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Interpreting The Gospel of John

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Lesson 1 John 1:1-18 Prologue

Introduction

There is discussion in scholarly circles questioning who wrote the Gospel of John. Was it really John the Apostle or was it another disciple of Jesus referred to in ancient texts as John the Elder? Or was the gospel put together by a community of disciples who followed after John. For a full discussion on authorship and the background of John, I recommend D. A. Carson's *The Gospel of John* from the Pillar New Testament Commentary series or *Encountering John* by Andreas Kostenberger. That's a very good introductory text.

I myself am quite committed to the belief that John the Apostle wrote this gospel. That he does not mention his own name in the text is not a problem, but rather affirms this conviction. It is noticeable that the author leaves out the name John while mentioning others like Peter, Andrew, and Philip, referring to himself only as the beloved disciple. That does not mean he saw himself loved more than the others. It is definitive of his own experience with Jesus. With Jesus he felt himself beloved. I believe he intentionally downplays his own presence because he does not want to write a gospel about John. The Gospel is not about John. The Gospel is about Jesus.

At the beginning of the book he writes of Jesus, "we have beheld his glory." And at the end he writes of himself, "This is the disciple who bears witness of these things, and wrote these things: and we know that his witness is true." He is claiming to be an eyewitness to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. He was one of the men very close to Jesus. And as much as we would love to know more about him and his life, that is not the story he wants to tell. He wants to witness for Jesus. He claims to be a first-hand witness not to build himself up but to give credibility to his account. And he removes his name to center the focus on Jesus. He wants us to see Jesus.

That's what he says in his purpose statement. Not all books of the Bible give us purpose statements. John helps us out in that way. He gives us his purpose in 20:30-31.

³⁰ Therefore many other <u>signs</u> Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; ³¹ but these have been written so that you may <u>believe</u> that <u>Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God</u>; and that believing you may have <u>life</u> in His name.

There are four key words here that have been important through the gospel by the time we get to the end of chapter 20: signs, believe, Jesus, and life. John wrote about certain, select miracles which he calls signs. "Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these have been written..." Why? Why did John write about these signs? "So that you may believe." What does he want you to believe? He wants you to believe "that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God." And why does he want you to believe that? Because of this conviction, "that believing you may have life in his name."

The Gospel of John is an evangelistic book. John the Apostle is an old man, the last remaining member of the 12, and, according to tradition, the only one not to be executed for his faith, the only one to die of old age. John has been preaching about Jesus all his life. Now, before his death, the Holy Spirit leads him to write out his witness. Three other Gospels had already been written. They are all closely related in the stories they tell and the language they use. John's language is unique, and he tells us some stories not yet heard. The synoptic Gospels emphasize the kingdom and repentance. John's gospel emphasizes eternal life and belief. John wrote his gospel to appeal broadly to Gentile peoples. But he certainly also wrote his gospel to appeal to his fellow Jews. The Gospel of John is firmly rooted in the thought of the Old Testament. We will see that in this lesson. It is also written after the temple was destroyed in 70 AD. Many Jews at this time are disoriented and uncertain. How do you do Judaism without the temple. John may be seizing on the opportunity of that disillusionment or that disorientation to witness to Jews. He assures his readers that Jesus Christ is the full realization of all Moses that spoke about. The temple may be no more. And we may no longer be able to celebrate the great feasts in Jerusalem. But all this was meant to pass away. Jesus

has replaced the temple. Jesus has replaced the feasts. Consider these signs that I am writing to you so that "you may <u>believe</u> that <u>Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God</u>; and that believing you may have <u>life</u> in His name."

John is going to take us on a journey with Jesus focusing on these three major themes: the nature of Jesus, the nature of faith, and the nature of discipleship. Who has Jesus truly revealed himself to be? What does it mean to believe in him? And how does a true believer live? The nature of Jesus, the nature of faith, the nature of discipleship.

This podcast series is designed to follow along that journey. We are going to cover the whole text of John. And we will have this tension. There is so much to consider in the text, we could spend two years going verse by verse. But with such a focus on detail, we would miss what John wants to show us. We need to let the narrative flow. So, I am thinking more like 36 lessons in this series. We will see. I will be around that number. We need to take larger chunks of text, so that we can maintain the connection from one narrative to the next. And John is mostly story, presenting the words and actions of Jesus and the words and actions of people responding to Jesus. We will have to slow down during chapters 13-17 when we move from narrative to prose discourse. But for the most part, we need to keep moving along with the narrative.

We start this lesson with the prologue, John 1:1-18. This section is not narrative. These verses have been referred to as highly structured prose, note quite poetry, but denser and more structured than typical prose writing. We will have to focus in carefully here. Still, I want to make sure that we capture the whole of this passage. John sets up ideas here that he will later explain through the narrative. So, I will leave some things unsaid. We can trust John to develop ideas for us as we move along in the gospel.

One last comment before we start in with the text. If you will take about 15 minutes to observe the text before listening to the podcast, you will triple your benefit from this study. Simply read through the text, write down whatever stands out to you as important or strange or interesting or confusing. Questions make great observations. Why did he say this to that person? What does this mean? Who is he talking to? Where are they headed? When did she meet him? Who, what, when, where, why – pepper the text with questions for about 15 minutes before each podcast to get the most out of the teaching. Or listen to the podcast, and then observe the text yourself, and if you want, listen to the same lesson again. Or observe a chapter or two before listening. However you can, add in a component of reading and observing the text of John for yourself.

We start with John 1:1-5 and one of the greatest mysteries of the Christian faith.

John 1:1-5 In the beginning...

¹ In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being. ⁴ In Him was life, and the life was the Light of men. ⁵ The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.

In verses 1-2, notice how the text begins and ends the same. "In the beginning was the Word...He was in the beginning with God." In the beginning he simply was. And then, in the beginning he was with God. Something similar is said in the middle of the two verses. Two statements: First, "the Word was with God," and then, "the Word was God." This is the mystery. How can the Word both be with God and how can the Word be God at the same time? The word for Word here is logos, a concept full of abstract meaning in Greek philosophy. But the Word is going to be defined quite concretely by John. We are not talking abstraction. By the time we get to verse 18, we clearly see that the Word is Jesus who is a personal being both distinct from God and yet also defined as God. This is the concept of trinity, at least two members of the trinity. This is the idea that God can be one being and also three persons. The Word was with God and the Word was God, both at the same time.

Christian cults typically twist this idea. Mormons allow for Jesus to be god, but not the God. Jesus is a god. Jehovah's Witnesses go the other way. Jesus is divine, but Jesus is not God nor is he a god. Mormon's and Jehovah's Witnesses would both claim that the English here does not translated the Greek well. And that reveals either a lack of knowledge or a lack of honesty about the Greek. John balances the Greek so elegantly to create this tension that is rightly translated in the English. The Word is somehow both with God and at the same time the Word is God.

I've heard a lot of illustrations, trying to get across the idea of trinity. (1) An egg is three in one, the shell, the white, and the yoke. (2) A man can be father, son, and husband while being one man. (3) Water exists in three states, liquid, gas, and solid ice. I don't know if you have heard any of these illustrations. But all of them ultimately reject the biblical concept of trinity. They are all heresy. The egg is a description of three different parts that make one whole. The man is one person who simply has three roles. And the water is one substance that can appear in three different states. And all of those can be helpful just trying to get us thinking about trinity but none capture correctly the true idea, the true biblical idea of trinity. We really have one being in three separate persons.

I love what C. S. Lewis does in <u>Mere Christianity</u>. He does not attempt to illustrate trinity. Instead, he illustrates why we cannot illustrate trinity. I will let him say it in his own words. I am reading from <u>Mere Christianity</u>, unfortunately without a British accent.

You know that in space you can move in three ways – to the left or right, backwards or forwards, up or down. Every direction is either one of those three or a compromise between them. They are called the three Dimensions. Now notice this. If you are using only one dimension, you could draw only a straight line. If you are using two, you could draw a figure: say, a square. And a square is made up of four straight lines. Now a step further. If you have three dimensions, you can then build what we call a solid body, say, a cube – a thing like a dice or a lump of sugar. And a cube is made up of six squares.

Do you see the point? A world of one dimension would be a straight line. In a two-dimensional world, you still get straight lines, but many lines make one figure. In a three-dimensional world, you still get figures but many figures make one solid body. In other words, as you advance to more real and more complicated levels, you do not leave behind you the things you found on the simpler levels: you still have them, but combined in new ways – in ways you could not imagine if you knew only the simpler levels.

Now the Christian account of God involves just the same principle. The human level is a simple and rather empty level. On the human level one person is one being, and any two persons are two separate beings – just as, in two dimensions (say on a flat sheet of paper) one square is one figure, and any two squares are two separate figures. On the Divine level you still find personalities; but up there you find them combined in new ways which we, who do not live on that level, cannot imagine. In God's dimension, so to speak, you find a being who is three Persons while remaining one Being, just as a cube is six squares while remaining one cube. Of course we cannot fully conceive a Being like that: just as, if we were so made that we perceived only two dimensions in space we could never properly imagine a cube. But we can get a sort of faint notion of it. And when we do, we are then, for the first time in our lives, getting some positive idea, however faint, of something super-personal – something more than a person. It is something we could never have guessed, and yet, once we have been told, one almost feels one ought to have been able to guess it because it fits in so well with all the things we know already.¹

So, all our illustrations here in our reality ultimately break down because we are talking about something beyond our reality. That is why we call the trinity one of the great Christian mysteries. We can only begin to approach an understanding of God's true nature. And this is not illogical. If God is

¹ C. S. Lewis. *Mere Christianity*. (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996) 142-143.

God, then there ought to be things about God that we can not wrap our minds around. If you can understand all there is to know about the nature of God, then God is not greater than your finite mind. God is not beyond you. He is limited to the size of and ability of your mind. Do you really want a God that is no bigger than your mind? Lewis remarks that a god you can capture with your human minds is not a god worth worship. For God to be God there must be some mystery about his nature that defies human understanding. He must be beyond us. The trinity, the fact that the Word is with God and the Word is God is one such mystery.

Verse 3 adds on to our understanding that the Word is more than creation. The Word simply was. He did not come to be. He was in the beginning. Everything else came to be. And it came to be through the Word. John makes this emphatic by stating it in two ways. First, "All things came into being by him." That is pretty clear. Just to be absolutely clear, John goes on, "and apart from him nothing came into being that has come into being."

The creative power of the Word leads into verse 4 and the claim that in the Word is life. He is the source of life. And interestingly, the life that is in him is also light. In a sense we will see that through the resurrection. He will come to earth, he will lay down his life, and he will take up life again. Death cannot keep the source of life dead. And in taking his life back up again, people will see. Through the cross they will see. Through the resurrection they will see. The life in him is light. At the same time, this statement must be more than the resurrection. Because the life that is in Jesus shines out the whole time he walks on the earth.

Verse 5 tells us that the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness does not comprehend it. Or your translation may say the darkness does not overcome it. The Greek Word John uses literally does mean overcome. The darkness cannot overcome or snuff out the light. Metaphorically, the Greeks also used that word to talk about comprehending an idea. When your mind overcomes something, it understands that which it overcomes. We do not have to decide yet, between overcome and comprehend. We can let the Gospel story play out and pay attention to what happens. What is the darkness presented in John? And will the darkness attempt to overcome the Word and fail? Or will the darkness fail to understand the Word? Or both?

In these five verses, John could not have made a more magnificent statement about the nature of Jesus Christ. He is with God. He is God. All things came to be through him. In him is life. And therefore, he is the light. Darkness cannot defeat him. Amen! John gives everything away at the beginning. It gets even better when you notice the background John has just painted. We have been focusing on the foreground of the picture. These are the main ideas. The most important stuff. But did you catch the background? What context is John alluding to? What other text of Scripture is drawn into the picture through John's word choice?

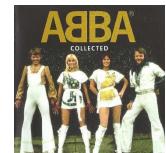
"In the beginning," what does that remind you of? "In the beginning," "Word," "all things came into being," "life," "light," what does that language bring to mind? It is the creation. John starts the Gospel of Jesus Christ with the first words of the Old Testament. Genesis 1:1 "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." John 1:1 and 3, "In the beginning was the Word...all things came into being by him." Genesis 1:3, "Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light." Genesis 2:7, "the Lord God breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being." This is how God created. He spoke, "Word, light, life, the beginning." This is the magnificence of God. This is the magnificence of Jesus.

The Chiastic Structure of the Prologue

Now having considered the first five verses, let's step back and think about the whole, all 18 verses of the prologue. There is structure here that points us to several key ideas. And it is a chiastic structure. In other podcasts, I've spoken about chiastic structures that appear in Romans, Genesis, Leviticus, Deuteronomy. Chiasm is a type of parallelism that shows up most clearly in the Psalms and other poetic literature but is also used in narrative and prose discourse. Western education focuses on linear structures, Part I. A. B. C., Part II. A. B. C. and so on, in a straight line progression of ideas. A

chiastic outline creates parallels. You might have three ideas, A. B. C. and then come back to those same ideas in reverse order, C' B' A', ending up back where you started.

A famous European chiasm is the 70s rock group ABBA. Quite literally they present themselves in an A B B A pattern. The band name is the first letter of each member's name. Agnetha, Benny, Bjorn, and Ani-Frid. A B B A. They always posed for photos chiastically with the guys on the outside and the girls on the inside. That's chiastic, guy, girl, girl, guy. They didn't use that for the band name, Benny, Agnetha, Ani-Frid, Bjorn. That would be BAAB, which is chiastic but doesn't have the same ring as ABBA. ABBA is a great chiasm.



We are going to see a lot of chiasm in John's gospel. I am going to go through the whole of 1-18 quickly to show you the pattern, and then will come back for a closer inspection of the text. I'll also post on the John resource page at observetheword.com a structural chart, so that you can see the chiasm, and a more in-depth article about the chiastic pattern if you would like more detail.

One of the oddities about John's prologue is the double reference to John the Baptist. This is the first clue to consider, to get us looking. The first reference comes right after the verses we have already considered. This is John 1:6-8.

⁶ There came a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness, to testify about the Light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸ He was not the Light, but *he came* to testify about the Light.

After moving on from the Baptist in verses 9-14, John comes back to him in verse 15.

¹⁵ John testified about Him and cried out, saying, "This was He of whom I said, 'He who comes after me has a higher rank than I, for He existed before me.'"

Why do that? Why not say all you have to say about John the Baptist and then move on. If a student were to write this way today in an essay or a journalist in an article, it would be considered bad style. It breaks up the flow. But as with any oddity we come across in the Bible, it is wise to stop and think about what might be going on. When you see parallel elements in a text, one thing you can do is look for other parallel elements. We have seen what comes before the first reference to the Baptist. That is what we looked at in verses 1-5 at the beginning of the passage. So, what comes after the second reference at the end of the passage. This is John 1:16-18.

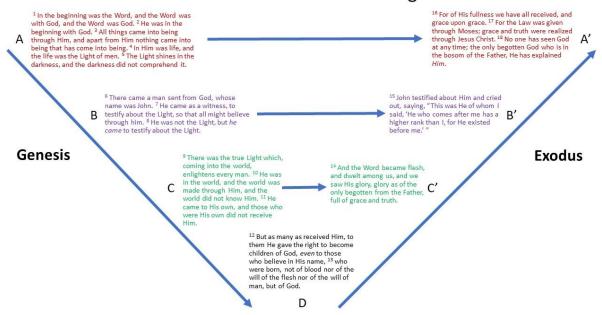
¹⁶ For of His fullness we have all received, and grace upon grace. ¹⁷ For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸ No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained *Him*.

In the beginning of the prologue, we have the Word with God and the Word is God. Here at the end, we have Jesus Christ described as the only begotten God who is also with God, "in the bosom of the Father." Also, in the beginning, the Word is described as the light of man. He is the one who makes God known. Here at the end, we are told that "he has explained" God. He has made God known.

Okay, that looks like parallelism of ideas. So, what happens in the middle of the passage? Any parallelism there? Well, yes. The verses immediately after the first reference to the Baptist, verses 9-11, describe the light coming into the world. And the verse immediately preceding the second reference to the Baptist, verse 14, describes the Word as coming into the world. Both are about Jesus coming into the world.

At the center of the passage, we have verses 12-13, describing new birth as the effect of receiving the one who comes into the world. Our passage, then, has seven elements, a favorite number of John. We have three pairs and a lone middle: A, B, C, X, C', B', A'. That's our structure. Now let's focus back in at the text, and I am going to do that following this chiastic structure. So, I am going to consider A and A' together, then B and B', then C and C', and end with X at the center.

Chiastic structure John's Prologue



A and A' Jesus, being God and being with God, uniquely makes God known.

We begin with the beginning and the end verses 1-5, which we have already covered, and 16-18.

¹ In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being. ⁴ In Him was life, and the life was the Light of men. ⁵ The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.

Now the end, 16-18.

¹⁶ For of His fullness we have all received, and grace upon grace. ¹⁷ For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸ No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained *Him*.

The key idea shared by both of these passages is that Jesus, being God and being with God, uniquely makes God known. In Jesus is life and that life is the light of men. Light makes things visible. Jesus is also described as the fullness of the glory of God. Grace and truth are realized, understood, seen, in Jesus Christ. When you see Jesus, you see the fullness of grace and truth. Jesus embodies for us the character of who God is. Jesus can reveal God because Jesus is God.

Jesus also shares a special relationship with God the Father. Jesus has been with God since before the beginning of all created things. And Jesus enjoys intimate relationship with God. The phrase that Jesus is in the bosom of the Father communicates that intimate relationship. And the original readers would have gotten the image, even though it is lost on us. We encounter the same idea at the last supper in John 13:23, "There was reclining on Jesus' breast one of his disciples, whom Jesus loved." Back then diners reclined in the ancient style to eat, laying down on cushions without a chair, leaning towards the table on the left arm, with their legs pointing out away from the table. And the right hand then is free to take the food. In this position, when a diner tilts his head back towards the person on his left, his head would be almost up against the chest of that person, if they are laying close together at table. If there is noise or chatter going on, then that position of leaning back creates an opportunity to speak in a low tone or whisper to communicate privately at the table. That's why Peter told John to ask Jesus who the betrayer would be. Jesus must have been just to the left of John. Peter would have needed to speak loudly. But John could speak quietly. He could just lean back. We are told in 13:25, "[John] leaning back thus on Jesus' breast, said to him, 'Lord who is it?'" John was

in a position to communicate intimately and quietly about what was going on. He got special knowledge from Jesus.

This is the image we get of Jesus and God in verse 18 of the prologue. "The only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, he has explained him." Being in the bosom of the Father brings out this image of being at the Father's right hand at table, sharing close, personal conversation. Jesus, being in unique and intimate relationship with the Father is uniquely able to reveal the Father.

B and B' Disciples witness for Jesus.

The next pair of passages abruptly move us into the concrete, specific reality of history. We move from what might be abstract word, life, light, to a specific man, living in a specific time in a specific place. This is our B and B', verses 6-8 and verse 15.

⁶ There came a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness, to testify about the Light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸ He was not the Light, but *he came* to testify about the Light.

Then jumping to verse 15.

¹⁵ John testified about Him and cried out, saying, "This was He of whom I said, 'He who comes after me has a higher rank than I, for He existed before me.'"

The reference to John the Baptist has this effect of bringing us from abstract religious concept of light into concrete reality. People in society, they love to talk positively about the need for light and the power of love and the importance of faith. But as human solutions, those concepts are usually left general and without real content. What concrete truths does the light reveal? How does love practically interact with justice and evil? Who is the object of the faith? Verses 1-5 could be accepted by the abstract philosophers of Greece. But John the Apostle sees no solution in that. He is going to ask his readers to believe in the name of Jesus; to believe in Jesus as Jesus reveals himself — that's the light he is talking about; to believe in the concrete, historical reality of wrath, justice, love and grace that are brought to bear on the cross of Calvary.

We are assured that John the Baptist himself is not the light. John is defined in relationship to Jesus. That's where his identity lies. We are not looking for a human leader. The goal is not to become a disciple of some man. This is not the story of John the Baptist. He is not the light. This is not the story of John the Apostle, he does not even want to mention his own name. This is the story of Jesus. He is the light. He is the greater one coming into the world. John the Apostle presents John the Baptist here, in a sense, as the ideal disciple. The primary role of the disciple is witness. The Baptist came to witness. And that's why the Apostle wrote this book, as a witness. We are going to follow this theme through the gospel, paying close attention to what the people in the narrative say about Jesus. What's their witness?

C and C' Jesus, coming into the world, reveals the glory of God.

We move back to Jesus in C and C'. These are 9-11 and verse 14.

⁹ There was the true Light which, coming into the world, enlightens every man. ¹⁰ He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. ¹¹ He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him.

Then verse 14.

¹⁴ And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.

We have recognized that Jesus is uniquely able to reveal God. How is he going to do that? By coming into the world. "There was the true Light which, coming into the world, enlightens every man. He was in the world..." We humans have a great problem. We are very capable at uncovering truths about our physical world. We can replace a broken human heart with a new one. We can send people to the moon. We can microwave popcorn. We can facetime overseas at no extra cost. We

have done amazing things. And yet, we really struggle to come up with an agreed upon moral code or a definition of human purpose or an understanding of the nature of God. Who is God? Who am I? What's my purpose? Three pretty essential things we are not so good at figuring out.

We have three insurmountable problems. One, we are inside the experiment. We cannot look from the outside in objectively. We did not make ourselves. We have been made. We do not know the mind of our creator or the nature of the spiritual world. He is on the outside. We are on the inside. Two, we are limited in our knowledge and our rational ability. Three, and even worse, we have been corrupted. Even if we did have full knowledge and astounding rational capability, education and skill are not our primary problems. The compass of our heart does not point true north. We cannot define morality or justice or goodness. We get some thing right, but we get so much wrong. We cannot define God or purpose, because our hearts and minds have skewed off track away from our original design.

Truth may be able to set us free, but how can we hope to know the truth about God if God is the only one who knows the truth about God? Our only hope is for God to enter into this world, the world he has created and to show us, teach us, guide us. That is exactly what John announces in verse 9, "The light has come into the world."

In verse 14, we move from the image of light coming into the world to the image of the Word coming into the world. And what we read shocks. "And the Word became flesh." Wait a minute. The Word does not become. The Word is. The Word was in the beginning. The Word was with God. The Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Everything else became through the Word. The Word does not become. The Word is not made. The Word simple is, yesterday, today, and forever. The Word is.

This is the second great mystery of the Christian faith, the incarnation, God becoming man. The Word not only came into the world, the Word became flesh. That's the stuff people are made of. Is that even appropriate. Can flesh be good? Its uncomfortable. Its too mundane, too common place. How does holy, eternal God become anything, much less become human flesh? We don't know. Again, this is mystery beyond our ability. We sense something, something both humiliating but also glorious in the willingness of our Lord to "empty himself, taking the form of a bondservant, and being made in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross (Philippians 2:7-8)."

John sees the incarnation as glorious. The glory of God has come down to reside with human beings. And in his focus on the glory of Jesus, John changes the background to our canvass from Genesis to Exodus. In the book of Exodus, after God cuts covenant with Israel at Mount Sinai, the next step is for Moses to go up on the mountain, receive the tabernacle pattern, build the tabernacle and watch God indwell the tent in the midst of the people. And even though there is the major problem along the way with the golden calf, this plan becomes reality in the last paragraph of the book, Exodus 40:34-35,

³⁴ Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. ³⁵ Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud had settled on it, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle.

After the golden idol rebellion, God had told Moses he would not dwell in the midst of Israel because they were a stubborn, stiff-necked people whom God would end up destroying. It is the great problem depicted by the burning bush. How does fire not burn up the bush? How does holy God not burn up a flammable people? The answer is in the name of God. And after Moses prays, telling God that Israel cannot be his people if he does not go up among them, God relents, having taught Moses the lesson he intended for Moses to learn. Moses then asks to see God's glory. He wants to see the nature of the holy God who is going to be able to live among a sinful people without destroying them. And God tells Moses that he cannot see the fullness of his glory. No man can see the full glory of God and live. But God will speak his glory. He does this by speaking this name in Exodus 34:6-7,

The Lord, the Lord God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; ⁷ who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave *the guilty* unpunished...

John draws upon this story here in the second half of his prologue. When he says that he has beheld the glory of the Word, "glory as the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth," that phrase "full of grace and truth" is a fair rendering of the name of God in Exodus 34:6, "full of lovingkindness and truth." The Word is full of the glory of God.

When John says in verse 14, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us..." the verb he uses for dwelt is not the normal Greek verb used throughout the gospel. It is a unique word used only this once in the whole book. It literally means to live in a tent, to tabernacle. As God's glory came down to dwell in the tabernacle, Jesus Christ came down as the glory of God to dwell in the tent of a human body.

In verse 18 we are told that "no man has seen God at any time," a reference to God's word to Moses in Exodus 33. And in verse 16 we are told that from the fullness of Jesus "we have received grace upon grace." "Grace upon grace" might mean abounding grace, lot's of gracce. The pronoun in the Greek means more literally grace in place of grace. I think John is saying that the Law was given to Moses and in that there was grace. But it was a lesser revelation of grace. It was the grace of God spoken in words. It was the grace of God, provided symbolically, looking ahead to the greater grace revealed in Jesus Christ. In Jesus the glory of God is not spoken in words. The Word became flesh. He is the full realization of grace and truth.

Jesus is Word. Jesus is light. Jesus is the fullness of the glory of God. Jesus reveals who God is. You want to see God. Look at Jesus.

X Those who believe in Jesus become children of God.

And so we come to the middle of our passage, verses 12-13. In verses 9-11, we had this problem. Even though the light of Christ came into the world, the very world he created, the world did not know him. His own people did not receive him. Israel rejected him. That's the great tragedy imbedded in this prologue. The tragedy of human sin. We already caught a hint of it in verse 5. Even if God does come into the world to teach us the truth about himself and about us, the darkness will not comprehend, the darkness will seek to snuff out that light. Our primary problem is not education. Our primary problem is sin and that we don't like the light. Even so, there is hope in John 1:12-13.

¹² But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name,

who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

"But as many as receive him" is parallel to "even those who believe in his name." To receive and to believe are here two ways of saying the same thing. And the result is stated twice, also. To those who receive and believe, "To them he gave the right to become children of God" and then again "who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God." Those who believe in Jesus become children of God.

Conclusion

Let's sum up using the chiastic structure of the text. On either end of the passage we have this idea, Jesus, being God and being with God, uniquely makes God known. Moving one step in we have the repeated idea that the true disciple witnesses for Jesus. Moving in another step, we are told this truth, Jesus, coming into the world, reveals the glory of God. That's the how. Jesus is in the unique position to truly reveal that nature of God, how does he do it? He does it by becoming one of us. And even though the darkness in humankind will misunderstand him and try to extinguish him, those who do receive Jesus, who believe in him as he has revealed himself to be, they will become children of God.

These truths are rooted in the long story that began in Genesis and moved through Exodus and has been fulfilled in Jesus Christ. You can be part of this story, too. John invites you to come walk with Jesus. He wants to teach you something about the nature of Jesus, the nature of faith, and, if you are willing, the nature of discipleship.

Along the way, John is going to use three words first used here in the prologue to challenge your thinking on faith. From verses 10-12, the three words are know, receive and believe. We will see in this gospel those who claim to know but do not know, claim to receive but do not receive, claim to believe but do not believe. It is not enough to be religious. It is not enough to believe certain things about Jesus or to wear a cross or to call yourself a Christian. John is going to invite you to consider what it truly means to know, to receive, to believe.

These are not simple themes. Can we truly know God? The two great mysteries of trinity and incarnation raise that question. Can anyone truly know God?

That question reminds me of my oldest daughter Julia as a toddler on the beach in North Carolina. I have a picture of her with this happy, determined face marching towards the water. I remember the scene. The tide had just gone down. She chases after the water towards the ocean. Seconds later she will be turning around with a squeal, running away from the water as the ocean flows back up the beach. And I think to myself, "Did Julia, then, did she know the ocean? At that time in her life did she have any knowledge of the depth and power and beauty of the ocean?" Yes, she did. She knew that the ocean was so deep it could



go over her daddy's head. She knew it was so powerful it could knock her daddy down. And she knew, too, of its sparkling beauty. She could see the light on the water like diamonds glinting on blue satin. She possessed real knowledge about the ocean. At the same time, she had no idea, no idea at all of its unfathomable depths, of its crushing power, of the breathtaking beauty under those waves.

This is one of the great glories of the Christian faith. You can know God, because he makes himself knowable. He is willing to invite you into true experience with him. At the same time, you can never fully know God. He is infinite and unfathomable. Forever is not a long enough time to delve the depths of his beauty, of his power, of his wisdom, of his grace. There is always something new to discover. You begin knowing by looking deeply into Jesus Christ. If you truly see him, you truly see the glory of God.

Reflection questions

- 1. Read John 1:1-18. Make a list of things that stand out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing. What questions come to mind?
- 2. Consider the text chiastically. Do you agree or disagree that the beginning verses 1-5 and end verses 16-18 both picture Jesus Christ as uniquely able to reveal who God is because he is God and he is with God? Does that seem right to you?
- 3. The chiastic pairs in this prologue do not simply repeat one another. The second part restates a shared principle with new information. What do verses 16-18 add to the idea of revelation in 1-5?
- 4. What stands out to you in the references about John the Baptist in verses 6-8 and 15?
- 5. Both verses 9-11 and verse 14 discuss the Light/the Word coming into the world. What ideas do you get in 9-11 that you do not get in 14? And what ideas do you get in 14 that you do not get in 9-11?
- 6. What do verses 12-13 reveal about the basic human response to Jesus Christ? What seems important to you in the language John uses?
- 7. The glory of Jesus Christ is important in John. Glory is the revelation of the true nature of Christ, his true name. What are some things that are glorious to you about Jesus? How have you seen Jesus?
- 8. Take time to pause and praise God for the glory of his character and to ask him to help you see him as he truly is.

Lesson 2: John 1:19-51 Introduction

Introduction

Let's first talk about the structure of John. Structure guides meaning. And structure helps us break down the whole into workable parts we can get our minds around.

So, how does John structure his Gospel? Both in John's purpose and in his prologue, he emphasizes the importance of belief in the name of Jesus. Believing in the name is believing in the character or true nature of Jesus. The idea of glory is similar. It is a reflection of the good and powerful aspects of a person's name or character. In the prologue, John identified the glory of Jesus with the name which God had revealed to Moses in Exodus 34:6-7. Jesus is the fullness of grace and truth. He is the fullness of that name. Grace and truth are realized in Jesus (John 1:14, 17).

God reveals his name twice in Exodus, in the passage just cited (Exodus 34:6-7), but then also much earlier in Exodus 3 at the burning bush, the call of Moses. God there reveals himself as Yahweh, as "I am." Through his ministry, Jesus made at least fourteen references to himself as "I am." The I am statements connect the nature of Jesus with the name of God and reveal more of his glory. There are two pairs of seven I ams in the Gospel of John. Seven times Jesus simply says, "I am." The most famous occurrence is in John 8:58, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was born, I am." Another seven times Jesus includes an object.

1. I am the bread of life. 5. I am the resurrection and the life.

2. I am the light of the world. 6. I am the way, the truth and the life.

3. I am the door of the sheep. 7. I am the true vine.

4. I am the good shepherd.

I have wondered whether John uses the I am statements to structure his book. So, I have looked into that. If he does, I have no clue how. I have not figured out how. The I am's statements speak to the major themes regarding the nature of Jesus and the nature of faith, but I don't think they help us structure the book.

There are other repeated elements through John's gospel. For example, there are seven feasts in John, if you count the wedding feast. These do say something about the movement of Jesus in the Gospel, usually from Galilee to Jerusalem and back to Galilee. But the feasts do not structure the overall text, either. We also have a number of individuals giving witness to Jesus: John the Baptist, Andrew, Philip, Nathanael, Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman, Peter, Mary, Martha, even Pilot. Once more, these testimonies work with our major theme of knowing Jesus but do not reveal an organizing principle of structure.

Then we also have the signs. In his purpose statement John says that he wrote about certain signs so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ and believing have life in his name. John limits the number of miracles he reports. And he calls those miracles signs. Signs contain information. Signs point to something, reveal truth about something. John wants us to see meaning in the miracles. There are seven signs in John, depending on how you count. I like to count them this way.

Water to wine
 Healing the official's son
 Healing the lame man
 Feeding the five thousand
 Walking on water
 Healing the blind man
 Raising Lazarus
 The Resurrection

Do the signs help us structure the book? Well, actually, yes. First, without considering the signs, scholars recognize a division around chapter 12. At the end of chapter 11, the leaders of the Jews have decided to kill Jesus. And we are told, "Jesus therefore no longer continued to walk publicly among the Jews (11:54)." In chapter 12 Jesus enters Jerusalem for the last Passover. So, prior to

chapter 12 we have the three years of his public ministry, then he withdraws, and after chapter 12 we have the passion week. Chapter 12 could be grouped with either half of the Gospel. It could go with 1-11 or it could go with 13-21. It is a transition. I am going to group it with the first part, so we will have chapters 1-12 as part 1 "The Word Among Us" and 13-21 as part 2 "The Hour of His Glory." "The Word Among Us" covers a period of three years. "The Hour of His Glory" covers a week. All seven signs, as I have listed them, occur in part 1 "The Word Among Us." The one ultimate sign of his resurrection occurs in part 2, "The Hour of His Glory."

The signs particularly help us see John's organization in the part 1 of the Gospel. The narrative begins with a group of disciples interacting with Jesus. That is in the second half of chapter 1. That is our lesson for today. That scene is balanced by a similar scene at the end of John in chapter 21 where we come back to a small group of disciples interacting with Jesus. Those two sections are introduction and conclusion for the whole narrative. The main part of the narrative then is in chapters 2-20. At the beginning of chapter 2, we get the first sign, right away, at a wedding in the town of Cana. John calls this miracle "the first sign." At the end of chapter 4, we get a second miracle which John enumerates as "the second sign." It is also occurs at Cana. So, these two signs bracket the first section of part 1. We start chapter 5, then, with the story of Jesus healing a lame man on the Sabbath and getting in trouble for it. Then we have in chapters 9 and 10 the story of Jesus healing a blind man on the Sabbath and getting in trouble for it. Those are signs 3 and 6. And they bracket for us the second section of part 1.

Chapter 11 stands apart describing sign number 7, the raising of Lazarus, and bringing the conflict with the religious leaders to its highest point of tension. Chapter 12 then transitions us from part 1 "The Word Among Us" to part 2 "The Hour of His Glory."

In part 2 of the Gospel, we do not have more signs to help us structure the chapters. But we do not need help. The first section shifts from narrative to prose discourse. Chapters 13-17 are almost all speech. This is Jesus' last night with his disciple. The second section of part 2 describes his betrayal, arrest, crucifixion and resurrection. That's chapters 18-20. I have given the sections these titles.

In chapters 2-4, Jesus reveals himself.

In chapters 5-10, Jesus challenges the darkness and the darkness resists.

Chapters 11-12 are the turning point and transition.

In chapters 13-17, Jesus prepares his disciples.

In chapters 18-20, Jesus is lifted up.

On the John resource page at observetheword.com, I have posted structural charts for the whole gospel and for each of these four major sections, two in part 1 and two in part 2. There are charts there in English and Croatian. In our next lesson we will start section 1 "Jesus reveals himself." Before we go there, we have an introduction to consider.

After the prologue of John 1:1-18, which sets up the main themes of John, the narrative begins with an introduction in which John reports on four days of witness. The first two days describe the witness of John the Baptist. The next two days describe the beginning of faith among some disciples. The emphasis throughout is on knowing Jesus and making Jesus known. We start on the first day in John 1:19-28.

The Witness of John the Baptist

Day 1 (1:19-28)

¹⁹ This is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent to him priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, (1) "Who are you?"

²⁰ And he confessed and did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ."

²¹ They asked him, (2) "What then? Are you Elijah?"

And he said, "I am not."

(3) "Are you the Prophet?"

And he answered, "No."

²² Then they said to him, (4) "Who are you, so that we may give an answer to those who sent us? What do you say about yourself?"

²³ He said, "I am a voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as Isaiah the prophet said."

²⁴ Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. ²⁵ They asked him, and said to him, (5) "Why then are you baptizing, if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?"

²⁶ John answered them saying, "I baptize in water, *but* among you stands One whom you do not know. ²⁷ *It is* He who comes after me, the thong of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie."

²⁸ These things took place in Bethany beyond the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

You know those pop-up books where you open the book and the pages unfold into a 3-D shape? We need to use our imagination when we read biblical narrative, so that it does not lie flat in 2-D on the page. Something is going on here. There is energy. There is tension. It is not conflict, yet. This questioning and investigation.

Imagine if a new spiritual movement popped up in your home town or just outside your home town. Some guy was preaching outside the city, baptizing people in a river. And he was attracting a following. People were going out to see him and listen to him and be baptized by him. Some young men had set up camp with him, sitting under his teaching as though he were a learned professor. Don't you think your church leaders would want to find out more about this guy, especially when members of your church start going to hear him preach? They want to go investigate. They want to find out who he thinks he is, especially since he is working outside of any kind of establishment and his attracting a following.

So, leading Jews want to know what John the Baptist is all about. What is he telling people about the temple, about the priesthood, about them? Who does he claim to be? What does he want?

So, leading Jews in Jerusalem, later identified as Pharisees, send some priests and Levites to investigate. They come asking who John is. John is going to start by telling them who he is not.

John offers up he is not the Christ which was probably the first question on their minds. Then he denies being Elijah and denies being the prophet. Why these three? Christ, Elijah, and the prophet? These are three figures prophesied in the Old Testament expected to appear at the end of days. The Christ, which is Greek for Messiah, is prophesied numerous times in the Old Testament. One of Daniel's prophecies set his coming during the first century, around this time, if Daniel's reference to 70 weeks is actually 70 times 7 years. He wrote in Daniel 9:25

So you are to know and discern *that* from the issuing of a decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until Messiah the Prince *there will be* seven weeks and sixty-two weeks; it will be built again, with plaza and moat, even in times of distress.

The prophecy about Elijah is in the last two verses of the Old Testament, Malachi 4:5-6.

Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord. He will restore the hearts of the fathers to *their* children and the hearts of the children to their fathers, so that I will not come and smite the land with a curse.

And reference to a special prophet like Moses is made in Deuteronomy 18:15.

The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your countrymen, you shall listen to him.

Jewish writings outside of the New Testament show expectation of these three figures. Regarding the prophet some writers expected this prophet to come from the wilderness across the Jordan and to perform signs, maybe even divide the Jordan river like Joshua did and like Moses parted the Red Sea before him.² So, it is curious that John has set up shop in that area by the Jordan where there is already the expectation of the coming of the prophet.

All three figures are expected in the last days. John rejects these identifications. John knows who he is not, which is quite important and not always true of Christian leaders. John knows he is not the prophet. He is not the Christ. He cannot save. John knows that he is not the main show. John points people to Jesus and not to himself.

John knows who he is not. And he also knows who he is. And he knows who he is in reference to Jesus Christ. This is a theme we will pick up in the second half of this lesson once men start coming to Jesus. We may proclaim the name of Jesus, but we do not give Jesus his name. Jesus is who he is, not who we want him to be, not who we want him to be. And that is not true the other way around. We do not name ourselves. We receive our name. That runs contrary to the popular idea of freedom and identity in modern western society. You define yourself. You can be whatever you choose to be. You are autonomous. You can give yourself definition. But in the end that is a terrible burden to bear. With all these questions and all this doubt and all this wondering deep in our soul, and we are told we have to define ourselves? And we can never define ourselves. And even if we do define ourselves, we can never live up to that definition. We cannot even know ourselves accurately on our own. We are who he has created us to be. And we are only fully ourselves in relationship with him as he has created us to be. God must give us our name if we are truly to be free.

John knows the name he has been given. He is the forerunner. He is the one crying out in the wilderness. He is the one not worthy to untie the sandals of he who is to come. John's glory comes from Jesus. He is the one who must diminish, so that Jesus may be lifted up. The climatic event of John's entire ministry occurs on the next day, described in John 1:29-34.

Day 2 (1:29-34)

²⁹ The next day he saw Jesus coming to him and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! ³⁰ "This is He on behalf of whom I said, 'After me comes a Man who has a higher rank than I, for He existed before me.' ³¹ "I did not recognize Him, but so that He might be manifested to Israel, I came baptizing in water." ³² John testified saying, "I have seen the Spirit descending as a dove out of heaven, and He remained upon Him. ³³ "I did not recognize Him, but He who sent me to baptize in water said to me, 'He upon whom you see the Spirit descending and remaining upon Him, this is the One who baptizes in the Holy Spirit.' ³⁴ "I myself have seen, and have testified that this is the Son of God."

Especially just coming off the Exodus allusions in the prologue, it is hard not to think of the Passover lamb described by Moses in Exodus 12 when John cries out, "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." The first Passover lamb was sacrificed by Jews ready to flee Egypt. The blood of the lamb covered over the doors, and it covered believers, causing the angel of God's wrath to pass over. And Jews in John's day were reminded of this lamb every year in their celebration of the Passover.

But it is also hard not to think of Isaiah's description of the suffering servant in Isaiah 53 who would "be pierced through for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities ... like a lamb that is lead to the slaughter, and like a sheep that is silent before its shearers, he did not open his mouth (Isaiah 53:5, 7)."

²Richard Bauckham. *The Testimony of the Beloved Disciple, "Jewish Messianism according to the Gospel of John"*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007) 216.

Though John does not say which lamb we are to consider, the idea of a lamb sacrificed for symbolic atonement was a clearly understood cultural image in the minds of everybody who heard him. That there is one lamb in particular and that he is a man, that would be astounding that is a bit shocking.

In this description of Jesus coming to John the Baptist, John the Apostle does not tell us anything about Jesus actually being baptized. We know that from the other gospels. John's purpose here is to report the Baptist's words about Jesus, to report the witness, not to record the act of baptism. And in this, John gives deference to Jesus. "After me comes a man who has a higher rank than I, he existed before me." At some point early in the Christian church believers who died for Christ began to be honored for their martyrdom, respected. And in a sense that is good. But that honor shifted later to a kind of adoration or worship. And it seems to me that John the Apostle has gone out of his way in the prologue, "he is not the light," and here at the baptism to put John the Baptist in his rightful place as a lesser servant of Jesus. Because neither John wants any of the focus on them. They want the focus on Jesus.

Curiously, John says twice "I did not know him." My Bible has John saying, "I did not recognize him," but the Greek verb is the word to know and is the same verb from before in verb 26 when John tells the priests and Levites, "among you stands one whom you do not know." We are not surprised that tells the priests that they do not know Jesus. But John not knowing is a strange thing, considering they were cousins and considering that John has already defined himself in terms of the one to come who stands among you. What does he mean that he does not know Jesus?

The theme of knowledge is connected in this gospel with the theme of revelation. From the beginning and end of the prologue we picked up this principle that Jesus, being with God and being God, is uniquely able to make God known. Only he can make God known. He is the light. He is the one who explains the Father. We have to be careful then in the claims we make about witness.

And John the Apostle is being careful here in how he writes this. Jesus is not dependent on John the Baptist for credibility. We do not know Jesus unless Jesus makes himself known. We do not know God unless God makes himself known. We do not name him. He names us and reveals himself to us. Jesus is the true light. The true witness. All human beings play a secondary role. They can witness, but their witness is not what gives credibility to Jesus. John the Apostle made clear in the prologue that John the Baptist is not the light. He is only a witness to the light. This is not to say that we can not refer to John as a light of any kind. In fact, Jesus is going to say about John in 5:35, "[he is] the lamp that was burning and was shining and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light." So, he is really a light, but he is not the light. And we need to make that distinction.

I believe the tension here about John not being a light and about John not knowing or not recognizing Jesus indicates the need to honor John for his role without overstating that role. He is a witness. But he is not the one who reveals Jesus. No one can reveal Jesus. The true light is his own witness. He is the one who self-witnesses or who is witnessed to here by the Father as it is here when the Spirit descends on the Son.

Having been created in the image of God. We have honor. We have glory. But let's not overstate that glory. You are created in the image of God. This is part of your name. You are an image bearer. Your purpose is to reflect his glory. Your purpose is to reflect him. But you, yourself, are not the light. You reflect the light. You are the moon. God is the sun. The moon has no light in and of itself. Alone the moon is a cold, dead rock. But when the light comes from the sun, and reflects brilliantly off the moon, that moon shines with its own special kind of glory. We call it the light of the moon. And it is, in a sense. But we also know it is truly the light of the sun. It is the glory of the sun reflecting off the moon. John is the light in that he reflects and points to, gives witness, to the true light which is Jesus. This is how much greater Jesus is than us. His light comes from himself. Our light comes from him. We have glory. A glory that comes from being in right relationship with him, a glory that comes from him and reflects through us.

John is not the one who knows Jesus. God knows Jesus. Jesus knows Jesus. Jesus must reveal himself. So, John's witness did not depend on John naming Jesus. God identified Jesus with the dove coming down. And it is now John's time to step back. He has executed his role. He has prepared men and women for the coming of Jesus. On the next two days, we are going to see the beginnings of faith as men begin to turn towards Jesus. The third day is John 1:35-42.

The Beginnings of Faith in Jesus

Day 3 (1:35-42)

³⁵ Again the next day John was standing with two of his disciples, ³⁶ and he looked at Jesus as He walked, and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God!" ³⁷ The two disciples heard him speak, and they followed Jesus. ³⁸ And Jesus turned and saw them following, and said to them, "What do you seek?" They said to Him, "Rabbi (which translated means Teacher), where are You staying?" ³⁹ He said to them, "Come, and you will see." So they came and saw where He was staying; and they stayed with Him that day, for it was about the tenth hour. ⁴⁰ One of the two who heard John *speak* and followed Him, was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. ⁴¹ He found first his own brother Simon and said to him, "We have found the Messiah" (which translated means Christ). ⁴² He brought him to Jesus. Jesus looked at him and said, "You are Simon the son of John; you shall be called Cephas" (which is translated Peter).

John's definition of himself in terms of Jesus was not false humility. He understood he was not the Christ. He did not hold on to the men who followed him as though they belonged to him. He pointed them to Jesus. This text begins with John pointing out Jesus and giving witness, "Behold the Lamb of God." John did not collect disciples for his own movement. He was preparing people to follow Jesus. So, when he proclaimed Jesus, his two disciples literally followed after Jesus.

The two men just start walking behind Jesus. And Jesus stops and turns and asks, "What do you seek?" They do not answer directly what they want to know about Jesus himself. They just ask where he is staying. Jesus invites them to "Come and see." On the surface that means, "Come and see where I am staying." But when the Light of the World says, "Come and see," that means something more profound than "See where I am staying." Now, look back up in verse 34 where John the Baptist says, "I myself have seen and testify that this is the Son of God." There is something deeper to see here. And Jesus says, "Come and see."

One of these two men was Andrew, Peter's brother. He is excited. They found the Messiah. So, he rushes off to go tell Peter. Peter comes to meet Jesus. The first thing that happens is that Jesus looks at Peter and changes his name. His name was Simon. Jesus calls him Cephas, which is Aramaic, the common language spoken at the time in Israel. Cephas means rock. The Greek translation is Petros. The English is Peter.

Andrew had named Jesus. He called him Messiah, which is Hebrew for anointed one. Translated into Greek, Messiah is Christ. Jesus Christ means Jesus the anointed one, glorious son of David, the King. Andrew named Jesus to his brother Simon, but when Simon comes to Jesus, Jesus names Peter. It is not a name that fully describes Peter, not yet. He is a rock but yet. He is going to have to grow into his name. It is what Jesus sees in Peter. It is the transformation he has in his mind for Peter. It is Peter's true name. And not only has Peter found the Messiah, he is just at the beginning of finding himself in Jesus.

There is a pattern here of the beginning of faith, the beginning of discipleship. We start with John the Baptist, the one who has already come to believe and understand himself in terms of Jesus. He points two others away from himself to Jesus. They start to follow Jesus. Jesus invites them to see. They see. Having seen, Andrew goes and tells someone else what he has seen, pointing that person Peter to Jesus.

It is not clear at this point how much Andrew really understands. He has the beginning of faith. But does he truly know Jesus? When he makes the claim to have found the Messiah, does he even know what he is talking about? The rest of the Gospel is going to suggest that none of the disciples had a strong grasp on what it truly means for Jesus to be Messiah. None of them want him to die. But faith must begin somewhere. Faith begins by accepting ideas barely understood. We then grow into our faith. Part of our own growth comes from witnessing to others. Nobody holds Andrew back. Nobody tells him he is too young or that he does not know what he is talking about and he really does not know what he is talking about. Or that he should let his elders do the witnessing. This young man is excited about the little bit he knows, so he rushes off to tell another young man.

Disciples witness to what they know. Andrew does well. He does not put on himself the responsibility of explaining Jesus or arguing Jesus or proving Jesus. He just proclaims what he believes, and he brings Peter to Jesus. We can do that. If we attend a church that worships Jesus and serves Jesus, we can bring people. We can tell people what we have seen in Jesus, and we can bring people to the body of Christ to see Jesus. If we meet with other students, if you are in college, you can bring students into fellowship and worship with other students where they can see Jesus. We bring people to Jesus by reading the Bible together, by coming here to the Gospel of John. John wants to show us Jesus. And we can bring somebody here to look, to see Jesus. Disciples witness to who Jesus is and invite people to come and see for themselves. Ultimately it is Jesus who must reveal Jesus. He himself is the light. He must open the eyes of the human heart if he is to be seen.

Moving on to the fourth day, this pattern of faith repeats in a little different way. It is a pattern, not an exact formula. Let's read the final paragraph in the chapter, 1:43-51.

Day 4 (1:43-51)

⁴³ The next day He purposed to go into Galilee, and He found Philip. And Jesus said to him, "Follow Me." ⁴⁴ Now Philip was from Bethsaida, of the city of Andrew and Peter. ⁴⁵ Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found Him of whom Moses in the Law and *also* the Prophets wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph." ⁴⁶ Nathanael said to him, "Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see." ⁴⁷ Jesus saw Nathanael coming to Him, and said of him, "Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!" ⁴⁸ Nathanael said to Him, "How do You know me?" Jesus answered and said to him, "Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you." ⁴⁹ Nathanael answered Him, "Rabbi, You are the Son of God; You are the King of Israel." ⁵⁰ Jesus answered and said to him, "Because I said to you that I saw you under the fig tree, do you believe? You will see greater things than these." ⁵¹ And He said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see the heavens opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man."

The day before it was the two disciples following Jesus after they heard the witness of John the Baptist. Here, instead of anyone finding Jesus, the day starts with Jesus finding Philip and challenging him, "Follow me." Philip does. We do not know what Philip already knew, and we do not know what kind of dialogue he may have had with Jesus. John simply wants us to know he followed. Then Philip did what Andrew had done, he went and found someone else. He found Nathanael and told him what he believed about Jesus, that he is the one of whom Moses and the prophets spoke. John the Baptist was not the Christ or the prophet. Jesus is.

Nathanael is a little skeptical. What good can come out of Nazareth? Later in chapter 7 Jewish leaders similarly scoff that "no prophet comes out of Galilee." There is both a healthy skepticism and a corrupted skepticism. The Jewish leaders of chapter 7 have decided against Jesus because he is a threat to their position. Their skepticism is corrupted by what they are trying to hold on to. Their identity is validated as leaders of Jerusalem at the center of Jewish power and prestige. They have a name. And they don't want to let it go. So, they scoff at the idea that anything good can come from a

simple, country, out of the way place. They know about all the miracles Jesus is doing, so they need to find something they can scoff at. They have the condescending skepticism of an elite that claims to be open to God and claims to know. But they are not really open in any way that would challenge their position or lifestyle. They are shut to that. Nathanael's skepticism is of a healthier kind. He does betray a negative stereotype of Nazareth. But he himself is from Bethsaida, which is also in Galilee like Nazareth. So, his skepticism may be a little self-deprecating. And it does not stop him from going to see the man about whom Phillip speaks.

When they arrive, Jesus says of Nathanael, "Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile [or in whom there is no deceit]." Before Nathanael can behold Jesus, Jesus beholds Nathanael. Jesus sees him. And in a sense, he names him just as Peter had been named. It is noticeable that Jesus says of Nathanael, "[he is one] in whom there is no deceit." He is not deceitful. That is not the same as saying, "[here is one] in whom there is truth." He is not deceitful, but he does not know either. Nathanael was honest in his not knowing, which is a healthy step towards, but not the same thing as, knowing.

So, this insight from Jesus into his character along with Jesus' ability to tell Nathanael he had seen him under a fig tree, struck a chord in Nathanael's heart. And praise for Jesus spills out, "You are the Son of God. You are the King of Israel."

But like with Andrew's claim to have found the Messiah, we have got to wonder whether Nathanael knew at all what he was talking about. These are grand titles, Son of God, King of Israel. Did he have any clue, really? Jesus comes back with a skeptical question of his own. It would be lovely to hear the tone of voice Jesus used when he said, "Because I said to you that I saw you under the fig tree, do you believe? You will see greater things than these." This is a central question for people in this gospel. "Do you believe? I hear the words you are saying, but do you really believe what you are saying?" The disciples here call him the Son of God, and yet, they will be absolutely stunned when he walks on water and stops the storm. What did they believe when they called him Son of God? They call him Messiah, but they are going to refuse that he must die. What do you think the Messiah came to do? This is how belief works. We make intellectual statements about spiritual truth that may reflect some beginning of knowledge, some beginning of seeing in our soul. But it takes time and relationship and experience, it takes failure and sin and struggle, it takes disillusionment and disorientation, it takes an unmaking of our foundational assumptions and expectations, to get to a deeper knowledge of who God is, who we are, and what it means to live for him.

This is just the start of Nathanael's journey. Faith has to have its beginnings. It is often hard to discern whether a follower of Jesus has truly come to see Jesus or is only repeating the theological truths they have heard, without real understanding or commitment to those truths. Is it real faith or is it not real faith? Sometimes it is impossible to unravel without doing actual damage. If we try to pull out the weeds for failure, if we have put all these judgments and tests and barriers that people have to prove their faith, we will uproot true seed in the process. We will ruin the wheat with the tares. We bring people to Jesus and get them started on the journey and then we just have to wait and see where it goes.

Looking back over these two days describing the beginning of faith for some of the disciples, we see several references to Jesus, names and titles to think about. We can count them up from verse 35 to 51. We have Lamb of God, Rabbi, Messiah, one of whom Moses and the Prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, Son of God, and King of Israel. What do you know? There are seven. John's favorite number. Seven references from other people, and then at the end, one self-reference Son of Man.

Jesus lets other people give him the grand titles, Messiah, Son of God, King of Israel. But then he gives himself a rather innocuous title Son of Man. This follows the pattern that John reports through the gospel. The term Messiah will be referred to twice and the term Christ will be used 19 times.

Mostly this happens when people discuss who Jesus is. Jesus only refers to himself as Christ one time in the whole gospel, and it is in third person. He allows others to proclaim him Christ without contradicting them, but he does not give this title to himself. Similarly, Jesus uses the term Son of God only three times to describe himself but always in third person. He never directly declares, "I am the Son of God."

Someone not reading the Gospel of John closely might question whether Jesus saw himself as Son of God or as the Christ, the Messiah. That really misses what is going on, and in a sense, Jesus is okay with that. For people who do not care to follow Jesus, to seek Jesus, to learn from Jesus, Jesus is willing to let them pass him by without understanding. When we look at what Jesus does say about himself, he may not say "I am the Son of God," but all the "I am" statements he does say and everything else he does say, there is going to be no getting around the fact that he identifies himself with God. We just have to seek a little. We have to look and listen to what he is saying.

Jesus appears to be using the title "Son of Man" to force people to pay closer attention to who he is and what he is saying. Jesus also uses the title as a way to make strong claims about himself without giving the leaders of Israel ammunition to use against him. He is not afraid. But he does maintain control of the timing. He will give himself over when he is ready to give himself over and not a minute before. A man who begins his ministry claiming to be the Son of God or the Messiah is not a man likely to have a long ministry. First, he has no credibility. Somebody just shows up, why should we believe any man claiming such grand titles for himself? Second, the rulers of Israel would be quick to crush the blasphemous claim Son of God and the political claim to Messiah.

Jesus' use of the Son of Man title is brilliant. On the surface, it could just mean "a man," just a son of man, just a man. But everybody, friends and enemies would suspect Jesus is using it to make some kind of claim about himself when he keeps repeating the title. What lies behind the term? In their collection of prophecies recorded in Ezekiel, Ezekiel refers to himself as Son of Man about 90 times. It is all over the place. And that's the most likely reference to come to mind when people start thinking about Son of Man, "Son of Man, who says that? Oh, Ezekiel says it a lot." Jesus seems then to be making a high claim about himself that he is like one of the great prophets of old. He is like Ezekiel. It is almost like it is false humility. It is a bold claim, but it is not a claim that will necessarily result in charges being brought against Jesus. Especially not when he continues to maintain popularity through healing and other miracles. It is a claim that makes sense. It is a claim that his enemies can believe he is making about himself. It gives them a box to put Jesus in, while leaving the question of what he is really about kind of open. It is not really a clear box, but it is enough for people to think they know what Jesus is doing.

But there is a third layer to the claim. It is not just Son of Man is a man. It is not Son of Man is Ezekiel the prophet or a great prophet. The third layer, the third possibility is not so apparent. And if Jesus is saying it, it is shocking. But his enemies are not going to be able to prove that this is what he is actually saying. Daniel had a vision recorded in Daniel 7 about God, the Ancient of Days, who took his seat on a fiery throne. Thousands upon thousands attended him. Books were opened. Beasts were slain. And on the clouds one was coming like a Son of Man. Here is Daniel's Son of Man reference in Daniel 7:13-14.

I kept looking in the night visions, One like a **Son of Man** was coming, And behold, with the clouds of heaven And He came up to the Ancient of Days

And was presented before Him.

And to Him was given dominion,

That all the peoples, nations and men of every language

His dominion is an everlasting dominion

And His kingdom is one

Glory and a kingdom, Might serve Him.

Which will not pass away; Which will not be destroyed.

Well, that Son of Man, now that is a title. Nathanael was right. He is the Son of God. He is the King of the Jews. One thing I am sure Nathanael did not expect was that in coming to see Jesus he would also discover that he himself had been seen.

Conclusion

Jesus saw Nathanael coming to him and told Nathanael who he is, "an Israelite in who there is no deceit." That was Jesus' name for Nathanael. Before we ever see Jesus. Jesus sees us. When Simon came to Jesus, Jesus also gave him a new name. You are the rock. And when John the Baptist described himself, he did so in terms of Jesus. "I am the one not worthy to untie his sandals."

Jesus knows us. Jesus names us. Our identity finds its home in relation to Jesus. Not only can you not know Jesus on your own without him revealing himself to you, you cannot know yourself on your own without him revealing you to you. You can only begin to find yourself after you have found Jesus.

We are just beginning this journey here. In the conclusion of the gospel, in chapter 21, we will again read about a group of disciples who are again with Jesus. Nathanael will be there. Peter will be there. They will be changed men, changed by success and changed by failure, changed by walking with Jesus. Jesus invited them to come and see. It has started here. But they have a long way to go. And after three years we are going to see that their understanding of these titles they used at the beginning, their understanding has been transformed. They have truly progressed in knowing Jesus and they had begun to find themselves in him.

This is the journey John is inviting us on. Come and see Jesus. I have a story to tell you. Come and see the heavens opened, angels ascending and descending on him. Come and see and follow and be changed.

Reflection Questions

- 1. Read the witness of John the Baptist in John 1:19-34. What stands out to you as important, strange, interesting or confusing? Make several observations.
- 2. John the Baptist denies that he is Elijah, but the angel who appeared to his father before his birth says of John, "It is he who will go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, 'to turn the hearts of the fathers back to the children...' (Luke 1:17)." What is going on here?
- 3. How do you understand John's statement to not recognize or know Jesus, when he did apparently knew Jesus in the normal sense of knowing another person? What does he communicate in asserting he did not know Jesus?
- 4. Read the beginning of faith in these first disciples coming to Jesus as recorded in 1:35-51. What stands out to you as important, strange, interesting or confusing? Make several observations.
- 5. Do you think Andrew knew what he was saying when he named Jesus as Messiah or Nathanael when he named Jesus as Son of God and King of the Jews? Were these statements of true belief? Can you believe without understanding what you are saying?
- 6. What is one of the images or titles of Jesus proclaimed in this text that stands out to you? Or is there another image that you think of when you think of Jesus?
- 7. John the Baptist knows who he is not. What are some things you know are not true of you? Are their characteristics or roles, responsibilities or strengths that you have come to recognizing as not belonging to you? It may be some standard you have thought you ought to live up to or some value you have for yourself or some image of yourself that you have let go of. Or it may be some standard, value or image someone else has for you. Who do you know you are not?
- 8. What have you been learning about yourself as you walk with Jesus? How has your relationship with God helped you to see who you are?
- 9. How would you define yourself in relationship to Jesus?

Lesson 3: John 2:1-12 Water to Wine

Introduction

According to the overall structure of John we laid out in our previous lesson, the gospel of John is divided into two halves, part 1, from chapter 2 to chapter 12, covers the public ministry of Jesus. Part 2, from chapter 13 to chapter 20, covers the week of Jesus death. We are calling part 1 "The Word Among Us" and part 2 "The Hour of His Glory." The title of part 1 comes from the prologue 1:14 where John declares, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory." The title of part 2 comes from several references to time in this gospel. The first reference to the hour of Jesus occurs in our text for this lesson, the story about the miracle in Cana. Let's go ahead and read the text. This is John 2:1-12.

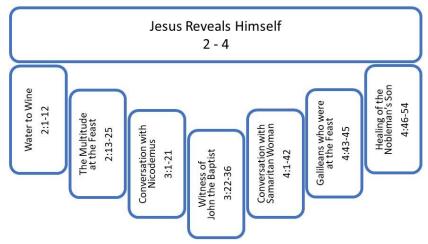
¹ On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there; ² and both Jesus and His disciples were invited to the wedding. ³ When the wine ran out, the mother of Jesus said to Him, "They have no wine." ⁴ And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what does that have to do with us? My hour has not yet come." ⁵ His mother said to the servants, "Whatever He says to you, do it." ⁶ Now there were six stone waterpots set there for the Jewish custom of purification, containing twenty or thirty gallons each. ⁷ Jesus said to them, "Fill the waterpots with water." So they filled them up to the brim. ⁸ And He said to them, "Draw *some* out now and take it to the headwaiter." So they took it *to him.* ⁹ When the headwaiter tasted the water which had become wine, and did not know where it came from (but the servants who had drawn the water knew), the headwaiter called the bridegroom, ¹⁰ and said to him, "Every man serves the good wine first, and when *the people* have drunk freely, *then he serves* the poorer *wine; but* you have kept the good wine until now." ¹¹ This beginning of *His* signs Jesus did in Cana of Galilee, and manifested His glory, and His disciples believed in Him. ¹² After this He went down to Capernaum, He and His mother and *His* brothers and His disciples; and they stayed there a few days.

The reference to hour came in verse 5 with Jesus saying, "My hour has not yet come." At the end of the first half of the Gospel, in chapter 12, verse 23, Jesus is finally going to say, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified." This does not mean that the glory of Jesus is not seen until the that time when the hour comes. Here in verse 12 of this passage we are told that Jesus manifested his glory. Jesus has come to reveal himself and, in revealing himself, to reveal the nature of God. The revelation of Jesus Christ is going to build up to a climatic moment of revealed glory. The revelation starts here with the first sign.

As we study through John, it is helpful to keep these two major parts of John in mind to help us keep track of where we are in the story. The first part of John, "The Word Among Us," can be further divided into two sections. Those two sections are marked off for us by two pairs of signs. The first pair of signs that mark off the first section of part 1 are the two signs that occur in Cana of Galilee. We have this miracle of the wedding feast, called the first sign, then in chapter 4 we have the healing of the nobleman's son, called the second sign. So, this first section of part 1 includes chapters 2-4. This is the beginning of the revelation of his glory as he walks among us. A notable aspect of these first stories is the absence of significant opposition. Jesus reveals himself, but there is no strong push back from religious leaders or from gatherings of Jews. People are still investigating, trying to get a handle on who Jesus is.

I think this section has a seven-part chiastic structure. On either side we have the two signs performed in Cana of Galilee. After the first sign we will see Jesus interacting with a gathering of people at the Passover feast in Jerusalem. And then just before the end, before the second sign at the end, Jesus is again interacting with people who were at this same feast. Moving inward, we have Jesus dialoging with the Pharisee Nicodemus in chapter 3 and then with the Samaritan woman at the well in chapter 4. Those two dialogues parallel each other. In between those two conversations, we

have the witness of John the Baptist as the center of our structure. This whole section from 2-4 we are titling, "Jesus Reveals Himself."



The section starts with the miracle at the wedding of Cana. Let's go back through the text, observing what Jesus has chosen to reveal about himself through this first sign. We start with the basic context in verses 1 and 2.

Context 2:1-2

¹ On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there; ² and both Jesus and His disciples were invited to the wedding.

