Jewish men during Jesus' time would attend three feasts in Jerusalem (Deuteronomy 16:16): the Festival of Unleavened Bread, the Festival of Weeks, and the Festival of Tabernacles. John's Gospel mentions Jesus visiting Jerusalem four times (2:13, 5:1, 6:4, 19:14), usually during Passover, which may also refer to the Feasts of Unleavened Bread and Tabernacles lumped together with the Passover and collectively called "the Passover."

The other Gospel accounts put their depiction of Jesus clearing the Temple later in their narration, toward the end of Jesus' ministry. It could be that Jesus did this more than once. By reporting this one early in Jesus' ministry, the Evangelist presents a state of tension and confrontation between Jesus and the religious leaders occurring right from the beginning of his Ministry.

Though at other times John reports on Jesus' emotional state (in the story of Lazarus's raising, for example), John does not describe Jesus' actions in the Temple as angry. Like a parent who has full composure and self-control while communicating displeasure and discipline to a child caught in wrongdoing, Jesus' action seemed thought out and controlled and not impulsive (2:15-16). He takes the time to obtain and prepare a whip of cords, for example. Rather than acting in anger, Jesus was making a spiritual point and demonstrating his right to cleanse the Temple. Nothing about this undertaking represents a flaw in the character of Jesus.

Vendors and money exchangers were on the Temple site to serve visitors who needed to exchange the currency usually used outside to buy items inside the Temple, items required for sacrificial rituals. Roman money was not permitted in the Temple areas because it had pagan symbols on it. Yet many were desecrating the Temple by using it as a place for corrupt commercial gain.

That there was no attempt to resist or restrain Jesus during the fracas indicates that Jesus' authority was acknowledged, at least at some level, though his usual critics would question that authority. The disciples recognized the spiritual implications (rather than the emotionality) of Jesus' action in the Temple. They saw it as fulfilling a prophecy that "zeal for your [God's] house" would consume Jesus (Psalm 69:9). The other Gospels record Jesus as quoting Isaiah 56:7b and Jeremiah 7:11, in reference to other prophecies about God's "house," which John does not record. Certainly anyone of Jewish heritage would recognize a connection between Jesus' words and God's pronouncements about cleansing his house of worship in Ezekiel (for example 45:18-20).

Though the disciples (and no doubt many others) could see that Jesus was God's divine representative, the opposing Jewish religious leaders demand a "miraculous sign" from Jesus to show his authority to act as he has done, suggesting that they believe his actions need official sanction to be allowed. But Jesus' bold action was defiantly powerful enough to cause even the authorities to step back and not immediately arrest him. It could be that these leaders suspected that Jesus' action may have been supported by Roman interest, or it could be that they were hoping he would make a public declaration that he was the Messiah, which they could then use against Jesus in the Temple courts, where they had the power to act summarily.

John will soon unfold the story of Nicodemus—a person from their official ranks who has come to the realization that Jesus was "a teacher come from God," empowered by God (3:2). It could very well be that like Nicodemus other religious leaders in the Temple saw a divine stamp in the power and authority of Jesus in this action, and hesitated in their critique.

Jesus challenges their arrogance by prophesying about his own death and resurrection (his hour) that will be the defining event to show or demonstrate His divine Messianic status (his glory) (2:19). He connects his own body to the Temple. He is the Living Temple of God: His physical body is where God resides and the human physical building in which they had so much pride would be supplanted. Later New Testament writers refer to the believer as "temple" bearing God's Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 3:16, 6:19;

2 Corinthians 6:16; Ephesians 2:20-22, Hebrews 3:6, 1 Peter 2:5).

John the Evangelist takes a moment to jump ahead and mention that later he and the other disciples would realize that Jesus' prophecy about his own death and resurrection came true, which led them to believe the Scriptures and in Jesus' teachings (2:22). So it was not till after the Resurrection and Ascension that John and the other disciples were able to connect the Old Testament scripture with the words and actions of Jesus. This "hindsight" confirmed Jesus' divinity and gave both recorded scripture and Jesus' words added credibility. The disciples grew in their reliance on God's words—both the Old Testament scriptures and the new words of Jesus.

In the closing words of this chapter John discloses that Jesus knew better than to trust the professed faith of this Festival crowd and apparently even the attempts by his disciples to convince him, relying only his own knowledge of each person (2:23-25).



Respond to God's Word

1. Why is the metaphor of marriage fitting in Christianity?
2. If the Bible is a true record of life events why would anyone reject the reality of miracles?
3. Do you think Jesus' cleansing succeeded in eradicating commercial activity from the Temple? If it did not, what do you suppose was the action intended to accomplish?

Pray

- Invite the Lord to be present in your marriage, family relationships and other close relationships to strengthen them. Thank him for being the Bountiful Provider.
- Praise the Lord for his revealed Glory and ask the Holy Spirit to enable you to see Jesus' actions in the events of your life.
- Thank the Lord for his leadership in confronting irreverence to God and ask for the courage and understanding to know when and how to confront blatant disregard of the true purpose of God's house.

Born Again to Eternal Life

John 3

John the Evangelist has laid the groundwork for the tensions between Jesus, acclaimed as the Messiah, and the Jewish religious leaders who would oppose him at every turn. It is amazing then, that one of those religious leaders should privately seek out Jesus for answers to his questions about salvation.

Nicodemus was a Pharisee (3:1), part of an influential religious group (the separated ones) who believed in the inspiration and sanctity of the Jewish bible, the Torah, the coming of the Messiah, the resurrection, and miracles.

The Pharisees originated during the Maccabean period, which started formally with Judas Maccabeus, a Jewish patriot. His sons continued as a dynasty that ruled Judea, from the time of the Maccabean Revolt (167 B.C.) until Pompey conquered Palestine in 63 B.C. The group first emerged as a priestly family also known as the Hasmoneans or Asmoneans. They operated in the Maccabean period (second and first centuries B.C.). The nickname Maccabeus, “the Hammer,” was first given to Judas who started to rule in 166 B.C. after the death of their father. The Hasmoneans (Maccabees) were credited with restoring Jewish political and religious life, a cause with which the Pharisees were closely aligned.

The Sanhedrin, the ruling religious body, was made up of seventy Jewish leaders responsible for theological teaching and interpretation. Its members came from wealthy families (Nicodemus’s family is described in the Talmud as one of the four richest in Jerusalem). Despite his wealth, influence, and leadership charisma, Nicodemus kept his association with Jesus secret, perhaps fearing the loss of social-religious status, should he be excommunicated for disloyalty to the other members of the Sanhedrin.

Nicodemus went to Jesus at night as if what he was doing was wrong or evil (3:2). If so, his fear of men was greater than his fear of God; but the Evangelist could also have introduced night, or darkness, to symbolize ignorance or lack of spiritual enlightenment. Yet it was customary for Pharisees to study their Scriptures at night. Nicodemus’s interest shows that, despite the opposition of the ruling class, some of these Jewish leaders could not deny evidence of Jesus’ divinely sanctioned mission (see 9:16). Nicodemus

apparently came to Jesus with honest motives, and so Jesus accepted him.

Jesus seemed to take Nicodemus by surprise with his directive that those who want to see the Kingdom of God must be “born again” (3:3). The word Jesus uses, *anōthen*, also means a person is born “from above” (3:31). Birth is the means of entering the human world equipped to adapt to it; so being born “from above” would mean to enter God’s spiritual world equipped to participate in the spiritual world of the Kingdom of God and Christ.

Jesus’ had used the “born again” language intentionally, to reorient Nicodemus’ thinking or to get him to focus on the spiritual meaning of his point. Remember how he got the attention of the religious leaders by claiming he would “raise up” the destroyed Temple in only three days? That startling language was a way for him to introduce the truth of his coming crucifixion and resurrection (2:19-21).

Jesus says that the one who is born again will “see” the Kingdom of God. The Greek word here, *idein*, encompasses seeing with the eyes and understanding with the mind, as well as experiencing or giving heed to something. The Evangelist seems to be saying that without spiritual rebirth, no one can perceive or make sense of the Kingdom of God. The work of the Spirit is needed to equip the believer to enter God’s Kingdom because it is only by means of this “rebirth” that we can, this time not by natural means, as was the first but by spiritual cleansing (Titus 3:5). So, since we cannot on our own accomplish this, we need the Spirit of God to bring us into His Kingdom.

Jesus urged Nicodemus—who was still in the dark, unable to see the Kingdom of God—to be born from above, in order to cross the flesh-Spirit divide. And though he is supposed to have some level of theological expertise, Nicodemus asks the most basic question about what Jesus means by referring to a second natural birth (3:4). Jesus takes Nicodemus where he is, at an unsophisticated spiritual level, and brings him into better understanding. (Later, John will show a similar scene, in which Jesus takes the Woman at the Well into a clearer understanding of the Living Water. John 4:10-15.)

Jesus’ description of a difference between birth in the flesh and birth of the spirit (3:5-6) seems to recall teaching from Ezekiel (36:25-27), which describes a spiritual baptism for cleansing together with the gift of God’s implanted, transforming Spirit. The *flesh* (3:6) refers to life from a human, physical, biological source, while spiritual life comes from a spiritual, divine source.

The criterion for the natural person to become a spiritual person (equipped to live in the Kingdom of God) is being born again. This birth is cooperative work of the believer and Holy Spirit (who is from above). It is only the spiritual

work of the Holy Spirit in the believer that will generate the spiritual qualities required to perceive (and be able to participate in the affairs of) the Kingdom of God while on earth; but the seeker must submit by faith to being changed (recreated, made new) into such a spiritual person (2 Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 6:15; Ephesians 4:22-24, 1 Peter 1:23). It appears that Nicodemus took Jesus' instructions to heart and later became a Christian.

The Kingdom of God

This teaching Jesus offers to Nicodemus is the only place in John's Gospel where the term *kingdom of God* appears. John seems to be describing the "place" or realm where God shows himself through the life of Jesus and where his exclusive rule operates. God already reigns this way in heaven, and Jesus has brought a version of this reality on earth through his ministry, for those who accept him to experience. Those who believe in Jesus share a special relationship of loving obedience to God, seeking to do his will on earth as it is done in heaven. Later this relationship will be consummated in heaven, when God will be the only Ruler over his entire redeemed Creation.

Being born again is essential because, for now, the Kingdom of God does not have a physical location; it is a state or condition of living in communion with God. Believers, who accept Jesus as "the Way, the Truth and the Life," enter the Kingdom of God when they believe in Jesus, aided by the Holy Spirit. They accept, by faith, God's salvation that's presented in Jesus' life and especially his death on the cross. Primarily through the Holy Spirit, who guides us from within as directed by Christ, who is one with the Father, we continue in this relationship until our physical bodies die. Our death on earth is really a means of being transformed from a time-bound, limited physical existence into a timeless, spiritual one, in which the Kingdom of God and Eternal Life merge (and our inner and outer experience become integrated, non-localized, and in complete sync with God's will). This assimilation into a vast celestial assembly before God is described in one of John's other books, *Revelation*.

The Spirit

Jesus incorporates the image of wind to help Nicodemus understand the work of the Spirit (3:8). The words for *spirit* and *wind* are the same in Greek, so Jesus is playing with the language a bit, comparing the work of the Holy

Spirit as beyond human prediction or control, although people can tell that he is working just as we see the effects of the wind without seeing the wind itself. Christian conversion (spiritual birth) will remain a mystery, but we can relate to the ordinary experience of wind blowing even though we cannot tell the origin or final destination of a gust of wind. We will never be able to figure out the profound activities of the Wind of winds because the Holy Spirit is a Sovereign God in action.

God's Word is filled with references to the Spirit and the work of the Spirit. The word translated as "spirit" in the Old Testament (*ruah*) and the New Testament (*pneuma*) means wind, breath or spirit. The *spirit* refers to the life-giving breath of God (Isaiah 42:5), which when taken away causes us to return to dust and die (Psalm 104:29-30). Other references indicate God's sustaining strength such as Samson experienced (Judges 15:14-17) and a person's mental state, morale, or self-confidence (Proverbs 18:14). It is mentioned in the reactions of Jacob (Genesis 45:26-27), the Queen of Sheba (1 Kings 10:5, which in Hebrew as in the KJV, reads: "... *there was no more spirit in her*"), Jesus (John 11:33) and Paul (2 Corinthians 2:13, where NIV uses "*peace of mind*"), as well as in Mary's emotional response (Luke 1:47). Inanimate objects do not have spirit or breath (Habakkuk 2:19). Someone who is quick-tempered is "hasty of spirit" (Proverbs 14:29). A man may have a "spirit of jealousy" come upon him (Numbers 5:14, 30). In the New Testament *spirit* most often refers to the inner being of a person or the mental, as opposed to physical, state through which God and people can relate (Mark 2:8, 14:38, Acts 7:59, Romans 1:9, 1 Corinthians 5:3-5, Colossians 2:5). The spirit is a non-material, state of being although it is also sometimes translated as *wind* (John 3:8) and *breath* (2 Thessalonians 2:8). As a member of the Trinity however, He is a Person (John 4:24), fully sentient and emotionally responsive (Ephesians 4:30).

Nicodemus seems taken by surprise by Jesus' unconventional teaching, apparently still ignorant of the spiritual nature of God's work (3:9). It seems shocking that a religious leader, who teaches others about God with designated authority on theological matters, should have such limited spiritual understanding (3:10). But Jesus knows that the Sanhedrin's (Nicodemus's) ignorance is in contrast to what he brings, the revelation of God the Father through the Son, and of God's plan for salvation.

When Jesus says the leaders don't receive his testimony of the truth, he means that they are not willing to understand (3:12), even earthly truths from him. Jesus seems aware that this group has nurtured an ego or false

self, which makes them unable in general to approach life without falseness. If they are unable to understand or learn what's true about God's salvation here on earth because they choose not to, how can they ever hope to understand what goes on in God's spiritual Kingdom? Without the work of God's Spirit, there is no understanding of spiritual matters. Elsewhere, the apostle Paul explains that only under the guidance of the Holy Spirit would a person understand spiritual teaching (1 Corinthians 2:14-15).

Jesus answers Nicodemus's question "How can these things be?" by pointing to himself as the only Way. Jesus reinforces his authority to speak and teach by referring to heaven, where he alone has already been (3:13). He alone is the one who makes a way into God's presence. Eternal Life will not be achieved by earthly means; it comes from God in heaven, and only he whom God sends from heaven with that mission is in a position to impart it.

The Son of Man

Jesus uses the name *Son of Man* (3:13) to refer to himself during his conversation with Nicodemus. This label is used a few times in the Old Testament and then regularly to refer to Jesus in the New Testament.

Sometimes in the Old Testament the term is applied to a non-divine person(s). For example, Ezekiel is the Son of Man who uses God's power to give life to the bones of dead people; on his own he does not have the divine power to do this (Ezekiel 37). Psalm 80 mentions the Son of Man: "Let your hand rest on the man at your right hand, the son of man you have made strong for yourself" (80:17). In this context, the nation of Israel, brought up by God like a son, is in need of rescuing.

The term is first associated with the Messiah in Daniel 7, where in a vision of the *Son of Man* Daniel describes a person with divine characteristics, coming to take over the rule of God's Kingdom: "I saw in the night visions, and, behold, one like the Son of man came with the clouds of heaven, and came to the Ancient of days, and they brought him near before him. And there was given him dominion, and glory, and a kingdom, that all people, nations, and languages, should serve him: his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom that which shall not be destroyed" (Daniel 7:13-14). Jesus seems to use this title however to update Daniel's prophecy in that before this heavenly ruler could take on the Messianic role, he had to become human, a son of man.

Nicodemus and the other religious leaders would certainly connect Jesus' reference to himself as the "Son of Man" with this passage from Daniel about the Messiah. They challenged his claim to be this divine figure as blasphemous. Another Gospel account depicts one such confrontation:

The high priest said to him, "Under oath by the living God I demand: Tell us if you are the Christ (Messiah), the Son of God."

"Those are your words," Jesus replied. "Nevertheless, let me tell all of you: From now on you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of Power (God) and coming in the clouds of heaven."

Then the high priest tore his clothes, saying, "He has blasphemed; why do we need any more witnesses? Now that you have heard the blasphemy, what do you think?"

"He is guilty and must die," they answered. (Matthew 26:63-66; see also Mark 14:61-64)

Jesus' use of the title *Son of Man* so infuriated the religious leaders they collectively condemned him to die on the cross. Yet his role as Son of Man conjoined humanity with God to perfect God's loving plan of salvation (John 3:16), reconciling us with our Father through his work at the Cross.

Jesus also refers to a scriptural historical event that Nicodemus would know well—the saving of the Israelite people from death by snakebites. The people of Israel were wandering in the wilderness, unhappy with the trauma and delay of getting to the Promised Land; they railed against God for not giving them the life they thought they should have. This, in effect, was a rejection of God's sovereignty, grace, and sufficiency. The Lord gave them a clear picture of what life might be like without his continuing grace! When poisonous snakes came among them, the people were forced to turn to the only means of salvation, by looking to a bronze serpent that was lifted up (Numbers 21).

Jesus says that just as "Moses lifted up the serpent . . . so must the Son of Man be lifted up". Jesus, lifted on the cross, represents the antidote against Satan's (the snake's) destructive bite (sin). This Old Testament event anticipated the purpose of Jesus on the cross "that whoever believes in him should . . . have Eternal Life." (3:14-15)

Though he is conversing directly with Nicodemus, Jesus seems to realize that his words are for Nicodemus and for others. Nicodemus uses the word *we* (3:2), so perhaps he is asking on behalf of himself and others in the Sanhedrin who wanted Jesus' confession of divinity and wondered if they would qualify to enter God's Kingdom. Jesus replies using a plural *you* (3:7),

directing them to the message of the Cross. Belief in the power of salvation through the sacrifice of Christ is the only way to achieve Eternal Life.

The message is given clearly in John 3:16, along with the reason behind God's provision—love. Because God loved us so much, he gave us Jesus. God's love is the one and only reason for the events described in the Bible. God did not set out to limit our freedom, dominate, or show up our inadequacy. On the contrary, he wanted to make it possible to live a complete life with Him forever in Paradise.

Son of God

John (3:16) emphasizes the extreme nature of God's gift of love to humankind, in presenting the birth, life and death of Jesus as God sacrificing his one and only Son (his only, one-of-a-kind Son) in order to make it possible for any believer in Jesus to live with God forever. This is how much God values us; he gave what was most treasured and valuable to him. Firstborn sons were highly valued in ancient culture—and even more so, an only son. John's readers would understand this statement as indicating truly selfless love of the highest order. Later Jesus will emphasize this ultimate kind of love when he said, "Greater love has no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends" (15:13). Father and Son agree, in complete unity of wills, on this plan for our salvation.

Because God is holy and righteous he cannot have us with him as sinful as we have become. So he offered himself in the form of Jesus, his one and only Son, who is without sin to always stand before him in our place on our behalf (Romans 8:34). For Jesus to carry out this plan, he had to live and die as a sinless human while still being God. As Paul describes it, "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21). God placed the burden of human sin on Jesus, who had no sin but whose divine righteousness covered over or nullified our sinful state to make us righteous before God. God as the Judge finds the accused (us) guilty and out of loving compassion chooses to pay the fine himself (through Jesus). He does it in style! Leaving his father on the judge's bench of power and privilege Jesus steps down to assume and share a lower role with us in the condemned prisoner's box, where, protecting us under his judicial robes He faces his father as us. Indeed in the triune God is the capacity for ultimate and perfect cohabitation of justice and love. Indeed, there is no God apart from him, "a just God and a Savior" (Isaiah 45:21).

Eternal Life

Eternal Life is central in John's theology of God's plan of salvation (3:16, 12:25), and John wants his readers to see that this Eternal Life has its beginnings here on earth. Believing in Jesus now (6:47), through the work of God's Spirit (6:29), gives us salvation, through the gift of Jesus, his one and only Son. Our acceptance, in faith, of God's invitation, while we're on earth, immediately opens up a spot in heaven, so to speak (3:36). The special, God-designed relationship starts right away on its way to full expression. Already in the company of Jesus (6:65), as we travel with him (1:43, 10:27-28, 21:19b), we learn the truth, starting with recognizing who God is in Jesus (6:40, 12:44-45, 17:3). This journey toward heaven takes place in the light of his divine guidance (8:12, 12:46). In heaven we will celebrate the full realization of the special relationship (17:24), Eternal Life with God, which began when we chose to follow Christ (12:26) and that will never end (10:28).

Jesus uses language of judgment and condemnation to help Nicodemus (and us) to understand the great mercy of the Great Judge, who does not desire to impose a sentence of punishment because our liberation (salvation) has been provided by the sacrifice of Jesus (3:17-18). In this court of God's justice those who choose to believe in Jesus will receive a sentence of "Free from death." In accepting the offer to believe in Jesus we thereby accept to live in God's light, whereas rejecting the offer means living in darkness. The light of the true knowledge of God has been shed by the presence of Jesus; those who still choose darkness will avoid Jesus' influence. Those who come to the light and live its truth will have a God-approved life (3:21). The Evangelist's narrative now takes a turn from this conversation with Nicodemus.

John the Baptist

It appears Jesus has taken some time to teach his disciples and to baptize others who were beginning to follow him (3:22). Before the Baptist's disciples who seemed worried about this situation could raise their concern with him an incident interrupted, which the Evangelist has recorded, apparently the way it occurred, uninfluenced by the awkward transition in the narrative (3:23-26). Such details anchor John's storytelling in real history since he is reporting events as an eyewitness.

When his disciples eventually present their problem however, the Baptist

provides a response in perfect and appropriate humility: “He must increase, but I must decrease” (3:30). The Baptist’s immediate testimony is that Jesus is the divinely appointed One, the rightful leader in God’s plan of salvation. Like a “friend of the Groom,” John the Baptist yields center stage when the Groom arrives. (See the New Testament teaching about believers as the bride of Christ: Mark 2:19, 2 Corinthians 11:2, Ephesians 5:23-32, Revelation 19:7, 21:2.) John the Baptist is joyful about carrying out his God-given duty as one who would prepare the way for Jesus. He bows out, stating that his unmistakable joy is complete, because as the friend of the Bridegroom in charge of preparing the bride (potential believers) he can now announce, “The Messiah is here!” (3:29)

John the Evangelist reinforces the Baptist’s testimony and links his words with what Jesus has recently told to Nicodemus, in a kind of summary. The one from above (Jesus) “is above all” (3:31). Then the Gospel writer goes on to echo Jesus’ statements to Nicodemus. John 3:32 echoes Jesus’ words in 3:11 about how people have resisted and are still resisting receiving the testimony of truth. John 3:31 echoes Jesus’ words in John 3:12, which contrasts the knowledge of heaven and of earth, showing Jesus’ message brought from heaven is clearly superior and authoritative. John 3:33-35 establishes the divine authenticity of the Special Ambassador from heaven, just as Jesus mentioned in John 3:13.

John finishes reiterating the plan of salvation (3:36) by touching on the story of the serpent lifted up in the wilderness (3:14-16) as pointing to Jesus being the one and only way to Eternal Life. The Evangelist makes it plain: He who believes in Jesus has everlasting life! The unbeliever remains subject to God’s condemnation for sin.

Believing that Jesus on the cross is the ultimate revelation of God’s love for us mysteriously transforms the life of that believer from earthly to heavenly. Unbelievers who choose to reject God’s offer are like their ancestors who, by choosing not to look up at the serpent, were left with the lethal result of the snakebite. As the apostle Paul writes, “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold (suppress) the truth ...” (Romans 1:18; see also Ephesians 5:6). And Paul points to the way we can be protected from God’s justly hostile displeasure: “Much more then, being now justified by [Christ’s] blood, we shall be saved from [God’s] wrath through him” (Romans 5:9).



Respond to God's Word

1. What language would you use to describe being “born again,” or “born of the Spirit” (3:8)?
2. What do you think is the role of the Holy Spirit in God’s plan of salvation?
3. Why was it necessary for Jesus to be Son of Man while also Son of God?
4. When do you begin to participate in the Kingdom of God? When does Eternal Life begin? Explain.

Pray

- Ask the Holy Spirit to continue to inspire your understanding of the meaning of Jesus’ life and teachings and help your obedience to them.
- Consider the extent of the love God felt for you to sacrifice his one and only Son to make it possible for you to live with him, without sin. Thank Him for offering you this salvation.
- Ask the Holy Spirit to teach you to fully accept the authority of Scripture and the legitimate supremacy of Jesus.

Jesus and the Samaritan Woman

John 4

The Samaritans were Jews in the Northern Kingdom who had married and intermingled with the Assyrians who had conquered the Israelites (2 Kings 15:29). Since they were not full-blooded Jews, they were considered less worthy and less authentic. The Samaritans were prevented from worshipping in the temple in Jerusalem therefore they worshipped at a shrine (on Mt. Gerizim) in their territory. The Samaritans only accepted the Torah (Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament) and not the whole of the Jewish Old Testament (the Law, prophets, histories, and other writings). These worship-related issues created a rift and ongoing tension between Samaritans and Judeans. Jews were highly contemptuous of Samaritans, believing Samaritans were worse than Gentiles and that to be Samaritan was worse than just being a woman. Jews would not drink from the same vessel as Samaritans, considering the water to be contaminated. This explains the reaction of Jesus' disciples to his interacting with and accepting a drink from a Samaritan woman. And that's why his parable of the Good Samaritan, in which a Samaritan (usually seen as inferior and quasi-infidel/pagan) is the heroic good neighbor, would have shocked his listeners (Luke 10:25-37).

The Gospel of John provides important details of Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman, introducing facts relating to the travel, including the mid-day heat, exhaustion, and thirst that anchor the story solidly in history. A fully human Jesus comes very naturally into conversation with a lady at a well. Nothing about the story appears staged. Indeed, God has orchestrated an encounter with divine significance.

Right away Jesus' behavior is radical! No self-respecting rabbi would publicly engage in discussion, let alone debate theology, with a woman (especially a woman of ill repute). Jesus' behavior, outlandish and so conciliatory to non-Jews, would seem highly provocative and even irreligious to the Jewish leaders.

John describes how Jesus and his disciples were traveling and baptizing and blessing more and more followers. Then Jesus and his disciples moved from Judea over to Galilee, perhaps to leave John the Baptist to minister by himself and not to give the Pharisees opportunity to engineer difficulties for

their shared work of the gospel. For now, the Pharisees had backed off the Baptist, accepting his explanation that his work was preparatory (1:19-27). Jesus refers to this when the Pharisees attempt to railroad him in the Temple (Matthew 21:23-27; Mark 11:27-33; Luke 20:1-8).

John the Evangelist writes that “it was necessary for” Jesus to go through Samaria (4:4). Since it was possible for Jesus to travel by the usual round-about route (along Samaria’s border), Jesus goes through Samaria because it was part of God’s plan. In the town of Sychar (or perhaps, Shechem, where the Israelites worshipped when they had no temple, where the nation of northern Israel began to break apart [1 Kings 12:1-17], and where Joseph’s bones were buried [Joshua 24:32]), Jesus sits down by Jacob’s Well (Genesis 33:18-19). This well, originally a gift from Jacob to Joseph, his favorite son (4:5), is still a sacred site for visitors. In Jesus’ time, the well was an important historical symbol to Samaritans, a place that stood for the source of preserving life. This divine appointment brings the true Source of life-giving water to rest alongside this well (4:6).

Jesus has been traveling, and it is now mid-day, when the sun would be at its hottest. Humanly, Jesus needed the rest and the drink of water. When the Samaritan woman approaches to draw water, he speaks to her politely, without the superiority or contempt of an enemy, “Please give me a drink?” (4:7).

Though it is unlikely that all of his disciples have gone together to get bread, Jesus is alone with the Samaritan woman, who immediately registers her surprise that Jesus, a Jew, would associate with her (4:9). They begin by talking about Jesus’ thirst but Jesus continually responds to her by addressing her own need for spiritual renewal, “living water.”

Just as Nicodemus hadn’t understood Jesus’ switch to spiritual truths in talking about birth and rebirth, the Samaritan woman at first interprets Jesus’ statement as that he could give her better though ordinary water for sustaining earthly life. Therefore she’s mystified, since the well is deep and he had no means of drawing the water. So it seemed to her that Jesus did not want water but to belittle their community’s well and must be putting himself above their renowned ancestor Jacob (4:12).

The Samaritan woman did not yet realize however that the water Jesus would give her and everyone else who wanted it was the Holy Spirit (4:13-15). Before she could receive it however, she would need to critically review her life, a lifestyle Jesus called into question by asking her to fetch her husband. How surprised she was when Jesus revealed how much he knew about her (4:16-18). Jesus was gently showing her his divinity. John the Evangelist

is making sure his readers notice that Christ makes his salvation available to everyone—and that no one is beyond redemption. We see that this event tells about God, who is not subject to social or ethnic taboos and ceremonial restrictions. Jesus' journey through Samaria was deliberate, to offer salvation to this woman and her community.

Eventually she says, “Lord, I can see you are a prophet” (4:19), and this is a spiritual turning point for her. She is now able to enter a serious spiritual discussion with Jesus because the Spirit has opened her eyes to acknowledge this truth about him. She begins to talk like a child of God (Romans 8:16). Realizing Jesus' acceptance of her, she raises an important theological question: Why was it wrong to worship God where they live? Jesus answers that a physical location for worshipping God the Father will soon become irrelevant (which may foreshadow the future destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem and the shrine in Samaria, but certainly points to believers being reconciled to God through his work at the Cross) and that God is concerned with how, not where he is worshipped. He points out that God wants only worshipers who sincerely acknowledge and show reverence through a mental-spiritual connection with him and who have learned from Jesus who (in truth) God really is. Jesus adds that this kind of worshipping is imminent as well as already occurring. The Samaritan responds with her simple and limited understanding of the promised Messiah, to which Jesus adds that God's plan was to offer the blessing of salvation to the Jews first, through whose Davidic lineage the Messiah was to come and bless the world—including the Samaritans (4:22-25).

At this point Jesus fully reveals his identity, using words God uses to describe himself, “I am he.” Jesus, sent by God, fully man and fully God, also known as Christ, is indeed the expected Jewish Messiah, given to bless the Samaritan people and the whole world.

The disciples are surprised to find their Rabbi speaking with a Samaritan woman (4:27); apparently they were yet unfamiliar with Jesus' approach of total inclusion of all souls in the salvation mission. From respect for their leader, they don't question him. The Evangelist does certainly intend to show that God does not discriminate at any level. This new way brings unity among all peoples. Indeed an important teaching by Jesus by which all Christians must adhere and teach the world.