We start on the third day, which makes us wonder, "Third from what?" It feels like we are jumping into the middle of a sequence. Is it the third day of the week? Or what is this? And then we remember that John organized the previous narrative as a succession of four days. We started with priests and Levites questioning John the Baptist, and then, John the Baptist witnessing to the fact that he is not the Christ, but only a witness to the Christ. On the next day, Jesus came for baptism, and John witnesses to him, not out of his own knowledge, but in response to the Father who affirmed the Son by the Spirit who alighted on Jesus in the form of a dove. On the third day, disciples follow Jesus, begin to see who he is and give witness of what they believe to others. The pattern is repeated on the fourth day as more disciples follow, see, and witness. The chapter ends with the promise that the disciples are going to see much more.

This narrative begins, "On the third day...", making it the seventh day from the beginning when those Levites and priests came to question John the Baptist. Both of those numbers make us perk up and pay attention, both third day and seventh day. Both seem significant. Does John just want to keep a good record of how much time has passed? Or does John notice something special in the timing and is communicating that to us here? We will just leave the question about the days as an observation for now. I want to go through the whole narrative first and then come back to possible symbolism because possible symbolism needs to be interpreted in context of the whole story and in context of the other potential symbols.

We are next told that we are in Cana of Galilee. The reference of Cana does not seem to be particularly significant, except that it enables John to make a nice parallel with the sign described at the end of chapter 4, which also takes place in Cana. The fact that we are in Galilee helps explain why Jesus and his mother and his Galilean disciples are all together at the wedding. We do not need to assume that Jesus is there as a special guest. Our text says that Jesus and the disciples were invited. We do not know if they all have a connection to the family. Or if this is some big event and lots of Galileans are invited. We are not told anything else. What we know is that there is a wedding in Galilee and all these Galileans are there. Mary is mentioned first, but not as Mary. John likes to refer to her as the mother of Jesus. If he had just said Mary, he would have had to clarify that it is Mary, the mother of Jesus, since there are a number of Marys in the life of Jesus. John just goes here with

"mother of Jesus." And he does the same thing later in chapter 19, referring to her as mother of Jesus. In both cases, Mary's status as Jesus' mother is important to the story. Her importance to this story may even be emphasized by the fact that she is mentioned first, Mary, Jesus, and the disciples.

The scene is very human. It is a wedding celebration. They are all there to celebrate a man and a woman newly united in marriage. Though, we do recognize that the main point of this story in the gospel is not to affirm human marriage. The main point is to reveal to us something about Jesus through a sign that he performs at this particular wedding. The wedding is the background context for the sign. And we do not want to make the mistake of pulling the background to the foreground and then missing the point.

This text is not about marriage. It is about Jesus. So, our lesson is not going to be about marriage. That would miss the point. At the same time, I do believe, in a secondary sense, that this text does affirm marriage and affirms the celebration of marriage. We see here that Jesus is not a stoic. He does not avoid marriage. He does not avoid celebrations. In another place when Jesus spoke about marriage, he looked back to Genesis 2, affirming God's plan to unite a man and a woman together as one. That is an affirmation of human intimacy, which also includes an affirmation of human sex. That teaching of Jesus outside of this context fits with his presence here. Jesus affirms marriage.

Since I have already brought up what this passage is not about, let me go ahead and add that this story is also not about drinking wine. Though there is the drinking of wine here. Jesus promotes, in fact, the drinking of wine here by making wine for people at the feast to drink. Again, Jesus is not a stoic who denies human enjoyment. He is not sitting at this feast, judging everybody who has a cup of wine sitting in front of them. When they run out, he is going to make them some more.

Some Christians, rightly concerned about the negative influence of alcohol, wrongly try to interpret the wine here as somehow non-alcoholic. That defies credibility. Wine in a Mediterranean culture contains alcohol. It was normally diluted with water when it was drunk. D. A. Carson writes that the dilution of the wine with water would have made the alcoholic content less than what you have in a typical beer. Carson also points out that drunkenness was culturally frowned on. So, though the text does not show that Jesus was against a person drinking wine, it certainly does not also go the other way and suggest that Jesus is okay with people getting drunk. The issue of wine is in the background, not in the foreground, of this story. So, like with marriage in general, we can only notice a few things about wine in general. Neither is the point of the story.

So, let's keep going to the point of the narrative. We are moving towards that in verses 3-5 which introduce tension into the story. There is an emergency at this particular wedding. This is 3-5.

Tension 2:3-5

³ When the wine ran out, the mother of Jesus said to Him, "They have no wine." ⁴ And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what does that have to do with us? My hour has not yet come." ⁵ His mother said to the servants, "Whatever He says to you, do it."

The simple structure of these three verses is this: Mary speaks, then Jesus speaks, then Mary speaks again. The mother of Jesus begins by pointing out to him that, "They have no wine." And this is a big deal. Jesus is supposed to feel empathy for the bridegroom. His mother expects that. In an honor-shame culture, running out of food and drink is more than deeply embarrassing. It is a terrible way to start a new life together. It is shameful, and it will be remembered and talked about in Cana, in Galilee. Women in the West can certainly understand the worry Mary felt for the young couple. It seems to me as you move towards Eastern cultures that tension is heightened. Women feel shame if they do not serve an abundance to guests without running out. There should be plenty left over to prove that there was enough, and nobody went hungry, everybody had what they wanted. And in the case of a special occasion, like a wedding feast, there is no way that you allow food and drink to run out. This is a catastrophe, a significant human crisis. Mary feels it. She also feels some

responsibility to do something. We don't know why. But she does. And she transfers that sense of responsibility to her son Jesus.

We do not have reason to think that Mary was thinking Jesus would do a miracle. There is no biblical record of Jesus doing miracles as a child. John calls this miracle the first sign. And that may mean the first sign that he is reporting in his gospel. But even if John is primarily numbering the signs according to his use of them in his gospel, this miracle at the wedding feast does appear to be the first chronological miracle of Jesus. The four Gospels do not give us an exact timeline of events in Jesus' early ministry, but they do all report on his baptism by John the Baptist and the beginning of his teaching ministry as coming before making any mention of Jesus performing miracles. The miracles begin after Jesus has already become recognized as a teacher. So, it does not make sense to think Mary is asking for a miracle here right at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry before he had begun to perform miracles. And Mary would not need to expect a miracle anyway. She would have belief in the capability and influence of her son without the need for him to do a miracle. He could fix this.

We can try to imagine what Mary expected from Jesus. Certainly, Mary was aware of the competence of her son. She had lived with him. From the very beginning, when he was left as a boy by himself at the temple, he was found sitting in the midst of teachers, amazing the crowd with his questions and answers. After that Luke tells us, "[Jesus] continued to grow and become strong, increasing in wisdom; and the grace of God was upon him (Luke 2:40)." Over the years Mary would have seen Jesus growing in wisdom and ability. And now he is a grown man, and he has begun teaching. His influence is growing. He has disciples. Mary trusts him to do what needs to be done.

After Mary speaks. Jesus speaks. And, as so often happens when Jesus responds to something said to him, his words surprise us. We are not sure what he is talking about when he says his hour has not come, and whatever it is he is talking about, we are not sure why he is talking about it, right now? What does this have to do with the problem at the wedding?

The first thing we notice is that Jesus responds to his mother as "Woman." And that does not sound like an appropriate way to address your mother. And it is not really. There is no record from the times of Jesus that this was something you would say to your mother. In Croatian, a husband can call out to his wife, "Ženo", which is "Woman," and that is fine as long as his tone is appropriate. And we can see that as a term of endearment, even though we don't have that in English. But that is addressing a wife. That is not addressing a mother. Even if Jesus uses a nice tone here, there is some distancing in his response. He is choosing to refer to her as woman, rather than mother.

And this idea of distancing goes along with the next phrase he uses. My Bible translated it, "What does that have to do with us?" I have another Bible that translated it as, "What do I have to do with you?" The Greek this even more abrupt, "What to me and to you?" It is an idiom, which basically means, "What do you and I have in common in this matter?" I have another English version that translates the phrase as, "What does this have to do with me?" I don't like that one any more than the one I read to you, "What does that have to do with me?" Or, "What does that have to do with us?" It's not bad, but it loses the contrast, "What to me and to you?" Or, "What do I have to do with you?" There is a comparison going on in Jesus' phrase. There is a distancing. Not just from the problem, not just, "What does it have to do with us?" Or, "What does it have to do with me?" That is only distancing yourself from the problem. It is better to say, "What do I have to do with you in regard to this matter?" there is, again, a distancing from Mary. "What to me to you?"

It is a rebuke. And, we can imagine it as a kind rebuke. It does not need to be said with angry or frustrated or disrespectful tone. However, kindly spoken, it is still a rebuke. It separates Jesus from the authority of Mary as his mother. And it separates him from any family obligation that might be assumed by Mary as his mother. She is the mother of Jesus. She is also a woman, a mere human. Jesus is not going to be coerced by human considerations at any level. Jesus acts in harmony with and obedience to the will of the Father, not the will of any human, not the will of his human mother Mary.

Whatever this rebuke does, it lets us know that the resulting words and actions of Jesus do not come about because of obligation to or special relationship with his mother. Jesus acts freely and independently as a higher authority.

Jesus also says, "My hour has not yet come." I have already mentioned that Jesus will come back to the idea of his hour later in the narrative at the point when his hour does come. The hour of his glory will coincide with his crucifixion and then resurrection. That is the hour of his glory. But that time has not yet come. Here, we do not know that, yet. We don't know what his hour is. Mary would not have known what he was talking. She would not have known he was talking about his crucifixion. This is one of the literary aspects of the Gospel of John. He means for us to read his Gospel many times and to reflect on what we read. That was his own experience. He did not get much of what Jesus said during the lifetime of Jesus. There were things that he had to think back over. And just like that would have been true for John that is true for us. He does not explain everything to us the first time he presents it. There are things that Mary did not know here, yet. And so, we also are not told them either. And we are not going to be able to get it without reflection. We have to read through the story and then come back and think about it.

So, Mary cannot have known what he meant about his hour, but she did know that he was both the Son of God and the Son of David. She was the one person who absolutely knew that he was more than a man, that he had no human father. At his birth, angels spoke of him, shepherds worshiped him, wise men sought him out, prophets proclaimed his name. It is hard to imagine that Mary was not aware of Isaiah 9:6-7, and did not hold that close to her heart, "A child will be born to us a son will be given to us; the government will rest on his shoulders; and his name will be wonderful Counselor, mighty God, eternal Father, Prince of peace. There will be no end to the increase of his government or of his peace..."

So, I imagine for Mary that the hour she was looking for was his ascendance to kingship, when is he going to take up this role that God had given him to be our Savior as the Son of David, to take his place on the throne, to begin the increase of the government of peace that was foretold. In a sense, Jesus is speaking about this. But more precisely, he is speaking about what must happen first, his death and his resurrection.

So, though precisely what it means for his hour to come may not be clear to Mary, she does have some insight, and would not have been completely baffled by the rebuke. The timing of Jesus' Messianic ministry is his own, not hers. I think she would get that. He has not yet revealed himself publicly. It is not her right for her to push him or ask him to do so.

And though she may have received his correction, she is not done speaking. This feels so human. This feels so much like a mother. She goes on to, she turns to the servants and she says, "Whatever he says to you, do it." I think she did accept his rebuke. And I do think this is not a mother trying to override her son. It is a mother who is not giving up. I think she got the message that she does not have the influence over his time. And I think she got the message that she is asking more than she realizes. If Jesus was not yet ready to reveal himself, then she would be inappropriately drawing him into a public situation. She needs to be aware of that. He is not just her son. He is the Messiah. There is a lot at stake for him in whatever he says and whatever he does. He has reminded her of that. But she still asks.

There is something in their relationship that allows her to receive correction from her son and still trust him to do something. So, even though she humbly received his message, she continues to act very much like a mother, very much like the woman he has called her. She feels the problem of no wine deeply. She knows her son can do something about it. And she persists by speaking to the servants. She goes on and puts Jesus' name out there. And we are just going to see what he does.

And Jesus, having communicated his independence of Mary decides to act just as he had planned to act before Mary even asked him and before he correct Mary. He gives these instructions to the servants in 6-8.

Instructions 2:6-8

⁶ Now there were six stone waterpots set there for the Jewish custom of purification, containing twenty or thirty gallons each. ⁷ Jesus said to them, "Fill the waterpots with water." So they filled them up to the brim. ⁸ And He said to them, "Draw *some* out now and take it to the headwaiter." So they took it *to him*.

It is a good thing the servants were obedient because Jesus' instructions make no sense. If he had stopped to think about what he was saying...but they didn't. They just did what he told them to do. They filled up the six stone purification jars with water. All together the six stone jars held between 100 and 150 gallons, which is 500 to 750 liters. That is a lot of liquid. According to Old Testament custom, Jews washed themselves as well as cooking vessels when they or their vessels became ritually unclean. In addition to Torah law, Matthew 15:2 refers also to the custom of the elders about ritually washing before eating. So, there are both biblical and other traditional practices of washing that require jars of water to be present. So, it explains why the jars are here at the wedding.

Jesus may have just chosen to use the jars out of convenience. They were the largest liquid containers available. But the number of potentially symbolic details in this story keep adding up. So, we have got to wonder about the presence of purification jars.

The servants finish doing what they were told, they fill up the jars and they take some water to the headwaiter. Now we get the miracle in verses 9-10.

Miracle 2:9-10

⁹ When the headwaiter tasted the water which had become wine, and did not know where it came from (but the servants who had drawn the water knew), the headwaiter called the bridegroom, ¹⁰ and said to him, "Every man serves the good wine first, and when *the people* have drunk freely, *then he serves* the poorer *wine; but* you have kept the good wine until now."

The headwaiter or steward is in charge of managing the feast, but the bridegroom had the responsibility of providing all the food and drink. It may have been customary to provide the best wine first because people who have had a good portion of wine are not so discerning about what comes after. Whatever the custom, the state of intoxication of the people at this particular feast is not emphasized. The steward knows the traditional custom, and he is surprised. Apparently, whenever Jesus does something, he does it well and producing good wine is no exception. Jesus knows good wine. There is something festive and fun about it. We can imagine the up and down emotional ride the bridegroom has just experienced. A moment before he was facing deep shame as a young, newly married man. Now, not only has Jesus saved him from shame, but he is also getting credit for providing excellent wine. Not only is he not shamed, he is honored.

On the human level, it is a wonderful wedding gift. Jesus turns a crisis into cause for celebration. Just as the feast was about to make a dreadful downturn, the fun and joy of the celebration is recharged.

And while the comment of the steward, "You saved the best for last," works well on the simple level of the wine at the wedding, we suspect the steward has said something profound without realizing it.

So, let's read one more verse and then come back to the symbolic elements scattered through the whole story. This is verse 11.

Glory and Belief 2:11

¹¹ This beginning of *His* signs Jesus did in Cana of Galilee, and manifested His glory, and His disciples believed in Him.

The reference again of Cana provides an inclusio for the narrative. It is a nice way of framing a story by ending similar to how you began. In this sign Jesus has manifested his glory, that is made known his glory, revealed his glory, and his disciples have believed.

His glory is manifested through the power of his miracle. Jesus has just changed the molecular structure of water simply by declaring it to be so. There is no trick, no gimmick, no technology. The power of his will has created wine. A few days before Nathanael had called Jesus, "Son of God". Jesus had responded with the question, "Do you believe?" Then he told them they would see much greater things. This is the first of those much greater things. Now do you believe he is the Son of God? The text says they do.

We are not told if anyone else believed at the wedding. We do not know who else knew about the miracle other than the servants. Maybe others believed. That is not the point of the story. The point is that Jesus told his disciples they would see more. He revealed himself to them. And they have seen. And they have believed.

John does not get here into the validity belief or the nature of belief or the maturity of belief. Since the belief is not questioned here, we are left assuming that it is true belief. But we do not have to assume the disciples had full insight, that they understood everything that had gone on. Belief and knowledge grow. They have begun to believe, according to the knowledge they have at this point and according to their awareness of what is going on.

Jesus has manifested his glory clearly through power in this miracle. It is a sign because it points to the nature of who Jesus is as the one who creates through the power of his word. This is an affirmation of the claim in the prologue that through the Word "all things came into being."

From our first reading of the story, we get that this miracle is pointing us to Jesus as God. The main point is not hidden. At the same time, the more we read the story, the more we begin to notice that there is some smaller lettering on this sign that we missed the first few times we read it.

The Symbolism of the Sign

Let's go back and talk about the symbolism.

What are some of the details that stand out as potentially symbolic? Here are some possibilities.

Third day

Seventh day

A wedding

Wine

Purification jars

The number 6

Saving the best for last

When I separate out these details from the story, I cannot help but think of the crucifixion, especially with Jesus comment, "My hour has not yet come." He is pointing us to the crucifixion. We see that later in the story. So, then we start noticing other things, like third day and wine and purification.

But there is also this context of wedding and bridegroom, which leads other people to see a reference to the glorification of all believers in heaven with Jesus described as the wedding feast of the Lamb.

Some scholars feel a need to choose whether we are being pointed towards the cross or towards the fulfillment of all things in the new Jerusalem. Since I am not really a scholar, I do not feel the need to choose. I believe we are being pointed towards the wedding of the Lamb, that great feast in heaven that occurs after Jesus comes back to gather in his bride the church. At the same time, I believe we also hear in this story the dark notes of crucifixion that must be played before the joyful wedding music can be heard.

I believe the reference to the third day points us to the crucifixion. The hour of Jesus suggests that shocking moment of glorification when God's love and justice kiss at the cross. That is the moment we see fully and ultimately what it means to say that Jesus is full of grace and truth, that in Jesus

God's name is realized. We see his nature when we realize that our great king would die for us, unconditionally, sacrificially, so that we might be presented pure and clean on the wedding day.

Along with this day being the third day, when we look back over chapter one, we realize it is also the seventh day, which is a day of completion, rest, fulfillment. So, at the same time that we are being pointed towards crucifixion, we are also being pointed ahead towards fulfillment.

Likewise, the wine points to both. At the last supper, Jesus says, "Drink this all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins (Matthew 26:27-28)." Does John expect us to think of wine in this way, as the blood of Jesus? I think he does. He could have just told us that there were six stone jars nearby. But he goes on to make sure we know they are jars of purification. The purpose of those jars is to enable a ritualistic washing of water that symbolizes atonement from sin. That water may provide real physical cleansing, but only symbolic spiritual cleansing. That water does not remove sin. It does not really make somebody clean. The penalty of sin is death. We have all sinned. We all deserve death. The only way we are washed clean is if someone righteous is willing to spill his blood for us in our place to take our debt. Jesus provides true purification for us through his blood. We remember this every time that we drink the wine of the Lord's Supper. Turning the water of Old Testament purification to New Covenant wine points us toward the atoning death of Jesus Christ.

Jesus also went on to say at the Last Supper, "I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in My Father's kingdom." So, even as he connects the wine to the symbol of blood of death for our sins, he also mentions wine in a future context of joyful reunion. There is a joyful drinking of wine with Jesus in heaven, fitting for the image of a wedding feast.

John's reference to the number of water jars may be meant to emphasize the difference between the symbolic water and the wine which is Jesus' blood. Six is elsewhere taken as a number of incompleteness. If seven is a number of fullness or perfection, which it is in John, then six, as not quite seven, represents imperfection. So, that which came before is not perfect. The water could not really cleanse us from our sin. The blood of Jesus really is perfect. It really does purify us from our sin.

In the prologue, John had compared Moses with Jesus. The grace of the law through Moses is surpassed by the grace of the New Covenant that comes from Jesus. The Mosaic law emphasized symbolic atonement whereas the New Covenant fulfills that symbolism in Jesus with realized atonement, real. The Mosaic law also received the name of God spoken. They only could hear it. Whereas the New Covenant is mediated through the Word of God who has become flesh. We do not just hear the word, we see the Word. The Word is with us.

When the steward says, "You saved the best for last!" He is proclaiming the truth of the New Covenant. What came before was a shadow of the real. It seemed good. And it was good. The Mosaic Law was good. But it is not as good as the New Covenant. Jesus is not a shadow. Jesus is the real.

The tragedy of the cross must precede the celebration of the Lamb. The bride must be made ready. And the only way she can be made ready is through the death of the bridegroom. This is not ultimately tragic because the bridegroom rose again and went to prepare a place for his bride. He will come again for her. The joy of this wedding feast in Cana is but a shadow of the exuberant joy of the wedding feast of the Lamb when he gathers his bride the church, the gathered who have believed in his name. There will by joy and laughter and fellowship and love and good wine, like we have never experienced. Every happy wedding is a little glimpse of the celebration that awaits.

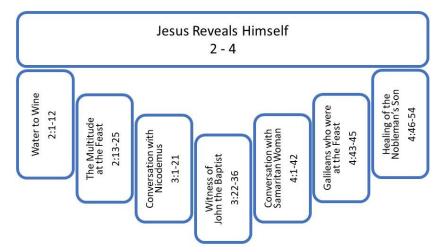
This miracle, which John calls a sign, points us ahead to both of these realities, first to the cross and then to the wedding of the Lamb. It is doubtful that the disciples understood the symbolism present in this first sign. They witnessed the power of the creative miracle, of water changed to wine. They got that. They saw the big lettering of the sign. In that way, Jesus manifested the glory of his power as the Son of God. And they believed.

Reflecting over his experience with Jesus, what he saw and what he heard, John realized later that more was going on than he first new. It was not hidden. The lettering was just smaller. He did not have the awareness he needed to read it. But he got that awareness later on. And he wrote those details down for us to consider ourselves as we walk with Jesus and as we keep going back over this story in our own mind, looking closer to see what things we may have missed in how this sign at the wedding feast points us to Jesus.

Reflection questions

- 1. Read John 2:1-12. Make a list of things that stand out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing. What stands out to you? What questions come to mind?
- 2. Even though this story is not about marriage what do you take away from Jesus' presence at this wedding?
- 3. Also, this story is not about drinking alcohol, but the drinking of wine is present. What questions does that raise for you that you could study further elsewhere in Scripture?
- 4. How do you understand Jesus' comments to Mary in verse 4? If this is Jesus distancing himself from Mary, why does he do that? Why speak to Mary strongly like that?
- 5. Stop and think for a moment about the nature of this miracle. You may have become so familiar with the story that the magnitude of what Jesus did has worn off on you. What has to take place for water to be transformed into excellent wine? What does this reveal to you about Jesus?
- 6. What elements of symbolism stand out to you? Do you see the crucifixion here? Do you see here the joyful gathering of the church in heaven?
- 7. What does it mean that the disciples saw and believed? Did they not believe days earlier in chapter 1? What do they now believe?
- 8. The disciples proclaimed some big truths about Jesus in chapter 1, "Son of God," "Messiah," "King of Israel." If you grew up in church, you proclaimed from a young age big truths about Jesus as you sang the worship songs and hymns. You proclaimed these big truths before you experienced for yourself something of the power or provision or holiness or awe of God. When have you experienced God showing you more about who he is? What is some event in your life, some experience that open your eyes to see Jesus? That opened your eyes to truths you had sung about but did not understand?

Lesson 4: John 2:13-25 Multitude at the Passover Introduction



After the miracle at the wedding feast in Cana, Jesus, his mother, brothers and disciples go to Capernaum, still in Galilee. Shortly after, Jesus and his disciples travel to Jerusalem for the Passover celebration. John's report highlights Jesus' act of cleansing the temple and three different responses to him. One of the responses comes as a summary in 2:23-25. I will save those verses for later in the lesson. We start with the act of cleansing the temple and two different responses to Jesus. This is 2:13-22.

¹³ The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁴ And He found in the temple those who were selling oxen and sheep and doves, and the money changers seated *at their tables*. ¹⁵ And He made a scourge of cords, and drove *them* all out of the temple, with the sheep and the oxen; and He poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables; ¹⁶ and to those who were selling the doves He said, "Take these things away; stop making My Father's house a place of business." ¹⁷ His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for Your house will consume me." ¹⁸ The Jews then said to Him, "What sign do You show us as your authority for doing these things?" ¹⁹ Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." ²⁰ The Jews then said, "It took forty-six years to build this temple, and will You raise it up in three days?" ²¹ But He was speaking of the temple of His body. ²² So when He was raised from the dead, His disciples remembered that He said this; and they believed the Scripture and the word which Jesus had spoken.

The Act of Cleansing

This section starts with a reference to the Jews, the Passover of the Jews. We saw this before when the Jews sent men to question John the Baptist. Because John uses this designation frequently and since some people go so far as to suggest the reference is anti-Semitic, it is worth considering careful who John has in mind when he refers to "the Jews." The answer is a little complicated. I find D. A. Carson's explanation helpful. Rather than try and paraphrase it, I'll give it to you in his words.

[The expression 'the Jews'] is frequent in the Fourth Gospel, and because it commonly occurs as the designation of those who oppose Jesus, it has attracted much discussion. Some see in the expression evidence of Christian anti-Semitism; others think it refers primarily to Jewish leaders, not to the people at large; some think it reflects geography (a Galilean might well refer to his fellow Israelites from Judea as 'Jews')...

In fact, careful examination of the seventy or so occurrences suggests John uses 'the Jews' in a variety of ways. Sometimes the expression is rather neutral, explaining a ritual for readers removed from Palestine [as with the purification jars at the wedding in 2:6]. Elsewhere the expression bears decidedly positive overtones ('salvation is from the Jews', 4:22; Jesus himself

is a Jew, 4:9). Some Jews believe (11:45; 12:11); others, unfortunately, seem to come to faith, and then turn away again (8:30ff). In 7:1, the expression takes on geographic colouring: the people of Judea. Most commonly it refers to the Jewish leaders, especially those of Jerusalem and Judea [as in 1:19 when the Jews sent priests to question John the Baptist], and usually they are cast as those who actively oppose Jesus, fail to understand him, and who finally seek his death. Pre-eminently, they constitute the focal point of opposition to Jesus, [the concrete example of the world not knowing him and his own not receiving him described in 1:10-11]. Not all Jewish leaders, however, are presented negatively: Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea fare much better (3:1ff.; 7:50; 19:38–42).

This diversity of usage excludes interpretations that pit John's church against all 'Jews' of his day, for in that case the instances that are neutral, positive or dictated by geography make little sense. The only context where the diversity of uses makes sense is the context of the historical Jesus. This does not mean that John's choice of terminology has not been influenced by his own context at the time of writing: apparently John is seeking to press the claims of Jesus Messiah on ... [Jewish readers outside of Palestine], and the failures of the Jewish leaders who were Jesus' contemporaries constitute an admirably clear warning. Certainly 'anti-Semitism' is scarcely a reasonable charge against the Evangelist in any case, granted that he himself was a Jew. Even the charge of 'anti-Judaism' rather misses the mark, for the Evangelist is not motivated by a desire to destroy what he understands to be right and good in Judaism, but to controvert those who have so failed to appreciate their own heritage that they have failed to see its fulfillment in Jesus Christ.³

We can take from Carson's explanation three basic points to help us in our interpretation through the Gospel. (1) First, John is not anti-Jewish. (2) Second, John uses the term "the Jews" in a variety of ways that must be determined by context. (3) And third, John often uses the term to refer to antagonistic leaders in Israel who provide a concrete example of that darkness which opposed Jesus.

The Passover of the Jews here in verse 13 may only intend to designate geography, the Passover held in Jerusalem of Judea, that is the Passover of the Jews. The later references to Jews questioning Jesus in verses 18 and 20 most likely indicates Jewish leaders who were in some state of opposition against Jesus and his action to cleanse the temple.

For the Passover, each family would offer a sheep. Sheep were also offered for sin offerings and freely as thank offerings. The poor may offer a pigeon in place of a sheep. An ox is very rarely required, never for an average citizen, but perhaps offered by a rich person as a thank offering. This is the range John mentions here, merchants of oxen, sheep, and pigeons or doves. Money changing was required because the temple officials would only allow the temple tax to be paid in a specified currency, probably to ensure the quality of the silver.

Finding all this business going on in the temple, Jesus clears it out. Since the other Gospels report the cleansing of the temple as happening during the final Passover week when Jesus is crucified (Mt. 21:12–17; Mk. 11:15–18; Lk. 19:45–46), some assume that John has played loose with the chronology to bring that event forward for his own purpose to this beginning of Jesus' ministry. A simpler solution is to assume that Jesus cleaned the temple out twice. It is easy to imagine that the merchants moved back in during the interval of two or three years. And it is also not hard to imagine that the anger that arose in Jesus once might arise again.

Verse 15 tells us that Jesus made a scourge or whip of cords and "drove them all out of the temple." That could be taken to mean he drove everybody out with a whip, the sellers of oxen, sellers of sheep, sellers of doves, and moneychangers. But that does not match up with verse 16 where Jesus

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³ D. A. Carson. *The Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Gospel According to John*. (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1991) 141-142.

tells the sellers of doves, "take these things away." Jesus does not drive out the merchants or the doves with a whip. The report makes better sense when you consider three different actions. Jesus used the whip to drive out the sheep and oxen. A whip on the rump of an ox or sheep is not particularly painful but will get those animals moving. Jesus turned over the tables of the money changers and that got them to move out. And he commanded the sellers of doves to pick up the cages and leave. Jesus is not whipping people. He is not opening all the cages or knocking them over to set the doves free. Jesus is driving the merchants with their property out of the temple. He is not here making a statement against personal property or against trade or against the sacrificial system. His zeal is for the temple as a specially designated place for the Lord to meet with his people.

Jesus calls the temple his Father's house. The Hebrew word for temple is a loan word from ancient Sumerian that literally means big house. The pagan idea understands temple as a home or palace for the god. The idol in the temple is literally the god in his home. Our Lord has always forbidden the fashioning of an idol as an image of Him. God does not dwell in the temple in the way the people surrounding Israel think a god ought to dwell in a temple. God is so much greater and uncontainable than that. He says through Isaiah, "Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool. Where then is a house you could build for me (Isaiah 66:1)?" God is not to be understood as limited to the temple. God, however, did make his presence to dwell in a special way in the temple. The temple is the place people go to experience the presence of the Lord, to worship him, to make sacrifice to him, to hear the teaching of his word. Biblical religion requires a focus on the word of God. It is fine if people want to worship God where they walk in the paths or in the forests. But there needs to be a focal place of faith. The word of God was taught elsewhere. And it should have been taught in every Jewish home. Still, the temple bore a special responsibility to guard, maintain, and give witness to the true revelation of God, according to Holy Scriptures.

Jesus' zeal for the temple is a zeal for the right worship of God and for the glory of God's name, that God would be proclaimed and that his fame would be made known, according to who he has revealed himself to be. The word translated here in English as zeal comes directly from the Greek word zelos. In the positive sense zelos is enthusiasm or deep concern, while in the negative it might be translated as jealousy or contention. It is an intense desire for a cause. You can imagine people getting fired up about football or the environment or some particular points of theology. Jesus was fired up for the glory of God and the right worship of his name. He was fired up. He was zealous for the house of God.

The challenge in verse 18 for a sign is a challenge to the authority of Jesus. People were thinking, "Who are you to come into the temple and make such a scene? You are not a priest or a Levite." That is the underlying question in the asking for the sign. Jewish leaders would read Jesus' action of clearing the temple as a declaration of authority. They had sent men out to ask the John Baptist what role he perceived himself to be playing when he baptized. The action implied a claim of authority. They assume that the action of Jesus is claiming some kind of role and the authority that would go with that role. "Why else would he take it upon himself to attack an established practice permitted by the right temple authorities? He must be claiming to be somebody. We know the Messiah will heal the lame and give sight to the blind. We know the Prophet will do miracles like Moses and Joshua. We know Elijah was a man of power. What sign do you do to prove that you have the authority of one of these figures?"

Jesus does, in fact, reveal his claim to authority when he calls the temple his Father's house. He is the beloved Son come to his own house. That is what authority he has in the temple. It is his. But the stewards do not recognize him. Jesus does not clarify that claim. Instead, he responds to their request for a sign by offering to perform a sign. Tear down this house, and I will rebuild it in three days. Of course, they are not going to take him up on that. It is a nonsensical request to tear down the temple. The man is crazy. They pushed him. He pushed back. And though they completely miss it, Jesus is telling them what great sign he is going to do.

John declared in 1:14 that the Word became flesh and tabernacled among us. He lived among us as if living in a tent, as in a temple. Jesus is the temple. God's glory resides on earth in him. The physical temple represented the center of true faith under the Old Covenant. It was the focal point. Jews looked to the temple in Jerusalem for the true proclamation of who God is. Jesus himself is the focal point of faith in the New Covenant. We look to him to see the true manifestation of who God is. Jesus is the temple. Jesus is God come down to meet with men. He is Emmanuel. He is God with us. And he tells them, "Tear it down. In three days, I will rebuild it. Kill me. In three days, I will raise myself back up from the dead."

Nobody knew what he was talking about when he said that. But after the resurrection, the disciples remembered. Speaking about himself, John tells us in verse 22, "His disciples remembered that the said this; and they believed the Scripture, and the word which Jesus had spoken."

Let's pause a moment to consider what we can take away from this story so far concerning the nature of Jesus and the nature of faith. We have one action and two responses.

The Nature of Jesus

So, concerning his nature, Jesus cleansing of the temple gives us in sight into who he is. The clear aspect of Jesus' nature understood by those present was that he was one who had zeal for right worship and right relationship with God. What they did not understand, but what was also being communicated by Jesus, was his on special relationship with God as Father and he as Son and his future death and resurrection. The quote from Psalm 69:9 captures the idea of zeal for the temple and also the effect that zeal will bring about from opposition. The zeal of Christ consumes him in the sense of burning inside of him and moving him to drive out the merchants. That zeal will also consume him in another sense, in the sense that his persistent revelation of the true nature of God will provoke the leaders of Israel and will lead to his death. He will be consumed because of his zeal. But he is not a man to be overcome by the darkness. He will also, in three days, rise again.

The Nature of Faith

First response

There are two responses to Jesus. The Jewish leaders who hold positions of authority over activity in the temple, suspect Jesus' action as a declaration of authority, which it is. Their suspicion is right. They have no idea how right. He truly is somebody, the most important and impressive somebody they could ever meet. In challenging him to do a sign, they stumble onto what he actually intends to do. More than once when people stumble onto Jesus' plan without any understanding of the plan, Jesus pushes them back. He is going to do what he is going to do, but he is not going to do it out of pressure from some human source. We saw him distance himself from Mary at the wedding even though he was fully ready to do a miracle. He was planning on it. We will see him reject his brothers' urging to attend a feast in chapter 7 because they are urging him for the wrong reasons. After pushing them back, he goes up to the feast as planned for the right reasons. Similarly, here at this Passover Jesus was already planning to do miraculous works that were going to lead people to believe in him. He was planning that before the leaders pressed him for a sign. So, multiple things happen here at once. Jesus pushes them back by offering a sign they could never agree to, tear down the temple. He also points ahead to the ultimate sign, his death and resurrection. And he is clearing the way to do the miracles he had already planned to do at this Passover on his own terms.

Second response

The second response to Jesus that John indicates here is the response of the disciples. It is not an immediate response in this context of this Passover, but one that happens much later after the crucifixion and resurrection when the disciples think back to this day. By commenting on the disciples' belief here, John is giving us more information about the nature of true faith. It fits in with what he has already been teaching us.

In chapter 1 some of the disciples made bold claims about Jesus, calling him, "the Christ, Son of God, King of Israel." Jesus responded, "Do you believe?" It's a question we might be tempted to ask

ourselves if we have grown up in church. You know, I have sung some pretty amazing things about Jesus at a young age before I ever had a chance to process those truths in light of my own experience with God, by my own experience of life. It is really fair as I am singing "Jesus is my shepherd. And Jesus is God. Holy, holy, the three in one." As I am singing these things, it is quite fair to ask, "But do you believe? Do you know what you are saying? Do you commit yourself to the things you are proclaiming?" That is not true just for those who grow up in church. It is a common experience for all people who are young in their faith or who are seeking God. Faith has to start somewhere. And it usual starts with confessing some pretty significant truths, some amazing theology that we have not yet seen worked out in life. It is not our own ideas. It is something somebody has witnessed to us. And we claim it, but we have not experienced it, and we have not been challenged in it, yet. We can ask ourselves, "Do I believe?" And we are not necessarily sure if we believe.

A few days later, at the wedding feast, the disciples are given a chance to positively affirm the statements of belief that they had already made. They see the power of Jesus and the text says, "They believe." We do not know if the earlier statements of belief were moments of saving faith and then this experience at the wedding was an affirmation of that belief. They believed, affirming what they had already believed. Or if the earlier statements were proclamations that were not signs of true faith, but were on their way to true faith, and then they become true belief after the sign at the wedding. We don't know.

What we do know, what John is telling us, is that these men, these disciples, who begin here, continue on with Jesus. And the seeds of faith at some time take root. Because these men are going to last through the crucifixion and the resurrection. And they are going to look back at this time. From the point of settled conviction, they are going to consider these earlier events and they are going to see truths that they had missed the first time around and they believe in those things.

These are two truths about the nature of faith that John teaches through his Gospel. (1) One, true faith is affirmed over time as we, his disciples, continue to walk with him and (2) two, true faith is affirmed through commitment to the word of God. As John says here, "[the disciples] believed the Scripture and the word which Jesus has spoken."

Third response

There is a third response to Jesus at this Passover. The first response came from leaders of the Jews. The second came from Jesus' disciples. The third will come from Jews in the crowd at the feast. We see this in the summary report John provided in verses 23-25.

Let's read the text.

²³ Now when He was in Jerusalem at the Passover, during the feast, many believed in His name, observing His signs which He was doing. ²⁴ But Jesus, on His part, was not entrusting Himself to them, for He knew all men, ²⁵ and because He did not need anyone to testify concerning man, for He Himself knew what was in man.

John gives us a lot to think about in these three verses.

We are told that many believed. That sounds straight forward enough. John further qualifies that statement of belief by saying, "[they] believed in his name." And that is a strong statement of belief. To believe in someone's name is to believe in their true nature, to believe in their character, to believe in who they truly are. That is what it implies. We have come across this terminology already in the prologue. In 1:12 John wrote, "to those who believe in his name he gave the right to become children of God." And John comes back to this terminology again in his purpose statement. This is in 20:30-31.

³⁰ Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; ³¹ but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name.

Signs, belief, name, all key words in the purpose statement are also key words in this summary right here of the Passover. They believe in his name having seen signs. Their belief in his name is motivated by signs. John wrote about the signs in this book to move us, the readers, to believe in Jesus. And he has just reported that after the first sign at the wedding feast the disciples responded with belief. So, we are not surprised to see in this report of the Passover many believing as a result of the signs Jesus performed.

But it is not that simple is it? If John had just left it there, we would have been sure that the many who believed in response to the signs had believed indeed. But in telling us how Jesus responded to that belief in verses 24-25, John raises some questions.

²⁴ But Jesus, on His part, was not entrusting Himself to them, for He knew all men, ²⁵ and because He did not need anyone to testify concerning man, for He Himself knew what was in man.

The language here is interesting. So far, the primary issue in John has been about knowing Jesus and witnessing for Jesus. Man cannot know or see without help. Jesus must reveal himself. Here that is turned around. Man may not be able to know Jesus, but Jesus knows man. Man may need a witness to understand Jesus, but Jesus does not need anyone to testify to him about man. Jesus knows man. And in this case, that knowledge of man motivates Jesus to withhold himself from these who are said to have believed in his name. The Greek literally says that the many "trusted" in Jesus, but Jesus did not "entrust" himself to them. It is the same verb "pisteuo." It highlights the tension between the fact that the people are said to trust in Jesus, but Jesus does not trust them. And he does not trust them based on divine insight into the state of their hearts.

To not entrust himself indicates that Jesus held back truth about himself. We have already noticed that Jesus is reluctant through his ministry to declare directly that he is "Son of God" or that he is "Christ," preferring instead the term "Son of Man." In not entrusting himself to the people, Jesus does not mislead them. He does not deceive them. He holds back from disclosing truth about himself at this time to this multitude of people because he has insight into their hearts. At a later Passover, Jesus will make a triumphant entry into Jerusalem entrusting himself to multitude. And we know how that is going to end.

Why does he not entrust himself to these who have believed in his name? In addition to not wanting to challenge Jewish authority with an open declaration of being the Christ or Son of God, Jesus also seems to resist an open declaration because he knows that any such revelation of his true role would immediately be misinterpreted by the masses of people who already have cultural and religious concepts in their mind in regard to the idea of the Prophet and the Christ. They would not be able to receive Jesus on revelation of himself because they have preconceived definitions. This continues to be one of the great challenges for biblical witness in countries that adhere to some kind of state or cultural, religious identity. Preconceived religious notions about God and Jesus create a fog that resists the light of Jesus' self-revelation in the Bible. Biblical truth struggles to get through that religious fog.

The idea of Jesus not entrusting himself to these people at the Passover who have just believed raises the question of belief. Is it possible that those who are said to have believed in his name have not truly believed? Is it possible to believe without believing?

One thing we are going to find in John is that he is not formulaic in regard to his phraseology about belief. I mean, he does not use any consistent terminology to indicate to us whether a person believes in such a way that truly leads to salvation. He uses a lot of terms, believe, receive, know, see. And we usually qualify those terms. Instead of saying faith, we might say true faith or saving faith. We use those terms because we understand that belief is problematic. People can claim belief without truly believing. People can believe without believing rightly. I can believe that God will save me if I am good enough. But if I did, my belief would be fatally flawed. I could believe that Jesus is a great prophet and moral teacher. But if I did, I would not experience eternal life as a result of my

belief. True belief requires both right understanding and a right state of the heart. It cannot just stay up there in my mind. Somehow true faith is deeper than that. What the content and heart state are that are necessary for true faith, we are going to have to wait for John to clarify for us.

And we will have to pay close attention, since John does not use regular qualifiers when he mentions faith or belief. He does not say true faith or saving knowledge or real belief. John teaches both that belief is key to eternal life, and also that not all belief leads to eternal life. John will say that people believe or that people receive or that people know and then leave us to question, "What do they believe? What do they receive? What do they know?" To evaluate the state of a person's faith in the Gospel of John, we have to wait and see whether John gives us more insight about the people who have expressed belief, either through narration or through dialogue or through behavior. How do they act after having believed? What do they say? What further insight does John himself give us?

John's approach is not formulaic. It is true to life. Just because a person claims to believe in Jesus or to know Jesus, we do not really know, we don't really know if their faith is true simply based on their own claim. We have to wait and consider what they say and how they behave life. We discern the nature of their faith based on how the story proceeds.

Here John has us wondering. It certainly sounds like true faith when he says many believed in his name. But then Jesus does not entrust himself because of his insight into the human heart. Who is he not entrusting himself to? The masses as a whole? To these who specifically believe in his name? Or to the part of the masses that do not believe in his name?

John does not make clear who Jesus does not entrust himself to. He creates cognitive dissonance. Something does not seem right about this, but we do not have enough information to figure it out. Now, I think this is intentional on John's part. I think he has us thinking on purpose. We are wondering about the belief of these people, and we are wondering about Jesus not entrusting himself.

Again, this is true to life. If we are going to witness to the name of Jesus, we are going to be left wondering, wondering about the state of heart in the people we witness to, wondering what is truly going on inside when they say they believe, wondering to what degree we should entrust ourselves in relationship. How affirming should we be? Should we support them if they want to be baptized? Would we put them in a position of leadership? Would we share with them some of the struggles in our community? To what degree do we entrust ourselves based on their own testimony of belief?

Working in a region of the world with strong culturally defined religions like Roman Catholic Croatia, Eastern Orthodox Serbia, Muslim Bosnia, I have become more tentative about how I evaluate a person's claim to believe in Jesus. I want to know, "What do they believe about Jesus. What do they believe about his offer of salvation?" In evangelistic activity, the goal is not to judge another person but to evaluate the possible state of their heart in order witness to Jesus in a way that helps that person see him more clearly. It is not about an argument or about being right or winning. It is about helping people see Jesus as he has revealed himself to be, so that they might enter into true, spiritual relationship with God through him.

Once, I was at a summer camp in Zadar, Croatia. I was trying to help out a woman and her boyfriend. They had no money and needed a place to stay. As I was scurrying around, trying to figure out what I could do, our staff woman Ceca said to me, "You know Michael, she is really not a very good person. She is trying to scam you. You are being too nice." Ceca has relationship with people from all over the social spectrum. She can share the gospel with anybody. She also has discernment. And she was telling me, "Michael, do not entrust yourself to that woman and her boyfriend." She was not saying, "Do not do anything." She was saying, "Slow down. Recognize they are trying to use you. Be careful what you say and do. Do not entrust yourself so much to them."

Americans often drive Ceca crazy. She loves us, but we drive her crazy. Short term missionaries, and long-term missionaries, tend to get very excited about a person's claim to faith, about a person

checking a box on a card or praying a prayer for salvation or singing worship songs with a lot of emotion. But what does it mean for someone who has grown up in a religious environment to pray a prayer or be emotional while singing about God or checking a box? Especially when they have just been asked to do this by an American? What does it really tell me about the state of their heart? All of those actions could indicate that something real going on inside of a person. But these actions also might indicate something very different than what I want them to indicate.

It has been a normal aspect of college ministry for me to enter into spiritual relationship with students who claim to believe and then, after a year or two, watch them walk away from Christian community. I've seen students who claim to believe walk away from Christian community in North Carolina, in South Carolina, in Zagreb, in Split, not just students, professionals, church elders, missionaries. Do they still believe, or did they never believe, or did they believe and lose their belief?

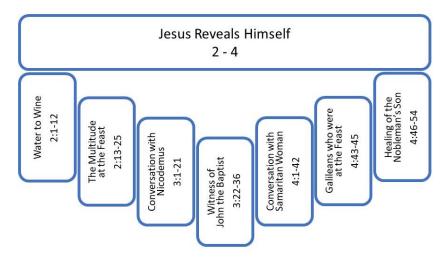
I find this tension in evangelistic outreach. On the one hand, I want to celebrate and rejoice when a lost son or daughter comes home to Jesus. On the other hand, I want to be wise in regard to the human heart, recognizing that a profession of belief is not the same thing as truly believing. Maybe it is good that we have naturally optimistic, positive Christians who rejoice immediately when someone professes faith and that we have more reserved Christians who smile and wait, not quite ready to entrust themselves to that profession of faith. They want to see where it is going to go.

At the end of this report, John has left us wondering about belief. And that is not a bad place to be. We need this question in our mind as we continue on in the gospel. What is the nature of genuine faith? How do I know that my belief is the kind that leads to eternal life? How do I help lead others to faith that is genuine? As we consider the examples in our own lives, John is also going to give us some examples, starting in the next chapter with a religious leader in Israel who is apparently not so clear about the state of his own faith.

Reflection questions

- 1. Read John 2:13-25. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What are some questions that come to mind?
- 2. How do you imagine the scene of Jesus clearing out the temple? As you think about the scene and about the words of Jesus in John 16, what three emotional terms would you use to explain the zeal of Jesus? What emotion does it seem like to you he was expressing?
- 3. When in your life have you felt zealous for the glory of God or for the importance of helping people come into relationship with God? If you cannot think of a personal example, who is someone you respect for their zeal for God? What does that look like for them?
- 4. In 2:22, John suggests a connection between belief and the Scripture or the Word of Jesus. How do you understand the relationship between a person who has truly come to believe and their attitude towards God's word? How do you see that in this text? And how have you seen that in your own life or in people you know? Provide a concrete example.
- 5. In 2:23, John says, "many believed in his name." And yet, in 2:23, he writes, "Jesus was not entrusting himself to them."
 - a. What do you think it means that Jesus did not entrust himself to them?
 - b. How do you evaluate or understand the nature of their belief?
 - c. Do you feel that you can resolve this tension here or do you think John leaves the question unresolved? Why?

Lesson 5: John 3.1-21 Conversation with Nicodemus Introduction



"Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews; this man came to Jesus by night..."

What a great start to a story. He is a man of the Pharisees. This is the most prominent spiritual and moral movement among the Jews of Jesus' day. They believed in afterlife. They believed in the importance of keeping the whole of the law. They were not Christmas and Easter believers. They were saying their prayers every day, giving to the poor, fasting and arguing about issues ranging from predestination to what constitutes lust of the eyes. This man belonged to this serious, religious group committed to the Scripture. He was a Pharisee.

We also get his name, Nicodemus. That makes you wonder if maybe he was known. Maybe he was prominent among the Jews or became prominent in later Jewish or Christian circles. It was a rare name for Jews, but we do have records of it appearing in the powerful and wealthy Gurion family. He is a somebody. He is described as a ruler, suggesting that he was a member of the Sanhedrin, the 71-member ruling council of Jerusalem, consisting both of priests and non-priestly aristocrats.

In verse 10, Jesus calls Nicodemus a teacher, which is not true of all aristocratic Pharisees. They were not all teachers. Nicodemus represents the most elite religious class of the day. He has the best training. He is from a good family. He has power as a ruler and influence as a teacher. This is the man who came to Jesus at night.

Let's read the story in two parts. First let's read the dialogue between Nicodemus and Jesus in 3:1-15 and address that conversation. Then we will look at the commentary that continues in 3:16-21. In both of these passages, we are keeping our two major themes in mind, the nature of Jesus and the nature of faith. What additional insights are revealed here, concerning who Jesus is and how a person comes to that faith which results in eternal life? We start with John 3:1-15.

Dialogue

- ¹ Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews; ² this man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, "Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him."
- ³ Jesus answered and said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."
- ⁴ Nicodemus said to Him, "How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born, can he?"

"At Night"

"At night" is the kind of detail in John that you pass over at first as simple, literary context. The man came at night. That's when he happened to come. Dinner parties happen at night. The reference just helps describe the scene. That is one valid interpretation. But then the text is going to end with reference to light and dark, a recurring theme in this Gospel. And later on in the Gospel, we are going to read of a particular person going out into the night. So, we come back to this reference and wonder is there more to the night than simply the time of day. Some see here reluctance on Nicodemus' part to be seen openly with Jesus. Maybe he is afraid for his own reputation. Maybe he is not afraid, maybe he does not want people to misinterpret his interest as an endorsement of this Rabbi Jesus. Influential people have to take care when they meet with known personalities. Nicodemus doesn't know yet if he wants Jesus in his camp or if he wants to be in Jesus' camp. I think "night" here does suggest a reluctance to be seen openly with Jesus. Nicodemus is not identifying as an open believer. But I think "night" in this context speaks even more to Nicodemus' spiritual state.

The previous story described for us many Israelites at the feast of the Passover believing in the name of Jesus. And yet, the nature of that belief motivated Jesus to hold himself back from those believers. He did not entrust himself to them. And so, we wonder what it really meant to say that they trusted in him. What did they believe about Jesus? What was the nature of their faith, if Jesus needed to hold himself back from them?

Immediately after that account, with Jesus still in Judea, we get this story of one of the rulers, coming to Jesus at night who claims to come in response to signs Jesus did. Signs were in that last story. Nicodemus brings them up here. In that last story Jewish rulers questioned Jesus' zeal in the temple, requiring of him a sign to prove his authority to act the way he did. Jesus pushed them back, suggesting a sign they would never agree to try, "tear down the temple." And then Jesus went on to do many signs. As a result of which many believed, even if inadequately. So, how about this Nicodemus? What is his connection to those events? Was he one of the rulers who required a sign of Jesus and was then later surprised at the many signs Jesus did? Did he himself believe in some sense with an inadequate faith like many others?

He does not seem to be one of those. He acknowledges the signs Jesus did as saying something about Jesus. But he is no Nathanael crying out, "Son of God, King of Israel!" We are not encouraged yet to think of Nicodemus as one of those who believed. And we are going to be discouraged by his lack of insight. He comes at night, suggesting the state of his soul, the extent of his insight. He is in the dark.

But he does have this one thing going for him. And it is a very important thing. He came to the light. He came at night. His mind and heart were still wrapped up in the darkness. But he did come. He did knock. He is asking. And we might say that in some way Jesus is going to entrust himself to Nicodemus. If not completely, still, to a considerably more degree than he did to the many who professed belief at the Passover.

⁵ Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. ⁶ That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not be amazed that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' ⁸ The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit."

⁹ Nicodemus said to Him, "How can these things be?"

¹⁰ Jesus answered and said to him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and do not understand these things? ¹¹ Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know and testify of what we have seen, and you do not accept our testimony. ¹² If I told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ascended into heaven, but He who descended from heaven: the Son of Man. ¹⁴ As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; ¹⁵ so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life."

"Signs"

So, when he enters, Nicodemus states a truth about the signs. If Jesus did indeed do the miracles credited to him, then those miracles point to God. Nicodemus sees two truths in the signs. First, God is with Jesus. "No one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him." Second, Jesus' teaching is validated. "We know you have come from God as a teacher."

Jesus now puts those assertions to the test and begins to teach. How much does Nicodemus believe what he has just said about Jesus. "You say, I am a teacher, consider this, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." And Nicodemus does not bring up this topic. Jesus does. And part of the statement would have been very familiar to Nicodemus; another part quite foreign. Who gets into the kingdom of God was a common theme of religious debate. In fact, if Jesus had just asked, "Who do you think gets into the kingdom of God?" Nicodemus would have felt quite comfortable with that conversation. There was no debate about the basic answer. Everybody knew the basic answer. The righteous person gets into the kingdom of God. That's who gets into the kingdom of God. You get in by being righteous. The debate, even among Pharisees, was "How righteous do you have to be?"

Though if our culture does not use the term righteous, pretty much everybody who believes in God and an afterlife understands the discussion of criteria. Who does God let into heaven? And there are those in culture who reject God and heaven all together. But Jesus is talking to a very religious person at the moment, so let's just consider the religious people in society. Who is righteous enough to get in? I think for me, living in a culture like Croatia where religion and nationality are connected helps me understand the potential Jewish answers to the question. There are some in Croatia who feel like being Croatian is good enough. You are automatically Catholic if you are Croatian, so as long as you are marginally Roman Catholic, your Croatian identity gets you into the kingdom of heaven. Don't over think it. Most sincere Catholics would argue there has to be more than that. You need to at least observe the sacraments. You need to be baptized and you need to confess your sins and you need to take mass once or twice a year and you need to be married and buried as a Catholic. Nobody can be perfect. You do not need to be, as long as you keep the most significant rituals, then you are okay. But then you have more serious Catholics who would argue that some standard of moral behavior must be achieved. You do not get in just because you are a Catholic Croat by birth. And while the sacraments are important, they are not enough. You also have to care enough to try and walk with God and live a life honoring to God. This are the ones who are going to wait for marriage to have sex, or something like that. They are morally serious.

The reality in every religious culture is that you have a continuum of thinking on this question of how good is good enough, whether we are talking about Protestants in North Carolina or Orthodox in Ukraine or Muslims in Iran, there are those who believe that being born into a certain situation is basically good enough, others who would argue for at least some basic religious ritual as necessary, and still others who would push for a higher degree of moral accomplishment. Everybody seems to believe that some combination of faith plus ritual plus moral works provides entrance into eternal life. And they just push it backward and forward along the continuum. Somewhere in there is the answer to this question.

This is a normal debate for the topic of the kingdom of God. Who is righteous enough to get in? And Nicodemus would have been comfortable discussing this. Are all Jews included among the righteous, having been born into the people of God? Or must you also keep the covenant markers of Sabbath rest and food laws and circumcision to be counted among the righteous? Or must you go further, also applying yourself to moral obedience? How much is enough to be counted righteous? Who really gets into the kingdom? And as a Pharisee, Nicodemus is going to be on the further side. He is going to require being a Jew, he is going to require keeping the covenant markers, and he is going to require moral obedience.

Without getting too much into the kingdom of God idea right now, we can observe that John states his concern through his Gospel in terms of eternal life. He does not really talk about the kingdom. He only quotes Jesus referring to the kingdom of God twice in this Gospel, once in this passage with the Jewish ruler Nicodemus and once much later talking to the Roman Governor Pilate. With everybody else the discussion is about eternal life. And that would not throw Nicodemus off track. As a Pharisee he believed in the resurrection, so he understands the idea both of a kingdom of David on earth but then also of an eternal kingdom that will last forever.

What threw Nicodemus off balance was Jesus' statement regarding who gets in.

"Born again"

³ Jesus answered and said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." ⁴ Nicodemus said to Him, "How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born, can he?" ⁵ Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. ⁶ "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.

What is that? The "born again" get into the kingdom of God. Nicodemus, is like, "I have no idea what you are talking about Jesus." The "born again" language does not have a parallel in the Old Testament for Nicodemus to draw from. That does not mean he does not have any Old Testament background that might be helpful. Moses had taught in Deuteronomy that God would do a new spiritual work in his people, circumcising their hearts so that they might be able to love him with heart and soul (Deuteronomy 30:6). And Jeremiah indicates that under the new covenant God would write his law on the heart (Jeremiah 31:33). Ezekiel prophesied that God would put a new heart and a new spirit within, removing the heart of stone (Ezekiel 36:36).

So, it is understandable that Nicodemus would be thrown off by the birth language, but it is also interesting that he is not about to catch up with Jesus. He is not able to follow Jesus through the dialogue and understand that they are talking about internal spiritual change. He has become so used to religion as doctrine and ritual and morality that he has no ability to grasp hold of Jesus' metaphor for spiritual regeneration.

We do not have to take Nicodemus as being so dull that he really believed Jesus spoke about being physically born again by the same mother. Nicodemus is most likely just pointing out the absurdity in what Jesus has said, not because he thinks Jesus is seriously suggesting that, but to indicate that it makes no sense. This makes no sense that you would crawl up into your mother's womb and be born again.

Jesus makes a slight change the second time he asserts the necessity of new birth. The first time he says that a person cannot "see the kingdom of God" unless born again. The second time he says a person cannot "enter the kingdom of God" unless born again. I believe the change is significant. To this point in the Gospel, seeing has been related to knowing and understanding. By the light of Christ, we see truth. If that emphasis is consistent here, Jesus is implying that a person cannot understand or know, cannot see, the true nature of the kingdom of God without being born again. New birth is necessary to see. And point number two is that new birth is necessary for entry. And that's not something Nicodemus has ever heard before in his discussions about who gets into the kingdom. The "born again" get in. What does that mean?

"Born of water and the spirit"

Now Jesus' clarification that one must be born of water and the spirit has resulted in a lot of debate about the necessity of baptism for salvation. I don't know if you have heard that before. The assumption has been made that being born of water is baptism and being born of the Spirit is the internal work of regeneration done by the Holy Spirit.

Baptism is in the immediate context at the end of chapter 3 where we are told both John and Jesus are baptizing. So, it is not out of the realm of possibility to be thinking about baptism here in John 3. Does the water here refer to baptism? And if it does, does it refer to the baptism of repentance performed by John or to baptism in the name of Jesus that we see after the birth of the Church? Those are two valid options. And to support the two options we can look back to 1:33 and the Baptist's comment that he was sent to baptize in water whereas Jesus would baptize in the Holy Spirit. And that is an interesting parallel here. That if John the Baptist baptizes in water and Jesus in the Holy Spirit, and you must be baptized by water and the Spirit to enter the kingdom of God, then is baptism necessary to enter the kingdom of God?

But is the problem, because the witness of the New Testament Scripture is decisively against the idea that water baptism is necessary to be born again or to enter into eternal life. At one point, frustrated by the divisiveness of the Corinthians, Paul declares, "For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel (1 Corinthians 1:17)." That's an interesting claim if baptism is a necessary element of salvation, but Paul is saying, "I didn't come to baptize. I came to preach the gospel." And here in the Gospel of John, John uses the language of birth in the prologue, writing, "But as many as received Him, to them he gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in his name, who were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God (1:12-13)." In those two verses John sets up a parallel in which becoming children of God and being born of God are the same thing and receiving Jesus and believing in Jesus are the same thing. For John, the crucial issue is true belief in Jesus. That is how you are born again. Baptism is not mentioned in the prologue. And if we go to the end of the Gospel to the purpose statement in 20:30-31, we get the same emphasis. John tells us that these signs have been described, so we might believe in Jesus and have life in his name. There is no reference to baptism. In fact, there hasn't been since the end of chapter 3, the first verse of chapter 4. John does not consider baptism a necessary requirement for eternal life. Belief yes, baptism, no.

So, what is baptism doing here as a requirement for new birth? Well, is it baptism here? Is being born of water a reference to baptism? A different perspective is to understand the birth of water as physical birth and the birth of the Spirit as regeneration by the Holy Spirit. That interpretation emphasizes the two required births for life. First, we must be born physically as though by water. But that is not enough. We must also be born spiritually by the Spirit. If this is the right interpretation for water and spirit then verse 6 builds on this way in this way, "that which is born of the flesh is flesh and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit." Two births are in mind, one of water or flesh and one of the Spirit.

That interpretation is consistent with New Testament doctrine, and I like it, though, I favor yet another interpretation. D. A. Carson emphasizes three factors that indicate Jesus had only one birth in mind here, not two.⁴

First, when we notice the parallelism of Jesus' two statements, we see that one birth is in view. You need to look in your Bible to see this.

Verse 3 and verse 5 begin the same way, "Truly, truly, I say to you..." Verses 3 and 5 also end the same way, except in the change of the word "see" to "enter", "...he cannot see [or enter] the kingdom of God."

Interpreting the Gospel of John

³ Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.

⁵ Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. and the spirit

⁴ D. A. Carson. *The Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Gospel according to John*. (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1991) 194.

And then the middle of each verse states the necessary condition for seeing the kingdom of God or entering the kingdom of God. In verse three it is, "unless one is born again." And in verse 5 it is, "unless one is born of water and the Spirit." So, "unless one is born again" is parallel to "unless one is born of water and the spirit." So the most natural way to take these to statements is to recognize that being born of water and the Spirit in verse 5 is the same thing as being born again in verse 3. It is spiritual birth.

A second point has to do with the grammar. The preposition "of" in verse 5 controls both water and Spirit as one unit. We are not born "of water" and then born "of the Spirit." There is just one "of" here. We are born "of water and the Spirit." That suggests that Jesus had one birth in mind and that one birth came both from water and the Spirit.

A third point can be made from regular Old Testament use of water as symbolic for the Spirit. That suggests a conceptual base for the interpretation of water here in a context that Nicodemus could have been expected to understand. If Jesus is referring water and spirit in an Old Testament sense, it gives Nicodemus a chance to follow because of all of his Old Testament knowledge. The best Old Testament example is probably Ezekiel 36:25-27.

²⁵ "Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. ²⁶ Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷ I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances.

The sprinkling of water in this passage is not a rite that must happen before God puts his Spirit into his people. The sprinkling of water in this passage is symbolic of the spiritual reality. It is the same thing as putting his Spirit into his people. Similar language is also used by Paul in the New Testament in Titus 3:5-7.

⁵ He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, ⁶ whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, ⁷ so that being justified by His grace we would be made heirs according to *the* hope of eternal life.

In this passage, though the word water is not used, the ideas of being washed and being poured out invoke the idea of water that are applied directly to the Holy Spirit. We are washed by the Holy Spirit. And the Holy Spirit is poured out. We could say that Jesus' use of water here in John 3:5 operates with a similar purpose as that of the more developed ritual of baptism that later comes into play in the New Covenant. Water is a symbol of spiritual cleansing and regeneration which is accomplished by the Holy Spirit in the soul of a person. Baptism is going to be ritualized in the New Covenant as a symbolic indication of that spiritual inward reality. So, to say that one must be born of water and the Spirit here is simply to say that one must be regenerated by the Holy Spirit. That is the interpretation I favor.

"Do not marvel"

Jesus goes on to tell Nicodemus not to be so surprised that people must be born again, comparing spiritual reality to the wind. It is a very nice, simple illustration that says so much about the reality of true faith. I remember using this when my girls were really, really little. And just abstract concepts didn't make any sense to talk about God. They knew the wind. And they could feel the wind. And just to say, "You know how you can't see the wind. That is like God. You can't see God. But you know he is there." True belief is a spiritual reality. This is one of the reasons it is so challenging for us to know whether someone has true belief or not. The wind blows. You know it is there. But you cannot see the source. You don't really know where it is, where it is going. God is at work in the souls of men and women. There is a reality of the spirit going on that we cannot see. This is where the work of God is taking place, where it must take place.

"The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit."

Nicodemus has not understood what Jesus is talking about. Being righteous is about being a Jew, performing Jewish ritual, doing good moral works. This talk of being born of the Spirit as the criteria for entering the kingdom of God does not fit. "How can it be that spiritual birth satisfies the requirement of righteousness? How can it be that a person is born of the Spirit?" And that's his question. "How can it be?" Nicodemus claims to be a teacher and yet, does not understand. And Jesus calls him out for that.

⁹ Nicodemus said to Him, "How can these things be?" ¹⁰ Jesus answered and said to him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and do not understand these things? ¹¹ Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know and testify of what we have seen, and you do not accept our testimony. ¹² If I told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ascended into heaven, but He who descended from heaven: the Son of Man."

It is not easy to know exactly what distinction Jesus is making between earthly and heavenly things. It sounds like the subject they have been talked about is considered earthly things to Jesus. But they have been talking about spiritual birth. Still, I think that is the right view. Earthly here does not necessarily mean fleshly or material, but that which happens on earth, that which human beings can understand. A teacher of Israel ought to have insight into the spiritual realities of the human heart. Heavenly things more rightly have to do with the divine nature of Jesus or the future, eternal kingdom of God, things that have not been revealed in the word of God, that can only be known if you have been to heaven and seen them.

And for his part, Jesus is able to reveal heavenly truth to Nicodemus, things that he has never heard of before. And that agrees with the assertion in the prologue that Jesus, being God and being with God, is able to uniquely reveal God. Jesus can reveal as yet unrevealed truth about heavenly things, but if Nicodemus has not been able to understand the conversation so far, he is not going to be yet ready to receive more.

Nevertheless, Jesus goes on to reveal more to Nicodemus, just a little bit more. Jesus chooses to entrust a bit more of himself, a bit of the heavenly things, even though Nicodemus cannot yet see what Jesus is talking about. Jesus says in verses 14-15,

¹⁴ As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up;

¹⁵ so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life.

The reference may be obtuse to modern readers. It would have been clear to Nicodemus. He would have known exactly what Jesus was talking about. It makes me think of Captain America and the reference to flying monkeys in Avengers, which shows I come from a Marvel family. Captain America became famous fighting Nazis in World War II. But he is frozen in ice, and he misses 70 years worth of culture. So, through the whole Avengers movie, references keep flying over his head until Nick Fury makes a comment about flying monkeys. And Cap goes, "I get that reference! I get it!" And he would get that reference. It is from the Wizard of Oz which came out in 1939. That is his time period. So, he is pretty excited to finally get something. And that's just how I imagine Nicodemus here. He does not know what Jesus is talking about. And then Jesus throws out a comment about the bronze serpent. And he is probably thinking, "I get that reference! I know what we are talking about."

And even if we don't get it, he would have known so well the story from Numbers 21, where after forty years wandering in the desert, the first generation of Israelites out of Egypt, grumbles for the 1000th time, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loath this miserable food." That's not true. They have got food and water. When necessary God provides it miraculously. God has cared for them the whole way. They are getting mana from heaven. There is food. They just don't like it. They call God's food, "miserable

food," revealing the hardness of their heart that lacks faith, lacks gratitude, and refuses to take responsibility for their own sin which got them stuck in the wilderness.

As an act of judgement, that also had the purpose of shaking them back to repentance, God sent poisonous snakes into the camp. And people were dying from the poisonous bites. After initiating his wrath, God also provided a way out. He told Moses, "fix a bronze serpent on a pole," with the instruction that anyone bitten should look at the bronze serpent and so, will live.

Nicodemus would have gotten that reference to Numbers right away. But apparently that is all he got. He falls out of the conversation at this point. And we are to assume that he did not get the comparison Jesus made to himself.

¹⁴ As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up;

To be lifted up is most naturally taken as to be exalted. A king is lifted up in praise. His glory is announced. The phrase "lifted up" will be used three times in John. It is really the irony of John. Right away, we see that something is wrong. Lifted up is the language of glory for a king. But here the Son of Man is compared to the serpent in the wilderness. Nicodemus could not have known what this meant. But we know. As the serpent was lifted up on a pole, Jesus is going to be lifted up on a cross.

We are driven then to ask, "What is the nature of the parallel? How is Jesus like the serpent?" We could say, "Jesus died for us on a cross." Well, yes he did. But the serpent didn't die for them on the pole. The serpent is not a symbol of atonement. If it had been a sheep or a goat, we might see that connection. But no snake ever died in anyone's place. That is not what we are supposed to see.

So, we return to consider the original story. The serpent is the curse, the consequence of sin, the expression of God's wrath. The right punishment was hung on a pole. The snake was put on a pole. And if anyone would looked to that pole, they would be granted life.

This is one aspect of the cross. What do we deserve for our sin? What is the consequence, the right expression of God's wrath? What is the curse? "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." "And the wages of sin is death." I deserve to die for my sin. So, what do I see when I look at the cross? I see a man put to death. I see the curse. I deserve the snake. I deserve death. And if in faith we say, "That should be me. That is the just punishment I deserve," then we will live.

Nicodemus asked, concerning new birth and entry into the kingdom of God, "How can these things be?" These things can be because the King has come to earth to be lifted up on a cross. He has come to take the cure that we deserve, so that by looking to him, we might live.

With Nicodemus out of the story, now we go on to the second part of our passage. This is the further commentary in 3:16-21.

Commentary

¹⁶ "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him. ¹⁸ He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. ¹⁹ This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil. ²⁰ For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. ²¹ But he who practices the truth comes to the Light, so that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God."

Notice the contrasts set up through this paragraph. Death and life. Condemnation and Salvation. Light and Darkness. Let's consider all three.

¹⁵ so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life.

Death and Life

John 3:16 is one of the most famous Bible verses there is. We all know it, "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life." It is a beautiful one sentence summary of the gospel. We probably have not often thought about it in comparison to the bronze serpent story which is the lead into the proclamation of John 3:16. Recognizing that context helps us to see the tension here between the wrath that comes from God and the salvation that comes from God.

The Israelites deserved the just punishment of death. But God gave them a way out. Why? "For God so loved the world." He is motivated by his love. In the case of the serpent, we are talking about physical life and death. Here, we are talking about eternal life and death. We are talking about being left out of the kingdom of God forever. The perishing here is not just physical death, it is eternal death. The result of belief in the Son is eternal life. And that is our first contrast. The contrast between eternal life and eternal perishing.

Judgment and Salvation

Verse 17 moves on to set up the contrast between judgment and salvation. "For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him." This is where modern culture stops with this verse. And ends up usually getting it wrong. The context of the bronze serpent reminds us that judgment has already been pronounced. The Israelites had sinned. God pronounced judgement. The wrath, the assurance of perishing, came from God. God is the one who sent the snakes. Who does Jesus come to save us from? Well, from God. We could also say from ourselves. We are the ones who have sinned bringing the penalty upon ourselves. But then God is the just judge who is going to demand the penalty be paid. We need salvation from the right justice of God. God provided the Israelites the bronze serpent, so that they might be saved from his wrath. The Son of Man will be lifted up for the same reason. That we might be saved from God's wrath. We do not need to wait for death for a sentence of judgment. Judgement day is not when scales will be weighed. The scales are already weighed. We already fall short. Judgement day is the day of execution. But the pronouncement has already been made.

And verse 17 should not be used to set Jesus up in contrast to God's just judgement. It is not true that the Father judges and the Son does not judge. All judgment has been given into the hands of the Son. He reigns as King. He pronounces judgement. The reason Jesus does not come into the world to judge is not because Jesus does not judge but because Jesus has already judged. He does not need to come into the world to do that. Why would he come into the world to judge? We are already under judgment. And this is what we read in verse 18. "He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God." What we need is salvation from the just wrath of God. That is why Jesus came into the world. He came to take our judgment upon himself. And this is the second contrast, the contrast between the judgment of God and the salvation of God.

Just as the judgment is motivated by the good justice of God, the salvation is motivated by the love of God. "For God so loved the world." And the way we receive that salvation is through believing in Him. If we do not believe in him, we cannot be saved from the judgement that has already been pronounced. We are on death row. God has made an offer. Look to the Son who has been lifted up on a cross in your place. He has already paid your penalty. Look to him and trust in him and your judgement will be removed. His death will be counted as your payment.

Light and Darkness

Now, why would a person not accept that offer? Part of the answer comes with the third contrast, the contrast between light and dark.

¹⁹ This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil. ²⁰ For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. ²¹ But he who practices

the truth comes to the Light, so that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God."

One problem that prevents us from coming to faith in Jesus, is our lack of spiritual insight. That is not the problem we just read. This is the problem we have seen already in Nicodemus. His coming to Jesus seems to suggest that he wants to know truth about Jesus. But even with all his religious training and experience, he cannot understand the necessity of spiritual regeneration and he cannot fathom how it might be accomplished. Now, I said "even with all his religious training and experience" whereas I probably should have said, "in part because of all his religious training and experience." The wheels of his mind are so deeply fixed in the rut of a very well worn path, such that he is not able to follow the lead of Jesus when Jesus calls him onto a new path. The problem is not with the allusions Jesus has made. It is not too abstract for Nicodemus. In our next chapter an uneducated, Samaritan woman is going to start by being confused by an illusion to living water, but she will be able to follow where Jesus leads her. She is going grasp the essential truths that this very committed religious priest is not able to follow.

With Nicodemus we see a dullness of spiritual sight.

But the contrast here at the end, this is a slightly different contrast. It is a more fundamental problem. The main reason human beings cannot see the what the light reveals is that human beings do not want to see what the light reveals. The fundamental problem is moral. Jesus may be good and true, but we do not want the good and true. We will take it a bit but not when it contrasts our deeper, darker needs, not when it contrasts the false visions of ourselves we have created. We don't want that good and true. We can take a bit of Jesus as long as we filter him through our own prism of seeing the world. The world loves Jesus who never judges, who comes to save and validates everybody in their own desires and their own definition of themselves. You are good. And you are good. And you are good. You're all good. Jesus would never judge anybody. That Jesus does not body anybody. They will welcome that Jesus.

But that is not the light of Jesus. That is putting a heavy blanket over the window to make sure Jesus does not get through.

When the light of Jesus reveals some of our favorite desires as cruel and selfish and vain, prideful, ugly, we do not welcome that. We want to shut it out. We want to push Jesus back, shut it down. Who are you Jesus to suggest there is anything deeply wrong with me and my desires? Who are you to claim that what you see is true in me?

It is like waking up from pitch black sleep to a piercing light because mom reached in and turned on the light. If we had a long stick, we'd whack the lightbulb. It is good we don't. Instead, we roll under our blanket with the pillow over our head. The light hurts the eyes and we long to be back in the darkness.

The light of Jesus reveals our moral works for what they are, our sense of justice for what it really is, our sense of goodness, our sexual desire, our lusts, our greed, our vain identity. You can imagine how the authorities in Jerusalem felt after Jesus cleared out the temple. "Who are you to come in here, young man, and suggest you are more zealous for God than we are? Who are you? You are from Galilee. What are you doing?" He upstaged them. And they claimed to be the most good. But they had allowed God's temple to fall into such a state. They knew he was right. But they did not admit it. They did not say, "He is right. We should have done better. Thank you Jesus for that rebuke." Not at all. "Who is he to disrupt the temple of God! Whipping those poor animals. What kind of person is he? Causing such a disruption, so much noise during a holy week. The Romans are going to get upset. People can't worship. What is he doing? He wants to draw attention to himself. It is just all about him." I don't know, of course, what they really said. But they did not like Jesus shining a light and so, they turned towards their darkness, and they call it light.

And if Jesus keeps shining light into their deeds and their identity, you can bet that they will seek a way to extinguish the light all together.

We finish this passage here wondering what happened to Nicodemus. Did he hide in the dark or did he come to the light? At the beginning, it seemed a little of both. But we are going to have to wait with Nicodemus. We don't get an answer right now at what happens to Nicodemus, what is going on in his heart. We are going to have to wait to see if he comes back in the story later.

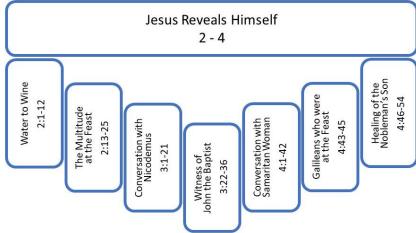
Let's sum up with three principles of faith that stand out in this dialogue.

- 1. One, content matters in faith. Saving faith is faith in Jesus and not in the Jesus we might want, but in the Jesus who is. The bronze serpent parallel to the Son of Man being lifted up adds some to our content. We see in verse 18 a switch from Son of Man to Son of God, so the content of faith includes recognizing the divinity of Jesus. It is also includes recognizing that Jesus has died to take the curse we deserve. That is going to be a fundamental aspect of belief in Jesus.
- 2. Spiritual reality matters in faith. Faith is not simply an act of the intellect or even an act of the will. It is those things. But it seems that Jesus has suggested here that some spiritual work must happen in us, not only before we enter the kingdom of God, but before we can see the kingdom of God. Spiritual truth is seen with spiritual eyes. Eyes that a serious, trained, religious Jew like Nicodemus did not have. He could only barely see that Jesus must be from God because of the signs he did. He could not see much further than that.
- 3. Human nature resists faith in Jesus. We learn here that our biggest problem is moral. Deep in the soul, deep in our natural state, human beings do not want to entrust themselves to Jesus, at least not to the true Jesus as he reveals himself to be.

Reflection questions

- 1. Read John 3:1-21. Read this conversation with Nicodemus as though for the first time. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing?
- 2. What do you think Nicodemus understood and what did Nicodemus not understand? Try to be specific.
- 3. What is your general impression of the priesthood? Do you tend towards a more negative or a more positive view of priests? Can you relate to how Nicodemus' training, experience, and position hinder his ability to understand Jesus? Does that make sense to you or is it surprising to you?
- 4. How would you describe the parallel between the bronze serpent and the son of man?
- 5. How does that parallel help you to understand 3:16-22?
- 6. Which contrast stands out to you the most in 3:16-22? Life and death; salvation and judgment; light and darkness? Why?
- 7. Which of the three summary statements stands out as most significant for you at this time in your life? Why?
- 8. Would you describe yourself as born again? When would you say you were born again? What is some way that your life has changed from the time when you were not born again to now?





Symmetrical structure in historical narrative

We have come back to John the Baptist to hear a second testimony from him about Jesus. A testimony that rises up out of the challenges of real life ministry. There is a discussion going on among John's disciples. They are not happy. They are frustrated. They come to John and John speaks truth into their confusion.

We have just left the conversation with Nicodemus in the first half of chapter 3. There is a big difference between Nicodemus and John. Nicodemus is still in the dark as far as we know. John the Baptist on the other hand is the one person who seems to truly get Jesus, so far. He is our quintessential disciple. He is the one who witnesses. According to the prologue, in 1:6, "There came a man, sent from God, whose name was John, he came for a witness, that he might bear witness of the light." And in 1:15, "John bore witness of him and cried out, saying, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me has a higher rank than I, for he existed before me."

Then also in the Introduction in the rest of chapter 1, we start with John affirming that he himself is not the light, not the Christ, not Elijah, not the Prophet, not the light and then fulfilling his role to bear witness to Christ, declaring Jesus to be "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" and to be the one who is greater, the one who has existed before.

Now, we return again to John the Baptist, and a second testimony to Jesus. Before we get into the text for this lesson. I want to take some time to consider again the structure of the Gospel of John. This text is at the center of the first section of the first part of the Gospel. If the structure truly is symmetrical then this testimony of John the Baptist is given prominence by John the Apostle. Let's remind ourselves of the structure and also take a moment to consider the implication of a symmetrical form in a historic narrative.

This is the big picture structure we have recognized in John. The Gospel starts with a prologue in the first half of chapter 1. Then we have an introduction in the second half of chapter 1 which will be followed up at the end of the Gospel with a conclusion in chapter 21. Both introduction and conclusion present a small group of disciples interacting with Jesus, inviting us to consider this journey that they have been on with Jesus, from start to finish, and to think about what changes they have experienced in their own lives as a result of this journey.

The main text of the narrative, then, is chapters 2-20, which is divided into two parts, the public ministry of Jesus in 2-12, which we are calling "The Word Among Us" and the passion week in 13-20, which we are calling "The Hour of His Glory." Both of these parts divide into two major sections with some transition chapters. We are in the first section of part 1, chapters 2-4, which I have titled "Jesus Reveals Himself." All of these titles are made up because John did not give us any titles, nor did he

give us any chapters. What he did instead, was use several miracles of Jesus as structure markers and then gather together events and dialogues in a symmetrical pattern. Recognizing these patterns leads us to divide the book into several sections. And recognizing the different sections helps us to recognize and follow the major themes of John as he develops them through the Gospel.

So, we have four major sections in the Gospel, two in part 1 and the two in part 2. I see likely chiasm in all four of these sections. The chiastic structure in this first section of chapters 2-4 seems to me the clearest. The outer frame, that is the beginning and ending of the section, is marked off by the stories of the first two signs, water to wine at the beginning and the healing of the nobleman's son at the end. The second frame of the chiasm consists of two stories on either end referring to people who believed in Jesus at the Passover in Jerusalem. The third frame consists of two dialogues, one with Nicodemus and another one with the Samaritan woman. And finally, the seventh part of the structure takes central place without a parallel element. That seventh story is our focus for this lesson, it is the second testimony of John the Baptist.

Does recognizing a formal structure in the narrative have any implications on the historicity of the story? A false assumption sometimes made in recognizing the parallelism in John is to conclude that the narrative is therefore not historical. It is supposed that, being driven by the impulse to create artistic symmetry, John made up or rearranged material to achieve the parallelism he desired. Historical accuracy suffered in the face of artistic expression. Symmetrical structure and historical accuracy cannot go together, it is suggested.

David Gooding addresses this concern about symmetry and historicity in his commentaries on the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts. A Member of the Royal Irish Academy, Gooding is also a collaborator on several books with the Oxford Mathematician and Christian Apologist John Lennox.

I believe Gooding's defense of Luke and Acts applies also to John. Arguing that Luke created symmetrical structure in the Book of Acts while also maintaining chronology and historical accuracy, Gooding writes this about Luke's process.

There's no denying, then, that in the process of forming the symmetry Luke has been very selective in what he has chosen for detailed description, and what he has decided to mention only in summary form. But there is no need to deny it, for it does not call in question the historicity of the incidents he has described in detail. Luke has maintained a basically chronological sequence; but then, admittedly, he has, like a jeweler constructing a necklace out of stones of different colours and sizes, selected events along the course of that chronological sequence that form meaningful symmetries. But how does that in itself form a ground on which to question the historicity of his narrative?⁵

Gooding goes on to describe how a first century author might select his material and organize it in a certain arrangement to communicate meaning to his audience. All historians make interpretation through their selection of events, by what they include and what they leave out, and also in their choices in what to highlight and what to skim over. Historians then add narrative to communicate their interpretations about the importance or nature of the events that they have selected. The Gospel writers are historians, but not merely historians. They are intentionally providing for us interpreted history. And in their case, that interpretation is inspired by God. John chose to make an arrangement out of selected historic events. And as Gooding has put it, the resulting symmetry is "meaningful symmetry." We are supposed to notice the design, and in noticing the design be led to further consideration about the themes presented in the symmetrical stories. Let's consider John's symmetry.

Symmetry does not imply that John made up stories or inserted fictional events into true narratives just to produce a balanced structure. It is true that John made some narrative decisions to help

⁵David Gooding. *True to the Faith - The Acts of the Apostles: Defining and Defending the Gospel.* (Colerain, N. Ireland: The Myrtlefield Trust, 2013) 507.

create symmetry. For example, he choose to call the healing of the nobleman's son in chapter 4 the second sign. It is not the second miracle that Jesus did. Jesus did many signs at the Passover reported in chapter 2. This second sign is the second miracle that John has decided to describe in his Gospel. Choosing to call this miracle the second sign helps him set up the parallelism with the first sign of water to wine at the beginning of the section. So, we start with the first sign, and then we end with the second sign.

While John may have added some narration to help create symmetry, like calling this the second sign, mostly John relied on the selection of historical events to create hi parallelism. The healing of the nobleman's son makes a parallel with the water to wine because both miracles really, historically occurred in the same town, Cana of Galilee. That was a historic fact. John also recognized in both events truth about the nature of Jesus and truth about the way people interact with Jesus. By placing the two events in a symmetrical structure, John invites us to consider both stories together. Maybe we are supposed to compare and contrast the two or maybe we are supposed to see one as an appropriate beginning to this section of text and the other as an appropriate conclusion. John does not tell us why he created the symmetry. We are supposed to reflect on that.

We can assume that Jesus had many conversations with many people between the time of these two miracles in Cana. John selected just two of those conversations to describe for us, one conversation with an established, Jewish Pharisee and another with a marginalized, Samaritan woman. There is no need to conclude that John made up the stories to create irony or to create symmetry for his narrative. We should probably conclude that he chose these stories among potential other stories as any historian must do. And he chose them with symmetry and theology in mind. Looking over potential dialogues to include in his Gospel, John recognized the irony of Nicodemus not understanding Jesus and how that contrasts with the Samaritan woman who did come to see or understand Jesus. John saw a lesson about faith in the true events of these two stories and was motivated by how these two stories represent these themes, the theme of the nature of Jesus and the theme of the nature of faith. By arranging his material in a parallel fashion, John gives us more food for thought. Not only are we to consider what we learn from the dialogue with Nicodemus and also consider what we learn from the dialogue with the Samaritan woman, but John takes us one step further by encouraging us to consider what we learn when we compare the two. That is what the symmetry does for us. It helps us see important themes while also challenging us to think harder as we compare and contrast the paired accounts.

I am only imagining what John's process might have been. I cannot really know. My point is that it is not too difficult to imagine how a theologian who has years of experience with Jesus would have to consider carefully many events and many miracles and many sermons and then select from that material in order to faithfully communicate a message of truth. In making his selections from the available material, he is able to be true both to the history of the events and also true to the theological implications of the events as he organizes that material in a symmetrical way.

Here is one final observation about John's symmetry. Choosing to sandwich the story about the many who believed at the Passover in between the first sign and the conversation with Nicodemus meant that John would need to have to tell some kind of parallel story between the conversation with the Samaritan woman and the second sign, that is, if he wanted to maintain a symmetrical structure. What he gives us in chapter 4, after the Samaritan woman, is a three-verse reference to people in Galilee. There is not room for much detail in just three verses. When we look closely, though, we see that there is parallelism. John points out that these Galileans in chapter 4 were at the Passover describe in chapter 2, and they had seen the things Jesus did at that Passover. John goes on to make a point about faith in chapter 4 that parallels the point he made in chapter 2. We will look at that point when we get to chapter 4. In the case of these two parallel stories, the length of text is not symmetrical. The Passover story in chapter 2 takes 13 verses and communicates quite a bit of detail. This parallel in chapter 4 is a summary of only three verses. So, it is not perfectly balanced. John took the what he had at hand in the historic material without feeling the need to create a detailed parallel

story to balance the text. The short summary served his need and creates a conceptual parallel. This suggests to me that the historicity of the stories is more important than the symmetry of the structure. John's structure is not rigid. It is not perfectly balanced. There are going to be questions of are we even seeing it right? Is this really parallel? It is more like the symmetry you might find in nature. It is more organic, like a crystal or like a flower. It follows the actual events of Jesus' life and interaction with people. The truth is not invented to create symmetry. The symmetry is means of collecting and presenting historical truth to communicate theological truth. The resulting affect is a narrative that flows smoothly, even though it is structured, the structure remains in the background, and it does not hinder the telling of the story.

The Witness of John the Baptist 3:22-36

Alright, we are ready now to move on to the second half of chapter 3, if we have recognized the structure correctly as three parallel narratives surrounding a central narrative, then this testimony of John the Baptist has added significance as the center of the larger section that is chapters 2-4. Let's consider the text and then consider how the text applies to our walk with Jesus.

The text divides into three parts. First, we are going to get context. Then, we get John's self-identification in relationship to Jesus. And then, we get the testimony about Jesus. Let's read the whole passage, John 3:22-36.

²² After these things Jesus and His disciples came into the land of Judea, and there He was spending time with them and baptizing. ²³ John also was baptizing in Aenon near Salim, because there was much water there; and people were coming and were being baptized— 24 for John had not yet been thrown into prison. ²⁵ Therefore there arose a discussion on the part of John's disciples with a Jew about purification. ²⁶ And they came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, He who was with you beyond the Jordan, to whom you have testified, behold, He is baptizing and all are coming to Him." 27 John answered and said, "A man can receive nothing unless it has been given him from heaven. ²⁸ You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, 'I am not the Christ,' but, 'I have been sent ahead of Him.' 29 He who has the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom's voice. So this joy of mine has been made full. ³⁰ He must increase, but I must decrease. ³¹ He who comes from above is above all, he who is of the earth is from the earth and speaks of the earth. He who comes from heaven is above all. 32 What He has seen and heard, of that He testifies; and no one receives His testimony. 33 He who has received His testimony has set his seal to this, that God is true. ³⁴ For He whom God has sent speaks the words of God; for He gives the Spirit without measure. 35 The Father loves the Son and has given all things into His hand. ³⁶ He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him."

Context of the Witness 3:22-26

Verses 22-26 set up the context for us. Jesus and his disciples have left Jerusalem, where Jesus performed many signs and met with Nicodemus. Now they have gone out of the city and they are still in Judea, but they are in a rural area, and they are baptizing. That is one of those tantalizing references to the ministry of Jesus that gets no follow-up anywhere. Only John mentions that Jesus and his disciples included baptism as part of their ministry. So, we really don't know much about it. Later in 4:2, John will clarify that Jesus himself was not baptizing. His disciples were baptizing. The comparison in the text between the baptism of John and Jesus, seems to be the point, and especially at this early stage in the ministry of Jesus, suggests to me that we should think of Jesus baptizing people similarly to how we think of John the Baptist baptizing people. It is a baptism of repentance to prepare the heart of the individual to participate in some new thing that God is doing.

There seem to be two discussions going on here. One leads into the other. The first was between John's disciples and a Jew. Maybe the reference to Jew here indicates someone with position in Jerusalem, a priest or a Pharisee. We do not know. The discussion has to do with rites of purification.

As we noted in the story about water to wine where purification jars were used, Jews held both to Mosaic laws about washing for ceremonial purification and also to traditions from the elders about washing. There were baptismal pools in the temple area in Jerusalem. These pools allowed for the washing of the whole body. They were used for initiation into Judaism by converts, but more regularly by Jews performing Mosaic or traditional washings. If baptism is connected to washing for purification, then a Jew might be baptized many times. The discussion seems to have started somewhat along these lines. The Jew wants to know how John baptizing fits in with Jewish law and traditions about purification. So, he is questioning John's disciples.

But when these disciples approach John the Baptist and call on him as their Rabbi to resolve the dispute, we see that the discussion has moved on from an argument about that purpose of baptism to a complaint that Jesus was draining people away from John. It is not clear how the conversation changed course, but you can imagine the disciples defending the validity of John's baptism to the Jew and then somebody bringing up the fact that Jesus' movement threatenedthe distinctiveness and the size of John's movement. You can imagine John's disciples being frustrated with Jesus' disciples. "Baptizing is our thing. Why are they baptizing? They just want to steal people from us."

We can't really tell how negative the disciples were in their comments to John. But John's response to his disciples comes off as a rebuke to me, and that suggests they were not happy at all that people were going over to Jesus.

John's witness about himself 3:27-30

As we noted before in chapter 1, John's witness of Jesus includes a sober assessment of who he himself is. He states who he see himself to be. Success, even success in doing the right thing, can go to a man's head, leaving him with a heightened sense of his own importance and of the importance of any movement or church he has been involved in establishing or growing. In the success of his own ministry, John has not forgotten who he is. You see that in how unshaken he is by the decline of his movement. Let's read again how John sees himself in 3:27-30.

²⁷ John answered and said, "A man can receive nothing unless it has been given him from heaven. ²⁸ You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, 'I am not the Christ,' but, 'I have been sent ahead of Him.' ²⁹ He who has the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom's voice. So this joy of mine has been made full. ³⁰ He must increase, but I must decrease.

John says something that could be taken as rather pious, "A man can receive nothing unless it has been given him from heaven." That's something you might say when something you value dearly is taken from you, and you just can't do anything about it. God gives. God takes away. But that's not John's heart. John does not begrudge that which was taken from him. He understands that he had a special role to play. He was sent ahead to prepare for the coming of Jesus. For many personalities, at least for mine, I still feel like John must have some twinge of regret or sadness at the demise or decline of his own work. So, I love the illustration John uses to help me understand how he feels and why he feels that way. He compares himself to a friend of the bridegroom. It is an analogy I can understand emotionally. It has always been about Jesus for John. He knew he was preparing for a wedding. He knew he wasn't...The bride is not his. It is his friend. And everything he is doing to set up the wedding, prepare the flowers, to make the dresses, or to bake the cake, or whatever, he has always been doing it for Jesus. It has been clear in his mind. He has known he was not the bridegroom. He is the friend of the bridegroom who cannot wait for the wedding to happen. He can't wait for the bridegroom to come and to be glorified, to be celebrated with his bride. He looks forward to the wedding and it brings him joy. It is the joy of the marriage of his friend. That's the joy John feels as he sees the movement of Jesus increase, and his correspondingly decreases. But for John his movement is not just decreasing, his people are going over to Jesus. It is like he is handing the bride off into the hands of the bridegroom. It is really about Jesus for John. His heart is fixed on Jesus not on his own creation, his own work, his own movement, his own church.

This is a rebuke to his disciples. "Don't you guys get what we have been about? Do not feel misplaced loyalty to me. Our first loyalty, our first love, is to Jesus. Don't make me your Jesus."

After communicating how he understands himself in relationship to Jesus, John gives testimony to who he understands Jesus to be. We need to know who we are. More importantly, we have to know who Jesus is. This is 3:31-36.

John's witness about Jesus 3:31-36

³¹ He who comes from above is above all, he who is of the earth is from the earth and speaks of the earth. He who comes from heaven is above all. ³² What He has seen and heard, of that He testifies; and no one receives His testimony. ³³ He who has received His testimony has set his seal to *this*, that God is true. ³⁴ For He whom God has sent speaks the words of God; for He gives the Spirit without measure. ³⁵ The Father loves the Son and has given all things into His hand. ³⁶ He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him.

That's the testimony. Verse 31 contains the same language Jesus used in his rebuke of Nicodemus as a teacher of Israel, "If I told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things (John 3:12)?" Now here John is connecting himself to earthly things and Jesus to heavenly things. Jesus is as greater than John in his revelation as the Sun is greater than the moon in its light. John can speak only as a man of the earth, even speaking as a prophet of God, even with the Spirit giving him words from God, he cannot rise to the level of Jesus who speaks as one who comes from heaven. Jesus does not speak words from God that he himself has not experienced first-hand knowledge about. John says of Jesus, "What He has seen and heard, of that he testifies."

But then John makes this statement about the reception of Jesus, "No one receives His testimony." Those words remind us of the prologue, 1:10-11,

¹⁰ He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. ¹¹ He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him.

We have gotten a concrete glimpse of this in the last two chapters. Jesus cleaned out the temple, his father's house, as the son who had come to his own, but he was challenged by the stewards. They did not know him, and they did not receive him. And they did not want to give their stewardship up to him. One of them came to Jesus at night, drawn to him, but still not able to know him.

Faith in Jesus as spiritual reality

The statements are made in a very stark, black and white way. "The world did not know him...His own did not receive him...no one receives his testimony." That sounds pretty absolute. But then, both in the prologue and also here in this testimony, some hope is given that the reality is not so absolutely bleak. In 1:12, "But as many as received him, to them He gave the right to become children of God." So, it is not true that no one received him. And here in verse 33, "He who has received His testimony has set his seal to *this*, that God is true." The starkness of the initial statements indicates to me that the majority will continue to be against Jesus. And it also indicates that this really is the truth of all people. Nobody in the world can know Jesus. None of his own can receive him. All people will continue to reject Jesus in their own nature. No one will believe. No one will receive. No one will know. Not unless God does something to enable them to believe. A man cannot see the kingdom of God unless he is born again. That was Jesus' word to Nicodemus. God must do a spiritual work in us if we are to see Jesus. This truth about the nature of faith, that it is a spiritual reality that God must initiate, is possibly suggested here. I think it is suggested to Nicodemus. We have to wait until chapter 6 before Jesus asserts this truth directly. So, we will mention it again when we get there.

Faith in Jesus as an acceptance of truth

We can hear another idea. We can hear this idea that faith is a person's agreement or putting their stamp, their seal, to the truthfulness of God. And that idea is also not really developed here. The

concept of truth has not been developed yet by John. It is barely alluded to in the prologue. "We saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth." Jesus somehow realizes the truth of God. The idea that faith acknowledges the truthfulness of God is getting ready to be addressed in the very next chapter when Jesus has his conversation with the Samaritan woman. We will consider the nature of truth at that point when Jesus declares that "true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth (4:23)." In this we see that this testimony right here at the center of chapters 2-4 is summarizing some ideas that John has already developed, for example, in the conversation with Nicodemus, but is also introducing ideas that are going to be developed in the second half of the section, for example in the conversation with the Samaritan woman. Truth is one of those ideas that is going to be developed.

Truth here is connected to Jesus as the one who speaks the words of God. He is the one who has seen and heard first-hand. And that speaking of truth is connected to the Holy Spirit. The revelation of heavenly truth here is presented as a trinitarian work involving Father, Son and Holy Spirit, centering at this moment on the Son. Nothing is withheld from Jesus. He comes from above. He is in perfect love relationship with the Father. Everything we need in order to be in relationship with God comes through Jesus Christ, because God has put all things into the hands of Jesus.

Faith in Jesus as the only way to eternal life

And so we get this last grand statement, really the central point of this testimony, the central point of the whole of chapters 2-4, "He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him."

This is a summation of that truth already proclaimed at the end of the conversation with Nicodemus. Just as the wrath of God remained on the Israelites who were instructed to look to the bronze serpent for salvation, so also the wrath of God abides on everyone who does not now look to the Son of God for salvation. Eternal life and wrath are not states that await us. John testifies about these things as though they now are. If you truly believe in Jesus Christ, you have already entered into eternal life. If you do not, then the wrath of God remains on you already.

Jesus is the key. Belief in Jesus is essential to eternal life. There is no other way to eternal life. There are not many ways. There is one way. That way is Jesus. This is the testimony of John the Baptist.

Faith in Jesus as related to obedience

There is one more new idea suggested here but not yet developed. John does not say here that he who does not **believe** in the Son will not see life. He says, "He who does not **obey** the Son will not see life." Obedience is now brought into our conversation about faith for the first time here. And it is set parallel to belief. "He who **believes** in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not **obey** the Son will not see life." So, obedience has some relationship to true faith, to discipleship. And as with the concept of truth, this connection between belief and obedience is only suggested here. It is just brought up but is not developed. It is hinted at. We are going to address this idea most fully not until chapter 14 when we are really talking about discipleship. For now, we are just left to think about it.

And we do have some context for thinking about obedience here in this story. John accepts his role as a forerunner to Jesus. He is not looking to build his own movement to build his own identity, to create for himself his own basis for honor or value out of his work of ministry. That is not what ministry is about for John. Because of his faith in Jesus, because he has seen Jesus and in seeing Jesus he has seen himself, John is able to carry out in joyful obedience the ministry God has given him to fulfill.

Application

Let's make application to our lives. John's testimony here challenges me to stop and consider my own heart attitude. Why am I serving in Christian community? Who am I serving in Christian community? In whatever you do for God in his service, in church or in Christian movement or in any sort of provision or care for people, you have to stop and ask yourself at times, "Am I in this ministry for Jesus? Is Jesus the central reason for everything that I am doing? Do I understand my role as only a part in his great design? Is he my joy?"

A healthy heart serves God first out of love and gratitude and wonder, and then serves the people God loves. Even when our motives are right, motives are always mixed. We have other cravings which get fed by our service. Christian ministry feeds our craving for affirmation, validation, influence, control, significance, power, intimacy. So, we continually need to come back and monitor our own heart. John's testimony here to his disciples recommends to us four heart check questions.

1) Is this my ministry?

The more responsible you are for your role or your group or your childcare or your food pantry or your movement or your church, the more likely you are to feel, like, "Yes. This is my ministry. It was my idea. I raised the funds. I had the vision. I gathered the people. This is my personal ministry. This is the part of our community that I contribute, I developed."

When I feel deeply that some aspect of ministry is mine, isn't that saying something about the state of my heart?

What do I mean when I say the ministry is mine? What would it really mean to say that the ministry belongs to Jesus? Can I affirm with John, "A man can receive nothing unless it has been given him from heaven?" Did I really build this? Do I own this fruit? Can I affirm that with contentment, this is really a gift from God, without begrudging God, especially if God decides to take it away?

Can I give up my ministry? Can I be okay with the ministry diminishing? Can I accept that my service is not a major emphasis of our church or movement? Can I support the ministries that are a major emphasis of our church or movement?

How much of my value or identity or importance in our community is tied to my ministry?

This is the first heart monitor test. What does it really mean in my heart to say that this ministry is not mine, that all my effort and participation is in the service of my king, this is his ministry?

The second heart monitor test from John is this.

2) How do I feel when I compare myself with others?

That is what these disciples were doing. They were comparing their work with John to the work that Jesus was doing.

Am I excited that a guy younger than me is able to gather together a bigger Bible study than I am? Does it bother me that the numbers in whatever I am doing, whether evangelism or discipleship or care, are less than her numbers or his numbers or that ministry's numbers or that church's numbers?

Does it bother me that he or she gets more praise for their ministry? Why do they get mentioned? They get mentioned all the time. I never get mentioned.

Whom do I compare myself with? Of whom am I jealous? Who do I wish I could be like?

Can I accept with joy that my role may diminish while someone else's role is increasing?

Can I trust God to raise me up or leave me where I am? Or do I feel like I have to push myself forward? I have to take what is mine.

Can I support the person in my community who seems to do all things well?

Can I support that other ministry or church that seems to do all things well without feeling the need to emphasize what they do not do so well? Can I just rejoice in what they are doing?

The third heart monitor question has to do with the happiness of your heart.

3) Is Jesus my joy?

Success in ministry can rightly bring happiness. We want to do a job well. We want to experience fruit from our labor. We feel good when God smiles on us.

So, ask yourself, "When I do not have success in ministry, do I still have joy?"

In my success can I identify the source of my joy? What makes me happy in ministry? Is Jesus at the center of that?

Do I delight in Jesus? Can I just leave everything right now and go take a walk with Jesus and experience joy? Can I experience joy in what Jesus is doing through other people and other movements and other churches? Am I a friend who really, really is happy for the bridegroom?

Here is one last heart monitor check.

4) How important is it to me to follow a particular leader?

John's disciples seem to be very committed to him. They may be worried about themselves as the numbers of their movement decrease. But they may also be worried about the honor and prestige of John the Baptist. They love him. They think he is wonderful. They owe their spiritual growth to him. They have never heard anyone preach like him. They love his vision, his rough appearance, his independence, his standing up against religious institutionalism.

And to see his ministry diminish hurts.

Who are the most important Christians in your life? Has a particular man or woman especially poured into you? Has a preacher or teacher led your church or opened your eyes in a special way? And do you put that person on a special pedestal? Are they the only one who can really do what they do?

John's disciples were right. John the Baptist was absolutely unique. He had insight that no one else in his day had. He could really see Jesus. He understood more than anyone what God was doing. He was spiritually advanced beyond all of the twelve disciples gathering around Jesus. He was special.

But as John the Baptist puts it, "He who comes from above is above all, he who is of the earth is from the earth and speaks of the earth. He who comes from heaven is above all." Jesus is central, not John the Baptist. Have I made anybody else central to my experience of Christianity?

Our true allegiance is not to any man or woman on this earth. Our true allegiance is to Jesus Christ. And Jesus has his people doing all kinds of wonderful, fruitful ministries all over the earth.

So, we consider these questions.

Am I holding on too tightly to any human leader? What would happen to my faith if that person fell into sin? Or turned away from Jesus?

Have I made my Christian service dependent on any one person?

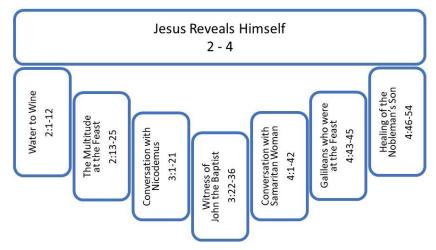
John the Baptist does not want to build a movement around himself. John the Baptist wants to point people to Jesus. That is his joy. And that is the kind of leader you want to follow, one who is quite ready to let you go, who will support you as you continue to pursue Jesus wherever Jesus sends you.

Focus on Jesus. Keep on serving him. Be sure to take a moment every now and then to monitor your heart. Do a heart check. And when you see a problem, a wrong motivation, find a friend to talk to and pray with who will help you get your eyes fixed back on Jesus and then continue serving him.

Reflection questions

- 1. Read John 3:22-36. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What are some questions that come to mind?
- 2. Imagine the discussion of John's disciples in 3:22-26 in some modern day context. What are two or three possible examples that would include someone like the Jew who initiated the question and then two other parties in apparent or perceived competition like John's disciples and Jesus' disciples?
- 3. What impresses you about John's witness about himself in 3:27-30? In what way would you like to be like John?
- 4. How does John's witness of Jesus in 3:31-36 summarize points made so far in the Gospel? Be specific.
- 5. Go through the application section and consider each of the four heart monitor questions for yourself. If you are not participating in any area of service, you can also address these questions to your ministry to your family or to your desire to live as a Christian witness at work.

Lesson 7: John 4:1-26 Conversation with a Samaritan Woman, part 1 Introduction



"There came a woman of Samaria to draw water." That is our introduction to the woman who became famous because of her conversation with Jesus at a well in her hometown. John sets this woman in contrast to the man we encountered at the beginning of chapter 3, "Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews; this man came to him by night."

There is significant similarity between the two stories. Both stories describe Jesus dialoguing with a single person. In both, Jesus introduces the topic of internal, spiritual regeneration. And in both Jesus uses water as a metaphor for regeneration. Those are the similarities. The differences are striking.

The gender of the two persons is different. The race is different. The religion is different. The moral position is different. The social behavior is different. And the response is different. In all of these differences, but one, Nicodemus has the advantage over the woman at the well. Let's consider each of these six differences briefly to get the full impact of the contrast.

Gender

Starting with gender, Jesus should not be talking with the woman. "He who prolongs conversation with a woman brings evil on himself, ceases with the words of the Law and receives on himself Gehenna [which is Hell]." That's from a rabbinic source. The strictest Pharisees would walk with heads down to prevent looking at a woman. Jesus consistently breaks this prejudice, clearly he breaks it here with the Samaritan woman and also, later in the Gospel in conversations with Mary and Martha and Mary Magdalene. But from the accepted cultural point of view, advantage number one goes to Nicodemus, simply because he is a man.

Race

Nicodemus is also a Jew. The Samaritans are not fully Jew and not fully Gentile. They are mixed blood. In the 8th century B. C., the Assyrians demolished the Northern Kingdom of Israel. In accordance with their strategy to disorient subjugated peoples, the Assyrian conquerors deported the majority of the Jewish population from the North and imported other defeated peoples into Israel. These peoples intermarried with the poor remnant of Jews left who were left, so the Samaritans of Jesus day were looked down on by Jews as mixed race.

Religion

Jews also looked down on Samaritans for their religious adaptation. Samaritans practiced a form of Yahweh worship, accepting the first five books of the Jewish Bible but only the first five books. Along with other religious beliefs and practices developed on top of these select biblical books, the Samaritans also built their own temple on Mount Gerizim, that was around 400 BC. Jewish animosity against Samaritan religious innovation was exemplified by the Jewish leader John Hyrcanus who destroyed that Samaritan temple about 150 years before this conversation Jesus was having with the

woman. In contrast to the woman, Nicodemus is by race a member of the chosen people and by religion a highly committed Jew, a Pharisee. He is very well educated in Bible and theology. He is a teacher. The woman is at best only familiar with the folk religion of her misguided people.

Moral

There is also a moral difference. As a Pharisee Nicodemus is presumed to be highly religions not only in his beliefs but also in his moral behavior. The Pharisees were respected for putting into practice the law of Moses. Whereas, this woman has been married five times and is living with a man who is not her husband. D. A. Carson writes, "Rabbinic opinion disapproved more than three marriages, even though they were legally permissible; no body of religious opinion approved common law marriages."

Social

Finally, concerning social position, Nicodemus has it and the woman does not. As a member of the ruling counsel in Jerusalem, Nicodemus is at the top of society both politically and probably also monetarily. The woman is towards the bottom of society. This is probably suggested by John when he points out she came to the well alone in the heat of the day. She draws her own water, nobody helps her, at a time when no one else would be there.

The contrast between the two is huge and every factor lies on the side of Nicodemus. Jesus has every reason to talk to him. Jesus has no business at all speaking to the Samaritan woman. Nicodemus could enhance Jesus' reputation. With the woman, he is in danger of staining it.

Considering the influence and position of Nicodemus, something that stands out to me is that Jesus did not make any apparent attempt to win Nicodemus over politically or religiously. Jesus' challenged Nicodemus in regard to the core issue of the gospel. If Jesus had come to set up the Davidic Kingdom on earth, why would he not work to develop positive relationship with insider, somebody like Nicodemus. He is not hostile. He could be of use to Jesus. But in his conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus shows no thought about doors Nicodemus could potentially open. And he is also not worried about doors Nicodemus might potentially shut. Jesus seems to be quite free from any allure of Nicodemus' political and religious influence. Jesus does not treat Nicodemus as a means to a greater end. Jesus sees Nicodemus as a man in need; a man who needs to see God; a man whose religion has left him in the dark; a man who needs to be born again.

And here in Samaria at the well, what does Jesus see here? Does he see an untaught, unworthy, morally lacking Samaritan woman unable to understand, unworthy of his great teaching? No. He sees a daughter who needs to come home; an immortal soul who needs to drink from the waters of eternal life; a precious woman made in the image of God, worthy of his time and attention. Jesus saw Nicodemus as he truly is. Jesus sees this woman as she truly is. And in the end, considering all of these piled up differences, all in the plus column for Nicodemus, we come to the most startling difference of all. While Nicodemus is unable to go where Jesus leads, this simple, Samaritan woman with shaky morals and no religious training, sees and believes and immediately becomes a witness for Jesus Christ. She does more work of eternal lasting value on this one day, than Nicodemus had done in his entire life.

Let's walk through the story. I am going to focus only on the conversation with the woman in this lesson. We will leave the response of the disciples and the villagers for our next lesson. I will read the introduction to the passage first, and then, after that we will read the dialogue. The introduction is 4:1-6.

Transition and Context (4:1-6)

¹ Therefore when the Lord knew that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John ² (although Jesus Himself was not baptizing, but His disciples were), ³ He left Judea and went away again into Galilee. ⁴ And He had to pass through Samaria.

⁶ D. A. Carson. *The Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Gospel according to John*. (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1991) 221.

⁵So He came to a city of Samaria called Sychar, near the parcel of ground that Jacob gave to his son Joseph; ⁶ and Jacob's well was there. So Jesus, being wearied from His journey, was sitting thus by the well. It was about the sixth hour.

The first two verses transition us away from the ministry time in Judea. Not only were John's disciples aware of the growing movement surrounding Jesus, the Pharisees were, too. Several times in the Gospel we get references to this balancing act Jesus so wisely conducts. At the wedding he cautioned his mother about pushing him into public action. We have also commented on Jesus' avoidance of using the terms Christ and Son of God for himself, preferring instead the ambiguous term Son of Man. Jesus is not afraid of conflict with Jewish leaders. Jesus is not afraid of death. He is maintaining control of his ministry, not allowing the opposition opportunity to act against him. Jesus is in control.

Jesus decides now to move away from the center of power in Jerusalem and go back to his home area of Galilee. To do so he must pass through Samaria. Samaria was the capital city of the former Northern Kingdom. It is still a city, but also the name of the whole region right at the center of the ancient Israel. And John is simply stating the geographic reality in verse 4 when he comments that to move from Judea in the South to Galilee in the North Jesus had to pass through Samaria. I have heard preachers say that a good, religious Jew would refuse to travel through Samaria. I think I have even said that myself. They would instead go around it. But I have not been able to verify that claim, as I have been looking into it for this lesson. I don't know of any contemporary sources from the day of Jesus that confirm that. D. A. Carson quotes Josephus to indicate that, though the antipathy between Jews and Samaritans was strong, Jews still preferred to take the shorter route through Samaria just as Jesus does here.⁷

On his way through Samaria, Jesus comes to Sychar, a town by Mount Gerizim. It is the sixth hour which, counting from six in the morning as the first hour, is 12:00. It is noon. Tired from the journey, showing his humanity, Jesus sits by the village well as his disciples go into Sychar for food. Now we are ready to pick up the conversation. Let's read it in full and then go back through it. This is John 4:7-26.

The Conversation (4:7-26)

⁷ There came a woman of Samaria to draw water.

Jesus said to her, "Give Me a drink." 8 For His disciples had gone away into the city to buy food.

⁹ Therefore the Samaritan woman said to Him, "How is it that You, being a Jew, ask me for a drink since I am a Samaritan woman?" (For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.)

¹⁰ Jesus answered and said to her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who says to you, 'Give Me a drink,' you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water."

¹¹ She said to Him, "Sir, You have nothing to draw with and the well is deep; where then do You get that living water? ¹² You are not greater than our father Jacob, are You, who gave us the well, and drank of it himself and his sons and his cattle?"

¹³ Jesus answered and said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will thirst again; ¹⁴ but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him shall never thirst; but the water that I will give him will become in him a well of water springing up to eternal life."

¹⁵ The woman said to Him, "Sir, give me this water, so I will not be thirsty nor come all the way here to draw."

¹⁶ He said to her, "Go, call your husband and come here."

¹⁷ The woman answered and said, "I have no husband."

Jesus said to her, "You have correctly said, 'I have no husband'; ¹⁸ for you have had five husbands, and the one whom you now have is not your husband; this you have said truly."

¹⁹ The woman said to Him, "Sir, I perceive that You are a prophet. ²⁰ Our fathers worshiped in this mountain, and you *people* say that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship."

⁷ Carson, 216.

I am going to consider this conversation from the perspective of gospel witness. What do we notice about how Jesus communicates the good news to this woman? There is a lot to notice here. I am going to be emphasizing four points.

- 1) Jesus took the initiative.
- 2) Jesus was more concerned with the woman than with his own image.
- 3) Jesus showed her the respect of human dignity.

²⁶ Jesus said to her, "I who speak to you am He."

4) Jesus told her the truth.

We start with the fact that Jesus took the initiative.

1) Jesus took the initiative (4:7-8).

You can imagine a situation where you are alone and someone approaches, something about the person makes you uncomfortable. They are from a different racial group. Or they speak a different language. Or they are wearing some kind of foreign clothing. Or they are from a poorer class. You don't feel completely comfortable with their presence. Do you initiate a conversation with them?

Jesus does. And he does not just say, "Good afternoon." Or, "God be with you." Or any standard greeting. If he did, he would likely have received a look, a nod, or a formal response with no expectation of any further conversation. Interestingly, Jesus initiates conversation by asking for something. He puts himself in the place of need. He needs something from the woman. She understands his need. He is tired and thirsty and has nothing to draw water with.

The question does not strike the woman as odd, but the questioner sure does. She immediately points out the incongruity of Jesus' request. He ought not be speaking to her. It is not appropriate. And that brings out my second point. Jesus was more concerned with the woman than with his own image.

2) Jesus was more concerned with the woman than with his own image (4:9)

She says, "How is it that You, being a Jew, ask me for a drink since I am a Samaritan woman?" We have already made a whole list of reasons Jesus should not be talking to her at all from a cultural point of view. She sums it up with two words "Samaritan woman." Jews consider Samaritan's unclean like Gentiles, but even worse, they have perverted the Scriptures to affirm their own cultural aspirations. Jews do not deal with Samaritans.

And a good, religious Jewish man should not be speaking with a woman by himself in a public place. Yes, maybe he has a valid reason, wanting water and having nothing to draw with. But cultural convention should prohibit such a request. Jesus can wait for his disciples to return. He cannot be that thirsty. This is just inappropriate.

What is the woman supposed to think? What would she think? If you are a woman, what would you think? Let's say you are walking up to a bench in a public place, a square, or a park, or a bus stop, and no one else is around except this one man, about your own age, sitting there. You come up, obviously minding your own business. And the man speaks to you. What do you think? What thought comes to mind? Why is this man breaking social convention to initiate conversation with you?

What do you think is the first thought that came to the Samaritan woman's mind? Remember, she has had five husbands and now lives with a man not her husband. She has experience with men. What do men want from her? What has been her experience? What do imagine she thinks this Jewish man wants?

²¹ Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe Me, an hour is coming when neither in this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. ²² You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. ²³ But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers. ²⁴ God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth." ²⁵ The woman said to Him, "I know that Messiah is coming (He who is called Christ); when that One comes, He will declare all things to us."

I can't help but think there is some sexual tension here from her point of view. It may be quite low at this point, but she has to wonder about a strange Jewish man initiating conversation with her.

Not only does Jesus not seem to be concerned with how anyone else might view him when he initiates this conversation, Jesus does not seem concerned at all with how the woman might view him. He is not going to stay quiet just because she might misjudge his intentions, just because there might be some uncomfortableness or weirdness. He is not asking for water for his sake. He is asking for water for her sake. He is giving her an opportunity to hear truly good news.

To be honest, this is a huge obstacle for me against sharing the good news of Jesus with other people. What will they think of me? And I know it is irrational. I have words of eternal life to share. What does it matter what somebody thinks of me? What does it matter if they think I am a little impolite or a little odd or they wonder what I am doing striking up a conversation? I mean, really, why does it matter if they think I am strange, talking about Jesus. It should not matter. I know it shouldn't matter. And still, there is this significant emotional barrier in me that resists initiating conversation with people I do not know. And I do not see that here with Jesus when all social convention would tell him, "Just pretend she is not there. Just ignore her." Jesus doesn't ignore her. Jesus ignores all the social convention about gender and race and religion and moral behavior and social standing. He is not concerned with his own image. He is concerned with this woman's need for a Savior.

I also see Jesus in his concern treating the woman with respect. That's my third point. He showed her the respect of human dignity.

3) Jesus showed her the respect of human dignity (4:10-15)

Human dignity is grounded in the belief that all men and women are created equal in the image of God. Jesus knows this to be true. And so, he enters into back and forth conversation with this Samaritan woman in very much the same way he did with Nicodemus. Jesus chooses different themes to fit the person he is speaking with. But I cannot discern that he treats one with any more or less respect than the other.

After she says, "How is it that you ask me for a drink?" Jesus responds, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who says to you, 'Give Me a drink,' you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water."

Jesus is not talking to this woman about the Kingdom of God or about being born again. That language spoke better to a Pharisee. Jesus talks to this woman about water to drink. His metaphor fits the person and the situation around the well. In the end, it is the same message. Both Nicodemus and this woman need internal spiritual regeneration which comes as a gift of God through belief in Jesus. It is the same message. It is just communicated with different terms appropriate to the person who needs to receive the message.

Jesus' statement is intriguing and a little enigmatic. He does not start right off preaching to the woman. The statement he makes draws her into conversation.

Similar to how Nicodemus took Jesus' metaphor literally and asked Jesus how a person can be born again from the same mother, so also, this woman takes Jesus' metaphor about the water literally, responding to him with the question,

Sir, You have nothing to draw with and the well is deep; where then do You get that living water? You are not greater than our father Jacob, are You, who gave us the well, and drank of it himself and his sons and his cattle?

Notice that Jesus did not first say that he would give her eternal water or eternal life. He said, "living water." And we probably hear that as something spiritual. But living water has a very literal meaning. It can just mean running or moving water, a stream or a river, very valuable in this part of the world as opposed to well water or a cistern. Living, running water is preferable to well water, which can be stagnate or can be used up. The well can go dry. The woman takes Jesus as saying he has the ability

to provide better water than this well. In a dry, agrarian society that is a pretty impressive even audacious claim. Water is valuable and hard to come by.

Showing some local pride, the woman points out the value of this particular well, which happens to be famous. Jesus must not know where he is. He needs to be educated. She is suggesting something like this, "The well you see here was dug by Jacob himself, 1800 years ago. Jacob's sons, the fathers of the twelve tribes, and all their livestock drank at this here well. It did not run dry for them. It has not run dry for 18 centuries. And you claim to be able to give me something better?" I like how, in her retort to Jesus, she emphasizes the importance of her hometown well and in doing so also points out that Samaritans have a claim that goes all the way back to the patriarchs. "You Jews may look down on us, but our lineage and history goes as far back as yours does." There is a bit of ethnic pride in her response. There is also a bit of irony since the true answer to her question is, "Yes. As a matter of fact, I am much greater than Jacob. Supremely greater than Jacob." But Jesus does not say that. He keeps that in. He does not judge her or treat her with contempt.

Instead, he answers her by pressing on with his metaphor,

Everyone who drinks of this water will thirst again; ¹⁴ but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him shall never thirst; but the water that I will give him will become in him a well of water springing up to eternal life.

Now that is something new. Jesus is not claiming to provide a better source of water. He is claiming to provide better water, something on a different order. He is talking about removing that thirst down in the soul. And this woman certainly thirsts. She has had five husbands and is living with a man not her husband. She knows that life leaves you wanting. There is a yearning in the heart of every person, a craving for satisfaction, a sense that there must be something more, a God-shaped vacuum, a thirst for eternity. Jesus speaks to the thirst that he knows to exist within her.

The woman either is not able to follow Jesus, yet, or she does not want to give him any outward indication that she is following him. She responds literally again, as though Jesus is still really talking about water, even though he said eternal life, "Sir, give me this water, so I will not be thirsty nor come all the way here to draw."

Jesus then changes direction. He does something both painful and merciful. He presses his finger onto the wound in her soul. He forces her moral failure into the light to bring her need to the surface.

This is tricky in evangelistic conversation. To need a savior, a person must admit their own failure. And it is not always easy to help them see that. If you have no need, you need no help. My next point is going to be that Jesus told her the truth. But I am not yet ready to leave this point that Jesus showed her the respect of human dignity. We need to recognize the connection between the two, between respect and truth, because it is possible to speak truth with respect but also possible to speak truth with disrespect.

Jesus speaks truth. And it is painful truth. But it is not spoken with judgment or condescension. Jesus speaks truthfully about the moral failure the woman needs to own before she can see her savior. I believe this is an act of respect for the dignity of this woman as a human being. Jesus treats her as a moral agent created in the image of God. He does this both speaking to her about her moral failure and speaking to her later about her incorrect religious views.

He respects her enough to correct her, to disagree with her. And that may sound like disrespect to you, but if so, that is probably because modern culture takes the wrongheaded opinion that disagreement is somehow also disrespect. In Jesus' day, a religious teacher was not supposed to spend his time teaching women. Woman could not grasp moral and theological truth like a man. Their place was to obey what their husband told them. Teach the husband, and he would tell the woman how to behave and what to believe.

We see Jesus rejecting that idea of women here in his conversation. He treats her with dignity as though she has the potential to discern right from wrong herself, both in regard to morality and in

regard to doctrine. Jesus is giving her the opportunity to take responsibility for her own moral behavior and her own understanding of truth. He treats her as a moral person with her own intellect and her own will.

There is a difference between someone who disagrees with your ideas and someone who scorns you as a person. You can hear in the words and voice when someone communicates to you with sarcasm and condescension and judgement. I don't detect that hear in this dialogue from Jesus. He is not putting the woman down. He is not putting the woman down. He is disagreeing with her and giving her a chance to respond to his claim about truth. Recognizing the respectful way that Jesus speaks leads us to the fourth point. Jesus told her the truth.

4) Jesus told her the truth (4:16-26).

As I have said, Jesus reveals both moral truth and doctrinal truth. We start with moral truth. Jesus presses in on her woundedness to get her to pay attention to what he is telling her. Jesus brings her need to light. It is truth about her. At the same time, Jesus' statement also helps her to see something of the truth about him. He is no ordinary man. He sees things he should not see. He knows what he should not know.

- ¹⁶ He said to her, "Go, call your husband and come here."
- ¹⁷ The woman answered and said, "I have no husband."

 Jesus said to her, "You have correctly said, 'I have no husband'; ¹⁸ for you have had five husbands, and the one whom you now have is not your husband; this you have said truly."

Quite understandably, the woman first tells Jesus, "I have no husband." She does not want to volunteer her life situation to this stranger. Why would she admit to him her failing? She does not lie. She also does not tell the whole truth. No matter. Jesus does not need her to. He knows what is in the heart of man and woman.

Whatever her life story it has contained much sadness, too much sadness and loss. It would be wrong to assume the woman is responsible for the failure of all her earlier marriages. We do not have enough information to go on. All four husbands could have died. Or she could have been divorced. Or a mix of the two; some could have died, some could have ended in divorce. We do not need to know all that. We know it has been hard. And we know that she is currently living with a man outside of marriage. We expect she is living under the shame of her situation. It seems that is why John points out she came to the well alone at noon. She seems to be avoiding people. And the other women are probably fine with that. It saves them the trouble of avoiding her.

Though the woman recognizes something special about Jesus and acknowledges him as a prophet, she quickly turns the conversation away from her personal moral failings to religious disagreement.

¹⁹ The woman said to Him, "Sir, I perceive that You are a prophet. ²⁰ Our fathers worshiped in this mountain, and you *people* say that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship."

This is not uncommon in evangelistic conversation. When it gets personal, it is safer to change topics, to move to something more impersonal, to theological or worldview differences. She is putting up a roadblock. "We say this. You say that. You might recognize something about my need or brokenness, but what good does that do? You believe one thing. I believe another thing. You are from your faith. I am from my faith. That's the way it is."

Jesus goes on to do something considered inappropriate in our day. He tells her, "We may have differences, but that is because your religious beliefs are wrong." He has told her moral truth. Now he is going to tell her spiritual truth. He loves her too much to leave her in spiritual darkness without at least pointing her toward the light. She will have to choose. Jesus is going to give her the chance to make that choice. She is responsible to question the religious tradition she was raised in. It is not a valid excuse before God to say, "Well, you know, it is what I was told. It is what my people believe. I guess, I guess, that's all, I guess I'm stuck. I have to accept it." No.

²¹ Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe Me, an hour is coming when neither in this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. ²² You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. ²³ But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers. ²⁴ God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth."

This is what some today would call intolerant. And it is intolerant, though it is not at all intolerant of the woman. Jesus shows love and respect for the woman. Jesus is intolerant of the false belief system that keeps this woman chained to eternal death. And he tells her so. He tells her straight out.

Jesus first claim probably does not stand out so much to us from our vantage point. He says, "An hour is coming when neither in this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father." We have seen the gospel spread all over the earth. So, this makes sense to us. But it is a very strange thing for a Jewish Rabbi to say. What is he saying? The Jews have it all wrong thinking their truth is the only way? That God will accept all religions on all mountains? No. That is not what he is saying at all. Jesus is talking about a major change coming between the Old Covenant God made through Moses and the New Covenant established through his death and resurrection. Under the Old Covenant, the locus of the people of God is geographic. The central point is the temple in Jerusalem. To worship God means connecting yourself with the God of the temple of Israel. That is the source of true knowledge. That is the focal point of worship of the one true God.

Under the New Covenant, after the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit will indwell believers. This is one of the truly new things about the New Covenant. It is spoken of in the Old to be realized in the New. This is the new heart. This is God putting his law into people's hearts that the prophets spoke about. The locus of the people of God will shift from being geographic, the temple in Jerusalem, to being spiritual. Jesus will be the center. Faith in him will be the defining mark of those who are the people of God. That is the reality to be made clear later in the ministry of Jesus and in the teaching the Apostles. That is what he is talking about when he says, "An hour is coming when neither in this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father." That is possible by the gospel reality which enables the church of God to spread to every culture. It is not a validation of all religions or all claims on truth. And that is indicated in the further words of Jesus, when he claims straightforwardly, "You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews."

This is a truth claim based on concrete historic reality. The Jews have received the Holy Scriptures. And through the Jews will come the Messiah. He will be a Jew, a son of David. Jesus tells the woman that her belief claims are not accurate. Her worship is lacking. Her claims to knowledge are wrong. Jesus claims knowledge.

Jesus connects faith with truth. Faith must acknowledge and yield to the truth of the gospel in order to produce worship that is acceptable and pleasing to God. This is the truth that Jesus did not hold back from the Samaritan woman.

²³ An hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers. ²⁴ God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.

The Christian religion, when it is truly Christian, follows Jesus Christ in making a strong truth claim. There is one Savior. He is Jesus Christ. There is one way to God. Faith in Jesus Christ. Worship based on false claims about God is not acceptable to God as worship. God requires two things. God requires internal regeneration by the Holy Spirit, new birth. And God requires recognition and submission to the truth revealed in Jesus Christ. Spirit and truth. Those who worship must worship in spirit and in truth.

Those are the kinds of worshipers God is looking for. And we might think that Nicodemus is the perfect potential representative. God is looking for worshipers like Nicodemus, certainly not like this

Samaritan woman. If we were to think that we would be so wrong. In the earlier conversation with Nicodemus, the conversation faltered. Nicodemus just fell out of it. He could not follow Jesus. He did not understand. He was not yet able or not yet willing to yield to the truth.

What should we expect from this simple, uneducated, foreign woman? Certainly, she will not be able to follow Jesus' revelation if Nicodemus could not. She is not a picture of the type of worshiper that God is seeking? Well, is she not? What is God seeking? Worshipers who will worship in spirit and in truth. And she is beginning to follow what Jesus is saying about himself. She remembers something she has heard. She says, this is from her Samaritan religion, "I know that Messiah is coming (He who is called Christ); when that One comes, He will declare all things to us." It is an interesting, it is an interesting connection. It is something jumbled up in Samaritan religion that comes to her mind and God uses that to open up her heart.

If the Samaritan woman was referring to the Samaritan Messiah, then she was thinking of a second Moses figure called Taheb. According to Carson, "Samaritans pictured the Taheb as one who would reveal the truth, in line with his role as the ultimate prophet." That thinking matches with what the woman has just said. "He will declare all things to us." And it just happens that Samaritan idea matches the truth of who Jesus is. He is the Light who comes into the world to open eyes to the truth of who God is. No matter how grand a stage or how worldwide that scope will be for Jesus, his care for the whole world, he is dying for the whole world, he is the light for the whole world, and he still takes time to show love for this one insignificant woman. For this one moment, he has directed all his attention on this struggling lady that came to the well just to get water.