A Community Responds

Her meeting with Jesus was compelling enough to cause the woman to put aside the task at hand and go back to tell the people in her town about him (4:28-30). “Come, see,” she tells them, “the man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?” Perhaps the townspeople could already see a change in this woman’s behavior; they do not dismiss her as only a prostitute with a tale about a male stranger in town. They, in turn, feel drawn to Christ.

Jesus has told the woman that he is the Messiah, but perhaps it is too huge a truth for her to absorb all at once, since she says to her neighbors, “Could this be the Messiah?” Whatever she had come to believe at this early stage, she presents his true status as the Christ as the first idea for the townspeople to consider.

Jesus, who had arrived in town exhausted and thirsty, now puts off eating because he is busy with another kind of food—doing the will of God, who sent him (4:34). The Evangelist again presents both the human and divine sides of Jesus. Jesus may be hungry but he does not rely on only one kind of food. His attention is, at this moment, focused on reaping a harvest of those who will come to believe in the Messiah (4:35-38). The “sowers” he mentions were the Prophets, who planted the seed of God’s righteous Word among the people of Israel. It is now the work of Jesus’ disciples and the Church to gather in the harvest of committed believers.

The harvest is happening right there in that town, with the Samaritans (4:39-41). They begin by hearing the Samaritan woman’s testimony, and follow up by listening to Jesus for themselves (4:42). Jesus teaches among them for two days, and many believe. Hearing his teaching is the source of their life-changing experience. They come to believe that Jesus is “the Savior of the World”—his salvation is not just local, but a universal event. This is the first use of this description of Jesus.

John brings us this exceptional story. More than being about the Samaritan woman herself, it’s about God, who reveals himself to an acknowledged sinner who had been outcast from his original plan for Israel. He accepts her into the Kingdom of everlasting life and then makes her into an effective disciple.

This lone encounter of Jesus inside the Jewish enemy camp, with a social reject who had serious moral defects, underlines the nature and target of his mission and showcases the proper example of how acceptance of Jesus as the

Messiah works. This unlikely scene beautifully compliments the depiction of the Good Neighbor. That verbal parable and this acted parable send a message to the Jews who are relentless in opposing Jesus' divine ministry. God can produce believers and supporters where it is least expected or most improbable. In this account Jesus broke down all racial, cultural and gender barriers along with all enmity and prejudice about who is entitled to his salvation. Jesus has come not to those who have no need of a physician, but to those who are spiritually sick. He is here to call sinners to repentance (Mark 2:17).

The Healing of the Herodian Official's Son

The people of Galilee were experiencing a newfound faith. Cana, where he had turned water to wine, was nearby, and people were already responding to that evidence of Jesus' divinity. John the Evangelist now includes the story of another miraculous event, the healing of the Herodian official's son (4:46-53). As usual, John's purpose is to show how the people of Galilee came to believe in God's Son, the Savior of the world, in hopes that we too will believe.

Word of Jesus' divine power to heal is spreading—and has spread as far as Capernaum to a royal household, where an official's son is near dying. The royal household would not have been friendly or wanting to promote the legitimacy of a Jewish Messiah who would be a threat to the stability of Roman domination—and yet this man comes to Jesus, and Jesus responds to him favorably. Jesus comments that the people believe in him only because of the “signs and wonders” he is performing. Jesus knows that a show of his power would bring acknowledgement, but he would like even more for people to come to an inward realization and acceptance of his power.

Wonderfully, this Herodian official takes Jesus “at his word.” That faith makes it possible for grace to be received. Because of the father's faith, the son was healed—and from the exact moment when Jesus told his father that the son would live. Though the man's faith was still conditional on tangible evidence or display, he did accept Jesus' words on their face value (4:50).

Finding out the healing confirmed the words from Jesus made this official a stronger believer. This story provides a significant theological portrayal of God's unrestricted grace. The crux of the story is not about an official's faith (which in fact was, initially, a lack of faith needing proof), but another

example about Jesus showing he is God. One way or another the identity of Jesus was being revealed and accepted—by Jews at the wedding at Cana, among Galileans who at first were rejecting, by non-Jews, even by a government representative of a powerful foreign nation, along with his “household.” Jesus’ ministry of salvation is finding acceptance among Galileans (4:45), Samaritans (4:39), and Gentiles (4:53), people who were not originally the recipients of the Promise. Yet the core of the religious leadership did not respond by believing in Christ (1:11; 2:18-19; 4:1-3; 7:1).

Nonetheless John the Evangelist continues working toward his goal that Jesus is to be seen, recognized, and experienced as sent by God to do his will.



Respond to God’s Word

1. Romans 8:16 records that the Spirit “bears witness” with our spirits that we are “children of God.” How do you see this understanding coming to the Samaritan woman at the well? Do you feel assured you are a child of God?
2. Do you feel tempted to exclude any type of person or group of people from the good news about Jesus and therefore people different from you from your Christian circle? How does the story about the events in Galilee help you overcome that bias?
3. What helped you come to believe in Jesus’ power to save? Did the Gospel accounts of “signs and wonders” help you to believe in Christ’s divinity? Consider also 10:37-38 in answering this question.

Pray

- Thank the Lord and praise him for the diversity he has put into our bodies and minds. Ask him to help you recognize and be able to break yourself free from prejudice and discrimination of all kinds.
- Praise God for sending Jesus to explain everything about him. Confess your inability to always recognize that Christ is in your midst. Ask for spiritual enlightenment so you will act appropriately, to his glory.
- Ask for recognizable opportunities and spontaneity to bring others to Christ, enabled by Holy Spirit. Ask that the testimony of your own faith in Christ will be powerful in the same way the Samaritan woman's was for her community.

Jesus Shows God in Action

John 5

Since it was God's uncontainable love that made him create humankind, that same love made a way for people to come into relationship with him. The Way, of course, is Jesus, the Word, or message of love from the Father. John the Evangelist chooses the events and episodes from Christ's life, such as the one in this chapter, to show us who God is, with the ultimate purpose that we might believe that Jesus is the Savior, the Son of God.

Jesus Dispenses Mercy at the Pool

John begins this section of his Gospel with more evidence that Jesus was fully man, this time by showing him again joining in with fellow Jews in Jerusalem to celebrate a feast as an act of worship to God.

Jesus visits the pool called *Bethesda*, which means House of Mercy (5:2), where a natural underground water source would bubble up irregularly. A local explanation suggested that this bubbling up of the water was due to an angel stirring it (5:4), and that the first disabled person to get in the water as it began to bubble would be healed. So many disabled people gathered by this pool (5:3).

Jesus' question to one invalid there, "Do you want to get well?" may seem surprising. Jesus had been told the man had been lame for thirty-eight years without finding his way into the pool for healing. So perhaps this man was used to being supported by gifts to the poor and lame. Jesus probably wanted him to think about what healing would mean (5:6). Jesus puts a similar question to blind Bartimaeus (Mark 10:51). It seems Jesus wanted these recipients of his grace to see the gift of being healed as significant and meaningful, and perhaps to consider what it would mean for them, to operate in relationship with God, going forward.

The handicapped man explains why he couldn't receive healing in the pool (5:7), but Jesus seems to know already what he is going to do. His command, "Get up" could be restated, from the Greek, as "Rouse yourself, pull yourself together." At the Lord's further command: "Pick up your mat and walk", the man was instantly cured. It's not possible to say whether this man's healing

required first his act of obedience in getting up or whether Jesus would have healed him anyway, for his Father's glory. The apostle Peter writes that some are suffering because it is God's will, and that these should "entrust their souls to God", while continuing to do good (1 Peter 4:19). Only God knew, in that large crowd of disabled people needing healing, which person Jesus would choose to heal. Maybe because this man really could not help himself he had prayed earnestly for a miracle. And John—the only Gospel writer recording this account—probably tells this story of God's incomprehensible distribution of grace (in this case healing) to give us a picture of his sovereign power but always on the basis of love.

Lord of the Sabbath

The Evangelist shows Jesus as God in an act of healing and the religious leaders quibbling about the timing (based on Sabbath law), totally ignoring the Love angle.

According to the Creation narrative God completed the creation of everything in six days and then blessed the seventh and called it holy, setting it apart as sacred. The Sabbath as such represents a good time to stop, rest and reflect on God's actions at least in the prior six days. Now God is perpetually holding the universe together, so he obviously did not and does not cease working altogether on that one day. God's instructions to the Jewish people, through Moses, were to set aside one day of the week for worship and for rest. But Jewish religious leaders imposed a very strict adherence to the Mosaic Law (though many of these were from their Tradition of the Elders and not from the Pentateuch) and interpreted its requirements to the smallest detail. The man healed by Jesus is confronted as a Sabbath-breaker for the simple "wrongdoing" of carrying his mat—in obedience to Jesus' command.

Far from rejoicing with the long-lame man for the great blessing of being healed, these religious leaders wanted to find the one who had healed this man because he had caused him to break a Sabbath law by carrying his mat! But Jesus is the Lord, the Creator who made the Sabbath, the designer of the whole picture, of which the Mosaic Sabbath laws were only a part. John the Evangelist shows us that the One who is greater than Moses is here! Jesus was not defying the laws of God; he was acting as the God who created the Sabbath as a blessing to the people he loved.

The man who was healed gives all the credit—and blame for the

Sabbath-breaking—to the unknown person who healed him (5:11). It seems a bit remarkable that the man who was healed did not know it was Jesus who healed him (5:12-13), and his accusers did not seem to know that Jesus was the healer for whom they were looking. Their chance for direct accusation was thwarted because Jesus, with foreknowledge, had withdrawn.

But Jesus and the man who'd been healed meet each other again at the Temple, where Jesus seems to exhort him to stop committing sin. Jesus had healed this man, and hoped for him a life of seeking and serving the Lord. He may have been warning the man that he could lose his soul to Satan (the worst fate) if he was not watchful of how he lived (5:14). The man however reported to the religious leaders that it was, in fact, Jesus who had healed him, likely following their orders. And so the battle over religious jurisdiction was on! The religious leaders needed to establish on pain of severe punishment that no one was above the law.

The Son and the Father

The Christological formula adopted at the Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon states that although God was incarnate he did not change when he became human but remained fully God. For the redemption of humankind to be effective however, Jesus also had to be completely human. These two natures in Jesus—human and divine—were cooperative and mutually responsive. Jesus, however, totally submitted his human will to God, as God originally intended Adam to do. And this is the love relationship God wants with us. So it is fitting that he sets up the model in Jesus for us to observe.

Jesus brings up with the religious leaders his unique relationship with the Father when they confront him about breaking the Sabbath. “The Jews” however, as the Evangelist presents these opponents, not only actively resist Jesus as the Messiah (or as God’s special envoy), but in their blindness, are becoming unyielding and arrogant toward the Savior of the world, to the point of wanting to kill him (5:16-18).

The ongoing work of Jesus’ Father is the renewing of a proper relationship with us through Jesus so that he can display his love for us as freely as he chooses. The Evangelist presents Jesus’ relationship with God the Father as akin to that of the intimate love that’s typical of a Jewish father and a trustworthy adult son. The actions of Jesus mirror the actions of a loving Father and in this case of the paralyzed man it is to improve quality of life. Their

relationship and work are based on love.

With plain speaking, Jesus claims divine unity with God in nature (5:17, 19-20), supernatural power (5:21), and in the role of designated Judge, a role the Father relinquished to Jesus (5:22-24). Jesus explains that people will be judged based on their allegiance to him. These claims of divinity and unity with God infuriated his opponents in the extreme. Such talk was the ultimate insult, dishonor, or impiety to people who believed that even to use God's actual name is blasphemy, let alone claim equal identity. The Jewish people did not use the Tetragrammaton, YHWH, and would replace this name of God with "the Lord," "the Almighty," and other names for God.

As he answers the charge of blasphemy, Jesus further reinforces his identity as God's Son by taking on the role of Judge, which had always belonged to God the Father. Jesus claims the authority to decide who will receive Eternal Life, in the past and in the present (5:21-30). Jesus seems to be saying, "Like Father, like favorite Son" (5:19-20).

Jesus asserts that God knows and is pleased with everything he does, and that further miraculous revelation of Who God is ("greater works") will amaze the Jewish leaders (5:20). These "greater works" are probably the healing of the man born blind and the raising of Lazarus from the dead, since Jesus immediately points out that, "Just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it" (5:21). These "greater works", which God "will show him" (Jesus) would include the future events of the Cross, the resurrection, and the ascension. Jesus submits to God's will perfectly because he knows the divine act of salvation is love—like all the actions of God from before Creation until his reunion with us after the inauguration of the eternal Kingdom. Jesus did not hijack or usurp these qualities of his Father; God gave them to him within their love-bound relationship in which Jesus completely conforms to his will.

Jesus explains the details of his role as the Son representing God in flesh. He does all the things that God himself has the power to accomplish, the control of all aspects of life and the role of sole Judge (5:21-23). The reason and benefit to humankind is that God is giving Eternal Life to those who accept the Son (5:24-27). Jesus is a living Court of Justice. By believing in him and his work now, we are not condemned but have membership in his Kingdom (5:24).

As always, Jesus carries his roles of Son of God and Son of Man together. Jesus as Son of God can communicate with "the dead" and adjudicate upon their eligibility for Eternal Life (5:28-29) and as Perfect Man he has been

entrusted with judging other men on earth (5:26-27). He calls us to believe now and be received into his and God's Kingdom.

The Sabbath provides a helpful example for the dual role of Son of God and Son of Man (the accounts in the other Gospels also can be helpful: Matthew 12:1-8, Mark 2:23-28, Luke 6:1-5). Jesus makes a logical connection between human lordship over the Sabbath and his Lordship over us. He indicates that the Sabbath is subject to human needs, because humans are more important to God than Sabbath rules. But he, the Perfect Man, who has priority over ordinary people being their Lord, is therefore Lord of the Sabbath for the same reason. It is absolutely fitting that the One whose will is perfectly in obedience to God's can judge those who have imperfect standing with God. God is in continuous communion with his Son, who judges as the Father supplies instruction and who seeks always to please the Father (5:30).

The view of salvation as automatically available when a person believes in Jesus may be seen figuratively as being given a coveted ticket to a premier sports or fashion event. We already have the ticket to heaven when we accept Christ; that is, we are reconciled to God. Having chosen to follow Jesus we then have to find our way (to the place where the real action is, Heaven), by continuing to follow Jesus in obedience, as he leads us to God's Presence. Scripture gives comprehensive instructions how to get there through Christ. Staying in faith and obedience to his teaching keeps us following Christ and gets us there. Falling away from him takes us off the path (the Way) and leaves us wandering in denial and confusion, perceptually compromised, in a wasteland of the lost, susceptible to the spiritual influence of Satan (who, ultimately however, can never win). But we bring joy to the Father when we work and walk toward our salvation in Christ.

Testimonies about Jesus

Jesus does not expect his statements will convince his critics to believe or accept his message; he points to two other important witnesses to the truth of his claims—the testimony of John the Baptist and the testimony of the works of God shown through him. These works are the activities that point to Jesus as God's Representative. By Jewish traditional legal standards, condemning an accused for a crime requires at least two reliable witnesses (Numbers 35:30, Deuteronomy 19:15). With two witnesses, these religious leaders could not take Jesus' claims of divinity lightly or ignore them.

The religious leaders had previously investigated John the Baptist, without condemning him for claiming that he was preparing the way for the Messiah. Jesus cites that testimony, not because he needs a human witness but for the sake of these religious leaders who need the “light” that the Baptist provided, like a “lamp” that burns brightly, for their salvation.

The second, much weightier witness is God himself, who sent Jesus under his authority, by which he is to represent the Father, as he performs his assigned “works” that incorporate his teaching, healing, miracles, sinlessness, compassion, and knowledge of God (5:36-40). Christ’s actions provide evidence of God’s activity in his ministry and they fulfill Scriptural prophecies about the Messiah—restoring sight, speech, and hearing, feeding the poor, making the lame to walk (Isaiah 29:18; 32:3-4; 35:5-6a; 42:7).

But these witnesses are wasted on the Jewish religious leaders, who, Jesus says, “do not have the love of God” in their hearts and “do not seek the glory that comes from God” (5:42, 44). The sources of evidence are unavailable to Christ’s opponents, who cannot relate to them morally or spiritually. These accusers are blind to enlightenment by God’s Spirit to understand the Scripture and perceive Jesus as the fulfillment of God’s plan of salvation. Ironically, the accusers expend much energy selectively studying Scripture as if that process by itself is the means by which to gain their salvation. Therefore they completely miss the true message and goal of Scripture, the revealing of Jesus as the Messiah. As such the opponents have not responded to Jesus’ many witnesses: God, their Scripture (the words of the Prophets, since Moses), the Baptist (the last of the prophets sent in the Spirit of Elijah), and the work of Jesus (teachings, miracles and their results), because of deliberate rebellion. Jesus tells them, “You refuse to come to me to have life” (5:40).

These defiant ones have not internalized what it means to love God (Deuteronomy 6:4-9). As such they have no independent or objective and reliable means of evaluating Jesus or his work. Because they are used to exchanging compliments with each other (5:44), it is easier for them to accept self-commendation and to reject truthful evidence when God offers the praise. Jesus tells them it is not possible for them to believe in him if they value only mutual praise and won’t receive the faith that comes from God alone.

Jesus reminds his opponents that he is not the one who finds fault with their attitude and faith-life. Moses, whom they claim to value and revere, really, is their accuser by his own testimony about the Messiah. Because they

reject Moses' testimony about Jesus they are left without any basis for true faith: not from intimacy with God through the Scriptures, nor from believing the revealed truth in the Torah in particular or from direct revelation from God. Their situation is dire because they are left with no means of spiritual advocacy.



Respond to God's Word

1. Why could Jesus “break the rules” with respect to the Sabbath?
2. Faith and unbelief seem to feature prominently in this chapter. What are the hindrances to faith suggested here?
3. How do you understand the connection of Jesus with his Father? Describe that relationship.
4. Have you come across evidence of the friendly-slap-on-the-back-theology being practiced in our time (when people congratulate each other but perhaps miss the mark spiritually)?

Pray

- Thank God for his power to heal and his grace at work in your life. Acknowledge his sovereignty to choose whom he will heal, and trust him with your own health and with that of others for whom you are praying for healing.
- Thank God for giving you access to Who he is through Jesus, the Son.
- Ask God to lead you, by his Spirit, into obedience that leads to deeper relationship in the Father's presence eternally.

A Day in the Life of Jesus

John 6

John chooses to tell the story of one day in Jesus' life, probably about a year after the events he just narrated. In narrating these events that occurred in less than twenty-four hours, John includes two "signs" (the miracles of Jesus, which point to God) and the first of seven "I am" statements that will establish Jesus as truly God.

The Feeding of the Five Thousand

People are coming out in crowds to see Jesus "because they saw his miracles," especially his healing of the sick (6:2). Earlier Jesus had seemed to condemn this motivation (4:48), wishing that people would come out of longing to know God and see him at his Father's work. In this chapter, especially, we realize that Jesus has consistently emphasized the importance of seeing God at work in his miracles, rather than just finding these signs entertaining.

Jesus looks up and sees the hungry crowd and prepares to enact a living picture of himself as the Bread of Life. He knows already what he is going to do (6:6), and yet he uses this opportunity to teach his disciples. He asks, "Where can we buy bread?" The real answer, which his disciples and the crowd will soon see, is that Jesus is the only one who can provide more than sufficiently for human needs even when it seems impossible. The question-and-answer method, this time directed at Philip, was representative of a typical rabbinic teaching method that required the student to search for hidden meaning. The Evangelist suggests that the ingredients for recognizing Jesus as the Messiah were there at hand but the disciples did not yet always discern when Jesus' divine intervention was all that was necessary (according to Mark 6:52, because their hearts were "hardened"). Obviously, even if Jesus and his disciples did know where they could purchase bread locally, feeding such a large crowd was, humanly speaking, well beyond their means. So Jesus proposes a human, though obviously impractical solution, which Philip zeroed in on. Jesus then uses Philip's answer to dramatize a teaching about himself.

In this account Philip answers with more detail than the group response given in the other Gospel accounts (Matthew 14:13-21; Mark 6:30-44; Luke

9:10-17) and which, representing the human point of view, seems to point to the absurdity or hopelessness of expecting to feed such a crowd. Andrew, who has brought people to Christ before (1:41-42, 12:22), introduces the boy with five loaves and two fish. “But,” he asks with a distinct lack of hope, and almost apologetically for the smallness of the offerings, “how far will they go?”

In presenting the divine viewpoint Jesus shows Philip, Andrew, the other disciples, and all who were able to see the truth in his actions that there is nothing too small for God to use to our benefit (in this case, to sustain us). Jesus however first gives thanks to the Father. The word for “gave thanks” in this passage, *eucharistiko*, connects this breaking of bread with the Last Supper, when Jesus, as the divine Priest, will formally institute the Holy Eucharist as he conducts the liturgy of praise to God. This feast is another important indicator for John of Jesus’ divinity.

Jesus is a spiritual and physical life-giving Source (6:10-11). He multiplies the bread and fish for the multitude, a crowd comprising more than 5000, excluding women and children from many parts of the nation and beyond. This provision recalls how God fed the Israelites and provided Manna in the desert (Exodus 16); the disciples are instructed to gather up the fragments so that nothing would be left to spoil (6:12-13), just as the Israelites were instructed to do with the Manna. God’s grace is not to be wasted! The boy’s offering seems to fulfill a requirement, given in Deuteronomy, that men coming to worship would not come empty-handed (Deuteronomy 16:16-17). The boy’s gift is as if on behalf of all the men who are present. Undoubtedly Jesus is embodying the truth that he is himself the “Bread of Life,” a teaching that will follow this miraculous feeding of an enormous crowd.

When the disciples gather the leftovers, a meal that had begun in a small boy’s waist purse, now fills twelve baskets. This, after everyone present had enough to eat! Not only is there no dire situation in which God cannot provide or redeem, God will supply all our needs in abundance because He is the All-sufficient Provider. The message of this miraculous “sign” is that in the New Kingdom nothing will be insufficient or superfluous.

As John tells the story we are led to see there is no place for hopelessness in the presence of our God, a caring Provider who can always meet our needs more than sufficiently, even against apparently insurmountable odds. This kind and benevolent God blesses people out of his unlimited resources (Psalm 132:15). His disciples with their literal Jewish minds needed to learn to see beyond the material dimension and recognize spiritually, that being the Messiah (6:35-36) Jesus was truly the Bread of Life, (Exodus 16:4;

Nehemiah 9:15; Psalm 78:24-25). Jesus meant to bring his disciples further along in seeing him as the representation and giver of Eternal Life, and John includes the story to present Jesus as the prophesied Messiah. His actions showed the divine Son offering life in agreement with the Father.

Those present were impressed, calling him “the Prophet” they were expecting, probably a reference to Deuteronomy 18:15-19 (Acts 3:22, 7:37). Others wanted to force kingship on him, making him an earthly king who could overthrow the Roman Empire. By withdrawing, Jesus thwarts this plan; it was not how the Father planned Jesus’ Kingship (6:14-15).

Jesus Walks on the Sea

On the same day that his disciples would see Jesus supernaturally able to provide food, virtually out of nothing, they also see him walk on water. Both events seem designed to teach them to recognize the Messiah, who has the power and authority to be their Savior.

We appreciate the incredulity of Jesus’ disciples at anyone, under those windstorm conditions at night, being able to be upright on that lake, being fishermen who were familiar with the weather changes and dangerously violent nature of the storms that arise there. This human object had to be supernatural (6:16-18).

The disciples in the “dark” without Jesus (6:17) and in the context of strong winds and rough water were like the very many in the world who, in desperate situations, also have difficulty recognizing the Light of the World as being uniquely divine. In the midst of life’s storms, even believers struggle to recognize the almighty power of Christ to save and reduce the power of our anxieties.

The Evangelist presents a human-divine person, ready and fully able to save us from perishing. Though other accounts talk about Peter attempting to walk toward Jesus on the water, John leaves out that part of the story, perhaps so as not to detract from the all-important message about Jesus’ divine nature with that account of the over-eager action by one of his disciples (Matthew 14:22-33; see Mark 6:45-52).

This spiritually spectacular event, which the crowd was not able to witness, would be compelling evidence to Jewish readers, who were familiar with stories of prophets gifted with God’s power to defy the laws of nature. Elijah defied nature when he called fire down fire to burn up his sacrifice

and lick up a large amount of water (1 Kings 18:38-39). Elisha, who received Elijah's mantle, caused an iron ax to float (2 Kings 6:1-7). In these cases of divine intervention there was no understanding that the prophets were themselves divine. But when Jesus walked on the lake, he identified himself by the statement "It is I"—just as Yahweh (God the Father) described himself as "I AM" (Exodus 3:14-15; see also Matthew 14:27, Mark 6:50). In John's theology, Jesus' use of the "I AM" statements marks him out unmistakably as God's Representative.

Though the various Gospel writers include different details about the storm quieting when Jesus entered the boat or the boat immediately reaching the other shore (6:21), all four Gospels keep the divine power and authority of Jesus as the central focus of this story.

A creative storyteller dreaming up a fictional account using only a few of Jesus' miracles might not include two dramatic accounts of miracles in a row, as John does in his Gospel. But like the other Gospel writers, John is writing remembered history, so he includes these events apparently as they are recalled to actually happen—evidence that his account lacks the smoothness of a deliberately invented narrative. Variance in the chronologies of John and the other Gospel writers, rather than historicity, may merely indicate differences in their memory or intentions. In this case Luke does not record Jesus walking on the lake.

The Bread of Life

The crowds who'd been fed so amply the evening before turn up again in great numbers. Jesus recognized that the people's motivation this time around was secular and earth-bound. They sought him for the free food, missing the spiritual significance of his action (6:25-27). He addresses this issue by talking about food that endures to Eternal Life (6:27) thereby offering himself as "the Bread of Life" (6:35). He begins the dialogue with "Very truly" (6:26, 32, 53), words that alert the listener to take seriously, the truth of something he is about to say. In other words, "Heads up!"

God provides Jesus so that God's Spirit can enter us and make us spiritually strong (sustained) for his Kingdom. The physical food he provides nourishes our bodies; but he promises spiritual food that will activate our faith to do the work that will have value for our Eternity. This makes it eternal food for Eternal Life! Jesus' authority to grant eternal food is an important sign of his

divine authority and authenticity. The Evangelist seems to connect the telling of this feeding event with both the eating of the Passover Lamb (6:4) and the provision of manna for God's people in the wilderness. Jews would have understood this symbolism and perhaps even realized the likeness of the people Jesus fed to the wandering people of Israel as they moved in a crowd from one place to the other, in open country. They seemed however to be trying to maintain continuing access to the food Jesus had provided (6:31, 34) and like their ancestors in the wilderness they needed to focus on the spiritual meaning of the feeding (Exodus 16:4; Psalm 78:24-25; Deuteronomy 8:10-18).

The Evangelist now shows how Jesus confirms that his Messiahship is spiritual not political and that he desires his seekers to "hunger and thirst after righteousness" (Matthew 5:6). Food from the mouth and hand of God however, lasts forever (6:27), unlike the events that foreshadowed these Messianic events, like the giving of Manna that did not last and did not sustain forever.

The Messiah's very words bring sustenance and life, just as God's do (Deuteronomy 8:3; Proverbs 9:4-6; Matthew 4:4; Luke 4:4). Jesus has just significantly demonstrated that he has the official authority of God the Father—by feeding a crowd miraculously and by literally stepping on the laws of nature (the Walking-on-Water Epiphany, as a complement to Moses' Fire Epiphany).

Just as Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well quickly turned to serious, spiritual matters, so does this talk, as Jesus answers the people's question about how they can do the works that God requires (6:28). The people ask about what "works" are needed to establish a special relationship with God. But Jesus answers with the singular *work*—because there is only one requirement: Believe in the One God has sent! The only requirement from God is for us to believe in Jesus as God's Son. This faith comes as a package deal, as our faith is lived out in our allegiance and willingness to obey Jesus.

Though Jesus doesn't really like it when people simply seek a flamboyant demonstration of his divinity (4:48), in this case (6:30-31) he responds to the people's request by taking time to explain to them about bread from heaven, which is so much more valuable to them than another meal of fish and bread. Jesus may have known that these listeners had a real desire to find out if they were doing the right things to attract God's favor (6:28). Jesus offers himself as the answer. He keeps pointing them back to himself, the Messiah, the Messenger from God. Jesus explains that this time, unlike the time when

the Israelites received manna, the Bread God gives is for the whole world.

These people realized that the bread and fish they'd recently eaten was provided by a miracle (6:14). Their understanding may have provided an opening for Jesus to describe himself, the non-decaying, eternal Bread of Life but with a twist they had not expected.

The people respond with an eagerness for redemption, even if their understanding was limited (6:32). Jesus announces to them, "I am the bread of life." He is both the Giver (the Source of the bread) and the substance, the actual food that has come down from heaven—like manna, except this time with a nourishment that will last forever, nourishment for the whole world (6:33, 40). Jesus points out that God has earmarked those who will find a loving acceptance when they come to him. Here Jesus explains that the entire plan of salvation is God's, with all its parts prescribed by him and now handed over to Jesus for execution (6:44): "All those the Father gives me will come to me" (6:37). Everyone who looks to the Son will have Eternal Life—permanent salvation, unlike the one-time rescue the Israelites received in the wilderness when they looked to the statue of the serpent in order to survive the snakebite.

Jesus uses an "I AM" statement, again linking himself with Yahweh. Jesus identifies himself as the Source of all life, with reassurance of complete satisfaction forever as only God, our Benefactor, can satisfy (Psalm 103:5). Again, when Jesus equates himself with the Father, some of the Jewish religious leaders resent this message (6:41-42). Some of them stumble over his earthly genealogy—they know his mom and dad, so how can he claim to come "from heaven" (6:42)? It's possible they didn't like the idea of universal access to salvation that Jesus was presenting, finding it inconsistent with their interpretation of salvation as being the exclusive privilege of Jews. But Jesus has stated it plainly: *Everyone* who believes in the Son will have Eternal Life (6:40). His mission from God is to ensure that those whom God has chosen to be his children will remain connected and faithful.

Jesus is aware of the grumbling—the same attitude (grumbling) that described how the Israelites revolted against God in the wilderness because they were dissatisfied with the food they were given (Numbers 21:5). Jesus reminds them that if they were faithful to God's Word, they would know that he represents God. He is teaching about himself in fulfillment of prophecy (6:45). Jesus explains His Messianic role as one of a sacrifice for the world, using an "I AM" statement: "I am the bread of life... I am the living bread that came down from heaven"; or as quoted by his enemies, "I am the bread

that came down from heaven..." (6:35, 41, 48, 51) These statements convey truths about Jesus, the Son of God. He is the bread that gives life. He is a living, dynamic, life-giving, transformative entity with the mysterious capability to enter into a person and continue living. Those who eat the bread "live forever" (6:51, 58). This power of immortality is conveyed with the same language that described the tree of life in Genesis 3:22.

The critical Jewish leaders stumble over a literal interpretation of Jesus' words: "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" (6:53). This misunderstanding often takes place, as God seems to give some people understanding to receive spiritual truth while others get hung up on the literal sense (John 3:4ff, 4:11ff, 11:11ff). This same difficulty in understanding appears to surround the mystery of the Eucharist today. People struggle to realize that the bread and wine are more than physical symbols, and that Jesus is fully present in the believer who shares in the Eucharist, to the same extent as during the original Last Supper.

It does not seem reasonable to understand Jesus' words as meaning that every time a person eats bread they are eating his body, etc. The only other situation these words could apply meaningfully seems to be in celebrating the Passover as depicted in the Last Supper. This was an occasion at which God's salvation of his people was ritually acknowledged. In the same way Jesus invites people to formally acknowledge him and in that context the spiritual operation of converting the ordinary bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Jesus occurs as we put Jesus' words into action, even today.

Not understanding Jesus' statements in their ritual context, these critics of Jesus' teaching miss the spiritual content that Jesus conveys using human words and concepts (6:53-59). We eat Christ's flesh and drink his blood by taking something outside of us into ourselves. We internalize the Spirit and make him a natural part of our entire makeup and functioning. The events in the wilderness were limited by the fact that consuming ordinary food did not give Eternal Life. At that time God used a material life event to teach the Israelites about his life-giving power. But in this case Jesus is using spiritual life language to teach about God's power to give life eternally through his Son.

In these verses Jesus seems to be making the Passover meal and the Holy Eucharist an indispensable medium for the renewal or strengthening of our faith in his Work. To live a spiritual life on earth and be equipped to live eternally with God it is necessary for Christ to co-habit with us by being ingested in the way that last Passover meal with his disciples was and for us

to continue to be reminded of our unique relationship with Christ through regular celebration of the moment of salvation. We accept Jesus words because we believe in him (6:64) and always trust Scripture's instruction. So we believe enactment of Jesus' Passover flesh-and-blood meal becomes an essential means of our spiritual nourishment and sustenance, acting in us like real food (6:55), though this Food (Jesus Himself) came down from heaven (6:58). Yet, these spiritual truths remained steeped in mystery for those who could not perceive the truth in Jesus' words (6:60). Perhaps it is important to recognize the main significance of depending on Jesus in the way we depend on food for survival generally (Deuteronomy 8:3; Matthew 4:4) as opposed to the specific acknowledgement of his sacrificial death, which is to be memorialized in the Eucharist ceremony. So then a person may not diminish spiritually if, say, for medical reasons they cannot eat or drink. It is believing in Jesus' words and the working of Holy Spirit that ultimately counts (6:63).

Some Followers Walk Away from Jesus

Those followers with materialistic and earth-bound thinking who could not accept Jesus' spiritually-oriented teaching about how to get Eternal Life, turn out to be those God has not selected (6:64-65). Jesus challenges them with a "What if?" scenario (6:60-61) that will actually take place at his coming Ascension. We know, from hindsight, the truth of this statement that the Son of Man will ascend to heaven, where he was before.

John reminds us that Jesus was not surprised by this departure of some of his followers (6:37, 64). Jesus knows who will accept Him and who will not, since it is His task to conserve the group of those that are already chosen by God to remain faithful. He always knew that people were not equipped to receive the full content of his message by their own understanding. God wanted prospective believers who would be willing to continue to trust him implicitly whether they were able to see beyond the ordinary facts of human life or not. He has already selected those who will respond favorably to Jesus (6:65). Nonetheless as Peter tells us, believers must be "alert and of sober mind" (vigilant and clear-thinking) in protecting their faith (1 Peter 5:8). Therefore it is necessary to stay focused on Christ and God. Less than wholehearted allegiance means leaving the door open for Satan to enter. This could, did and does lead to being unable to resist his temptations (13:27).

On the other hand, despite being chosen by God to be Jesus' followers they could exercise their freewill to stay with Jesus or leave. He reiterates this choice to the twelve closest of His disciples (6:67). His question seems to call on the disciples to engage in soul-searching for any conflict about their continued commitment to his message and acceptance of whom he has claimed to be. Peter's answer is an unequivocal, substantive, illuminating, and broadly appealing acknowledgement that Jesus is the Christ (6:68-69). The Evangelist could not have heard a more convincing endorsement of what he would later communicate in his Gospel.

Jesus replies to Peter with a comment that the Evangelist explains refers to Judas. Though in the form of a question, Jesus was rather emphatically stating: I have chosen you, even the one who will betray me. Jesus showed his foreknowledge, as well as indicating that Satan's minions can be found at work in the least likely places, even attempting to sow corruption at the source of God's dispensation of Grace (6:70-71).



Respond to God's Word

1. Jesus feeds a huge crowd, and soon after that, he walks on water during a storm. When do you struggle to trust in God's provision or in God's power? What do you know about who God is, as shown to you in the person of Jesus in this chapter, that helps you to trust him?
2. If you wonder whether you are one of "those he has given me"—that is, the ones who belong to Jesus—consider the evidence that shows this. In what ways have you shown evidence that you partake of the Bread of Life?
3. Some of Jesus' followers said, "This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?" They were responding as believers needing to internalize his blood and flesh. How do you understand this hard teaching? How do you see it as connected to Jesus' mission?

Pray

- Praise God for having an inexhaustible store of provisions. Thank him for his compassion for you in your difficult circumstances, and confirm your faith in him to help you overcome them in the way he already has decided is good for you.
- Thank the Lord for His way of showing up in our life's storms and ask the Holy Spirit for the ability to recognize and trust the Lord's calming and unique way of solving life's problems.
- Ask God to help you continue to seek nourishment from him, the spiritual staple food of life.
- Thank God that he is the ultimate source of the satisfaction of all your needs and for his benevolent love in choosing you to share Eternal Life with Him.

The Living Water

John 7

While Jesus' opponents among the Jewish religious leaders accused him as a blasphemer, John takes pains to show us Jesus as a worshipper! Worship is faithfully and rightfully acknowledging God's supremacy. It is often an outward and public communion with our Maker that Jesus modeled for us as a reminder of God's continuing presence.

Across the years of Israel's history, the people experienced God's presence and his glory, first in the ancient Tabernacle—essentially a portable booth, which they built and moved with them as they traversed the wilderness (Exodus). Since those Old Testament days, the Jews have celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles, or Festival of Booths—an eight-day festival in September or October, during which they live in makeshift booths, pray for rain for their crops and commemorate those years of wandering in the desert without permanent homes.

In due course after settling in their respective territories they had a permanent Temple built in Jerusalem. Jesus teaches that he is now the permanent Living Temple. According to Josephus (a first-century Jewish-Roman historian and religious scholar), when the physical temple was fully lighted during the Feast of Tabernacles, its powerful illumination from Mt Zion could be seen by the world. Christ the spiritual Temple is the Light of the world.

Jesus at the Feast on His Own Terms

The opposition to Christ was growing into a heightened desire to kill Him (John 5:18; 7:19, 30, 44; 8:37, 59; 10:31, 39; 11:53). Even within his own family there seems to be a vicious undermining designed to expose him to danger that could cause his death. His brothers, listed as James, Joseph, Simon and a Judas, who were possibly step-siblings on Joseph's side from a previous marriage (including sisters, Matthew 13:55-56; Mark 6:3), according to the Evangelist, misunderstand or reject his message (7:5). As such they attempt to entice Him with humanly appealing emotional desires ("Show yourself to the world" as a wonderworker), which shows their ignorance of Jesus' true

calling. Perhaps this is not so surprising, since even his own disciples (including John, prior to Jesus' resurrection) failed to grasp the true essence of his Messianic role (2:22). His brothers however seemed to see His actions as motivated by a desire to become famous. Perhaps they were actually unaware of the danger Jesus faced and its extent. The other gospels mention that prophets are rarely honored in their own hometowns or among relatives (Mark 6:4, Matthew 13:57, Luke 4:24) and John recalls that Jesus said so (4:44). Nonetheless Jesus' brothers did come to believe in Him (Acts 1:13-14).

Though Jesus as God could divinely bind his opponents from acting against him, he chooses a human solution to avoid encountering his enemies in Judea, first staying in Galilee, then going up to Jerusalem quietly (7:9-10). He turns down his brothers' misguided invitation for public dramatic display because his mission had a different goal that's based on a purposeful plan. Avoiding the company of these brothers, who thought any time was good for a display of Jesus' power, Jesus went up to the Festival later (7:8). He knew his "time" had not yet come (that is, the time for his ministry's "grand finale," his glorification). At the very beginning of the Gospel of John, at the start of the Prologue, the text says, "His own did not receive him." These brothers would be a part of this group, who so clearly do not recognize Jesus for who he is. Later, his brothers James and Jude would become authors respectively of two Epistles in the New Testament.

John reports that Jesus went up to the Festival after telling his brothers he was not going to attend (7:8,10). Jesus did stay in Galilee for a time before going up to Jerusalem in secret. Perhaps he was acting shrewdly, to match the craftiness of his brothers (see the parable of the Shrewd Manager in Luke 16:8; also David's Song of Deliverance in 2 Samuel 22:26-27 about showing oneself shrewd when among the "devious"). Jesus went on his own terms, to ensure his work would go according to his Father's plan.

By the time Jesus arrived at the Festival, there were already conflicting whispering voices about Jesus and his ministry. Whether they were detractors or people who privately believed Jesus was the Messiah, saying anything publicly was politically unsafe (7:13). Speaking in Jesus' favor meant opposing the leaders; and others who supported his enemies would not wish to be star witnesses for the death penalty in a Roman court. Regardless, the Evangelist sets a scene that is fraught with danger for the perceived self-proclaimed Messiah.

A few days into the Festival, Jesus begins to teach in the temple courts and easily distinguished himself by the quality and profundity of his teaching

(7:14-15). His learning impressed his listeners who realized he did not go through the lengthy traditional training in the rabbinical schools and under formal rabbinic mentorship. Jesus did not quote the teachings of any of the leading scholars to lend credibility to his scholarship—because he didn't need their authority.

Jesus humbly and immediately points to the source of his teaching message and credibility: He is depending on God, speaking from his knowledge of God with truth and genuineness, not motivated to enhance his own position but solely to glorify God. He challenges the crowd to observe whether anyone else is proving their authenticity by exclusively promoting God as the Author of their message and not themselves. According to Jesus, the evidence of whose protégé he is contrasts starkly with the religious leaders' disobedience of the teachings in the Law of Moses. Jesus points out that they are not even keeping the law that they accuse him of breaking; therefore he challenges their murderous motivation by plainly asking, "Why [then] are you trying to kill me?" (7:19).

Escalating Conflict

"The crowd" (which is John's code for uncommitted listeners) remains in the dark about the bloodthirsty intentions of Jesus' opponents and as such accuses him of being delusional (7:20). Jesus knows they have been accusing him as a Sabbath-violator since the healing of the paralyzed man at the Pool of Bethesda (5:1-13, 16, 18). He exposes the hypocrisy of the religious leaders as well as their limited understanding of God's new relationship with humankind. It would seem logical that if the Sabbath rules have not been a hindrance to performing circumcision on one part of the body (as an act of submission to their covenant with God), then the Sabbath rules do not prohibit healing a whole person in submission to the New Covenant. Jesus' opponents are comfortable violating the Sabbath Law to keep a circumcision law that came from the patriarch about one part of the body (on the eighth day of a boy's birth). Yet they seek to take his life, for healing a whole person, which they hypocritically claim is a serious breach of the same Law. In fact none of these assailants can claim innocence from breaking the Law.

At the time when Jesus healed the man at the Pool of Bethesda he explained his action as: "My Father is working, and I AM also." (5:17) He urges the people to stop deciding on spiritual matters only on how things appear

from a human perspective, which is bound to be wrong; God's work needs to be evaluated from God's point of view, the only correct way (7:24).

John the Evangelist does not record all the times that Jesus healed on the Sabbath (Matthew 12:9-14; Mark 3:1-6; Luke 6:6-11, Luke 13:14-17, 14:1-6; John 5:9-18; 9:13-14). At other times his actions were used to oppose him. He defended his disciples when critics found fault with them plucking and eating corn as they went through a cornfield on the Sabbath (Matthew 12:1-8; Mark 2:23-28). Jesus cast out demons on a Sabbath day (Mark 1:21-26, Luke 4:31-35). He was doing the work his Father gave him to do.

Jesus is well aware that the people of Jerusalem were debating whether or not he could really be the Messiah (7:26-27) and also discussing the threat against his life (7:25). He answers their questions as if they'd spoken them aloud to him (7:28-29). Jesus tells the people his earthly origin is not the whole story about who he is. His work originates from God, who is authentic and has no hidden agenda. Therefore his Message from God is trustworthy, and Jesus cannot be accused of fudging it. In other words, he plainly claims, "I'm genuinely God's Messiah."

Infuriated, they tried to capture Jesus, but they were supernaturally restrained (7:30) against their will! The time of Christ's glorification is to take a little bit longer (7:8); that will happen at the Cross. Meanwhile, many who are coming to believe in Jesus' claim do so because they realize it couldn't be possible for some future Messiah to show God's power more convincingly than Jesus does (7:31).

The authorities act decisively once they hear the rumor that Jesus must be the Messiah, sending the temple guards to arrest Jesus (7:32). It's true however that, secretly, some of the religious leaders agreed that Jesus must really be the One sent from God.

Jesus knows the time of his death is drawing near, though not according to the timetable of his opponents. He speaks about his return to "him that sent me". We know he meant to his Father, which would follow after his death on the cross and his resurrection. None of his believers can take that journey with Him.

The critical Jews begin to mock Jesus' statement about going where they cannot go (7:35-36). Where could a Jewish rabbi go to teach about the Law of Moses, except perhaps to Jews who were dispersed in the Greek world among the pagans, due to the Diaspora of the Babylonian exile? But John's readers know, from having just read about Jesus bringing the teaching about the Living Water to the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well, that Jesus absolutely

would bring the good news to those beyond the local Jewish community. And, of course, the gospel about Jesus has been spread directly to these very Greeks through the work of Paul, the apostle to the gentiles.

The Evangelist seems almost to be saying to his readers, “That crowd could not figure it out, but you know where Christ would be, don’t you?” He would be with God the Father. It’s a bit more difficult to know to which group Jesus is saying, “You will look for me and not be able to find me.” To be sure, his disciples will see him briefly in person after his death; but all believers will have to undertake a spiritual journey to be reunited with him permanently in heaven. The looking and not finding is more permanent for those who fail altogether to understand the significance of Jesus’ life and death.

Jesus the Living Water

With the growing belief that Jesus was the Christ, the Evangelist presents Jesus’ teaching about himself as the spiritual Source of life (living waters). Believers will have this unending, Spirit-generated life in themselves (7:37-44). Some of John’s readers would understand that Jesus was teaching about the gift of the Holy Spirit, which came at Pentecost. Still, Jesus’ unbelieving listeners would know that Jeremiah had cautioned against rejecting “the Lord, the fountain of all living waters” (Jeremiah 17:13).

His listeners at the height of the Festival of Tabernacles were in all likelihood already reflecting on what it meant to be thirsty in the desert and to believe in the benevolent God who quenched that thirst when Moses struck the rock. They could understand that Jesus’ reference to himself as living water was part of his claim to being the Son of God. Jesus’ mention of “rivers of living water” recalls a prediction that when the Messiah comes he will cause a river to flow from the Temple in Jerusalem (Joel 3:18).

The Festival attendees were talking about Jesus, calling him the “prophet” (a reference to Elijah or the person of whom Moses spoke) or the Messiah (7:40-41). Some wanted to do away with him, while others couldn’t agree on his identity, stumbling over his origins in Galilee—not knowing, as John’s readers would have known, that Jesus had indeed been born in Bethlehem, the town of David.

The hostile religious leaders want to seize him, but they are prevented. These leaders are not in control, and neither are the stubborn unbelievers in this crowd. God is in control, always bringing about his salvation plan,

with these naysayers unwittingly serving to support it. Despite the people's disagreement about Jesus (7:43) and the clampdown by the leaders on any public expression of faith in him, his Messianic credibility spreads.

Dissension among Jesus' Religious Opponents

The Temple guards sent by the Sanhedrin ended up returning to report they found it unreasonable to carry out the arrest of so untypical an “agitator” (7:45-49). The “rulers of the Pharisees” dismiss their response as uneducated on the law (7:49) and must have been deceived by Jesus. It appears the crowd's action or reaction, to which the guard was sympathetic, deterred them from arresting Jesus. Ironically the Pharisees describe the crowd contemptuously as “cursed,” or spiritually condemned for believing in Jesus as compared to themselves, the “holy people” who did not believe.

John wisely includes a comment from Nicodemus, subtly reminding his readers that there were some among the Jewish leadership, who secretly believe in Jesus. Nicodemus calls attention to the legal requirement of an examination before a verdict of guilt (7:50-51). The others dismiss Nicodemus's correct and law-abiding suggestion by restating a well-known false stereotype that no prophet (including the Messiah) can come out of Galilee—despite the fact that the prophet Isaiah had predicted God “... will honor Galilee” (Isaiah 9:1). The birthplace of Jonah was Gath-Hepher and of Elijah was Tishbe, both in Galilee. Also Hosea and Elisha were most likely Galileans.



Respond to God's Word

1. What do you make of Jesus' brothers' attitude: veiled sibling rivalry, opposition, naïve innocence, or genuine interest?
2. In this chapter, John describes a wide range of responses by various people toward Jesus. Judging from this account, why do you think Jesus was so badly misunderstood?
3. How do people misunderstand Jesus in contemporary times? Are there similarities to the positions reflected in the people described in this passage?
4. What does the response of the religious leaders to Nicodemus (7:52) suggest? Surely they must know (and that Nicodemus also knows) that there were prophets from Galilee. Therefore what do you think the Evangelist wants their response to show?

Pray

- Ask the Holy Spirit to remove from you any attitude or tendency that might subvert the gospel message.
- Ask Holy Spirit to teach you when and how to speak out or act out of honesty against leaders who expect you just to follow their questionable lead, uncritically.
- Ask for insight into spiritual activities and truths that your human knowledge cannot give you and how to understand Scripture for that purpose.
- Praise the Lord for his example of courage and ask that you may receive reminders and empowerment to act in the same way.
- Pray for the Work of Holy Spirit in convicting believers and attracting non-believers to continue to inspire and encourage the committed.

Light of the World, Forgiver of Sins

John 8

The eighth chapter of John opens with a section that scholars believe may have been appended by someone else and not written by John the Evangelist. God, in his sovereignty and wisdom, has allowed this passage to be included—and I praise God that it is. Fully in keeping with John’s purpose of showing who God is by showing us Jesus, this story of the woman caught in adultery (which doesn’t appear in the other Gospel accounts) gives us special insight into God’s approach to the sinful state of humankind. Jesus shows us, clearly and unambiguously, a non-dogmatic, compassionate, and forgiving God. Yea!

A Woman Caught in the Act of Adultery

Jesus is still in Jerusalem for the Festival of Tabernacles. Following the thorny confrontation with Jewish leaders in the Temple courts, the crowd goes home; but Jesus retreats to the Mount of Olives (7:53, 8:1; KJV). The text doesn’t say how he spent the time, but probably to rest and pray.

The next morning he appears again in the Temple courts (8:2). John uses a Greek word, *paregeneto*, that suggests Jesus appeared as if from nowhere or unexpectedly. Once again a crowd gathers to listen to Jesus teach with his distinctive authority. But his detractors from the day before have a trick up their sleeves and are hoping to trap Jesus and accuse him (8:6).

No doubt the teachers of the law and the Pharisees (8:3) believe they have flummoxed Jesus when they bring in a woman caught in the act of adultery and remind Jesus that the law of Moses commands that such a woman be stoned. They believe this is a win-win, ironclad case of jurisprudence in their favor. Their beef with Jesus has been what they view as rebellious disrespect for the Mosaic teaching (violating Sabbath rules). Since no backlash among the people has resulted from that, his religious opponents hope that sensitivity to a moral (sexual) crime will resonate more readily with the crowd. Clearly, Jesus is on trial (8:6). If Jesus agrees with the Mosaic Law, it strengthens their position and weakens Jesus’ stand of opposition to their brand of theology. By this they hope Jesus will be forced to show that their adherence

to the minutiae of the Mosaic Law really matters and not some idealistic innovation about the Kingdom of God. The opponents know that if he teaches anything contrary to the Law of Moses, it will antagonize the crowd. So the Jewish leaders hope that Jesus' reputation will be undermined, enough to have the crowd turn against him. They are sure they have him perfectly cornered!

Jesus' reaction was totally unexpected. It showed his superior knowledge of the Law as well as his empathy and compassion; but above all, unparalleled wisdom. His Solomon-style response does not violate the Mosaic Law his accusers quote but expands it in a way consistent with his other teachings—especially his teaching that God forgives our sins as we forgive others (see the parable about the wicked servant in Matthew 6:12, 18:32). At the same time he frees humankind from the tyranny of the judgment of others by teaching us to look first at our own shortcomings (Matthew 7:5). He teaches here, too that, before God, we are all sinners and cannot ever approach him as if we are superior to others. Even his accusers versed in the Law had no choice but to withdraw!

The Evangelist tells us that Jesus bends and writes on the ground (8:6). The question of what he was writing continues to be intriguing. One theory is that Jesus may have written the sins of the woman's accusers in the crowd, which they severally recognized and so departed. Beyond that however it's possible the Jewish accusers and observers recall the words of Jeremiah 17:13: "O Lord, the hope of Israel, all that forsake you shall be ashamed, and those who depart from me shall be written in the earth (in the dust), because they have forsaken the Lord, the fountain of living waters." Moreover many at the Festival of Booths would also remember Jesus' declaration on the last day: "If anyone is thirsty for God that person should come to me to satisfy that thirst; because if you believe in me, as Scripture says, life-giving rivers will flow from your innermost being" (7:37-38, paraphrased). Jeremiah's words seem to connect the event of Jesus writing on the ground with that significant prophetic message and as such contributes to John's goal of proving Jesus is God's Messiah.

This was a tense situation, with all eyes on Jesus. It seems that John would report on the content of the writing if the words had theological significance for his disciples and accusers to see. While in view of Jeremiah's words Jesus' action of writing probably did have a purpose, in all likelihood the actual content was unimportant, especially that he resumed writing with no one showing interest. John indicates that it was to Jesus' words that the people

reacted (“... those who heard”, 8:9) rather than to his writing. Jesus may have used the writing time to deliberately delay giving a verdict to allow momentum to build for maximum teaching value. And what a verdict! Jesus’ response shows that only the Messiah can be greater than Moses and Solomon. Jesus displays his divine nature, “slow to anger and abounding in love” (Psalm 103; Jonah 4:2), and he shows that God understands the common condition of sinful humankind and wants to free us for a better life (1 John 1:9). At Jesus’ perfect words, the accusers become the accused, and the one they accuse is allowed to go free, empowered to live a better life. The accusers and the crowd leave, with the oldest leaving first, perhaps because they have had the most sin.

Jesus reacts to the woman with respect and compassion in contrast to the behavior of contempt and condemnation from the religious authorities. He relates to her in a way that would make her re-evaluate her social status (“Has no one condemned you?”) and her self-worth (“Neither do I condemn you.” In every encounter with God, the humble (contrite) sinner leaves his presence better and “cleaner.” God is always willing to forgive and show mercy. The judgments given by Jesus were to lighten the load (“My yoke is easy and my burden is light” Matthew 11:30). This time his judgment set the path to a new and better life for this woman.

The Light of the World

This story of Christ’s forgiveness for the woman caught in adultery is neatly juxtaposed with his teaching that he is the Light of the World. With startling contrast, we see the Pharisees operating in theological darkness, tending toward the wrong path, behaving as if they are reading from a different scriptural script. And Jesus presents another “I AM” statement that enlarges our picture of his role as the Messiah: “I am the light of the world” (8:12). Jesus brings illumination through the revelation of the full identity of God and gives to his followers the “light of life”, the light that brings life—that is, Eternal Life in the kingdom of God. We follow Jesus with assurance, as the lamp for our feet (Psalm 119:105), on the Way that leads to the presence of the loving and forgiving Father, where there is Eternal Life. By following Jesus we learn to live the life God wants for us (1 John 1:5-7).

The Pharisees again accuse Jesus of being his own witness, whose claims cannot be backed by anyone else (8:13). John uses this comment to present

the case for why the religious authorities are misguided about his message of divinity (8:14-18). His identity is wrapped up with where he comes from and will return, which includes being with God before his incarnation, the bringing of salvation through his glorification at the Cross, his resurrection, and his ascension. The religious leaders do not have this information, and they are not and have not been in right relationship with the Father to be able to accept God's testimony about Jesus. Because they have used only faulty, judgmental, human criteria to evaluate his status, their conclusions about Jesus are certain to be flawed. Their deficient understanding does not invalidate Jesus' claims. The Father, who designed Jesus' ministry, validates Christ's work.

The accusers, almost mockingly, display their ignorance of the Father (John 8:19), and Jesus immediately points out that ignorance: "If you knew me, you would know my Father." Though this interchange is taking place among those who are hostile to him, Jesus is in charge (no one can seize him "because his hour had not yet come"). The words "Where I go, you cannot come" reiterate the words "you will die in your sin." These unbelievers will remain separated from God. If they do not believe Jesus is the One he claims to be, there will be no Salvation for them. For now the door is open for their repentance, but there will be a point when this available access point (Jesus) will not be found (8:21). The crowd gets sidetracked confused by not knowing where he would go that they couldn't go, guessing therefore that he might mean suicide.

Who Is Jesus, Really?

When at last they ask the right question ("Who are you?"), the Jewish leaders continue to misunderstand Jesus' answer. Jesus points to his crucifixion! The proof of his identity—the explanation of his life on earth and true relationship with the Father—all come together, to be revealed at the time of his glorification when he is crucified (8:28-29).

The accusers began by accusing him of self-promotion, but Jesus repeatedly refers to the Father's full direction and support of everything Jesus does (8:29). Then they question his claim to be God's Son, which he puts down to their estrangement from God. Though this angers them, they are prevented from taking action against him (8:20). They continue to misunderstand and dismiss his teaching (8:22, 27). Yet despite all the efforts of these naysayers,

John shows us that Jesus' message is still getting through and changing lives: "Many believed in him" (8:30).

Who Are the Descendants of Abraham?

The next teaching that John presents is significant information that he gives specifically to the Jews who had become believers (8:31), some of whom came from that very group of Jewish leaders who had been opposing him. We know of a few in that category—Nicodemus, Joseph of Arimathea, possibly Jairus, whose daughter Jesus brought back to life (Luke 8:40-42, 49-56). Jesus explains that those who continue in, or remain committed (*meinete*, which in Greek indicates continuing adherence) to his teaching, are his disciples. Complying with his teaching is not a one-shot attempt but a continuing practice. Such a life-style will set free believers from their sinful life with its eternal deadly consequences, like a slave released from the shackles in which his former master (Satan) once had him.

As descendants of Abraham, the Jews believed that God is their religious Father, who, through Abraham, made them beholden only to him (8:33). Jesus was not focused on their covenant history but on their personal relationship with God—and he saw the slavery of sin. Some rejected Jesus because they were not willing to accept what they took as his unorthodox reinterpretation of their Scripture. In pride, they refused to revise *their own* understanding of the Scriptures. So they continued to believe they had always been free from enslavement, although even at the time of this exchange the Jewish nation was under Roman rule.

These new believers, however, needed to set aside the Abrahamic heritage for a freedom from sin they would receive from the Kingdom about which Jesus preaches. The fledgling faith of these first believers required nurturing and mentoring, which Jesus provides (8:34-38). Jesus teaches that not living under God's rule means accepting the rule of sin, which is the same as being shackled to it. This is the life and death that those who refuse to join God's family of believers are doomed to experience. It is sin that estranges people from God, giving "no permanent place in the family." Jesus explains that it makes sense to turn to and believe in him, the only one who can lift us out of our second-class position of slavery and give us a recognized place that we can never lose, as members of the family in God's Kingdom. A son or daughter belongs in the family forever (8:35).

Those who resist Christ's teaching are in effect showing allegiance to and obeying Satan (who can only keep them enslaved): "You are doing what you have heard from your father" (8:38); and are acting under Satan's deceitful and destructive influence, not as Abraham's children (8:44). Satan's lies leave "no room" for Jesus' true words (8:37). Jesus reminds them that if they were using Abraham as their guide in life then they should have unquestioned faith in him as Abraham did (8:39-41). The people fail to recognize that they could not be following in Abraham's legacy of faith in God if they had murderous intentions toward God's Son. Eventually they recognize that by "your Father" Jesus means "spiritual father" rather than biological ancestor. As such they "protested" that there is no illegitimate father responsible for their spiritual ancestry: "The only Father we have is God himself." (8:41)

Jesus explains why his opponents are unable to perceive him as the Son of God, who in obedience is carrying out his Father's bidding. He points to the evidence of his sinless record as an indisputable known fact, which distinguishes him from other human beings. It was a common business practice for a son to represent his father at all times, with the trustworthy son having full power to represent the father's wishes. The people Jesus is addressing should understand the legitimacy of a son standing in for his father, as this was a common practice. Jesus tells them that the reason they cannot understand the straightforward language he uses to announce the Father's message is that they are listening instead to Satan (the murderer and liar, 8:44). Their heads are full of misinformation and cannot tolerate or trust the truth Jesus provides.

Jesus made a clear distinction between his opponents being Abraham's descendants (John 8:37) and choosing to be children of the devil (8:44). The relationship to Abraham was the result of God's promise to give Abraham countless descendants, which he sealed with a covenant (Genesis 15:4-6, 18-21). Their ancestry as a nation was divinely instituted. On the other hand, the antagonistic, disbelieving attitude of Jesus' enemies clearly demonstrates that they have rejected Abraham as their ancestral father and replaced him with the devil—an untrustworthy, destructive guide. In contrast, Jesus says the person whose allegiance is to God pays attention to what comes from God (8:47). Such a person can hear and receive the words of God.