And something happens to her. Something clicks in her heart. Her eyes start to open. She is as one who has been in a long, long sleep, who is just starting to wake up. She says, "I know the Messiah will tell us all things." And Jesus says to her, "I who speak to you am *He.*" A more literal translation of the Greek is, "I am who speaks to you." This is the first "I am" statement of John. And it is said to this woman who does not get it at all at this moment. We are later going to see that this is a claim to divinity. And John is going to build on this. There is going to be seven "I am" statements like this where Jesus just says, "I am." And there are going to be seven where Jesus says "I am" plus an object. "I am the bread of life." "I am the light of the world."

I do not think that the woman picked up on this at all here. Having our eyes open to Jesus does not mean we immediately get everything about Jesus. It means we get enough. She sees him. In that moment, the eyes of her heart are open, and she sees him. And then she runs off to tell the village.

I love this story on so many levels, the love Jesus shows for one individual; the way he speaks truth with respect; the way he begins with his own need, but then he leads her to her need; the way he uses language that just matches the situation. Jesus is clearly the master.

Conclusion

And we are disciples. A friend of mine recently told me that he likes the term apprentice better than disciple. Because the word disciple can imply passive learning, just sitting at the feet of the master. An apprentice is more active. An apprentice learns, not only by listening to the master, but also by watching the master and imitating the master, doing what the master does until he or she acquires the ability to do those things for themselves.

In the gospel of John, the primary role of the disciple or apprentice is witness. That is what we see disciples doing. They are the ones who point to Jesus. How do we learn to be a witness? Well, by being an apprentice of the master. And here he is modeling for us in this conversation with the Samaritan woman how to witness. I have suggested four principles. Let's sum those up in our conclusion.

⁸ Carson, 226.

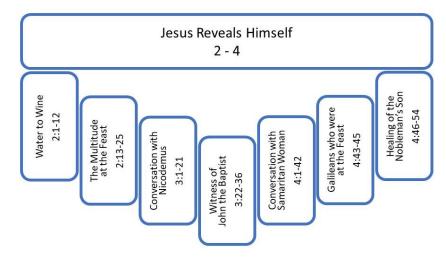
- (1) First, as Jesus took the initiative, we take the initiative. We do not wait for others to ask us for living water to drink. They might not even know they are thirsty. Or they might not connect us with any possible solution to their thirst. We take the initiative to share the good news about Jesus with others.
- (2) Second, as Jesus was more concerned with the woman than with his own image, we have to be willing to put aside our fear of what others think about us for their sake. We need God to somehow increase our love for lost people such that our concern for them overcomes our concern for our own reputation. Jesus models for us that it is okay with God if people misunderstand our motives and thinks we are a little weird. God knows our heart. And God knows what we are about.
- (3) Third, as Jesus showed this woman the respect of human dignity, we ought not pre-judge any person, no matter gender, race, clothing, smell, social standing, Jesus reaches across culture. He reaches across class barriers. God is at work. He is ready to surprise us. You never know who might be ready to believe.
- (4) And fourth, as Jesus told her the truth, if we are to witness to Jesus, we also have to tell the truth. We have to be willing to disagree; to say with humility and respect, "I think you are wrong about that. I believe Jesus is the only way. There is no other way. And this is why I believe that..."

It is our task to proclaim the truth. It is not our task to change the human heart. We cannot argue anyone into true faith. A Nicodemus will take years to believe. For this woman, it took one unexpected moment, one conversation. Faith is spiritual sight. It is something God must bring about in the human heart. And that is not our part. Our part is to share what we know with love and respect in the power of the Holy Spirit, entrusting the results to God.

Reflection questions

- 1. Read John 4:1-26 as though for the first time. What are some things that stand out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing?
- 2. Evaluate the four suggested evangelistic principles given in this lesson, answering the following three questions for each principle.
 - 1) Jesus took the initiative.
 - 2) Jesus was more concerned with the woman than with his own image.
 - 3) Jesus showed her the respect of human dignity.
 - 4) Jesus told her the truth.
 - a. How do you see this principle represented in the dialogue with the Samaritan woman?
 - b. Do you agree or disagree that this principle is something we Christians should put into practice in gospel conversations?
 - c. What could the application of this principle look like applied by you and by members of your Christian community to people around them? Can you offer an example from your own experience or the experience of someone you know?
- 3. Would you add to these four principles any other principle to witnessing that you see modeled by Jesus here in this passage?
- 4. What do you think about the last statement of this lesson as a definition for witnessing? Does this sound right to you? Is there anything you would add or change?
 - "Our part is to share what we know with love and respect in the power of the Holy Spirit, entrusting the results to God."
- 5. Consider two or three people in your life that you could help know more about Jesus. Pray that God would give you opportunity and courage to share with them your belief in Jesus. And pray for God's work in them to open their eyes to see Jesus.

Lesson 8: John 4:27-42 Conversation with a Samaritan Woman, part 2 Introduction



The conversation in John 4 between Jesus and the Samaritan woman ends this way.

The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ); when that one comes, he will declare all things to us."

Jesus said to her, "I am, I who speak to you."

With those who believed at the Passover feast in chapter 2, Jesus held himself back. He did not entrust himself to them. With Nicodemus in chapter 3, Jesus gave him an opportunity, but Nicodemus could not follow. Jesus entrusted himself somewhat, but not fully, speaking in third person when he said,

As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; that whoever believes may in Him have eternal life.

But here with this non-Jewish, morally suspect woman, Jesus reveals himself more directly than he has to anyone so far in the Gospel story, even more than we have yet seen him reveal himself to his disciples. He declares to her in first person, "I am," meaning, "I am the Christ you are expecting."

True faith is a spiritual reality. We are not yet, told that this woman sees truly with spiritual eyes. But it appears that Jesus sees something real in her and so, he chooses to entrust something of his identity to her. He affirms that he is the Christ.

Before we can learn more about the state of the woman's heart, the disciples turn up. It seems to be terrible timing, though we have to be glad they did not show up any earlier than they did. With their appearance the conversation with the woman stops.

The presence of the disciples does allow for a teachable moment by Jesus. The text for this lesson describes for us the effects of the gospel conversation. We will consider the effect on the woman first, then come back to the teachable moment for the disciples, and finish with the effect on the Samaritan villagers.

Let's read the text, John 4:27-42.

²⁷ At this point His disciples came, and they were amazed that He had been speaking with a woman, yet no one said, "What do You seek?" or, "Why do You speak with her?" ²⁸ So the woman left her waterpot, and went into the city and said to the men, ²⁹ "Come, see a man who told me all the things that I *have* done; this is not the Christ, is it?" ³⁰ They went out of the city, and were coming to Him. ³¹ Meanwhile the disciples were urging Him, saying, "Rabbi, eat." ³² But He said to them, "I have food to eat that you do not know about." ³³ So the disciples were saying to one another, "No one brought Him *anything* to eat, did he?" ³⁴ Jesus

said to them, "My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me and to accomplish His work. ³⁵ "Do you not say, 'There are yet four months, and *then* comes the harvest'? Behold, I say to you, lift up your eyes and look on the fields, that they are white for harvest. ³⁶ "Already he who reaps is receiving wages and is gathering fruit for life eternal; so that he who sows and he who reaps may rejoice together. ³⁷ "For in this *case* the saying is true, 'One sows and another reaps.' ³⁸ "I sent you to reap that for which you have not labored; others have labored and you have entered into their labor." ³⁹ From that city many of the Samaritans believed in Him because of the word of the woman who testified, "He told me all the things that I *have* done." ⁴⁰ So when the Samaritans came to Jesus, they were asking Him to stay with them; and He stayed there two days. ⁴¹ Many more believed because of His word; ⁴² and they were saying to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves and know that this One is indeed the Savior of the world."

Effect on the Samaritan woman

The Samaritan woman's life is changed forever. That's the effect of the gospel conversation on her. There is a visible immediate effect. She had come to the well for water. But at the end of her conversation with Jesus, she turns back to the village, leaving her water jar by the well. She is not interested in what she was doing. She is on a new mission. She wants to announce the good news. She thinks she has met the Christ, and she wants to let the other villagers know. It says specifically, "she invites the men." She speaks to the men and says, "[Could this be the Christ?] Come, see a man who told me all the things that I have done; this is not the Christ, is it?"

But who is going to listen to her? What kind of witness is she? Why doesn't Jesus shush her as he so famously does in other cases, telling people not to say anything about what they have experienced? Even if she was not morally suspect or religiously suspect as a Samaritan, she still has to deal with significant cultural prejudice against her as a woman. Women were not officially recognized as credible witnesses.

Josephus, a Jewish writer working for the Romans in the first century AD writes in his Antiquities.

But let not a single witness be credited; but three, or two at the least, and those such whose testimony is confirmed by their good lives. But let not the testimony of women be admitted, on account of the levity and boldness of their sex, nor let servants be admitted to give testimony on account of the ignobility of their soul; since it is probable that they may not speak truth, either out of hope of gain, or fear of punishment. ⁹

This prejudice against women in the ancient world was not limited to Jewish culture. In his work *Politics,* Greek philosopher Aristotle wrote, "As regards the relationship between male and female, the former is naturally superior, the latter inferior, the former rules and the latter is subject." ¹⁰

This legal and philosophical prejudice may not fully apply in a Samaritan village where men and women interact with one another through daily life and where people have history with each other. Prejudices do not always fully apply in day to day life. Men still might listen. A strong or unique woman may lead her family or gain social position in a prejudiced society.

But this woman does not strike us as having any credibility that would overcome the cultural gender discrimination. Quite the opposite. From a cultural standpoint, she has no credibility in her social status.

None of that seems to bother John the Gospel writer. He had the opportunity while composing his narrative to choose to leave in the testimony of the woman. It would not have been hard. It is only two verses. John could have just left out her witness and reported the Samaritans coming without giving credit to the woman. He does not do that. He says that some of the Samaritans believed

⁹ W. Whiston. *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged.* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1987) 117-118.

¹⁰ Thomas Wiedemann. *Greek and Roman Slavery*. (New York: Routledge, 1981) 19.

because of the woman. This fits John's practice. Only three people specifically call Jesus "Christ". Andrew does when he goes to get Peter. This woman here asks, "Could this be the Christ?" But it is clear she thinks he is the Christ. And then Martha declares Jesus as the Christ. So, out of the three two are women. John also reports Mary's anointing of Jesus, and Mary Magdalene being the first to witness the resurrection and proclaim it to the disciples. Like Jesus did when he spoke to this woman, John ignores cultural discrimination against women as witnesses. He includes them as credible in his narrative. For him, man or woman, it makes no difference.

So, what did make this woman credible? First, I would say that eternal fruit from witnessing does not depend on our credibility but on the work of the Holy Spirit. God opens the eyes of the heart to see. So, it is not fully a matter of human or social credibility. But then I would also add that this woman did have the credibility of a changed life. Or at least she was beginning to. We would think the Samaritan woman's moral situation, living with a man she is not married to, would discredit her as a trusted witness. And I imagine it would among the self-righteous religious who have already made up their mind about what is proper. They would not have listened to anything she was saying. But others would notice that something odd is going on. This woman who goes to the well in the heat of the day to avoid people out of shame, is now talking to everybody without shame about something she has just experienced. This is noticeable. Something is different about her. Something is going on. The villagers see something, and they connect it to her words, and they decide to go and see firsthand for themselves.

Effect on the disciples

In his telling of the story, John has created an interesting effect in the way he ends the conversation with the Samaritan woman, just as the disciples come up, then he tells us what is going on with the woman in the village, before returning to tell us about the conversation Jesus has with the disciples. John makes us aware of significant spiritual reality swirling around the scene while the disciples remain clueless. We know something is going on in the life of the woman and something is going on in the village while they are having this conversation. But when we ask, "What was the effect of the gospel conversation on them?" The answer appears to be, "None whatsoever." They did not get that anything special had taken place or was going on.

When they first came up to the well, "They were amazed that [Jesus] had been speaking with a woman, yet no one said, 'What do You seek?' or, 'Why do You speak with her?'" I remember more than once planning to meet my brother Charlie somewhere on the campus of N. C. State University when we were students and coming to that spot and seeing him engaged in a serious looking conversation. And I knew Charlie well enough to know that he was probably sharing the gospel. So, I would find a seat and just wait until he was done.

Thinking back to those times makes the lack of interest by the disciples really stand out to me. Didn't they know Jesus? Why wouldn't they assume something significant was going on when they see Jesus talking to the woman?

I'd like to give the disciples credit that they hesitate to speak to Jesus, so as to not interrupt that significant thing that was happening. But the disciples do not suggest to us that kind of spiritual awareness. In fact, Jesus is getting ready to point out the exact opposite. Their amazement is simply shock that Jesus would be talking to a Samaritan woman. She is a Samaritan and a woman, both strong prohibitions for a Jewish Rabbi. He should not be speaking to her. Maybe Jesus wanted something from her, which would raise the suggested question, "What do you seek?" They could have asked that. In fact, that is how Jesus initiated the conversation. He asked for water. The disciples could have assumed he wanted something. Or they could have just made no assumption and just asked the second suggested question, "Why do you speak with her?"

But they don't ask either question. They just don't seem to be that interested. They had been given a task to get food. And they got the food. And now they urge Jesus to eat, "Rabbi, eat." They are so caught up in the logistical tasks of their ministry that they miss out on the truly amazing event that

has just happen, and that, in fact, is still going on. As they are urging Jesus to eat, the woman is hurrying off to tell the villagers all about Jesus.

When Jesus says, "I have food to eat that you do not know about," the disciples start asking, who slipped him a sandwich? Just like Nicodemus and just like the Samaritan woman did initially, the disciples miss that Jesus is speaking metaphorically about spiritual truth. They take him concretely, literally. So, Jesus explains. This is in 34-38,

³⁴ Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me and to accomplish His work. ³⁵ Do you not say, 'There are yet four months, and *then* comes the harvest'? Behold, I say to you, lift up your eyes and look on the fields, that they are white for harvest. ³⁶ Already he who reaps is receiving wages and is gathering fruit for life eternal; so that he who sows and he who reaps may rejoice together. ³⁷ For in this *case* the saying is true, 'One sows and another reaps.' ³⁸ I sent you to reap that for which you have not labored; others have labored and you have entered into their labor."

Jesus is not saying that he has no literal need for food. He is saying that he has a strong desire. And the desire is like the desire for food, and it is a desire to do God's work. And he experiences satisfaction, like when you eat, satisfaction of that desire when he does the work of God. Jesus willingly, eagerly put aside his own physical thirst to draw the Samaritan woman into a conversation about her spiritual thirst. Jesus is attentive to the spiritual dimension of reality, and he is also attentive to God's leading. Jesus will take time to eat, and he will take time to drink, but not right now. Not if it means missing this present opportunity with this woman.

Jesus words highlight the disciples lack of spiritual awareness. Even if they miss on their own the opportunity to speak into the life of this Samaritan woman, they should have at least assumed that Jesus was doing something significant, and they should have asked him about it. But they were too focused on the task that they had been given to give any thought to the Samaritan woman.

Everyone in this agrarian society knew about the harvest of grain. Each generation before them had sown and reaped at the same time of year with the same expectations. You plant the seed, and you say to yourself, "Yet four months, and then comes the harvest." That's common knowledge.

The disciples are like the farmers who have planted and then turn to other things, with no expectation of harvest any time soon. They have got four months to do other stuff. They are busy about that. So, in this case, the disciples are busying themselves to secure food and drink, or to get from Judea to Galilee where they can then pick up ministry later. This is not harvest time. This is Samaria. There is no expectation of harvest at all.

Essentially, Jesus is saying, "The harvest is now. Are you not paying attention? If you will do the work of reaping this spiritual harvest, which is already ready, will produce eternal fruit. Men and women will enter into eternity. I have just sown. Get ready to reap." Jesus has done the sowing in the heart of the Samaritan woman. She then took that seed to the village. And she planted the seed there. And the harvest has quickly ripened. The villagers are on their way. They are ripe for the harvest ready to be reaped by Jesus and his disciples.

The spiritual awakening going on among the villagers shows us again that true faith is a spiritual reality that can come in a moment with very limited knowledge or preparation. Time with the spiritual harvest is not consistent. We cannot plan it like a literal harvest. Ministry strategies must be developed with a readiness to adapt, a willingness to be spontaneous, according to the spiritual reality of the situation. There might be immediate fruit, but there also might need to be a long and patient wait. Spiritual sowing and reaping can happen in a moment's conversation as with the Samaritan woman or over months or years like with Nicodemus, or even over generations among hard soiled peoples. There might be along wait for the fruit, a lot of sowing before there comes reaping.

The effect on the Samaritan villagers is immediate. Let's read that again. This is verses 39-42.

Effect on the Samaritan villagers

³⁹ From that city many of the Samaritans believed in Him because of the word of the woman who testified, "He told me all the things that I *have* done." ⁴⁰ So when the Samaritans came to Jesus, they were asking Him to stay with them; and He stayed there two days. ⁴¹ Many more believed because of His word; ⁴² and they were saying to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves and know that this One is indeed the Savior of the world."

Verse 39 is an incredible statement to me, that many Samaritans believed, "because of the word of the woman." In light of how impossible it seems for some people to accept Jesus Christ, how can it be that simply on the testimony of this of this one, discredited woman during an afternoon's conversation, "Many Samaritans believed in [Jesus]."

Why did they believe? What did they believe? How much did they really understand?

We can't know the facts of their internal state. John does point out a transition in their faith. Many believed something based on the testimony of the woman, and after two days under the teaching of Jesus they said to her, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves and know that this One is indeed the Savior of the world."

There is a point there about the nature of faith and a point about the nature of Jesus. So, concerning faith, the Samaritans were reinforced in their belief by the word of Jesus. We could wonder whether they had true faith from the testimony of the Samaritan woman. For example, maybe they believed she had truly met the Messiah, expected by Samaritans, but had not yet understood enough to believe in Jesus as their Savior until they heard him teach. The initial belief may not have been saving faith, but a step towards true belief.

John does not make that clarification. So another option would be that some of these Samaritans had their hearts opened by the Spirit of God even through the very limited testimony of the Samaritan woman, and then when they heard more from Jesus himself, his word found a home in hearts and minds already opened to see. I can see either option as being valid.

And this is always a question in evangelistic ministry. It is possible for an initial claim of belief, an initial prayer to receive Christ, to be a move in the right direction, though not yet a true yielding to Jesus. It is also possible for faith to come in a moment and then be confirmed and strengthened later by the Word of God.

We do expect true faith to understand and submit to Jesus according to his own self-revelation. Content of faith regarding the nature of Jesus is evident here among the Samaritans who have believed. They don't just believe anything. They believe something specific. John tells us they acknowledged Jesus as the Savior of the World.

That is the first time we have heard that title in this Gospel. And it is very appropriate for this occasion. Nathanael calls Jesus "King of Israel" in chapter 1. He is. And he is more. He is also Savior of the World. He did not just come for Israel. He came for everyone, including these non-Jewish Samaritans.

Isaiah prophesied in Isaiah 49:6,

It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved dones of Israel; I will also make You a light of the nations so that My salvation may reach to the end of the earth.

Reference to the world in John typically distinguishes between Jesus as the one who has come from heaven and the world that which he has entered into. The world is the present state of human experience. And it is usually resistant to Jesus. There are a few times when world is used in this sense of scope, as in all people in the world. This is the sense in 1:29 when John the Baptist cried out, "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." Jesus makes atonement for all the people of the

whole world. Also, God's motive declared in 3:16 applies not just to Israel but to all people, "For God so love the world, that he gave his only begotten Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life." And so also here, Jesus reveals to the Samaritans that he has not come only to provide salvation for Israel but to provide salvation for all peoples of the world.

Conclusion

John has used this encounter with the Samaritans to teach us some important truths about the nature of faith in Jesus. Let me sum up some of the key ideas John is showing us.

- 1. First, saving faith is available to all people regardless of racial, cultural, or social differences, regardless of religion or class, moral standing or education. Jesus is Savoir of the World and all people have the potential ability to believe in him and experience eternal life.
- 2. Second, saving faith is a spiritual reality that can happen in the life of a person in a single moment.
- 3. Third, there are marks of saving faith that help us recognize when a person truly believes. As Jesus told Nicodemus, the work of the Holy Spirit to bring about new birth in the heart is unseen, like the wind. Even so, there are marks in a person's life that suggest that the person has come alive internally to God. Two marks of faith are described in this passage.
 - a. Mark number one is responsiveness to the word of God.

True belief wants to hear the word of God. The Samaritans implored Jesus to stay with them and teach them. Jesus did. And they responded positively to his teaching. They received Jesus' own self-witness.

We will see further examples in this Gospel both of people who turn away when Jesus reveals more truth about himself and people who respond when he reveals more truth about himself. The desire to hear more and the acceptance of what is heard is a mark of true faith, of eyes that see and a heart that receives. Resistance or rejection of Jesus' own self-witness suggests that the original belief of that person was not true belief, but a belief based on what the person wanted Jesus to be. That kind of belief wants to define Jesus, does not want to be defined by Jesus, and does not want Jesus to make demands on their behavior. That kind of belief becomes frustrated when Jesus turns out to be something different or something more than what the person first bargained for.

This aspect of true faith, that there is something in the person who believes that desires the word of God, motivates me to invite people to get into the Word, whether they are still seeking God or whether they have proclaimed faith in Jesus, the way to confirm that faith and grow in Christ is to interact with the Scripture, just as the Samaritans interact with Jesus' teaching. We all start out with fuzzy theology and questionable behavior. But are we open to the instruction from the Lord? Is our heart drawn to the truths of his Word? The Word of God affirms something real going on in our hearts and enables us to think rightly about God, about ourselves, about the world. The word is a spiritual sword that pierces into our hearts. It is a surgeon's tool in the hand of the healer to transform us. And if we truly believe, something in us will draw us to God's word.

b. Mark number two of true faith is a desire to tell other people about Jesus.

True belief wants to testify to that which has been believed and experienced.

John has been making this emphasis. John the Baptist witnessed and pointed others to Jesus. The small group of first disciples in chapter one went out to share their discovery and bring others to Jesus, Andrew brought Peter, Phillip brought Nathanael. Here the first response of the Samaritan woman is to leave her water jar and run off to the village to share the good news she had just learned about Jesus.

The text does not tell us her inner thoughts after Jesus said to her, "I am, I who am speaking to you." Instead, it describes for us the fruit of her faith as a desire to witness.

The gospel conversation Jesus had with this one woman made an effect on her, an effect on the disciples, and an effect on the whole village. And that effect challenges us to live in the present with our spiritual eyes open to the people we come in contact with. These three things are eternal: God, His Word, and people.

We easily get caught up in the pressing needs and desires of everyday life, just like the disciples did. It is not as though they were never spiritually aware. Several of them had followed John the Baptist. They were early witnesses for Jesus. But here at this moment they lost sight of the realness of eternity in the heat of the day after a long morning's walk stopped here at some out of the way Samaritan village at lunch time. And we understand that. We understand what that feels like, and we understand that focus. We understand that they don't see the woman. We understand this, because we do this all the time. They don't really see her. They don't see her spiritual need and eternal soul. And we don't see the people around us. We don't see their spiritual need and their eternal soul, not when we are tired and hungry and somewhere we don't really want to be.

Jesus sees. He is not thrown off by his own real thirst. He remains aware of the even more real thirst of the woman. He sees the spiritual harvest because his eyes are open. He never stops thinking about God as he goes through his day. He processes everything according to his thoughts of God.

John brings his challenge to the disciples to us to us. He rewrites it for us. He is asking this, he is challenging us, "Are you looking? Do you believe that every single human being you will meet today is an eternal being of great worth to God? Would Jesus stop and talk to that person? Do you believe that they are thirsting? And do you believe that Jesus is the solution to their thirst? Do you accept from the example of this woman that anyone can be a witness for Jesus? If she can, you can. If we say yes to these things, if we accept the challenge, then let's keep our eyes open to the harvest field, and let's take opportunity and let's seek to create opportunity to share the good news, the good news that we have found the Christ, the Savior of the World!

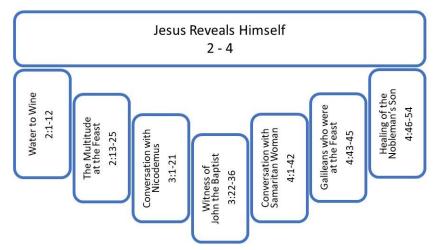
Reflection questions

- 1. Read John 4:27-42. What are some things that stand out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing?
- 2. What concerns do you have about sharing your faith in Jesus with someone else? What worries do you have or what holds you back?
- 3. How does the fact that God used this Samaritan woman as a fruitful witness addresses many of the barriers people feel against sharing their faith?
- 4. Does it surprise you that the disciples were so out of tune with what was happening around them spiritually with the woman and the villagers? Why or why not?
- 5. What main message do you take away from Jesus' teaching that the harvest is white?
- 6. John highlights the reality that there are those who believe without believing and receive without receiving. This will be a theme in the next lesson. How do we know when a person has that true belief that has brought about new birth? This passage suggests two marks of new birth seen in the Samaritans, a desire to share the good news about Jesus and a desire to learn the word of God.

Agree or disagree with the following statement: Everyone who has truly believed will desire to witness for Jesus and will desire to know the word of God.

7. How have these marks of new birth worked in your own experience?

Lesson 9: John 4:43-54 Galileans who were at the Feast and Healing the Nobleman's Son Introduction



With this lesson, we finish the first section of the Gospel of John, chapters 2-4, which I have been calling "Jesus Reveals Himself." This is the initial reveal. The Light came into the world. John said, "The Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten Son from the Father, full of grace and truth." The Word, the Light became flesh, he became the man Jesus. And we have seen him. He has revealed himself. John's report of this revelation begins with the first sign at a wedding. At the end of that story John wrote, "This beginning of his signs Jesus did in Cana of Galilee, and manifested his glory and his disciples believed in him." This is what John has been talking about. They beheld the glory of the Word of God who has come in the flesh as Jesus. They beheld his glory through the actions and teaching and miraculous signs that they saw him doing. Jesus made the glory of his nature known to them.

This Gospel is about the nature of Jesus and Jesus making his nature visible, knowable. We are ending this first section with a second sign also in Cana of Galilee. And this second sign draws in the second great theme of the Gospel, the nature of faith. The second theme considers the human response to the first theme, the nature of Jesus.

In this lesson, I am covering two smaller parts of the larger section. I believe John arranged the whole of chapters 2-4 chiastically with seven parts. The first sign and the second sign serve as the outer frame. The first inner frame consists of the Passover report back in chapter 2 and a report here concerning Galileans who were at that Passover. In this lesson, before we look at the last story, which is the second sign, we need to address these Galileans who were at the Passover. It is quite short, only three verses. Still, it is an independent section in John's arrangement. It fills out the chiasm, and it provides an important transition, moving us from Samaria to Galilee and foreshadowing what is going to happen in Galilee later in chapter 6.

So, we start with the Galileans at the feast and then move on to the second sign. We start with just three verses, John 4:43-45.

Galileans Who Were at the Feast (4:43-45)

⁴³ After the two days He went forth from there into Galilee. ⁴⁴ For Jesus Himself testified that a prophet has no honor in his own country. ⁴⁵ So when He came to Galilee, the Galileans received Him, having seen all the things that He did in Jerusalem at the feast; for they themselves also went to the feast.

Verse 45 makes the connection for us back to chapter 2, telling us that these Galileans received Jesus because they had "seen all the things that He did in Jerusalem at the feast; for they themselves also went to the feast." Like Jesus, many of the Galileans travelled to Jerusalem for the feast of Passover. It is not unusual that there were a lot of Galileans there. And some of them saw him clear out the temple,

and some of them saw him heal people. They were there when all the buzz about Jesus was going on. "Who is this new guy?" "He is one of us." "Well, who is he?" So, we start with this connection back to the Passover.

There is also here a strange dissonance in these three verses; something does not seem right. And did you catch it? Did you catch the problem in the text? John tells us that Jesus, "testified that a prophet has no honor in his own country." But then right after that John says, "the Galileans received him." Well, that does not sound like no honor. So, what's going on there? That does not seem to make sense. Why does Jesus point out that there is no honor and then the Galileans show him honor? A number of scholars propose solutions that somehow his own country, "there is no honor in his own country" is not supposed to be equated with Galilee. They are trying to remove the dissonance, to get rid of the tension. I think that is the completely wrong approach. I think John has inserted this tension here on purpose.

When we think back to chapter 2, we might remember that there was similar dissonance there, similar tension with a couple of things John said. He said, "during the feast, many believed in His name, beholding His signs which He was doing." That sounds like a report of positive belief in Jesus. That's in 2:23. Then, in the next two verses 2:24-25, we have this,

But Jesus, on His part, was not entrusting Himself to them, for He knew all men, and because He did not need anyone to bear witness concerning man for He Himself knew what was in a man.

Many trusted in Jesus, but Jesus did not entrust himself to the many. That's a similar tension to what we have here in chapter 4. We have what looks like a positive response to Jesus, but based on his own insight into the hearts of men and women, Jesus does not accept the response as positive. Later, after that incident at the Passover in chapter 2, we see Jesus entrusting himself a bit to Nicodemus, and then, we really see Jesus entrusting himself to the Samaritan villagers. But he did not entrust himself to all these who were said to believe at the Passover. So, we are led to wonder about their belief. What did they believe about Jesus?

And now we come to Galilee, and we are told that many of these Galileans who were there also at that Passover are now receiving Jesus. But as in chapter 2, we are not just told that they are receiving Jesus. We are told something else that Jesus knows, "a prophet has no honor in his own country." The tone of that comment that throws some doubt onto the reception that the Galileans are giving Jesus.

Just as we are to understand from chapter 2 the reality that it is possible to believe in Jesus without believing in Jesus, here also, I think we are to understand that it is possible to receive Jesus without receiving Jesus. There is an outward receiving. There is a welcoming of Jesus, maybe not so much in Nazareth, according to Mark 6:1-6, but that is not the emphasis of John here. John is indicating that there really were people in Galilee who positively received Jesus. And that sets up a problem for us because Jesus seems to still be holding back from them. Jesus is aware that the positive reception is not fully positive. Not that the people are not sincere. We do not have to imagine them as two-faced or hypocritical. It is actually a more challenging problem. It is possible to receive or believe in Jesus on one's own terms without receiving or believing in Jesus on his own terms.

Maybe his hometown of Nazareth had some problem with Jesus' rise to fame. But other Galileans seem quite proud that one of their own would go down to Jerusalem and clear out the temple and do miracles and become known. It is easy to imagine some regional pride. We have this when one of our own goes and makes a name on a bigger stage, as an entertainer or politician or humanitarian or athlete or whatever. But they become famous, and they become known, and they carry our name with them. He is a Galilean. He is a North Carolinian. He is a Dalmatian. He is whatever. And when he or she comes home, we receive them. But we receive them according to the image that we have of who they are to us. We receive them because, their honor brings us honor. There is a good chance we don't them at all in their true character. And we might not really want to. We want them to fulfill a public role that brings benefit or credibility or honor to us. We receive them on those terms.

I believe the Galileans had an image of Jesus as a political leader or as a prophet or as a miracle worker. That is what they received. They received this definition that they had given to Jesus. Whether they truly have received Jesus or are prepared to truly receive Jesus will be seen as Jesus reveals more of himself to them. How are they going to respond to that? What do you do with Jesus when Jesus starts to make you uncomfortable? When the boxes don't line up? When life is not working out as you expect it to? When God is not doing what he is supposed to do? When his definition of himself does not fit how you want him to be defined? Or when his definition of himself makes significant claim on you and on your stuff and on your identity?

When that starts to happen, will they treat Jesus like the Samaritans treated Jesus? Is the field white for harvest in Galilee as in Samaria? Will they invite Jesus to teach them about himself and will they receive that - not their image of who they want Jesus to be, but the revelation that Jesus gives - will they receive that?

That is the challenge for each of us. It's your challenge. Are you prepared to receive Jesus according to his own definition of himself or do you persist in defining Jesus according to who you want him to be? Are you willing to submit to his authority and his demands on you as a human being?

We are going to continue to get into this as we move through the Gospel. How it is with these Galileans will become more apparent as we go along. The very next story gives us reason for both positive and negative expectation. Let's move on to that story, *The Healing of the Nobleman's Son*, in John 4:46-54.

Healing of the Nobleman's Son (4:46-54)

- ⁴⁶ Therefore He came again to Cana of Galilee where He had made the water wine. And there was a royal official whose son was sick at Capernaum. ⁴⁷ When he heard that Jesus had come out of Judea into Galilee, he went to Him and was imploring *Him* to come down and heal his son; for he was at the point of death.
- ⁴⁸ So Jesus said to him, "Unless you *people* see signs and wonders, you *simply* will not believe."
- ⁴⁹ The royal official said to Him, "Sir, come down before my child dies."
- ⁵⁰ Jesus said to him, "Go; your son lives."

The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and started off. ⁵¹ As he was now going down, *his* slaves met him, saying that his son was living. ⁵² So he inquired of them the hour when he began to get better. Then they said to him, "Yesterday at the seventh hour the fever left him." ⁵³ So the father knew that *it was* at that hour in which Jesus said to him, "Your son lives"; and he himself believed and his whole household. ⁵⁴ This is again a second sign that Jesus performed when He had come out of Judea into Galilee.

Concerning the identity of the nobleman or royal official or however your Bible translates his title, D. A. Carson writes this,

The Greek word for royal official, basilikos, sometimes rendered 'nobleman,' probably refers to someone officially attached to the service of a basileus, a 'king' – here doubtless referring to Herod Antipas. He was tetrarch of Galilee from 4 BC to 39 AD and not properly a 'king' at all; but he was popularly considered one (Mk. 6:14). There is no evidence that this official was a Gentile.

So, that's the kind of man we are talking about. He is a wealthy, connected Jewish man from Capernaum in Galilee. And he has a son who is sick. He is ill to the point of death.

Two details of this story stand out to me as challenging and important for our interpretation.

"Unless you see signs"

The first is what Jesus says to the man after the man pleads with Jesus to come and heal his son. This is the translation in the ESV, "Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe." That translation leaves in place a deficiency in English. Since we use "you" as both a singular and a plural pronoun, you don't know which it is except by context. And here you would assume the "you" is singular since we are told Jesus is talking to the man. But like a lot of other languages, Greek has a singular "you" and a plural "you." And the one here is plural.

My Bible tries to help us see this in English by translating Jesus' response, "unless you people see signs and wonders..." We could also use the Southern plural, "Unless y'all see signs and wonders, y'all just won't believe." That's quite fair to the Greek. I apologize for that long explanation for all y'all whose language makes that obvious when you read it the first time. This is a particularly English problem.

So, the odd thing we need to pay attention to is that Jesus responds to the request of the nobleman with a challenge, and he is making that challenge in the plural to more than just the nobleman, if to the nobleman at all. It is an odd way to respond to the request for help. But maybe not so odd for Jesus, since he often responds in unexpected ways. He keeps you on your toes. He makes you think.

We can try to imagine what is going on. I imagine that the nobleman comes up to Jesus and begins to implore him publicly. As usual, there are people around Jesus. And I can imagine that Jesus' speaks not to the man — He is looking at the man. He is having a conversation with the man — but at this point he is really speaking to the crowd. He might even start to look around at the crowd. I think Jesus is challenging these Galileans that John has already mentioned. This challenge is connected back to that little, short section about Galileans who receive without really receiving.

Jesus says, "Unless y'all see signs and wonders you will not believe." The Galileans who received Jesus in verse 45 had seen the signs he did at the Passover in Jerusalem. Jesus knows that the many who believed and the many who received did so because of miracles. They believed something about Jesus', something about his ability to do miracles. They did not necessarily have insight into who Jesus truly is or have a willingness to submit to Jesus' own self-revelation. Signs faith does not necessarily translate to saving faith. They can be two different things.

Jesus is aware of the expectancy of these Galileans. They are hanging around to see him do something. He is also aware that they lack the spiritual insight or willingness to interpret the signs rightly. Isaiah had said long before that, "When God's salvation comes] then the eyes of the blind will be opened, and the ears of the deaf will be unstopped. Then the lame will leap like a deer, and the tongue of the dumb will shout for joy (Isaiah 35:5-6)." These are the types of signs that are happening around them. But it is not clear at all that people are making the right connections that the prophet would have them make. They saw the signs without seeing Jesus.

As far as we can tell, the Galileans received Jesus as a miracle worker. Jesus, knowing what was in their hearts used this opportunity with the nobleman to challenge those present who were waiting and watching for Jesus to do more miracles. He speaks past the nobleman to those gathered saying, "Unless y'all see signs and wonders you will not believe." And I think we are to take the tone of Jesus as going to suggest, "And even in seeing signs and wonders you will believe only what you want to believe."

Can true faith come from belief initiated by miraculous signs? Well, that brings up the second interesting detail we need to pay attention to. The text is going to say twice that the nobleman believed. And it seems his belief is strengthened through the fulfillment of a sign. If the Galileans teach us to be cautious about sign belief, what about the nobleman?

"He himself believed and his whole household"

On his way, the man's slaves met him to report that his son had recovered. Apparently, the trip to Capernaum was of some considerable distance to wherever Jesus was, since the healing happened at 1:00 in the afternoon the day before the nobleman met his servants. When the nobleman realized that the healing happened at the exact moment Jesus declared his son well that realization led to a second statement of belief. John had written that he had believed and started off, now John writes, "he himself believed and his whole household."

This second statement of belief is connected to the miracle, the sign. We are not told that the man believes more about the nature of God. Though it is easy to imagine he did. Who declares by his word and immediately heals a person miles and miles away? Who does that? What kind of man is this? Jesus is the kind of man who has the power to give life by his word. In the next chapter, John will show Jesus claiming that just like God the Father, God the Son "gives life to whom he wishes." That is what Jesus has just done

in the physical realm. He has given life to the nobleman's sick son, according to his own will to do so. This theme of life is going to continue to play out and it is going to increasingly be heightened. Jesus here gives life to a sick son. Later, he will give life to a dead man. Later still, he will give life to himself after his crucifixion. These miracles, so visible in the physical realm, affirm Jesus' claim over the spiritual realm. Jesus has the power to regenerate the soul, to give living water, to provide eternal life.

What did this man believe, he and his household? We do not know for sure. That is not a part of John's story. I think eternal life has truly come to them. I think that is the implication. I think John is setting up for us here a general lack of insight into the signs of Jesus compared to this less frequent case of true belief. I think they got it.

Sign faith

There is an ambiguity to faith based on an experience of miraculous events. When people have these experiences and that causes them to believe, you don't really know where they stand spiritually. For the disciples at the wedding feast, the first sign found eyes able to see in the miracle the glory of the one who performed the miracle. Jesus manifested his glory, and his disciples believed. Here with the nobleman it also seems that the sign has found hearts open to receiving truth about Jesus.

But a miracle is only an effective sign if the message of the sign is received. And reception is a spiritual act that includes understanding by the mind and a willingness of the heart. It seems this nobleman and other family members and servants in his household had their hearts open to receive the message of the sign.

We see through this man and through the disciples that miracles can be effective as signs, directing people to deeper truth about Jesus.

Yet, Jesus challenge of the Galileans who saw his signs in Jerusalem warns us not to put too much credit in a human response to miracles. People want things and are glad to receive those things. People are amazed at the miraculous and will give acclaim to people who perform them. People will make all sorts of promises when God shows up and acts on their behalf. But the hearts of men and women are blind to spiritual reality, unless God does a work in them. Miracles do not change the hearts of people. God changes the heart. God opens the eyes. Seeing a miracle is not the same thing as seeing Jesus.

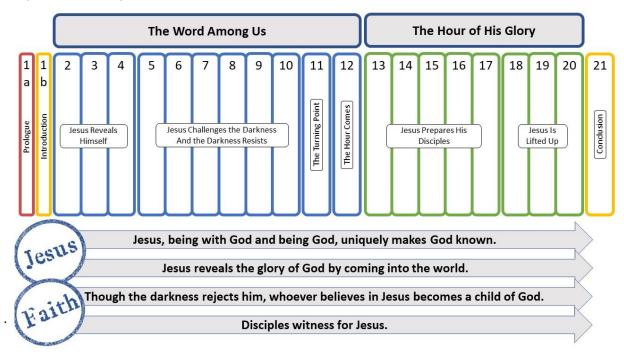
Nicodemus saw the signs and even concluded that Jesus was from God. But Nicodemus was not able to move on from there to receive more about Jesus. He could not see Jesus. Not yet, at least. The Samaritan woman experienced a sign from Jesus when he told her about her life. And she responded. The eyes of her heart were opened to see. The rest of the Samaritan villagers followed without seeing a sign. They believed based on her testimony, and then more importantly based on the Word of Jesus. They just believed in the word, not on the miracles.

The person who truly believes, is the one who sees and receives Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God, and continues to receive the Word of Jesus as Jesus further reveals himself. That continually reception, that willingness to learn from Jesus is a mark of true faith. It shows that the eyes of the heart have in fact been opened. As we press forward in our study John's Gospel, we are going to keep our eyes open for further examples of how Jesus' word and how his signs relate to the faith of men and women, to the response that he is given.

Conclusion

We conclude here the first section of the first part of the Gospel of John. This first part, chapters 2-12, presents Jesus as the Word Among Us, showing Jesus active in his public ministry. And this first section of this first part describes Jesus' initial self-witness as he reveals himself in Galilee, Judea, and even in Samaria. The section was bordered in the outer frames by two signs that speak to the nature of Jesus as the creator who brings life. The first inner frame raised the difficult problem of human faith, giving us two examples of people who seemed to believe without believing and receive without receiving. The second inner frame provided a contrast between Nicodemus and a Samaritan woman to introduce to us the reality of internal, spiritual regeneration which is necessary for eternal life. You must be born again. You must drink the water of eternal life which comes through faith in Jesus. We were also challenged in

that contrast in our thinking about who is most likely to come to true belief, well, certainly the moral priest. No, the Samaritan woman. Then the central section presented the testimony of a true disciple, John the Baptist, who understood Jesus, according to the self-revelation of Jesus and who understood himself in relationship to Jesus. His joy was not in his own glory, his own increase. His joy was in the increase of Jesus. As Jesus was glorified, John the Baptist's joy increased. That's the first section of the Gospel of John, chapters 2-4

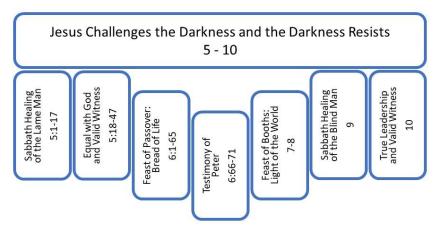


Moving on to the second major section in this first part of the gospel, chapters 9-10, John will continue to give witness to the nature of Jesus and the nature of faith. We are going to continue to see both themes. This next section will also be bounded by two of the seven signs, just like the first section. We will start with the third sign which is the healing of the lame man and end with the sixth sign which is the healing of the blind man. And in this section, as Jesus continues to shine as the light of the world, we are going to see increasing opposition against him. This is just as John indicated in his prologue, "the light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not comprehend it [or overcome it]...he came to his own and those who were his own did not receive him (1:5, 11)." But there is always hope in John. There is always hope in life. There is always hope in Jesus. And this is the hope, "But as many as did received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God (1:12)."

Reflection questions

- 1. Read John 4:43-54. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing?
- 2. Compare 4:43-45 with 2:23-25. Does the dissonance or tension stand out to you in each passage? Would you agree that these passages suggest that some are believing without believing or receiving without receiving? Or would you explain the tension in these two passages in a different way?
- 3. How does the depiction of Galileans in the story that follows in 4:46-54 add to your understanding of verses 43-45? (If you are reading in English, remember that the you in 4:48 is plural in the Greek, so addressed to a group even though Jesus is speaking to the nobleman.)
- 4. Agree or disagree: If we could experience more miracles of power in our Christian communities, more people would believe in Jesus.
- 5. How do the encounters various people had with Jesus in chapters 2-4 help you understand the role of signs?
- 6. Considering the Samaritans, the Galileans and the Nobleman, what do you think must happen for a person to come to faith in Jesus?

Lesson 10: John 5:1-30 Healing of the Lame Man and Equality with God Introduction



Do you consider Jesus offensive? There is a lot about Jesus that is not offensive. Jesus as the baby in the manger is not offensive, Jesus inviting children to himself, Jesus forgiving sinners who come to him, Jesus who did not come to judge but to save. There is a problem for us presented by Jesus. Jesus makes the true nature of God concrete and less abstract. To say that God is love is abstract. What do we really mean by that? To say that God is love, so he became a man and died on a cross gives concrete reality to the assertion that God is love. But it also gives you a choice. Now you are not faced with belief of an undefined abstract principle about God. "God is love." Everybody can claim to believe that if they want to. Jesus forces you to go further. Do you believe God is love inevitably ends with God becoming man and dying on a cross? Do you believe in that particular, concrete act of love? If you reject that act of love, you are rejecting the biblical vision of God. The physical presence of Jesus in the world forces us to make a choice about who God is. Is he the God of Jesus Christ? Or is he some other god? The two cannot be the same. There is no God who is not one with Jesus Christ. To reject God the Son is at the same time to reject God the Father. E

Are the claims of Jesus offensive to you? His claims were offensive to many in his day. After Jesus heals the lame man in John 5, he makes some claims about himself which draws anger from some who hear him. John records that response in 5:18.

¹⁸ For this reason therefore the Jews were seeking all the more to kill Him, because He not only was breaking the Sabbath, but also was calling God His own Father, making Himself equal with God.

We have not encountered much by way of opposition to Jesus in the first four chapters of John. That changes in this second major section of John, starting right here at the beginning with the first story. This section of text, chapters 5-10, is marked off by two Sabbath healings, which provide pretext for the Jewish rulers to go on the attack against Jesus whose ministry increasingly challenged their authority. The theme of opposition against Jesus indicated in the very first verses of chapter 1 is now being addressed by John and will carry through the rest of the Gospel. The light of the world has come, but the darkness does not comprehend the light and seeks to overcome the light.

I have titled this larger second section of John, "Jesus Challenges the Darkness and the Darkness Resists." And I have divided the chapters according to the parallelism that seems apparent in the text. We will have seven divisions, like our last section, but not purely chiastic. Almost chiastic, but not quite. The structure can be seen as chiastic if we only have five divisions of text. This structure would be bounded at beginning and end by the two Sabbath healings which are the healing of the lame man in chapter 5, and the healing of the blind man in chapters 9-10. These are also the third and sixth signs reported by John. After the healing of the lame man we have the Feast of Passover in chapter 6 paralleled with the Feast of Booths in chapters 7-8. I am recognizing the Testimony of Peter

in 6:66-71 as the center of the section. So, we have two signs, two feasts, and a central testimony. That's five divisions. But the two healings really divide into two divisions each. Both healings are followed by teaching from Jesus in response to opposition. After the healing of the lame man, we have Jesus asserting his equality with God and stating his witnesses. After the healing of the blind man, we have Jesus asserting true leadership and again stating witnesses. Dividing these two divisions gives us our seven divisions for the larger section. We have a Sabbath healing on one end, followed by the claims of Jesus, and a Sabbath healing on the other end, followed by claims of Jesus, moving in we have the dialogue that occurs at two feasts, Passover and then Booths. And in the center, we have the testimony of Peter.

Starting with this first Sabbath healing, we will consider closely the claims Jesus makes about himself. What has gotten the Jewish leaders so riled up? Why do they want to kill Jesus? Are their charges against him accurate? Do they really understand the claims of Jesus? We are going to see that they do understand what Jesus is saying. And that is precisely what makes them so mad. Jesus offends them.

We have three parts to the text in chapter 5: the sign, the claims, and the witnesses. Jesus' claims and explanation of witnesses are quite important and worth careful thought. So, we will address the sign and claims in this lesson and then hold off the witnesses until the next lesson.

We begin with the sign in John 5:1-17.

The Third Sign: Healing of the Lame Man (5:1-17)

¹ After these things there was a feast of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ² Now there is in Jerusalem by the sheep gate a pool, which is called in Hebrew Bethesda, having five porticoes. 3 In these lay a multitude of those who were sick, blind, lame, and withered, [waiting for the moving of the waters; 4 for an angel of the Lord went down at certain seasons into the pool and stirred up the water; whoever then first, after the stirring up of the water, stepped in was made well from whatever disease with which he was afflicted.] 5 A man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. ⁶ When Jesus saw him lying there, and knew that he had already been a long time in that condition, He said to him, "Do you wish to get well?" ⁷ The sick man answered Him, "Sir, I have no man to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up, but while I am coming, another steps down before me." 8 Jesus said to him, "Get up, pick up your pallet and walk." 9 Immediately the man became well, and picked up his pallet and began to walk. Now it was the Sabbath on that day. ¹⁰ So the Jews were saying to the man who was cured, "It is the Sabbath, and it is not permissible for you to carry your pallet." ¹¹ But he answered them, "He who made me well was the one who said to me, 'Pick up your pallet and walk.' " ¹² They asked him, "Who is the man who said to you, 'Pick up your pallet and walk'?" ¹³ But the man who was healed did not know who it was, for Jesus had slipped away while there was a crowd in that place. 14 Afterward Jesus found him in the temple and said to him, "Behold, you have become well; do not sin anymore, so that nothing worse happens to you." 15 The man went away, and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had made him well. 16 For this reason the Jews were persecuting Jesus, because He was doing these things on the Sabbath. 17 But He answered them, "My Father is working until now, and I Myself am working."

This is our third feast if we count the wedding feast. And I like to count the wedding feast because that gives us a total of seven feasts reported in John's Gospel. This is an unknown feast. Some think it should be read as "the feast," which is the way some Greek manuscripts have it. "The feast" would indicate the Passover. But we do not know for sure. So, we'll just leave it as an unknown feast.

Except for the wedding feast, which was in Cana, and the Passover in chapter 6 which was in Galilee, every other feast is a reason to find Jesus in Jerusalem. In this scene, Jesus is at a pool credited with healing qualities. It is not clear what the word sheep refers to in the Greek text. Most likely it is not the sheep pool, but the sheep gate. Nehemiah referred to a sheep gate in Jerusalem's wall. If this is

what sheep indicates here, then the pool is by a small gate on the north wall of Jerusalem. The name Bethesda means "house of outpouring."

The second half of verse 3 and all of verse 4 may or may not be in your Bible. The ESV has left it out. My NASB has marked it off with brackets. And the footnote explains that many manuscripts do not have this text. The part marked off is this,

[waiting for the moving of the waters; ⁴ for an angel of the Lord went down at certain seasons into the pool and stirred up the water; whoever then first, after the stirring up of the water, stepped in was made well from whatever disease with which he was afflicted.]

Some scholars believe this part of the text did not appear in a number of manuscripts because it was added later to explain the tradition behind the healing power of the disturbed waters. Whether this text is original or not, I think we are supposed to take the belief that the waters had healing power as folk religion. John reports what was believed about the pool, but neither Jesus nor John affirms the truthfulness of the belief. Every religion has various kinds of healing myths. Christians in many different parts of the world have developed their own extra-biblical beliefs and practices. When you are suffering, maybe even dying, and you have no hope for healing through conventional means, the motive to try unconventional means can understandably become quite strong. It is not surprising to find the sick of Jerusalem gathered by a pool with a healing myth and supposed healing properties.

Jesus asked the man a rhetorical question, "Do you wish to get well?" The question draws out a response. The man explains that the problem is not with his wishing, and apparently not with the power of the pool, but simply because he cannot get into the pool in time.

Jesus has no limitations on his healing power. He simply says, "Arise, take up your pallet, and walk." Sometimes God requires the human element of faith to be present for healing to take place. If a person will not believe in Jesus, the person will not receive the blessing of healing. This is not one of those times. Jesus is only limited by human faith when he chooses to be limited by human faith. Here he chooses to act in power regardless of what the lame man knows or believes. The result: the man immediately becomes well, takes up his pallet, and begins to walk.

You have to imagine that someone noticed what just happened. The man had been lame for 38 years. And he had been lying here a long time. Now he just gets up and walks. Somebody must have noticed. The surprising part of the story is what some religious people noticed. Their first instinct is to judge the problem with the healing. That may have been the essence of their religion. Honor comes from the ability to appear in complete compliance with the law. Shame belongs to those who fail to keep the law. This man deserves shame because he has failed to keep the Sabbath rules.

He is walking around with his pallet. That is his failure. It is not a prohibition of Old Testament law. The Old Testament prohibition is broad with room for interpretation. Jews are not to work on the Sabbath. It is not at all clear at all that a lame man who has just been healed and who picks up his mat is doing the kind of work prohibited by the law. But the elders of Israel had added rules upon rules to make sure everyone knew exactly what is defined as work and what is not defined as work. Picking up your pallet and walking with it apparently falls into the culturally defined category of work.

And we might be surprised that these Jewish watchdogs jump on the lame man for working on the Sabbath instead of rejoicing that he was healed on the Sabbath. But let's assume that these religious policemen did not know the lame man, and they did not see him healed. They just saw a man walking under the colonnade, openly breaking a known Sabbath rule. So, we get why they accused the man. But then the man responded, "He who made me well was the one who said to me, 'Take up your pallet and walk.'"

I can't tell if the man was embarrassed by being called out. He must be pretty excited that after 38 years he is walking. If shamed, he may have shifted blame to Jesus. But maybe he is just responding with enthusiasm, "The man who made me well, told me." I assume his emphasis was on "the man who made me well." This is where we have to stop being gracious to the religious men who have

stopped him. Up to this point, we get that they are focused on the flagrant Sabbath breaking. He is going against a social convention. It is really obvious. Somebody needs to put a stop to this. But didn't they hear what the man just said. He said, "the man who healed me."

But they are so fixated on the minor infraction of carrying a pallet on the Sabbath, it does not even seem to register in their brains that this man is claiming to be healed. They should have paused and asked, "What do you mean the man who healed you? Healed you from what?" Instead, they say, "Who told you to pick up your mat?" Like they didn't even hear he just said he was healed. They are stuck in their religious rut, intent on finding someone to blame for this blatant Sabbath breaking. They demand to know, "Who said to you to pick up your mat?" not because they want to know about the healing, but because they have a grievance.

This man did not even know who healed him. That's how well he knew Jesus when he was healed. He did not know him at all. But Jesus knows the man. And Jesus comes to him. Three things stand out to me here. First, Jesus finds him. Jesus knew what he was doing when he told the man to pick up his pallet and walk. He knew that the man would experience antagonism for the act. He also knew this would be good for the man. Jesus sometimes puts us in tough situations. He is the shepherd. We obey his lead. But he did not abandon the man. Jesus allowed the man to face opposition and then came to him. Jesus sought him out to guide him in the right way forward.

Second, I find it interesting where Jesus found the man. Where did the man go after being healed? He did not go home. He did not go to the market. He went to the temple. I am not sure what to make of that, but it seems like a positive mark in the man's favor. He may have gone there to report to the priests so that he could go through ceremonial cleansing, or he may have gone to the temple to give thanks to God.

Third, I find it interesting what Jesus said to him, "Behold, you have become well; do not sin anymore, so that nothing worse happens to you." We might question here whether the man's lameness was due to his sin. That question will be addressed in the parallel account in chapter 9. Without reading too much into this statement, I see Jesus pointing the man from physical sickness and healing to the more important reality of spiritual sickness and healing. Jesus is willing to heal physically. But that is not the most pressing need of any person. True, eternal life comes by addressing the more fundamental problem of human sin. Jesus is pointing the man toward what is more essential so that his physical healing would not be an end goal but would instead be a turning point.

Jesus' command not to sin brings up again the ethical dimension of faith. We encountered this in the testimony of John the Baptist when he made a similar connection. That was in 3:36. He said, "He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him." John makes a connection between faith and obedience. Jesus is directing this healed man towards obedience. The connection between moral obedience and faith is just hinted at in this early chapters of John. John keeps his focus on the nature of Jesus and the nature of faith, John does not provide us with any of the moral teaching that we encounter throughout the other Gospels. We don't get the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of John. We don't get, "Be salt. Be light." And what that should look like. John's focus is on the nature of Jesus and the nature of faith. In John, we are going to have to wait for development of obedience in context with Jesus' final preparation of his disciples. So, it is going to come in John. But that is going to be in chapters 13-17. Prior to that the emphasis is on faith alone.

The main purpose of the story we have here seems to be to highlight the antagonism against Jesus that comes from men determined not to see the message of the healing sign. After the first sign, the disciples believed. After the second sign, the nobleman and his household believed. After this sign, no one is said to believe.

A miracle of great power has been performed. Isaiah specifically prophesied that the Messiah would heal the lame. And yet, there is no investigation into the miracle at all. No one is even trying to read the sign. They have already made their mind up about Jesus. They just want to shut him down. It is not clear whether the lame man is complicit in this. He does go to tell Jewish leaders that he has identified Jesus. We do not know if there was malice in that action. Was the man acting against Jesus? Or was he witnessing to Jesus? The text leaves me wondering. I am not sure.

The intent of the leaders is not in doubt. Verse 16 tells us, "For this reason the Jews were persecuting Jesus, because He was doing these things on the Sabbath." Jesus knew quite well what he was doing when he told the man, "take up your pallet." That did not need to be part of the healing command. But it was. Jesus knew he was commanding the man to break the Sabbath rules. And I say rules because I do not believe Jesus was commanding the man to break the Sabbath law of Moses, but he was willing to break the additional tradition of the Jewish elders. Jesus is not at all bound by our favorite religious traditions or rules. Having the man break those rules set up a faith challenge for religious people. Would the power of the miracle move them to question their own tradition and assumptions or were they so confident in the rightness of their perspective that they would disregard any possible sign communicated through the miracle?

The Jewish leaders were not ready at all to reconsider their own position. Jesus had poked a hornet's nest. And in doing so on the Sabbath, he gave the Jewish leaders ammunition for accusation. And when they did come to charge Jesus, he gave them even more. Jesus challenges the darkness in their hearts when he answers their charge with these words, "My Father is working until now, and I Myself am working." This is how the darkness responds.

¹⁸ For this reason therefore the Jews were seeking all the more to kill Him, because He not only was breaking the Sabbath, but also was calling God His own Father, making Himself equal with God.

That's the charge of the Jews. He is making himself equal with God. Jesus claims to be doing the work of the Father as justification for breaking their Sabbath rules. Jesus claims to be over the Sabbath and he places himself on the level of God. At least, that's how the Jews heard it.

Those who deny that Jesus elevated himself to the level of God, like Jehovah's Witnesses for example, they would read this as though the Jews misunderstood what Jesus really meant. They would say that when Jesus says he is doing what the Father does, he is modeling what we should all strive to do. Jesus taught us to pray, "Your will be done on earth as in heaven." We should all try to follow the will of God; all try to do to the works the Father is doing. They would argue that the Jews have misunderstood what Jesus was saying.

And that is not a bad argument because the Jews often and regularly misunderstand what Jesus is saying. So, they would say that Jesus is not saying he is the same as God. Jesus is just promoting true relationship with God. Jesus is the model. We can be like Jesus. We do the works of God and that does not make us equal to God. The argument is that the Jews just misunderstood what Jesus was saying.

When we consider the Jews misunderstood, it is not a bad argument. Our point about the Jewish leaders is that they are in the dark. They do not see. They do not understand Jesus. So, it is quite possible that they have misunderstood Jesus on this point. We cannot automatically take their declaration about Jesus to be accurate. So, how do we know what Jesus was saying?

Well, fortunately for us, in this case, all we have to do is read on and let Jesus tell us whether or not he is claiming equality with God. The claims of Jesus come in the middle section of chapter 5, verses 19-30. So, we are going to move on to those claims now. This is an incredibly important section of Scripture. It often gets passed over. Let's read the text, 19-30,

Claims of Equality with God (5:19-30)

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- ¹⁹ Therefore Jesus answered and was saying to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, **the Son can do nothing of Himself**, unless *it is* something He sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, these things the Son also does in like manner.
- B For the Father loves the Son, and shows Him all things that He Himself is doing; and the Father will show Him greater works than these, so that you will marvel.
 - ²¹ For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them **life**, even so the Son also gives **life** to whom He wishes. ²² For not even the Father **judges** anyone, but He has given all **judgment** to the Son, ²³ so that all will honor the Son even as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent Him.
 - ²⁴ **Truly, truly,** I say to you, he who **hears** My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal **life**, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into **life**.
 - ²⁵ Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live.
- For just as the Father has life in Himself, even so He gave to the Son also to
 have life in Himself; ²⁷ and He gave Him authority to execute judgment, because He is the Son of Man.
- Do not marvel at this; for an hour is coming, in which all who are in the tombs will hear His voice, ²⁹ and will come forth; those who did the good *deeds* to a resurrection of life, those who committed the evil *deeds* to a resurrection of judgment.
- A' l can do nothing on My own initiative. As I hear, I judge; and My judgment is just, because I do not seek My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me."

In our last chapter, with the Samaritan woman, the Samaritan villagers, the Galileans and the Nobleman, we focused on the second great theme of John, the nature of faith. Here, we return to the first great theme of John, the nature of Jesus. Who does Jesus claim to be? What is his own revelation about himself?

What stood out to you when we read through the passage? Were there any phrases that just jumped out? I have found this text hard to get a hold of mentally when I read it straight through. I know there are a lot of important truths here. But it is difficult to get it organized in my head. And so, as I read it through it is kind of like one thing pushes out the other. There is a lot of repetition in the text. And my mind struggles to put it all together. The repetition is the key to the organization of the text. And understanding the organization of the text highlights the key points of emphasis. And it should not be a surprise to us by now that the repetition in the text might indicate a chiastic structure. And it does.

I'll give you an overview of the pattern and then address the parallel pairs together. If you would like a visual of this pattern, check out the text in the transcript for this lesson at observetheword.com.

The passage begins and ends with Jesus telling us, "the Son can do nothing on his own initiative." That is one of the more apparent repetitions. That is in verse 19, and it is in verse 30. So, that is our A and A', beginning and end. In verse 20, Jesus says, "You will marvel." Then in verses 28-29 he says, "Do not marvel." That is our B and B'. In verses 21-23, Jesus tells us God has given him power over life and authority to judge. He repeats both claims in 26-27. That is C and C'. Then in the center of the passage, both verse 24 and 25 begin with "Truly, truly," and both declare that the one who hears has life. That is D and D'.

Let's consider each pair together starting with A and A'. These are the first and last verses.

A and A' Separate and Submissive

This is verse 19.

¹⁹ Therefore Jesus answered and was saying to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, **the Son can do nothing of Himself**, unless *it is* something He sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, these things the Son also does in like manner.

And verse 30.

³⁰ "I can do nothing on My own initiative. As I hear, I judge; and My judgment is just, because I do not seek My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me.

Ok. So, you probably caught the phrases this time that stand out. These are "the Son can do nothing of Himself" and "I can do nothing of My own initiative." In the first verse, Jesus links this to what He sees the Father doing. Jesus must act in harmony with what he sees. In the second verse, Jesus connects his limitation to the will of the Father. Jesus will not act based on his own will but only in harmony with the will of the Father. These statements emphasize the separateness or uniqueness of Father and Son and also the submission of the Son. This is the reality expressed in the phrase from John 1:1, "the Word was with God." The Father and the Son are two different persons acting in complete harmony. They are able to be with each other because they are separate. In the separate unique roles of Father and Son, Jesus declares his own submission to the Father. Harmony is achieved as the Son acts according to what he sees in the Father and according to what the Father wills.

We have to be very careful in how we interpret this because we do not want to lessen the Son's equality with the Father. But, at the same time, we do not want to eliminate the distinctiveness of the Son from the Father. I think we can say that Jesus could act on his own apart from the Father in a theoretical sense. Jesus has a will and he can act. But in actual practice, the Son is in such harmony and submission to the will of the Father that the Son will never, in fact, act contrary to the Father. The perfect consistency of the Son's own character constrains him to always choose to act out of love and submission to the Father, such that, he will never act on his own initiative independently from God the Father. He can do nothing on his own by the constraint of his own character. The character of the Son is such that he must always choose to do right in relationship with God the Father. According to his own nature "the Son can do nothing of Himself."

I like very much how Jesus bookends this speech. He is getting ready to claim great power and authority on the level of equality with God. But on either side of those claims, at our beginning and our end, Jesus asserts both the uniqueness of personality between Father and Son and also his submission as Son to the Father. The tension created by the outer frame and the center of the passage is the tension of the trinity. The Word is both with God, that is distinct from God, and the Word is God, that is equal to God.

Moving on to B and B', Jesus creates a contrast between marveling and not marveling.

B and B' Marvel at the works and accept the claims.

This is verse 20.

²⁰ "For the Father loves the Son, and shows Him all things that He Himself is doing; and *the Father* will show Him greater works than these, so that you will marvel.

And then verses 28-29.

²⁸ "Do not marvel at this; for an hour is coming, in which all who are in the tombs will hear His voice, ²⁹ and will come forth; those who did the good *deeds* to a resurrection of life, those who committed the evil *deeds* to a resurrection of judgment.

B, which is verse 20, serves as a transition from the idea of separateness and submission in A to the idea of equality in C whereas B', which is 28-29, transitions from equality in C' back to separateness and submission in A'

Verse 20 emphasizes that because of the love of the Father, the Son sees all things that the Father sees. Jesus has said he does the works of the Father and here he asserts that he is aware of all the works of the Father, even greater works not yet done. He is aware because the Father, motivated by love, holds nothing back from the Son. These greater works to come are going to make us marvel. If you have not marveled yet at the miracles of Jesus, just you wait.