In their ignorance, Jesus' opponents accuse Jesus of being a hated Samaritan and demon-possessed—dishonoring his Jewish heritage and labeling him insane. The insult is even worse in Aramaic, in which the word for "Samaritan" (*Shomeron*) is the same as "child of the Devil." John the

Baptist also warned them of their misguided view of a guaranteed access to God because of His covenant with Abraham. The Baptist addressed them as: “You brood of vipers! (Matthew 3:7-10)

Jesus repeats the truth about himself—that his loyalty and obedience is to God the Father and their opportunity for Eternal Life is obedience to his message (8:49-51). He does not fight the slur on his character, but merely says, “You dishonor me.” God is the true judge, he reminds them, and his work is to proclaim salvation for those who demonstrate faith, for God’s glory.

The persistent misunderstanding by his opponents gives Jesus more opportunity to speak the truth about himself (8:52-58). They seem truly to believe he is out of his mind and taken over by a demonic spirit. Ironically, their incensed accusations (“Are you greater than our father Abraham? He died, and so did the prophets.”) actually point out the truth: Yes! Jesus is greater than Abraham and all the prophets; they are people but he is God. Yes, they died; but Jesus is eternal. He just keeps pointing to the authority of God his Father (8:54-56). He reminds them that Abraham knew the promise of the Messiah and welcomed his coming.

Jesus’ claim to know Abraham (see Luke 16:19-31) is the last straw for these literal human thinkers who cannot believe that Jesus is God. When Jesus claims to be God, these unbelievers prepare to stone him as a blasphemer.

But it wasn’t God’s plan for Jesus to die in that way on that day; and he slipped away.



Respond to God's Word

1. Review Jesus' response to the woman caught in sin, in contrast to that of his opponents' behavior. Since Jesus reveals God the Father, how do you feel about God's justice?
2. How have you broken free from the slavery of sin? Does your method include Jesus' teaching on how to become free? If not you're not alone. Now you need to set up a daily devotional plan or select one from a book or an online source. Ideally your plan needs to include a bible passage, a commentary on the passage and a prayer. This will keep you close to effective biblical solutions and expectations
3. What is Jesus trying to teach his listeners when he claims, "Before Abraham was born, I am!"?

Pray

- Thank the Lord for his Grace and his lesson on the equality of our condition before God and for imparting the wisdom of refraining from attacking or condemning others on moral grounds.
- Ask the Holy Spirit to help you live by Christ, the Light of the World, as a guide for your footsteps.
- Ask the Holy Spirit to keep the "face of God" implanted in your heart to enable you to recognize him in action in your life and in the world.
- Acknowledge your need to hear God speaking to you directly and through Scripture as well as for the constant willingness to follow his instruction.
- Ask the Lord to strengthen your assurance of belonging to his family and remove any trace of rejection at any level or in any area of your life.

Jesus Gives Vision to a Man Born Blind

John 9

This account of Jesus restoring the sight of a Man Born Blind makes a natural complement to his teaching that he himself is the Light of the World. In this sixth miraculous sign included by John in his Gospel, Jesus is shown more clearly as God or the equally powerful Son of God. John had introduced him as “The true light that gives light to everyone” (1:9) so now Jesus confirms this fact (9:5) and demonstrates that ability in a way that everyone can relate. John also reports words of Jesus (8:12) telling us he is the life-giving Light from God that reveals God out of the darkness of the world’s ignorance about who he really is: The light, which heralds Eternal Life by shining on the darkness that’s stopping us from knowing and acknowledging the true God.

When Jesus and his disciples encounter a man blind since birth, his disciples want to know if the man’s blindness was punishment for his own sin or for sins committed by his parents (9:1). The Jewish people inferred from the laws given by Moses the idea that good actions brought good consequences and bad ones produced bad results (Deuteronomy 28). This cause-effect result of sin would extend across generations. For example, the second commandment carries the warning that for those who display hatred for God, “the iniquity of the fathers” will be “visited” on the descendants to “the third and fourth generation” (Exodus 20:5). We are told a preceding generation’s rejection of God tends to have consequences that continue to be evident for many generations. With sin multiplying however, the Lord’s Word, which came through the prophet Ezekiel seems to now hold individuals accountable for their own misdeeds. Ezekiel rejected a local legend: “The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge,” instead saying: “the one who sins is the one who will die” (Ezekiel 18:2-4)

In Jesus’ time apparently, prevailing folklore assumed that children could inherit the sins of a past generation and among the Jews blindness was considered one of the worst punishments—indicative of some detestable wrongdoing. And experiencing that “punishment” since birth made it most pathetic.

As usual Jesus' response falls perfectly in line with God's agenda for salvation and for displaying the truth that Jesus and the Father are one. The disciples' question (9:2) allows Jesus to present an answer to the larger question: *Is suffering the result of sin?*

The Bible points to several explanations for why people endure suffering or trials. It does indeed mention that suffering can come from God (Ecclesiastes 9:1; 1 Peter 4: 19); it is inevitable (Ecclesiastes 7:14; 1 Thessalonians 3:3). Pain and adversity are also the consequence of committed sin (Psalm 32:3-5, 119:67) and they prevent us from falling into sin in the first place (Hebrews 12:7; James 4:6-10; 1 Peter 4:15), especially that of pride (2 Corinthians 12:7b). We may infer however that sometimes we suffer because of our own doing; in other words we reap what we sow (Galatians 6:7-9). Suffering and trials can help us develop virtues (Romans 5:3-5; James 1:2-4; 1 Peter 1:6-7) and teach us obedience and discipline (Acts 9:15-16, Philippians 4:11-14). These experiences may equip us to comfort others (2 Corinthians 1:3-7), or prove the reality of Christ in us (2 Corinthians 1:8-11). The book of Job shows that even suffering is a sovereign right of God (Job 42:11; 1 Peter 4:19) that He may exercise on even people with impeccable lives (Job 1:8). Other passages suggest that our suffering may provide a benefit to others in testimony to our faith in Christ (Ephesians 3:12-13). Suffering because of our faith is good and to be expected (John 16: 2, 33; 2 Timothy 3:12; 1 Peter 3:14, 17). Certainly, an important reason for enduring suffering whether wrongfully or to prove the "genuineness of your faith" is to bring glory, honor and praise to God (Daniel 3:16-18, 24-29; 1 Peter 1:6-7).

This particular man's suffering (blindness) is God's teaching tool. Jesus explains that he was born blind "that the works of God might be displayed in him" (9:3). And the Light of the world proceeds to "do the works" of the One who sent him (9:4-5). Jesus creates sight (9:6) out of the dust of the earth (that is new sight; not by mending, since the man was blind since birth), much like when man was created in the beginning (2:7a).

The Old Testament prophecies claimed that the Messiah would make the blind see. The Source of all light in the world—physical light, all knowledge or enlightenment in the world, divine eternal light, and the revelation of God (1 John 1:5)—deliberately displays his divine identity in this extraordinary act of healing.

Jesus tells the man to wash in the pool of Siloam, and the Evangelist includes the meaning of that name, "sent." Jesus himself is the Sent One, on a mission to represent the Father. Now he sends the healed man to proclaim

the Good News. The man left Jesus, still blind, probably so that he could not serve as an immediate eyewitness or because Jesus was avoiding the on-the-spot acclamation for such a spectacular gift.

The Spiritually Blind Miss the Point

Do the Pharisees rejoice at the goodness of this healing or the wonder of seeing God's work accomplished? No. Their spiritual vision is so impaired that all they can see is the possibility of themselves being displaced as the legitimately appointed representatives of God by the public seeing the display of and believing Jesus' divinity (9:38). Readers however are likely to see the religious leaders as bullies anxious to deny an obvious theological and down-to-earth truth: Jesus has divine power to heal and exercises it with compassion, putting aside human rules that could only hinder the progress of God's Work. Both the type of condition he healed and the way he did it showed he was God's Representative at work with full divine authority. Jesus acted how God's anointed Messiah of his people is expected to behave—with quiet, gentle confidence (Isaiah 42:1-4, 18). As such the only explanation consistent with Scripture was for the Pharisees to admit that Jesus was God's Messiah. This they could not accept.

Intent on discrediting Jesus to stop his growing popularity among the people, they behave in a way that sharply contrasts Jesus attitude. They emphasize obeying rules (in this case, Sabbath rules) rather than relieving suffering, stating boldly that “this man is not from God” despite all evidence to the contrary (9:16). Their emphasis on rules is going to contrast with the teaching Jesus will shortly provide about being the authentic, caring Good Shepherd. They interrogate the man and the man's parents, as if they and Jesus were accomplices, somehow faking the blindness; and thus the healing was a trick (9:18-19). They bully the parents, making them fear excommunication from the synagogue and social isolation. The religious establishment actively suppresses the truth by preventing people, with intimidation, from voicing their belief “that Jesus was the Messiah” (9:22) and these leaders seem to be putting pressure on the healed man to that end. Ironically the conclusion was unavoidable: “He is a prophet”, declares the man (9:17).

The Pharisees stick to their continual refrain that Jesus' claim to divinity is blasphemous and that his lack of respect for their Sabbath rules was contradictory. They just could not accept it was possible for an ordinary man, as they persisted in perceiving Jesus, to fill the role of the Messiah under God's anointment. Therefore they declared Jesus an impostor and a self-styled

prophet trying to deceive people and cause political havoc. But Jesus' actions showed the people that he is actually the God of Creation, and the Pharisees' witness for the prosecution (the previously blind man) turns out to be a more powerful witness for the defense!

"Give glory to God (by confessing to the truth)," the Pharisees demand (9:24-25), hoping the man will denounce Jesus as a fake. That a believer in God cannot lie under such oath has a long religious history (Joshua 7:19). Yet the healed man naively yet expertly avoids self-recrimination while confirming Jesus' divinity.

The Pharisees accuse the healed man of being a disciple (9:27) for not helping them expose the unseemly tactic they believe Jesus is using to entice people to believe. Instead God's Holy Spirit emboldens the man to refuse to obey their authority. As Jesus has done before, the man points out that they "don't know" everything! His words point to the imperfection or incompleteness of the theological knowledge of his questioners (9:30-33). The man testifies that a "godly person" does God's will, saying, "If this man were not from God, he could do nothing" (9:33). John the Evangelist gives a strong voice to the view of the man-in-the-street for recognizing that Jesus must be God's Special Messenger (or Son) acting with divine authority. Here the previously blind man is shedding God's Light on the darkness the religious leaders are in.

The man born blind physically and spiritually receives a double gift of illumination. We witness not only his immediate physical transformation but also the growth of his spiritual understanding as he sees Jesus initially as a man (9:11), then as a prophet (9:17) and finally as Lord (9:38). His testimony and confirmation of Christ's divine identity is compelling.

The frustrated synagogue rulers react by throwing him out, return to their claim that he was steeped in sin from birth; but Jesus has just plainly stated that his blindness was so that God's work could be displayed and gave him sight to demonstrate this point. Though the Pharisees have expelled him from the synagogue, Jesus does not shun him but seeks him out for a special theophany (see another unmistakable presentation of himself as Messiah in John 4:26).

The Pharisees had set out to destroy his credibility; instead they lose their power to crush the spreading evangelistic authenticity and spiritual legitimacy of Jesus' message. The truth about Jesus' divinity can win souls even against the most powerful of human obstacles! That healed man and every reader of the Gospel, including us, cannot but respond with acknowledgement and worship!

This miraculous sign presents a further dimension of divinity when we consider that the event was planned and put into action before this man was

born, in order that later in his life Jesus would create his sight. And now that Jesus has explained it we know that this blindness was indeed intended for God's glory. What an awe-inspiring and eye-opening blessing from impairment we would otherwise probably consider unjustified suffering!

The judgment that comes as a result of being exposed to Jesus' teaching happens by reason of the individual's choice: to believe in him and become enlightened or remain spiritually blind.

The Pharisees have *seen* God's power at work in Jesus. They cannot claim to be innocently blind, so their guilt remains (9:41) as they continue to reject the Light of the World who came to make the blind to see.



Respond to God's Word

1. When you have experienced suffering or hard times, how have you felt about God "letting" you suffer? Can you see any reasons for your suffering (and suffering in general), or is it all still a mystery?
2. Consider whether the religious leaders had a credible case against Jesus from any perspective, however weak. In their position, could you make a plausible argument for rejecting Christ?
3. The religious opponents of Jesus are described above as scared. Why were they afraid?

Pray

- Pray that a skewed perception of good and bad does not cloud your understanding that God is always at work for His own glory.
- Thank God that his wisdom and love are always in action for your good. Praise him for the work of Jesus that shows this.
- Pray for the courage and wisdom to be bold and understandable in testifying for Christ when required and to use the appropriate language and tone for the occasion (heeding 2 Timothy 2:24-25).
- Confess to the Lord that sometimes you stray from the path he has laid down for you to follow, behaving as if you are blind. Thank him for his mercy and the gift of his Spirit to help you to always act for His glory.

The Good Shepherd

John 10

The Jewish people knew that God was described in their scriptures as Israel's Shepherd (Psalm 23, 80:1-2, Isaiah 40:11). As their Shepherd, only God can appoint a representative in that role. Jesus is going to establish himself as the Shepherd (and the Gate), and show why God has not chosen the Pharisees as good shepherds of his people (Isaiah 56:10-11; Ezekiel 34:1-10). In fact, God promises to rescue his sheep from negligent, false shepherds and look after his sheep himself (Ezekiel 34:11-12). Jesus is the "David" (the one from the line of David) whom the Lord appoints as the Good Shepherd over Israel (Ezekiel 34:23-24). Those within the protection and care of the Good Shepherd will be saved from destruction and will have access to a well-rounded life. Jesus has the Father's full authority to bring his sheep into close relationship with him.

Jesus begins instructing the Pharisees by describing himself as both the Shepherd and the Gate. God the Father as Gatekeeper keeps the Good Shepherd connected to the sheep by providing an open Gate through which the sheep he has entrusted will go. Anyone who tries to get to the sheep by any way other than the Gate (Jesus) is "a thief and a robber" (10:1), and not a true shepherd.

The Good Shepherd's own sheep are mixed up among other sheep, but he calls them out and makes sure he doesn't leave any behind of his own (10:3-4). The sheep that are his listen for his voice as he calls them by name. He knows them, down to their individual unique nature (by name). Their connectedness comes essentially from listening to or hearing the Shepherd's voice. Those who follow the Shepherd are attentive to his presence and words (10:4) as he leads them. This image of a shepherd who "goes on ahead of them" recalls the time when God brought out his people and went ahead to lead them as a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night (Numbers 27:15-17; Exodus 13:21-22).

A shepherd must have an intimate connection with his sheep and the closeness has to be mutual as the sheep can guarantee their safety only by responding to the right shepherd (10:5). Jesus called his disciples by name and continues to do so with those who choose to follow him even today. Jesus is

pointing to those God has chosen as believers whom Satan and his representatives have not been and will not be able to ensnare (10:29-30).

John the Evangelist makes sure his readers don't miss Jesus presenting another "I AM" statement. Jesus says, "I AM the gate" (10:7, 9). This teaching follows the story about the Pharisees who set themselves up as the lawful gatekeepers (9:28); but they frighten the sheep, compared with Jesus who provides the ultimate safety and protection in God's Kingdom. Under God's loving sovereignty, those who choose to be his followers will "come in and go out and find pasture." No sheep can be lost because the only Gate is Jesus.

Jesus' message is that, in contrast to those who use devious ways to gain access to the people's attention but fail, he has come with legitimate intention and a selfless, authentic mission. Under this care his sheep will have complete safety, freedom and provisions—a picture of life that contradicts the non-believer's erroneous view that the Christian life is restrictive and limited. An outsider views Christianity as a life when someone else controls one's choices, forcibly. From the inside, however, we know we have willingly chosen to live "life to the full" (10:10), in safety with a loving Caregiver. In Greek this verse may be more meaningfully stated: "I came in order that believers might continuously live an all-round rich and satisfying life that's far beyond expectation."

This comfortable, pleasant, protected state of life lived in unlimited abundance is well portrayed in Psalm 23:

The Lord is my shepherd, I am never in need.
 He makes me lie down in green pastures,
 He leads me beside quiet waters,
 He energizes my life.
 He guides me along the right paths for his name's sake.
 Even though I walk through the darkest valley (where death hovers),
 I will fear no evil, for You are close beside me;
 Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me. (Psalm 23:1-4)

This psalm goes on to equate the relationship with that of royalty (23:5) and being at home (23:6) with God in heaven. This is the substance of the invitation from God through Jesus to come home that John wants to resonate with his readers. John's Gospel therefore emphasizes that Jesus is the legitimate emissary of a loving, bountiful God. And it is the message of this commentary's title, which comes as an appeal from our Father to the entire world. This

is the hope of everlasting life Christians have. We “hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful” (Hebrews 10:23).

Jesus describes himself as the Good Shepherd, who will not lead God’s people astray (Jeremiah 50:6). He says the shepherd offers his life for his sheep, reminding his listeners of David, who was also ready to do this, thereby foreshadowing the events of the Cross, when he will die in place of his sheep.

In contrast to this Good Shepherd’s committed and affectionate connection with His flock, Satan’s “employees,” who take instructions from that leader, do not feel any sense of caring responsibility toward the sheep as the owner does (10:12). For the Owner of the sheep, it is not a job but a relationship of love and mutual affection. The sheep know the Shepherd, recognize his voice, and listen to it (10:14, 27). The close intimate relationship eliminates uncertainty. Today we know the Shepherd and learn his voice through Scripture and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The ability to respond when God communicates comes from continuous self-surrender with strong belief in him and his Word. This close relationship between the Shepherd and his sheep parallels the one between Jesus and the Father, who have complete knowledge of each other (10:15).

Jesus refers to “other sheep,” not of the same pen, that he must bring (10:16). Jesus had already begun reaching beyond the Jews to the Samaritan people, and the ministry of the gospel, thanks mainly to St Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles (Acts 22:21; Romans 11:13; Galatians 2:8), was going to extend among many gentiles across the world, bringing us all into the one Shepherd’s fold.

Jesus says he will undertake the ultimate expression of the Shepherd’s work; his death is going to be a willing and divinely sanctioned self-sacrifice. Jesus will take up his life again after giving it up (10:17-18).

As usual, those listening to Jesus are divided in their view of who he is. Some of these previously stubborn leaders are now openly endorsing the divine authority behind Jesus’ ministry. They refer again to his work of healing that man born blind (10:21).

The True Temple

Jesus participates in the Feast of Dedication in Jerusalem (today, the celebration of Hanukah), endorsing its religious legitimacy and showing by his attendance that he honors God by worshipping him. This Festival marked the

work of Judas Maccabaeus (or the Maccabee, meaning either “the hammer” or “the appointed one” of God) who cleansed the temple of Greek abominations and then rededicated the temple.

We find Jesus like other humans celebrating the festival of rededication of a physical temple set apart for God’s purposes (10:22-24), while at the same time John the Evangelist highlights Jesus as the divine one set apart by the Father (10:36). This duality in Jesus’ nature is essential in John’s theology

John gives the account true historic details, mentioning that it was winter (10:22), to explain why Jesus was walking in Solomon’s Colonnade—to avoid inclement weather and not to provoke the conflict that ensued.

Ironically, the Jewish leaders come to Jesus asking, “How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly” (10:24)—as if Jesus hasn’t been communicating this exact message all along! Perhaps, here on their own turf, they hope to make it official, once and for all.

Jesus responds by returning to the image of believers as his sheep (10:26-30). These religious leaders see themselves as God’s appointed shepherds and take offense when Jesus claims that role. Sheep have to be watched, protected, and guided constantly, which is what the Lord does for us. No matter how hard Jesus’ religious enemies try, they cannot take his place; they cannot be God nor can they offer Eternal Life. Jesus provides us access to the Father’s always-available and satisfying pasture (Isaiah 49:9-10).

Believers are part of his body; he cannot lose us (10:29). In Isaiah, God says, “Look, you are permanently etched into the palm of my hands!” (Isaiah 49:16, paraphrased).

Determined though they were to stone Jesus, the Jewish leaders had to stop and listen to what he had to say (10:31-32). The Evangelist makes it clear that Jesus is in control of how God’s plan will unfold; Jesus stops the action long enough to teach and then to move on unharmed, escaping the grasp of his accusers.

And they hear what he is saying! These leaders understand Jesus’ message but do not accept it (10:33). Jesus presents an obvious logic, namely: If the Word (God’s Spirit in Scripture) makes divine those to whom he comes, how can it be said that the Word (Jesus) himself is not divine? Since the meaning of Scripture “cannot be set aside” (annulled) that is, be broken up and applied selectively; what was true then (in Psalm 82:6) has to be true now (in Solomon’s Colonnade) and as well in our present time (10:34-36). Based on the evidence these leaders cannot avoid the fact that Jesus is divine (10:37-38)—but they quibble, making the distinction that maybe his works (miracles) are

divine, while rejecting that he himself is God (10:32-33).

Jesus must have left Jerusalem with sadness over the persistent spiritual blindness of these religious leaders. In contrast, he returns to the place where his ministry began, along the Jordan River, where John had been baptizing. There his teaching found a receptive audience, and many recognized him for who he is (10:40-42).



Respond to God's Word

1. Spend some time reading Jesus' teaching about himself as the Good Shepherd, along with Psalm 23. How is the metaphor of shepherd meaningful to you today? Can you think of language (metaphor) that would more effectively convey tender, unconditional caring in our modern context?
2. What are Jesus' "works" –and what do you believe about them?
3. Jesus talks about giving his sheep life "to the full." In what ways is your life protected and richer because you know God? How have you experienced fullness?

Pray

- Thank God for giving us accounts of Jesus that let us hear the voice of Jesus, who reveals God himself.
- Thank God for his Holy Spirit, being an ever-present means of guidance in your life. Ask that you would closely follow Christ, your Good Shepherd.
- Ask God to help you be aware of opposition from critics or enemies of God's way of life, and for the Spirit's help to keep pointing you to Jesus as the model for how respond.
- Thank the Lord for his selfless, voluntary act of "laying down his life for his sheep," a sacrifice that guaranteed your salvation. Pledge to follow him individually and in the community of other Christians.
- Pray for direction to find a physical and/or mental place of safety, regrouping and reaffirmation of your connection with Christ.

The Resurrection and the Life

John 11

John the Evangelist never loses sight of his overarching purpose: helping people believe that Jesus is the Son of God chosen and anointed to be our Savior and that by having this belief we will become entitled to live forever with God because of Jesus. So his narration of the story of the raising of Lazarus is a deliberate centerpiece in this mission. Here the Evangelist is exhibiting the mightiest display of Jesus' divine power—the power over life and death.

The Raising of Lazarus

John doesn't tell us just how Jesus came to be involved with the three siblings—Lazarus, Martha, and Mary (11:1-2), though he mentions something that would happen later than this (which most likely, John's readers would know about), when Mary had anointed the feet of Jesus with an expensive perfume, an act Jesus explained as burial purification for his impending death. John's account says that Jesus loved this family (11:5). Like other human men, Jesus had friends.

The Greek word John uses for “sick” implies “growing weak,” or an illness that progressively worsens. As such it would have seemed urgent for Jesus to rally his disciples; he does not. Instead Jesus immediately assures them that regardless of how things look, God is in control (11:4). The Evangelist appears to indicate deliberateness to the delay. By staying two more days, probably those at the receiving end of the message would remember that Jesus set out *on the third day* to raise Lazarus (11:6); and from that viewpoint Jesus' purposes in glorifying God through Lazarus's illness (11:5) seemed to include creating a subtle parallel with his own death and his resurrection.

There are other parallels, which make this account of Lazarus's resurrection a distinct foreshadowing of Jesus'. Both men were undeniably dead. Both deaths occurred with the objective of glorifying God. And Jesus (as God) obviously knew ahead of time that Lazarus would die, even as he knew ahead of time that he too would die.

Despite the possible dangers (the Jews in Judea had tried to stone him,

11:8), Jesus explains there is urgent work to be done to bring the Judeans, who were under misguided and rebellious leadership out of their dark world of ignorance. The disciples did not think it was wise or safe to go back to Judea, but they were willing to go with Jesus to face death with him (11:16). Thomas either believed Jesus' ministry was worth dying for—or that if Jesus were to die, they'd be better off dead themselves. (Of course, many of Jesus' disciples did, indeed, eventually die for the ministry of the gospel!) But we know that Jesus knew what He was doing.

John has woven many strands into this story—Jesus being in control of his Life, shown by a lack of fear of his enemies; his humanity; his divinity; and his impending death and Resurrection. Together, these events seem to present the raising of Lazarus as a climax and sort of prequel to the pre-planned glorification of God on the cross. Using this event as a symbol of Christ's own resurrection, John unveils Jesus as the One in whom God's ultimate divine power over life and death resides.

Jesus' teaching here includes mention, again, of light and darkness—those who have no light will stumble (11:9-10). When a person chooses to be led by ignorant or wicked teaching (such as by the religious opponents of the Lord) he “stumbles.” Jesus does not wish for anyone to stumble from lack of illumination, while he is present to offer needed light.

Jesus also says that Lazarus has “fallen asleep,” which the disciples interpret as leading to restoration of good health, but Jesus knows that he means death, which has no finality with him. So he tells them plainly that Lazarus is dead and that the entire occasion will provide an important faith-building experience (11:11-15). Jesus needs his disciples to witness this resurrection event in anticipation of his further revelation coming at his own resurrection, the undeniable proof of his divinity to those who will see him after he has returned to the Father. The Lazarus event completely removes the absurdity of the resurrection of a buried corpse.

Four days in the grave is significant, since common belief was that resuscitation could only occur no later than three days. Jesus made sure there was no doubt Lazarus was dead and beyond being revived by any natural means. With no refrigeration or embalment and in a humid Mediterranean climate, natural decay of the body would almost certainly be well under way.

The town of Bethany was nearby (11:18), which again highlights that Jesus intentionally did not hurry to prevent his friend's death. On an earlier visit with this family, Jesus told Martha that her sister made a wiser choice focusing on him rather than fret over domestic affairs (Luke 10:38-42). On this visit,

it's Martha who comes out to be with Jesus, while Mary stays home. And Martha immediately speaks aloud what everyone must have been thinking: "If you had been here, my brother would not have died." But she also shows a depth of faith John the Evangelist would like us to share: "Even now God will give you whatever you ask" (11:21-22). What seems impossible to the human eye is not beyond God's power, through Christ. Even with a strong faith in Jesus Martha was not expecting that He would bring Lazarus back to life—certainly not after so long (11:23-24).

"I Am the Resurrection"

Here again, Jesus makes a self-revealing I AM declaration! He is the means by which physical death loses its permanent quality, making it forever possible for us to be united with God. Those who believe are agreeing with God that we wish to rekindle that relationship, which he intended from before Creation. Believing in Jesus brings Eternal Life *right now*—not ultimately, at the end of the world (11:24), but now! Jesus is here to break the finality of death.

Martha's faith in Jesus is solid. She voices a clear confession that Jesus is the one and only Messiah predicted in Scripture (11:27), a strong testimony from a close friend, who was in a position to know.

John the Evangelist repeatedly proves the complete divinity of Jesus, but he manages to show Jesus as fully human as well. When Martha's sister comes to him weeping, along with other mourners, their suffering affected him deeply (11:33). Some of those mourners ("the Jews" 11:31) may have included some of his religious opponents (11:45-46). The word conveying Jesus' deep emotion (*enebrimēsato*) could also encompass anger about something that needs to be corrected. Undoubtedly, Jesus was deeply moved by the people's sadness, but possibly also angry that suffering due to sin and death had to come into the world. In that case we are observing how God reacts when we suffer: He suffers with us! On Jesus, God's grief is easily visible to onlookers. Whereas the group wept (in the Greek *klaio* is to weep aloud) perhaps in ceremonial fashion; Jesus shed tears (*edakrusen*) in deep sorrow. It is perhaps important to note that Jesus was reacting to a "natural" death, not one suggestive of a specific sin.

Jesus' tears provokes an actual tender moment among his enemies (11:36), even the people who possibly wanted him dead could see Jesus' grief over

the death of his friend. Others, though, felt the irony in the air (11:37); if Jesus opened the eyes of a blind man, couldn't he have healed Lazarus and prevented this death? This questioning of Jesus' late arrival preventing his healing Lazarus is an important "loose end" only because Jesus was orchestrating events to bring glory to his Father and to create this foreshadowing parallel to his own resurrection.

Martha doesn't know what Jesus is doing when he approaches the tomb, still mourning (11:38-39). Despite her strong faith, she didn't know he was accomplishing purposes of his own. She is mildly protesting because she doesn't know Jesus' plan. Jesus reminds her that this Lazarus event is inseparably linked to God's own action for his glory (11:40).

Jesus prays, demonstrating again his strong intimacy with the Father (11:42), and then he speaks to Lazarus—in a voice loud enough to wake the dead! (11:43)

Lazarus comes out, resurrected from death (11:44), and many people from Bethany and mourners who'd come from Jerusalem were present as witnesses. The truth of Jesus' divinity was undoubtedly compelling, such that: "the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him." Word however quickly came to a faction of Jesus' enemies back in Jerusalem (11:46).

Religious Leaders Are Poised to Kill Jesus

As such these opponents decided to act. The Sanhedrin, the ruling group of religious leaders, met to discuss a plan to deal with Jesus' unstoppable ministry. Their campaign to denounce Jesus and limit his popularity was, so far, ineffective. Their opposition to Jesus is deliberate and not only out of ignorance; these leaders intentionally seek to protect the security of their Jewish religious and political heritage. Though appearing outwardly noble, their motivation is really self-serving and sinister.

But God's plans cannot be thwarted, and God is still at work even through the diabolical plans of these Jewish leaders. One influential cleric, Caiaphas, suggests that they can save the nation for themselves by making a scapegoat of one person, Jesus (11:49-50). In other words, if they put forward Jesus as the troublemaker who needs to be taken out, they would appear to be protecting Roman interest and get rid of their main rival, without making enemies of the people. John explains that Caiaphas's comment turned out to

be prophetic since God's actual plan was for one man to die for the Jewish nation and the Jews scattered around the world (Diaspora), uniting them by faith in Jesus (11:51-53). Because John depicts the Jewish religious leadership so critically, some have considered his Gospel anti-Semitic. In reality John's gospel seems intended to attract believers among the Jews, Hellenistic believers and God's children everywhere. In this sense the Gospel is universal. Jesus himself confirms that His death is equally available to people everywhere when He says, (John 12:32), "And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw *all men* (everyone) to myself".