But after Jesus says that. After he tells us, "The works should make you marvel," he is going to go on in the center of this passage to make claims, amazing claims, about himself. And then he is going to come back in verses 28-29 to tell us the opposite, "Do not marvel." Having marveled at the greatness of his works, do not marvel at his claims. Jesus is playing on two different aspects of marvel here. The first aspect of marveling is simply to stand in awe and wonder at the great things we see that are beyond physics, it is impossible, but Jesus is doing them. We marvel.

The second aspect includes a refusal to accept these things that have shocked us. This marveling is an inability or unwillingness to accept the claims that Jesus has made about himself. And Jesus says, "Don't do that." If you have marveled at the healing of the lame man or the feeding of five thousand or the walking on water or even what's to come, the raising of the dead, and my own resurrection from the grave, when that has happened, and you marvel at these things, as you should, do not marvel at my claims. The works prove the claims. And if I claim the authority to have life and I prove it by taking my own life up again, then do not remain resistant, marveling in unbelief at the claims proven by the works. That is the play of words that I believe is going on with the marveling.

If we continue to marvel at the miraculous works of Jesus, but we suspect his claims, we refuse to admit that he is indeed God, then we are left unable to account for his power, but worse than that, we are excluded from relationship with him. The sign does not work. It does not actually take us into faith in Jesus. Once you have marveled, accept the witness of the works and marvel no longer. The Word is among you. Behold his glory and believe.

We also get in verse 29 another connection between righteous behavior and belief. Jesus has insisted that eternal life comes by faith in him and here he indicates that faith in him is in line with a resurrection of life to those who did good and a resurrection of judgment to those who do evil. But as I have already said, we are going to have to wait for chapters 13-17 for John to explain how he understands the connection that exists between eternal life that comes through faith alone and the requirement of righteous living. So, how do faith and obedience work together. We are going to have to wait for that. But it is here.

We are now ready to hear the claims of Jesus in C and C'.

C and C' Power to Give Life and Authority to Judge

This is 21-23. These are the claims.

²¹ "For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them **life**, even so the Son also gives **life** to whom He wishes. ²² "For not even the Father **judges** anyone, but He has given all **judgment** to the Son, ²³ so that all will honor the Son even as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent Him.

And then 26-27.

²⁶ "For just as the Father has **life** in Himself, even so He gave to the Son also to have **life** in Himself; ²⁷ and He gave Him authority to execute **judgment**, because He is *the* Son of Man.

If we wondered whether Jesus' claim about doing the works of the Father is really a claim to equality with God or if we wonder when Jesus talks about being submissive to God and not being able to do anything on his own, whether he is separate from God, these verses strongly swing us back the other way to recognize that Jesus is claiming nothing less than equality with the Father. And if A and A' align better with "the Word was with God," the distinctiveness, C and C' align better with "the Word was God," equal, one.

C' restates the two assertions of C. First, Jesus asserts that his power to give life is equal to that of the Father. "For just as the Father...even so the Son." Second, Jesus claims that all judgment has been given into his hands. This is the other side of the truth stated back in John 3:17 where we were told "God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world." Well, that is because the Son already holds all humanity under judgment with the Father. The world did not need to be judged. The world needed to be saved.

Power to give life and the authority to judge all men, those are not works that humans do in the attempt to model their lives after God. Those are works appropriate to God alone. What human has the right to give anyone life? Or can give himself life? What human truly has the right to judge other men, much less all 7 billion men. These are claims of equality with God.

Jesus connects himself so closely to God that he is able to say in verse 23, "all will honor the Son even as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent Him."

I began this lesson with the strong assertion that Jesus makes the nature of God more concrete and to reject Jesus is to reject God. I base that statement on claims Jesus makes throughout this Gospel such as the one we have just read in verse 23, "all will honor the Son even as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent Him."

When I hear someone suggest that the God of Jews, Muslims and Christians is the same God, this is the passage I think of first. There are other places we could go to. We should show how the Jewish and Muslim visions of God make too little of human sin, suggesting that human beings can somehow be pleasing to God through religious ritual and moral behavior. We should also show how the Jewish and Muslim visions of God, making too little of human sin, also misunderstand the immensity of God's mercy and grace. And I would make those arguments to anyone who suggests that Jews, Muslims and Christians worship the same God, protesting that, "No, really the character of the God of the Bible is very different from the character of the God presented by Jews or the God presented by Muslims." But before I made those arguments, I would simply come to this passage.

"He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father." Anyone who claims to believe in God and yet, dishonors the Son, does not truly believe in God, at least not in the God of Jesus Christ. They may believe in a god that has some of the same characteristics as the biblical God. But they do not know the true God.

The divine qualities of justice and love find full expression in Jesus. If a person truly knows God the Father, then even if that person had not known God the Son, when they learn about the Son, they will see the Father in him and receive him. If they do not see the Father in the Son, then they did not really know the Father after all.

There are attributes of God that Jewish, Muslim and Christian theology all agree on. Those theological beliefs can provide common ground that we can use as a bridge to discuss what we believe about who God is. We agree on some things. But just because our understanding of a person includes some important similarities, that we agree about some attributes, that does not mean that any one of us truly knows the person about whom we speak. If a person hears the truth about Jesus and determines that Jesus cannot be God, then that person has decided not to believe to know God as he has revealed himself. God has revealed himself in Jesus. To reject Jesus is to reject God. If you reject Jesus, you cannot know God. You cannot go further. In rejecting Jesus, you reject the essential nature of the God of the Bible of the Father. And you choose to accept a different version of God, one that is inspired by human thought and human philosophy.

When the eyes of the human heart are opened, when a person begins to see with saving faith, that person sees God the Father in Jesus and marvels. They say, "Now I see. Now I understand. This is truly who God is!" That is the claim of Jesus. And it is in full agreement with what he is going to tell Philip later in chapter 14.

Having claimed the power to give life and the authority to judge, Jesus goes on to make the audacious claim that we find in D and D', this is verses 24-25.

D and D' Eternal Life to all Who Hear and Believe

²⁴ "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life.

And again,

²⁵ "Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live.

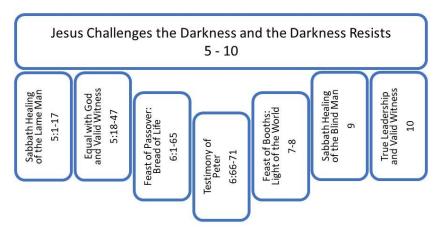
Both verses start with "Truly, I say to you" and both use the parallel terms hear and live. Verse 24 adds the word believe. In this context hearing is more than sound waves vibrating in the ear. Hearing in this sense includes both understanding and submission to that understanding. A child knows what their mom means when she says, "Look at me. Did you hear what I said? Did you hear me?" Submission to the hearing is expected. Hearing, understanding, receiving, truly believing in Jesus Christ leads to eternal life. The one who has power to give life and the one who has authority to judge says that if you believe in him then you have eternal life and do not come into judgment. These are the claims of Jesus.

Reflection questions

- 1. Read the story of the healing of the lame man in John 5:1-18. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What are some questions that come to mind?
- 2. How would you describe the difference between the healing the man hopes for from the pool and the healing the man receives from Jesus?
- 3. How do you explain the animosity of the Jews against Jesus that seems to irrationally ignore the possibility of a miraculous sign?
- 4. Read the speech of Jesus in John 5:19-30. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What are some questions that come to mind?
- 5. How do you understand the proclamation by Jesus that the Son can do nothing apart from the Father? Why does Jesus say that in this context? What does he mean by that?
- 6. Do you agree or disagree that Jesus claims here equality with God? Why or why not?
- 7. How you would you respond to the claim that Muslims, Jews, and Christians worship the same God? Would you agree or disagree with that statement? Why or why not?

⁸ Philip said to Him, "Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us." ⁹ Jesus said to him, "Have I been so long with you, and *yet* you have not come to know Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; how *can* you say, 'Show us the Father'?"

Lesson 11: John 5:31-47 Equality with God and Valid Witness Introduction



Does Jesus claim to be God? That's a trickier question than it may sound? Jesus makes statements that could be taken in different ways. Jesus may refer to himself in third person as Son of God, but then he also makes the argument that all Jews are in a sense sons of God. He calls himself Son of Man, but does he mean Son of Man like Daniel 7 Son of Man seated on a throne or the more frequent Ezekiel Son of Man, meaning simply a human being. He says he is one with the Father, but also that we are one with each other.

So, when he makes the claim John 5:17, "My Father is working until now, and I Myself am working," we might be excused for not jumping to the same conclusion as those in his audience who angrily charge Jesus of "making himself equal with God."

But then, what claims does Jesus make of himself? Does he deflect that accusation? No, he does not. In the case of John chapter 5, Jesus does not hold back. He goes on to make these claims.

- ²¹ Just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son also gives life to whom He wishes.
- ²² "For not even the Father judges anyone, but He has given all judgment to the Son,
- ²³...He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent Him.
- ²⁴...he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life...
- ²⁵...an hour is coming and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live.
- ²⁶ "For just as the Father has life in Himself, even so He gave to the Son also to have life in Himself;
- ²⁷ and [the Father] gave [the Son] authority to execute judgment, because He is *the* Son of Man.

These are the claims we considered in our last lesson. John records them in John 5:19-30. What kind of man makes claims like these? Who makes the claim to rightly judge every other human being? Who makes the claim to be able to give eternal life to whomever he wishes? Who makes the claim to have life in himself the way that God has life in himself?

C. S. Lewis famously argued that these are the claims of either a lunatic who really believes he can give life to other people or a fraud, a liar, who is manipulating people for his own agenda, or, if in fact the claims hold true, he is the Lord.

This is how Lewis communicated the argument in his book *Mere Christianity*.

I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about [Jesus]: I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his claim to be God. That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God, but let us not come with any patronising nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to. . . . Now it seems to me obvious that He was neither a lunatic nor a fiend: and consequently, however strange or terrifying or unlikely it may seem, I have to accept the view that He was and is God (*Mere Christianity*, 55-56).

A valid objection to the argument has been proposed. There is a fourth option. A person might claim that Jesus is neither Lord, liar, or lunatic, but merely legend. He is literally too good to be true. If we cannot conceive of him as either liar or lunatic, we might conclude he is not real at all.

Lewis was aware of this fourth option and gave his opinion on it in a 1950 essay titled, "What are We to Make of Jesus?" Justin Taylor points this out in an article for the Gospel Coalition, commenting that Lewis draws on his expertise as a recognized Oxford literary scholar and critic, when Lewis writes,

Now, as a literary historian, I am perfectly convinced that whatever else the Gospels are they are not legends. I have read a great deal of legend and I am quite clear that they are not the same sort of thing. They are not artistic enough to be legends. From an imaginative point of view they are clumsy, they don't work up to things properly. Most of the life of Jesus is totally unknown to us, as is the life of anyone else who lived at that time, and no people building up a legend would allow that to be so. Apart from bits of the Platonic dialogues, there is no conversation that I know of in ancient literature like the Fourth Gospel. There is nothing, even in modern literature, until about a hundred years ago when the realistic novel came into existence.¹¹

Jewish leaders heard Jesus' claim to be doing the works of God on the Sabbath, and they rightly interpreted Jesus as making himself out as equal to God. Jesus has gone on to state claims about himself in very strong terms. He claims the power of life and the authority to judge. He claims to hold your destiny in his hands. Believe in him and you will have eternal life. Do not believe in him and you will be judged and perish.

This is the choice before each of us. Is Jesus only a legend? If not is he a lunatic? If not is he a liar? If not, he is Lord. And, if so, will I yield to him?

Jesus does not end without giving support to his claims. He goes on to call four witnesses to affirm his claims. He calls on the witness of John the Baptist, the witness of his works, the witness of the Father and the witness of Moses. This call of witnesses is recording in our text for this lesson John 5:31-47.

³¹ "If I *alone* testify about Myself, My testimony is not true. ³² "There is another who testifies of Me, and I know that the testimony which He gives about Me is true. ³³ "You have sent to John, and he has testified to the truth. ³⁴ "But the testimony which I receive is not from man, but I say

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¹¹ Justin Taylor, https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/is-c-s-lewiss-liar-lord-or-lunatic-argument-unsound/

these things so that you may be saved. ³⁵ "He was the lamp that was burning and was shining and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light. ³⁶ "But the testimony which I have is greater than *the testimony of* John; for the works which the Father has given Me to accomplish—the very works that I do—testify about Me, that the Father has sent Me. ³⁷ "And the Father who sent Me, He has testified of Me. You have neither heard His voice at any time nor seen His form. ³⁸ "You do not have His word abiding in you, for you do not believe Him whom He sent. ³⁹ "You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; it is these that testify about Me; ⁴⁰ and you are unwilling to come to Me so that you may have life. ⁴¹ "I do not receive glory from men; ⁴² but I know you, that you do not have the love of God in yourselves. ⁴³ "I have come in My Father's name, and you do not receive Me; if another comes in his own name, you will receive him. ⁴⁴ "How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another and you do not seek the glory that is from the *one and* only God? ⁴⁵ "Do not think that I will accuse you before the Father; the one who accuses you is Moses, in whom you have set your hope. ⁴⁶ "For if you believed Moses, you would believe Me, for he wrote about Me. ⁴⁷ "But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe My words?"

The Witness of John the Baptist

Jesus prefaces his call of witnesses with this statement. "If I alone testify about Myself, My testimony is not true." I think there are two ways we can take that. If we take Jesus as speaking in terms of a court of law this does not mean that his testimony, given alone, is false. It means it cannot be counted as true under Jewish law. The Mosaic requirement of more than one witness is stated in Numbers 35:30, Deuteronomy 17:7, and Deuteronomy 19:15, "A single witness shall not rise up against a man on account of any iniquity or any sin which he has committed; on the evidence of two or three witnesses a matter shall be confirmed." These are witnesses for the prosecution. Jesus is following the same rule for the defense, though instead of giving two or three witnesses, he gives four.

Jesus might not have been speaking only about the legal requirement when he said, "If I alone testify about Myself, My testimony is not true." We could also understand Jesus as saying that any claim to equality with God must be backed up by the witness of the Father and the witness of the Scripture. If the claim is not in harmony with such witnesses as these, but stands alone, on its own, then it must necessarily be false. Any true claim must be in agreement with the testimony of the Father and the testimony of the Bible.

One witness we expect is the witness of a forerunner, an Elijah figure. The prophets say that a forerunner will come. And this is the first witness Jesus calls. In fact, all four of the Gospel writers quote Isaiah 40:3-5 where Isaiah predicts one who will announce the coming of God. Here is the quote. This is the way Luke puts it. This is from Luke 3:3-6.

⁴ as it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet,

"The voice of one crying in the wilderness,

'Make ready the way of the Lord, Make His paths straight.

⁵ Every ravine will be filled, And every mountain and hill will be brought low;

The crooked will become straight, And the rough roads smooth;

⁶ And all flesh will see the salvation of God."

In John's Gospel, John the Baptist himself quotes Isaiah 40:3 when Jews come to ask who he claims to be. The only claim John will make about himself is that he is "a voice of one crying in the wilderness." So, Jesus here calls John the Baptist as a witness. He says,

³² There is another who testifies of Me, and I know that the testimony which He gives about Me is true. ³³ You have sent to John, and he has testified to the truth. ³⁴ But the testimony which I receive is not from man, but I say these things so that you may be saved. ³⁵ He was the lamp that was burning and was shining and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light.

Two quick clarifications about the testimony of John. First, Jesus does not depend on the testimony of John or any other human witness to establish the truthfulness of his claims. They might support the truthfulness. They do not establish. Man does not determine truth or define God. So, Jesus says, "The testimony I receive is not from man." The value of John's testimony is for these people, to help people who have believed John or heard John to come to believe what already is true about Jesus. It is not true because John said it. It is true. And John said it.

Second, Jesus calls John a lamp that was burning and shining. The Gospel writer said in 1:8 that "[John] was not the light, but came that he might bear witness of the light." Now he says that John is a lamp, a light shining brightly. Which is it? Is he the light or is he not the light? The distinction, as I have said this before, is something like the difference between the sun and the moon. Jesus himself is the one true light. He is the source of truth. What light we have is a reflection. Like the moon, it is not our own light. It is the reflection of him off of us. We are not the source of truth. We do not define truth. We recognize truth, and we communicate truth. We point others to the source of truth. We can help light a way to Jesus. But ultimately Jesus is the light. He is the one who uniquely knows the truth, because he is in unique relationship with the Father. Jesus must reveal himself.

The Witness of Jesus' Works

After calling John the Baptist as a witness, Jesus calls his own works as witness.

³⁶ But the testimony which I have is greater than the testimony of John; for the works which the Father has given Me to accomplish—the very works that I do—testify about Me, that the Father has sent Me.

This is why John calls them signs because they point us to Jesus' true nature while also affirming his teaching. Does Jesus have the authority to judge and the power to give life? What would help us to believe that this is true? Well, a man who can heal a sick son or raise up a lame man, that is the kind of man that might have the power of life, especially if these types of miracles were foretold by God as the types of miracles that the Messiah would do.

I already quoted Isaiah 35:5-6 in an earlier lesson. In light of the healing of a lame man, it seems fitting to quote the same prophecy again but with a little more context. This is Isaiah 35:2b-6.

^{2b} They will see the glory of the Lord,

³ Encourage the exhausted, and strengthen the feeble. ⁴ Say to those with anxious heart,

"Take courage, fear not.

The recompense of God will come,

⁵ Then the eyes of the blind will be opened

⁶ Then the lame will leap like a deer,

For waters will break forth in the wilderness

The majesty of our God.

Behold, your God will come with vengeance;

But He will save you."

And the ears of the deaf will be unstopped.

And the tongue of the mute will shout for joy.

And streams in the Arabah.

Isaiah declares that when the salvation of God comes his people will see his glory in miracles of healing; healing of the blind, the deaf, the lame, the mute. These are the signs that will accompany the Messiah. Jesus tells his audience, "Pay attention to what I am doing. Accept my works as witnesses to the truthfulness of my claims."

The Witness of the Father

Jesus next calls God the Father as his witness.

³⁷ And the Father who sent Me, He has testified of Me. You have neither heard His voice at any time nor seen His form. 38 You do not have His word abiding in you, for you do not believe Him whom He sent.

The witness of the Father is greater than the witness of works, though also more personally experienced. At the baptism of Jesus, God the Father affirmed Jesus. The testimony of God is objective, not depending on any human being. And yet, there is this problem that the testimony of the Lord is not heard or received because our hearts are dark, because we are dead to the voice of God. Even though his witness is the one that counts most, it is a witness that does not impact us unless he opens our eyes to hear and to see. So, not everyone was able to understand the voice of God or to hear the voice of God. The authoritative, objective record of God's word that the Jews should accept, rather than a subjective voice that is inside of them, they should accept the written words of Scripture. And that is the fourth witness that Jesus calls.

The Witness of Moses

³⁹ You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; it is these that testify about Me; ⁴⁰ and you are unwilling to come to Me so that you may have life. ⁴¹ I do not receive glory from men; ⁴² but I know you, that you do not have the love of God in yourselves. ⁴³ I have come in My Father's name, and you do not receive Me; if another comes in his own name, you will receive him. ⁴⁴ How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another and you do not seek the glory that is from the *one and* only God? ⁴⁵ Do not think that I will accuse you before the Father; the one who accuses you is Moses, in whom you have set your hope. ⁴⁶ For if you believed Moses, you would believe Me, for he wrote about Me. ⁴⁷ But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe My words?

Here is a great irony of human religion. "You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; it is these that testify about me; and you are unwilling to come to me so that you may have life." The Jewish audience of Jesus is going to the right source of truth to find out how to fill the craving in their soul for true life. They are going to the Bible. And yet, even looking in the exact right place, they cannot see, they cannot find what they are searching for. Though lack of biblical knowledge is a significant contributor to human darkness regarding moral and spiritual truth, education is not the number one problem. The corruptness of the human heart is the number one problem. There are men and women in the Jewish communities, in religious studies departments, in the liberal Christian church, who know the Bible and don't receive Jesus. They don't see God.

Jesus gives indication here about how the corrupt human soul interacts with biblical truth to lead some very religious people down a false road. When Jesus says, "I do not receive glory from men," he is implying that this is, on the other hand, exactly what they are seeking. Their study of the Bible has at root a motive of self-glory.

Jesus goes on to charge that they do not have the love of God in them. That is in line with the motive of self-glory. It is about me and my glory, not about love for God. If religion is about receiving honor or glory from God and man, it is not about honoring God. I might honor God as a way to get to something. I might worship God or profess love for God or serve God, but if the motive is to receive honor for my goodness or recognition of my worship or to get something back from God, some reward for my goodness, then the motive is not love for God. It is love for me. My professed love for God comes out of a heart for myself. I want to be recognized as good by God and men. I want honor. And I want reward.

Jesus further charges that this heart motive for self-glory is reflected in the behavior of his religious opponents as they receive one another based on the honor they have accrued in society. Jesus' miraculous works should, at the very least, move these men to consider whether he is in fact from God. In this Nicodemus proved a better example. He may not have understood Jesus either, but at least he began to pay attention. He did not dismiss Jesus or seek a way to shut Jesus down without considering whether in fact Jesus truly is from God.

But these men are not concerned with the truth about Jesus unless he honors them as they believe they deserve to be honored. He is not willing to give them that. His teaching does not affirm their religious honor, their rules, their etiquette. And so, they refuse him. They consider him an enemy to their status. They presume that they have secure and stable position with God. They do not need someone like Jesus. Rejecting Jesus, they continue to give honor to one another based on their human system of honor.

Honor in the sense that I am using it is defined by social and religious norms in culture, the sociological definition for honor. We have our own cultural system of validation that makes us feel honorable or worthwhile. Oh, you graduated from university. Good for you. Oh, you have a doctoral degree. Wow. Or your children are successful. Or you are the head of your own company. Or you are an athlete. Or you belong to that church. Or you give to that charity. Wow, you have read the Bible all the way through this year. That's awesome. Or you gave your summer serving the poor. Or you're an elder in your church, and on and on. And some of the activities and achievements that confer honor in our culture really are honorable deeds. Its good stuff. Some God does not care about at all. Either way, the motive behind accruing the honor that comes from society is not love for God. It is a seeking of validation. We want to feel good about ourselves, to feel like we have value, to feel better than some people, approved of by other people. We want the rewards we deserve. Jesus rejects that human system of value. And he is telling his audience, "If that is what you are in the Bible for, if that is why you are spending all this time understanding the words of Moses, then you are reading Moses and missing life.

The Jews of his day convinced themselves that they were seeking glory for God's sake. Jesus tells them that they are seeking their own glory. Paul says something similar in Romans 10:2-3,

² For I testify about them that they have a zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge.

Jesus rejects their very basis for self-satisfaction. They believe they have understood the Law of Moses as a system of works, which, when executed properly, establishes their sense of worth and success. Jesus rejects that understanding of Mosaic religion. He tells them that he has no need to accuse them, since they are accused by the very words of Moses upon which they are trying make their own claims. Jesus tells them in verses 46-47, "If you believed Moses, you would believe Me, for he wrote about Me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe My words?"

Jesus is saying that you cannot have correctly understood the function of the law and the heart behind the law if you reject me. If you have correctly understood the law, then you will have love for and insight into the nature of God, which would then lead you to gladly accept me. He says, "Moses wrote about me!"

What is Jesus talking about? Where do we see Jesus in the books of Moses? This is not an abstract claim. John has given us at least four examples so far in his Gospel. If you were to think back through, John, starting in chapter 1 through chapter 4, when does John refer to Moses in reference to Jesus? What comes to your mind? Where is Moses in John? I'll give you four.

The Creation (1:1-5)

The first is at the very beginning of the Gospel in the first five verses. "In the beginning was the Word...all things came into being by him." John writes of the beginning, of the making of all things, of word and light and life. He is linking Jesus with the creation, with the first verses of Genesis chapter 1. We may not have recognized the presence of Jesus in creation, but John assures us that he was certainly present and active.

Indwelling the Temple (1:14-18)

In the second half of the prologue, John shifts to Exodus. He writes this in 1:14 and 17.

¹⁴ And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth...¹⁷ For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ.

John brings together the story of God's glory indwelling the tabernacle, that's in Exodus 40, and the story of God revealing his name in Exodus 34. John brings both of those together, because God's name is his true character and his glory is the display of that character. So, his name and his glory go

³ For not knowing about God's righteousness and seeking to establish their own, they do not subject themselves to the righteousness of God.

together, and they are made visible in Jesus Christ. This glorious character described to Moses in words is now revealed in the flesh in Jesus Christ.

The Passover Lamb (1:29)

Maybe getting into something that should have been more obvious in the Old Covenant, the third reference came in John 1:29 when the Baptist saw Jesus and linked him to the Passover.

²⁹ The next day he saw Jesus coming to him and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"

The Jews should have recognized that the Passover Lamb was a substitute that does not really take away sin. The ritual is that the blood of the Passover lamb was applied to the door of each Jewish home that the angel of wrath might pass over those families. And the original message from Moses was that the Israelites had not escaped the judgment of God any more than the Egyptians. The Egyptians deserved judgment but so did the Israelites for their own sin. So, by faith they had to trust God to save them. But that lamb did not take away their sin. It only serves as a foreshadowing of something else, of some great salvation, of a true price that must be paid. Jesus is the true lamb that they should have been looking for, waiting for, whose death will pay for the sin of the world.

The Serpent in the Wilderness (3:14-15)

The fourth reference we have already in the Gospel of John is in John 3:14-15.

- ¹⁴ As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up;
- ¹⁵ so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life.

The curse justly deserved by man for sin is death. Jesus will be lifted up on a cross to take that curse on himself. When Moses wrote these things, he was writing about something that must be done in the future. He was writing about Jesus.

We could go on to consider references, many, many more references not recorded by John. We could mention the promise to Abraham in Genesis 12 that his seed will be a blessing to the nations; or the cutting of covenant with Abraham in Genesis 15 which indicates that God has decided to take the curse of death on himself; or the sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22 where God gives another lamb, a ram, in place of Isaac, a substitute; or the Day of Atonement in Leviticus 16 where the blood of one goat covers over the law and another goat removes sin far from the people; or Deuteronomy 18 where Moses foretells that another prophet like him will rise up in Israel; or Deuteronomy 30 where God promises after exile to bring his people back and do an internal work of spiritual regeneration in them, so that they might love God with heart and soul. In all of these texts, Moses is pointing ahead to Jesus Christ. And this is just Moses. We are not even getting into all the prophesies. This is the Law.

Conclusion

So, these are the claims of Jesus, that just as the Father has the power to give life, so also the Son has the power to give life to whomever he wishes. And just as God has authority to judge men, so also the Son has authority to judge all men. Whoever believes in him will be given eternal life, and whoever does not believe will perish in eternal judgment.

Jesus has called his witnesses to support his claims. He has called on the prophesied forerunner. He has called on his miraculous works. He has called on God the Father. And he has called on the Holy Scriptures. These are his witnesses.

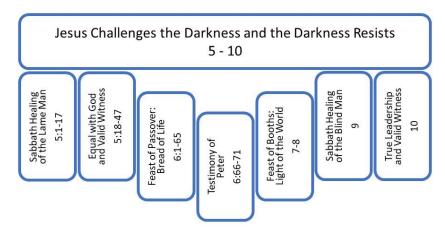
And just like the audience of old, each one of us faces a choice. We must ask, is this man only a legend or is he real? And if he is real, is he out of his mind to claim power over life and judgment, is he a lunatic or is he sane? And if he is sane, how can he make such claims, is he a fraud trying to manipulate me, is he a liar? But if he is neither legend, nor lunatic nor liar, what choice is left. He must be Lord. And if so, what then? Will you bow down to him and worship? Will you follow where he leads?

Reflection questions

- 1. Read John 5:31-47. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What are some questions that come to mind?
- 2. When in your life did someone fill the role of John the Baptist for you, pointing you towards Jesus? Why did you believe or trust that person? What about them helped you to believe in Jesus?
- 3. Concerning miraculous signs that witness to who Jesus is, how does the resurrection affirm what Jesus has said about himself in John 5:19-30?
- 4. Have you experienced miraculous works in your life or the life of someone you know that have served as a witness pointing to the reality of Jesus Christ?
- 5. How do you understand the witness of the Father as a testimony to the truthfulness of Jesus?
- 6. How has the Word of God worked in your life to affirm for you who Jesus is?

Lesson 12: John 6:1-51 I am the Bread of Life

Introduction



What do you want from Jesus?

I remember walking across campus as a college student who had grown up in church, thinking where is joy in my life? Where is peace? I had never seriously doubted the reality of God or the reality of Jesus as God. At that moment, I was questioning the reality of my own experience. The Bible clearly promises peace that goes beyond understanding. And joy. That's in all the songs. I read the Bible as a duty. I attended church as a requirement. I lived a moral life. I believed the basics to be true. But I did not feel love for God. I did not experience spiritual joy. I was often unsettled and anxious, experiencing a human peace when busy and distracted, but not knowing a spiritual peace that could overcome my worry. I wanted to know the joy and peace promised in the Bible.

What do you want from Jesus?

Would you like help with your marriage? Direction in your finances? Help for your children to grow and mature and make wise choices? Would you like a secure job? Would you like better government? Thoughtful leaders who are looking after the well-being of society? Would you like to be amazed? To experience something more than the steady flow of life? These are all good desires. Good things to seek out.

What do you want from Jesus?

Some people just want the basics from Jesus. They want food on the table. Health for themselves and their family. They want shelter in a safe and secure place. They want love in a relationship.

What do you want from Jesus?

That's a critical question for us to be asking as we consider the nature of saving faith. What am I really after? What motivates me to call on the name Jesus?

That question is central to John chapter 6.

In this chapter we have two miracles, followed by a dialogue with a crowd, followed by a test of faith that leads many disciples to give up on Jesus, followed by a testimony from one of Jesus' main disciples. In this lesson, we will consider the two miracles and the initial dialogue. We will save the faith test and Peter's witness for the next lesson.

The feeding of the 5000 is recorded in all four gospels. And just like John, Matthew and Mark include the account of Jesus walking on water right after the feeding account. John, however, is the only one to give us the dialogue with the crowd that then follows on the next day. Let's start with the miracle of the bread and fish. This is also the fourth of John's seven signs.

The Fourth Sign, Jesus Feeds 5000 (6:1-14)

 $^{
m 1}$ After these things Jesus went away to the other side of the Sea of Galilee (or Tiberias). $^{
m 2}$ A large crowd followed Him, because they saw the signs which He was performing on those who were sick. ³ Then Jesus went up on the mountain, and there He sat down with His disciples. ⁴ Now the Passover, the feast of the Jews, was near. 5 Therefore Jesus, lifting up His eyes and seeing that a large crowd was coming to Him, said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread, so that these may eat?" ⁶ This He was saying to test him, for He Himself knew what He was intending to do. 7 Philip answered Him, "Two hundred denarii worth of bread is not sufficient for them, for everyone to receive a little." 8 One of His disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to Him, ⁹ "There is a lad here who has five barley loaves and two fish, but what are these for so many people?" 10 Jesus said, "Have the people sit down." Now there was much grass in the place. So the men sat down, in number about five thousand. ¹¹ Jesus then took the loaves, and having given thanks, He distributed to those who were seated; likewise also of the fish as much as they wanted. 12 When they were filled, He said to His disciples, "Gather up the leftover fragments so that nothing will be lost." ¹³ So they gathered them up, and filled twelve baskets with fragments from the five barley loaves which were left over by those who had eaten. ¹⁴ Therefore when the people saw the sign which He had performed, they said, "This is truly the Prophet who is to come into the world." 15 So Jesus, perceiving that they were intending to come and take Him by force to make Him king, withdrew again to the mountain by Himself alone.

What do these people want from Jesus?

John uses the word sign twice, once at the beginning of the account and once at the end. Verse 2 gives us a general motive for why this large crowd of people followed Jesus, "because they saw the signs which He was performing on those who were sick." These are apparently not the sick. Jesus has gone around to the far side of the Sea of Galilee. The lame, blind, and deaf could not follow him there. But many who had seen Jesus heal did follow him.

They expected something from Jesus. But I doubt anyone expected Jesus to create bread and fish. John emphasizes the abundance of provision twice. First, he tells us that Jesus told the disciples to gather the leftovers after the people were filled. They did not just have a bite to tide them over. The 5000 people present ate bread and fish until they were satisfied. Then, they gathered up 12 baskets of leftover bread. This is not a miracle of people sharing what they have. This is a miracle of creation, revealing Jesus' divine power to call things into being and revealing Jesus' willingness to provide.

The people came because they had seen signs of healing. The experience this sign gives them another idea.

¹⁴ Therefore when the people saw the sign which He had performed, they said, "This is truly the Prophet who is to come into the world." ¹⁵ So Jesus, perceiving that they were intending to come and take Him by force to make Him king, withdrew again to the mountain by Himself alone.

What do they want from Jesus now?

They wanted something more in life. And their plan is to get it by making Jesus king. The plan starts with new leadership. That sounds familiar doesn't it. If we just had a better king or president or prime minister who would give us everything we want and make our nation great. That would fix things. At least it is a start.

We can imagine their desire to be free of the Romans. They want to enjoy feeling part of something special. They want to be the Israel of old like in the times of David and Solomon. They want a leader to provide peace, security and bread. And Jesus is their guy. He is the Prophet like Moses. He has done a great miracle. Who better to be king?

So, they have an agenda for Jesus. This is how Jesus can make our lives better. But even as they prepare to push their agenda onto Jesus, Jesus sees their intention and draws back. He will not entrust himself to them because their intention runs contrary to the work of salvation that he intends to do for them in accordance with the will of the Father.

This sign sets up the dialogue. And we see here how they people read the sign. They do not want Jesus. They want something from Jesus. They want Jesus to be who they want him to be, so he can provide for them.

As a contrast, John then gives us a concise report of Jesus walking on water. And this is just going to be Jesus with his disciples. This is the fifth sign reported by John.

The Fifth Sign, Jesus Walks on Water (6:15-24)

¹⁶ Now when evening came, His disciples went down to the sea, ¹⁷ and after getting into a boat, they *started to* cross the sea to Capernaum. It had already become dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. ¹⁸ The sea *began* to be stirred up because a strong wind was blowing. ¹⁹ Then, when they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and drawing near to the boat; and they were frightened. ²⁰ But He said to them, "It is I; do not be afraid." ²¹ So they were willing to receive Him into the boat, and immediately the boat was at the land to which they were going.

²² The next day the crowd that stood on the other side of the sea saw that there was no other small boat there, except one, and that Jesus had not entered with His disciples into the boat, but *that* His disciples had gone away alone. ²³ There came other small boats from Tiberias near to the place where they ate the bread after the Lord had given thanks. ²⁴ So when the crowd saw that Jesus was not there, nor His disciples, they themselves got into the small boats, and came to Capernaum seeking Jesus.

John leaves out the part about Peter walking on water. I wonder why. That seems like a fitting addition for his theme of faith in this gospel. But perhaps, he wanted to keep this report short, using it just as a contrast to the main dialogue of the chapter between the crowd and Jesus. And John will give Peter his chance to shine at the end of the chapter. Here are some observations from this short account.

The only words of Jesus here are, "It is I. Do not be afraid." The Greek is shorter, just four words, "I am. Fear Not." This is our second absolute "I am" statement. Like with the Samaritan woman, this is not an example with an object like when Jesus says, "I am the Light." This is Jesus simply saying, "I am."

Those four words, "I am. Fear not." are directed straight at the human soul. When we come to Jesus looking for something, for food, for healing, for blessings, for guidance, whatever we are looking for, when we come, we find ourselves standing before the one whose name is "I am." We may not have come looking for him. And if the eyes of our heart are not opened, we may not even see him when we stand right in front of him. But when we do so Jesus, we see the Holy One of God, the All Powerful One, The Righteous One. The One who creates out of nothing. Who commands the elements. Who reigns over the laws of physics. He is the one who sees into our souls and knows our intentions. He is never fooled. To see him truly is to experience him seeing you. When you stand before him, the right response is fear. We do not fear nearly enough for we do not fully see his holiness, nor do we understand our own sinfulness. Isaiah did. Isaiah saw. And he fell on his face, "Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of Hosts (Isaiah 6:5)."

As long as we see Jesus as the one who exists to meet our needs, as our genie in the bottle, we do not see Jesus. We do not make Jesus king. Jesus is King. Jesus is the Lord of Hosts. When we see Jesus rightly in his glory, when we see Jesus rightly in his glory, when he says to us, "I am," we are going to need for him also to say to us, "Do not fear."

The disciples get here another glimpse of who Jesus really is with the power over the elements. And they continue to be a model for us of struggling, yet sincere, human faith. I do not want to make too much out of their response here, to make it too positive. They are still struggling to see who Jesus really is. And in fact, in his Gospel at the end of this incident, Mark says, "They were greatly astonished, for they had not gained any insight from the incident of the loaves, but their heart was hardened." So, their faith, they are still struggling in their hearts. And Mark focuses on that struggle. But here, John is willing to focus only on the positive. And even though they are struggling, they are still attached to Jesus. And the text tells us that they "receive" Jesus into the boat.

That word "receive" is important in John. It is the word from John 1:11-12 where we are told, "those who were his own did not receive him. But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God." It is an idea linked to faith. The same idea is communicated about the Galileans in 4:45 who welcomed, or received Jesus, though without truly receiving Jesus. Jesus reveals his glory to the disciples, as he walks across the water. And they see and receive.

This self-revelation of power was just for the disciples. Jesus entrusted this just to them. The rest of the crowd was left behind. They wake up expecting Jesus to be nearby but cannot find him anywhere. And they knew that the disciples had left in a boat. And the boat was gone. They left without Jesus. So, surprised at not finding Jesus, many of them get into available boats, and the follow the disciples because certainly the disciples are going to be able to find Jesus.

This crowd that has gone looking for Jesus finds him. And now we are ready for the dialogue the revealing dialogue that follows. I am going to address it in three parts, beginning, middle and end.

The beginning of the dialogue is John 6:25-34.

The Beginning of the Dialogue (6:25-34)

²⁵ When they found Him on the other side of the sea, they said to Him, "Rabbi, when did You get here?" ²⁶ Jesus answered them and said, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you seek Me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate of the loaves and were filled. ²⁷ Do not work for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you, for on Him the Father, God, has set His seal." ²⁸ Therefore they said to Him, "What shall we do, so that we may work the works of God?" ²⁹ Jesus answered and said to them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent." ³⁰ So they said to Him, "What then do You do for a sign, so that we may see, and believe You? What work do You perform? ³¹ "Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread out of heaven to eat.' " ³² Jesus then said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, it is not Moses who has given you the bread out of heaven, but it is My Father who gives you the true bread out of heaven. ³³ "For the bread of God is that which comes down out of heaven, and gives life to the world." ³⁴ Then they said to Him, "Lord, always give us this bread."

These people were searching after Jesus. They are putting in some effort. They followed him into the country, up onto a mountain. They spent the night out there. And now they have tracked him across the Sea of Galilee. They have not given up on Jesus. But why? What do they want from Jesus?

When they find him, they ask the question of the moment, "Rabbi, when did you get here?" They had wanted him when they woke up, but he was not around. They did not see him leave. And they had set out after him. And now they want the answer to the mystery, how did he disappear?

And Jesus, as he does so often, completely ignores the question. He is not interested in telling them that he walked across the water. He is not going to entrust that to them. Instead, knowing the hearts of men and women, he turns the conversation back to motivation and desire. Why do you want to find me in the first place? Verses 26-27,

²⁶ Jesus answered them and said, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you seek Me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate of the loaves and were filled. ²⁷ Do not work for the food which

perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you, for on Him the Father, God, has set His seal."

Signs had led Nicodemus to conclude something about Jesus. That he had come from God. When he told her about her past, the Samaritan woman responded to that sign by declaring Jesus to be a prophet and then willingly received correction from Jesus as he revealed more to her. On the other hand, the men by the pool of Bethesda, when told "The man who healed me told me to pick up my mat," ignored completely the potential sign of healing. They didn't even hear it. Instead, they focused on the fact that Jesus authorized the breaking of a religious rule.

Signs do not work if you cannot read them correctly and certainly do not work when you ignore them. Nicodemus was confused. He saw the sign but couldn't read it. The religious leaders were antagonistic. They ignored the sign. This crowd is misled by their own desire. Their desire is getting I the way of understanding the sign. They want more bread. And that present surface level desire gets in the way of deeper reflection about what has just happened. They do not show desire to follow-up on the sign. They are happy to eat the bread, but they are not thinking about how it pointed them not to what Jesus did, but to who Jesus is.

Wanting something from Jesus can be the thing that prevents us from wanting Jesus.

Just like with Nicodemus and with the Samaritan woman, Jesus speaks to these people metaphorically about spiritual reality. Jesus redirects them, telling them that they need to do something to get something. They need to work for food that is eternal. The problem is not in desiring something from Jesus. The problem is when we hold on to that desire so tightly that we will not be redirected by God to that which is more important. They want bread. Ok. That is not a bad desire. But you have Jesus with you right now, and Jesus is telling you that there is something more important that you need to be thinking about.

Again, just like with Nicodemus and the Samarian woman, these people take Jesus' metaphor literally. The want bread and cannot get past literal bread. Jesus has told them it is going to take work. They might be willing to work for the bread. But they want to know what kind of work is required.

"Therefore they said to Him, "What shall we do, so that we may work the works of God?" Jesus answered and said to them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent."

They have been hiking around for a couple of days to get what they want from Jesus. They are willing to do some work. Give them some ritual to do or moral requirement to fill or activist plan to execute, and they may be all in. There is no telling what religious people will do to get what they want out of their religion. Religious people understand when they are given requirements, that they are going to have to fulfill those requirements in order to get what they are looking for.

Jesus gives them a work far easier and far harder than that. "Believe in me. That's the work you do." This is not the kind of religious work they expected. Or if they were expecting some political job to set him up as king, it is not that either. They believe in their hearts, like we all naturally do, that we get something from God by doing something to merit reward. Ritual, good works, action, these are the kind of works that merit favor. Faith can be understood this way. If we are spiritual enough and focused enough and committed enough to truly believe in God, if that is how we think about faith, faith is my effort to believe, then our faith is a spiritual work that deserves reward. If you have enough faith, then you are spiritual enough to get what you have earned. But that is not the kind of faith Jesus is talking about. Jesus calls it a work here, but as he does so often, he is using their language to challenge pre-conceptions as he is calling them to something significantly different than the normal human assumption.

Jesus calls them to the work that is not a work. This work is simply an acknowledgement of who Jesus is and a submission to that reality. This work of faith is simply honoring Jesus as the Holy One sent

from God, bowing to him as Lord, and receiving from him the grace he offers, and then following after him in the new life he gives. Faith is spiritual sight that leads to a response. That is the work they must do. It is both simple and yet, also impossible apart from the hand of God. We simply will not see or respond if God does not do something in us.

Still not getting the metaphor, they challenge Jesus to prove himself.

They said to Him, "What then do You do for a sign, so that we may see, and believe You? What work do You perform? Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread out of heaven to eat."

Really? The irony here. You have seen signs of healing. That's what brought you out in the wilderness in the first place. And then, once you got here, you experienced this great miracle of the loaves and the fish. And now you are going to stand there and brazenly challenge Jesus to do another sign. Now, it is not a bad reference that they pull out of Scripture. Manna from heaven under the leadership of Moses certainly fits with the miracle of the feeding of 5000, and it fits with the metaphor Jesus himself is using. So, they are in the right context. On the surface, it is a good religious response, a good use of Bible.

But it is also revealing of their underlying heart attitude. They are using the Bible to argue further what they want from Jesus. In a sense they are daring Jesus to make more bread. Or trying to manipulate Jesus to make bread. And that has been done to him before in the wilderness by someone else with seriously bad intentions. To that earlier challenge, Jesus responded, "Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God." It's good to know your Bible. It is foolish to try to manipulate God using his own word. God will always win that argument. God sees the intention of the heart. In this case, they use the Bible to continue arguing for their own agenda.

Jesus has already called them out for their heart motive even before they make this challenge. He has already told them that they do not want to know him. They want bread. This response affirms what Jesus has said.

Still, Jesus does not respond in anger to their misguided response, their attempt at manipulation, their argument. But he does ignore the request and continues on with his metaphor, urging them to consider their deeper need.

³² Jesus then said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, it is not Moses who has given you the bread out of heaven, but it is My Father who gives you the true bread out of heaven. ³³ For the bread of God is that which comes down out of heaven, and gives life to the world." ³⁴ Then they said to Him, "Lord, always give us this bread."

They envision daily bread, physical bread out of heaven. That is what they think Jesus is saying. God did provide life for the Israelites in the desert through Moses. He gave them the sustenance they needed to sustain their biological existence. It is the longest ongoing miracle in Scripture, operating on an enormous scale. God is willing to provide for our earthly needs. But a question we should ask about those Israelites in the wilderness long ago is whether the sign of manna led them to the deeper need. Did they move from physical dependence to spiritual dependence? Did they move past the surface blessing to come to the deeper need of knowing and experiencing relationship with God?

That is what Jesus is telling this crowd to do. Biologically living human beings are dead spiritually. Since the garden of Eden, we have been cut off, by nature, from the spiritual life that comes through relationship with God. Jesus is saying, "That manna came from God to sustain physical life, while at the same time pointing to something more important. I am speaking to you of a bread that also comes from God in heaven, but it is a bread that gives more than physical life. It is a bread that makes you alive spiritually."

Speaking about eternal life, Jesus is not talking only about life after that starts after death. Jesus is speaking about a life that starts now. He has hinted at this new kind of life before. He told

Nicodemus, "You must be born again." New life starts with a new birth. It is a spiritual regeneration. He calls it abundant life in John 10:10. That is the life he has come to give. And just as there is belief that is not belief and belief that is true belief. So also, there is life that is not life and there is life that is true life. Jesus offers true life. Human beings are meant to be alive biologically and spiritually.

The offer and the response remind us of the Samaritan woman. Jesus said to her, "The water I give shall become a well of water springing up to eternal life." The woman responded, "Sir, give me this water, so I will not be thirsty, nor come all the way here to draw." She took it literally. The response here sounds pretty much the same, "Lord, always give us this bread." Like with the woman, they are still thinking about something physical that sustains biological life.

Jesus will explain further. He has already clarified for them what work they must do to receive the kind of bread he is talking about. The work is to believe in him. It is the work that is not a work. It is faith. And he has told them that this is no ordinary bread for ordinary life, but a special bread that brings people alive for eternity. Now Jesus is going to clarify for them what the bread of life actually is.

This is the middle part of the dialogue in John 6:35-48.

The Middle of the Dialogue (6:35-48)

C

Χ

- ³⁵ Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life; he who comes to Me will not hunger, and he who believes in Me will never thirst. ³⁶ "But I said to you that you have seen Me, and yet do not believe.
- ³⁷ All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out. ³⁸ For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me.
 - ³⁹ This is the will of Him who sent Me, that of all that He has given Me I lose nothing, but raise it up on the last day. ⁴⁰ For this is the will of My Father, that everyone who beholds the Son and believes in Him will have eternal life, and I Myself will raise him up on the last day."
- D 41 Therefore the Jews were grumbling about Him, because He said, "I am the bread that came down out of heaven."
 - ⁴² They were saying, "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How does He now say, 'I have come down out of heaven'?"
- D' 43 Jesus answered and said to them, "Do not grumble among yourselves.
- C'
 A No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day.
- 45 It is written in the prophets, 'And they shall all be taught of God.' Everyone who has B' heard and learned from the Father, comes to Me. 46 Not that anyone has seen the Father, except the One who is from God; He has seen the Father.
- A' Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes has eternal life. 48 I am the bread of life.

If we seek something from Jesus without seeking Jesus, we might find a temporary satisfaction of our desires but will never find lasting satisfaction; not until we seek that which our soul truly needs. Lasting fulfillment is in Jesus, in knowing Jesus. Only in knowing Jesus can we come alive spiritually. And only in coming alive spiritually can we begin to experience the joy and peace our hearts long for. Lasting joy and peace, life, is not in Christian community, not in the Bible, not in good works, not in prayer and fasting; not when those things are considered as a means to find joy and peace. We do not find joy and peace by seeking joy and peace. We find joy and peace by seeking God, seeking to know Jesus. When we seek God, when we seek Jesus, through Christian community, through the

Bible, through doing good works, through prayer and fasting, when these things are means to knowing him, then joy and peace follows from that relationship, not as the end goal, but as a result of the end goal. God is the end goal. And when we know God, joy and peace are the right rewards that come from that loving relationship. They are the rewards in the sense that they are the right outcome of intimacy with our heavenly Father.

What do you want from Jesus? Do you only want to satisfy natural or biological desires, or do you want to come alive to the more fundamental desire for God, to desire God?

A and A' (35-36 and 47-48)

"I am the bread of life!" is the first "I am" statement with an object in the Gospel of John. Did you notice that Jesus repeated it? In the first verse of the section, verse 35, Jesus declared, "I am the bread of life; he who comes to Me will not hunger, and he who believes in Me will never thirst." Then at the end in verses 47-48, "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life."

And when we have repetition at the beginning and end of a section, what should we start looking for? Yes. More repetition. There may not be anymore. But we have to look. What we find here is another chiastic section in the middle of the dialogue. This one has four parallel pairs and a lone central idea. We begin and end with Jesus declaration, "I am the bread of life" and with the key word "believe". This is our A and our A.'

I am going to go through each pair of ideas just like I did with the chiasm in chapter 5, but I am not suggesting that this is the way we are supposed to read a chiasm. The dialogue works by reading it straight through. I am breaking it down into the pairs to help us observe carefully the key ideas of the dialogue. I am assuming that those key ideas are the repeated ideas in the parallel pairs.

So, the first key idea in A and A' is "I am the Bread of life" and the challenge to believe.

B and *B'* (37-38 and 45-46)

B and B' are verses 37-38 and 45-46.

Jesus says in 37-38, "All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out. For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me." Then in 45-46, "It is written in the prophets, 'And they shall all be taught of God.' Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father, comes to Me. Not that anyone has seen the Father, except the One who is from God; He has seen the Father."

Two ideas are repeated. First is that idea that God initiates who comes to Jesus. "All that the Father gives" and "Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father," these are the ones who will come to me. That the Father is the one who gives us into the hands of Jesus does not surprise us because we have encountered already, for example with Nicodemus, the declaration that some kind of spiritual work or regeneration of being born again must take place in the human heart in order to see, to see the kingdom of heaven, to enter the kingdom of heaven. God must do something for true faith to exist. And when God does that in a person's heart then they come to Jesus. True faith sees and responds.

The second idea in these short passages is the idea of Jesus coming from God. He has come down from heaven to do God's will. And it is the Father's will to give a remnant to Jesus, that some would come to him.

C and C' (39-40 and 44)

C and C' come next in 39-40 and 44.

Jesus says in 39-40, "This is the will of Him who sent Me, that of all that He has given Me I lose nothing, but raise it up on the last day. For this is the will of My Father, that everyone who beholds the Son and believes in Him will have eternal life, and I Myself will raise him up on the last day." Then

in verse 44, "No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day."

The key idea repeated in this parallel pair is the statement that Jesus will raise up on the last day all who have come to him, all who are given to him by the Father. Both pairs state their ideas as a group reality and as an individual reality. The group idea comes first with the word "all". It is like this, "all that the Father gives me will come to me" and "of all that He has given me I lose nothing." Then we get the individual sense, "Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me" and "everyone who beholds the Son and believes in Him will have eternal life." There is a body, a flock, a group of individuals given to Jesus by the Father, and with the emphasis here that the Son will lose not one of these but raise all to eternal life. This group is made up of individuals who believe in Jesus and are going to be taken care of by Jesus.

Faith is not something that merits eternal life after death. If so, eternal life might be something we gain and then we lose and then we gain again and then we lose again, and so on, throughout our current biological existence until death, after which, we find out whether or not we were able to hold on until the end. Jesus' teaching here indicates that the faith he requires comes from the Father. It is something the Father does, and it leads to a secure relationship with him. The faith is not merited by us in the first place. It is spiritual sight that leads to a response that has an effect. The one who believes is born again spiritually, at that moment, entering into an unearned, yet eternal state of life. Jesus connects here the ideas that faith is initiated by the will of God and, therefore, is ensured through the work of Jesus. No one who comes will be lost, can be lost.

Of course, Jesus' teaching here raises a number of questions. We have all known people who have claimed to be believers and turned away from Jesus. We have known people who claim to be believers and yet, do not live like believers at all. And we have known people who claim to be believers, leave for a while, and then come back. What are we to make of all this, and the different variations of it?

Whatever we are to make of it, we ought to interpret our experiences according to the teaching of Jesus and not the other way around. Experience does not define our theology. Experience will at times give us insight, at other times it will confuse, at other times it will dismay us. But we take that experience, and we come back to the word of God in order to reinvestigate our assumptions. But we are taking our cue from what the Scripture says. Our experience cannot mean something other than what the Word teaches. And what does Jesus teach?

So far in this gospel, it is not hard to believe that many who turn away from Jesus actually never truly believed in Jesus. They believed things about Jesus. They were seeking things from Jesus. They have an idea of who they think Jesus is. And they enjoy the community of faith for a while. But like many in this gospel, they believed without believing, received without receiving, claimed to know without knowing. That is a true spiritual reality that we have to take into account. In the community of faith there are many who don't truly believe. And sometimes we are just mistaken about whether a person was truly been born again or not.

Now, I am not saying that that is an answer for all of the experiences. It is an apparent answer in this chapter where Jesus is declaring he will not lose one and yet, by the end of the chapter many disciples end up walking away. And the implication here is that, at least for those disciples, they never truly believed. We have come to recognize that not all who claim to want to learn from Jesus, who claim to be disciples, have really come to see Jesus. But there is more to this question, and we will address it more as we go along in the gospel. Later we will have to ask, "What about Judas?" And then later still, "What about Peter and his denial?"

For now, what we see here is Jesus promising eternal security for everyone whom the Father gives to him.

D and D' (41 and 43)

This idea that Jesus is himself the bread of life offered by God is not something that the majority is this crowd was ready to accept. D and D' both highlight grumbling in the audience. John tells us in verse 41, "Therefore **the Jews were grumbling about Him**, because He said, "I am the bread that came down out of heaven." And then in verse 43, "Jesus answered and said to them, '**Do not grumble among yourselves**."

And what do we think about when we hear the word grumbling? Well, there is a good chance that we think about the generation that wandered in the desert. Day after day for forty years they experienced the miraculous sign of bread from heaven. But did they ever recognize the sign and seek out a deeper sense of dependence in relationship with God?

John has been leading us to this conclusion. All of chapter 6 has set up for us the background context of Exodus and Numbers. John is the only gospel writer to mention that the feeding of the 5000 happened when "the Passover of the Jews was at hand." John tells us that a great multitude followed Jesus out to the mountain, that they had nothing to eat, and Jesus gave them bread. Jesus then miraculously crosses over the Sea of Galilee, reminiscent of Moses taking Israel through the Red Sea. Then in the dialogue, we have the crowd of Jews bringing up the reference themselves, saying, "Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, as it is written, 'He gave them bread out of heaven to eat.'" They had called Jesus the Prophet. That means they were already comparing him to Moses. If we complete the comparison and Jesus is Moses that makes the crowd here equivalent to the Israelites in the wilderness.

Ironically, they have fulfilled their own comparison in a most unfavorable way. The Israelites following Moses refused to follow where the sign of manna pointed them. They were faithless, grumbling the whole time. Even at the end in Numbers 21 as they are moving back towards the promise land, so that the second generation can go in, they still are bringing up the same repeated, complaint, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt in this wilderness to die? For there is no food and no water, and we loath this miserable food." We loathe the manna from heaven. That's my imagination of what church would become like for someone who has been in it that long believing without truly believing. That at some point you start to loath it. It might be fun at first, you get to know new people and new things. But I cannot imagine spending 40 years worshiping God without the experience of being born again. How boring. How dull and tedious. I can see using the word loathing.

And just like those Israelites of old, these Israelites in the crowd with Jesus, they grumble, quickly. They were happy to receive bread from Jesus, and they are even willing to do some kind of work for more. But they cannot accept that Jesus himself is the answer to what they want.

X (42)

They do begin asking the right sort of questions, though it is going to be with the wrong sort of attitude. The center of the passage is verse 42, where they ask,

"Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How does He now say, 'I have come down out of heaven'?"

That is what they should be asking. Who is this Jesus? But they do not ask it with an openness of heart to really seek out the truth about Jesus. They ask it by way of rejecting any greater claim. They have already decided who he is. It is a rhetorical question for him. He is only the son of Joseph and Mary. His claim to come out of heaven is ridiculous. We reject it. And like the religious leaders by the pool of healing in Jerusalem, they forget about the miraculous signs he has done when they are assessing his claims. They are not putting the two together.

The signs pointed them toward Jesus, but they were unable to read the language of the signs and unwilling to learn how. They stuck to their own assumptions about him. They held onto their own desires. "This is who we believe you to be and this is what we want you to give us."

None in this crowd experienced the power of the statement "I am. Fear not." That was reserved for the smaller group of disciples who would prove to be truly his because God had given them to him.

The end of this dialogue goes to verse 58. But I am just going to read through verse 51 as a conclusion for this lesson. Then we will pick up where we leave off in the next lesson. So, let's end with 49-51.

The End of the Dialogue (6:49-51)

⁴⁹ "Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. ⁵⁰ This is the bread which comes down out of heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. ⁵¹ I am the living bread that came down out of heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread also which I will give for the life of the world is My flesh."

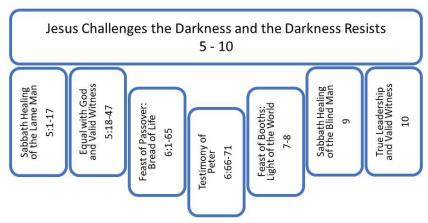
What do you want from Jesus? Jesus tells the crowd their desires are too limited. They want bread for this life. That's a need. But he fed their fathers bread for forty year, and they died. Jesus is offering something more fundamental. Jesus offers eternal life that starts in the here and now through faith in him. To know and believe in Jesus is the key to this new kind of life, to real life.

What do you want from Jesus?

Reflection questions

- 1. Read quickly through the two signs described in John 6:1-24. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What are some questions that come to mind?
- 2. Read through the beginning of the dialogue in John 6:25-34. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What are some questions that come to mind?
- 3. Read through the middle of the dialogue in John 6:35-48. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What are some questions that come to mind?
- 4. What does it mean to you that Jesus is the Bread of Life? Is that the same as saying he provides living water (as he said to the Samaritan woman)?
- 5. Read through the end of the dialogue in John 6:25-34. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What are some questions that come to mind?
- 6. What do Jesus' assurances in 6:39-40 and 44 mean for you personally?
- 7. What do you think about this statement, "What you want from Jesus might be the thing keeping you from Jesus?" Does your personal experience lead you to agree or disagree?

Lesson 13: John 6:52-71 Eat My Flesh and Drink My Blood Introduction



What do you want from Jesus? That's our overarching question for John chapter 6. The crowd wanted something from Jesus. They wanted him to be who they wanted him to be. And they wanted him to give what they wanted him to give.

Whatever Jesus does for us, whether miraculous signs or provision of our needs or healing of relationships, can lead us to look more closely at him, but as we see in John 6, signs and provision can also distract us from Jesus. What we want from Jesus might be the thing that keeps us from seeing Jesus. Do I want something from Jesus, or do I want Jesus?

While dialoguing with a crowd in Capernaum, Jesus recognizes a hardness of heart similar to the generation that died grumbling in the wilderness. Unlike the Samaritans in chapter 4, this crowd is not willing to follow where Jesus leads. They want what they want and become frustrated that Jesus insists on something different. Faced with their obstinance, Jesus decides to shake them with a test of faith.

John 6 began with two signs, one for the masses and one just for the disciples, a dialogue followed the signs. That dialogue led to a test of faith and two responses. In our last lesson, we looked at the two signs and the beginning of the dialogue. In this lesson, we pick the dialogue back up with the test of faith and then consider the two responses that follow. We will start with the test. This is in John 6:49-59,

A Test of Faith (6:49-59)

A lest of Faith (0.45-55)	
Α	⁴⁹ "Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died.
В	⁵⁰ This is the bread which comes down out of heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. ⁵¹ I am the living bread that came down out of heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread also which I will give for the life of the world is My flesh."
С	⁵² Then the Jews <i>began</i> to argue with one another, saying, How can this man give us <i>His</i> flesh to eat? ⁵³ So Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in yourselves.
D	⁵⁴ He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.
Χ	55 For My flesh is true food, and My blood is true drink.
D'	⁵⁶ He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him.
C'	⁵⁷ As the living Father sent Me, and I live because of the Father, so he who eats Me, he also will live because of Me.
B'	⁵⁸ This is the bread which came down out of heaven;
A'	not as the fathers ate and died; he who eats this bread will live forever."
	⁵⁹ These things He said in the synagogue as He taught in Capernaum.

Jesus words are best understood as a test of faith.

Like the middle of the dialogue, that began with "I am the Bread of Life" and ended with "I am the Bread of Life", this passage is also chiastic. It begins and ends with Jesus repeating that the fathers ate the manna and died. Referring to the physical death of that generation is a challenge to look beyond what you think you want to that which is really, fundamentally essential. You want bread. But bread today does not do anything about eventual death. There is a bread that comes down out of heaven that provides eternal life.

Jesus has already declared of himself, "I am the bread of life." He has told us that he is the bread, that the bread provides eternal life, and that the way to get this bread is through faith in him. The crowd refuses to follow Jesus in this, intent on the kind of physical bread he has already multiplied for them. That is what they want. They also reject that he is from heaven, asserting that they know who is mother and father are.

At this point, it appears that Jesus has decided to push them away. He is going to push them back. As Christians used to the idea of the Lord's Supper, we immediately soften the words of Jesus, "eat my flesh, drink my blood." But for this original audience the idea of drinking human blood would have been extremely offensive. It ought to be offensive to us to think about. To make matters worse, Jesus is saying these things in a synagogue. I think John held on to that detail until verse 59 to emphasize for us the incongruity of what Jesus has just said. Jews, by Torah law, drained the blood out of their meat before eating. God states in Leviticus 17:10, "I will set my face against that person who eats blood and will cut him off from among his people." 1500 years of Torah practice has ingrained in Jewish people a revulsion for blood in food. And now, Jesus, in a synagogue, tells people that they must eat his flesh, human flesh, and drink his blood, human blood. How revolting! It is just gross. And even if he does have some symbolic or mystical idea in mind, this is completely inappropriate. This is a metaphor, a preacher, a priest should never use, not anywhere, not in a synagogue, certainly. What is Jesus doing?

New birth, eternal water, everlasting bread, those metaphors confused, but they did not offend. But this? Why would Jesus say something like this? And maybe the more important question is, "Why didn't Jesus later explain himself when so many got offended and stopped following him?" It is one thing to shake people up a bit to make sure they are paying attention. But when they get angry and start walking out on the basis of the offensiveness of the preaching, why not just say, "Hold on there. Wait a minute. I am not being literal. You are not really going to eat me. Of course not. There is a deeper meaning." Why not clear it up? Why doesn't Jesus do that? Why does he create this emotional and cognitive dissonance, this internal struggle and tension, and then just allow it to sit there? He lets it stew until the majority of people turn and walk away? Why doesn't he clarify his words?

I believe Jesus is testing their faith. Clarification has not worked to this point. He has given them a metaphor. But they refuse to take his definition or follow his lead. They insist on defining Jesus as they want to define Jesus. You are a miracle worker. You are the prophet. You could be king. But Holy One of God who comes from heaven? Bread of life? They are resistant. They have begun to grumble. They want what they want and believe what they believe, and they refuse to follow where his teaching leads.

What then is going to be the result for them? Is it a good thing to allow religious people to create their own definitions of church, their own definitions of God, their own definitions of themselves and then to remain comfortable in that delusion? What is the end result of not believing in God the way God has revealed himself to be? If belief in Jesus Christ is the only way to eternal life, do we really feel okay leaving people in their own disillusion. Is it the ultimate aim of the church to keep people in or to grow the numbers no matter what? To keep people feeling happy and comfortable and to go along as much as possible with society?

If we are not willing to push back against false views of the gospel, if we are not willing to challenge misconceptions, if we are satisfied affirming each one in his or her own personal beliefs, then what

does that say about our ultimate concern for their well-being? Are we more concerned about gathering numbers or avoiding conflict? Or are we more concerned about the true state of each individual heart?

Jesus is not focused here on numbers. Jesus is most concerned that people wake up to the deadness of their spiritual state. He is more concerned with eternal life than with temporary life. He is not satisfied to leave people in a state of self-delusion. He would rather shake them up and drive them away, for then it least they might come to the realization that they are indeed lost, and they might possibly repent and turn back.

That's what I believe Jesus is doing. He is creating significant mental and emotional distress in this crowd of followers, because they are holding so tightly to their own definition of who he is and what he ought to do for them.

Recognizing that Jesus has just created a faith challenge. Now, let's consider what Jesus' words mean. So, yes, he is challenging the people. He is creating this distress. Can we understand what he is talking about? Does he only create confusion or is there a way to interpret what he is saying?

What does this faith challenge have to do with how we understand the Lord's Supper? The center of the challenge, the chiasm, comes in 54 through 56.

- ⁵⁴ **He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life**, and I will raise him up on the last day. ⁵⁵ For My flesh is true food, and My blood is true drink. (Then again,)
- ⁵⁶ He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him.

If you grew up in a Christian church, then your interpretation of Jesus' words are affected by what your church teaches about the Lord's Supper. Even though Jesus has not instituted the Lord's Supper, yet, at this point in his ministry, we still cannot help thinking about it. If your church understands taking the bread and wine as a more literal act of eating the body and blood of Jesus, you likely read that into this passage. But if your church teaches the taking of bread and wine as a symbolic act, then you probably automatically interpret Jesus' words as symbolic.

The challenge, then, is to put aside assumptions about how to interpret this text and try hard to question how the original hearers were supposed to understand what Jesus was saying. And since John is the one who has created the literary context, we should interpret the words of Jesus, according to the information John has given us in this passage and in the Gospel as a whole.

Now Jesus certainly uses literal language. He literally says, "eat my flesh and drink my blood", and he says the result is eternal life. This is abiding in me. If you are from a church that treats this symbolically, you might immediately conclude that it is ridiculous to believe that we can somehow eat the flesh of Jesus or drink the blood of Jesus. But then, Jews and Muslims will tell us that it is ridiculous to believe that God is both one and three or that God could become a man. We would argue that the trinity and incarnation are not ridiculous at all. Rather, they are mysterious, being beyond our full grasp because we are speaking about the nature of God. Well, the same could be said about the Lord's Supper. A Christian could argue that we do eat the flesh of Jesus and drink the blood of Jesus in a real way that is somehow beyond our full comprehension because it has to do with the nature of God. It is not ridiculous. It is mysterious.

So, without concluding too quickly whether Jesus is speaking somehow literally or symbolically, we can ask whether the text points us in one direction or the other. What is our reason for interpreting the text in the way we interpret it? In fact, you may want to pause this lesson right now and think about that. If you believe this text is speaking symbolically, then what in the text leads you to discount the fact that it sounds literal? Or if you think it is literal, what in the text leads you to reject the idea that Jesus is speaking symbolically? What observations lead to your interpretation?

Here are my thoughts. Here are four reasons why I think Jesus is speaking symbolically here about spiritual realities.

- (1) First, the teaching of Jesus recorded in John has shown Jesus speaking symbolically about spiritual realities. We have seen this before. Nicodemus questioned whether a person must enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born again. The answer was no. Nicodemus interpreted literally a metaphor about spiritual regeneration. Similarly, was Jesus speaking literally to the woman at the well about physical water? No. And we will see in chapter 7 that Jesus connects water welling up inside the believer with the Holy Spirit. He was not talking about a real well or a real water that would continually produce. Jesus' words were about a spiritual reality of which physical water was only symbolic. We come then to the teaching about bread and find that Jesus is not talking about any bread at all. There is no real bread. But about himself, "I am the Bread of Life!" It is a metaphor. So then, when Jesus begins talking about eating his flesh and drinking his blood, we have good reason to believe Jesus is using physical metaphor as symbolic of spiritual reality. It follows.
- (2) Second, taking the statement, "I am the bread of life" as having a material reference that we can somehow eat would set this "I am" statement off from the ones that will come later in the Gospel. Jesus will also declare that he is the light. But we do not have a ritual that imagines him as physically light. He will claim to be the door and the vine, but both of these are also taken symbolic of spiritual reality. Jesus is not a door to be literally opened nor is he a vine to be literally planted. If we interpret Jesus words consistently through John, then he is not saying that we can somehow literally eat his flesh and drink his blood. I am the bread of life points to a spiritual reality, not a material ritual.
- (3) Third, let's consider the spiritual reality. If Jesus is declaring that literally eating his flesh and drinking his blood produces eternal life, then we would have to conclude that eating the Lord's Supper is the means by which we gain eternal life. And some indeed conclude that. They stay consistent with their belief. But is that what Jesus has been teaching through the Gospel of John?

No, it is absolutely not. That is not what Jesus has been saying. Jesus has repeatedly taught that the way a person receives eternal life is through faith in him. That is the point of the dialogue in chapter 6 that we studied in our last lesson. It was also the message to Nicodemus. It was the message to the Samaritan woman. It is the message here. Jesus began his teaching about the bread of life by declaring, "he who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst." Jesus is talking about spiritual satisfaction, spiritual completeness. He identifies himself as the bread and the way to get the bread is faith. Eating and drinking of Jesus become synonymous with faith.

In verse 40, "This is the will of my Father, that everyone who beholds the Son and believes in him may have eternal life." The promise of eternal life Jesus gives in 54 says that whoever "eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life." Belief is parallel to eating and drinking.

Eternal life does not come through the Lord's Supper. Eternal life comes through believing in Jesus. That is the consistent message of John up to chapter 6 and that is going to be the consistent message after chapter 6. And, in fact, it is a consistent message through the New Testament. We do not see an emphasis on the Lord's Supper through the letters. We see an emphasis on faith in Jesus. That is everywhere. The eating and drinking of Jesus in this chapter is symbolic of true faith. To eat and drink is to believe in, to receive Jesus. That is why the result is eternal life.

(4) Fourth, a final point, we need to be careful not to mix symbol with reality. The Lord's Supper is not the primary background for the words of Jesus here. Right? He is not talking about the Lord's Supper unless it is somehow in the future. The Lord's Supper has not been established, yet. It would be more right to say the Lord's Supper is about what Jesus is saying here. The background for what Jesus is saying here is the Passover feast. And, later, at the last Passover, that is where Jesus is going to institute or establish the Lord's Supper. So, there is a connection between Jesus words here and the Lord's Supper. That connection is the Passover. So, we need to go back to the Passover to consider the meaning. The words here and the words at the Last Supper, both draw from the reality of the Passover feast. Both take meaning from the Passover feast.

We think back in the Old Testament, flesh and blood, what is flesh and blood about? Well, in Leviticus chapter 17 it is pretty clear that flesh and blood are connected to a sacrifice of atonement.

They are not to be taken separately like flesh is one thing and blood is one thing but as a whole. It is flesh and blood. Flesh and blood are the whole sacrifice both together representing the animal whose life is given up. The life of the sacrifice is offered in place of the sinner. That is what atonement means. This is the kind of sacrifice that is offered in place of someone else. As the blood drains from the animal, the vitality of the flesh is seen to drain away. The eyes close. It is like the animal goes to sleep. The body stops moving. The life is gone. So, giving up the flesh, giving up the blood, is giving up life. The animal is sacrificing life. And if we don't want to be completely scandalized by the words of Jesus, thinking he is talking about some kind of mysterious cannibalism, then we need to understand his reference to flesh and blood as a reference to sacrifice. And since John has already informed us that this is the time of the Passover, and all our language has been from the manna in heaven and the coming out of Egypt, the most immediate reference of sacrifice is the Passover Lamb. That is what we are supposed to think about at Passover. When Jesus institutes later the Lord's Supper, that is what people are supposed to be thinking about. When he talks about flesh and blood, you are supposed to be thinking about the Passover lamb. And you remember that the lamb had its blood smeared on the doorposts of Jewish homes during the last plague in Egypt, so that the angel of wrath would pass over those homes and the firstborn would not die. That lamb was symbolic. That lamb did not really protect people. It did not really take away sin. It pointed ahead to a true sacrifice of atonement. John the Baptist recognizes that this symbolic sacrifice of the lamb comes true in Jesus. So, when Jesus comes to be baptized, we read this in chapter 1, John the Baptist cries out, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29)."

So, what is Jesus talking about when is talking about flesh and blood? He is talking about Passover lamb that people ate. People ate the Passover lamb. He is talking about himself as the sacrifice. This is the spiritual reality that Jesus is pointing us to through his shocking metaphor, that he himself is the sacrifice that must die for our sins. That is why it provides eternal life. Jesus provides eternal life for us by taking punishment on himself so that the wrath of God will pass over. His flesh and blood is the sacrifice of atonement. Eating the bread and wine at the Passover feast was a reminder to Jews of God's great salvation out of Egypt. Eating the flesh and blood of Jesus is not something we do literally. It is a symbolic way of remembering God's even greater deliverance from sin. Jesus is calling on us to believe in him as the Passover lamb. Eating is receiving. When we take the Lord's Supper, we proclaim our faith in Jesus through a symbolic act. By eating the bread and drinking the wine, we proclaim our faith that Jesus indeed gave up his own flesh and blood for us as the true sacrifice of atonement that takes away our sin and makes possible eternal life.

Let me sum up these four points. We could interpret Jesus words as a mystical eating and drinking of the flesh and blood of Jesus in some mysteriously real way. But to make such an interpretation is to reject the information we have been given through the Gospel of John. Up to this point, whether with new birth and Nicodemus or living water and the Samaritan woman or bread of life and this crowd gathered, the metaphor has always pointed to a spiritual reality apart from any material counterpart. The material is not in mind, only the spiritual. We do not really crawl into our mother's womb to be born again. So, why would we then at this point argue that the eating of Jesus' flesh and the drinking of his blood deviates from our consistent interpretation of John, in this one instance to require a real material eating of Jesus.

In fact, to this point in the narrative, with Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman and the gathered crowd, John has emphasized that the inability to understand Jesus use of metaphor to point to a spiritual reality shows a lack of faith, a lack of sight. To insist on a physical or material meaning in the metaphor of eating and drinking is to make the same interpretive mistake that has been consistently pointed out in those who do not see, who do not believe. Eating and drinking here is intended to shock the audience, but the interpretive principle remains the same in John. Jesus is speaking about spiritual reality to all who are willing to follow where his teaching leads. He is the bread of life. He is the source of eternal water. To eat and drink is to believe and receive.

This is a test of faith. We read next how the majority responds to the test. This is John 6:60-66.

The Majority Response (6:60-66)

⁶⁰ Therefore many of His disciples, when they heard *this* said, "This is a difficult statement; who can listen to it?" ⁶¹ But Jesus, conscious that His disciples grumbled at this, said to them, "Does this cause you to stumble? ⁶² What then if you see the Son of Man ascending to where He was before? ⁶³ It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and are life. ⁶⁴ But there are some of you who do not believe." For Jesus knew from the beginning who they were who did not believe, and who it was that would betray Him. ⁶⁵ And He was saying, "For this reason I have said to you, that no one can come to Me unless it has been granted him from the Father." ⁶⁶ As a result of this many of His disciples withdrew and were not walking with Him anymore.

Notice that John's identification of the audience just changed. Earlier, in verse 52, John told us that Jesus was talking to the Jews. And this is not the Jews down in Jerusalem the leaders who were opposed to him. In this context, the Jews are a broad term for a crowd of gathered people, everybody in Galilee is Jewish. So, they are the Jews. Now he tells us that many of Jesus' disciples found Jesus' words difficult to accept. These are disciples. They are not the Twelve. We know that because after these disciples have turned away and left, Jesus is then going to speak to the Twelve. So, these are not the Twelve, but they are also not a randomly gathered crowd of Galileans. These are people who in some way identify as a follower of Jesus. That is what the word disciple means. It means follower.

We know that people identify with Jesus without truly understanding who Jesus is. Way back in 2:23 many believed in Jesus at the Passover feast, but Jesus, knowing what is in the heart of a man did not entrust himself to them. They said they believed. But what did they believe? Jesus knew they did not truly believe. We are told the same thing about these disciples here. Jesus tells them in verse 64, "But there are some of you who do not believe." And then John says, "Jesus knew from the beginning who they were who did not believe." Jesus sees into their heart. Jesus is not surprised by the fact the many of these who followed him do not truly believe in him. Just as we have recognized in John that there is belief that is not true belief and life that is not true life, so also there are disciples that are not true disciples.

For these disciples, the word of Jesus proves too difficult for them. In this case too difficult means offensive. And if we are honest about it, there is stuff in the Bible that is too difficult for us, even offensive. We read parts of the Mosaic law and we say, "Who can accept this?" We have all kinds of struggles whether it is emotional or intellectual. We have struggles about predestination, the conquest of Canaan and the killing of people, the reality of hell, slavery, homosexuality, dinosaurs, the flood, creation of Adam and Eve, laws of purity that apply only to women and not to men, women's roles in ministry, hard sayings, things that seem unfair, too harsh, contradictory. There are things that offend, things that are too hard. Who hasn't said at some point about something in the Bible, "This is a difficult statement; who can listen to it?" What do you do with the teaching that shakes you up, that troubles you emotionally and intellectually? What do you do with it?

Jesus says something very interesting here to these disciples that would be easy to pass over. We can miss this. Jesus says, "Does this cause you to stumble? What then if you see the Son of Man ascending to where He was before?" What does that mean? Why does Jesus say that? "What then if you see the Son of Man ascending to where He was before?" Jesus has just spoken to the crowd, and they do not like what he is saying. If Jesus were at this moment to ascend into heaven, would that change their response to his teaching? The question is this, "Who do you really believe that Jesus is?" Do you expect Jesus to ascend into heaven? Do you see Jesus sitting on the throne of heaven? If the teaching of his word causes severe emotional or intellectual dissonance, distress, but you truly believe that he is the Son of Man who sits the throne of God, are you still going to walk away from him? You don't have to be happy and comfortable with all your Bible problems. There is a lot of teaching to agonize over. But in the end, do you believe that you care more about people than God cares about people, that you discern better than God discerns, that you understand science better than the Creator of the universe,

that you understand sexuality better than the Creator of sex, that you understand justice more than the eternal judge, that you understand suffering better than the one who took all of human suffering and sin on himself. It comes to this. Do you really believe that Jesus has truly risen as the Son of Man to the throne of heaven? Do you really believe he is God and his Word is his Word? And if you do, can you seriously turn away from any of it? Whether you get it or not.

If Jesus is who Jesus claims to be, if he holds the power to give life and authority to judge, then the question of his teaching is a question of who really has authority over truth. Is it me or is it him? You do not have to understand it. You do not even have to good about it. You don't have to like it. You don't have to get it all. But you do have to choose whether you are going to hold on to Jesus, or you are going to walk away from Jesus, in spite of whether you get what he is saying, which should not surprise any of us that we don't totally, emotionally or intellectually get what the King of the Universe is saying . So, if you don't get it, do you still believe in him?

As he says, "Does this cause you to stumble? What then if you see the Son of Man ascending to where He was before? If you imagine Jesus on the throne of heaven, what then are you going to do with his teaching?

"It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and are life. But there are some of you who do not believe."

Jesus does here give them here a little bit of insight into his teaching about eat my flesh, drink my blood. He does not explain the whole metaphor. But he gives them just a bit if they are listening. "It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing." We are not talking about material, fleshly reality, we are talking about the Spirit and the spiritual. When we talk about new birth, when we talk about living water, when we talk about the bread of life, we are talking about something you cant see or touch or eat. Eternal life comes from the Spirit not from the flesh. The flesh profits nothing. He has been talking about the Spirit. And he says it here plainly, "the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life." You don't abide in Jesus by eating, really, his flesh and drinking his blood. That is not mentioned at all in the great abiding in Jesus chapter in John 15. There he is a vine. Life is about abiding spiritually in Christ, through faith. It is a spiritual relationship with God. And he gives them that hint. He does not stop, and he doesn't cry out, "it was just a metaphor! Wait! Come back!" He has given them a faith challenge, and they are going to have to choose whether they say with Jesus, even without understanding, or whether they turn away because they don't understand. They are going to have to make a choice. Jesus is forcing that on them.

Jesus goes on to repeat an important point about faith he has made already in this dialogue. It is not really up to these disciples. It is not by their own will or intellect or spirituality. They cannot in fact believe out of their own flesh. And this is one of those hard truths that might drive you away from Jesus. You have to decide. It comes out of Jesus' mouth. Is it too hard? Are you going to hold onto Jesus or are you going to walk away? The Bible both challenges people with the responsibility to believe in Jesus as an act of their will and also declares that people cannot do so unless God first opens their eyes to see. God must do something in the human heart in order for a person to see and believe.

But even if Jesus were to ascend into heaven in front of them, they would not as a result of that sign accept his teaching. Miraculous signs do not bring about true faith. God brings about true faith. Remember what Jesus said in verse 37, "All that the Father gives me shall come to me." And then in verse 44, "No one can come to me, unless the Father who sent me draws him." And then here again in verse 65, "No one can come to me unless it has been granted him from the Father." Even seeing Jesus ascend into heaven is not going to change the heart of a person. God must open our eyes and draw us to himself.

I met a young woman from Iran here in Zagreb who rejected Islam and chose to identify herself as a Christian. In her long journey from Iran to Europe she found herself stuck in Serbia unable to go further. The night before crossing into Croatia, she had a dream about Jesus. When she woke from the dream, she prayed to Jesus for safe passage. She got it. Somehow, she miraculously, according to her, was able to cross into Croatia. And so, she became a disciple or follower of Jesus.

Like many asylum seekers from the Middle East, she did not want to be in Croatia. She hoped to go further to a more affluent country like Austria or France or Germany. But being an E.U. country, all who register in Croatia must stay in Croatia to apply for asylum. Instead of staying, she prayed to Jesus for safe passage into Germany. But that was breaking the law. She was caught trying to cross the border and brought back. And she was in trouble. Jesus failed her. So, now she no longer calls herself a follower of Jesus.

A dream and a perceived miracle led her to proclaim faith in Jesus. She said she believed. But her faith was not true spiritual sight. She had not been born again through the work of the Holy Spirit. She responded to something powerful. And she claimed to be a disciple, but she was not a true disciple. She had in her own mind who Jesus is and she had what she wanted from Jesus. And when Jesus did not give her what she wanted, he did not live up to her expectations, she walked away. That is not the Jesus she wanted.

Interestingly, I have also met a man from Iran who had a very similar story who I believe truly has come to faith in Jesus. God can use dreams and miracles. But the key ingredient is not a dream or a miracle. The key ingredient is the internal work of God in the heart of a human being. You cannot come if God has not granted it, and he does not draw you.

Judas is the specific example used here and also later in verse 70. Judas is not an example of a true believer who falls from grace. That is made very clear here. We are told that Judas didn't believe because God never did the work in his heart that was necessary in order for him to believe. And so, Jesus was not surprised that Judas betrayed him, and he was not surprised here that many of his disciples left. Because Jesus from first to last sees what is in the heart of a person. He is not fooled. That is why he creates the faith test. That is why he challenges them, so they will not follow him in self-deception.

Now, Jesus is not done. We have had one response. We need to get the other. Next, he turns to the twelve, and he challenges their commitment. This is in verses 67-71.

The Minority Response (6:67-71)

⁶⁷ So Jesus said to the twelve, "You do not want to go away also, do you?" ⁶⁸ Simon Peter answered Him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life. ⁶⁹ We have believed and have come to know that You are the Holy One of God." ⁷⁰ Jesus answered them, "Did I Myself not choose you, the twelve, and *yet* one of you is a devil?" ⁷¹ Now He meant Judas *the son* of Simon Iscariot, for he, one of the twelve, was going to betray Him.

What do you think about Peter? Did Peter understand what Jesus was saying about eat my flesh and drink my blood? Did he get it? No! He had no clue what Jesus was talking about. Read through the rest, the disciples don't get the teaching of Jesus, yet. They are confused with everybody else. Peter was not with Jesus because of his clear understanding of theology. Peter was with Jesus because of Jesus. He did not get what Jesus was saying, but he got Jesus. Peter trusted Jesus. He believed in Jesus. Peter held on, even though he had no idea what Jesus was really talking about. "Lord, to whom shall we go? (Where are we going to go?) You have words of eternal life. You are the Holy One of God! (I am sticking with you)."

This is the contrast. When Jesus asked, "What if you saw the Son of Man ascend into Heaven?" Those who had left had never believed that Jesus really was the Son of Man who was really going to ascend into heaven. Peter does. So, he was shaken too, but he was holding onto Jesus.

When the teaching of Jesus shakes you up, you have to ask yourself what you believe about Jesus. What do I believe about Jesus? When life does not make sense, when you are confused or hurt or your prayers go unanswered, do you cling to Jesus. Do you say with Peter, "Lord, to whom are we going to go? You have the words of eternal life. You are the Holy One of God." And when this happens, having been shaken, you discover what you really believe about Jesus.

Conclusion

This story of a mass desertion in Galilee follows a couple of chapters after the story of revival in Samaria. The disciples were journeying with Jesus through that despised country where people believed in a partial, twisted version of Torah. And they were moving from ministry in Judea where ministry happens to Galilee where ministry happens through Samaria where nothing happens. They just stopped there for lunch.

They did not see the Samaritans as people. They did not pay any attention to them. But Jesus did, beginning with the simple woman at the well and moving on to the whole village. And Jesus rebuked the Twelve for their lack of awareness, informing them that the harvest has come early. You don't have to wait until Galilee. The fields are ripe, ready, right here, right now.

But are the fields white for harvest everywhere? That's a question I've asked myself after 23 years of working to proclaim the gospel in Europe. Some countries seem fairly open and experience significant response. Other places seem quite hard, closed to the gospel. And when I look out past Europe, there are other peoples even more responsive than the most open here and there are still others even more closed than the hardest here. Are all peoples ripe for harvest? Is that the message of John 4?

Well, according to John, the answer seems to be, "No." That's one of his points. Sometimes individuals surprise us, like Nicodemus not being able to follow the thought of Jesus whereas the Samaritan woman did follow the thought of Jesus. And as groups, peoples can also surprise. The Samaritan village was ripe for harvest, willing to believe in large numbers. But in his own birth region of Galilee, Jesus met stiff resistance and stubbornness of heart. "He came to his own, and those who were his own did not receive him (1:10)."

I do not think I could have held out as Jesus did when he saw so many Galilean followers turn and walk away. I would have cried after them, "It is just a metaphor. I don't really mean eat flesh and drink blood." What an awful prayer letter to have to write, especially just after the feeding of the five thousand. That was awesome. I know exactly what I am going to say about this. "We saw a great miracle. It was great. But nobody believed in Jesus and almost all our people left us." Who wants to write about that? A complete desertion. I've got twelve left.

It gives insight into the wisdom and heart of Jesus. Jesus was not about big numbers. He was about transformed lives. He did not want surface followers who in reality refused to give up their own definitions about Jesus. He was willing to challenge their false belief even if it meant he would lose everybody. He would rather push all away, so that some might truly believe.

The faith challenge was also for his own, for his close disciples. Jesus, I don't think, expected them to walk away. He knew they would not. He knew they were true, all but one. He expected them to hold on. His challenge to them provided an opportunity for them to experience the testing of their faith, to be strengthen by that testing in their own conviction that Jesus is all. "Where are we going to go? You are the one from God."

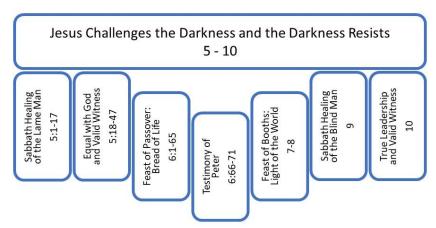
So, after everybody left, we could ask did Jesus fail in Galilee? Was his ministry a failure? Everybody left. Well, how you answer that depends on your spiritual math. How do you count success? Through this faith test, Jesus pushed away from his movement the many who did not truly believe, but he held on to a dedicated few. And when we look ahead into the future, we see something really interesting, really interesting. On the Day of Pentecost, Acts chapter 2, when the Holy Spirit comes upon the followers of Jesus and they began to miraculously witness in Jerusalem in the languages and dialects of those present, people in the crowd are going to marvel, they are going to be amazed, and they are going to say, "What is going on here? Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?"

Why, yes, indeed. Was Jesus successful in Galilee? Maybe not if you go by breath of numbers, but if you go by depth, those who held on, these are from Galilee. And they are about to turn the world upside down.

Reflection questions

- 1. Read John 6:52-71. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What are some questions that come to mind?
- 2. What are the results of eating Jesus' flesh and drinking his blood, according to 6:54-56? And how do you understand these results as having come from "eating" and "drinking?"
- 3. How do you understand the connection between what Jesus is saying about eating and drinking in 6:54-56 and what he says about himself as the Bread of Life in 6:35?
- 4. How do you understand Jesus' statement in 6:65 that "no one can come to me, unless it has been granted him from the Father"? In 37 and 44 Jesus makes similar statements in connection to his promise of security for all who have been given to him. What do these truths do for you emotionally or intellectually? Is your response one of peace or do these truths create some dissonance in you?
- 5. When in your life has some truth of Scripture created in you an experienced of significant dissonance or instability? What was your response? Did that truth drive you from Jesus for a while or drive you to Jesus?
- 6. Would you say you are seeking something from Jesus currently in your relationship with him or you are seeking Jesus himself? If you are seeking Jesus, who do you understand him to be?

Lesson 14: John 7 The Feast of Booths and Living Water Introduction



Six months have passed since the large-scale defection of Galilean disciples. We know this because the desertion happened at the time of Passover, and it is now time for the Feast of Booths, which occurs six months later.

Understanding the festival calendar is not essential for understanding the message of John, but it does help. The festivals provide a symbolic context for a number of passages. We experienced this in chapter 6. The feeding of the 5000, the declaration "I am the Bread of Life!", the sacrificial language "eat my body, drink my blood" that all occurred in the context of Passover. The manna provision from heaven, the lack of faith in that grumbling generation, the blood and flesh of the Passover lamb, that was all background to the dialogue between Jesus and the people. Similarly, we are going to be able to expect connection between the Feast of Booths and the teaching of Jesus in chapters 7 and 8.

Let's talk about the feasts a little bit. I count seven feasts in the Gospel of John by including the wedding feast from chapter 2. I grant that the wedding is not an Old Testament religious feast, but it does provide religious symbolism particular to the New Covenant. So, I think John is quite creative in his ordering of the feasts in his Gospel.

- (1) There are seven with the Wedding Feast. That Feast occurs in chapter 2.
- (2) The First Passover mentioned is also in chapter 2.
- (3) An Undesignated Feast occurs in chapter 5.
- (4) The Second Passover is mentioned in chapter 6.
- (5) The Feast of Booths is the setting for chapters 7 and 8.
- (6) And the Feast of Dedication occurs in chapter 10.
- (7) Finally, we have the Third Passover. It is mentioned at the end of chapter 11. But it provides the background for the whole of the second half of the Gospel, chapters 12-20.

Three references to Sabbath also occur in John (that's in chapters 5, 9 and 19) and that would give us a total of 10 feasts, which is another symbolically satisfying number.

In organizing the feasts in your head in the calendar, it is helpful to remember the number seven. That is obvious just thinking about the typical Sabbath, which is the seventh day of every week. It is also helpful for remembering the three primary feasts of presence. Presence means that all of the able-bodied Jewish males were required to be present in Jerusalem for the feast. Those are Passover, Weeks and Booths. Passover occurs in the middle of the first month of the year. The Feast of Weeks occurs seven sabbaths and a day after the last sabbath of Passover. That is seven sevens, forty-nine, plus one which is why it is later called Pentecost, Pente being 50 in Greek. And then the Feast of Booths occurs in the seventh month, which is easy to remember if we keep in mind the number of 7.

We have Passover in the first month. Feast of Booths in the seventh month. Pentecost came seven sevens after Passover. The separation of time between Passover and Booths also creates a nice calendar year for Israel because it occurs exactly half a year after Passover. It is also helpful to note that the seventh month is really emphasized in the feast calendar. On the first day of that seventh month is the Feast of Trumpets, on the tenth day is the Day of Atonement, and then we have the Feast of Booth starting on the fifteenth day.

The three main feasts all had connections both to Jewish salvation history and also to God's provision of harvest. On the last day of the Passover Feast, also called the Feast of Unleavened Bread, a first-fruit grain offering from the early barley harvest was offered in the temple. That Jewish first month coincides with our ending of March and beginning of April. Fifty days later at the Feast of Weeks, which is our May or June, a wheat offering was made for the early summer harvest. And then in the seventh month at the Feast of Booths, our September or October, an offering was made to celebrate the late grain harvest and the harvest of grapes and olives.

These festivals reminded the people where provision comes from. And, yes, they worked hard to till the land and to plant the seed and to cultivate grain and fruit, but they also recognized that sun and rain and protection ultimately comes from God. I've been told that there is something about working the land that makes it easier for a person to appreciate that we live in a created world governed by a Creator God, and so in our day, we find that far more atheists live in the city than in the country. Someone might try to argue that city dwellers are better educated academically and so, they are more likely to be right. But that kind of false elitism is going to be rejected by the end of this chapter, by the end of John 7.

Connecting the harvest to celebrations of thanksgiving provided a regular reminder for the Israelites of their dependence on God for life and abundance.

The festivals gave this same reminder of dependence by pointing the people back to essential moments in their salvation history. At Passover they remembered the sacrificial lamb and the Exodus from Egypt. At the Feast of Weeks, they celebrated the coming to Mount Sinai and the receiving of the law that bound them together as a nation. At the Feast of Booths they remembered the wandering in the wilderness, and God's provision of water and bread throughout.

John does use the feasts in his Gospel to give us a sense of time. That is part of what he is doing. We are journeying with Jesus from Passover to Passover. The years are moving by. And the mention of Booths or the Feast of Dedication reminds us that there is a chronology here, that John is telling us things according to fixed times. This is a real story. It's in real time. But John is doing more with the festivals than just fixing the chronology. His references to various feasts make a point.

In John's lifetime, before he writes this Gospel, the Roman fist had finally come crashing down on the Jews. In 70 AD, Titus destroyed the temple. Hundreds of thousands of Jews died and were enslaved. No one could any longer travel to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover or Weeks or Booths. Even if they could get to Jerusalem, there is no temple, no altar for sacrifice, no holy place. This is a time of dismay and disorientation for Jewish people and for Jewish proselytes, Greeks who had connected themselves to Judaism. Where do we go from here? The temple, so central to Jewish worship and identity is gone. How do we know God? How do we live for God? Without the temple, for the Jews there is no easy answer, not spiritually, not intellectually, not emotionally.

Into this vacuum, John has written his Gospel. He is proclaiming fulfillment. You do not need to go back to the Old Testament. You go forward in Jesus. You want to celebrate the Passover Lamb? Jesus! You want the provision of bread through the wilderness? Jesus! You want flowing water in the desert? Jesus! You want Sabbath rest? Jesus! When you look back, stop longer look back to the Exodus. That's looking too far back. Something new has happened. You look back to the cross on Golgotha. You look back to an empty tomb. The promise to Abraham is fulfilled in something new. "Believe in me and from you will flow rivers of living water!"

This is the message of John 7. There is no need any longer to celebrate the Feast of Booths. Its message is fulfilled in Jesus. We are going to look at three sections to the chapter. A family argument and two debates. The family argument teaches us something about the timing of God. This is John 7:1-13.

The Timing of God (7:1-13)

- ¹ After these things Jesus was walking in Galilee, for He was unwilling to walk in Judea because the Jews were seeking to kill Him. ² Now the feast of the Jews, the Feast of Booths, was near. ³ Therefore His brothers said to Him, "Leave here and go into Judea, so that Your disciples also may see Your works which You are doing. ⁴ For no one does anything in secret when he himself seeks to be *known* publicly. If You do these things, show Yourself to the world." ⁵ For not even His brothers were believing in Him.
- ⁶ So Jesus said to them, "My time is not yet here, but your time is always opportune. ⁷ The world cannot hate you, but it hates Me because I testify of it, that its deeds are evil. ⁸ Go up to the feast yourselves; I do not go up to this feast because My time has not yet fully come."
- ⁹ Having said these things to them, He stayed in Galilee. ¹⁰ But when His brothers had gone up to the feast, then He Himself also went up, not publicly, but as if, in secret. ¹¹ So the Jews were seeking Him at the feast and were saying, "Where is He?" ¹² There was much grumbling among the crowds concerning Him; some were saying, "He is a good man"; others were saying, "No, on the contrary, He leads the people astray." ¹³ Yet no one was speaking openly of Him for fear of the Jews.

There is a disagreement between Jesus and his brothers concerning strategy. The brothers give Jesus unsolicited advice for a next move. They tell him in verse 3-4, "Leave here and go into Judea, so that Your disciples also may see Your works which You are doing. For no one does anything in secret when he himself seeks to be *known* publicly. If You do these things, show Yourself to the world."

If we did not know that Jesus was going to rebuke them, we might conclude that this is pretty sound counsel. It is a possible strategy. Jesus' rebuke is maybe a rebuke to us as well to be careful about giving strategic advice too quickly without prayer, without submission to the will of God.

Before telling us about Jesus' response, John first lets us know the brothers do not believe. That helps us consider their advice. It also helps us understand Jesus' response. We also know by this point in the gospel not to take lack of belief as necessarily indicating strong opposition from the brothers against him. There is quite a range of those who do not believe all the way from those who want to kill Jesus to those who claim to believe without believing. The strategy offered by the brothers suggests that they believe in his power to do miracles, and they believe in his potential to become someone of note in the religious world of Israel. We do not know if any of them would call him the Prophet or the Christ. That does not seem likely, yet. But they know he is gifted, and he is able to become a public figure, if only he will make the most of the right opportunities.

So, the advice makes strategic sense. The brothers are aware of the desertion of many Galilean disciples. That is a blow to Jesus' position. But it is not necessarily a critical blow. Galilee is not the place to build a movement anyway. If you want real influence, real power, you are going to have to make a name for yourself in Jerusalem. The Feast of Booths is a prime opportunity. The seventh month is the most important on the calendar. Pilgrims were already in Jerusalem for the Feast of Trumpets and the Day of Atonement. Booths, as one of the three main feasts, requiring the presence of all males, is just going to swell the population of Jerusalem. It is going to swell it to the bursting point. It is the most religious, most joyfully festival time in the calendar year. Jesus needs to make a strong showing. He needs to give confidence to the disciples who remain in Galilee and to the ones who have believed in Judea. At this feast, Jesus can strengthen his base and grow his movement. It is time to seize the moment.

But in giving this advice, the brothers have missed the heart and mind of Jesus. If Jesus wanted numbers, back in chapter 6, he would not have let all those Galilean disciples go without explaining to them the symbolic meaning of eating his flesh and drinking his blood. That episode taught us that the strategy of Jesus is not about gathering numbers and building influence within society's acceptable religious structures. Jesus determines strategy according to goals and timing in harmony with the will of God. He is not pressured into his moves by others. Jesus is depending on God and that determines the underlying values that drive his decision making.

Jesus lets them know they are way off the mark when he responds, "My time is not yet here, but your time is always opportune. The world cannot hate you, but it hates Me because I testify of it, that its deeds are evil. Go up to the feast yourselves; I do not go up to this feast because My time has not yet fully come."

Why is Jesus' time "not yet here"? Because he is waiting for God's timing.

Why is their time "always opportune"? Because they are making strategic decisions according to the values of the world. "The world cannot hate" the brothers because the brothers create strategy in line with what the world finds valuable. The brothers see the spiritual from the lens of worldly religious structures. The world defines for them how to act spiritually.

But the world hates Jesus because Jesus opposes its system of values and its structures. Jesus sees the world through a spiritual lens. Because of that, he sees it rightly.

I was teaching a course for Cru staff in Macedonia just a couple of weeks ago. One of the staff Ilija previously worked as a host for Good Morning Macedonia. Ilija shared with me that when he informed the human resource representative that he was leaving television to work for Leader Impact, a Christian ministry of Cru, she could not believe it. She became hostile. She tried to shame him. She expressed shock that he would leave a respectable, progressive career not to move on, but as she put it "to go back to the Middle Ages, the dark ages". Ilija just left. But when he shared this with me, I immediately thought of Jesus' words here. The world sees through the lens of the world with the values of the world. The brothers cannot give Jesus strategy because they do not understand the values that Jesus is operating on.

Jesus is not so much avoiding a clash with the world as he is managing that clash. We might ask whether Jesus lied to his brothers here. He said he was not going up. But after they left, he did go up. I think it is perfectly valid to read an implied condition into the words of Jesus. "I am not going up to announce myself in the public way you are advising for me." Or, "I am not going up based on a strategy of the world but am waiting on the Lord and will go up if and when he so directs me." That is the implication behind his not going up.

And it appears that God did not want Jesus to avoid public confrontation at the Feast of Booths. He does go up. He does speak publicly. We cannot know for certain why the Father led Jesus to wait and go after the brothers. But we can look forward to chapter 12 and imagine another way of going up. At that future Passover feast, Jesus will go up very publicly. He will ride in on a donkey, crowds are going to gather. And they are going to follow him in, and they are going to shout dangerous political things, like, "Hosanna! Save us! Son of David." That very public stirring up of the crowds precedes Jesus' arrest and his crucifixion.

We can imagine that to be exactly the kind of public entrance the Father wants Jesus to avoid at this time. Jesus will enter Jerusalem privately. Confrontation with the world must be managed according to the timing of the Father, because the Father has more for the Son to accomplish before the time of the cross.

And Jesus does this. He manages the timing according to the will of the Father, but it does not mean avoiding being public or avoiding confronting the crowds. We are going to see at the feast Jesus standing up to teach twice. The teaching is going to be followed by two debates. And the debates are

going to be followed by responses from Jewish leadership. These are two similar cycles, Jesus teaches, people debate, leaders respond, then Jesus teaches, people debate, leaders respond.

The Source of Truth (7:14-36)

We start with the teaching section of the first cycle. This is John 7:14-24.

- a. Jesus teaches (7:14-24)
 - ¹⁴ But when it was now the midst of the feast Jesus went up into the temple, and *began to* teach. ¹⁵ The Jews then were astonished, saying, "How has this man become learned, having never been educated?"
 - ¹⁶ So Jesus answered them and said, "My teaching is not Mine, but His who sent Me. ¹⁷ If anyone is willing to do His will, he will know of the teaching, whether it is of God or *whether* I speak from Myself. ¹⁸ He who speaks from himself seeks his own glory; but He who is seeking the glory of the One who sent Him, He is true, and there is no unrighteousness in Him. ¹⁹ Did not Moses give you the Law, and *yet* none of you carries out the Law? Why do you seek to kill Me?"
 - ²⁰ The crowd answered, "You have a demon! Who seeks to kill You?"
 - ²¹ Jesus answered them, "I did one deed, and you all marvel. ²² For this reason Moses has given you circumcision (not because it is from Moses, but from the fathers), and on *the* Sabbath you circumcise a man. ²³ If a man receives circumcision on *the* Sabbath so that the Law of Moses will not be broken, are you angry with Me because I made an entire man well on *the* Sabbath? ²⁴ Do not judge according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment."

John tells us Jesus was teaching, but he does not tell us what Jesus was teaching. He just tells us the crowd marveled at it. They were amazed at the knowledge of Jesus though he had not been trained as a scribe or a priest. Where does he get this knowledge? Jesus takes the opportunity to teach about his teaching. Though the crowd gives him a chance to boast about how he knows so much, Jesus ignores that. He does not tell us how he has attained his knowledge. He does not seek his own glory. Instead Jesus focuses on the source of his knowledge, the source of truth. And this turns into a challenge for his listeners.

If indeed they are educated in the Word of God and know God's will, then Jesus tells them, "You should be equipped to discern whether I am speaking in accordance with the truth of God or whether I am speaking for myself." Jesus is seeking the glory of God. He is not seeking to establish a movement just about himself or for glory for himself or influence for himself. But Jesus does not expect the crowd to respond positively to him. He doesn't expect them to discern that he is in harmony with the Father. He has already judged them that they are not really seeking to follow the Word of God written in the law of Moses. That might be surprising since they are all there to celebrate a feast from the law of Moses. They have a version of the law, a set of regulations, a way of following it, and ceremonies that work in their culture. So, they have this religious setup. But Jesus rejects the idea that their traditional following of Moses is an actual understanding or submission to the Word of God delivered by Moses.

It seems to me that Jesus' approach here is similar to his approach in Galilee. This is not a conversation of invitation like the one he had with the woman at the well. This is a conversation of confrontation. Jesus does not want to be mistaken as one who fits into their culturally defined Jewish understanding of religion. He does not want to allow those who here to absorb him into their own definitions and values. That is a standard danger with cultural religion. It is either going to reject him or worse mold him to fit the system. Jesus would rather be rejected. He must be if he is to remain true to the Father, true to his own nature. He cannot be taken as merely a good man, a religious teacher, a prophet. He is Lord and Savior.

So, Jesus cuts through any potential compromise, declaring that his teaching is from God and their commitment to Moses only lip service. They have strayed in their hearts and their behavior condemns them.

The crowd does not take that accusation well, so they lob one back at Jesus. It is a bit less sophisticated. They just say, "You have a demon!" And then they deny the possibility that anyone would want to kill Jesus even though it is a common suspicion that killing Jesus is exactly what the religious leaders have in mind.

And Jesus knows what argument has been set up against him. It has been stewing for a while, since chapter 5. He knows the Jewish leaders have not forgotten when he healed the lame man on the Sabbath. And Jesus challenges that accusation, which also provides an opportunity to prove what he has just said, that they do not truly follow Moses. Here is a paraphrase of his teaching here, "Yes. I know what you are saying. I know you want to kill me. And I know you justify your position based on the fact that I healed a man on the Sabbath. But you know the law makes exceptions. The law allows for circumcision on the Sabbath. You allow for that. And yet, you are so sure that healing a man on the Sabbath breaks the law of Moses. You are judge based on your agenda to convict me. This is your hatred to convict me. You are not judging the case with righteous judgment."

Jesus' words on this matter just stir up the debate about him even more. And we move on to John 7:25-31.

b. People debate (7:25-31)

- ²⁵ So some of the people of Jerusalem were saying, "Is this not the man whom they are seeking to kill? ²⁶ Look, He is speaking publicly, and they are saying nothing to Him. The rulers do not really know that this is the Christ, do they? ²⁷ However, we know where this man is from; but whenever the Christ may come, no one knows where He is from."
- ²⁸ Then Jesus cried out in the temple, teaching and saying, "You both know Me and know where I am from; and I have not come of Myself, but He who sent Me is true, whom you do not know. ²⁹ I know Him, because I am from Him, and He sent Me."
- ³⁰ So they were seeking to seize Him; and no man laid his hand on Him, because His hour had not yet come. ³¹ But many of the crowd believed in Him; and they were saying, "When the Christ comes, He will not perform more signs than those which this man has, will He?"

We might have asked the same question these people begin with. Aren't the leaders wanting to kill this man? How is he getting away with teaching publicly? Why don't they arrest him? That makes them wonder whether there is something to Jesus after all. Is there something hidden the leaders aren't letting on to.

But he can't be the Christ. They know he cannot be. Because they claim to know where he is from. And no one knows where the Christ is from. Their own knowledge is there basis for rejecting Jesus.

And Jesus' responds by affirming what they know and what they don't know. "Yes. You know something. You know I am from Nazareth in Galilee born of a woman named Mary. There is a historical, physical side to me. And you are okay claiming that knowledge. But there is more. And this you do not know. You do not know who sent me. You do not understand where I am really from. You do not know me. They are satisfied with the little they know about Jesus and it is enough for them not to seek more.

Aware of this debate among the crowd, Jewish leaders respond. This is John 7:32-36.

c. Leaders respond (7:32-36)

- ³² The Pharisees heard the crowd muttering these things about Him, and the chief priests and the Pharisees sent officers to seize Him.
- ³³ Therefore Jesus said, "For a little while longer I am with you, then I go to Him who sent Me.
- ³⁴ You will seek Me, and will not find Me; and where I am, you cannot come."
- ³⁵ The Jews then said to one another, "Where does this man intend to go that we will not find Him? He is not intending to go to the Dispersion among the Greeks, and teach the Greeks, is He? ³⁶ What is this statement that He said, 'You will seek Me, and will not find Me; and where I am, you cannot come'?"

Officials are sent to arrest Jesus. The chief priests are the establishment. They are of the party of the Sadducees. They hold the traditional ways of authority. They hold to religious structures that give them power. And Jesus is a threat to that position. They are stewards. And they do not want to give that stewardship up to some kind of king like Jesus. The Pharisees are a more grass roots movement made up of all levels of society. They do not control the council of the Sanhedrin, but Pharisees do sit on the council and they have considerable moral influence. They keep the law. They are zealous for God and for morality. But Jesus challenges their legalism. Jesus sees through to their heart. And so, he is a threat to them as well. Normally, the Sadducees and Pharisees would be political opponents. But here they unite together against Jesus. So, the Pharisees and the chief priests together sent officers to seize him. Because he is a threat.

Jesus declares, "For a little while longer I am with you, then I go to Him who sent Me. ³⁴ You will seek Me, and will not find Me; and where I am, you cannot come." The crowd cannot understand what he is saying. And as has constantly happened, Jesus speaks about heavenly or spiritual truth, but the people can only interpret it according to the physical. Where is he going? It is not in their mind at all that he is talking about heaven. Is he going to the dispersed Jews who live among the peoples of the Roman and Persian empires? Is that where he is going? Is he leaving Israel, going on a missionary journey?

The wondering of the crowd indicates they do not really know what they claimed to know. They claim to know where Jesus is from. But they only know half the story. Their knowledge is limited. They do not know that he is going back to the Father and that if they believe in him, he will prepare a place for them. They don't get it. They know without knowing.

So, Jesus, says, "You will seek me..." Remember when he says that in the Gospel of Matthew? "If you seek", what comes next? If you seek... "You will find." But not so here. The opposite here. If you seek you will not find, and you cannot come. Because the seeking here is not going to be done with a heart for God, a heart humbled and submitted to the teaching of Jesus. They will seek blindly. They will seek only with the eyes of the world and so they can't ever find him. And they can't ever join him where he is going.

Jesus words are truth because they come from the Father just as the Word given by Moses comes from the Father. The Father is the source, the source of truth. And both the revealed word of Old Testament Scripture and the revealed word of the teaching of Jesus come from the Father. So, the person who truly understands one or the other, they will recognize the two as harmonious. Jesus does not come to overturn Moses. Jesus comes to fulfill Moses.

That is the first cycle of Jesus teaching, the people debating, leaders responding. Now, we come at the end of chapter 7 to a second cycle. Again, Jesus teaches, the people debate, the leaders respond. In that first cycle we focused on the source of truth. In this second cycle we are going to focus on the source of life.

The Source of Life (7:37-52)

But before we start on the second cycle, let's take a moment to investigate a little more what happens at the Feast of Booths in the time of Jesus. We take our basic understanding of the Feast of Booths from Leviticus 23 and Deuteronomy 16. But there are two other prominent mentions in the Old Testament that influenced how Jews of Jesus' day understood the Feast. It influences the symbolism. These are Nehemiah 8 and Zechariah 14.

Nehemiah 8 tells about the priest Ezra preaching to the Jewish remnant returned from Babylon at the time of the Feast of Booths. The Law is read, and the people experience conviction, probably both for their own sins and the sins of their ancestors. And they begin to weep. But Ezra tells them to enjoy the Feast, "Go, eat of the fat, drink of the sweet, and send portions to him who has nothing prepared; for this day is holy to our Lord. Do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength...They celebrated the feast seven days, and on the eight day there was a solemn assembly according to the ordinance (8:10, 18)."

The whole of Nehemiah chapter 9, the following chapter, is a Psalm of confession and praise. And it confesses the sins of Israel from Abraham to the Exile and praises God according to his name, "gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in lovingkindness." This Psalm in Nehemiah 9 was likely read at future celebrations of the Feast of Booths to bring to mind this revival with Ezra. The Psalm expresses the heart of the people after that much earlier Feast of Booths. And it was a heart of conviction. And it was a heart of listening to the word God. It was the heart response Jesus desired but it is not the heart response he saw of these people at this Feast of Booths.

The second prominent reference to the Feast of Booths in the Old Covenant is found in Zechariah 14. It was also typical to read this passage at the celebration. The latter half of Zechariah's prophecy is very much looking forward to the future day of the Lord and emphasizes the Messiah, the Shepherd King. And we get all these Messianic prophecies in this part of Zechariah.

In 9:9, "Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout *in triumph*, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you; He is just and endowed with salvation, Humble, and mounted on a donkey, Even on a colt, the foal of a donkey."

Then in Zechariah 11:13, "The Lord said to me, 'Throw it to the potter, *that* magnificent price at which I was valued by them.' So I took the thirty *shekels* of silver and threw them to the potter in the house of the Lord."

In 12:10 "I will pour out on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the Spirit of grace and of supplication, so that they will look on Me whom they have pierced;"

And in 13:7 "Strike the Shepherd that the sheep may be scattered; and I will turn my hand against the little ones."

Then in the final chapter we get this reference in 14:7–9 about water and light on the last day, "⁷For it will be a unique day which is known to the Lord, neither day nor night, but it will come about that at evening time there will be light. ⁸ And in that day living waters will flow out of Jerusalem, half of them toward the eastern sea and the other half toward the western sea; it will be in summer as well as in winter. ⁹ And the Lord will be king over all the earth; in that day the Lord will be *the only* one, and His name *the only* one."

Finally, we get a surprising vision of the Feast of Booths on the last day, which identifies the King with Yahweh and states an expectation that all peoples attend this Feast, both Jew and Gentiles.

This is Zechariah 14:16-17,

"¹⁶ Then it will come about that any who are left of all the nations that went against Jerusalem will go up from year to year to worship the King, the LORD of hosts, and to celebrate the Feast of Booths. ¹⁷ And it will be that whichever of the families of the earth does not go up to Jerusalem to worship the King, the Lord of hosts, there will be no rain on them."

So, we get this emphasis on Messiah and this emphasis on the time when there is no darkness, only light. And there is water streaming out of Jerusalem. These Old Testament passages, this from Nehemiah and Zechariah together with the original ones from Deuteronomy and Levitics, led the Jews in their development of the celebration. These four elements are reported in the Mishna, the official Rabbinic commentary on the Torah.

1) Booths

As we have already noted, the Israelites built booths in which they ate and slept for seven days. It was a lot of fun. It was like camping out in the backyard. Booths were built in the temple courts as well as in public and private areas. And the booths encouraged Israelites to imagine the experience of Israel in the wilderness.

2) Celebration

The celebrations included psalms and flute-playing and trumpet sounds and sacrifices, dancing and processions. In morning procession, worshippers carried a citrus fruit in the left hand and a bunch of twigs tied around a palm branch in the right hand to celebrate symbolically God's provision.

3) Water

Each day water was drawn from the pool of Siloam and taken in procession to the temple and poured out there in a bowl near the altar as an offering to God.

4) Light

Four enormous candelabra were set up in the court of women in the evening of the first day of the feast. And when these were illuminated, the rabbis say, "there was not a court in Jerusalem that did not reflect the light." A torch dance and music performed by Levites accompanied the illumination in the evening.

So, with this background, we are now ready to consider the impact of Jesus' words when he stands up as second time to teach in the temple court. This is John 737-39.

a. Jesus teaches (7:37-39)

- ³⁷ Now on the last day, the great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried out, saying, "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink. ³⁸ He who believes in Me, as the Scripture said, 'From his innermost being will flow rivers of living water.'"
- ³⁹ But this He spoke of the Spirit, whom those who believed in Him were to receive; for the Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.

We can't be certain whether Jesus stood up on the seventh day of the Feast or on the special Sabbath that occurred on the eighth day right after the Feast. Either way, we can imagine the power of his words at the end of this Feast. For seven days the high priest had gone to the pool of Siloam and filled a golden pitcher with water. He then led a procession back to the temple. Trumpets were sounded as he entered the courts. The priests marched around the altar as the choir sang the Hallel, that's Psalms 113-118. At the close of the last Psalm, the pilgrims shook the twigs they had in one hand and raised the citrus fruit they had in the other hand as an expression of thanksgiving to Yahweh. And the water was poured from the golden pitcher and it was an offering to God, symbolizing God's provision in the desert and Lord's pouring out of the Spirit in the last days.

This ceremony took place every morning for seven days. Every morning the Priest returned to the pool for water and carried the water to the temple. And now, Jesus stands up in the temple on the last day, and he cries out, "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture said, 'From his innermost being will flow rivers of living water.'"

It is an amazing proclamation. Just as Jesus had said in his one-on-one with the Samaritan woman, now, he proclaims to the gathered masses in the temple. There is no more going back to the pool for water time after time, year after year. "Believe in me and from you will flow rivers of living water. I am the source of living water."

Jesus is promising a kind of life that has never been experienced by human beings. Old Testament saints knew something of the Spirit and the joy of the Lord. But this, this is something new. None of the disciples had yet experienced it. As John says, the pouring out of the Holy Spirit will not happen until after the glorification of Jesus, after the cross, the resurrection and the ascension.

Jesus is speaking ahead about a New Covenant reality. And he is connecting it to temple language. The flowing river in Zechariah does not come out of a person. The river flows from Jerusalem. And in Ezekiel he says it is a river flowing out of the temple. In the New Covenant, each individual believer will be a temple indwelt by the Holy Spirit.

Jesus just foreshadows this truth here. He is going to come back to it in a private conversation with his disciples in chapters 14-16. The people recognize that he has spoken with authority. But they do not understand who he is. And they do not understand what he is really saying. And the debate begins again. Let's read 7:40-44.

b. People debate (7:40-44)

⁴⁰ Some of the people therefore, when they heard these words, were saying, "This certainly is the Prophet." ⁴¹ Others were saying, "This is the Christ." Still others were saying, "Surely the Christ is not going to come from Galilee, is He? ⁴² Has not the Scripture said that the Christ comes from the descendants of David, and from Bethlehem, the village where David was?" ⁴³ So a division occurred in the crowd because of Him. ⁴⁴ Some of them wanted to seize Him, but no one laid hands on Him.

The people continue the debate begun earlier in the Feast. Who is this Jesus? Instead of saying they do not know where the Christ will come from, this time someone remembers he ought to come from Bethlehem. And they are divided. They can't agree. And even though some want to lay hands on him they do not because God is in control of that. And again, the leaders respond. This is 7:45-52.

c. Leaders respond (7:45-52)

⁴⁵ The officers then came to the chief priests and Pharisees, and they said to them, "Why did you not bring Him?" ⁴⁶ The officers answered, "Never has a man spoken the way this man speaks." ⁴⁷ The Pharisees then answered them, "You have not also been led astray, have you? ⁴⁸ No one of the rulers or Pharisees has believed in Him, has he? ⁴⁹ But this crowd which does not know the Law is accursed." ⁵⁰ Nicodemus (he who came to Him before, being one of them) said to them, ⁵¹ "Our Law does not judge a man unless it first hears from him and knows what he is doing, does it?" ⁵² They answered him, "You are not also from Galilee, are you? Search, and see that no prophet arises out of Galilee."

Here we finally get a human reason for why Jesus was not arrested. From the human perspective of the officers, it is because Jesus spoke in a way that no one speaks. They became unsure of themselves. There was something about the authority in his voice, something about his presence.

But we see the elitism of the Pharisees in their response. "Who is this crowd to understand any of these things? This crowd, they are accursed. They are stupid. They don't know. Who are men like this Peter or John or Matthew, fishermen, tax collectors, who are they to make any proclamation about the Christ? What is a Samaritan woman or Martha or a blind man? They are uneducated. What does it matter what they say? We are educated. We are the religious class. We are the ones who know."

But we keep being reminded that education is not the key to spiritual sight. Knowing the Word of God is certainly important. But to understand the Word, something must also happen in the heart. God must do a work there in the human soul. And when he does, the common man or woman may see much more clearly with greater perception than the most highly educated or the most privileged or the most powerful.

And we see from John's report a problem with the heart of the Pharisees. Nicodemus, who by the way it is finally nice hear from again, makes a rational suggestion about procedure which is fully in line with the law. "Our Law does not judge a man unless it first hears from him and knows what he is doing, does it?" And instead of saying, "Good point." Or giving an opposing reason of law, the other members of the council, they just simply attack Nicodemus personally because the problem is not in their mind. The problem is in their heart.

They answered Nicodemus, "You are not also from Galilee, are you? Search, and see that no prophet arises out of Galilee." This problem in their heart, this antagonism against Jesus, the desire for the darkness to shut him down, blinds their ability or even desire to think. I mean really, "does not prophet arise out of Galilee"? Well, what about Jonah or Nahum? They are both from Galilee. And they made it into the Bible, so I guess they count. But maybe they mean the Prophet, the one who will be like Moses. He does not arrive out of Galilee. But that is overstating, because nowhere are we told where that Prophet is going to come from. But, of course, they would presume that he must come from Jerusalem, from Judea. They can't imagine anybody of worth or influence coming from Galilee.

And they don't even want to talk about Jesus being the Christ. They reject that he is the Prophet - no prophet from Galilee. But they don't even want to think about Isaiah's words in Isaiah 9 when he talks about Galilee and he says, "The people who walk in darkness are going to see a great light...a child will be born, a son given, and his name will be Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:2, 6)." If they would investigate a minimal amount, they could resolve the problem of the Messiah growing up in Galilee. It is pretty simple. He wasn't born in Galilee. He was born in Bethlehem, the city of David. And then he moved to Galilee and grew up there. But why search further? Why? They have already made up their minds about Jesus. They already know. And because they claim to already know, they cannot come to know. The knowledge that is available to simpler, less educated, more humble people, they can't access.

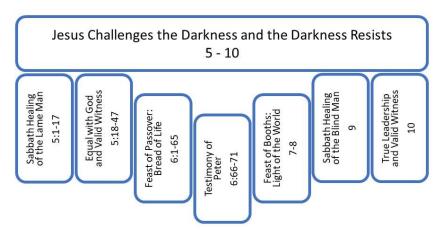
Jesus stood up in the temple speaking words of truth and exhorting the people to bring their hearts in line with the teaching of Moses. He also stood up promising the Holy Spirit to everybody who believes in him. The crowd and their leaders, they claim to know who Jesus is. But they deny the word. They deny the Spirit. They know without truly knowing. The way to know Jesus is to humbly receive the Word of God and trust him to work in our hearts by his Spirit to open our eyes so that we can see. Those who seek in that way, find. And the result is life. Life flowing in us, life flowing through us.

If anyone is thirsty, let him come to Jesus and drink. He who believes in him, as the Scripture said, "From his innermost being will flow rivers of living water."

Reflection questions

- 1. Read John 7:1-13. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What are some questions that come to mind?
- 2. How do you understand in your own life the experience of coming up with your own strategy as the brothers did versus acting in trust on God's leading, according to God's values? What stands out in the text concerning the brothers and concerning Jesus that might help you make the distinction in your own life?
- 3. Read John 7:14-36. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What are some questions that come to mind?
- 4. How do the Jews and the leaders of the Jews reflect this same principle of trusting in their own understanding on in the values of the world as the brothers had? What assumptions do they make?
- 5. How does Jesus continue to model guidance and action based on the guidance and values of God?
- 6. Read John 7:37-52. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What are some questions that come to mind?
- 7. Imagine the difference between those who just heard Jesus' words and those who really heard and believed Jesus' words when he made the proclamation of 7:37-38? What might the thoughts or feelings been like for different people in the crowd?

Lesson 15: John 8:1-11 Text Criticism and a Passage in Search of a Home Introduction



I am going to talk to you today about something that may be very new to you, maybe shocking. It is probably noted in your Bible, but you may have never paid attention to it and it is possible nobody has ever brought it up in church. It is not a secret. It is just not talked about.

If you have a Bible version that gives you any notes at all then your Bible probably sets off John 7:53 through 8:11 with an asterisk or with brackets or some mark with a footnote informing you that this passage is not included in the earliest manuscript copies of the Gospel of John. The Bibles I use all note this. I also checked to see if it is noted in an approved Roman Catholic version. The standard Bible version recognized by the Roman Catholic Church in Croatia does not provide any textual notes at all. So, you do not see it there. But the New Jerusalem Bible, which is an approved Roman Catholic version, does include a note agreeing that these verses do not appear in the oldest manuscripts of John.

This is a very well-known issue in biblical studies. Since the 4th century, the time of Augustine, there has been discussion about whether this passage is original to John. Prior to Augustine there is no discussion, but then, the text does not appear in manuscripts much before Augustine.

Even though the discussion has been known and ongoing for centuries, most readers of the Bible skip over the note without thinking about it. And preachers who believe the text is authentic or at least inspired by the Holy Spirit, preach from it without comment on its origin. And preachers who do not believe the text is inspired or authentic mostly just skip over it without any preaching or comment. So, most Christians are left uninformed.

I admit that for this series I did think about both of these options. The option of either just teaching the text without really addressing the problem. Or just skipping over it. I do not want to stir up questions and problems that we do not have time to adequately address. But then again, the goal of this series is the interpretation of the biblical text of John, so to skip over such a significant question would not be faithful to the aim of our study.

I believe that the Bible is the verbally inspired Word of God. And that, as such, the text of every book is without error on all the matters it addresses it the original text. There do still exist some questions about the original text. We are not always certain that we have the original words written down by the authors. To determine the original is the task of the field lower textual criticism. But to talk about text criticism, we need to go even further back and ask questions about how we got our Bible. This whole topic is much too big for this podcast. I am just going to overview the issues. If you want further study, you need to find a good book on the subject. I recommend, *The Origin of the Bible*, which is a collection of essays by many experts in different fields edited by Philip Comfort.

I will do this lesson in two parts. First, I will address the question about the origin of this text. Then I will consider the passage and how we should interpret it.

I. The Origin of John 7:53-8:11

We start first with the question, "What is the origin of John 7:53-8:11?" Let's break that question down into five sub-questions.

- 1) How do we know anything?
- 2) How do we know what books belong in the Bible?
- 3) How do we know the original text of the books we accept as Bible?
- 4) What do we know about the origin of John 7:53-8:11?
- 5) What do we conclude about John 7:53-8:11?

1. How do we know anything?

This is the question of epistemology or the study of knowledge. It is a question that took up a bit of my thought life in college. My undergraduate degree is a Bachelor of Science in the Philosophy of Science. I studied at North Carolina State University, an engineering and textiles school. My focus was Computer Science. So, for example, in the philosophy department we did not talk about how to create a computer with artificial intelligence. We talked about what is artificial intelligence? How do you know when you have got it? How do you define intelligence? How do you define artificial intelligence? Those are philosophy questions. We were thinking about the nature and definition of science. What is good science? And the nature of knowledge is integral to those kinds of questions.

I learned through my course of study that I am a presuppositionalist. I believe that all human beings depend on presuppositions as foundational to their world view, whatever it is. You have to start somewhere. And your starting point is ultimately not provable. You start with a presupposition you have accepted by faith but cannot prove.

For example, a person might argue that true knowledge comes from mathematics and the hard sciences, such as physics and chemistry. The problem with this statement is that it is not itself provable by math or the hard sciences. Using only math and physics, I cannot get to the statement "true knowledge only comes from math and physics." So, either this statement is unknowable, because I can't get there from math or physics. Or the person who believes it accepts it as a presupposition to start from. They have to admit that they cannot know that knowledge only comes from math and science. But they can admit to taking that statement based on faith. By faith, I am starting with the presupposition that only math and science can provide true knowledge.

We can then argue about whether that proposition is true or false, whether there are other sources outside of math and science that can provide knowledge, but at least we know the person's starting point.

I have a starting point I cannot prove. I start with two basic presuppositions. God is real. And the Bible is his word. I take both of those statements to be true, and I build my world view from that starting point.

Saying that I cannot prove these two points, does not mean at all that I am not able to argue for the existence of God. I can. There are great rational arguments for the existence of God. And it does not mean I have no reasons for believing the Bible is truly from God. I do. I can make a strong case that if there is any text, any word from God, the Bible is it.

But I can't prove absolutely that God exists, and the Bible is his Word. Though I believe absolutely those two truths. But can I believe prove absolutely that God exists and the Bible is his Word? Though I believe absolutely in those two truths, I do not believe that I can prove absolutely those two truths. I take them by faith, a reasonable, rational faith, but still faith. God is real, and he has communicated to us by the written word of Scripture. This is my starting point.

I do not believe that God's existence depends on me to prove. I do not believe that people define God. I believe that God defines people. I also do not believe that people define what is the Bible. God

is sovereign over his Word. God has defined the Bible. God inspired the Bible. God had it written down. He had it made known to his people. He has guarded it through the centuries. God superintends the production and transmission of his word.

My question was this, "How do we know anything?" My answer is that since God is real and he has communicated to us through his word the Bible, my two presuppositions, since these are true, we can know all kinds of things. This is my starting point. From this, I would affirm that God has made the universe. And God has made people in his image. He has created us in such a way that we can come to know truth. And though the fall of mankind into sin has messed with our ability to know spiritual and moral truth, we are still quite good at discovering truths about the material universe. He has made the universe knowable, and he made us in a way to know it.

Now, moving from my starting point of God and the Bible, we could ask another question.

2. How do we know what books belong in the Bible?

This is the study of canonicity. I believe in the Bible. What is the Bible?

Now, it is misleading as some imply that the church had a number of books under consideration and decided which books belong in the Bible and which books do not belong in the Bible. Considering just the New Testament, the writings of the apostles began to be read in the early church for the teaching and encouragement of believers. The texts read were from an apostle or had a connection to an Apostle, such as Mark's connection to Peter and Luke's connection to Paul. The quality and content of these early writings commended them to the early church. They were received broadly through the whole early church. In later centuries, church councils affirmed these writings which had already been received and were used in the church. There were some questions about whether to keep in a few books like Hebrews or 2 Peter. Should they be retained? We are not sure who wrote Hebrews. Do we keep it? Is it really Bible? But there were no other options of books to add in. It was only discussing whether or not to exclude. There were no other books really under consideration to be added. There candidates of early books written with a connection to an apostle and widely received and used by the early churches.