Caiaphas, as "High Priest that year," has an influential religious position. His statements galvanize the hostility of the group, who now become even more focused on killing Jesus. This time they issue an order for his arrest if he attends the Passover Feast. This feast commemorates the rescue of God's people when the Lord passed over their homes in Egypt. On that occasion he spared the lives of the firstborns of the Hebrews who had the blood of a lamb on their doorways according to the ordinance Moses received from God (Exodus 12). The blood of the lamb, whose limbs were unbroken, saved them from destruction. This historical event has lived on in the Passover celebrations even till today.

The original passing-over event was a foretelling of the blood of the Lamb of God that would give the whole world salvation. As the people of Jerusalem were preparing to sacrifice the ceremonial lamb, Jesus' enemies were making parallel arrangements to sacrifice the Lamb of God (1:29). As a result He withdrew from the places of His enemies' reach and stayed in the desert area of Ephraim, among people who would be hungry and thirsty for his teaching.



Respond to God's Word

1. Consider why the sisters' prayer for their brother to get well was not answered and instead he died. How does our limited knowledge of God's plan and purposes affect how we pray and how he might answer?
2. How is Jesus "the resurrection and the life"?
3. How were the religious leaders serving themselves and not God? Do you see any evidence of this happening in church leadership of today? How could this hinder the spread of the gospel? How can it hinder Christian unity?

Pray

- Praise the Lord that he hears all your concerns. Continue to bring them all before him.
- Confess your tendency to expect immediate, positive response to prayer and your failure to recognize the free exercise of his sovereign omnipotence.
- Ask God to guide you in every circumstance to protect you from errors.
- Thank the Lord that, because of Jesus, death is no longer the end of life but a stage for believers to become completely transformed to live a complete spiritual life with the Trinity forever.

He Comes in the Name of the Lord

John 12

Events are moving quickly toward the death and resurrection of Jesus. John chapter twelve describes an event that prepares Jesus for burial, followed by the Triumphal Entry of Jesus into Jerusalem at the Passover, and then a discourse by Jesus, predicting his death. Throughout, John will anchor his story in concrete details that reinforce the human presence of Jesus, the Son of Man, and truth, shown and spoken by Jesus that shows him also to be the Son of God.

The Seldom-Recognized Heroine

All four Gospel accounts describe a story with parallels to John's account of Mary anointing Jesus (12:2-8, Matthew 26:6-13, Mark 14:3-9, Luke 7:36-50). John mentions the incident twice (also, in 11:2).

Jesus is in the home of his friends, Lazarus, Mary, and Martha. Martha is serving, this time without the emotional drama Luke described in connection with another situation (Luke 10:38-42). Here, Mary goes beyond the custom of washing the feet of guests when she gave Jesus' feet "royal treatment", it seems, in the most lavish way she could, to show the extravagance of her love (deep affection), faith, and devotion toward Jesus. John describes this action (12:7; also Matthew 26:12; Mark 14:8) as pre-crucifixion burial preparation, in alignment with the preparation of the sacrificial lamb. Matthew and Mark include a stipulation from Jesus that Mary's act of love and devotion should be told in memory of her "wherever the gospel is preached in the whole world" (Matthew 26:13; Mark 14:9). Two accounts (Matthew and Mark) have her anointing his head and the others his feet. Either way, this act was a deliberate, premeditated step to show respect, caring and love, out of worship and gratitude.

According to John, Judas tries to use the occasion to grab attention putting forward an insincere objection (12:4-6), but Jesus himself explains the central importance to the unfolding plan of salvation of Mary's action, which is to include his upcoming burial. It's not that Jesus has no concern for the immediate needs of poor people (Deuteronomy 15:11), but that he

values Mary's act of worship and devotion as a love gift while he is physically present among them (12:7-8).

The Crowd Welcomes a King

It should not come as a surprise that crowds were multiplying (12:9-11). The raising of Lazarus was major, famous evidence of Jesus' divine power. While it increased the desperation of his enemies to kill Jesus (and Lazarus, too), many people were coming to faith in him.

The great crowd that had amassed for the Passover festival responds with overwhelming enthusiasm when they hear that Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. Jesus accepts this role, in the relative limelight, because at last it is time for this part of God's plan to unfold.

Jesus enters Jerusalem as a triumphant King! The people recognize him as a potential Messiah (Savior) by shouting, "Hosanna!" ("Save us!" 12:12-15). Their hope of freedom from foreign domination and control over the religious and social life of the nation rested on the coming of a Messiah-King, whom the people expected from the predictions of Scripture. They thought the Messiah would bring about a political overthrow of the Romans, allowing the nation of Israel a secure environment in which to worship God in all the theologically required ways, as in the days of David and Solomon.

Jesus' Triumphal Entry holds clues that some of their earthly expectations are misplaced. The Scriptures portray the Messiah as an obedient, suffering, humble Servant who teaches about God reconciling his people to the ends of the earth. He rides on a donkey, which conveys that humility of spirit. Jesus accepts the jubilation, since it acknowledges the truth about him: He is the true king who will liberate them (Psalm 118:25-29; Zechariah 9:9-10)—from the rule of evil and not from Roman or foreign rule; and using peaceful not warlike means.

Perhaps Jesus alone knows this day's "high approval rating" will be short-lived. If the religious leaders were incensed over the raising of Lazarus (proving Jesus' divinity beyond doubt), they hated this Triumphal Entry, too: "This is getting us nowhere! Look how the whole world has gone after him!" (12:19). So, immediately, the religious extremists set out to put a stop to the way people are following Jesus.

John mentions that some Greeks had come to the festival, looking for Jesus (12:20-22). Jesus' disciple Philip becomes a major passageway for the

faith to reach and take root in the Greek world. Even though it is not stated why they asked to see Jesus, Jesus reacts as if their arrival was a turning point in the course of his ministry (12:23). John records this, perhaps as a shift from God's interaction with people from the Jewish center of operation to a worldwide base for the gospel, according to the will of God.

And Jesus knows the time has come: "The hour has come that the Son of Man should be glorified" (12:23). This is a central frame in the narrative sequence of the Evangelist's record of Jesus' life on earth. Jesus initiates his steps to the cross by preparing his audience for his death.

Jesus states that he has to die in order to benefit the world in the same way that "a grain of wheat" has to fall to the ground and die in order to propagate crops and spread itself (12:24). Jesus' death will make God's divine nature useful to the world. Jesus' ministry is all about revealing who God is and fulfilling the plan of salvation, which has Christ's death at its center. This call to self-sacrifice extends to all those who follow Jesus.

All who take Jesus' life as their example (his servants) give up living life according to this world in order to be equipped to for Eternal Life (12:25).

The theme of service may seem new in John's presentation (12:26). Jesus connects the role of wanting to be his disciple with hating (shunning) the self-centered worldly life. In the Greek "serve" (*diakonēō*) means wait at table or care for the needs of others as the Lord guides in an active, practical way (Acts 6:2-7, 1 Timothy 3:10). There is a close connection between faith (in Greek, *pístis*) and serving as a deacon (*diakoneó*). Discipleship is service to Christ by following in his footsteps, which includes suffering with the goal of honoring God and as a result receiving an assigned place in heaven.

Jesus' human soul is troubled, but still he yields perfectly to God's will for him (12:27) because the Father and Son are unified. His impending suffering cannot be allowed to overshadow the importance of his Incarnation! Jesus knew he had to complete his mission (12:34), and he surrendered himself to bring glory to his Father (12:28).

A voice from heaven was heard at the time of Jesus' baptism, and a voice from heaven is heard again—universally audible but not universally comprehended (12:30-32). John obviously understood the sounds, and Jesus did, since he mentions it; others who were there attributed the sound to other noise sources. God's voice says he had glorified his name and would do it again, probably meaning at Jesus' Resurrection. Just as today, sometimes only those "tuned in" can hear when God speaks to them.

The Father and Son Acknowledge the Salvation Plan

Jesus, jointly with God, makes a promise of major transformation for the whole world: “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself” (12:32); and before that, “... the prince of this world will be driven out”: that is Satan, who entices us to accept his deceitful leadership (12:31). Satanic influences have torn peace, unity and harmony from our world and continue to do so, sometimes through people with a misguided or desperate understanding of Scripture. But the promises of God will always come to pass, so we continue to look forward to the day when *all* people are drawn to Jesus. Meanwhile, we persevere in faith and expectation, participating in Jesus’ mission in obedience to him. He has said: “... take heart! I have overcome the world” (16:33). In love, Christians can and will change the world while Christ will bring every believer to himself in the heavenly Kingdom amid joyous celebration. The Evangelist’s vision of this is unmistakable.

Jesus’ death will bring a new order of business between God and his people. His death will make Jesus a rallying point for people to come to the Father in a new relationship (12:31-32). Our estrangement from God engineered by Satan and due to sin is going to be eradicated with Jesus in the gap. When Jesus says, “And I,” he seems to be indicating this role is connected with the Father’s intention. He affirms the part he will play, in contrast to the prince of this world who divides in order to conquer people, to bring the whole world under his illegitimate power.

The people’s confusion about Jesus being lifted up indicates they understand Jesus is claiming to be their immortal Messiah. Therefore they wonder how Jesus at the same time can be that Messiah, described in Daniel 7 and the Son of Man who is about to die (12:34). He cannot be the Son of Man mentioned in Ezekiel who is the prophet himself and has long been dead. So the people are asking which Son of Man he is. The piece of information these people don’t yet have is that Jesus as a man will die and rise again as eternal Son, with his resurrection cancelling out his death and bringing the New Testament facts in complete alignment with the Old Testament description of an the everlasting Messiah. It is important for John’s readers to clearly recognize that this same Son of Man is the Light (12:35-36) that will lead redeemed followers to God’s presence.

Some Believe, Some Do Not

Jesus urges the people to learn about Christ now, while Jesus (the Light) is with them (12:35-36). Soon that door will close, and they will remain in ignorance, missing a chance to join the family of the enlightened faithful.

John states that in processing all they had seen Jesus do and heard him say some of the people fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah that their hearts would remain hard and their eyes blind, despite the testimony of Jesus' miracles, indicating his divinity and his authoritative teaching from the Father (6:30, 6:66; 12:37-41; Ezekiel 12:2). Yet this same message from Isaiah comes with a familiar promise that the Lord *would* heal them if they would understand with their hearts and come to him (Isaiah 6:10). Some of the people however, are convinced Jesus is divine (6:14).

In the unlikely camp of the enemy—that is, among the Jewish leadership—there were some who began to believe in Jesus' message, though they feared to openly acknowledge their faith wishing to avoid risking loss of position, banishment from the synagogue and social isolation (12:42-43).

Again Jesus pleads with the people to choose to believe in him, once more linking himself inextricably with God, the Father. He is the Messenger, the Savior and the Light to guide people out of darkness (12:44-50). His very words (and how they are received) will become at judgment time a testimony against anyone who makes it their job to entice us away from receiving those words of salvation. Jesus' words are commands from the Father, and obeying them "leads to Eternal Life."



Respond to God's Word

1. Jesus commends Mary's use of the expensive perfume to bless him, while he is with her, rather than using the money for the poor, as Judas suggested. Now that Jesus is not physically present on earth, how do you participate in serving the poor (perhaps struggling refugees or immigrants, the unemployed or underemployed, etc.)? How might you apply Deuteronomy 15:11 and Ruth 2:15-16 in your context in this century?
2. Jesus calls out, "Father, glorify your name!" (12:27), and a voice from heaven responds. How does this reinforce John's consistent message about the oneness of the Father and the Son?
3. How do you recognize and acknowledge when Jesus is guiding your words or actions?

Pray

- Thank God for Mary's example of honoring the Lord with her material resources (the best that her money could buy). Ask the Holy Spirit to inspire you to do the same in your own way (with humility), as well as to do things that will benefit others.
- Affirm your belief that in Christ every event in your life is known and allowed by God. Thank him for being in control of your life in a way that is always for the best for you.
- Ask the Holy Spirit to teach you to value God's gift of Eternal Life through Christ beyond any material object, relationship or human idea this world offers.
- Thank God for sending Jesus into our world to give us his message of salvation and Eternal Life, for perfectly representing the Father's loving nature, and for shedding the light of his divine truth.

The Book of Glory

John 13 – 20



The Humble Servant

John 13

Jesus' ministry has come to a turning point. Realizing that "the hour had come" for his work to come to its fruition, which would mean leaving this world and returning to the Father (13:1). At this watershed moment in his storytelling, John sets out the sequence of events:

- 1) Jesus' time had come.
- 2) His mission of love and obedience to demonstrate the love for the Father has been accomplished, despite detractors, and he is awaiting the grande finale.
- 3) Satan, the main opponent of God, has set the ball rolling through the religious leaders and Judas Iscariot, to stop Jesus' ministry, thinking that will upset everything in God's plan. Satan did not know he was ironically furthering the divine plan. What he meant for evil turned out to be the good God intended.
- 4) Jesus is ready, completely in tune with his Father about the inevitable course of their actions; and he is fully in charge of his own destiny.

With deep love for everyone Jesus loved us to the finish. At this point however he saves time to minister to his closest friends and disciples. Jesus does this by preparing them with teaching designed just for them. Chapters 13 through 17 of John's Gospel are often called the Dialogue of the Upper Room, or Upper Room Discourse, and they include this time of intimate ministry to the inner circle of the ones Jesus loved.

The Lord and Master Becomes the Humble Servant

It will soon be the Passover, and Jesus is having an important evening meal with his disciples. Jesus, the one who is the 'head of the family' and soon to be the Passover Lamb (the celebrity of the Feast), takes instead the role of the servant, welcoming his closest followers into his Kingdom in a ceremony of

cleansing (13:2-5). Jesus ceremonially prepares himself and proceeds to wash his disciples' feet. This is the Creator and Lord of the world, performing one of the most menial tasks in order to make an important point even to Judas.

What is the lesson Jesus conveys? "Humility" by itself seems too obvious an answer for an action complex enough for Jesus to tell Peter he can't really understand now what Jesus is doing (3:7) and to strongly caution him, stating in effect, "If you stop me from washing you, then you cannot share in my inheritance" (13:8, paraphrased). Here, the form of the verb for *wash* (in Greek, *nipso*, Aorist tense) implies repeated or continuing action of cleansing, especially from sin. This dramatized lesson is part of loving them "to the end." The disciples had yet to realize that Jesus' love motivated his every action—a love that would culminate in his death on the cross. In enacting the role of a servant as he washed his disciples' feet, Jesus is announcing he is the obedient Servant of the Father. Jesus undertook the salvation mission with humility out of love for and in obedience to His Father. As Paul explained it: "Though Jesus essentially embodied God's nature he did not consider his equality with God as something to cling to. Instead, choosing to strip himself of all dignity he was made to look human; and adopting the position of a Servant he humbled himself with obedience that meant his death, even a death on the cross" (Philippians 2:6-8, paraphrase).

John includes this account of Jesus washing his disciples' feet rather than describing the sharing of the bread and wine (the Holy Eucharist) during this supper, as the other Gospel writers do. John the Evangelist sees the magnitude of this picture of the Messiah as Servant, bringing cleansing to those who believe in him. In taking off his "outer clothing" (13:4), Jesus demonstrates the deliberate putting aside of nobility or claim to self-importance. It would be unheard of for the head of the family or master to wash the feet of guests; this was a task for the lowest servant level. The act of washing the feet of guests was a custom of hospitality; so Jesus was welcoming his disciples into his Kingdom in the new era soon to be inaugurated on the cross. Washing the feet also pointed to a baptismal cleansing that was necessary for entry into the Kingdom of God. They had been walking in the sinful world and needed to be washed clean from the sin of the world.

Jesus responds to Peter's questions with a many-layered teaching (13:8-9). Until Peter can accept Jesus as his slave, he cannot claim him as Lord. In God's Kingdom, to be a Lord you must be a slave. The other Gospels present this lesson as a statement when two disciples' mother asks for the highest position in Jesus' kingdom: "... whoever wants to become great among you

must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Matthew 20:26-28) In John’s account Jesus demonstrates it is the same for Master as for servant: love means submission. The onus is on Peter to submit to that truth, in commitment to accepting Jesus’ lordship. Jesus is still Lord, but his actions here model and emphasize the central importance of the qualities (love and humility) in the role these friends will soon take up, as evangelists, sharing the gospel. Here is a lesson in example-setting leadership, which is why they will be blessed if they do it. And since Jesus used washing to teach the essentials of evangelism, he seems to also present this preparation lesson for the disciples as a symbolic spiritual act of baptism to make them completely clean (which Judas was not) to enter God’s Kingdom. Peter’s protest may be seen as a false sense of righteousness, but in his sincere repentance Peter rightfully acknowledges a need for total purification in the presence of the Lord and High Priest (13:8-9).

Jesus encourages his disciples to practice this act of love and humility with one another (13:12-17). That is, in the same way his Father had sent him, the Son, in a humble state, so Jesus as Lord is sending his disciples out with the message of God’s love, which Jesus humbled himself to show. In performing this ministry the disciples should set an example of unmistakable love and humility. Blessing comes in practicing this lesson: Nothing aimed at showing God’s love is too lowly or trivial for a Christian to undertake.

Jesus Predicts His Betrayal

Clearly Jesus is in control of his life and all the events that will unfold. Jesus begins to pull out all the stops leading to the full disclosure of his divinity. In getting the disciples ready for when they will recognize him on the cross as the Messiah, Jesus applies the same terminology to himself (13:19) as God did when he told Moses to tell his people who he is (Exodus 3:14). In the Greek the words Jesus uses to describe himself (13:19) are identical, though in English they are variously translated as “I am who I am,” “I am he,” “I am the being,” and “I am the living God.” Jesus seems to be using language that will guide the future thinking of his disciples and help them remain focused on continuing the salvation ministry once Judas’ actions become known and his crucifixion, resurrection and ascension have proved his divinity.

Jesus had already mentioned that not everyone present was “clean” (13:10).

He breaks the news of his betrayal gently since it would be shocking to the disciples that this traitor was one of them (13:18). He states that the presence of a traitor among them is divinely ordained and not hidden from him. Jesus knows it will strengthen the disciples' confidence in him that he has bluntly forewarned them of the coming betrayal (13:19).

John presents very clearly that Jesus' prediction of betrayal points to someone from among his trusted friends (13:21). Jesus remains in control, as even this insider betrayal fulfills a scriptural prophecy. He doesn't "suspect" Judas; he knows (13:11, 18).

As an eyewitness informant, John tells us Jesus experienced deep emotional turmoil (13:21) about revealing this news to his friends. As God and man, Jesus discloses divine foreknowledge as well as shows the same troubled emotion that all humans sometimes experience under these circumstances.

The information was far from easy for the disciples to take in. They appeared extremely baffled. Because conversations likely erupted following their stunned silence (13:22), it's possible not everyone paid attention to or heard the exchange between John (the disciple Jesus loved) and Jesus about which disciple would betray Jesus. That likely explains John's comment that no one connected Judas' departure with his role in betraying their Lord. Jesus needed his disciples to show unity and intimacy and move forward after this damaging loss of trust among their ranks. He had washed their feet, even with Judas present, showing his love and forgiveness, even for Judas who was in cahoots with Satan (13:2).

The disciples still didn't realize what Jesus meant by telling Judas, "What you are about to do, do quickly." Only later would John and the others know that Judas, under the influence of Satan, orchestrated his evil intentions, still under Jesus' instruction (13:28). Those words "And it was night," seem to usher evil in, out of the shadows.

Jesus, the Bread of Life, had just offered the bread to Judas—and right then, Satan entered him. Judas would leave, with his personal experiences of Jesus, the Bread of Life, and Satan taking charge in him. In the end, Matthew tells us, Judas repented of his actions (Matthew 27:3-5). Jesus' salvation victory is dramatized in the spiritual battle for Judas' soul: evil lost; its darkness could not withstand Jesus' light. Judas acted in concert with Satan, through the devious religious leaders, but Jesus was ultimately in control of Judas' physical, psychological, and spiritual actions. All these events lead up to the final master plan to glorify the Father (13:31-32).

Glory in John's Gospel

The idea of God's glory has ancient roots. In the Old Testament we first encounter it in the Book of Exodus, when it represented the way the Israelites experienced Yahweh in physical form (in the Rabbinic literature it is called God's *Shekinah* [glory], a word that does not appear in the Bible). Since that time the belief among the Israelites was that no human can see God as he really is and live (Exodus 33:21-23). Instead God would reveal himself to his people through a reflected reality, his glory. His worshipers would know he is present by reflecting himself through fire, light, or cloud (Exodus 3:2-6, 24:17, 40:34-35; 1 Kings 8:10-11). Sometimes the people heard God through a thunderous sound, his voice. (Therefore the language, in Exodus describing Moses and God together "face to face as one speaks to a friend" should therefore be taken as a metaphorical description of their closeness as friends (Exodus 33:11).)

The Evangelist presents this understanding of God's Glory as an essential medium for revealing Jesus' authentic divinity. Jesus' visible presence, words, and actions are a true reflection of God himself among humankind, showing his love: "And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth" (1:14). This depiction of Jesus' core character is crucial to John's purpose in the Gospel, enough for him to use "glorify" (in Greek, *doxazo*) twenty-three times (as compared to nine times in the Book of Luke, where its next most frequent use occurs). Since God is love, this quality is seen in his dealings with us despite our rejection. This contrast between God's love and humankind's rebellion is represented in this scene from the Old Testament: "And the glory of the Lord appeared in the tabernacle of the congregation before all the children of Israel. And the Lord said unto Moses ... how long will it be before they believe me, for all the signs which I have shown among them?" (Numbers 14:10-11).

No wonder the Evangelist includes Jesus' miracles as benevolent "signs" among people who rejected God. According to John, these signs are all part of manifesting God's glory.

God's glory enhances Jesus! A large part of their relationship, however, is that Christ reveals God by reflecting or glorifying him through his life on earth. In this way, we can see the extent of the love between them and their love for us. Accordingly the word *glory*, whether as a verb or a noun, carries this meaning of reflecting/representing the Father in the various contexts

glory appears in this Gospel. In his presentation of Jesus, John demonstrates that the Father and his Son, who is his true reflection, achieved that crowning victory together at the cross, demonstrating God's glorification (13:31-32). John's clear and consistent message is that God reconciled the world to himself by Christ's glorification, which came through his crucifixion. Jesus' Ministry achieved mutual glorification of Father and Son!

Jesus tenderly addresses his disciples as "little children" (13:33), more clearly representing the loving Father, as he speaks gently about the confusion and persecution his death and departure will create for his disciples. They will be effective in continuing his Ministry if they remain united (in their messaging to others and attitude to one another, both of which are to be passed along as instructed). Their evangelistic success will come from imitating Jesus' love among themselves (13:34-35).

Jesus calls the commandment to love one another "a new commandment." It doesn't replace the old commandments summed up in the Synoptic Gospels (Matt 22:37-40, Mark 12:30-31, Luke 10:27) from Deuteronomy and Leviticus: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength" (Deuteronomy 6:5) and "love your neighbor as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18). Jesus' "new" command is rather a summation and re-statement of God's intention in the Ten Commandments. Therefore these words would not be new to his disciples based on their knowledge of the scriptures.

The addition: "As I have loved you" is however significant putting a specific stamp on the teaching. Loving each other as Jesus has loved them is a new format for applying the Old Testament laws about loving others. He loved them to the end in humility and to the highest possible degree by giving his Life (15:13). So Jesus is not violating the decree in Deuteronomy (4:2) that no one should change the Commandments of God.

Jesus gives them this interpretation of loving each other as a manifesto of discipleship: "By this shall all men know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (13:35). In other words: By the demonstration of this kind of mutual love people around believers anywhere in the whole world will experience firsthand that Christians are under Jesus' leadership and guidance. This is how the church must show the world they are living according to Christ's teaching. John wants us to recognize the significance of this "New Command" by putting it in the context of Jesus' drama-lesson on genuine affection that's unconditional and motivated by humble obedience to God.

Jesus' love for us consisted of obeying his Father by being willing to give

up his life (in humility) to make our reunion with God possible. It is self-sacrificial love in the service of a loving God wanting to restore a broken relationship. So we are to love one another to the same extent, that is, to the extent of being willing to die for the gospel in the service of God. Thereby the world will realize the kind of God he is.

This new commandment is to be the model for the Church while awaiting the *parousia*, or Second Coming. This love that characterizes the relationship among the Trinity is the basis of the same relationship that will serve as the common bond and I.D. among all members of the restored family of God.

In his eagerness to express the extent of his own affection for Jesus, Peter ignorantly claims his readiness to lay down his life for Jesus, not knowing the depth and significance of the events immediately ahead (13:36-38). Jesus predicts Peter's denials, but Jesus also knows that later Peter will lay down his life as the leading edge in the evangelization of the world!



Respond to God's Word

1. If you accept that humble love is a virtue, how do you currently practice this kind of service? If you aren't currently serving others with humble love (including family members), what are the obstacles blocking your way?
2. When have you seen the Church not complying with Jesus' teaching to love one another? When have you seen the Church live up to this high command?

Pray

- Thank God for his love and mercy that compelled him to offer his one and only Son to win you over and keep you as his own forever.
- Ask the Holy Spirit to plant a spirit of humility in you similar to Christ's, so you will be able to perform any task that will glorify your Lord and Master.
- Ask for forgiveness for those times you have betrayed Christ in your words or actions by allowing Satan to enter and have sway, whether you recognize this has happened or not.
- Thank Jesus for his example of love and ask him to help you show this love to other believers in every situation, especially in the eyes of non-believers.

The Way to the Father

John 14

Jesus had created an upheaval in the minds of his disciples when he revealed that one of them would betray him. Now he jars them with the incomprehensible news that he is leaving them. He compassionately ministers to their shock, confusion, and helplessness, by pointing the way to the Father.

Jesus' disciples have heard him say before that he will go, but this time they hear it in a more definitive way (14:1-4). Their need of Jesus' comfort shows that the disciples were taking the news seriously and hard, though not exactly sure what Jesus meant by "going away."

To comfort and strengthen his friends, Jesus describes the features or qualities of where he is going: "My Father's family has an abundance of places to live" (14:2, paraphrased). Jesus urges them to trust in him as they do in God and to understand *why* he has to go—to prepare a place for them.

"Preparing a place" is going to involve more than these friends could imagine, encompassing Christ's crucifixion, death, resurrection, and ascension. But this was the Way God was providing so that his people can come and be with him (14:3). By completing the final events of his ministry, Jesus will make it possible for his disciples, ultimately, to be with him. They already know the way there, as he is the Way, the means (justifying believers before God) of bringing them to heaven.

For now, Jesus assures his friends that they can be sure he will return for them (13:3-4). Jesus' detailed and reassuring words of comfort about the certainty of his return calls to mind the Father's tender promise "Count on me; I will not forget you" (Isaiah 49:15).

Thomas is thinking in concrete terms and wants a location! (14:5). The problem Thomas voices is that they know the Father is in heaven, but they don't know where that is or how to get there, at least in physical terms. Jesus' answer is spiritual, pointing to himself as the Way to the Father.

The Way, the Truth, and the Life

John presents another essential "I AM" statement, translated more accurately from the Greek as: "I am the way and the truth and the life." (14:6) Jesus is

the Way (path or route) to God. By following that Way, one learns everything there is to know about getting into the presence of his Father, since Jesus is the definitive, trustworthy Source of all Truth, which is God's Word (17:17). Since truth is based on knowledge, Jesus (the Word) is the only Light that that illuminates the way because he has complete knowledge of the Father. He is also the source and giver of Eternal Life, which travelling on the Way guarantees because he leads to the presence of God (14:7). Jesus makes his disciples understand that he completely represents his Father, who operates through Jesus. His own words and actions should have made his Father obvious to his disciples.

The disciples would have been familiar with the Old Testament concept of "the way" of the Lord as a committed lifestyle of following the prescribed faith in Yahweh (Deuteronomy 5:32-33; 29:19; Isaiah 35:8-10; Psalm 27:11). After Jesus' return to heaven, the early Church, comprised of his followers, was called "the Way." (Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14)

In the Old Testament truth is associated with faithfulness, reliability, and trustworthiness rather than with factual reality or the opposite of falsehood (Psalm 26:3, 86:11, 119:30).

Life in the Old Testament relates to a lifestyle based on God's commandments or rules, which is about living righteously, doing right (Psalm 16:11, Proverbs 6:20-23, 10:16-17).

So Jesus is explaining that he has come to present God's absolute standards for living a life committed to him (the Way), based on faithful or trustworthy teaching (the Truth), which require right actions that reflect God's character and values (the Life). Jesus is the embodiment of the *way*, the *truth*, and the *life*—the only person who can and does fill that role. Accepting him is the only means to come into God's righteous presence with innocence. So his words that he is the Way *and* the Truth *and* the Life tell us that Jesus is the Path to God while at the same time he is the revelation of who God is, and at the same time through his life he demonstrates the life that is to be lived with God. In the end he offers himself on the cross as the crowning evidence of what God's love entails (that is his wanting us to share in his life in total obedience this time, outside of Satan's power).

Jesus is like a stent, the small, expandable tube used by heart surgeons to insert into a blocked artery to clear it. The one in whom God's *truth* resides like a stent clears away the sins that block our access to the Father and becomes the *way* to him, so we can have a direct relationship with the Father for Eternity.

Jesus promises that if the disciples “really know” him, that is, have an intimate relationship with him (14:7a), they will automatically be in the same relationship with God as he. John has been displaying who God is throughout his book, but especially in the introductory words of his prologue (1:14, 18). The same depiction of Jesus representing God occurs elsewhere in the New Testament (2 Corinthians 4:4, Colossians 1:15, Hebrews 1:3). But “from now on,” his disciples will recognize that they do have a close relationship with God through their close relationship with Jesus and have had it with God all the while—in the Person of Jesus (14:7b).

Philip seems to not understand what Jesus has said in abbreviated form (14:8), so Jesus gives a more detailed description of the relationship between himself and the Father, which he expected Philip and perhaps the others to have grasped by now (14:9-11). While it is tempting to hear in Phillip’s request an echo of Moses’ question to God when he asked, “Show me your glory” (Exodus 33:18), the two requests do not come from the same place of need. Moses needed basic education about who YHWH is, encountering him for the first time, while Philip has had extensive teaching from his culture and Jesus about God’s nature and character. Therefore Phillip seems to be saying, “Even if we go through you, how will we recognize the Father on the other side?” He asks for physical characteristics by which to recognize the Father.

Earlier Philip was the disciple to introduce Jesus to the Grecian Jews, so John shows us, through Jesus’ answer to Philip, that Philip does not have complete knowledge of who Jesus is but that all knowledge resides in Jesus (14:10-11). Philip and the other disciples are depending on Jesus to show them God the Father in a physical manner.

Again Jesus brings their thinking to a multi-faceted, spiritual dimension from the merely physical one. He gives it as a matter of faith and acceptance. He and his Father have been working among the people, and the disciples have been close up to that reality and spiritual power. So they should have discerned the inseparable similarity between Jesus and God the Father (14: 9). Jesus does not just represent the Father in the sense of accomplishing a business transaction on his behalf; he shares life with him. They are distinct (not different) in essence and have unified behavior and purpose (14:10-11). The fact of Christ’s divinity should have been apparent in his miraculous actions, which John the Evangelist tells us are its “signs” or indicators (5:36, 10:38).

Jesus points them toward action that will show their faith in him—“doing the works I have been doing” (14:12). Faith enables action toward its target. The active life of a believer indicates the source of his or her faith;

faith indicates what's driving their behavior. These actions are not magic. To know the Father is to have an intimate knowledge of who Christ is and to live within that relationship. That will confer on any individual the ability to perform the same work of glorifying God as Jesus has been doing (and which is about to culminate in suffering and death on the Cross). In fact such Christ's disciples then, now and everywhere will do "greater things" since they will have him as intercessor and guide and will be operating under his Authority and Will ("whatever you ask in my name") as they represent Jesus in carrying the message to a much wider audience, furthering God's intention for the world and his Kingdom.

Jesus' promise that if they ask *anything* in his name, he will do it carries his full support and power. It may refer to anything in pursuit of establishing Jesus' name, representing him in evangelism and missionary work, which may also be described as bearing fruit (15:16).

Obedience with the Help of the Paraclete

Jesus tells his disciples that obedience to him is the evidence that they love him (8:31; 14:15, 21, 23), but he doesn't expect their obedience to take place without his help and comfort. He won't abandon them like orphans (14:18). And every promise Jesus makes here during the upper room huddle is fulfilled soon after his resurrection.

Jesus promises to send "the Spirit of Truth" as their advocate to replace Jesus on earth (14:16-17). Anyone not now in the group of his disciples but who chooses to obey him will also share this closer intimacy with him and his Father; Jesus will show himself to them and love them (14:21, 23). The love he expects is the same he has with his Father (14:31), which is one of total commitment and obedience. In the same way love for one another and complete allegiance to Jesus' teachings will hold them together (13:34-35).

Completely falling in line with Christ's teachings (in words and actions) shows we love Him. Love moves or empowers a person to do something connected with the object of love. Jesus is saying we need the emotional power of love (the one that motivates interpersonal intimacy) to give us the push to be in total alignment with his ministry. Like all emotions, love lives or dies depending on the thoughts and actions that feed it. What keeps love for Jesus going is obedience to His teachings; and that love-expressed-in-faith-based-actions will serve as a direct channel between him and his disciples always.

Because of their love and obedience the Father will agree to send the Holy Spirit after Jesus' physical departure. This promised Person—similar to Jesus—will be a permanent Supporter-Companion. This is the *Paraclete*, one called alongside to help and advocate (1 John 2:1). He is “the Spirit of truth,” whose role is teaching, revealing, and interpreting Jesus and his teaching to the disciples. He will be an Expert Guide for all forms of knowledge (John 16:13). He is also a faithful Advocate to what he is told to say. The Holy Spirit will remain *in close relationship with* them (14:16), which entails being *beside* (14:17) and *within* (14:17) them. He is the indwelling Spirit of truth (1 John 4:6).

So how does the Holy Spirit's “job description” distinguish him from the other members of the Trinity (Christ and God)? One way to describe him is as the communication link for bonding and for the release of God's power—to Jesus while Jesus is in human form on the earth and to Christ's followers. While Christ's role is to reflect his Father's glory (14:13), the Holy Spirit's function is to make the bond among the Trinity and their extended human family a continuing reality. This relationship was publicly inaugurated by the momentous Pentecost experience, after Jesus' Resurrection and Ascension, when the Holy Spirit entered Jesus' apostles.

The Holy Spirit's is not an inert, do-nothing role but an active and dynamic function of keeping us connected with God and Christ, teaching, guiding and providing needed information to fill in memory and comprehension gaps of Jesus' teachings about who God is. In essence the role John articulates is that Holy Spirit sustains the evangelical work and individual preparation of Jesus' apostles to be where Jesus is. In other words, the Holy Spirit acts like a spiritual umbilical cord that will continue to nourish the believer while keeping that person connected with the Trinity. Eventually He will be instrumental as a guide in bringing the believer on that final portion of the journey to the presence of Christ, who remains the only Way.

In summary: The Holy Spirit enables faith and unites believers with the Trinity and with one another. The Spirit maintains open spiritual access, helps us comprehend and communicate the divine nature and Mission of Jesus Christ and enables our use of God's divine powers vested in the Holy Spirit for the physical and/or spiritual benefit of the world. God contemporizes the Gospel Message and reveals knowledge through the Holy Spirit, including John's Gospel. He ensures guaranteed access to Eternal Life, assists in the qualifying judicial process, provides encouragement and unless blocked He protects the believer from material pride.

Promises for the Future

Jesus' words to his disciples hold many promises about the future. He refers to being gone but then they will see him (14:19). And we know that if Jesus returned from the grave we will too (1 Corinthians 15:20-22). Jesus promises that he will be *real* to his disciples and to all who keep his commands (14:21).

Judas (not Judas Iscariot) wonders why the Lord will appear to his apostles but not to the whole world, when the world so badly needs to know he is divine. The Jewish people had long expected the Messiah to be revealed to the world, so Judas wonders why things are going to be different from this traditional understanding. Jesus clears up a misconception in the teaching about a Messiah who was expected to come and show himself to the world (14:23-27). The Messiah is revealing himself to the world, but working through those who love and obey him. The apostles, already united with him, are first in line for this experience, beginning with when his revelation to them will be finalized on the cross. Jesus knows his disciples do not fully understand his statements, but the Holy Spirit will soon be there to reliably supply the knowledge they need. It is part of the Spirit's role to help a sinful world gain accurate knowledge about God and about Satan's illegitimate role in this world.

The Trinity is omnipresent and always existing, but now the Holy Spirit will have this new role of Paraclete in which he will remain forever after Jesus departs. This will be a delegated capacity ("in my name"), backed by Jesus' will and full authority, in the same way Jesus now represents his Father. The Holy Spirit will take on the role of representing Christ, teaching the truth; that is, continuing teaching who Christ is. Only Jesus can be the ultimate Way, Truth, and Life; these tasks cannot be delegated. It is an important distinction as to who Jesus is from who does the teaching about who He is.

What a promise Jesus gives—that the Trinity will make their home with those who love him! (14:23). The Trinity will occupy us, making mini-Trinity versions of us with which to fill the world, believer by believer. God's promises in Christ are always dependent on our obeying his teaching (8:31, 51; 1 John 2:5). We cannot make up our own instructional or preaching plan, however. He sends out disciples so they will represent Him to the world as Christians or "Christ lookalikes," going out with his Message, in his name (14:25-26).

Jesus is leaving them, and this is hard news. What the disciples need more than anything is *peace*, a peace of mind that is in total accord with the divine

will and that overcomes anything discordant in human life (4:27). This “Peace” (like the Hebrew, *shalom*) means not only the absence of emotional disturbance but also the presence of blessing (the blessed life). It is not a condition of our circumstances. Human peace is usually the kind of peace of mind (involving a removal of hostility and negativity) that comes from our perceptual response to our state of affairs. We get that peace from the world around us by manipulating or changing our circumstances. Jesus’ peace of mind is independent of our situation. The Holy Spirit provides mental peace as Jesus prescribes. It is firmly rooted in our trust in Christ and “transcends all understanding.” (14:1; Philippians 4:6-7) Other scriptural passages about the Peace of Christ also show that God does want us to have peace of mind (16:33, Colossians 3:15).

Jesus explains why he brings such hard news to his disciples (14:28). He wants them to know that his return to the Father who sent him on this successful mission is really a joyful and beneficial event.

Jesus reminds the disciples that Satan has no power or control over him because he is sinless (14:30). His friends may wonder why Jesus did not handle Satan differently in this situation, though they will understand better in the future. But he assures them that the mission’s ultimate purpose will be achieved—“that the world may learn” about God’s gift of salvation through Jesus (14:31a)

The chapter ends with Jesus saying, in effect, “Pull yourselves together so we can get going” (14:31b). Jesus calls on the disciples (while they are yet in a relatively composed state of mind) to be ready to witness the events in which God uses Satan to unwittingly fulfil His purpose of Salvation for the world. Although he has more to say, this seemed to be the best time to rouse them, as there was to be mass confusion later at Gethsemane.



Respond to God's Word

1. What does it mean to ask something of Jesus "in his name"?
2. When have you received answers from God that did not seem to be whatever it was you were asking for? How was God blessing you in his answer? See Psalm 66:16-20, 1 John 3:21-22, and James 4:3.
3. Try to articulate how you see Jesus as the Way, the Truth, and the Life, all at once.
4. Does peace of mind have a role in the practice of Christianity? What is your explanation?

Pray

- Thank the Lord for being the Way to the Father and for his reassurance that by your faith in him your place in heaven is secure.
- Thank Jesus for removing any obstacle that makes the Father distant, mysterious and unknown by presenting the true character of God in his own life for us to easily recognize.
- Ask the Holy Spirit to teach you what to pray for and how to make your life a representation of Jesus' so that the things you do are to his glory.
- Thank Jesus for continuing to live within you and for the guidance and support of the Holy Spirit, who will continue to teach you how to represent Jesus' true character through your obedience.

The Vine and the Branches

John 15

Anticipating his return to the Father, but also mindful of His disciples' unsettling predicament Jesus continues the Upper Room Discourse, as a time of preparing his disciples to carry on the ministry of the gospel. After just assuring them that he would not leave them as orphans, without help, and promising to send the Holy Spirit, Jesus reintroduces an Old Testament image of a formerly fruitful vine that has had branches broken, destroying its fruitfulness (Isaiah 5:1-7, Jeremiah 2:21, Ezekiel 15, 19:10-14), but he transforms it with his next "I AM" statement: "I am the true vine."

God the Gardener has done something new, restoring the relationship between Him and his people by introducing the true vine. For God to restore Israel to the former intended relationship, Israel needed a new dependable vine from which to grow, the Son God (Psalm 80:15) or the Son of Man (Psalm 80:17). With total dependence on his Father the Gardener, Jesus restores us to be the Kingdom God originally intended. We, his new fruit, depend totally on Jesus for our very existence, showing our fruitfulness as we extend God's Kingdom.

Jesus is saying that his work of salvation is the "true" (real, authentic) means of restoration of the chosen people of God to fellowship, as opposed to a counterfeit relationship offered by self-serving or corrupt spiritual leaders. God's chosen ones include all Christians (Galatians 6:15-16).

Jesus encourages his disciples not to allow worldly baggage to drag down their spiritual productivity. As pruning cleans out the useless deadweight from the branches of a vine, so will God cleanse those people who show promise so that they will yield more spiritual fruit. "Fruit" will result from a continuing relationship with Christ, soon to be enabled through the Holy Spirit, Jesus' faithful intermediary authorized by God.

The size of the fruit they found in the Promised Land would have continued to be unknown to the Israelites had they not participated in God's deliverance from Egypt. In like manner, the fruit of the Spirit that the disciples of Christ need to make manifest in their lives may seem unfamiliar. We know a fruit to be one thing, even with grapes; not usually composed of many different parts. Once we accept however, that God's special provisions (physical

or spiritual) are always beyond our imagination, the image of a composite fruit with all of what we need for spiritual growth, will cease to baffle. In that regard, it becomes enlightening to comprehend this gift of the Spirit as a fruit of fruits, consisting of “love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, and self control” (Galatians 5:22-23). Believers with these qualities will continue to be fruitful upholders of the Gospel.

Jesus tells his disciples, “Now you are clean” in the sense that they are under his influence and have been purified by his teaching (15:3). Right now they are in good shape spiritually. By being faithful to his teaching, however, they will remain that way, ensuring the widest spread of the gospel (bearing much fruit). By staying connected with him, they can receive nourishment to keep producing good fruit (15:4). Otherwise they become unproductive, incapable of serving his purpose. In other words though they will barely make it into heaven (1 Corinthians 3:12-15), Christians who lose this contact by breaking away or isolating themselves from their only source of fruit-bearing power will never bear fruit.

The encouragement to *remain* or *abide* in Jesus, means he wants us to choose to recognize our responsibility to continue keeping the relationship always active, in obligatory acknowledgment of Christ’s sovereignty. By maintaining an unbroken connection with the Source of our redemption and we receive Jesus’ all-sufficient spiritual nutrients to keep us alive in him. If we do not conform to Jesus’ commands we interrupt or break the spiritual link and then it becomes impossible to know whether or not we are alive in Christ. There is no way to know that the connection is still there unless we willingly work on it. It is for our benefit that we remain committed to Christ’s commands, and thus bear fruit. It is with this persistence or perseverance that we are able to bear fruit. The interaction is mutual (15:4a).

The ability to live a life that produces good fruit comes from the true spiritual teaching Christ offers (15:5). Cut off from the sustaining spiritual source and power of the Word of God, we atrophy spiritually and become incapable of spiritual activity (15:6). We will not lose our place in heaven because the Spirit of God given to us when we were born again is not taken away and cannot be evicted (John 10:28, 18:9; Romans 8:35-39). A non-functioning, inhospitable soul, however, can refuse to let Holy Spirit achieve God’s purpose in it by resisting (Acts 7:51), by quenching or putting out his fire (1 Thessalonians 5:19), or by grieving the Spirit (Ephesians 4:30).

Broken-off branches from Christ become useless in the way dead vine branches are and so dispensed with and burnt. This is not a reference to

going to hell. It is to losing the ability to be spiritually productive that leads gradually to becoming completely useless; but something remains alive, which in the case of dying trees is the stump (Matthew 3:10). While disconnection with Christ means lack of spiritual productivity, actively working against him in the opposite direction to produce sin or evil is not tolerated either (see Matthew 13:41-42).

Connected into the spiritual lifeline of Christ, we have full support and every resource we need to spread the gospel and glorify the Father (15:7-8). The mutual love between Jesus and his disciples, expressed in the lifestyle of obedience to God and love for one another, will show the world they are his, a testimony to the truth of the gospel. To execute the purpose for which he chose and appointed these believers, every prayer will be answered.

Love is self-sacrificial. Jesus shows his love (at the highest level of expression) by dying for us, and we show ours by continuing in obedience to the teachings for which he died (15:13-14). It is remarkable that he lays down loving each other as a command but does not make obeying him a requirement in the same way. Obeying Jesus is evidence of our love and a choice we make without compulsion.

The union of our faith and obedience with Christ's love elevates the level at which we are accepted within our relationship with Jesus; no longer servants, now we are friends, chosen to bear fruit (15:15-16). Jesus called his disciples "friends" as a sign of his love, now that he has entrusted them with the salvation plan he received from his Father. Our friendship with Jesus is his call, but our response can make or break the intended relationship. Our role is to believe in and stay in tune with Jesus' leadership through his teaching. Though now inducted into the circle of friends, we are not self-sufficient. We depend on the resources of the Trinity. In this friendship of unequal partners, we are the followers and Christ is the leader.

The idea of friendship with God is a familiar Old Testament concept. The Old Testament mentions many who were specially blessed by God. Abraham was considered God's friend (2 Chronicles 20:7), since God shared his plan of salvation through Abraham's offspring and Abraham obeyed God. God was calling the shots (Isaiah 41:8-9). God treated Moses like a friend (Exodus 33:11). Of the three friends only John the Evangelist received a Revelation, from God though Daniel, not mentioned as a friend, also did. Then, as during the ministry of Jesus, friendship is prompted by love. Love must always characterize the role of a disciple, which may prompt Christ to take our relationship with him to a higher level of friendship.

The Believer's Evangelical Assignment

John uses *the world* to represent a human-directed society that functions without regard for God's will (15:18-25). Remember how Jesus (through the Evangelist) explained God's relationship with the world in John 3:16? God loved (and still loves) the whole world even though it operates outside of his will, in rebellion. Paul reiterates this same idea: "When we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son" (Romans 5:10).

With two systems in apparent conflict—one disregarding God's will and the believers respecting God's will—the reconciling agent is Jesus, with his disciples participating in that work. But the conflict is real. Jesus predicts that "the world" will "hate" and "persecute" his followers because they have hated and persecuted him (15:18, 20). The Greek word for *persecute* can mean chasing after a wild animal to strike it down as a prize. Jesus' followers will be acting for the sake of his name, because they represent him (15:21).

Ignorance exonerates. A person may not be responsible for something they have never heard. But once exposed to the Gospel, one has a responsibility to conform to it (15:22). Unbelievers are guilty of ignoring both the message and the miraculous indicators that prove the validity of the gospel and Jesus' divinity. Whether or not people are exposed to specific information about Jesus and God's plan for salvation, Paul teaches that nature itself provides sufficient evidence of God's work in the world (Romans 1:18-20, 28). So those who are blinded by their chosen lifestyle are without excuse.

Jesus reminds them of his promise of the Advocate, Holy Spirit, who will soon be coming to teach, confirm, and remind them of Jesus' teaching (15:26- 27, 16:13-14). The disciples—including us, today—have the responsibility of proclaiming Jesus to those who need the proof however: "While continuing to honor Christ as Lord in your hearts, be ready always to give a well-reasoned reply to everyone who asks you to explain the basis of your confident belief; do so, though, with gentleness and respect" (1 Peter 3:15-16). Christians have a duty to bring Christ to non-believers and must perform it with gentleness displaying the best qualities in Jesus' Teaching.



Respond to God's Word

1. How do you practice remaining, or abiding, in Jesus?
2. Why would you expect to be “persecuted” for being Christian? How should you react?
3. Do you think you are a friend of Christ? How so?
4. How have you observed or experienced the conflict between a world opposed to God's will and those who practice living according to God's will?

Pray

- Confess your need to stay dependent on Christ. Ask the Holy Spirit to keep you nourished and spiritually cleansed to be able to bear abundant fruit for him.
- Thank the Lord for providing a stable relationship with him, within which you can have continuing usefulness and self worth.
- Thank the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit for their Love and their help so you will continue to obey, thereby strengthening your love relationship from which a friendship will grow.
- Thank God for the gift of the Holy Spirit and ask for the wisdom and courage always to be a witness for Christ.

Grief Turned to Joy

John 16

Jesus continues the Upper Room Discourse, teaching and instructing his disciples to prepare them for the time, coming soon, when he will no longer be physically available to them, though the promised Holy Spirit will be there as their Advocate and Paraclete. He wants to equip them so they will “not fall away” (16:1)—that is, so they might not be taken by surprise, become disoriented, and thrown off the course of Jesus’ mission.

These instructions come with a warning, following close on his teaching that in this *world* (in opposition to God’s will) they will face hatred and persecution, including a time when the disciples will be excommunicated and even killed (16:2) because of their association with Jesus’ ministry.

Certainly the apostles encountered persecution quite soon after Jesus’ death (as represented in the account of Stephen’s stoning)—and believers have been martyred for the gospel throughout history till the present. (Not that Christians have no history of persecuting others; they have persecuted those considered heretics, and they’ve participated in violent conflict against Muslims in the Crusades, for example. But while secular opponents victimize those with religious beliefs for a variety of reasons, religious persecutors convince themselves that they are serving God.)

For Jewish people, to be put out of the synagogue (or excommunicated) is a drastic punishment that entails living in social and religious isolation (16:2). The synagogue played a major role in shaping family values, conferring community status, and providing spiritual direction and social support to the people of Israel. If you were thrown out of the synagogue, you became a pariah, cut out of the loop of all social and community life, in shame.

People who have not had a close relationship with God will be the ones to persecute them (16:3). A person whose life is patterned after Jesus would not engage in these acts.

Jesus says: “when the time comes,” which carries an air of inevitability (reminiscent of Ecclesiastes 3, “Everything on earth has its appointed time”). These events are unavoidable but till now Jesus’ presence has acted as a shield protecting the disciples. He brings up the matter of his going away, and now no one is asking him where he is going (16:5). Peter had already

asked (13:33-37) and received Jesus' answer. At this stage, however with his leaving quite imminent they needed to have full understanding and appreciation of that event. But being preoccupied with grief (16:6) they needed to refocus. Jesus wanted them to put aside their grief in order to grasp how his going away will affect them.

Distress over his going away and its consequences may be blinding their understanding, but Jesus wants them to see why it is necessary for him to leave (16:7-11). He promises them a divine Helper, the Paraclete or Holy Spirit (16:7-8), who will not come until Jesus has returned to God the Father. The work of the Paraclete is specific and mainly involves providing the tools and fuel for the ministry of salvation to continue beyond Jesus' physical presence. During Jesus' absence he will remain in contact through the Holy Spirit (16:13).

The words most often applied to the Holy Spirit—*Paraclete, Comforter, Advocate*—have sometimes been applied to God the Father and Jesus as well (14:16, 2 Corinthians 1:3-4, 1 John 2:1). What each member of the Trinity mainly does as our comforting or advocating agent differs, though they work together. The Holy Spirit teaches or witnesses to all aspects of the truth about Christ's ministry and helps our prayers by intercession (Romans 8:26); the Son intercedes for us with respect to sin because God made us righteous by putting our sins on Jesus, who stands before him on our behalf (2 Corinthians 5:21, 1 John 2:1); and the Father is the source of all aspects of Eternal Life.

When he comes, the Holy Spirit will "reprove the world"—that is, convict or find the world guilty of using the wrong system of values with respect to sin, righteousness, and judgment (16:8). The sin is in not believing and accepting Jesus as Savior (16:9). Their opportunity to see Jesus portray the right way to relate to God will have gone when Jesus returns to heaven (16:10). And God will judge and condemn Satan (16:11), who has used deceitful tactics (sin) to control this world and disrupt the relationship God intends to have with mankind. Jesus makes a critical connection between his going to the Father and righteousness. His returning to God signals the successful end of their salvation work. Christ's work was about removing the power of sin over humankind so that the Father can relate to those who accept His salvation. In other words, by exchanging our fallen sinful state with his divine purity, Jesus made us righteous before God, guaranteeing our salvation. When God looks at the believer, he sees his Son's sinless condition. Believers agree with this transaction by giving allegiance to Jesus, God's

representative. This exchange is complete when Jesus returns to the Father. The world that does not believe in Jesus demonstrates a fatal error in denying their need to participate in this transaction, denying their only chance to escape the disastrous consequence of sin. None but the pretentious, unprincipled or blind will accept that a life of continually missing the mark (sin) is desirable and has no untoward consequence.

Even with God's declaration: "... I desired mercy, and not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings." (Hosea 6:6), the existing religious establishment continued to err in assuming that sin was satisfactorily taken care of through synagogue and temple worship and sacrifices, deeming Jesus' message as misleading and self-serving. John describes them as remaining in the dark because they refuse to follow the Good Shepherd through the Gate into an always-available pastureland. They refuse to partake of the Bread of Life. Their behavior was deliberate blindness: "You gave us the Torah, and the Torah we will stick to, forever, no matter what." By this wrong attitude they placed themselves outside the salvation plan. Along with the prince of this world (12:31), they will be condemned.

Despite the fact that Jesus knew he was facing the worst of all undeserved punishments—within twenty-four hours!—he nonetheless remained engaged in comforting and empowering his disciples. In this we see him living out this description from John: "Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end" (13:1).

The Guide to the Truth

After Jesus leaves, the Church will be in good hands, since the Holy Spirit will receive truths from him, by which to guide and teach Jesus' disciples accurately (16:12-15). Through this tutoring guidance of the Spirit of Truth, the unbelieving world will be shown to be in error for rejecting Jesus. The ministry of the Holy Spirit will be to present himself as the divine source of the ultimate truth, to guide believers to discover all truth, to speak only with Jesus' instruction, show believers things that are to come, to glorify Christ, and teach and remind believers what Jesus taught.

The disciples continue to struggle with what seemed almost like riddles that Jesus was telling them. With the whole story before us today, we know that Jesus being gone "a little while" before they see him again most likely refers to his being absent for the short duration of his death before they see

him again, resurrected. We know that Jesus was going to the Father, but the disciples had yet to grasp the reality of his imminent death and resurrection. As John the Evangelist explains, they would not fully understand until after Christ's death and resurrection. (2:22)

When Jesus says, "Verily, verily" (or, "Very truly I tell you"), he conveys firmness and trustworthiness of the statement (in the Greek: "Amen, amen"). He indicates that what follows is a statement of unquestionable importance—in other words, "This you can take to the bank!" What Jesus is telling his disciples can be relied upon to happen! Jesus makes more than one statement of this kind as he instructs his disciples.

Jesus compares the duration of the disciples' grief followed by a time of joy with a woman's experience in childbirth (16:21-22). He wants them to see that even a devastating event such as leaving His disciples can shift from being extremely emotionally painful to joyful. Jesus did not just expect the disciples to gain a spiritual perspective through Scripture or prayer. He paid attention to making them understand their circumstances along with the role their emotions will play. As well he addresses their peace of mind! The straightforward comparison with childbirth encourages the disciples to look beyond an immediate difficult situation to the time when it will be over. The lesson is, "This too shall pass." He did not tell them to ignore their circumstances. Instead He showed them how to deal with what they were going to face by looking beyond the painful event.

Jesus points them to one benefit of this future time when he is gone: Then they will not have to depend on Jesus for answers as they do now, when their human Teacher is accessible (16:23). In the future, they will have open, direct access to the Father's resources from which all their answers will come. When Christ's followers find that their requests are always granted for the furtherance of the gospel, their joy will be "full" (or "complete" 16:24). In other words, when they recognize (with time) that they haven't really lost him as their leader and friend but in fact have gained an additional divine Advocate, their present sorrowful state will be replaced with joy! The image Jesus shows is indeed that of a compassionate and encouraging God "who comforts us in all our troubles" (2 Corinthians 1:3-4).

Jesus admits he has been speaking figuratively or using parables. This manner of speaking ensured that his message went only to those who were chosen to receive his teachings. But now he promises that soon this style of teaching will not be necessary; then he will shift to plain language about his Father (16:25-28). He adds that soon, the disciples will make requests

directly of God, without needing Jesus as an intermediary. Because God loves all believers, he will hear us when we pray (1 John 5:14, Ephesians 3:12, Hebrew 4:16) even if the Holy Spirit will have to help us sometimes (Romans 8:26-27).

Jesus' unique teaching style set him apart from the Jewish religious leaders. He demonstrated obvious expertise in his subject matter, which made people speechless with amazement: "because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law" (Matthew 7:29, Mark 1:22, Luke 4:32). For John, the way Jesus handles the disciples' dilemma provides further clear proof of the loving nature of God, represented so completely in Jesus. By the response Jesus gave to their unasked question in a way that they understood the rationale behind His departure plan (16:28), the disciples recognized additional evidence of His divinity (16:29-30).

Even as the disciples are affirming this belief in him however, Jesus knows that a test of their faith and endurance is coming sooner than they know and that the time is already upon these believers when they will be scattered and separated from him (16:31-32). Jesus however takes courage from the constant presence of the Father. Because he wants his disciples to experience peace they need to know now that faith in him will bring the peace of mind they will need to help them deal not only with the sense of letdown from deserting Him but also with the persecution they and we will suffer. This peace is not a gift (as in 14:27); it is *in him* and is obtained through their willingness to use Jesus as their life anchor. As Isaiah puts it: "You will keep in perfect peace those who trust you whose minds are fixed or anchored in you." (Isaiah 26:3) Here, Jesus provides a key to evangelistic resilience, namely: Faith in him will give the disciples and us the inner peace and assurance needed to soldier on. This is not all. They and we need to know that the battle with non-believers is already won! Jesus says: "But take heart! I have overcome the world." (16:33)



Respond to God's Word

1. Can the teachings of Jesus bring about a completely peaceful world? How so or not so?
2. In what ways have you seen the Holy Spirit operating in your life that you can identify or describe with confidence?
3. How do you find comfort when you face enormous disappointment or a time of struggle?

Pray

- Thank the Lord for warning you about the danger people ignorant of Christianity will pose to believers. Ask the Holy Spirit to protect you from such experience.
- Confess the times you have felt God let you down and ask for clarity to understand God's actions are always for your good.
- Thank the Lord for identifying with your emotional and spiritual weakness and for informing the Holy Spirit of truths to guide your life.
- Thank the Lord for being a reliable and constant source of peace of mind in the face of problems, burdens, and persecution.

Jesus Prays

John 17

The prayer that Jesus taught his disciples in the other Gospels (e.g. Mathew 6:9-13) is often called “the Lord’s Prayer,” in the sense that it is a “how to” prayer meant to guide his followers to pray. The prayer included here in John 17 however is most aptly “the Lord’s Prayer” since Jesus makes a personal petition on behalf of himself (17:1-5), the disciples (17:6-19), and all believers (17:20-26).

This prayer by Jesus is significant because of its details. It is strategic, coming at the end of his final teaching session with his closest much-loved followers. It also marks “the beginning of the end”—that is, the brink of the finalization of God’s plan for saving the world, when his earthly life ends and his glorified life in heaven starts.

Jesus is praying at the end of his “upper room discourse,” wrapping up a session that began when he washed his disciples’ feet, ate with them, and then taught them. He prays where they can hear him in comfort, privacy and with full attention. Though some believe the ending of chapter 14, “let us leave” indicates the end of the supper-and-teaching session, it seems more likely that at that point Jesus was telling his disciples to pull themselves together to be ready to leave. Leaving then to pray on the move seems impractical, against Jesus’ teaching on praying (e.g. Mathew 6:5-6) and therefore unlikely.

A pause for prayerful reflection was important for these men, whose Rabbi just gave them the news that he was leaving. Because they want to be as much like their teacher as possible it was customary for students or disciples to follow a Rabbi around for much longer than Jesus’ disciples did. Personally committed and passionately devoted to their Rabbi, the disciples would note everything he did or said. Jesus gathered disciples (Mark 3:13-19) whom he would train to be like him (John 13:15). In Jesus’ day disciples followed their teacher without knowing where he would take them but understood that always it is to the place that’s exactly required to teach a specific lesson. So the commitment to their teacher was unconditional. In return disciples could count on full protection from their Rabbis, who were highly respected people in society.