Writings from later generations, like the so-called Gospel of Peter, were not included as canon, not because the church councils decided to leave those books out, but because such books were never even considered. Writings coming after the first century could not be shown to faithfully bear an apostolic witness. And were not available in the time of the early church to have been received and used by the early church. There are only a couple of rare anomalies like the Shepherd of Hermas from the late second century, which are positive as early Christian writings and have value, but also do not meet the standard of having an apostolic witness or near universal acceptance in the early church.

So, later believers did not establish the Canon or standard of Scripture. They gave witness to the text of Scripture already received by the church. I return to my presuppositions that God is real, and the Bible is his word. Ultimately, I have to trust that God produced and protected his Word. Again, we can and should make a study of how the Bible has come down to us. Though in the end, it is a matter of faith that God superintends the transmission of his Word. It is a rational faith. It is not a blind faith. But it still is faith.

Accepting that the books we have in the Bible are the books God intended for us to have, we can then ask another question.

3. How do we know we have the original text of the books we accept as Bible?

You can guess what my bottom-line answer is going to be. The bottom-line is that we have to trust that God protects his Word and delivers it to us. God is sovereign over the transmission of his Word.

But just because God is sovereign, that does not mean that he does not involve people, and it does not mean that he makes things easy for us. God delights in giving us challenges which require reason, hard work, and faith.

We no longer possess the original manuscripts of any biblical book. What we possess are copies and recopies of the text through time. What we have are over 24,000 manuscripts which are copies of the whole New Testament or more often a book of the New Testament or frequently a section of a book. And the study of lower text criticism considers the various manuscripts of any one book or passage to identify or come as close as possible to the original autograph of the text, the words written down by the biblical author.

Some people are very skeptical about our ability to come very close to the original. I am very positive about our ability to come extremely close to the original. Copying trends from the early centuries have been identified. For example, what is known as the Western type of text, includes copies that were more frequently adjusted to smooth out difficult Greek or to clarify ambiguities. The scribes following this trend did not hold as strongly to word for word copying. So, they created for us a number of our differences that we have to figure out.

The Alexandrian type of text, however, followed an earlier copying philosophy that prioritized holding to the original. The consistency of the Alexandrian type as well as the existence of very early papyrus texts are two of the factors that help text critics identify changes that took place by copyists over time who may have sought to clarify the text or who simply made mistakes, copying from line to line.

Usually, the changes do not affect the meaning of the text because the changes were inserted to make the Greek clearer. So, even though, for example, the Greek of John 6 contains 15 variations in different manuscripts, we have high probability concerning the original text. The variations are almost all just one or two words. And even when we do not know for sure which variation is original the differences have very little effect on our confidence in the meaning of the text, especially since meaning is always dependent on the surrounding context, and we have very high confidence that surrounding context is original.

So, even though a multitude of texts with a multitude of variations does challenge our ability to state with absolute precision what the original text of a biblical book was, what the multitude of texts does do for us is to show us that we really are working from an original autograph that has been faithfully copied. And it has resulted in some minor scribal error and scribal adjustment over time, but the consistency of all these texts as a whole indicates to us there was an original. What we do not find are widely different versions of the same book. We do not have three significantly different versions of the Gospel of John or wildly different versions of Matthew with different stories and different arrangements and different theology. Those don't exist.

In fact, the case of John 7:53-8:11, where an entire story seems to have been added to later copies, is extremely rare in the text tradition. In fact, there are only two cases in the New Testament where the question is about more than the text of one sentence. We are considering one of those two cases here in John 8. The other is at the end of the Gospel of Mark, chapter 16 verses 9-20. And if your Bible has notations it will show you that those are also set off. In both cases the text shows up in later manuscripts, not earlier ones. Neither case actually creates a problem for scholars concerning the original text. It is agreed that neither text belongs to the original.

So even though we must admit that there is a challenge to establishing exactly what the original text was word by word, we have confidence in the vast majority of the words. And we have confidence that there was an original autograph and that we have a way of working towards that. We can understand why most of the changes were made. The many copies have preserved for us the original. And where we are unsure, the meaning is not significantly hindered by questions about the text. The problem of interpretation is not much about, "Do we have the right text?" It is much more about understanding the Greek of the original. Our translation and understanding of the text is not really a textual issue. It is more about grammar and syntax and context and the flow of the argument. It is about translating what we do have.

John 7:53-8:11 is one of two examples of very unique, very unusual cases where a whole passage does not seem to be original to the text.

So, on to our fourth question.

4. What do we know about the origin of John 7:53-8:11?

The commentaries I have looked at regarding this passage are all agreed that it does not belong where we find it and, in fact, is not original to John. This is the conclusion of Carson in the *Pillar New Testament Commentary*, Beasley-Murray in the *Word Biblical Commentary*, Borchert in the *New American Commentary*, Kostenberger in *Encountering John*, Metzger in the *Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*. Beasley-Murry states, "It is universally agreed by textual critics of the Greek NT that this passage was not part of the Fourth Gospel in its original form." 12

The three main reasons for concluding that the text does not belong where it is found in John are these:

- (1) The external textual evidence shows this passage was not included in the early manuscripts of John. And that is most important.
- (2) The internal evidence does not seem to fit with John. For example, the reference to scribes and Pharisees is not found elsewhere in John, but it is found in the other gospels. The Mount of Olives is not referred to elsewhere in John, but it is found in the other gospels. And no one else in John refers to Jesus using this word for teacher but that is in other gospels. The internal evidence suggests this story fits with the oral tradition from which the other three gospels draw but does not suggest this story fits well into the Gospel of John.
- (3) The story interrupts the flow of the narrative as 8:12 continues the debate in the temple that we left off in 7:52 about who Jesus is, and the rest of chapter 8 fits very well into the context of the last day of the Feast of Booths that we were at when we end chapter 7. The structure of chapter 8 also chiastically parallel the structure of chapter 7, but this story interrupts that pattern.

These second two points about style and structure are not conclusive in my mind. Sometimes a passage does not seem to fit well. And I do not want to presume that I know what the original author was doing. But these questions about style and structure fit with the much bigger problem that this story is not found in the early manuscripts.

Addressing that problem, Beasley-Murray states the case of the external textual evidence with these five points.

- (1) No Greek commentator on the Gospel of John commented on this passage, referred to this passage, before Euthymius in the 12th century, 11 hundred years after Jesus. And at that point Euthymius questioned the passage.
- (2) No Eastern commentator commented on the passage before the 10th century.
- (3) The earliest western fathers, such as, Irenaus, Tertullian, and Cyprian, do not refer to this passage at all in their writings.
- (4) It is found in the writing of Ambrose and Augustine, who are Western church fathers of the late 4th and early 5th centuries.
- (5) Jerome acknowledged its presence in many Greek and Latin sources. But concerning these sources, Metzger points out that the passage does not occur in 27 of the early Greek manuscripts, including the earliest manuscripts. And when the passage is included in manuscripts, it is not always found in the same place. Most do include it in the place we have it in our Bibles right after John 7:52. But it is also found inserted after John 7:36, and after John 7:44, and even at the end of the John after 21:25. And it is found inserted at the end of the Gospel of Luke after 21:38.
- 5. What do we conclude about John 7:53-8:11?

I personally have to conclude that this passage is not original to John's Gospel. And I base that on the text evidence. It simply was not there originally in the early manuscripts.

¹² Beasley-Murray, G. R. (1999). John (Vol. 36, p. 143). Dallas: Word, Incorporated.

So, is John 7:53-8:11 not Holy Scripture? Is it not inspired by God?

That is actually a more difficult question. Some scholars say, "No." Some say, "Yes."

Beasley-Murray writes this, "There is no reason to doubt its substantial truth. The saying that it preserves is completely in character with what we know of our Lord, and quite out of character with the stern discipline that came to be established in the developing Church.¹³

Noticing how many different places copyists inserted the story, indicates that a number of believers felt this story should be included. They just did not know where to put it.

We can not tell how early the story begins to circulate. It seems to have the ring of truth. We can see in other incidents from his life Jesus escaping a trap set for him by opposing teachers and Jesus showing compassion to sinful people. This story could have been among the early oral and written tradition that the Gospel writers used and yet, simply did not make it into any of the four Gospels.

Being a cherished as a story about Jesus, particularly among believers in the West, but not belonging to any Gospel, it seems to have been a story without a home. Apparently, some early scribes decided to give it one.

Still, we do not know for sure if the story was created by later Christians, and then it became popular. Or if it came from an apostle. But even if it came from an apostle and it did not make it into the Bible, is it inspired by the Holy Spirit or was it not?

So, whether this passage should be considered biblical, "Is this real Bible", I am going to leave to you to consider and reflect on?

Regardless, it is a text that needs to be handled with a little more thought than is typically put into it. So, let's now consider the passage.

II. The Interpretation of John 7:53-8:11

Here is the text. John 7:53-8:11,

⁵³ Everyone went to his home. ¹ But Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. ² Early in the morning He came again into the temple, and all the people were coming to Him; and He sat down and *began* to teach them. ³ The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman caught in adultery, and having set her in the center *of the court*, ⁴ they said to Him, "Teacher, this woman has been caught in adultery, in the very act. ⁵ Now in the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women; what then do You say?" ⁶ They were saying this, testing Him, so that they might have grounds for accusing Him. But Jesus stooped down and with His finger wrote on the ground. ⁷ But when they persisted in asking Him, He straightened up, and said to them, "He who is without sin among you, let him *be the* first to throw a stone at her." ⁸ Again He stooped down and wrote on the ground. ⁹ When they heard it, they *began* to go out one by one, beginning with the older ones, and He was left alone, and the woman, where she was, in the center *of the court*. ¹⁰ Straightening up, Jesus said to her, "Woman, where are they? Did no one condemn you?" ¹¹ She said, "No one, Lord." And Jesus said, "I do not condemn you, either. Go. From now on sin no more."

The story is one of the accounts about Jewish teachers attempting to trap Jesus. They pose a question that has no good answer. At the very least, they hope to shame Jesus by luring him into an unpopular answer in front of a public crowd, even better they might trick Jesus into giving them grounds for bringing him to court.

But in this instance, the scribes and Pharisees do not stick to a hypothetical. They bring a real case before Jesus. They claim to bring before a woman caught in the act of adultery, and then they point out that the Law of Moses commands to stone such a woman.

¹³ Beasley-Murray, G. R. (1999). John (Vol. 36, p. 143). Dallas: Word, Incorporated.

The death penalty was integral to the God-inspired legal code provided through Moses. The specific method of stoning applies to only specific instances, most often to cases of occult or idolatrous practice. There are only two cases of sexual infidelity where the penalty is execution by stoning, both recorded in Deuteronomy 22:13-30. The first case commanding stoning is when a woman, claiming to be a virgin, is married and then found afterward not to be a virgin. The woman brought before Jesus is said to have been caught in the act, so it is hard to see how this case could apply. The second case commanding stoning is when a betrothed woman who is a virgin has sex with a man who is not her future husband. Betrothal is similar to what we would call engagement except it is legally binding. This is the only case that fits precisely with the words of the teachers who brought the woman to Jesus. This case could be considered adultery. The woman and the man could have been caught in the act. And it demands stoning.

Verse 6 in our passage tells us plainly that the goal here is not justice. And it is not the desire for purity in Israel. Rather, "They were saying this, testing Him, so that they might have grounds for accusing Him." The goal is to trap Jesus.

So, they want him to respond. At first, Jesus says nothing. He just stoops down to write on the ground. And when have we seen Jesus do that before? Write, stoop on the ground and write? In what other passage? That's right, none. We have never seen Jesus do this before. This is a first. And it has filled pages of commentary and time in many a sermon, wondering, "What was he writing?" And we don't know? We can only imagine. My favorite possibility would be that Jesus wrote from Deuteronomy 22:24, "then you shall bring them both out to the gate of that city and you shall stone them to death;" Jesus knows the law. Earlier in chapter 7 the crowds are astonished by his wisdom being a man not educated in the established structure. We also know from the other Gospels that Jesus quoted Deuteronomy three times to rebuke Satan in the wilderness. Jesus knows Deuteronomy. And if he were to write out Deuteronomy 22:24, he would score two points against the scribes and pharisees. First, Jesus would be asking, "Where's the man?" The law does not say, "Take the woman and stone her." The law says, "Take the man and the woman." If you caught them in the act, why did you let the man go? Why bring the woman here alone? If your concern is justice and holiness and the law of Moses, where is the man?

The second point would be the clarification that if she is to be stoned, the accusers should participate in the stoning. The convicted is not handed over to an executioner. If you bring the charge as a community, then you must take responsibility as a community to carry out the penalty. You must take her before the gates of the city, and you must stone her yourself. Are you prepared to do this?

We do not know what Jesus wrote. The story does not tell us. I think the most likely implication is that he is writing from the Law. And I think we are invited to reflect on what that might have been. And though I have no idea whether he wrote Deuteronomy 22:24 or not, I have no idea, I think the two points from Deuteronomy still stand implicitly. Where was the man? And if you go through with this, you all are going to have to stone her.

When Jesus does speak, he says these famous words, "He who is without sin among you, let him be the first to throw a stone at her." The words are not far from Matthew 7:5 "You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye." After speaking, Jesus bends down to write again, and one by one the accuser's leave.

Why do they leave? Are we to assume that each one was convicted by the words of Jesus of their own hypocrisy? That is a powerful lesson for all of us who read the story. And we may be convicted reading it. But is that the most likely assumption here. It is possible. I do not think it is likely. That is not how these accounts have ended throughout the Gospels. The people who test Jesus are not convicted or repentant when they lose. They are hardened to the message of Jesus. They are frustrated. They are probably angry. They have been shamed. So, they go off, and they plan some other way to catch Jesus.

We need to go back and think for a moment how is this case was supposed to trap him. They bring the woman and they say, "Now in the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women; what then do You say?" For the trap to be a good one, Jesus needs to be in trouble whether he says, "No, she should not be stoned." or "Yes, she should be stoned." The trap is designed that either response will turn out bad for Jesus. So, we ask why? Why would it be bad for Jesus to say, "No, she should not be stoned." What do you think? What is the problem with saying, "Don't stone her?" If Jesus says, she should not be stoned, he is going against Mosaic law.

On the other hand, what is the problem with Jesus agreeing with Mosaic law and saying, "Stone her." What do you think? From our vantage point, we could certainly say that the problem is a lack of justice, since the woman is singled out apart from the man. But I do not think that was a significant problem for the Pharisees. I do not think that is what they were going at. There is another problem. The Jews are not allowed by their Roman overlords to carry out execution without permission. That is why the leaders have to humble themselves before Pilate when they want to execute Jesus. They need permission. If Jesus says to stone her then he is asserting the right of Jews to carry out the Law of Moses on all points, including the right the death penalty. And that would put him at odds with the Romans. That would give them means for accusing Jesus, not before the Jewish leaders but before the Roman governors. This is a political trap.

Jesus refuses to be caught in a false either/or solution. He sees through that. He goes a different route, and he escapes the trap. Though with Jesus, when he does go a different route, he never merely escapes the trap, he also impressively turns the trap around on his opponents, making some deeper point that they never expected. Jesus traps the trappers while also teaching spiritual truth to the public audience.

By saying, "He who is without sin among you, let him *be the* first to throw a stone at her." Jesus does three things at once. (1) First, he affirms the just penalty of the law of Moses. Yes, the Law says she should be stoned. (2) Second, also drawing from Moses, Jesus puts the responsibility to stone the woman back on the community. He puts these men in danger of acting without permission from their Roman rulers. I think this is Jesus calling their bluff. They had no plan to stone the woman. They are not permitted to do so by Roman law. They did not expect Jesus to agree to that. And if he did, they expected it to be theoretical and out of their hands. They never expected Jesus to say, "If you believe what you say, then you follow the law of Moses which commands that you stone her."

And that is why I believe the accusers dropped the stones and left. I do not believe the older men were first convicted of their own hypocrisy and so, they went away heavy with guilt. I believe they were the first to admit defeat. Even if the young men had not realized it yet, the older ones knew they were beaten. And they would rather bear the shame of defeat then for honor sake act rashly and stone her in opposition to Rome. They took the only way out, which was to leave the field of play.

The third thing Jesus did was to teach those around. He turned the trap into a an opportunity to call out the hypocrisy of the accusers who are abusing the concept of biblical justice to shame Jesus. They didn't care about the woman. Do you really want justice? Are you really concerned with holiness in Israel? Where is the man? Why just bring this woman? You, yourselves, are unrighteous in this very act of theoretical justice.

"They began to go out one by one, beginning with the older ones, and He was left alone, and the woman, where she was, in the center of the court." In my mind, I do not imagine that the disciples left or the members of the members of the public in the temple left. Jesus and the woman are alone as the participants in the mock trial. All the other participants, all the accusers, had left. Jesus and the woman are alone but still in the public court of the temple. What Jesus says next is both for the woman and for us, the public. Verses 10-11,

 10 Straightening up, Jesus said to her, "Woman, where are they? Did no one condemn you?" 11 She said, "No one, Lord." And Jesus said, "I do not condemn you, either. Go. From now on sin no more."

What is Jesus teaching us? That's actually a tough question to answer. Is he teaching us that there should be no penalty, legal or spiritual, for adultery? Is he teaching us that sexual behavior is really a personal matter between consenting adults, and it is not so important to God?

Those ideas are sometime implied in the way this story is communicated but would certainly not fit with the gospels account of who Jesus is and what he stands for. Jesus teaches a high standard of sexual purity. In the sermon on the mount, Mathew 5:27-29 we read,

²⁷ You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery'; ²⁸ but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart. ²⁹ If your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.

That is Jesus. Jesus said that. That is his teaching. Recognizing Jesus' abhorrence of sexual sin increases the impact of what he tells the woman. Jesus has the right to condemn her. In chapter 5 we read that the Father has given the Son authority to judge. Not only does he have the right, he has the responsibility. He ceases to be a righteous judge if he randomly chooses when and when not to apply the law. Her accusers did act hypocritically, and the man caught with her also ought to be judged, and both of these considerations might be enough to throw the case out of court on legal grounds. But on spiritual grounds, the woman is still responsible for her own sin. Jesus cannot let her off simply because he feels sorry for her. He can be compassionate and gentle and treat her with respect of one who is made in the image of God, but he cannot ignore the sentence for her sin.

So, how does Jesus get away with saying, "I do not condemn you?"

Jesus can say it. Jesus can say, "I do not condemn you" because Jesus is the one who chooses to take the condemnation on himself. Justice is not ignored. Speaking to this woman, Jesus is choosing to go to the cross on her behalf for this sin of adultery.

When you receive that beautiful truth that there is now no condemnation for those who are in Jesus Christ, you are receiving Jesus' words, "I do not condemn you, because these things you have done, your sin from your mind, from your words, from your actions, the pain you have caused other people, the things you deserve to pay back, the death penalty, the wages of your sin is death, and for all that you have done, I do not condemn you. I am going to take that on myself on the cross, and I am going to die for you because of your sin. That is how I can say, 'I do not condemn you.'"

Jesus offers this woman a second chance not by ignoring her transgression, but by taking full responsibility onto himself. We do not know what he sees in her heart. Does she believe? Does she not believe? We do not know. Jesus offers forgiveness to everyone who will receive it, both to those who will and to those who never will. He still makes the offer. The true state of this woman's heart is not a matter for us. That is a matter between her and Jesus.

As we have already seen in other passages in John, not the same but similar, Jesus connects forgiveness with the moral imperative of "go and sin no more." That too, we have to interpret with the rest of the gospel. The woman's ability to not sin is not the requirement for her forgiveness. Belief in Jesus is the requirement for forgiveness. To go and not sin is the right response of faith. If you have truly seen Jesus and truly received his gift of grace and believe in his Word, then you understand the command as a way to show gratitude and the way to live out the abundant life he has promised. It is not a way to earn a right standing before his court. That is a false hope that no one can achieve. We can never successfully go and sin no more.

This is a beautiful story of the wisdom and justice and compassion of Jesus. I wish there was not any doubt about its origin. I would love to be able to teach this story without question. Unfortunately, there are questions about its origin. And if I am to love God and his Word with my mind, I can't ignore just those questions.

I do recommend reading along with this story the indisputable account of Luke 7:36-50. It is not the same story. But it does include pharisees and a sinful woman and the compassion of Jesus. It is one of my favorite Gospel stories. It affirms the key themes of this story.

Jesus rejects the hypocrisy of the religiously self-assured.

And Jesus welcomes in those who know their sin, their brokenness, and need.

Jesus offers second chances.

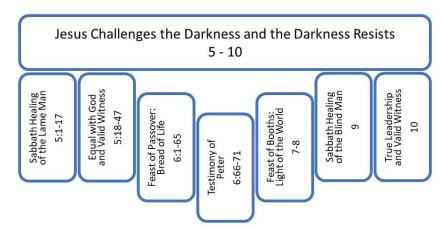
And the moral life, the response of this woman is a response of worship and gratitude to the love that Jesus has shown her. Let's end with the end of that story. This is Luke 7:48–50,

⁴⁸ Then He said to her, "Your sins have been forgiven." ⁴⁹ Those who were reclining at the table with Him began to say to themselves, "Who is this *man* who even forgives sins?" ⁵⁰ And He said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

Reflection questions

- 1. In light of the text criticism study suggesting John 7:53-8:11 is not original to the Gospel of John, what two or three major questions remain unanswered for you? Is there something you find troubling or something that you would like to follow-up on?
- 2. What two are three ideas were most helpful to you?
- 3. Reading John 7:53-8:11 as early Gospel tradition, what stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What are some questions that come to mind?
- 4. How would you describe the trap the Pharisees tried to draw Jesus into? How did they expect him to lose either way he answered?
- 5. How does Jesus' response both escape the trap and turn it back on the Pharisees?
- 6. What does the woman learn from Jesus?
- 7. How does this story speak to you personally? What main idea speaks most to you, whether to your head or to your heart?

Lesson 16: John 8:12-59 The Feast of Booths and the Light of the World Introduction



If we accept that the story of the woman brought to Jesus to be judged in 7:53-8:11 is a passage not original to John's manuscript, a passage in search of a home, then the text of John 8:12, "Again therefore Jesus spoke to them, saying, 'I am the light of the World'" continues the ongoing debate about Jesus at this Feast of Booths in Jerusalem.

So, we need to remind ourselves of the background to the Feast of Booths that we talked about in chapter 7. Nehemiah 9 was likely read aloud to the people, with reference to the Holy Spirit and water in the wilderness. Zechariah 14 was also read with reference to the future time of the Messiah when light would shine out from Jerusalem day and night and a river of water would flow from her.

By the time of Jesus these Old Testament texts had been worked into the celebration of the Feast of Booths with a procession every morning, taking water from the pool of Siloam to the temple to remind of God's provision of water and the future promise of the Spirit. And every evening four great candelabra were lit in the court of women in the temple, to symbolize that everlasting light that would one day shine in Jerusalem.

So, in this context of a daily water procession and daily lighting of great lights, Jesus stood up and declared.

If any man is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as the Scripture said, "From his innermost being shall flow rivers of living water (John 7:37-38)."

I am the light of the world; he who follows me shall not walk in the darkness, but shall have the light of life (John 8:12).

Yes! This is Jesus. The people of Jerusalem would have heard him saying these things from the perspective of the present feast. The river of water, the everlasting light. I fulfill the symbolism of the feast!

Jesus' brothers do not need to worry about his courage to proclaim himself publicly.

But will people listen? Will they understand? Let's see.

Structure

The text of 7 and 8 is chiastic. I am not going to follow that structure in this lesson because we are just in chapter 8. But I want you to know about it. The parallel terms of the chiasm bring order to the whole account of Jesus' teaching in Jerusalem at this particular Feast of Booths. And it shows us that chapters 7 and 8 are meant to be considered as one whole. They are meant to be considered all together.

Chiastic structure of Jesus at the Feast of Booths in John 7 and 8

A 7:18 Glory

B 7:19-20 Moses ... seek to kill me ... You have a demon

C 7:34 Where I am, you cannot come

D 7:36 You will seek me ... where I a m, you cannot come

E 7:38 Living water

X 7:40-52 Debate regarding the nature of Jesus

E' 8:12 Light of the world

D' 8:21 You will seek me ... where I am going, you cannot come

C' 8:22 Where I am going you cannot come

B' 8:40, 48 Seeking to kill me ... Abraham ... you have a demon

A' 8:54 Glory

So, the passage begins and ends with reference to glory. At the beginning in John 7:18, "He who speaks from himself seeks his own glory; but He who is seeking the glory of the One who sent Him, He is true, and there is no unrighteousness in Him." And then at the end in 8:54, "If I glorify Myself, My glory is nothing; it is My Father who glorifies Me, of whom you say, 'He is our God';" This idea of the Father's glory that stands out as A and A' contrasts the earthly strategy of the brothers who urged Jesus to go up and make a name for himself at the feast. Jesus is glorious. His glory will be revealed. But he does not act out of a motive for self-glorification. He acts out of a motive for the Father's glory.

Then in B we get a series of three things, a reference to Moses, the charge by Jesus that the people are seeking to kill him and the countercharge that Jesus has a demon. That's in 7:19-20. On the other side in B' 8:40 and 48, we get a similar series with reference to Abraham, a repeat of the charge by Jesus that the people are seeking to kill him and a repeat of the countercharge that Jesus has a demon

C and C' repeat the language, "Where I am going you cannot come." That is first in 7:34 and then again in 8:22.

D and D' is similar to that, repeating language, "You will seek me, but where I am you cannot come." That is in 7:36 and again in 8:21.

Then for E and E', our innermost frame, we have paralleled the two great claims of Jesus about being the source of water in 7:38 and light in 8:12. Jesus is not seeking his own glory. That was established in our outermost frame. But in this innermost frame, we recognize he is indeed glorious. From him comes water and light; life and truth.

In the center of the chaism, 7:40-52 we find the debate by the people concerning whether Jesus is the Christ and the rejection of such an idea by the religious leaders. Who is this Jesus? Could he be the Christ? Certainly not!

So, if you have ever read these chapters and thought you noticed ideas repeating, you are correct. You did. And I am not going to follow that chiastic structure in this lesson. Since we are just focusing on chapter 8, I am going to follow the flow of just that chapter. And I have divided it into two major parts. There is a statement in the middle that many believe in Jesus, that is in verse 30, so that will be our hinge verse. So, everything up to that verse in 12-30 is part I. The first part of the conversation. And everything after is part II. In part I Jesus shines light on his own nature. In part II he shines light on those who claim to believe.

Part I Jesus shines the light on himself (8:12-30).

I am going to read the whole text.

John 8:12

- ¹² Then Jesus again spoke to them, saying, "I am the Light of the world; he who follows Me will not walk in the darkness, but will have the Light of life."
- ¹³ So the Pharisees said to Him, "You are testifying about Yourself; Your testimony is not true."
- ¹⁴ Jesus answered and said to them, "Even if I testify about Myself, My testimony is true, for I know where I came from and where I am going; but you do not know where I come from or where I am going. ¹⁵ You judge according to the flesh; I am not judging anyone. ¹⁶ But even if I do judge, My judgment is true; for I am not alone *in it*, but I and the Father who sent Me. ¹⁷ Even in your law it has been written that the testimony of two men is true. ¹⁸ I am He who testifies about Myself, and the Father who sent Me testifies about Me."
- ¹⁹ So they were saying to Him, "Where is Your Father?"
- Jesus answered, "You know neither Me nor My Father; if you knew Me, you would know My Father also." ²⁰ These words He spoke in the treasury, as He taught in the temple; and no one seized Him, because His hour had not yet come. ²¹ Then He said again to them, "I go away, and you will seek Me, and will die in your sin; where I am going, you cannot come."
- ²² So the Jews were saying, "Surely He will not kill Himself, will He, since He says, 'Where I am going, you cannot come'?"
- ²³ And He was saying to them, "You are from below, I am from above; you are of this world, I am not of this world. ²⁴ Therefore I said to you that you will die in your sins; for unless you believe that I am *He*, you will die in your sins."
- ²⁵ So they were saying to Him, "Who are You?"
- Jesus said to them, "What have I been saying to you *from* the beginning? ²⁶ I have many things to speak and to judge concerning you, but He who sent Me is true; and the things which I heard from Him, these I speak to the world." ²⁷ They did not realize that He had been speaking to them about the Father. ²⁸ So Jesus said, "When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am *He*, and I do nothing on My own initiative, but I speak these things as the Father taught Me. ²⁹ And He who sent Me is with Me; He has not left Me alone, for I always do the things that are pleasing to Him."
- ³⁰ As He spoke these things, many came to believe in Him.

In this first part, I have three key texts to center in on.

1. The first is our beginning verse 8:12. "I am the Light of the world; he who follows Me will not walk in darkness but will have the Light of life." He who follows will not walk in darkness. The kind of following Jesus means is a following of submission to him as the revealer of truth. It includes following with the mind to accept what Jesus teaches and following with behavior that lives out what Jesus teaches. That kind of following results in an experience of Jesus as the light of life. The follower receives the light of truth, receives understanding that leads to life.

What we see in the following dialogue is a group of people walking in darkness who refuse to submit to Jesus. They will not go where he is leading. And so, they continue to walk in darkness.

We need to interpret the words of Jesus in this dialogue as one whose perspective comes from one vantage point and the words of the Pharisees as those whose perspective comes from a very different vantage point. Jesus' perspective is also as the one who is with God and is in eternal relationship with God. He is the one who uniquely reveals God. He is the Son who fellowships at the table of the Father who shares close relationship. Jesus sees everything from this vantage point, so his perspective is true.

The Pharisees interpret things from the vantage point of human reason and human law and human desire. Their sight is limited and skewed. The dialogue begins as from the human vantage point of law, with the Pharisees rejecting the testimony of Jesus as untrue because of a lack of witnesses to corroborate his claims. The law says you need two witnesses. Your words cannot be true.

But Jesus is the light. He is the source of truth. He is from heaven. There is no one and can be no one to corroborate his claims. He is the one who must self-witness. A man cannot shine a light on the light to prove that it is light. The light is the light. So, Jesus says, "My testimony is true for I know where I come from and where I am going." And he points out the problem of their vantage point. "You judge according to the flesh." That includes the limits of human flesh, limited knowledge and limited reasoning ability, but also includes the twisted values of human flesh. They do not evaluate rightly because they are self-deceived. And they are certainly not objective. They cannot evaluate Jesus rightly.

When Jesus says, "I judge no one," we have to again take care to pay attention to his point. We have to remember from back in chapter 5 that all authority has been given to him to judge. He is not saying he will never judge anybody. And in verse 26, we have to notice that he says, "I have much to say about you and much to judge." That Jesus does not judge at this point of the conversation, has to be qualified with something. It may mean he does not judge from the vantage point of the world as the Pharisees do. Or perhaps it means that even though Jesus would judge that is not what he is doing at the moment. He is now not judging them. Instead, he is giving them witness to what is true.

Jesus goes on to play by their rules. He goes on to claim himself and the Father as valid witnesses. He makes the point that he is the one whose self-witness is the truth, verse 18, "I am the one who bears witness of Myself." And that is a valid point if you are indeed the light. And they sort of let that slide. I do not think they would allow that in a court of law that a person is a self-witness. But they give him that. He also says that the Father gives him witness. But here we see the refusal of his opponents to consider the spiritual reality of God as his Father. They are going to stick on the literal, the worldly. They want the witness to be produced. "Who is your Father? Show him. Bring him."

Jesus tells them, and he said this before, "You know neither Me nor My Father; if you knew Me, you would know My Father." This is a point Jesus made, and it is a point he is going to make again. Knowledge of God is tied so tightly to Jesus that if you truly know the Father then you will acknowledge the Son. There is no one who truly knows God as Father and rejects Jesus. And if in fact, you come to know the Son, then by knowing the Son, you know the Father. Rejection of the Son shows that you do not know the Father and can never know the Father until you accept the Son. If you do not see the Father in the Son, you cannot see the Father at all.

Our first key verse indicates the theme we need to recognize throughout this dialogue. Jesus is the light of the world. To see, we must follow him. If we are not willing to submit to his teachings, we will continue on in the dark.

2. We are coming up on the second key verse in verse 24. In the lead up staring in verse 21 Jesus returns to the point he had made earlier in the chapter 7, that he is going away and though they seek, they cannot follow. But Jesus adds here something that is not in chapter 7. He tells them they cannot come and because of that, they are going to die in their sins. They need to go where Jesus is going. Jesus has raised the stakes.

In chapter 7, they wondered if going away meant going outside Israel to teach Jews in the diaspora. But now that Jesus has brought in the idea of death into it, they start wondering if he is talking about killing himself. Is that what he means by saying we cannot follow? And they are not far off. But it is not Jesus who is going to take his own life. They are going to take his life.

In verse 23, Jesus restates the problem of vantage point, "You are from below; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world." They judge by the flesh as those from a lower, worldly vantage point, walking in a valley of darkness. That is why they do not get what he is saying and that is why they cannot follow him.

Now we get our second key verse in 8:24, "I told you that you would die in your sins, for unless you believe that I am he you will die in your sins."

I assume you caught the key word "believe" in that text, a key word to John. But what are they supposed to believe? English translations try to clarify it by translating the text like this, "unless you believe that I am he." But the Greek does not say it clearly like that, and it would do better to stick with the literal Greek even if it is a little ambiguous. The text should state, "unless you believe that I am" not "that I am he." The "he" is added. The "he" is not in the Greek. And it is intended to clarify, but it does the opposite. Jesus statement is meant to stand as an absolute "I am statement." We have already had two up to this point in the Gospel of John, and there are two more coming in this chapter. So, this is our third I am statement.

Jesus is saying, "You must believe that I am." I am what? Simply I am. You must believe I am. Well, who is I am? The name God gave Moses in Exodus 3:14, Yahweh, means "I am who I am." The reference here could be pointing right back to that in Exodus, especially in light of our Exodus references in the prologue regarding the name of God. Or the reference here could be pointing to several references in Isaiah 40-55 (Isaiah 41:4; 43:10, 13, 25; 46:4; 48:12), all of which, state "I am he" in the Hebrew, but in the Greek Septuagint, the official translation by the Jews of the Old Testament into Greek, the Greek uses the same language as John does here. And it simply say "I am". This is how Isaiah 43:10 would read from the Greek version.

¹⁰ "You are My witnesses," declares the Lord, So that you may know and believe Me Before Me there was no God formed,

"And My servant whom I have chosen, And understand that I am. And there will be none after Me.

The phrase I am would have been blasphemous to listening Jews if they understood the reference clearly. They do not here. They want Jesus to fill in the blank. You say that we must believe you are. What do you mean by that? "Who are you?"

3. We come to the third key verse in 8:28, "Jesus said, 'When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am." This is the fourth absolute "I am" declaration. It is also John's second reference to the Son of Man being lifted up. There are going to be three of those. And these statements are called the irony of John because the language to lift up is befitting a king and implies that he will be lifted up with praises and exalted in glory. And that certainly applies to Jesus. He is king and he deserves to be praised and lifted up. But the first lifting up of Jesus referred to in John 3:14 indicates that it is a lifting up on a pole, like the bronze serpent in the wilderness. The lifting up of Jesus is not a lifting up with praise, because he is going to be lifted up on a cross. The intent is to shame him. The result is his glory. And is the irony. The glory of God is displayed through the willing sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. This is where his unmovable justice meets his unconditional love. The glory of God is that he takes sin so seriously and yet is so moved by love so astounding that he himself would take our place on a cross. That our king would die for us. He is a glorious king. Unexpected glory.

So, the people ask, "Who are you?" Jesus responds, you will know that I am when you lift me up on a cross. He does not say you will know who I am. He says you will know that I am. You will know that I am God. The cross will reveal my very nature, my glory, my name. The name I am. Not all will see and know. But many will see and know.

They need a new perspective from a new vantage point if they are ever going to understand who Jesus is speaking as the one who was sent down from outside. From the vantage point of the Father, he takes in everything there is to see and to know. His perspective is true. He makes things known. The cross is going to be essential for us in truly understanding who he is.

Now, in verse 30 we are told, "As he spoke these things, many came to believe in him."

At first, I just want to say, "Amen!" It seems like he is not getting through to anybody. Nobody understands what he is talking about. And at the end of the dialogue, "Many came to believe in him."

This concludes the first part of our passage. Jesus reveals who he is. But mostly the people interacting with him are unwilling to submit and so, continue on in darkness.

We ought to be surprised that many believe. We might ought wonder about their belief. In the second part of the dialogue Jesus is going to shine light on these who claim to believe.

Part II Jesus shines the light on those who claim to believe (8:31-59)

Part II is 8:31-39. It consists of 7 statements by Jesus, each with a response from the crowd. Rather than read this back and forth dialogue through all at once from 31-59, instead, I am going to comment as we go.

1st statement and response

The first statement is well known, John 8:31-32,

³¹ So Jesus was saying to those Jews who had believed Him, "If you continue in My word, *then* you are truly disciples of Mine; ³² and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free."

This is one of those verses that we love. I love this verse. We should. Jesus clarifies this truth about true faith that has come up before. Those who really believe seek to know the Word of Jesus, so they can live by it. That point was made with the Samaritans who asked Jesus to stay and teach them. It was made in chapter 6 when Jesus taught about eating his flesh and drinking his blood but many refused to abide in his word, so they left. They were not true disciples. But Peter, testifying, "Where are we going to go? You have words of eternal life." And he stayed along with twelve and eleven of them were true disciples. The light of Jesus makes us free when we receive his word and do it.

We love this verse. But the crowd, not so much. It is surprising, because he is talking to those who said they believed. But when he implies that they need to be set free, they don't like it. We quote this and expect people to like it. They offense. The more Jesus reveals about the state of their hearts the more offended they are going to become. Are these the ones who just believed? Or is this the crowd gathered around? Who is getting so offended at Jesus? And I think John leaves that ambiguous on purpose. He has Jesus speaking directly to those who believe. But I think we can imagine, it is these who believe plus the crowd that is around them. And so, some of those who believe certainly do not truly believe.

In 2:23 when many believed and Jesus recognized the belief as spurious he did not entrust himself to them. Here, Jesus also notices a problem with those who claim to believe, but instead of pulling back, he pokes into their heart.

The truth will set you free. But it is not just any truth. It is hard truth about you. It is a truth that jabs deep into the heart. It jabs at your self-made identity. It brings into question that which you consider good about yourself or that valuable about yourself. Whatever words that you use to identify who you are, your denomination, your country, your state, your last name, your best achievements, your gifts, abilities, personality, all that is secondary and beside the point. That is not your true identity. Jesus reveals who you truly are, and it is really not pleasant.

This group does not want to receive the truth Jesus has for them. They hold on to their own ethnic, religious identity. And so, in the end, they are not set free.

Their first response is in 8:33.

³³ They answered Him, "We are Abraham's descendants and have never yet been enslaved to anyone; how is it that You say, 'You will become free'?"

So, they take offense that he said the truth will set you free. They are like, "We don't need to be set free. We are free. What do you mean we need to be set free? Are you calling us sinful? What are you saying about us?" It sounds like an ironic response. The most important historical moment celebrated in the history of these Jews is their release from 400 years of slavery in Egypt. "We have never been enslaved!" Really? It is also part of their current identity since for the past 600 years they have been under a series of rulers, Babylon, then Persia, then Greece, and now Rome. The end of the Psalm in Nehemiah 9 – I found this interesting – the Psalm I have been saying that was read out at the Feast of Booths laments this very fact,

- Behold, we are slaves today, And as to the land which You gave to our fathers to eat of its fruit and its bounty, Behold, we are slaves in it.
- Its abundant produce is for the kings
 Whom You have set over us because of our sins;
 They also rule over our bodies
 And over our cattle as they please,
 So we are in great distress.

So, they know they are slaves. But what do they mean by insisting, "We have never yet been enslaved to anyone"? Whatever they are saying is connected to their self-identity as children of Abraham. They know they have been slaves. But they may be saying, but not really or not by nature. This was an idea that some people are born naturally as slaves. But they are saying, "That is not us. We are children of the promise. We are descended of Abraham. We have high blood. We are children of special status."

2nd statement and response

But n the second statement Jesus pokes deeper. Verses 34-39,

³⁴ Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin. ³⁵ "The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son does remain forever. ³⁶ So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed. ³⁷ I know that you are Abraham's descendants; yet you seek to kill Me, because My word has no place in you. ³⁸ I speak the things which I have seen with *My* Father; therefore you also do the things which you heard from *your* father."

Jesus clarifies, "I am speaking about the slavery to sin, and it does apply to you. You are not by nature good or by nature extra special. Because you do sinful things. Because of that you are a slave to sin. You need the free Son to set you free." His specific example of sin is their hatred of him. And, at first, that does not seem to apply to those who have just believed. They believe. They want to follow. They don't hate him. Well, do they not? Wait until we get to the end of the chapter. They believed in a definition of Jesus that is not Jesus. And as Jesus reveals himself further, the more clear the biblical truth becomes, the more offensive that truth becomes to sinful man. As long as that truth is kept at a distance and is screened through worldly values... You know for example this idea that Jesus never judges. And the world loves Jesus as long as we can say he never judges. Jesus doesn't judge homosexuality. Jesus doesn't judge adultery. Jesus doesn't judge whatever I am doing. Because Jesus would not do that. Because Jesus came to save, and Jesus forgives. Well of course there is no

opposition to that kind of Jesus, the Jesus who permits me to do whatever I want and then forgives me for it. That is a great Jesus for the world. It is in line with the values of the world. It is just not Jesus. And so, when we reveal what Jesus truly believes about our sin, then he becomes more offensive. And here Jesus is telling them, "Your true nature, you are a slave by nature, not in the way the world classifies it that there are low born human beings who are slaves and high born human beings who are not, that is totally false, you are all slaves. Because you all sin. And you are slaves to that sin. Yes, you are descended from Abraham. But that does not change anything. You ultimately have a different father." And when he says that, he draws forth a simple response.

³⁹ They answered and said to Him, "Abraham is our father."

3rd statement and response

To that Jesus makes a third statement.

Jesus said to them, "If you are Abraham's children, do the deeds of Abraham. ⁴⁰ But as it is, you are seeking to kill Me, a man who has told you the truth, which I heard from God; this Abraham did not do. ⁴¹ You are doing the deeds of your father."

Jesus had similarly challenged their claim to follow Moses in chapter 7. If you do you will receive me. If you follow Moses, you are going to rejoice in me. It is the same with Abraham. Abraham was given a promise that through his seed all the nations would be blessed. Abraham had his own struggles but concerning this he never wavered. He held on to the promise. If you are following the example of Abraham, if you really are his children, you should receive me as the one who fulfills the promise. But again, Jesus indicates that your true nature reveals that you really follow a different father.

To this they respond,

"We were not born of fornication; we have one Father: God."

I am pretty sure this is making it personal. This sounds like a reference to the questionable birth of Jesus. Mary became pregnant during her betrothal. And if Jesus wants to talk about having a father and a different father and he claims that Abraham is not really our father, "Well, you were born of fornication. We have one Father: God." They are getting upset and they are getting personal. They even raise this importance of their own self-understanding. "Not only are we descendants of Abraham, our Father is God." And presumable they are depending on the biblical texts that speak of Israel as God's son. So, they have got Bible to back them up.

4th statement and response
But in his 4th statement Jesus rejects that claim.

⁴² Jesus said to them, "If God were your Father, you would love Me, for I proceeded forth and have come from God, for I have not even come on My own initiative, but He sent Me. ⁴³ Why do you not understand what I am saying? *It is* because you cannot hear My word. ⁴⁴ You are of *your* father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth because there is no truth in him. Whenever he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own *nature*, for he is a liar and the father of lies. ⁴⁵ But because I speak the truth, you do not believe Me. ⁴⁶ Which one of you convicts Me of sin? If I speak truth, why do you not believe Me? ⁴⁷ He who is of God hears the words of God; for this reason you do not hear *them*, because you are not of God."

If we do not follow this closely, we might think that Jesus is also getting personal. They say he is of fornication, and he says your father is the devil. But Jesus is serious. Jesus is saying, "Your father really is the devil." He rejects the presumed relationship they have on God. They might rightly look to God as the originator of Israel and that Israel came about by the promises of God and exist under the promises of God. But Jesus rejects past history as a basis for present relationship. The question is not about the

history of Israel or even the future promises to Israel, but the state of each Jewish heart towards God. No one who truly knows the Father rejects the Son. And yet, that is what they are doing. Jesus tells them, "You are self-deceived. Your behavior implies that you belong to a different kind of spiritual father." And then he just comes out and names that father. "You look a lot more like Satan than God. Your twisting of the truth, your desire to have me killed that matches Satan's plan for Jesus."

Satan hated God's plan for humanity from the beginning. He tempted the first couple away from God, murderously initiating death through the first Adam. He is a deceiver. He is a murderer. And then when Jesus came as a second Adam to set right the failure of the first, Satan tries to deceive him, to tempt him in the wilderness by twisting the word of God in order to maintain a reign of death over mankind. He is a deceiver. He deceives in order to kill. And in their opposition to Jesus, these Jews are acting in line with Satan's agenda. They want to hold on to their perceived freedom so much that they are willing to twist the words of Jesus, but the result is death.

Jesus ends this statement challenging his opponents to make a reasoned objection against him. Don't make it personal. If I am not from God, "which one of you convicts me of sin?" Bring forth your accusations. Bring witnesses. Let us reason together. Put me on trial. What sin have you seen me commit?

But being beyond reason they respond with an even more personal attack.

⁴⁸ The Jews answered and said to Him, "Do we not say rightly that You are a Samaritan and have a demon?"

Jews and Samaritans both made up stories to disparage the origin of the other people. D. A. Carson writes that these Jews may be referring to a Samaritan slander that Satan seduced Eve to bear Cain from whom came all the Jews. And that was the Samaritans putting down the Jews. And it may be that in this exchange, hearing Jesus tell them their spiritual father is Satan, that some Jews linked this to the false charge of Samaritans. And so, by labeling Jesus as a Samaritan, they don't have to pay any attention to anything he is saying. They just disparage him with this label. It is like calling somebody a Nazi. You call them a Nazi you don't have to talk about what they are talking about. You just give them this really negative label and it kind of puts them off to the side. So, they are like, "Okay. You are a Samaritan and you have a demon."

5th statement and response There is a fifth exchange.

⁴⁹ Jesus answered, "I do not have a demon; but I honor My Father, and you dishonor Me. ⁵⁰ But I do not seek My glory; there is One who seeks and judges. ⁵¹ Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps My word he will never see death."

As Jesus said from the start, "Follow me, keep my word, and you will be set free, set free from sin and death."

⁵² The Jews said to Him, "Now we know that You have a demon. Abraham died, and the prophets *also;* and You say, 'If anyone keeps My word, he will never taste of death.' ⁵³ Surely You are not greater than our father Abraham, who died? The prophets died too; whom do You make Yourself out *to be?*"

They hear Jesus. And Jesus is saying that he has the power to free them from death. And in this case, their response makes sense from their vantage point. Yes, Abraham and the prophets all did die. But Jesus is not speaking of physical death. He is speaking of spiritual death. And yes, in fact, Jesus is greater than Abraham and the prophets. You heard right. His claim indicates that he is much greater than these.

6th statement and response

Moving on to the sixth statement,

⁵⁴ Jesus answered, "If I glorify Myself, My glory is nothing; it is My Father who glorifies Me, of whom you say, 'He is our God'; ⁵⁵ and you have not come to know Him, but I know Him; and if I say that I do not know Him, I will be a liar like you, but I do know Him and keep His word. ⁵⁶ Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw *it* and was glad."

⁵⁷ So the Jews said to Him, "You are not yet fifty years old, and have You seen Abraham?"

So, they push him. They want to say, "Who are you making yourself out to be?" And Jesus is completely comfortable with his own self-identity. "I am not making myself out to be anybody. I am not lifting myself up in glory. I am telling you the truth. Accept it our not. This is the truth. And the truth about you is that you are not honest about who you are. Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day, and he saw it and was glad."

Any of the Jews in this group who claimed to believe in Jesus, certainly did not believe in him according to who Jesus claims to be. They may have believed him as an earthly, human Messiah, Son of David. But when he starts talking about Abraham rejoicing in his day, their response shows that they have a very limited view of who he is. "You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?" They do not get what he is talking about, because they don't get who he is.

7th statement and response

This leads in the 7th and final exchange.

- ⁵⁸ Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was born, I am."
- ⁵⁹ Therefore they picked up stones to throw at Him, but Jesus hid Himself and went out of the temple.

"Before Abraham was born, I am." This is the only place in my English translation of John where the absolute "I am" statement comes across loud and clear. Jesus is making a claim to predate Abraham. And even then, it is a strange thing to say. He does not say, before Abraham was born, I was born. Or before Abraham was born, I was. No. He says, "before Abraham was born, I am." Jesus is the one who always is. He is eternally I am. The same yesterday and today and forever. Depending on no one. Self-existent. Equal to God whose name is I am who I am.

Do the Jews get what he is saying, now? Yes, they finally do get it. And that is why they pick up stones to kill him. They finally understand what he is saying. And they want to shut it out. Jesus saw this in their hearts all along. Some already had murderous hatred for him, others, when they finally understand the truth that he was revealing about himself, they see the light Jesus is shining on himself, they want to shut it out. They are moved to kill him. They do not fall down and worship. That would be a sign of true belief. When he says, "Before Abraham was, I am," true believers worship. Amen. He is the I am. That is not what they do. They pick up stones to kill him. And so, just as the truth is revealed about Jesus, so also the truth is revealed about them.

Conclusion

This is what happens whenever people claim to believe in Jesus and make all these kinds of statements about Jesus, and they work the Bible to justify their own lifestyle or their own viewpoint or their own theology. And then when the Bible is preached and they truly see Jesus, who Jesus is, it reveals what is true. If they rejoice in the preaching of the word of God, even in the weird parts and the hard parts and the mysterious parts and the hard to take parts, but you rejoice in it because it is the word of God, it is Jesus revealed, it shows that you believe. But when you hate the word of God and parts of the word of God and you reject it and you call it evil and you try to twist it, it shows that you do not know Jesus at all.

Here is the hard truth for us. Another hard truth. Prior to coming to know Jesus Christ, we are all the same as these Jews. We might love all kinds of things about Jesus, especially from a distance. But when he reveals who he truly is, and when he reveals who we truly are, and we are given the choice to give up who we are in submission to him, we all try to eliminate him. The darkness cannot tolerate the light.

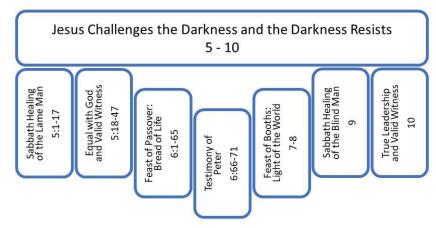
We are children of wrath. We are all spiritual children of the devil. That is the hard truth. We want to be independent of our Creator. We want to be free. We want to do it our way.

And we desperately need God to open the eyes of our heart, so that the light can come in. We do not come to God unless he has turned something on to make it possible for us to yield to him. Jesus teaches that your supposed freedom is actual slavery to sin. So, he says, yield to me. Submit yourself to the authority of my word. And then, in your submission, you will become free indeed; free from sin, free from death, free to truly live.

Reflection questions

- 1. Read John 8:12-30. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What are some questions that come to mind?
- 2. Looking over the back and forth dialogue between Jesus and the Pharisees, how does verse 8:12 serve as a summary of the what is going on? What specific examples in the dialogue draw out the reality of 8:12 (in a positive or negative sense)?
- 3. What is a specific, concrete example from some area in your life that you have experience the reality of 8:12?
- 4. Read John 8:31-59. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What are some questions that come to mind?
- 5. Following through the back and forth dialogue between Jesus and the so-called believers of 8:31-59, how does verse 8:31-32 summarize the reality of the dialogue (in a positive or negative sense)?
- 6. What is a specific, concrete example from some area in your life that you have experienced the reality of 8:31-32?

Lesson 17: John 9 The Light of the World and the Blindness of Men Introduction



John 9 begins, "Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he should be born blind?" The question by the disciples reveals their theological assumption about a man born with the handicap of blindness. They do not believe his blindness results from purely random, natural factors. They believe God must have a purpose for the blindness. Jesus will affirm that assumption that God is in control of the circumstances of life, including the blindness of a baby. God has a plan for every life.

Where the disciples go wrong is assuming that the blindness is a punishment for sin. That's the assumption. What is not clear to them is whether it is punishment for their parent's sin or the sin of the man? It seems they thought it possible even for a baby to be held guilty for sin in the womb.

The Bible would agree that blindness is a result of sin if we mean the corruption that entered creation as a result of the sin of Adam and Eve, so that the general source for blindness is sin. But the disciples make the mistake that Job's friends made assuming that pain and suffering in our lives is always the result of some specific sin that we or a loved oned have committed. Jesus rejects that assumption. In this case, the blindness of the man had nothing to do with his sin, or his parents.

³ Jesus answered, "It was neither that this man sinned, nor his parents; but it was so that the works of God might be displayed in him.

Sometimes God allows suffering in our lives as opportunity for us to participate in a glorious work. God is not just using the blind man for his own end, for his own glory. This man's blindness is also what prepares him to see. The suffering he has so far experienced in life enables him to enter into something new that may not have been possible at all if he had grown up with normal sight. That normal life might have eventually ended in eternal spiritual death. But the life of blindness, for this man at least, is going to end in eternal spiritual life. God has a plan for him that works both for his good and also for God's glory. The two purposes are intertwined. Jesus goes on to instruct his disciples saying in verse 4 and 5,

⁴ "We must work the works of Him who sent Me as long as it is day; night is coming when no one can work. ⁵ While I am in the world, I am the Light of the world."

Jesus is always the light of the world and is always at work. These words most apply to the present reality of his incarnation. The day is his present ministry and the night his coming crucifixion. During the day of his present ministry Jesus is the light of the world in a special way. He is revealing the Father and revealing himself through his miraculous signs, through his teaching, and through his interaction with people. He is the light that reveals.

Interestingly, Jesus uses the plural we here. "We must work the works of him who sent me." Jesus is including his disciples in this ministry of revelation. They are participating together with him. Now, of course, Jesus is central, but this blind man is going to participate and contribute in the display of God's glory.

For us, living now, Jesus continues to be the light of the world and the Father continues to work for the display of his glory, his nature, his name. And we who believe participate in the display of his glorious name. That display of the glory of God is right and just and good and loving, because God is uniquely the center of all things. He is that which is good and beautiful and true. And it is right and just and good to honor and praise, to point the whole universe to the wonder of his glorious nature. God himself must give attention to his own glory. He is uniquely in the position to do that because he is good and he himself is the source and display of all that which is truly good. So, if God is going to be good, even God must magnify the goodness of his own nature. Be cannot deny or reject himself as the source of all truth, all beauty, all goodness. And God is unique in this. We don't point everybody to our own goodness. We point everybody to God's goodness. But God also points people to his own goodness. He is the one for whom it is good and right to magnify himself. It is truly amazing how humbly he does this as the Son Jesus Christ. Yet, he still does it. Jesus displays the glory of his own nature. The light displays the light.

We exist to magnify the glory of God. The glory of everything that is good and true and beautiful. He is the center. He is the focus. And the magnification of his name is our greatest calling. It is also our greatest blessing. To magnify him makes us whole. It is also our greatest gift to magnify him to the people around us, we help them see God, to learn to glorify, to love God, to become whole.

Jesus' answer to his disciples applies to us also. Why was I born like this? However I am born, with this personality, these weaknesses, these strengths, these life circumstances, why? I will tell you why. So, that the works of God might be displayed in you. That you might reflect the glory of God. And we must do the works of the one who sent us as long as today is today. Jesus has sent us into the world to do the works that display the glory and goodness of God.

Back to the event at hand. Jesus had already declared himself the light of the world. He declares it again here, "I am the light of the world!" And he performs a sign that is going to highlight the reality of who he is. The account starts with Jesus and the blind man, then it is going to move into a debate. Jesus is not going to be there. It is going to be between the blind man and the religious leaders. But then it is going to come back to Jesus and the blind man.

So, first, Jesus and the blind man, John 9:6-14.

Jesus and the blind man (9:6-14)

⁶ When He had said this, He spat on the ground, and made clay of the spittle, and applied the clay to his eyes, ⁷ and said to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which is translated, Sent). So he went away and washed, and came *back* seeing. ⁸ Therefore the neighbors, and those who previously saw him as a beggar, were saying, "Is not this the one who used to sit and beg?" ⁹ Others were saying, "This is he," *still* others were saying, "No, but he is like him." He kept saying, "I am the one." ¹⁰ So they were saying to him, "How then were your eyes opened?" ¹¹ He answered, "The man who is called Jesus made clay, and anointed my eyes, and said to me, 'Go to Siloam and wash'; so I went away and washed, and I received sight." ¹² They said to him, "Where is He?" He said, "I do not know." ¹³ They brought to the Pharisees the man who was formerly blind. ¹⁴ Now it was a Sabbath on the day when Jesus made the clay and opened his eyes.

The method of this miracle is interesting. Jesus does not simply speak as he does elsewhere. He makes mud to put on the eyes. Spittle is considered in this time as both unclean and also contrary to that as having special properties. So, Jesus' action could be taken as a healer using the properties of clay and spit to bring about sight. But that is not what is going on here. Jesus is adding to the symbolic message of the sign by using the mud. And that is going to come out later. It's very intentional.

It is also interesting that the man does not see until he obeys. So, far in this Gospel, Jesus is the one who is sent. He is sent from the Father. Jesus is also going to be the one who sends. His disciples will become sent ones. This blind man is being sent by Jesus to a pool called Sent. He is a sent one. And it is through obedience that he sees. So, remember John 8:12. Jesus said, "I am the Light of the world; he who

follows me will not walk in the darkness, but will have the Light of life." Jesus does not simply say he who believes in me will not walk in darkness. He says, "he who follows me will not walk in darkness." To follow is to obey the word of Jesus. As he also said in John 8:31-32, "If you continue in my word, then you are truly disciples of mine; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free."

Jesus has given a word, a task, to the blind man. And if he will abide in that word, if he will follow in that word, he will be set free from his blindness. Obedience to the task does not earn him sight. Obedience shows a yielding to Jesus as Lord and the result is sight. When we yield to Jesus as the light by actually living according to his word, then our sight increases. It seems that Jesus builds this message into the sign. He could have just said, "Open your eyes and see!" Instead, he says, "Go as a sent one and the result will be sight."

Seeing the man people began to debate. Is this the blind man? It is the blind man. It can't be the blind man. He looks like the blind man. The man confirms it. He says, "I am the blind man. I used to be." And when asked, the man explains what Jesus did for him. Then in verse 14 we get a conclusion to this initial report telling us, "Now it was a Sabbath on the day when Jesus made the clay and opened his eyes." Jesus got in trouble with the religious leaders in chapter 5 when he healed a lame man on a Sabbath. In that case, Jesus did not do work himself, unless it can be argued that miraculous healing is work. But he did instruct the lame man to do what the Pharisees considered work when he told him, "Pick up his mat and go." So, Jesus told him to do work on the Sabbath. That is not really work in the sense of Torah law work. That is no clear at all. But it is work in the sense of the Jewish rules about what defines work. Here, in this passage, Jesus himself does the work by making the clay to use in the healing process. And he does that intentionally. Jesus is setting up this conflict. On Sabbath he intentionally makes mud.

But right now, he is nowhere to be found, so some busy-bodies bring the former blind man to the Pharisees for questioning. The report of the interrogation is in 9:15-34. So we will start it here.

Debate between the blind man and religious leaders (9:15-34)

¹⁵ Then the Pharisees also were asking him again how he received his sight. And he said to them, "He applied clay to my eyes, and I washed, and I see." ¹⁶ Therefore some of the Pharisees were saying, "This man is not from God, because He does not keep the Sabbath."

Yes, obviously this man is not from God. Because he took some dirt and he spit on it and he made mud and he put it on the eyes of the blind man and that blind man now sees. This is obviously not a man from God because he is working on the Sabbath. He does work. He makes mud. He is evil. He is sinful.

Why did Jesus make the mud? He made the mud to show us the Pharisees are blind. A man is standing in front of them who was born blind and they all see him every day at the temple begging. And he is blind. And he can't see. And now he sees. And they don't care that he sees. It doesn't even enter into their conversation. What they care about is that Jesus made some mud out of dirt and spit on the Sabbath day. How twisted is that? How blind? It is not that they are blinded by the rules of the law. They are blinded dark in their hearts. They want to reject Jesus. And they are looking for some way to reject Jesus. And this infraction, not even of the Torah, but of the rules they have made up to create a boundary for Torah, in breaking those rules, they say, "Aha! You see. You see what kind of man he is." And the religious rules of their over-zealous Sabbath keeping provide a pretense for what their hearts want; to condemn Jesus.

But not everyone is wholly blind. The text goes on.

But others were saying, "How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?" And there was a division among them. ¹⁷ So they said to the blind man again, "What do you say about Him, since He opened your eyes?" And he said, "He is a prophet."

That is not untrue. It is an understatement. Jesus is more than a prophet. But he is a prophet. And at this point, that's the best the formerly blind man can conclude. But the opponents of Jesus do not want to concede the point. Going on in verse 18,

¹⁸ The Jews then did not believe *it* of him, that he had been blind and had received sight, until they called the parents of the very one who had received his sight, ¹⁹ and questioned them, saying, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? Then how does he now see?" ²⁰ His parents answered them and said, "We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; ²¹ but how he now sees, we do not know; or who opened his eyes, we do not know. Ask him; he is of age, he will speak for himself." ²² His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that if anyone confessed Him to be Christ, he was to be put out of the synagogue. ²³ For this reason his parents said, "He is of age; ask him."

At the beginning of the Feast of Booths in chapter 7, verse 13, we are told people were afraid to debate about Jesus openly for fear of the Jewish leaders. And here we are told more specifically what that fear was all about. The religious leaders had already made it known that confession of Jesus as Christ will result in excommunication from the synagogue. You will be kicked out. And that's a series threat where so much of life happens around religion, and there is only one acceptable religion. This is a mono-religious culture. There is no other religious community to belong to. You can't just switch to a different denomination and start attending the church down the street. To be thrown out of the Synagogue means to be truly shut out from society. Understandably the man's parents are afraid. He is not going to be so afraid. He has been shut out of society all his life. But his parents are afraid. And they do not have the courage to stand up for their adult son, so the Pharisees go at him again. The dialogue is enlightening. This is verse 24,

²⁴ So a second time they called the man who had been blind, and said to him, "Give glory to God; we know that this man is a sinner."

That is what's called verbal irony. "Give glory to God; we know that Jesus is a sinner." Claiming to be on God's side, these leaders detract from the glory of God. They call the Son of God a sinner. But the formerly blind man gives glory to God by rejecting that charge.

²⁵ He then answered, "Whether He is a sinner, I do not know; one thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see."

Wow. That's the true testimony of every believer. "Amazing grace! How sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see." This man, though, this man is speaking literally. He is not speaking spiritually, yet. He is speaking literally. I could not see. And then he touched my eyes. He put some mud on me, and he sent me to wash, and now I see.

Every time I read this, I think I read it too fast. A blind man sees. I don't pause to think about what that like? To never see the sky, those blues. And the greens of the trees. The purple, the lavender, the pink of a flower, the yellow. To never see the face of the person you love most, the smile, the glint in the eyes, the color of the eyes, the response to you, the face, the face that loves you. To only imagine a truth of color but with no reference by which you can even understand what color is. What is beauty? What is that even? That makes no sense, if you have always been blind. And then to see. I just googled right now "a blind man sees". Try that. And I watched a video of a man who is seeing his wife for the first time in his life. Then I googled "girl that sees her mom for the first time". So, now I can't see because I am crying.

But to see! The human heart is born blind and to see the face of God smiling at you, that is what the Spirit of God does for us when he opens the eyes of our heart and know that. At times, before that, we can sense him from the creation. The sun suggests his warmth. Color suggests his beauty. The ocean suggests his power, the night sky his immensity. But to be born again of his spirit is to enable us to see his goodness and his smile and his holiness. It is a spiritual sight we are not born with as human beings. We are born dead blind. We cannot see God unless he grants us sight. And for now when he does, our sight here is like looking through a cloudy glass. We see dimly. But we get a glimpse. We begin to see the smile of his face, the glory of his goodness. But one day, one day, we are going to see God clearly, face to face in glory.

The man said, "Whether He is a sinner, I do not know; one thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see."

²⁶ So they said to him, "What did He do to you? How did He open your eyes?"

So, they are stuck on the mud.

²⁷ He answered them, "I told you already and you did not listen; why do you want to hear *it* again? You do not want to become His disciples too, do you?"

The conversation is taking a turn here. The formerly blind man is becoming defensive. He is upset. He is tired of them trying to make Jesus into something bad, to twist what he knows is good. And they can use all their learning and all their Bible knowledge, they are the educated ones, they are the ones with power, but he still knows, "I was blind and now I see." But they don't like taking this from him, so they reviled him, verse 28,

²⁸ They reviled him and said, "You are His disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. ²⁹ We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where He is from."

Oh, really? You claim to know Moses, but you don't know where this man is from. Jesus has already leveled this charge. Moses spoke about me. Abraham spoke about me. The Father loves me. If you do not see the Father in me. You do not know the Father. You do not follow Moses. The man does not make such an eloquent argument. He just says,

³⁰ ... "here is an amazing thing, that you do not know where He is from, and *yet* He opened my eyes. ³¹ We know that God does not hear sinners; but if anyone is God-fearing and does His will, He hears him. ³² Since the beginning of time it has never been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. ³³ If this man were not from God, He could do nothing."