To hear their Teacher was leaving them must have seemed incomprehensible. Usually disciples left when they “graduated,” that is, when they learned

well enough to lead other students; it was probably unheard of that the teacher is the one leaving, especially after such a relatively brief period of teaching them to become like him. A rabbi or teacher “dumping” or “abandoning” his disciples would cause deep sorrow and perhaps even shame.

No doubt Jesus recognized that his disciples’ confused and traumatic emotional state was not allowing them to “get going” (the words from the end of John 14), so he continued to reassure them (chapters 15 and 16) that their connection with him would continue, and so would their work in his ministry. He explains that his love for them based on that of the Father will be the bond between them, and that in the same way love must hold the disciples together as a unit. He also promises them that, when he has gone, He will prepare a place for them and will send the permanent Encourager, the Holy Spirit to guide and teach them; so his leaving is necessary and ultimately for their good.

This was heavy food for thought, and Jesus wrapped up his long discourse with his hope that despite their coming troubles they would have composure from being connected with him, and knowing that He had defeated Satan he had “overcome the world.” (16:33)

And then Jesus prays, giving his disciples (including John the Evangelist and us), a front-row experience and inclusion in a conversation between Father and Son that explains their inner, intimate relationship. Jesus prayed several times during his public ministry—for example, during his baptism (Luke 3:21), when his ministry began (Mark 1:35), the evening before he chose his disciples (Luke 6:12), all night at the Transfiguration (Luke 9:29), at Gethsemane (Matthew 26:39, 42, 44) and as he ceased to breathe (Luke 23:46). This prayer recorded by John, however, is the longest and most detailed.

Known sometimes as “the holy of holies of the New Testament” this prayer depicts Jesus reporting his achievements before the Father who sent him on his mission as the Son. The finality of Jesus’ ministry is assumed even before the climactic event actually takes place on the cross. Nothing can go wrong now; moreover Father and Son are prophetically aware of the actual conclusion and that calls for a celebration of Jesus’ victory. Notably the Holy Spirit does not feature in this prayer. The spotlight is on Jesus, for now. Once this phase of the salvation events concludes, the “handover” takes place at Pentecost and the spotlight then shifts to the Spirit’s role. At that point Jesus takes on another role as Intercessor, leaving the spiritual heavy lifting on earth for the Holy Spirit to continue.

In this prayer Jesus models that it is reasonable and caring to pray for others, which he continually does on our behalf in his role as Intercessor (Hebrews 7:25). Jesus emphasizes love as the core essence of his relationship with God—love embodied and expressed in godly action—and therefore the standard for all our relationships. The prayer highlights unity among believers as a hallmark and defining attribute of the Church. Throughout, the tone of the prayer is tender, free of judgment and pessimism. Ultimately, the prayer honors God the Father as the head of the Trinity, to whom we belong and who wants those he has chosen to be together within his family.

This honoring is implied in Jesus' posture of looking up toward heaven as he prays (17:1). It's not to be interpreted that God is up as opposed to down or to our side; nor is he away or near. God is! Everything is always in his presence, though not necessarily in his family. Because the Temple (traditionally a permanent place for God's presence) was built on hilly ground the custom was to look up in prayer (see Psalm 121:1-2). So by his posture Jesus was demonstrating humility, acknowledging God's supremacy. He may have only raised his gaze upward toward the Temple, following a common custom. Accordingly, this prayer attitude indicates our relative relationship with the Creator.

Jesus Prays about Himself: Glory to Whom Glory Is Due

The message in John's Gospel is that through being crucified Jesus brings glory to God and by that same process receives glory himself. In these first five verses of Jesus' prayer the words *glorify* or *glory* occur five times. The Greek word connotes ascribing weight by recognizing real substance (value), valuing Jesus and his Father for who they really are.

Jesus invites his Father, who provided the mission of salvation, to unreservedly declare it officially successful by presenting Jesus as divine, which will in turn show the divine intention behind the plan for salvation.

Jesus acknowledges that God gave him full authority over the entire human race (17:2. See also Matthew 11:27). From other scriptures, we know that Jesus also wields power over angels, and thrones (including Satan, a created being 1 Peter 3:22), all power in heaven and earth (Matthew 28:18), over men and over all rulers and powers (Colossians 2:10) and those whom God has chosen ("the elect", John 6:37, John 17:2, 6, 9, 24).

The point of the salvation mission is for Jesus to provide Eternal Life, which

he describes as: “Now this is Eternal Life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.” God the Father did not need this reminder about Jesus’ mission or its end goal of giving believers Eternal Life. The words of this prayer are for the benefit of the human listeners (17:13).

The point of Eternal Life is that the created ones who had fallen under Satan’s power and broken relationship with God should be restored, through Jesus, and come to know God, that is have an intimate, spiritual relationship with him (17:3). Paul sees knowing Christ as a lifelong endeavor and says that while on earth our knowledge is “in part” or always incomplete (1 Corinthians 13:9). It is humbling to note that as an eminent scholar, even after a lifetime of study he still prayed, “I want to know Christ” (Philippians 3:10). Here also knowing refers to a close, experiential, spiritually guided connection.

Eternal Life means we will know the only true God, and Jesus Christ. *Jesus Christ* includes his name, *Jesus* (which means Savior), and his title, *Christ*, which means *Messiah*. Jesus Christ is the one God has sent as His Representative. Remember how Jesus describes himself as the Way, the only passage-way to God (14:6), the only Messiah from the only true God.

When John describes God the Father as “the only true God,” he is not denying Jesus’ divinity (17:3). On the contrary! The Evangelist has taken great pains to develop this theme of the divine reality of Jesus, a claim for which the religious leaders deeply despised Jesus. John however is quite clear about Jesus’ divinity in 1 John 5:20. But here John presents Jesus’ own words in confessional prayer, giving his Father’s role pre-eminence in the Trinity.

“Mission accomplished!” is the main theme of Jesus’ prayer; He has finished the work God assigned him (17:4). Our salvation (prophesied by Daniel in 9:24) has been accomplished; so now we are not required to do anything. This feat will be announced from the cross for God’s and for Christ’s glory.

There is a celebratory finality in the shared glory between the Father and Son (17:4-5). Glory is the accolade that Jesus invites God to show to the world. John has faithfully narrated all the evidence, in stages, that Jesus is divine. Now, with the work completed, Jesus is ready for full restoration of his divine status in the Trinity, alongside the Father, receiving due glory. Yet he recognizes that the glory from this great accomplishment is ultimately and directly due to the Father’s will and plan. As the wording in the Greek suggests, Jesus asks God to “give me the glory that will reflect back to you.” (17:5) This is a request for an intimate joyous celebration between Father and Son, as the worthy emissary is reinstated to his former position of Son and

heir. This scene completes a circle from John's prologue (1:1-2, 14), showing Jesus as set to return to his former role as the Word of God, who himself is God.

Jesus Prays for His Disciples: Security, Deliverance, and Sanctification

Jesus turns the focus of his prayer on his disciples—those God gave him out of “the world.” When John the Evangelist uses the term *the world*, sometimes he simply means God's handiwork of creation (1:10, 3:16-17, 17:9, 11, 13, 15, 24). Other times John means those human beings who operate without reference to God-based values—those who are unwilling to give up a human-determined lifestyle for one that is accountable to God in Christ (15:19, 17:6, 14, 16, 21, 23, 25). God has given Jesus a group of those who believe in him, out of all the people in the world who were choosing not to believe. As from the time after his resurrection, Jesus' followers would include his eleven disciples, excluding Judas Iscariot who chose to be under Satan's control (13:27), and the 120 in the Upper Room (Acts 1:15). Paul identified 500 believers to whom Jesus appeared (1 Corinthians 15:6); and Luke records the 3000 converts who responded to Peter's speech (Acts 2:41). The entire Book of Acts describes the spread of the Church among gentiles through the ministry of the Apostles, spearheaded by Paul. But as well, this prayer includes all of us who have believed till today and into the future, as planned by God before Creation (17:20; Ephesians 1:4-6).

To these believers given to him by God out of this world, Jesus has revealed the Father (17:6) and he has given all the credit for the gift of the Word (himself) and salvation to God, who provided the plan for salvation.

As the first five verses celebrated the shared glory of Father and Son, the sharing of glory stretches to believers who belong to Father and Son especially since what's in them (their faith) glorifies Jesus: “I am glorified in them” (17:10). Believers who publicly declare their faith bring glory to Christ. And when we acknowledge Christ we get back his acknowledgement, when it counts (Matthew 10:32).

As Jesus is soon to leave his much-loved disciples, he prays for three important aspects of life for them—their security, deliverance, and sanctification. He begins by asking the Holy Father to protect them by the power of his name. The Father and Son have a common source of power,

which the Son is asking to be made available to his disciples. The common source is the Father, and the disciples' power will come from being faithful to Jesus' depiction of God as they present the salvation story. In effect, Jesus is asking for the same privilege of a special connection between his Father and the disciples as he himself shares with his Father (Galatians 4:6).

Jesus mentions that only Judas Iscariot (because of Satan's presence in his ministry) was lost, and there is a play on Jesus' words in the Greek: "and none of them is lost (*apōleto*), but the son of perdition (*apōleia*)" (17:12). Basically, it says, "None was destroyed except the destroyer's son." In other words Judas is a son of Satan whose work brings destruction (in parallel to the Son and the Father, whose work it is to bring Eternal Life).

Jesus raises the matter of Judas here to assure his disciples that God has always been in charge of the furtherance of his salvation plan. Satan did not deceive Jesus, but according to Jesus Judas was playing an assigned role that "Scripture would be fulfilled" (Psalm 41:9).

Jesus prays with a longing to share with his disciples the "full measure" of his joy (17:13). Jesus told them about the things of which his joy consists so the disciples would know everything that brought him joy, which will bring them joy too. This "complete joy" (see 1 John 1:3-4, John 15:11, John 16:24) occurs as the disciples are drawn into the celebratory glory the Father and Son are sharing. Jesus wants to leave his disciples with a joyous outlook. He gave them every reason to be happy for him and themselves.

This joy will help them cope with the hatred they have experienced and, as he is predicting, they will encounter from non-believers (17:14b). These disciples are part of God's Kingdom now and don't belong to the world of hostile and rebellious unbelievers destined for destruction (8:23-24; 2 Corinthians 5:16-19; Philippians 3:16-20; Hebrews 3:10-11). That shift from the world to being under God's Rule brings big changes. As followers of Christ we have a different standing, now in Christ and no longer through Adam. We have a new nature, now born of the Spirit. Our Master is Jesus, no longer are we ruled by the defeated prince of the world. Our new goal is to glorify Jesus and God only, as the architects of our lives. By having a new citizenship, life, and destiny, we thus maintain a clear difference in our reason for being from the non-Christian world although still among those who live that way.

Jesus doesn't pray that his disciples should escape this world of problems, but that God would deliver them from the schemes of the evil one (17:15. See also Matthew 6:13; 1 Corinthians 10:13). The disciples needed to stay in this world! They had a necessary and vital role to play. Their presence in the

world is to bring glory to Christ, by showing others who Christ is, by the way they live and by spreading the gospel. The disciples will be a force against Satan's persistent attempts to harass or lure believers away, without falling prey themselves.

Jesus prays for the disciples to be "sanctified" (set apart) for a specific task; they are to conform to the same pattern of life as Jesus, who devoted himself to his Father's mission (17:16-17). *Sanctify* in its comprehensive sense means to purify, consecrate or make holy as a process of being set apart as special to God. Believers are consecrated by Jesus (Hebrews 10:10) and by the Holy Spirit (2 Thessalonians 2:13, 1 Peter 1:1-2).

With his mission accomplished, Jesus intends to hand over to his disciples (the Church) the continuing "mission" of sharing the salvation story. As Jesus had been sent, now he will be sending them (17:18). Jesus has sanctified himself—set himself apart in dedication for this cause, that the disciples too might be set apart for taking over the same special work of revealing Jesus and God to the world. (17:19).

Jesus Prays for All Believers: Unity for Gospel Authenticity

Jesus' prayer takes a widening turn now, not praying for only these disciples who are present with him, but for all who will believe in him across the centuries. His prayer is that they may be unified, sharing the kind of unity experienced within the Trinity (17:20-21). As the Gospel message goes out into the world a unity among disciples will be evident (starting with his present audience), which will show that believers are held together by a common faith grounded in the love of God through Jesus Christ. Love is the reason for the salvation mission!

Jesus prays repeatedly that all believers "may be one" (17:11, 21-22). He prays for a spirit of unity to continue and explains what "being one" entails. The Father and Son and Spirit are unified in the mystery that is the Eternal Godhead or Trinity. All believers are assimilated (plugged) into this Source and as such our unity will enable the gospel story to retain its divine authority and authenticity.

Jesus prays about a "perfect" or "complete" unity (17:23). Another translation of the Greek might be, "... May they experience attaining to such perfect unity that the world will know that you sent me..." As only God can make possible the ultimate attainment of unity among us our job is to strive for the

goal of unity and Jesus' prayer will do the rest. This level of unity will display the true nature of God and continue to legitimize Jesus' ministry while showing that God's Love is for believers as much as it is for Jesus himself ("[you] have loved them even as you have loved me"). God loves us the way He loves Jesus (also, 13:1, 16:27).

Jesus mentions how God loved him before the creation of the world, indicating the eternal Trinity pre-existing the time of Creation. Scripture repeatedly mentions that God was preparing his Kingdom for us since the time of Creation or even before (Matthew 25:34, Luke 11:50, Ephesians 1:4-5, Hebrews 4:3, 9:26, 1 Peter 1:20, Revelation 13:8, 17:8).

God's plan for salvation through Jesus addressed the problem of sin that previously kept humankind from sharing intimacy with a "Righteous Father" (17:25). The willingness of unbelievers to remain ignorant of God's true nature rightfully invokes God's retributive justice. His love averted that just punishment for the disobedient action of all who do not believe in him. Indeed righteousness (doing what's right) seems to conceptually and experientially tie together the two core attributes of God, namely love and justice, upon which all His acts rest. God is the One who always does what's right, whether in showing love or being just. His righteousness makes him both loving and just by nature. His mercy and justice co-exist because of his righteousness. His righteousness constrained his wrath against sin and allowed his love to be displayed at the Cross (2 Corinthians 5:21, Psalm 71:19, Psalm 65:5).



Respond to God's Word

1. The early verses of this prayer show God and Jesus united in their shared glory, in celebration of their salvation mission—conceived by the Father and fulfilled by the Son. How do the later verses in this prayer draw the disciples (or all believers) into their shared glory, their shared love and their shared mission to the world?
2. How does Jesus describe “Eternal Life”? By this description, are you already experiencing Eternal Life as part of God’s Kingdom?
3. When have you felt that you were being protected, delivered, or sanctified by God?
4. Are there cultural norms or human tendencies that get in the way of Christians achieving “complete unity”?

Pray

- Thank the Lord Jesus for his obedience to God in bringing his plan for your salvation to a successful completion and for the assurance that you have Eternal Life.
- Confess that we will always need God’s powerful protection against Satan to keep his Church secure and unified as we present to the world who he is.
- Thank God for the opportunity and privilege of continuing to know him through Jesus Christ, and confirm that you are completely open to Father, Son, and Spirit making their home in you.

The Hour Comes

John 18

John the Evangelist's specialty has been his theology—showing us who God is, by showing us that Jesus is the divine emissary perfectly reflecting his Father. From time to time throughout the Gospel John as the narrator and Jesus playing the central role mention that the “hour” had not yet come, meaning the time in Christ's ministry when his mission would come to a climax, culminating in the ultimate glorification of Father and Son at the Cross.

That hour has now come. The last few chapters of the book of John cover a period of only about twenty-four hours. Chapter 18 covers the arrest and trial of Jesus. As usual, John's narrative differs in the details it gives as compared to the other Gospel accounts. Eyewitnesses, of course, note differing details coming from differing perspectives; this only reinforces the historical authenticity of the accounts of Jesus' life. John chooses to include details that focus on Jesus' role of High Priest, the consecrated One who offers Himself as the sacrifice that satisfies the Father's justice. John also makes sure his readers note the parallels between Jesus' sacrifice and the Old Testament practice of requesting God's forgiveness of sins through the shedding of the blood of animals; Jesus' killing perfected this Old Testament system of sacrifice (Hebrews 9:24-28). In the other Gospels, the Persian magi sought Jesus as a king. In John's, the representative of Roman power (Pilate) acknowledges Jesus as King (18:37).

The setting for Jesus' arrest, trial, and crucifixion was the Passover celebration, which comprised three feasts together—the feast of Passover (Leviticus 23:5), the feast of Unleavened Bread (Leviticus 23:6), and the feast of the First Fruits (Leviticus 23:11, 15-17). Paul describes Christ as “the first fruits” (1 Corinthians 15:20, 23) because his Resurrection occurred during the celebration of this feast.

Jesus Is Arrested

The special time of teaching and preparation shared with his disciples is over. The betrayer had left to set into motion the final events of God's salvation plan. It was time for Jesus to move toward that destiny (18:1). Jesus goes with

his disciples across the Kidron Valley to a private garden area. John does not use the garden's name *Gethsemane*, which literally means "oilpress," but he does mention the Kidron, which is the path of the flow of the blood of lambs killed in the temple sacrificial rites. As the Lamb of God, Jesus is about to shed his blood for our redemption: the final sacrifice. Therefore recalling this place as the location of Jesus' final hours will produce theological resonance among Jewish readers. This brook is the one David crossed in emotional agony when his son Absalom and his confidante Ahitophel betrayed him and sought to take his life. In the end that betrayer killed himself by hanging (2 Samuel 17:23). This symbolism too would probably not be missed by Jewish readers, who would be realizing the extent of betrayal Jesus experienced from those who should have promoted his cause (the religious leaders, Judas).

Gethsemane is a garden at the foot of the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem where the other Gospel accounts describe Jesus spending the night in agonized prayer just before his arrest (Matthew 26:36-46, Mark 14:32-42, Luke 22:39-46), but John does not mention this. Perhaps John slept through Jesus' time of prayer, or perhaps he leaves out this story because he did not wish to detract from the careful building up of the picture of Jesus' divinity. John has showed his readers, step by step, Jesus' revelation of who he really is, as One who has demonstrated his Power, even over death and therefore in total control of all events. It's also possible that, as a close friend, the Evangelist found this dark night of the soul too painful or too private to record.

Judas knows this garden, and he comes, bringing a cohort of soldiers he has received (literally: "having procured") from the chief priests and Pharisees for security. These Roman soldiers and Temple guards amount to a surprisingly large group making this arrest, as if the religious leaders were taking no chances that a riot may erupt because of Jesus' popularity or perhaps because Judas has told them that Jesus was aware of the plot against him. On the other hand they came in large numbers, perhaps expecting to arrest the disciples along with Jesus (18:3). They brought lights, as if they expected Jesus and his friends to hide in the bushes or thickets. Probably in a misguided attempt to keep his promise to defend Jesus at all costs (13:37, Luke 22:33), Peter impulsively draws out a weapon and slices off the ear of the high priest's servant, Malchus (18:10). Peter, probably unintentionally gets the ear, missing the man's head. John doesn't describe how Jesus stops to heal this man's ear. The other Gospel accounts report the incident without identifying Peter or Malchus (Matthew 26:51, Mark 14:47), with Luke alone describing Jesus healing the ear (Luke 22:51).

Jesus corrects Peter, indicating again that he is going about his Father's business by referring to drinking the "cup" (symbolic of destiny in Isaiah 51:17, 22, Psalm 75:8) his Father has given him.

And Jesus, with divine omniscience, remains in control; he prevents the soldiers from taking them all by stipulating they pinpoint the one person they seek (18:4). They are looking for Jesus of Nazareth (identifying people by where their family comes from was common, 18:5). Other accounts describe how Judas identifies Jesus with a kiss (Matthew 26:48-49, Mark 14:44-45, Luke 22:47-48). John does not mention this action of betrayal by a close follower of Jesus; perhaps it was repugnant to John, who understandably would be contemptuous of Judas' role (12:6, 18:2-3).

Jesus gives another "I AM" statement, which would hold significance to the Jewish readers of John's Gospel, who have been presented with numerous references by Jesus Himself using the same self-description God uses. "I am he" reflects the divine self-identification (18:5-6, Exodus 3:14). The words have the powerful effect of knocking his attackers back onto the ground (18:6). This militant crowd comes in the night (in the darkness of their ignorance) to carry out their evil plan and they cannot withstand the light in Jesus. Having made sure the leaders of the arresting crowd know it is him they are there to arrest, Jesus instructs them authoritatively to let his disciples go unhurt (18:8). This, John states, is to keep his word (6:39, 17:12). The commander and his officers then bind Jesus and take him away (much as Isaac was bound as a sacrifice, Genesis 22:9).

Peter Acts as Jesus Predicted

One high priest, Annas, has recently been deposed and replaced by Caiaphas, the same one who showed shrewd insight when he and the other leaders were plotting to kill Jesus (11:49-50). John reminds us of Caiaphas' advice undoubtedly to call attention to its actual unfolding.

Peter and another disciple follow the cohort of soldiers who took Jesus away. It's quite unlikely however that this other disciple is John, our eye-witness narrator, who never refers to himself as "another disciple" (18:15). Several times in his Gospel (20:2, 3, 4, 8), he uses the description "the other disciple", most often, appending *the one Jesus loved*, when he refers to himself (20:2). The high priest seems to know this other person ("another disciple,") who does not fit John's description of himself. Moreover, being a fisherman

from Galilee, like Peter, it is unlikely that John interacted influentially with leaders in Jerusalem. Perhaps the disciple with Peter in this narrative is Nicodemus or Joseph of Arimathea, two followers of Jesus who would be well known in high priestly circles. In any case it does not appear important to identify this individual by name.

Just a few hours earlier, Peter had been surprised to hear Jesus say that he would deny his friendship with Jesus. But the lie springs immediately to his lips when Peter is confronted (18:17). Peter's "I am not" contrasts flawed humanity's response with Jesus' repeated "I am" statements that signal he is God.

Meanwhile Caiaphas and Annas, together with other officials, are questioning Jesus, and the scene clearly justifies Jesus' criticism of the religious leadership's moral character. They come across in John's narrative as self-serving evil men who stop at nothing to protect their interests, image, and position (see also Matthew 26:59). The ancient historian Josephus and other rabbinic sources describe Caiaphas as loving money and involved in bribery and intrigue. They strike Jesus, an action that may fulfill an Old Testament prophecy (Isaiah 50:6).

John takes the story back to Peter in the courtyard, where he denies being one of Jesus' disciples again—and again (18:25-27). The cock begins to crow at the moment of that third denial, just as Jesus had predicted. (The other Gospel accounts include somewhat different details, for example about Peter cursing and about the servant girls' roles, probably because different eyewitnesses are giving the details they remember and value. See Matthew 26:69-74, Mark 14:66-71, and Luke 22:55-60.)

Pilate and the Jewish Leaders at Cross Purposes

Having been questioned by Annas and then by Caiaphas, Jesus is sent on to Pilate, whose historical existence, long questioned by critics, has been verified by the discovery in 1961 in Israel of a stone inscribed with the name *Pontius Pilate, Prefect*. Pilate was a Roman administrator in Judea (approximately 26-36 A.D.) during the time of Christ. Eusebius the ecclesiastical historian of Caesarea reports that Pilate killed himself in 39 CE on learning of his death sentence by Emperor Caligula. Pilate was known as a reckless, unscrupulous ruler, borne out by his torturing Jesus even though he insisted there was a lack of evidence for a guilty conviction, which the religious leaders were seeking.

The Evangelist puts this trial on the day before the Passover, whereas the

synoptic gospels put it on the day of the Passover after the Last Supper, which was their Passover meal.

Jesus remains in full control of what is happening. The book of Mark records that Jesus predicted with detailed accuracy that he would be turned over to Gentiles: “The Son of man shall be delivered unto the chief priests, and unto the scribes; and they shall condemn him to death, and shall deliver him to the Gentiles: And they shall mock him, and shall scourge (flog) him, and shall spit upon him, and shall kill him: and the third day he shall rise again” (Mark 10:33-34).

In complete theological and religious hypocrisy, the Jewish religious leaders avoid being defiled (according to Jewish law) by entering Pilate’s Praetorium (18:28) and all the while conducting a kangaroo court session to railroad and execute Jesus, an innocent man. The accusers spun the charge in front of Pilate from blasphemy (with which they had charged Jesus all through his ministry) to being a criminal, though when questioned by Pilate it was about being “King of the Jews.” This claim to kingship would bring a verdict of treason (by Rome) on the one hand, and on the other his claim to be the Messiah would bring a verdict of violating Jewish religious tradition. The other Gospels give the charge as treason. All accusations are undoubtedly intended to make a death sentence the only possible punishment (Matthew 27:11; Mark 15:2; Luke 23:3). Presentationss in these various trials may seem chaotic and inconsistent, but the judicial context was much less sophisticated than today’s legal systems.

Pilate initially suggests that the Jewish leaders judge Jesus according to Jewish law. The devious Jewish leaders however wanted a Roman crucifixion, since hanging from a tree is considered a curse (Deuteronomy 21:23), and if he were convicted and punished by the Jews, his death would be by stoning (Leviticus 24:16). Crucifixion, with its curse, however, satisfies critical prophecies indicating the salvation plan in action. Besides, Jesus had earlier mentioned the kind of death he would die, and mentioned “being lifted up” as he would be on the cross. So Jesus already knew he would be crucified (18:32, 3:14-15, 8:28, 12:32-33).

When Pilate asks Jesus if he is the king of the Jews, Jesus asks if that is Pilate’s own idea (18:33), giving the Roman Prefect an opportunity to recognize and confess his faith if he had it. Jesus does not plainly deny he is King and actually expands on the kind of Kingdom he represents (18:36). In biblical, ecclesiastical tradition Jesus is Prophet, High Priest, and King, although as is clear in John’s Gospel he is also God.

Jesus differentiates between his spiritual Kingdom of God and the earthly

kingdom of Rome. As a continuous narrative, Jesus' words appear to be teaching Pilate that he is missing an opportunity to give allegiance to a higher Kingdom than that of Rome, whose interests Pilate was protecting.

Pilate seems to consider, perhaps cynically that truth is relative and because of that there's no way to know what is true. He however actually comes down on the side of actual truth by declaring Jesus innocent because there was no legal basis on which to convict him of any crime. Nonetheless, Pilate is apparently more concerned with the mob outside his palace demanding action. Trying to save Jesus seems counter-productive to his need for self-preservation. As such, in presenting truth as relative Pilate seems to be preparing the way to avoid taking any responsibility for condemning Jesus to death. He does this duplicitously, privately acquiescing in Jesus' claim that he was "king" (18:36-37) but uses this most serious of the trumped up charges (claiming to be 'King of the Jews') to "bargain" for Jesus' release, which he knows these bloodthirsty leaders will not accept. Yet he concludes that allegation is an unfounded basis for a conviction (18:38-39). Thus he attempts to maintain legal integrity while on the other hand abandoning Jesus to the murderous desires of the Jewish leaders.

A legally capable and shrewd arbitrator, Pontius Pilate was unable to find proper legal grounds on which to convict Jesus. The other Gospel accounts describe how the religious leaders could not find witnesses to be taken seriously (even on their crooked terms) to testify against Jesus. These hostile witnesses confirmed that the Lamb of God was without blemish (fault), when slain. This account also leaves no doubt that it was the religious leaders who forced Pilate to allow Jesus' crucifixion. Later, Peter will preach about this day:

The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified his servant Jesus. You handed him over to be killed, and you disowned him before Pilate, though he had decided to let him go. You disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked that a murderer be released to you. You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead. We are witnesses of this. (Acts 3:13-15)

The Jewish religious leaders take their hypocrisy one step further by preferring to crucify an innocent man (whose charges as an insurrectionist they concocted themselves!) than an actual criminal (18:40). Barabbas was seen as a folk hero with political ambitions, and many Jews were in favor of using force and violence to free their people from Roman rule in order to establish a Jewish religious state and usher in the Messiah. The crowd

chooses a human criminal impostor of a messiah to live to fight a risky and unnecessary battle instead of the real, divine and blameless Son of the heavenly Father, who would fight and win a celestial battle guaranteeing eternal freedom.



Respond to God's Word

1. Though to differing degrees, both Judas (who betrays Jesus) and Peter (who denies Jesus, for now) fail to act righteously and fail to stand up for Jesus in this account of Jesus' arrest. Describe how, to your most recent memory, you failed to act for Christ. What kind of remorse or repentance has followed that action? Of remorse or repentance which attitude is the better practice for the believer?
2. Characterize the behavior of Caiaphas and of Pilate. What seems to motivate their actions and decisions?
3. How does this account portray Jesus as remaining sinless to the very end?

Pray

- Ask the Holy Spirit to teach you to be calm and trust him and to give you the appropriate response when faced with skeptics, critics, or opponents. Ask God for courage and wisdom to stand firm and confess your faith especially when challenged or threatened. So arm yourself with all aspects of the advice of 1 Peter 3:15
- Thank God for his lasting revelation in Scripture and ask to be given the privilege and readiness to be a disarming and powerful witness for Christ.
- Confess the times when or situations in which you felt you had or have pretended to have higher or better virtues, morals, or principles than you actually have and ask the Holy Spirit to teach you how to make your life more authentic.
- Confirm your acceptance of Jesus as your Lord (King) and your need for Him to always be your source and standard of truth.

Jesus Fulfills God's Salvation Mission

John 19

The Passover festival is taking place in Jerusalem, and it's the Day of Preparation—the day when the Jewish people were performing activities in readiness to kill the sacrificial lamb that symbolizes their salvation from the passing-over of the Angel of Death so many centuries before, when the people were slaves of Pharaoh.

Without realizing it, the Jewish nation was also preparing to kill the sacrificial Lamb of God, who would take away the sins of the world.

The Suffering Son

Like the lamb without blemish, Jesus is innocent. In the Gospel record six witnesses of his sinless humanity and his divinity pronounce him innocent: Pilate, Pilate's wife, Herod, Judas, the thief on the cross, and the Roman centurion. This event is foreshadowed and foretold in the history of the Jews. The prophet Isaiah foretold these events (for example Isaiah 53:3-7 offers a theological comment on Jesus' trial).

Archeological evidence shows that the cords used to flog Jesus would have been made of leather tongs with pieces of bone or lead on the ends. The crown made from a thorn bush recalls burning thorn bush in Exodus, in which the Spirit of God was present (19:1-2). The Evangelist shows Jesus, the suffering Messiah, being crowned as King, with a purple robe only the Roman emperor and royalty could wear. The soldiers may not have used real purple, which was very expensive, but substituted some dyed purple material. But for the Evangelist's theological purpose, purple befitted the Lord. The soldiers' taunts of "Hail, king of the Jews!" were based on the charge, which the Jewish leaders stated to Pilate earlier (19:3, 18:33).

John however is not as detailed as the Synoptic Gospels about the suffering Jesus was put through probably due to empathy with his close Friend and Master he could not bear to record it. What he reports however is authentic and enough for his purpose.

Pilate presents "the Man," hardly knowing that his words would recall Jesus' self-description as "Son of Man." Probably Pilate was contemptuous of

the accused dressed as a king, or perhaps he chose this mild name for Jesus as one that might not offend the religious leaders.

The crowd's response is overwhelming—and harsh: “Crucify!” Despite its mocking intended irony, the royal presentation of Jesus is too much for the religious leaders to bear as it is too close to the truth, which they have rejected and for which they despise Jesus and want him killed and cursed. When Pilate reiterates that he has no charge against Jesus his enemies state plainly that they reject Jesus as Son of God and Messiah. Here their charge is blasphemy (19:7).

Pilate is deeply frightened—perhaps really fearing that Jesus is supernatural. Roman storytelling included tales of gods having human children. Jesus is, of course, truly supernatural. Suddenly Pilate attempts to sweet-talk Jesus, suggesting that Pilate could exercise power on his behalf (19:8-10). Matthew's account mentions that Pilate's wife had a nightmare or night terror warning of Jesus' innocence and the need for her husband to withdraw from the trial (Matthew 27:19).

But Jesus knows that Pilate has no true power over him—and that all power comes from God, who is truly in charge of these ongoing events (19:11, Romans 13:1).

As they look for a strong angle from which to sway Pilate, the religious leaders put unrelenting pressure on him. They even accused him of opposing the emperor by protecting a rival traitor to Caesar (now pronouncing Him guilty of treason, 19:12); and this charge is too politically dangerous for Pilate to ignore. With our knowledge of how opposed and bitter the Jewish leadership was against Roman domination we can see their desperation in the reckless choice of taking sides with the Roman establishment against Jesus.

John began his Gospel by describing the Messiah who “came unto his own, but his own did not receive him” (1:11). Here is the clear picture of the Jews, supposed upholders of the worship of Yahweh, denying God's rule and theocracy, thus committing the ultimate blasphemy and sacrilege. This rejection of Christ carried with it personal, national, moral and theological self-condemnation. This is a subtle but powerful indictment of the religious class.

John does not record Pilate's plea of innocence in Jesus' death by symbolically washing his hands (Matthew 27:24-25) but his presentation leaves little doubt that it was the Jewish leaders rather than Pilate who wanted Jesus killed.

Here too, Pilate saw himself in a no-win situation and took a position of non-involvement. Posterity has judged him to be weak or devious. But Pilate clarified his judgment enough to write something that, in the end, was

actually truth: Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews (19:19-21).

Jesus carries his cross to the place of the skull (*Golgotha* in Aramaic, *Kranion* in Greek, *Calvaria* in Latin), a place outside the city (Hebrews 13:12), which fulfills the Old Testament stipulation that killing animals killed for sacrifice symbolizing atonement for Israel's sins should take place outside the city (Leviticus 16:27). It is very likely the same place (also known as Moriah) where Abraham was ready to offer his son Isaac as sacrifice in obedience to God.

Jesus' legs were not broken, as was customary, to ensure that death would definitely happen because he was already dead. So it seems that John is presenting further conclusive evidence that Jesus actually died on the cross. In addition to confirmation from the soldiers' physical inspection he described the soldier as delivering a deadly or aggressive stab that also corroborated Jesus' death to the soldiers' satisfaction (19:34), which the Greek word for "pierced" (*enuxen*) may connote. Certainly, Jesus' words to Thomas indicate a significant blow was delivered: "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe." (20:27) John staked his reputation on this report knowing the stabbing fulfilled yet another prophecy (Zechariah 12:10). Nonetheless, in agreement with the biblical record, a modern day medical investigation reported in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (JAMA) concludes: "Modern medical interpretation of the historical evidence indicates that Jesus was dead when taken down from the cross." (Edwards, Gabel and Hosmer, 1986, Abstract¹)

From the article, crucifixion was a form of prolonged torture and punishment intended to produce a slow death with maximum pain and suffering. In addition to widespread pain among other things there would be impeded exhalation causing shallow and agonizing breathing leading eventually to suffocation with the weight of the entire body pulling on the nailed-down wrist bones. Muscle cramps and burning or prickling sensations would engulf the outstretched and uplifted arms. The crucified person would die probably from a combination of fatal physiological events including damage to the tissue of the hands, shooting pain from muscular spasms, gushing discharges of fluids into the lungs and suffocation. This slow, torturous death could take up to nine days. It is the origin of "excruciating" (*ex-cru* means "from the cross").

It was common practice for the crimes of the crucified ones to be described

¹ Edwards, William D, Wesley J. Gabel, Floyd E. Hosmer, MS. "On the Physical Death of Jesus Christ". *JAMA*. 1986;255(11):1455-1463. doi:10.1001/jama.1986.03370110077025

on the crosses, and Pilate's unwitting proclamation of Jesus' Kingship is declared in Aramaic, Latin, and Greek (19:19-21). The complaining of the religious leaders over this inscription clarified that their rejection of Jesus in front of Pilate as King was not because they were caught up in the hysteria of the moment. They were definitely denying His Messiahship. As such it is from strong disbelief that they protest to Pilate, who stubbornly leaves the sign as written.

Jews reading the Gospel of John will not fail to recognize in John's description of Jesus' death, the fruition of the authentic prophecies of self-sacrifice stated in Isaiah 53 and Psalm 22, ultimately intended to restore sinful humankind. When the soldiers take the clothing from the lifeless body of Jesus (19:23-24), including the seamless undergarment, they fulfill to the letter the prediction in Psalm 22: "They divide my clothes among them and cast lots for my garment" (22:18). Eastern theology see important symbolism in the seamless tunic undergarment, which was worn by high priests, seeing it as a representation of the eternal, inviolable unity (in the Trinity, in the redemptive plan and the Church) that Christ represents.

The cross is the place where all people come as a meeting place with God. During the crucifixion, John records the presence of four women (representing the weak, vulnerable, and loyal), four soldiers (the strong, powerful, and unreached), the two criminals (the morally deficient) on either side of Jesus, and international travelers on the road (representing the world). The Evangelist does not name any other of the twelve at the foot of the cross, besides "the disciple whom he loved" (that is, John the Evangelist himself). Bypassing his stepbrothers, Jesus assigns the care of his mother to John the Evangelist. Perhaps only John was present at the crucifixion (19:25-27)

"It Is Finished"

God in Christ voluntarily gave his life to a humiliating and agonizing death, for us. (Note the inscription on the cross on the book front cover.) The Father allowed this death to occur because they both boundlessly love us! John declares that Jesus' divine foreknowledge and his obedience to his Father's salvation plan prompted him to say, "I thirst" (19:28-30). John lets his readers see that Jesus' suffering is not mitigated in any way, so that even his need to be quenched is not satisfied till God's work had come to perfect completion. Jesus' unsatisfying "drink" is so human, it's clear that Jesus' death was not

being divinely assisted. And “It is finished” marks the official end to Jesus’ Ministry. John uses the Greek word *tetelestai*, which often occurs in the context of debt transactions and indicates the debt is: “Paid in full.”

John mentions again the Day of Preparation and the special Sabbath (19:31-33) to emphasize that Jesus is the sacrificial Lamb of God who was being prepared and now is sacrificed. The jar representing the basin with vinegar wine and the hyssop branch are clearly reminiscent of the Exodus 12:22 account in which the blood of a spotless lamb was splashed on to the doorposts with “a bunch of hyssop”. Jesus is the Door to the Father, and he is the spotless/sinless Lamb of God. The hyssop branch used to offer Jesus sustenance was used to save the lives of Israel’s firstborns from the Angel of Death. This event is about saving humankind from death and giving us a chance for Eternal Life. Jesus chose to die and when: “he . . . gave up his spirit.” The narrative’s accuracy and integrity are reinforced by its detailed fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies (Exodus 12:46, Numbers 9:12, Psalm 34:20).

The bible text describes a flow of blood and water. Theologically, these represent the releasing of the gift of the Spirit (water), which cleanses us together with our being redeemed from sin (blood) and provide the two bases of our salvation: justification (blood) and sanctification (water). Scripture tells us that without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness of sins (Hebrews 9:22). In Eastern Orthodox theology the result of the piercing is seen as symbolic of baptism (water) and the Eucharist (blood), which gives legitimacy and sacredness to these sacraments of the Church. We might say as a typology that from the side of Adam came Eve through whom humankind came, so too the blood and water from the Second Adam symbolize the birth of the Church.

Just in case any readers are wondering about the authenticity of this Gospel’s account, John confirms it by saying, basically, “It happened; I am telling you it is true because I saw it with my own eyes” (John 19:35). Witnessing these events kindled John’s faith in Jesus as the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world—and he hopes it will kindle our faith as well.

Dead and Buried

Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus had left behind the dark world of ignorance about Christ, in which the rest of the Jewish leadership remained. With commitment and courage, they boldly identify themselves with Jesus

by claiming his body to perform Jesus' burial rites (19:38-39). Very likely these men lost their position in the Sanhedrin for doing this, along with their social status and community privileges.

The physical details given about Jesus' burial provide thorough evidence that Jesus' death was real (19:40-42). Jesus is buried like a King. The amount of embalming material is deemed extravagant, which suggests John included it to indicate Jesus' royal status.

The original sin of humankind took place in a garden—and Jesus, the atonement for that sin, is laid in a tomb in a garden (Isaiah 53:9, Matthew 27:60).



Respond to God's Word

1. Of what could you accuse each of Pilate, the Jewish leaders, and the crowd who had a hand in Jesus' death?
2. How do the sinful means and motives of wrongdoers serve to fulfill the purpose of God?
3. What has been accomplished at the moment Jesus said, "It is finished"?
4. As time permits, investigate the many correlations between John's narrative of Christ's death and the Old Testament prophecies. What does it tell you about God's plan being existent from the very beginning?

Pray

- Praise and thank Jesus for the love, patience, dedication and self-sacrifice that achieved our salvation despite the mockery and pain inflicted by the ones who would benefit from his great gift.
- Confess your part in causing Jesus pain and ask for his help to commit to be vigilant in observing your thoughts, words, and actions to bring them into submission to him, for his glory.
- Ask the Holy Spirit to continually wash you in the blood of the Lamb and confess your willingness to learn to be crucified with Christ.

That We Might Believe

John 20

From the first page of his Gospel, John presents Jesus as the Messenger-Representative of God: God himself present in Jesus come to fulfill a plan for our salvation. John's purpose throughout has been so that his readers would believe—believe that Jesus was fully human *and* fully God, that Jesus was the Messiah, that Jesus represented his Father with perfect union of personality and will, that Jesus is the Lamb of God who would take away the sins of the world. At the end of this chapter, John states it plainly: “These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:31).

The Empty Tomb

Because John is so eager for his readers to believe, it's been important for him to report with explicit authenticity on the life and ministry of Jesus. Having just provided an account of Jesus' finished work at the cross—with details that proved unequivocally that Jesus was dead—John moves on now to help us see that Jesus, unequivocally, is mysteriously alive again.

Chapter 19 ended with the report that Jesus' body was laid in a new tomb nearby. It was common for Jewish tombs in the area to have a small entrance over which a stone is rolled (though not a practice of the Greeks and Romans in the surrounding culture). The stone would be large—too large for one person to move it easily (though Matthew 27:60 and Mark 15:46 report that Joseph by himself rolled the stone). So John is showing God's hand, orchestrating events again when Jesus' follower Mary Magdalene visits the tomb and finds the stone rolled away (20:1). John is presenting evidence of an undeniable miraculous physical parallel to a miraculous spiritual event.

John goes on to provide a credible eyewitness account of the empty tomb, showing that the body could not have been stolen because of the placement of the burial clothes in the tomb.

John and Peter come running to the tomb. John arrives first and, stooping at the entrance and according to the Greek he “observes” or “gives a quick glance” (*blepei*, 20:5). Peter barges right past him, and he “scrutinizes” or

“analyzes” the scene (*theorei*, 20:6). As John comes all the way in, he “looks with understanding or insight” (*eiden*, 20:8). John the Evangelist is emphasizing the authenticity of these eyewitness accounts with the differentiation of these verbs. Peter “saw the strips of linen lying there, as well as the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus’ head. The cloth was still lying in that place, separate from the linen” (20:6-7). The Greek word expressing “wrapped”, *entetuligmenon* means: “entwined” or “knotted”, which suggests the head-cloth was in its regular spot knotted as it was on Jesus’ head. Jesus’ body has been released leaving his burial wrappings undisturbed in the position they were while previously on His body. The burial cloths were like a collapsed empty cocoon after Jesus’ body left them, undisturbed and in their original positions. Jesus did not fold anything!

How do the men respond to their investigations? John gives his first-hand testimony. He “saw and believed” (20:8).

The Day of Resurrection

John has made a point of mentioning that it was the “first day of the week” (20:1), so that he can reinforce to his readers that Jesus was “raised after three days” as the prophecies from the Old Testament and Jesus himself had predicted. All four Gospels seem to agree that the women (likely at different times) all came to the tomb after the Sabbath. This would be on our Sunday. If Jesus was buried on our Friday there is not enough time by Sunday to add up to 3 days and 3 nights in the grave. There were two Sabbaths in this story, one being a Special or High Sabbath, and Jesus was taken down from the cross to avoid defiling the Festival (John 19:31-35) on the next day, the High Sabbath, which was not on a Saturday. If so, then Jesus did not die on a Friday since the High Sabbath, which necessitated removal from the cross, was not a regular Saturday Sabbath. Therefore let’s follow the chronology backwards from the point of apparent Scriptural unanimity. After the regular Saturday Sabbath, very early next day, before daylight (20:1) to allow counting it as one day, was when the women came to the grave. Jesus had risen before this time. As such this day would count as one night only. From Friday dusk till Saturday dusk and Thursday dusk till Friday at dusk are two days and two nights. Thursday as the day of Jesus’ burial, because there was daylight up until dusk, has to count as one day only. Altogether then, from Thursday’s one day till Sunday’s one night then add up to three days and three nights. This would

mean Jesus was crucified on Thursday, although some reckon the days and nights differently. About the fact that the Lord was in the grave three days and three nights however, there does not appear to be disagreement.

Jesus himself had previously mentioned tearing down the Temple and rebuilding it in three days (2:19). The Books of Matthew and Luke recount how Jesus mentions the sign of Jonah: “As Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” (Matthew 12:40). What Jesus means by “in the heart of the earth” is important to understand. Jesus uses the analogy of the sign of Jonah (Matthew 16:4; Luke 11:29) to convey the worse plight at the Judgment of the Pharisees and teachers of the Law and their faithless compatriots seeking a sign as compared to the extremely sinful people of Nineveh (who repented). His choice of words (Matthew 12:40) seems to suggest that the “heart of the earth” is a parallel to “the whale’s belly” (or a very large fish), which means: “... deep in the realm of the dead” from where Jonah’s prayer came (Jonah 2:2). So Jesus is saying he will be among the dead for three days and three nights.

Luke 8 recounts how Jesus exorcised seven demons from Mary of Magdala, though she has sometimes been wrongly identified as the prostitute Luke wrote about in the previous chapter (Luke 7). The error derives from a mistake in an Easter message given by Pope Gregory the Great (591 AD). The Vatican officially corrected it centuries later (1969). Mary (John 20:1) has been a devoted follower of Jesus, and John gives her a central role as the first follower of Jesus to bring a validating eyewitness report of the Resurrection.

Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene, who is crying outside his tomb. She doesn’t expect to see Jesus, so he gently allows her to recognize his voice and his person. When she realizes Jesus is there, she cries out “Rabboni,” an affectionate term for *Rabbi*, or *Teacher*. Jesus seems anxious to assure his disciples at the earliest opportunity that he really is alive and will keep his promises to them.

He prevents Mary from holding on to him (20:17, though later he will allow Thomas to feel his wound sites), telling her he had not yet presented himself to his Father. It’s unclear what this means, whether the touch of her corruptible body to his incorruptible body will somehow defile him before he presents himself to God or because the two bodies cannot relate to each other (1 Corinthians 15:42-44). Perhaps the makeup of his spiritual body immediately post-Resurrection prohibited or made it unwise being touched by humans.

John does not record other appearances Jesus made to his followers, like the one described in Luke 24:13-33, when Jesus appeared to two disciples on their way to Emmaus (seven miles from Jerusalem), taking the opportunity to explain all the prophetic scriptures about the Messiah before allowing them to realize that He, the Messiah was present with them.

The political climate is not favorable for Jesus' followers, so soon after the crucifixion events during Passover in Jerusalem. Consequently the disciples are together behind locked doors when Jesus suddenly appears among them (20:19), as if locked doors and the materiality of walls were no obstruction to him (recall his burial clothes). Clearly his was more than a human body, though it was "flesh and bones" (Luke 24:39). And now probably, after having "reported to headquarters," so to speak, his disciples are able to touch him (20:20).

Jesus comes with familiar words, "Peace be with you" (20:21). It was a common greeting of the times, but it carries the meaning of a Messianic promise (Psalm 29:11, Isaiah 9:6, 52:7). Christ's peace will be a gift to enable them in their apostolic and evangelistic role (2 John 1:3, Romans 5:1, Philippians 4:7).

Christ's gift of his peace comes along with his promised gift of the Comforter, the Holy Spirit. In an act that forms a sort of prequel to the Day of Pentecost, when there will be a large-scale baptism by the Holy Spirit, Jesus breathes on the disciples and says, "Receive the Holy Spirit" (20:21). The apostles need encouragement and empowerment to come out from behind locked doors to take on the mission their Master is giving them. The risen Lord knew that their fear and cowering behind secured doors is a great barrier. His breathed Spirit was a guarantee of the power of his presence, as if to say, "I, your Encourager, am still with you." Because there was not to be a gap in the mission of spreading the gospel, the apostles needed to be in spiritual readiness. When the promised Counselor comes at Pentecost, the apostles will recognize its authenticity, having been pre-treated with a genuine experience of him.

This incident is similar to John the Baptist being filled with the Spirit or at various times in the Old Testament narratives when the Holy Spirit came upon Samson, Elijah, Saul, David, Solomon, and others. In these moments God connected with people in a divine way as they performed an important role.

No doubt John includes this scene to show Jesus acting as God, with power to impart the Holy Spirit. This instalment of the Holy Spirit appears

intended to give the apostles, made lifeless by fear and uncertainty, readiness empowerment till the great moment of when their new phase of life publicly begins. As such they are being commissioned to represent Christ and are given the same ability to give freedom from sin as Jesus had: “If you forgive anyone’s sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are retained.” (20:23; see Mark 2:5-7, 10-12) Along with this gift of the Spirit, Jesus gives them power and authority for his mission—as he had been sent by the Father as an apostle to us (Hebrews 3:1), he now makes his disciples into apostles. The enabling Spirit will allow the disciples to know that when they forgive sins it will be because those sins are already forgiven (by God) as well as when they do not.

The Evangelist gave this incident attention because like the Pentecost event no doubt, it too was a truly significant spiritual experience for him. How the Holy Spirit can come to them in this moment as a resident Person and then again, powerfully, at Pentecost is part of the mystery of the Godhead.

As part of John’s intention that we, his readers, may *believe*, he includes the encouraging account of Thomas, who struggled to believe his disciple friends who told him Jesus had been there when he was absent from the group. When Jesus reappears a week later, he already knows that Thomas has expressed an unwillingness to believe. Thomas wanted proof that the Jesus he knew, who had died is actually alive. By his seeing and touching Jesus’ scars Thomas gives additional power to the truth of Jesus’ divinity and testimony to all generations that the Teacher, Jesus, who died on the cross, whom the Roman soldier violently stabbed to ensure his death did come back to life. Hallelujah! As Thomas affirms the lordship of Jesus, Jesus affirms us—those who will believe even though we have not seen his physical body in person: “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” (20:29) This, of course, has been John’s point, all along, to establish the faith foundation on which Christianity rests: “We live by faith and not by sight” (2 Corinthians 5:7). So then he doubles down, with a clear formal statement telling us that these are written that we might believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that we may have life in his name.



Responding to God's Word

1. How does the eyewitness verification of the placement of the burial cloths encourage your faith? How do these accounts of the resurrected Jesus interacting with his disciples strengthen your confidence in the Messiah?
2. How does your experience of the peace of Christ intersect with the work of the Holy Spirit in your life?
3. What makes believing without seeing harder? Why do you think it might be more blessed than believing what you see with your own eyes?

Pray

- Pray for the persistent drive to seek Jesus.
- Thank God for his presence, and request the special privilege of the Holy Spirit who will closely guide your walk with him.
- Ask the Lord to help you receive his peace and to be able to act on the power that comes with it.
- Thank God for the good news of salvation through Christ and for your part in the mission to share the gospel.

Epilogue

John 21



Feed My Sheep

John 21

John seems satisfied that he has communicated the story of Jesus so that we, his readers, will *believe* in the One God sent to reconcile us to himself. But he includes an account of one more time the disciples share with Jesus. On this day, Jesus, the still powerful and loving leader, rallies his disciples in a way that will remind them of their dependence on him and reinforce his immediate availability to them for meeting their physical, spiritual and psychological needs. He also reaffirms his confidence in Peter and clarifies Peter's commission to maintain the life of the Church under Jesus' lordship.

Seven of the apostles are by the Sea of Galilee (also called the Sea of Tiberius or Lake Geneseret) because the Lord had told them to go there (Mark. 14:28, 16:7). These men had gone back to fishing all night, but their efforts (relying on their own capabilities) had produced no results. Then Jesus shows up and guides them to abundant success, once again reminding them that apart from him they can do nothing (15:5).

The text doesn't say why the disciples didn't immediately recognize that it's Jesus calling to them from the shore. Perhaps they weren't expecting him and their boats were far from shore, or the early morning light was still too dim to permit good visibility, or maybe they were just tired! But the man on the shore refers to them as friends (15:13-15), and the fishermen follow his instructions and bring in an enormous haul of fish. Recording the unexpected, large number of fish, which should have broken their nets but did not (21:11), probably provides an eyewitness detail. In adding this information, however, the Evangelist probably also means to underscore the undeniable presence of divine intervention.

That miraculous change in the results of their fishing may have been enough for John, whose gut feeling was that it must be the Lord (21:7). As they were already nearing shore, John jumps into the water to get to Jesus sooner than the others.

The disciples are invited to bring some of their recent catch to Jesus' campfire, where some fish are already cooking and he has some bread for them. (The mention of "fire with burning coal" may not be significant, but

it does call to mind the last time Peter and Jesus crossed paths, when Peter denied him. In that regard the Lord may be resetting the scene to reinforce his plan for Peter's role in the Church.) They share their provisions, perhaps foreshadowing the practice of the believers in the early Church to combine possessions and redistribute according need (Acts 2:44-45).

Jesus meets his disciples' need for food and some rest after their long night of fishing before he moves on to the main point of this meeting, the commissioning of Peter. This is not the moment the Lord forgave and re-instated Peter; this is the moment when he communicates the forgiveness that has already been accomplished. Jesus holds no grudge. This induction ceremony is, rather, for Peter's benefit (and ours). Obviously the Lord knew that openly forgiving Peter's denial would strongly motivate Peter to continue the ministry single-mindedly.

Jesus calls him Simon Bar-Jonah, his original name, and not Cephas, or Peter, the name Jesus gave him: "You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:18). This intentionally underlines that Jesus is about to formally entrust that church-building mission again to Peter.

Jesus asks, "Do you love me (*agapao*, indicating to love in a total and morally committed way, 21:15) more than these (meaning the others in the group). Peter answers, ". . . I love you" (*phileo*, indicating to love affectionately). The ultimate requirement for the task ahead of Peter is a superior love than affection for the Lord. Nonetheless Jesus charges him, "Feed my lambs"—in other words, "Make it possible for my Church to grow". The essence of discipleship and all evangelistic activity is love for Christ and nurture for his Church. It's not about the mistakes we make (especially under pressure, as when Peter denied knowing Jesus), but whether we, committed to a loving mission, keep the life of the Church going.

With the second and third queries, Jesus switches to "Do you really love (*phileo*) me?" Peter's reply could be interpreted as "You have the big picture about everything; so You know for sure that I have affection for you." In parallel to the three times Peter denied Jesus, Jesus provides opportunity for Peter to express his love three times. As such the asking isn't punitive but rather just a chance for Peter, upon reflection, to recognize the denial is erased. The Lord does formally restore Peter to full partnership in the universal functionality of his Body, the Church.

Jesus' commands to Peter are to feed (*boske*, pasture) his lambs (*arnia*, the young and innocent of the flock, 21:15); to shepherd (*poimaine*, tend) his

sheep (probata, any animal that grazes especially sheep that can be easily led usually astray, 21:16-17). In other words, “Take tender care of all my sheep, especially the vulnerable or impressionable ones.”

The imagery of God’s people needing to be managed as a shepherd does sheep is not new in Scripture. God himself was known as the Shepherd of Israel (Genesis 49:24; Psalm 80:1; Isaiah 40:11); He appointed leaders for his people to be their shepherds (2 Samuel 5:2; Jeremiah 23:4; Ezekiel 34). The New Testament leaders of the Christian Church play the same role (Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 2:25, 5:2-4), which Jesus demonstrated by identifying himself as the Good Shepherd (John 10:1-16). Now Peter is specially commissioned to be the Lord’s trusted shepherd. Based on the Lord’s request to feed His sheep Peter’s call is to commitment to nurture the Church in the same way Jesus the Good Shepherd nurtured his disciples.

John interprets Jesus’ comment regarding Peter’s behavior at old age as predicting to the nature of Peter’ death (21:19). Peter very likely was crucified in the mid-sixties AD—and John, who outlived Peter, knew that it had happened in fulfillment of Jesus’ words that day on the beach. Even Jesus’ instruction to “Follow me” may encompass this death of Peter: “Follow me, Peter, all the way to the cross.”

Jesus turns Peter’s attention away from inquiring about the Evangelist’s life. Whether John lives until the Second Coming is for the Lord to determine. Jesus wants Peter to stay focused on the task Jesus has given him, with Jesus as his example.

Before he lays down the pen at the end of his Gospel narration, John reinforces his testimony as fully true, as if perhaps to set it apart from the various other accounts written about Jesus (and in circulation among early Christians) that did not make it into the canon of Scripture. John seeks to protect the Lord’s divine authenticity and the Church’s credibility. As such the close friend and loved disciple of Jesus, a trustworthy eyewitness considers it important to clarify a mistaken and potentially damaging rumor before his death, which could happen before Jesus’ second coming (21:22-23). In which case such a story could lead to questioning the Lord’s divine omniscience.

With modest humility John has never named or identified himself much during the narrating of the events of Jesus’ life, but at the end he clearly identifies himself as the author. John writes this verse (21:24) in a way that the connection between the writer of the Gospel and the person to whom the rumor pertained cannot be broken.

So with carefully chosen information from a vast amount from which to choose John the author wove the important chunks of history into the magnificent fourth Gospel, which he now ends, satisfactorily convincing prospective contemporary and future readers (us) of why Jesus came to call everyone home!



Respond to God's Word

1. Contrast John's depiction of Jesus as the Son of Man and the Son of God.
2. Recall Jesus' seven "I AM" statements. How do these reinforce the truth that he is the Word is God?
3. From your own experience with this Gospel, has John accomplished his stated purpose of helping his readers to *believe*?
4. Here at the end of John's Gospel, how do you rate the value and authenticity of his presentation about Jesus' life and ministry?

Pray

- Express your trust in Jesus that he will bring understanding, joy, and satisfaction in times of despondency, hopelessness, doubt, or need. Ask him to help you recognize his presence in your life.
- Pray that God might give you a ministry of testimony that might help others believe in the One God sent to save the world.
- Ask God to help you find your place in the work of building his Church.

About the Author: A Testimony

I was raised in a Christian home within a strong faith-supported family system and developed a desire to serve the Lord early in my life. My father was a lay preacher and my mother participated in two or three ladies' permanent committees in our family church. I recall playing preacher before starting school, using gibberish language to preach to the neighbors' kids.

During early elementary school, I became seriously ill with typhoid fever, which was deadly in those days. My mother pledged to God that if he spared my life I would serve him as a pastor—and I was very willing to oblige.

The Bible was taught as a subject in school, and I did well, especially during high school, when I also sang in the church choir and played a leadership role in our Youth for Christ group. At seventeen, I became a lay preacher like my dad. Although I did not become an ordained minister I stayed as close as possible.

During college, my exposure to subjects in philosophy and biblical text analysis undermined the unchallenged understanding I had of Scripture, resulting in planting damaging doubts about the Bible's authenticity and authority. With a B.A. in theology and a diploma in education, I began to teach the Bible in high school. Eventually I pursued a doctorate in psychology. My undergraduate university education experience produced deep skepticism, which led to a rejection of my Christian faith.

Because of what I saw as so much innocent suffering in the world I denied the existence of a loving God. I could not accept the poverty and inequality of black people in the world. I sought to discover a more believable divinity from reading about other religions. I could not find one with the characteristics of Christianity but with a guarantee to remove inequality and suffering. Therefore I remained resigned to atheism for fifteen years.

But God was pursuing me by answering this and other questions I had, one by one. I realized that pain and suffering are necessary for the recognition of no pain or bliss. I realized that dark-skinned people had once ruled the world, millennia ago, so the current shift in the balance of power was not necessarily permanent. Eventually, I dropped my "war" with the Christian faith.

Since re-committing my life to Christ for more than thirty years now, I have remained resolutely faithful, including through an "accident" (the

Lord's *incident*) that left me totally paralyzed for a year and subsequently incompletely, though still slowly improving for almost ten years now. That downtime has resulted in my pursuit of a ministry through writing of which this Commentary is a product. All considered I do declare that my God is a grace-giving God, and I say with the psalmist, "Praise the Lord, my soul, and forget not all his benefits . . . The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love" (Psalm 103:2, 8).