What do you mean that you know he is a sinner? Do sinners open the eyes of blind men? And the man is not even asking them to give a definitive answer. Could we at least consider this? Will you at least consider that the guy's good? He healed me. You are stuck in the mud. But I see.

And so, the unlearned beggar sees what the educated leaders of society do not see. They are the ones who know the Bible. They are the ones who are tasked as stewards to await the coming king. The king has come, and they reject him. They grope in the darkness with mud caked on their eyes. With no way to respond to the experience and logic of the formerly blind man. And so, emotion overtakes the m. Verse 34,

³⁴ They answered him, "You were born entirely in sins, and are you teaching us?" (Yes. He actually is teaching you.)

So they put him out.

Jesus and the blind man (9:35-41)

That, thankfully, is not where the story ends. We have Jesus with the blind man. And then we have the blind man on trial with the pharisees. Now we come back to Jesus and the blind man again. And I love the next part. This will be verse 35-41.

³⁵ Jesus heard that they had put him out, and finding him, He said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" ³⁶ He answered, "Who is He, Lord, that I may believe in Him?"

That's priceless, that's wonderful! He has no clue who is the Son of Man. Tell me who is the son of man? I think he has an idea of the title, according to the response he is going to give. I think he might understand the Son of Man to be the Son of Man of Daniel 7 who is going to rule over the kingdoms of the earth. But he doesn't know who is the Son of Man. "Tell me which guy it is. Who is the Son of Man?" But he is sure of Jesus. Jesus is from God, and he is at the very least a prophet. "And whatever you tell me Jesus, "Who is he, Lord, that I may believe in him?"

³⁷ Jesus said to him, "You have both seen Him, and He is the one who is talking with you."

³⁸ And he said, "Lord, I believe." And he worshiped Him.

Is this true belief? That has been a regular question in John. Is this true belief? Yes, this is true belief. Jesus chose to entrust himself to this man, declaring himself "Son of Man" to this man, knowing already his heart. And then the text tells us the man believes, and "he worshiped him." Now that's really strange for a Jews to worship a man. A Gentile might get confused about whether or a man is a god-man or not. That fits into their worldview. You could be talking to Apollos or Zeus. You don't know. So, like when Cornelius received a vision about Peter and Peter shows up, Cornelius bows down and starts to worship him. And Peter das to say, "Get up. I am just a man like you." Jews do not tend to make that mistake unless it is an angel. And then they might fall down and start worshipping. They are overcome. Maybe what is most surprising here is that Jesus does as Peter does, "Get up, I am just a man." No, Jesus, even incarnate in the flesh, Jesus receives worship, and he doesn't correct the guy. This is telling us something both about the heart of the man who has just believed, it is a heart of worship, and about Jesus who understands himself to be worthy of worship, to receive worship. Only God does that.

After this, Jesus makes the last comment of chapter 9, and presumably, it is for this crowd of people that are always around him. He can't escape. But he must have met this guy in the temple, some public place, and there is a crowd around. And this is verse 39-41.

- ³⁹ And Jesus said, "For judgment I came into this world, so that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may become blind."
- ⁴⁰ Those of the Pharisees who were with Him heard these things and said to Him, "We are not blind too, are we?"
- ⁴¹ Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would have no sin; but since you say, 'We see,' your sin remains.

This is Jesus speaking as in a parable. We have to pay really close attention to what he is saying to work it out. There is tension again as we have already seen in John with the word judgment. Did Jesus come to the world to act as a judge? No, that was not his primary purpose of coming into the world. He is the judge. But he did not come into the world with the purpose of judging. He could have done that from heaven He came into the world to save the world. That we read in 3:17. But did Jesus' coming into the world initiate judgment. Yes, you can't proclaim gospel, you can't shine light into darkness without revealing the true nature of darkness, and its response to the light. Revealing the true nature of human beings and their need for a Savior inevitably leads to the salvation of some but also to a clarified judgment on those who reject the light. They might say, "Were God to speak to directly to me, if God would just tell me that he is, I would believe." Really? Would you? If you had been there in front of Jesus and you had seen the miracles of Jesus would you do better than these men? Do not be so sure. Were God to speak to you directly, you just might pick up a stone to kill him. Be careful how much stock you put in your own ability to judge and respond to spiritual truth. You are not as good as you like to think you are. You are not as insightful. You are not as spiritual. Those who assume they know or would know do not fare well in most of the history of Jesus on earth.

Those who do not see but come to see, those are the ones in darkness, but they know they are in darkness, and they see the light. And they respond to the light. They are the sinful who admit their sin, gratefully receive the grace of Jesus and follow him.

Those who see here in this text are those who claim to see, not those who really see. The seeing are those seeing who claim to see. They are people like the Pharisees who say, "Give glory to God; we know this man is a sinner." They claim to know but do not know, to see without sight.

Jesus concludes, saying, "If you were blind, you would have no sin; but since you say, 'We see,' your sin remains." In that sense, "If you were blind" means, "If you acknowledged your blindness, if you would admit you cannot see," then you could turn to Jesus and in turning to Jesus you would have no sin. You would be placed into grace. The reason their sin remains, reason their sin remains as a result of the claiming to see, is that the claim to see is a claim that "we know this man is a sinner." In their sight they see that Jesus is not the Messiah. In their self-declared knowledge, sight, seeing, they

reject Jesus. And that is the one thing, the one thing, we must not do. Cannot do. And so, their sin remains.

Conclusion

Concluding, we are on the second "I am" statement of the book of John. We had "I am the Bread of life" and now we have "I am the Light of the World." And John gives us two instances of Jesus claiming to be the light of the world. The first was in chapter 8:12 at the Feast of Booths. The resulting dialogue highlighted the blindness of the Jewish leaders and the crowds of people interacting with Jesus. Even those who claimed to believe, who claimed to see, by the end of the story they are picking up stones to kill him. They did not get what he was saying, and they were not willing to follow him as the guide to truth. They were not willing to abide in truth and so, be set free.

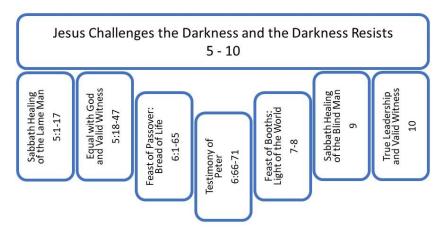
This second declaration in chapter 9 of "I am the Light" provides a positive opportunity for John to highlight someone who responds to the light. The majority in the story still reject Jesus. And they are going to try to shut out the light. This was declared in the prologue, "He was in the world. And the world was made through him. And the world did not know him. And he came to his own. And those who were his own did not receive him."

The majority through this gospel do not receive Jesus. Even when we have people who claim to believe, they end up walking away, because they have believed in a Jesus they want, not the Jesus who is. A great response is going to come from this generation. We are mostly negative because that is the reality when Jesus is among them. They reject him. There will be a day at Pentecost when the Spirit is poured out and thousands will be convict of this sin. But that day is not here, yet. Here it is mostly rejection. The majority claim to see and so remain blind. But not everybody. "But to those who receive him, to those who believe in his name..." And here is one. Here is one who had been blind but now truly sees. And seeing, he worships Jesus. Glory to God. Glory to God.

Reflection questions

- 1. Read John 9:1-41. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What are some questions that come to mind? (You may want to break this up into sections. Start by reading 6:1-14 and making observations. Then 6:15-34. And then 6:35-41.)
- 2. The pool of Siloam is the pool that the high priest would go and draw from each morning of the Feast of Booths to lead a procession to the temple to give thanks to God for his provision of water and the promised coming of the Holy Spirit. Here we are told that Siloam means "Sent." How do you understand the significance of being sent and seeing, both in this text and then also in your own Christian experience?
- 3. Jesus made mud and put it on the eyes of the man that he might see. This act symbolically applies to the Pharisees. They cannot see past the mud in their eyes. They are stuck and cannot see Jesus. How is the blindness of the Pharisees indicated in this text? What do they see? What do they claim to see? What do they not see?
- 4. In what way do you relate to the Pharisees and in what way do you relate to the blind man?
- 5. How does this text describing the spiritual state of seeing that applies to the blind man and the spiritual state of blindness that applies to the Pharisees
- 6. Write a paragraph, or if in a group give a brief description, of how you understand the eyes of your heart to have been opened to Jesus? Would you say that you see with spiritual sight? What do you see that you would not see if you had been left blind?

Lesson 18: John 10 True Leadership and Valid Witnesses Introduction



Who is your leader? Who defines for you the purpose of your life? Who do you go to for direction? Whose authority do you recognize in ordering your life? From whom do you ask permission before executing any major decision? If the answer is no one, then you are your own shepherd.

Who do you follow? Who is your leader? True and good leadership is the topic of John 10.

John 10 presents the very well-known metaphors surrounding two famous I am statements from Jesus, "I am the Door of the Sheep" and "I am the Good Shepherd." This teaching is delivered in the context of a larger section, as the completion of that section.

So, stepping back to take a broad look, we see that we have come to the end of the second major section of John, chapters 5-10, in which Jesus challenges the darkness and the darkness resists. There was misunderstanding of Jesus in chapters 1-4, but not much opposition and no talk of killing him. Resistance has steadily increased, intensified in chapters 1-5.

At the center of the section, we heard the testimony of Peter, "You have the words of eternal life. And we have believed and have come to know that you are the Holy one of God." If that testimony is the literary center of the section, then flanked on either side are two feasts, the Passover in chapter 6 and the Feast of Booths in chapters 7 and 8. The first contained the declaration, "I am the Bread of Life." The second contained the declaration, "I am the Light of the World." The Passover feast ended with a group of disciples who believed without believing and were pushed back by Jesus with the faith test, "eat my flesh, drink my blood." Abd then similarly, the Feast of Booths ended with another group that believed without believing and were pushed back as Jesus drilled down into their self-identity. The group of false disciples at the Passover deserted Jesus. The group of false believers at the Feast of Booths picked up stones to kill him. So, we have two dialogues ending with rejection of Jesus flanking the testimony of Peter who holds on to Jesus.

Then if we move further out in the section on either side, we have two Sabbath healings that bring about the anger of Jewish leaders and provide opportunity for significant teaching from Jesus about himself. Now, at the beginning this content is in chapter 5. And at then, at the end it is in chapters 9-10. There are three parallel divisions in each of those two sections. In chapter 5, (1) first, Jesus heals the lame man on the Sabbath, bringing about the anger of Jewish leaders. (2) Then, Jesus teaches us about himself. (3) Then, Jesus calls witnesses to support his claims. That same pattern follows here in chapters 9-10. (1) First, Jesus heals a blind man on the Sabbath, bringing out the anger of Jewish leaders. (2) Then, Jesus teaches us about himself. (3) Then, Jesus calls witnesses to support his claims.

In chapter 5, Jesus taught us that he has power over life and has authority to judge. In chapter 10 he builds on that teaching. He again asserts his power over life and his authority. Though his authority takes on a more personal tone. He is the leader we know and trust. He is King on High, but he is also the shepherd with us on the ground. He calls his sheep, and they hear his voice, and they follow him.

Of the three divisions that parallel that chapter 5, healing, teaching and witnesses, we addressed the healing of the blind man already in our last lesson. That was chapter 9. So, now, we continue on with two parts of this lesson. First, Jesus teaching about himself as our true leader. That is verses 1-21. And then a call to witnesses in verses 22-42.

Jesus is our true leader. (10:1-21)

Jesus is our true leader. Let's read John 10:1-21.

- ¹ "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter by the door into the fold of the sheep, but climbs up some other way, he is a thief and a robber. ² But he who enters by the door is a shepherd of the sheep. ³ To him the doorkeeper opens, and the sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴ When he puts forth all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. ⁵ A stranger they simply will not follow, but will flee from him, because they do not know the voice of strangers."
- ⁶ This figure of speech Jesus spoke to them, but they did not understand what those things were which He had been saying to them.
- ⁷ So Jesus said to them again, "Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. ⁸ All who came before Me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not hear them. ⁹ I am the door; if anyone enters through Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture. ¹⁰ The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I came that they may have life, and have *it* abundantly.
- ¹¹ I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep. ¹² He who is a hired hand, and not a shepherd, who is not the owner of the sheep, sees the wolf coming, and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters *them*. ¹³ He flees because he is a hired hand and is not concerned about the sheep.
- ¹⁴ I am the good shepherd, and I know My own and My own know Me, ¹⁵ even as the Father knows Me and I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep. ¹⁶ I have other sheep, which are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will hear My voice; and they will become one flock *with* one shepherd. ¹⁷ For this reason the Father loves Me, because I lay down My life so that I may take it again. ¹⁸ No one has taken it away from Me, but I lay it down on My own initiative. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This commandment I received from My Father."
- ¹⁹ A division occurred again among the Jews because of these words. ²⁰ Many of them were saying, "He has a demon and is insane. Why do you listen to Him?" ²¹ Others were saying, "These are not the sayings of one demon-possessed. A demon cannot open the eyes of the blind, can he?"

The Basic Shepherd Metaphor (1-6)

This text divides into four paragraphs. The first is verses 1-6. This is where Jesus delivers the basic metaphor. There are four players in the metaphor. There is a thief, a shepherd, a doorkeeper, and sheep. The thief and the shepherd each relate differently to the doorkeeper and differently to the sheep.

The thief must avoid the doorkeeper because he has no legitimate right to enter. He climbs over the barrier at some other point.

¹ Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter by the door into the fold of the sheep, but climbs up some other way, he is a thief and a robber.

And the sheep will not willingly follow this thief, because they have no relationship to him.

⁵ A stranger they simply will not follow, but will flee from him, because they do not know the voice of strangers."

On the other hand, the doorkeeper opens the gate for the shepherd who is recognized as having legitimate authority over the sheep. And when the sheep hear his voice, they respond, because they know him and trust him.

² But he who enters by the door is a shepherd of the sheep. ³ To him the doorkeeper opens, and the sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴ When he puts forth all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice.

My Croatian friend Vjenci says his grandfather gave each sheep a name. He remembers one called Jabuka which is Apple. When his grandfather called the sheep, they didn't even look up. He called each one by name, and he heads down, they just started walking after him at the call of his voice. Vjenci tried to call the sheep, when he was a boy, "Jabuko, Jabuko," but they completely ignored him and just kept on eating grass. He is not the shepherd. They do not know him.

Jesus has made clear that the primary issue of faith is the state of the human heart. Something has to be turned on inside of a person before they will follow after Jesus. But once it has been turned on, that person will indeed follow. Jesus declared in 6:65, "No one can come to Me, unless it has been granted from the Father." And then later in 8:47 "He who is of God hears the words of God; for this reason you do not hear them, because you are not of God." Seeing Jesus, hearing Jesus, these are senses a human being does not possess in his or her original state. Like the blind man at the beginning of chapter 9, we are born without sight. We cannot see the light unless the Light of the World opens the eyes of our hearts. We can also compare it to sound. We are born deaf, unable to hear the Word. But when he does unstop our ears, then we become his. We hear his voice, and we respond. We respond because we have begun to know him, and we trust him.

People in the gathered crowd are confused by Jesus metaphor. Verse 6 reports, "They did not understand what those things were which he had been saying to them." So, Jesus decides to expand on elements of the original metaphor. This is not so much an extension of the same metaphor, but more of an expansion of three key ideas, the door, the shepherd, and the sheep.

Expansion on the idea of the Door (7-10)

So, let's look at the expansion on the idea of the door. And this is verses 7-10.

⁷ So Jesus said to them again, "Truly, I ruly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. ⁸ All who came before Me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not hear them. ⁹ I am the door; if anyone enters through Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture. ¹⁰ The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I came that they may have life, and have *it* abundantly."

We find out that Jesus is too big for the metaphor. Not only is he the Shepherd who leads the sheep. He is also the door by which the sheep enter into the kingdom of God. The sheep are saved through him.

Now, I have heard the door here compared to a shepherd out in the country over night who uses an enclosure made of stone, just picked up out of the field, or an enclosure of thorn bushes and neither one has a set gate across the entryway. So, the shepherd lays himself down across the entrance. He becomes the door and prevents sheep from leaving at night or predators from entering.

The idea in Jesus' metaphor goes even further than that. Jesus is the entryway to salvation. Psalm 23 helps us imagine the goodness that our Shepherd desires to lead us into.

¹ The Lord is my shepherd,

I shall not want.

² He makes me lie down in green pastures;

He leads me beside quiet waters.

³ He restores my soul;

He guides me in the paths of righteousness

For His name's sake.

Jesus is the shepherd who restores the soul and guides us in righteousness, who gives us purpose. How do we enter into that goodness? Can Jesus simply call us and lead us into it? No. If he led, we could not follow him. We are not made for heaven. We have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. We cannot enter into perfect righteousness. We have no place in the kingdom of God. We cannot follow him in. The angel of wrath blocks the way back into the garden.

But by dying for us, Jesus becomes the portal through which we can enter into the holy place of God. Because we enter into his righteousness when we place our faith in him. We stand in his grace. In this way, he is our entryway. And what we find when we enter is life that is more than life. Or more than biological life. Life cut off from relationship with God is not real life. Jesus says, "I have come that you might have life, abundant life."

But there is one who tries to bar the way to life. Jealous of Adam and Eve and bearing a bitter grudge against the One who made him, Satan entered the garden to destroy the life God gives. He is a deceiver. He is a murderer. He hates the idea of life under the loving sovereignty of God. He continues to work against mankind, to steal and to kill and to destroy, in opposition of the work of Jesus Christ. And anyone who opposes Jesus Christ participates knowingly, unknowingly, willingly, unwillingly in the work of Satan to kill, to steal, to destroy, to block life.

Jesus is not speaking abstractly about good shepherds and bad shepherds. His words are an indictment of false spiritual leaders, beginning with those present around him. Those present in the story in chapter 9. Chapter 9 is a concrete example of what Jesus is saying. The blind man is one of the sheep of Israel. But as a sheep of Israel, he had lived as an outcast beggar under the rule of false shepherds. The true shepherd came to him and opened his eyes. The true shepherd saw him and cared about him. But the false shepherds reject that true shepherd, and they speak lies about him. And when this poor sheep stood up for the true shepherd, he was reviled, and he, himself, was cast out. But the true shepherd sought out the lost sheep. He came to him and spoke to him. And that sheep heard his voice and followed him. Finally, the true shepherd denounced the blindness of the false shepherds, telling them, "If you were blind, you would have no sin; but since you say, 'We see,' your sin remains (9:41)."

The leaders of Israel, knowing or unknowingly, are doing the work of Satan. They destroy through deception. They care most about their own positions of authority. They are not concerned, not truly, for the spiritual health of the flock under their care. They are concerned with maintaining their religion. They are not concerned with spiritual truth.

Here Jesus expands the idea of the door, in the next paragraph, he expands the idea of the Shepherd. Expansion on the idea of the Shepherd (11-18)

This is going to comes in two parts. First in verses 11-13.

¹¹ I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep. ¹² He who is a hired hand, and not a shepherd, who is not the owner of the sheep, sees the wolf coming, and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters *them.* ¹³ He flees because he is a hired hand and is not concerned about the sheep.

Jesus is not just the shepherd. Jesus is the good shepherd. In his goodness, he deeply loves his sheep. It is a revolutionary concept for leadership. If you are a leader, do you lover your people. Sheep are not expendable for Jesus. Sheep are not stepping blocks for his own agenda. Sheep are not the lesser, unworthy masses that exist for the benefit or aggrandizement of elite leaders. The agenda of the Good Shepherd involves the protection and care of the sheep. He loves the sheep. He wants the sheep experience life. He is willing to die for the sheep. The hired hand is the contrast. He is not concerned about the sheep at all.

This is not the first appearance of this contrast between good and wicked shepherds in the Bible. Jesus' teaching alludes to the shepherd prophecies in Ezekiel and Zechariah. Both of which are Messianic. So, listen to this. This is Ezekiel 34:1-4 and 22,

¹ Then the word of the Lord came to me saying, ² "Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel. Prophesy and say to those shepherds, 'Thus says the Lord God, "Woe, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flock? ³ You eat the fat and clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat *sheep* without feeding the flock. ⁴ Those who are sickly you have not strengthened, the diseased you have not healed, the broken you have not bound up, the scattered you have not brought back, nor have you sought for the lost; but with force and with severity you have dominated them...

That is a wicked leader.

²² therefore, I will deliver My flock, and they will no longer be a prey; and I will judge between one sheep and another. ²³ Then I will set over them one shepherd, My servant David, and he will feed them; he will feed them himself and be their shepherd."

Zechariah brings out even more Messianic prophesy around the metaphor of shepherd and ties into the Feast of Booths passage we have already noted as background to chapters 7 and 8 with its light and its water streaming out of Jerusalem. So, follow this. I am going to read five short passages, Messianic passages from Zechariah starting in 11:4-5,

⁴ Thus says the Lord my God, "Pasture the flock *doomed* to slaughter. ⁵ Those who buy them slay them and go unpunished, and *each of* those who sell them says, 'Blessed be the Lord, for I have become rich!' And their own shepherds have no pity on them."

Next Zechariah 11:12-13,

¹² I said to them, "If it is good in your sight, give *me* my wages; but if not, never mind!" So they weighed out thirty *shekels* of silver as my wages. ¹³ Then the Lord said to me, "Throw it to the potter, *that* magnificent price at which I was valued by them." So I took the thirty *shekels* of silver and threw them to the potter in the house of the Lord.

Zechariah 12:10,

¹⁰ "I will pour out on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the Spirit of grace and of supplication, so that they will look on Me whom they have pierced; and they will mourn for Him, as one mourns for an only son, and they will weep bitterly over Him like the bitter weeping over a firstborn."

And Zechariah 13:7,

⁷ "Awake, O sword, against My Shepherd, And against the man, My Associate," Declares the Lord of hosts. "Strike the Shepherd that the sheep may be scattered; And I will turn My hand against the little ones."

Then finally, Zechariah 14:7-9,

⁷ For it will be a unique day which is known to the Lord, neither day nor night, but it will come about that at evening time there will be light. ⁸ And in that day living waters will flow out of Jerusalem, half of them toward the eastern sea and the other half toward the western sea; it will be in summer as well as in winter. ⁹ And the Lord will be king over all the earth; in that day the Lord will be *the only* one, and His name *the only* one.

For those who have ears to hear in the audience, when Jesus says, "I am the Good Shepherd", and then you go back into Ezekiel and back into Zechariah and you see the wicked shepherds are the leaders of Israel, but there is going to rise up a good shepherd, but he is going to suffer, he is going to be betrayed for 30 pieces of silver, he is going to be pierced, and his little ones are going to be scattered, but in the end day he is going to be king who reigns in light and a river of life will flow from Jerusalem, if they could hear that, Jesus is saying, "I am the Messiah."

Jesus continues his elaboration on the idea of shepherd in verses 14-18.

¹⁴ I am the good shepherd, and I know My own and My own know Me, ¹⁵ even as the Father knows Me and I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep. ¹⁶ I have other sheep, which are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will hear My voice; and they will become one flock *with* one shepherd. ¹⁷ For this reason the Father loves Me, because I lay down My life so that I may take it again. ¹⁸ No one has taken it away from Me, but I lay it down on My own initiative. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This commandment I received from My Father."

Jesus repeats here that those who hear his voice and respond, those are his. This is a spiritual reality. And it is not just true of Israelites. There are sheep outside of Israel, "I have other sheep, which are not of this fold; I must bring them in also, and they will hear My voice; and they will become one flock with the shepherd." That lesson is not really going to sink in for the disciples until after the resurrection and after Pentecost and after the church begins to grow. But it is not going to stop in Israel, it is going to go beyond. Because there are sheep out there who need to hear the voice of Jesus. There are still sheep all over the world who need somebody to proclaim the good news. And when they hear it, they are going to respond.

Describing the relationship between Shepherd and sheep, Jesus makes a comparison to his own relationship with the Father. It is not an absolute parallel. Jesus' relationship with the Father is fundamentally different than our relationship with Jesus, because Jesus and the Father are equally God. Still, there are ways in which the relationship is similar. There is a personal, love relationship between Father and Son. There is also a personal love relationship between us and Christ. Even if there is as much difference between him and us as between sheep and a shepherd, there is still this personal knowledge, a knowing of names that involves a knowing one another. Jesus knows us, and we can come to know him.

The relationship is also similar in the sense of obedience. The Son obeys the Father, and we obey the Son. He is our Shepherd King. There is something of this in verse 17. And I do not believe that verse 17 means that God loves Jesus only as a result of his obedience – Jesus must obey first and then the Father loves him. It sounds like that, but that is not the idea. The Father loves who the Son is. And who is is the one who lays down his life. The Father loves this loving obedience that is part of the nature of the Son, this unconditional love for the Sheep that is part of his being. That is who he is. That's what is meant by verse 17, "For this reason the Father loves Me, because I lay down My life so that I may take it again." The obedience of the Son to lovingly lay down his life is the glory of his nature. And the Father loves that nature.

Another truth stands out. This is kind of striking in this passage. I am not sure where else it is expressed. We tend to think about the resurrection of Jesus as the act of the Father. That is what the Father does. He raises Jesus from the dead. But John emphasizes the reality of equality in Father and Son. Regarding his life, Jesus declares, "No one has taken it away from Me, but I lay it down on My own initiative. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again." No one kills Jesus without the authority of Jesus. Jesus has to willingly submit. And Jesus, himself, has authority to raise himself back up again. That strong language, that claim, leads to the response of the crowd. And if finds mixed reviews.

Response of the gathered crowd (19-21)

This is verses 19-21.

¹⁹ A division occurred again among the Jews because of these words. ²⁰ Many of them were saying, "He has a demon and is insane. Why do you listen to Him?" ²¹ Others were saying, "These are not the sayings of one demon-possessed. A demon cannot open the eyes of the blind, can he?"

The charge "He has a demon and is insane," reminds me of the Lord, Liar, Lunatic argument we borrowed from C. S. Lewis for the parallel lesson back in chapter 5. Who is this Jesus? What kind of person makes such claims? This crowd recognizes that Jesus does not leave them with the option of calling him a good moral teacher. Good people don't say this sort of thing. He claims to be the door of salvation for all people. You can't enter heaven unless you go through him. What good person says that? He claims to be the good shepherd not only over all Israel but beyond. He has this grandiose opinion of his authority. What kind of person says that? And now he claims that he has power over his own life and his own death.

What kind of man makes such claims? A demonic man who willingly deceives people, manipulates. Or an insane man who knows no better. He really thinks it is true. But it is not. Or the Lord of heaven

whose claims are true. These people understood the claims Jesus was making. And they recognized he has done great miracles. And so, now they are struggling to come to grips with it all.

Jesus has taught about himself. We had a sign of the healing of the blind man. Do you see the sign? Are you able to read it? Jesus helps us. He teaches us now about who he is. Who is the one who can heal the blind? He is the good shepherd. He is the door of the sheep. He is the one who has authority to lay down his life and to take it up again. They are not going to believe him. So, in the next section Jesus calls on witnesses to support his claims. So, let's read through that whole text. This is John 10:22-42.

Jesus calls witnesses. (10:22-42)

- ²² At that time the Feast of the Dedication took place at Jerusalem; ²³ it was winter, and Jesus was walking in the temple in the portico of Solomon. ²⁴ The Jews then gathered around Him, and were saying to Him, "How long will You keep us in suspense? If You are the Christ, tell us plainly."
- ²⁵ Jesus answered them, "I told you, and you do not believe; the works that I do in My Father's name, these testify of Me. ²⁶ But you do not believe because you are not of My sheep. ²⁷ My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; ²⁸ and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand. ²⁹ My Father, who has given *them* to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch *them* out of the Father's hand. ³⁰ I and the Father are one."
- ³¹ The Jews picked up stones again to stone Him. ³² Jesus answered them, "I showed you many good works from the Father; for which of them are you stoning Me?"
- ³³ The Jews answered Him, "For a good work we do not stone You, but for blasphemy; and because You, being a man, make Yourself out *to be* God."
- ³⁴ Jesus answered them, "Has it not been written in your Law, 'I said, you are gods'? ³⁵ If he called them gods, to whom the word of God came (and the Scripture cannot be broken), ³⁶ do you say of Him, whom the Father sanctified and sent into the world, 'You are blaspheming,' because I said, 'I am the Son of God'? ³⁷ If I do not do the works of My Father, do not believe Me; ³⁸ but if I do them, though you do not believe Me, believe the works, so that you may know and understand that the Father is in Me, and I in the Father."
- ³⁹ Therefore they were seeking again to seize Him, and He eluded their grasp. ⁴⁰ And He went away again beyond the Jordan to the place where John was first baptizing, and He was staying there. ⁴¹ Many came to Him and were saying, "While John performed no sign, yet everything John said about this man was true." ⁴² Many believed in Him there.

Feast of Dedication (22-24)

We cover a few months' time between verse 21 and 22. John has moved us forward to another feast. He has taken teaching from that later feast to complete the parallel with chapter 5 to give us a call to witnesses here. And we know Jesus told other parables about shepherds and sheep not included in John's Gospel, so it is not surprising that Jesus taught again on this same theme at a later feast, and then John has just brought the two together.

The Feast of Dedication is not an Old Testament feast. In 167 BC the Syrian ruler Antiochus Epiphenes IV, a really bad guy, set up a pagan alter in the temple of God in Jerusalem. And he sacrificed a pig on it to Zeus. Judas Maccabees, also known as the Hammer, led forces to retake the temple three years later. And it was cleansed and rededicated after those three years of defilement. This feast celebrates that cleansing, the dedication of the temple. And you have probably heard of it by another name, by the name Hanukkah or the Feast of Lights. Because of the lighting of the lights and joyfulness of the occasion, it was also referred to as a Feast of Booths in the month Kislev (2 Maccabees 1:9). It fits within our whole Feast of Booths context. And with the content John just brings it all nicely together here.

The reference in verse 36 to Jesus as the one whom God "sanctified and sent into the world" may also be John's way of indicating that this feast, too, finds fulfillment in Jesus. As the temple was sanctified anew, Jesus is the one who is sanctified. The temple was a shadow pointing to the reality of Jesus. If we study what the tabernacle and then later the temple were all about, it is constant symbolism about Jesus. And in that sense the sanctification of the temple also points to the sanctification of the Son, but the Son was set apart, sanctified, declared holy for his saving work, since the creation of the world. That was the plan. That he would come. And so, the Son fulfills this idea of the sanctification of the temple because he himself is the temple or he himself is the dwelling of God's glory on earth. So, I don't know. There may be a connection there. Or he is just telling us what time of year it is. It is the Feast of Dedication.

Expansion on the idea of the Sheep (25-30)

Now, before we get to the witnesses, we are going to expand – there is one more idea. We expanded on the metaphor with the idea of the door and then the idea of the shepherd. Jesus is going to give us a little more now about the idea of the sheep. So, listen to these truth claims. This is in verses 27-29.

- (1) "My sheep hear My voice" That is a mark of true belief. They are the ones who hear Jesus.
- (2) "and I know them" The sheep share personal relationship with Jesus.
- (3) "and they follow Me" True hearing implies following. The sheep hear, they trust, and they start walking behind Jesus.
- (4) "and I give eternal life to them" To know Jesus, to truly hear him and believe, is to experience eternal life as a gift from him.
- (5) "and they will never perish" Eternal life is, in fact, eternal. If you have eternal life, you will never perish. And it does not mean the sheep will not die a physical death, but it means they will die no spiritual death. They will live forever in the new heaven and the new earth with God.
- (6) And finally, "no one will snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given *them* to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch *them* out of the Father's hand." We might understand from the previous promise "they will never perish" that the sheep have eternal security. But just so we are sure about this, Jesus makes this explicit promise.

And it ties in with promises he made back in chapter 6, "all that the Father gives Me shall come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out...and this is the will of him who sent Me, that of all that He has given Me I lose nothing, but raise it up on the last day. For this is the will of My Father, that everyone who beholds the Son and believes in Him, may have eternal life; and I Myself will raise him up on the last day (6:37, 39-40)." Jesus adds here to those promises. It is building on the same idea. "No one will snatch them out of my hand." Why not? Because, "My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand." You can play that game that you might play with a little kid. And you hide a ball in your hand and close your fist and let them try to pry open your fingers. Nobody can do that to God, unless he let's you. God's hand is firm. And if he says nobody can snatch you out, nobody can snatch you out.

I recognize there is disagreement in the Christian world about whether or not a true believer can lose their salvation. I believe Jesus teaches here in John that they can't. I believe this teaching is strongly affirmed in the theology of the Christian life taught by Paul.

And since Paul develops the idea of eternal security more thoroughly in Romans 5-8, and since I have addressed that teaching in my Romans podcast, I will just say a few words about something here, an argument I hear that bothers me. So, I will not develop the whole argument here. If you want my argument, you will have to go back and listen to Romans 5-8. But there is something I hear that people say, and it ultimately denies an essential aspect of the gospel. This is the problematic argument in a simplified form. People say, "Since we have free will to enter into relationship with God, we also have free will to leave."

And I think, "Well, that sounds nice, but it is really false." There are times when we make a free will choice that we are free to then back out of the choice. But there are times when we are not free to back out of the choice. It is not that simple. And salvation is one of those times. It is wrong to understand salvation as merely the entering into a covenant with another person. The marriage relationship works to help us understand our salvation, that we say, "Yes to God." You say, "I do." You have to make that decision of the will, the volitional moment. But it is more than just a covenant, more than just a marriage. Something happens. So, that is part of the truth. It is just not the whole truth.

Along with bringing us into a covenant relationship with God based on grace, saving faith changes who we are as human beings. The new covenant believer has not just made a decision without any change, the new covenant believer experiences a spiritual regeneration by the Holy Spirit. Being born again is a true spiritual reality. It is not just a fiction of the mind. We are not just saying, "Oh, I am born again because I have made a decision." No when you made the decision, something happened to you. And you are born again.

And even if it is the human will that initiates the experience of being born again - which I do not think it is, I do not think that is what we learn in John, since no one can come unless the Father grants it, I think God has to do something in us - but even if we say that, if we say the human will is the decisive factor, we are often able to make decisions that cannot be undone. It is possible that we make a free will decision that you can't then change. Becoming pregnant, for example. That is a reality entered into by the human will. That creates an immortal life, a life that will live forever in death or will live forever in life. And once that new life has been conceived that reality cannot be undone by your will. You may have willfully entered into it, you cannot change it once it is done, once life exists. You can try to ignore it or erase it or unthink it, but you will not be able to. There is a new life. So, also with new birth. Once you place your faith in Jesus Christ, truly, you are born again of his Spirit. And it is not at all clear that you have any ability in your will to undo that new birth.

Now, you may disagree with me. That is fine. You may believe that it is possible for the spiritual regeneration of new birth to be undone. That is a longer conversation. But I do hope, and I encourage Christians to stop using the argument that just as we are free to enter into relationship with God, we are free also to leave relationship with God. Such an argument ignores the reality of the new birth by not addressing that fact that something transformative happens when a person truly believes. It is no longer simply a matter of the human will.

Okay. Back to our text, I believe Jesus is teaching here, that once you step into his grace, not only are all of your sins forgiven, so that there is now no condemnation, but you are also irretrievable taken into the care of God. Even if you try to walk away from Jesus, the Spirit in you will continue to cry out Abba Father. And Abba Father will never let you go. No one, not anything, is strong enough to snatch you out of his hand. Not even you.

To sum up the teaching here about the sheep. True belief brings about a spiritual response. The ears of the heart are open. If you truly believe that is a description of what has happened to you. You heard the voice of Jesus. You discovered that he knows you. And you followed after him. He has given you eternal life. You will not perish. You are held tight in the Father's hand.

Not only does the Father hold you, but so does Jesus, because they are one. In verse 30 he reminds us, "I and the Father are one."

That reminder is enough to incense the crowd. And they pick up stones to stone Jesus. And so, Jesus calls again on witnesses. We considered the witnesses more in-depth in chapter 5, so I am just going to point them out here to finish out the text.

The Call of Witnesses (31-42)

(1) First, Jesus calls on his works as witness. "I showed you many good works from the Father; for which of them are you stoning Me?" The people retort, "It is not because of your works but because of your blasphemous identification with God."

(2) Jesus then calls on the Witness of Scripture, quoting from Psalm 82:6. It is a tricky quote. Jesus is not here providing an argument for his own divinity. He seems to be both stalling the crowd in their anger and challenging them to go deeper, if indeed they can hear with spiritual ears. The quote from Psalm 82:6 is an example of the Bible applying the term "gods" to Israelites. He says, "If your own word calls people gods, then what problem do you have with me calling myself Son of God. But the text is a poetic sense. It more literally probably means "like gods." But it is enough here to force Jesus' opponents to pause and to have to consider his claim to equality with God.

And Jesus is doing more than just causing them to pause. The quote comes from context. And when Jesus quotes something, he is expecting us to look at what's around, what is the rest of Psalm 82. He is taking them there. He is playing a bit with them. He is challenging them to stop and think. But if they were to go back and follow-up and to look at the Psalm, they would see that it is a rebuke to Israel. In fact, the verse not quoted right before the one Jesus does quote charges, "they walk around in darkness." That's a major theme of John. Jesus has come to his own, his own walk in darkness and want to shut him out. That is what the Psalm says. It is right there if they would just stop and think about it. The quote goes on like this, verse 6, which he quoted.

⁶ I said, "You are gods,

And all of you are sons of the Most High.

⁷ "Nevertheless you will die like men

And fall like *any* one of the princes."

There is irony here. As a nation called to walk in relationship with Yahweh they are in a sense like gods. They are in a sense the sons of the Most High, not the sense that Jesus is, but in a another sense. But because they walk in darkness, they are going to die like men. And we can say like mere men. You are as the gods, but your result is going to be as though you are no more than a physical man.

So, on the one hand it is a rebuke of the crowd. But then, on the other hand, it raises the question, "What then does Jesus mean when he calls himself a Son of the Father, a Son of the Most High? Have we been misunderstanding him?" No. What has he been quoting. The Shepherd metaphors. He is bringing out Ezekiel. He is bringing out Zechariah. Look at his works. He is doing the works of the Messiah. But Jesus is not going to entrust himself to this crowd. He gives them some confusing word. And only if they have ears to hear, if they are willing to pay attention, then they will understand what he is talking about.

- (3) Third, Jesus reference in verse 36 to the Father sanctifying and sending the Son can be taken as a call on the Father as witness. This whole passage, you see, is not as direct a call of witness as in chapter 5:31-47, but the presence of the same four elements are here, the same four witnesses of works, word, Father and even John the Baptist, provides a very nice literary balance to the end of this major section in the Gospel of John.
- (4) So, fourth, we get to John the Baptist as we read from the very end of the chapter, the final verses 38-41.

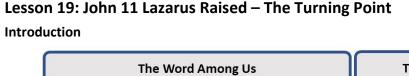
³⁸ but if I do them, though you do not believe Me, believe the works, so that you may know and understand that the Father is in Me, and I in the Father." ³⁹ Therefore they were seeking again to seize Him, and He eluded their grasp. ⁴⁰ And He went away again beyond the Jordan to the place where John was first baptizing, and He was staying there. ⁴¹ Many came to Him and were saying, "While John performed no sign, yet everything John said about this man was true."

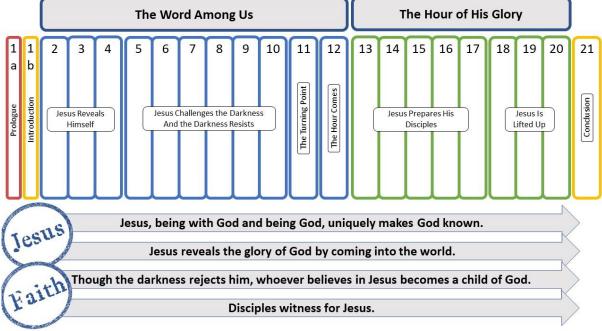
Jesus' words did not remove the hostility of the crowd in the temple. They still want to kill him. Jesus light shines in the darkness. He is the true shepherd. He is the true authority. But the darkness in the hearts of men and women hates the light that Jesus brings. So, Jesus leaves Jerusalem. And he goes back out to where his ministry began, out past the Jordan where John was baptizing. And then the passage ends with verse 42, "And many believed in Him there."

And now, Jesus will not return to Jerusalem until the hour of his glory is at hand.

Reflection questions

- 1. Read John 10:1-21. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What are some questions that come to mind?
- 2. What different truths are communicated through the two different I am statements of Jesus in this passage: "I am the Door" and "I am the Good Shepherd"?
- 3. Based on this passage and the context of John up through this chapter, what is the abundant life Jesus offers and how is that life experienced?
- 4. Read John 10:22-42. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What are some questions that come to mind?
- 5. Through the whole chapter, what truths stand out to you regarding the sheep? And how do you relate to that image yourself as a follower of Jesus?
- 6. Do you agree or disagree that Jesus is promising eternal security for those who believe? How would you support your opinion?
- 7. What do you think about Jesus' quote of Psalm 82:6 in verse 34? Does it disturb you or confuse you? Read through Psalm 82 and think about it in connection with the broader context of John. How is the use of the Psalm a faith challenge for those who will consider the words of Jesus?
- 8. How do you feel at the end of the Psalm, reading verses 40-42? Does this feel like the end of a major section of the narrative? Why or why not?





John 11 is the story about Lazarus. Well, it is really a story about the power of Jesus, and a story about faith in Jesus – the two great themes of John's Gospel. Jesus has just declared authority over all life, even over his own life and death. "No one has taken it away from me, but I lay it down on my own initiative. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again (John 10:18)."

Who do you want to entrust your life to? To a doctor? That is wise at times, though significantly limited. To a politician? That's much less wise. To yourself? Well, you do have responsibility to care for yourself and to make wise choices. But you cannot give yourself life and you cannot long preserve your life.

Who do you want to entrust your life to? How about the one who sees all things as they truly are because he has come from God and is in fact God? How about the one who has the power to lay down his own life and take it up again? The one from whom all life has come (John 1:3)?

Jesus will give his third I am statement with an object in this chapter. With each statements so far, he has also performed a sign to affirm the truth of his declaration.

He declared, "I am the Bread of Life" and then he multiplied bread and fish to feed thousands. Do you trust Jesus to give you nourishment? He then declared, "I am the Light of the World" and healed a man born blind from birth; not blind from sickness or battle wound or accident, but blind from birth until Jesus opened his eyes to see. Do you trust Jesus to give you sight? He now declares, "I am the Resurrection and the Life" and is going to follow that statement with the resurrection of a man already four days dead. Do you trust Jesus to give you life? Life now and life after death?

The resurrection of Lazarus is the seventh and greatest of the signs John reports in the first major section of his Gospel, the public ministry of Jesus. They began his ministry at the wedding feast and now they are going to end it with the resurrection of Lazarus.

This sign is not hard to read. This sign affirms Jesus' claim to power over human life. The power that is in Jesus overcomes death. This is true in this life. As he declared in 10:10, "I have come that you might have life, and might have it abundantly." And it is true of life after death, as he declared in 6:40, "For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who beholds the Son and believes in Him may have eternal life; and I myself will raise him up on the last day."

Jesus' life overcomes death.

This story is reported in four scenes, four personal conversations with Jesus: Jesus and the disciples, Jesus and Martha, Jesus and Mary, and Jesus and Lazarus.

Jesus and the disciples (11:1-16)

We start with Jesus and his disciples. Remember Jesus has left Jerusalem. John is not going to tell us where he is at the time of this story, but at the end of the last story, due to increased animosity against Jesus, he had withdrawn out near the Jordan river to the place of his baptism. It seems like Jesus is in a holding pattern, like a plane circling an airport waiting for the right moment to land. He remains in Judea. He is not far away, but he is some distance from Jerusalem, waiting for God's timing before initiating the final confrontation with the leaders of Israel.

This first conversation with his disciples is in John 11:1-16.

¹ Now a certain man was sick, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ² It was the Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment, and wiped His feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was sick. 3 So the sisters sent word to Him, saying, "Lord, behold, he whom You love is sick." 4 But when Jesus heard this, He said, "This sickness is not to end in death, but for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified by it." 5 Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. ⁶ So when He heard that he was sick, He then stayed two days *longer* in the place where He was. ⁷ Then after this He said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea" again." 8 The disciples said to Him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now seeking to stone You, and are You going there again?" 9 Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours in the day? If anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world. 10 But if anyone walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him." 11 This He said, and after that He said to them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I go, so that I may awaken him out of sleep." ¹² The disciples then said to Him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover." 13 Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that He was speaking of literal sleep. ¹⁴ So Jesus then said to them plainly, "Lazarus is dead, ¹⁵ and I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, so that you may believe; but let us go to him." 16 Therefore Thomas, who is called Didymus, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, so that we may die with Him."

There is so much to observe here. Let me first, just point out this intriguing comment about Mary. "It was the Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment, and wiped His feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was sick." It is not so much intriguing from the literary point of view as the from the historical point of view. John is going to tell this story of Mary anointing Jesus' feet in chapter 12. He has not mentioned it, yet. But here when he is talking about Lazarus, it seems that people know who Mary is better than they would know who Lazarus is. Of course, for us, you just mention the name Lazarus, and we all think of this Lazarus who was just raised from the dead. But none of the other Gospel writers included this story. And we do not know why. The people would not have heard it, not broadly. Richard Bauckham has wondered if the other Gospel writers did not include it because they wrote while Lazarus was still alive, and like Jesus, he was targeted by religious leaders. So, out of concern for Lazarus safety they did not mention him in their Gospels. We certainly don't know if that is the reason. It's a plausible thought. It is just a thought. But it does remind us how often there are good explanations to mysterious facts. We do not know what they are and that makes it all the more mysterious to us. But if we knew, we would understand, and it would make sense, and we would go, "Oh! That is why they did not include it." So, we don't know but it is worthwhile coming up with plausible ideas because there is one, we just don't know what it is.

What interests me most about this verse is that it indicates to us that John was writing to real people who were already familiar with the other Gospel reports but who had not heard everything. They had heard about Mary. They knew about the washing of Jesus' feet. But they might not have heard about the story of Lazarus. And this was the first time that it was written down. And it is being written down by John who was a first-hand witness.

In verse 4, Jesus makes a comment similar to his comment about the blind man of chapter 9. "But when Jesus heard *this*, He said, 'This sickness is not to end in death, but for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified by it." Just as the man born blind was allowed to suffer to participate in the glorious work of God, and from that suffering also received a sight he may have never had otherwise, so also Lazarus and his sisters are allowed to suffer that the glorious work of God might be displayed and that they might benefit from this powerful validation of their faith in Jesus.

I am also struck by timeliness of the statement for us right now during the coronavirus pandemic that has engulfed the world. Think about those words. "This sickness is not to end in death, but for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified by it." The statement itself does not apply directly to our situation. That would be taking it out of context. And in truth, this virus is ending in death for thousands. Here at the beginning, China, Iran, Italy have experience significant death tolls. EU boarders closed yesterday. The US just advised citizens not to gather in groups larger than 10. We do not know yet how bad it is going to get. We do know more people are going to die.

"This sickness is not to end in death", is a promise to Lazarus, not to all believers. We do not have a promise that we will not get sick and die. That is a misunderstanding of biblical truth. In truth, if you do not die from accident or murder, you will die by sickness. We have 100 or so years to live and then we all die, no matter the strength of our faith. No faith healer has escaped the final sickness, the corruption of the body that leads to death. Ultimate healing comes in the next life, not this life. But there is a principle here that applies. This sickness has been allowed, this pain and suffering and fear, that people might see God, and that God might be glorified and the Son with him. Just as that was true for these people gathered around the death of Lazarus, so that is also true of us. Human beings need to be shaken at times, so they will take their eyes off this life that is not life and ask important questions about true life, true life here and true life to come.

God calls his own to participate in this suffering. And it does not mean he does not love us. We are told here Jesus loves Martha, and he loves Mary, and he loves Lazarus and so, he waits two days. Wait a minute. He loves them, and so, he doesn't go to save Lazarus out of death? He doesn't go to prevent suffering and sadness? His love will work out for us in the end. It works for the good of all those who love him. Suffering does not always bring about evil in our lives. Sometimes suffering brings about good. And we trust God with that. Like the blind man, like Lazarus, like Jesus all who believe participate in some way in the corruption and brokenness of the world. We are to remain in the world We are not of it, but we are in it. Do we glorify God in sickness and in death? Do we help others see the light of truth in him? Witness through suffering is a constant theme of Christian experience. It is in Scripture, and it has been through the generations. How many stories have you heard of a believer who has died well? Of doctors or nurses, friends or strangers who receive a witness to the goodness and reality of God through a believer who is prepared to go through suffering and is prepared to go through death in order to meet God? God is with them in the suffering, and it becomes apparent to people around them.

God allows suffering to come into Lazarus' life in order that he might participate in the glorious witness of who Jesus is. That God allows suffering in our lives as part of his good plan is clear in this story. Jesus intentionally chose to wait. The sisters are going to say, "If only you were here Jesus." And he could have been. He chose not to be. The plan was for Lazarus to die. Sometimes God allows us to walk in suffering. Even in that suffering, the life of Jesus overcomes death. But to experience that life, that life of Jesus that overcomes death, we have to walk with him even when it looks like he is leading us towards suffering.

Jesus says, "Let's go." The disciples had misunderstood his hesitation. They thought he was staying away from Jerusalem because of the danger. "Bethany is too close to that danger. We don't want to go there. We left to let things die down. They want to stone you. We thought we were staying put. If we did not go right away, why would we go now?" They had misunderstood the delay. But like his brothers who misunderstood Jesus plan about going up to the Feast of Booths, the disciples miss the

values that are underlying the decision of Jesus. They do not see what Jesus sees. And so, they can't understand Jesus' decision making.

Experiencing life is not the same thing as doing everything you can do to protect your life. Experiencing life means walking in the light of Jesus. There are 12 hours in the day when you have light. Walk according to the light of day. Jesus is our light. We really do base our decisions asking, "What would Jesus do?" Or maybe even better, "What is Jesus leading me to do in my situation?" To walk in the day is to walk according to the values and wisdom and guidance of Jesus. To walk in the night is to walk according to the values and wisdom and guidance of the world.

Thinking about the coronavirus again reminds me of the challenge to walk in the light. It is not always clear what we should do. I think of two biblical images. In the Old Testament law God gave instructions to quarantine for people with infections disease to protect the community. And so, we are to act wisely to protect life. And that is one picture. The other picture is of Jesus' speaking to and touching the sick, the leper, and the outcast. And so, you have both of these pictures in Scripture of wisdom and of compassion. They are held together in tension. I just read a bit of advice from Martin Luther during an outbreak off the plague in Wittenberg. Luther wrote,

"I shall ask God mercifully to protect us. Then I shall fumigate, help purify the air, administer medicine and take it. I shall avoid places and persons where my presence is not needed in order not to become contaminated and thus perchance inflict and pollute others and so cause their death as a result of my negligence. If God should wish to take me, he will surely find me and I have done what he has expected of me and so I am not responsible for either my own death or the death of others. If my neighbor needs me however I shall not avoid place or person but will go freely." ¹⁴

See the tension there. There is wisdom to protect life. But there is also a trust in God to give aid, to help. Luther's interpretation of neighbor is broad. In the whole letter he argues for the continuation of the ministry to which you believe God has called you and an openness to assist whomever in the community God gives you opportunity to help. Walking in the light with Jesus includes wisdom in preservation of our own life and the lives of others and also compassion and courage to go where God leads.

The wisdom of Jesus comes from his vantage point, his perspective on life and reality. He sees clearly that death is not the end. Death is a door to life. At the same time, all life is precious to God because all people are made in his image. Life is a gift. At the beginning of life and the end of life, life is precious to God. We trust him with all life. He is sovereign over our lives. We are not. God determines whether our sickness leads to death or not. We trust him and seek to give witness to his glory no matter how God chooses to end our story. We do this by walking in the light of the truth of Jesus.

The disciples are a bit slow to catch on to Jesus' explanation about Lazarus. He said Lazarus is asleep. They say, "That's good, let him rest." Jesus speaks more plainly, "He has died." I wonder if he was exasperated with them. Maybe not. He knows his disciples well. He adds, "I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, so that you may believe; but let us go to him." Suffering is not the end of the story. There is purpose in Lazarus' death.

I love how Thomas ends the scene with these words, "Let us also go, so that we may die with Him." I do not read that as an optimistic call to a glorious death. "Let's go and let's die with Jesus!" I read it more as a melancholy resignation to what awaits if they go back to Jerusalem. I read it as Thomas the realist, not Thomas the optimist. Which, interestingly, adds to how we think of Thomas. We usually call him Thomas the doubter or doubting Thomas because after the resurrection he refuses to believe until after he himself touches the wounds in Jesus' hands. Here though, he is Thomas the courageous, willing to go to death with Jesus.

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¹⁴ Martin Luther, "Whether One May Flee From a Deadly Plague," Luther's Works, Vol.43 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999), 132. << https://blogs.lcms.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Plague-blogLW.pdf>

There is also an affirmation in his words, maybe not intended by him, but fitting with the story. The way to true life is to walk with Jesus, even if the way of Jesus seems headed toward death. Following the light of Jesus leads us out of the darkness of natural human existence. Abiding in the word of Jesus sets us free from the power of sin and the values of this world. And abiding in his word is more than living a moral life and doing the right thing. Thomas models something else for us. True life is not just about doing the right thing. True life is doing the right thing with Jesus, in relationship with Jesus, walking with Jesus.

Jesus' life overcomes death when we walk with him.

Jesus and Martha (11:17-29)

The next conversation is with Martha. This is John 11:17-29.

was near Jerusalem, about two miles off; ¹⁹ and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary, to console them concerning *their* brother. ²⁰ Martha therefore, when she heard that Jesus was coming, went to meet Him, but Mary stayed at the house. ²¹ Martha then said to Jesus, "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died. ²² Even now I know that whatever You ask of God, God will give You." ²³ Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." ²⁴ Martha said to Him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." ²⁵ Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies, ²⁶ and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die. Do you believe this?" ²⁷ She said to Him, "Yes, Lord; I have believed that You are the Christ, the Son of God, *even* He who comes into the world." ²⁸ When she had said this, she went away and called Mary her sister, saying secretly, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you." ²⁹ And when she heard it, she got up quickly and was coming to Him.

Martha starts by expressing her belief in the power of Jesus. "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died. Even now I know that whatever You ask of God, God will give You."

Jesus responds with a general theological statement accepted by many religions, "Your brother will rise again."

Martha affirms that theological statement, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." I am very curious to know how she said that. I wish we had her voice with it. Did she say it with resigned hope to wait for the future? "I know he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." Or did she say it with a questioning expectation, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day...but what about now?"

Jesus responds, however Martha said it, Jesus responds to the broader theological truth by directing the conversation to himself. He says, "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die. Do you believe this?"

Theology must become personal have affect. Abstract truth does not change our lives. Coming face to face with Jesus changes lives. I am reminded of something John Wesley wrote in his journal. This is from February the 7th, 1735, the day after Wesley arrived in Georgia to serve as an Anglican minister for colonists. He had been greatly shaken by potential death during a storm at sea. Having observed the peace of Moravian families on board the ship, in contrast to his own fear, Wesley asked to speak with the Moravian leader in Georgia August Spangenberg. This is how Wesley recounted that conversation in his diary.

[Spangenberg] said, "My brother, I must first ask you one or two questions. Have you the witness within yourself? Does the Spirit of God bear witness with your spirit that you are a child of God?"

I was surprised, and knew not what to answer. He observed it and asked, "Do you know Jesus Christ?"

I paused and said, "I know He is the Savior of the world."

"True," he replied; "but do you know He has saved you?"

I answered, "I hope He has died to save me." He only added, "Do you know yourself?" I said, "I do." But I fear they were vain words.

When asked about Jesus Christ, Wesley responded with a broad theological statement, "I know he is the Savior of the world." Spagenberg pressed in to make it personal, "But do you know he has saved you?" Wesley said, "Yes" but he only said it because he knew that was the correct answer. He also knew that he did not truly believe it in his own soul.

Saving faith is not assent to theological truths. Saving faith involves personal knowledge of Jesus Christ, personally believing that Jesus Christ is who he said he is.

Jesus extended a strong, personal invitation to Martha. He moved her from broad theological truth and brought her to himself. "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die. Do you believe this?"

It is a strong offer because it is clear and direct and asks Martha to make a choice. Life does not come from assenting to abstract theological ideas. Life comes from personal belief that those ideas are indeed true. Martha responds to the invitation of Jesus with a personal statement, "Yes, Lord; I have believed that You are the Christ, the Son of God, even He who comes into the world."

She came to Jesus distraught. Jesus pointed her to himself. She followed where he led, communicating out loud her faith in him and then, she left with hope.

When we pay careful attention to the words that Jesus spoke to Martha, we hear a distinction between physical death and eternal death. "He who believes in me will live even if he dies" that is physical death. "And everyone who lives and believes in me will never die." That is eternal, spiritual death.

As we recognized with Thomas, true life come from walking with Jesus. In this conversation with Martha, we also add the idea that true life comes through personal faith in Jesus. Our walk with him is not only moral, doing the right things, and not only theological, believing the right things, our walk with him is a personal relationship. Jesus declares, "I am the resurrection and the life, whoever believes in me will never die." Then he looks right at you and asks you, "Do you believe this? Do you believe in me?"

Can you see that in your mind and your heart right now? Jesus is looking at you. And he has declared, "I am the resurrection and the life." His eyes are on you. "Do you lay your life into my hands? Do you believe in me?" How do you answer Jesus?

Jesus' life does not overcome death for you until you personally entrust yourself to him. "Yes, Jesus. I believe you are my life. You are my resurrection."

Jesus and Mary (11:30-37)

Martha goes to Mary to tell her that Jesus wants to speak with her. The third conversation is with Mary and it is in verses 30-37.

³⁰ Now Jesus had not yet come into the village, but was still in the place where Martha met Him. ³¹ Then the Jews who were with her in the house, and consoling her, when they saw that Mary got up quickly and went out, they followed her, supposing that she was going to the tomb to weep there. ³² Therefore, when Mary came where Jesus was, she saw Him, and fell at His feet, saying to Him, "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died." ³³ When Jesus therefore saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her *also* weeping, He was deeply moved in spirit and was troubled, ³⁴ and said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to Him, "Lord, come and see." ³⁵ Jesus wept. ³⁶ So the Jews were saying, "See how He loved him!" ³⁷ But some of them said, "Could not this man, who opened the eyes of the blind man, have kept this man also from dying?"

Mary comes weeping, and Jesus weeps with her. For me, Jesus affirms here the value of lamentation or expressing of deep sorrow. To believe in life does not mean we are free from the pain, from the sorrow caused by death. We who believe still grieve. And it is right to grieve. And it is right to weep.

It is not easy to interpret Jesus' response to the mourners that comes in verse 33. First, Mary repeats Martha's sentiment. "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died." We are not told that Martha wept. I assume she didn't. Or she wasn't when she was with Jesus. Mary is crying, and also are the mourners who come with her. Confronted with their weeping, Jesus has an emotional response. My Bible says in verse 33 he was "deeply moved in spirit and troubled." I was surprised once in a Bible study a friend was reading from a German Bible and that friend pointed out that her text said Jesus was "angry and saddened." I assumed that the word for "deeply moved in spirit", the Greek word which is translated in English Bibles as "disturbed" or "groaning" could also mean "angry." And that for some reasons Germans preferred angry whereas Americans preferred deeply moved. As I have learned since, the word really does mean angry. Carson translates it as anger, outrage, emotional indignation. It seems that English translators are so uncomfortable understanding Jesus as being angry at this moment that they softened the language in their interpretation.

That softening of the language, instead of being angry, he is moved in spirit, it prevent us from seeing Jesus as angry with Mary for weeping. And that is good. I think that is a bad interpretation. We should not understand Jesus' anger as directed towards Mary for expressing grief at the death of her brother. But, unfortunately, softening the language prevents us from seeing what John saw and what he is reporting to us. Jesus was angry. Why? At what?

Is Jesus angry at a lack of faith being exhibited by the sisters? Well, no, that does not agree with Jesus' personal words to the sisters. It doesn't agree with this conversation he just had with Martha. Is he angry with the sisters and mourners for manipulating him to perform a miracle to bring Lazarus back? They are pressuring him, "Jesus, if you had only been here. Jesus can't you do something." No, I don't think that is where the anger comes from. Jesus knew he was going to raise Lazarus before he even came. And the sisters do not appear to be pressuring him. They are stating what they believe, "If you were here. Even now you could do something." They had sincere sorrow that he wasn't here before when Lazarus died.

So, what makes Jesus angry? There is a possibility that his anger is roused by these mourners who follow after her. The text specifically mentions that they get up and follow her. And since they are professional mourners, it is possible that their grief refuses to acknowledge any hope in the reality of life after death. And so, there may be some sense of anger at the darkness of their grief, that it is a grief that rejects life. That might be here. I think more or likely or mostly Jesus is angry at the reality of death and the persistence of the Jewish people to walk in death. In his conversations with the crowds at the Feast of Booths, Jesus told them that their opposition to him lined up with Satan's opposition. The mission of Jesus is life through truth. Those who oppose Jesus oppose life. The mission of Satan is death through deception. Jesus charged him with being a murderer and a deceiver. And in chapter 10, Jesus lines up leaders of Israel with that work. They are thieves who come to kill and steal and destroy. That is the work of Satan. And as long as they keep people bound in the darkness, they are doing the work of death. Jesus, on the other hand, came that we might have life, abundant life.

Death and persistent holding on to the way of darkness, the way that leads to death, I think these things make Jesus angry. He is angry at corruption, angry at deception, angry at death, and angry at a persistent lack of faith that holds on to these things.

This anger is not antithetical to his compassion. In Jesus the two work together. He sees the plight of all men and woman, and he weeps. He is not weeping here at the death of Lazarus. He knows he is getting ready to raise him from the dead. I do not think he is even weeping at the sorrow of Martha and Mary. Possible. How would you feel if you saw great sorrow in people you loved, knowing that in just a couple of minutes you were going to turn that sorrow into joy? Maybe you would weep for them for the sorrow they have endured. That is possible. Knowing that he is about to raise Lazarus, I think

that Jesus may be weeping here at the blight of death that has fallen on creation and at the darkness in the hearts of the men and women gathered around who refuse the light of life. He knows that some are going to believe. But he also knows that there are people in the crowd who are going to reject him even after he raises Lazarus from the dead.

With Thomas we saw that life is not simply doing right things but is doing right with Jesus.

With Martha we saw that life is not simply believing right theology, but personally believing, trusting Jesus.

With Mary I think we see that life is not about ignoring death, but includes mourning over the reality of death, even as we hope in Jesus. Life with Jesus includes anger and sorrow over the brokenness of this world and the participation of men and women in death in the darkness, refusing the light.

Jesus and Lazarus (11:38-46)

The fourth conversation Jesus has is with the dead man. This is verses 38-46.

³⁸ So Jesus, again being deeply moved within, came to the tomb. Now it was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. ³⁹ Jesus said, "Remove the stone." Martha, the sister of the deceased, said to Him, "Lord, by this time there will be a stench, for he has been *dead* four days." ⁴⁰ Jesus said to her, "Did I not say to you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?" ⁴¹ So they removed the stone. Then Jesus raised His eyes, and said, "Father, I thank You that You have heard Me. ⁴² I knew that You always hear Me; but because of the people standing around I said it, so that they may believe that You sent Me." ⁴³ When He had said these things, He cried out with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come forth." ⁴⁴ The man who had died came forth, bound hand and foot with wrappings, and his face was wrapped around with a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go." ⁴⁵ Therefore many of the Jews who came to Mary, and saw what He had done, believed in Him. ⁴⁶ But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them the things which Jesus had done.

In the final victory of life over death we are completely passive. We lie dead and he will choose or not choose to call our name. There is nothing we can do. Death brings about complete submission, complete vulnerability.

Lazarus has already been dead four days. Now, later rabbinic belief asserted that a person's soul hovered over the body three days. Then, when decomposition had set in the soul departed. And we cannot know for sure whether this belief stretched back to the time of Jesus. But it certainly seems implied here by twice we are told that Lazarus has already been dead four days. Four days. He is dead dead. Four days in the tomb is long enough to ensure that Lazarus is truly dead. Everyone gathering expected the smell of death, the stench to come forth from the tomb, everyone except Jesus.

Jesus expected the glory of God. Even Martha, she affirmed that she believed that Jesus could bring about the glory of God. She didn't know that he meant now. That he was going to bring about the glory of God. Jesus expected the glory of God to come forth, Jesus expected the glory of God to be displayed and to show him to be the author of life. So, he cries out, "Lazarus, come forth!" And Lazarus comes out. Jesus commands, "Unbind him. Take off those clothes of death. He is free."

Imagine yourself dying. Imagine as though you have just fallen asleep for the last time. You are not going to wake up. See yourself lying down on a long flat stone. There is a funeral for you. Your body is lowered into the grave. You have no power, no ability to wake up. No one can help you. They tried all they could. You died. You are buried.

You are now completely vulnerable to the authority and power and goodness of God. You can do nothing to wake yourself. Who are you trusting for life? In the end, are you trusting in yourself? Are you trusting that your goodness and your religious activity, and your faith are powerful enough, good enough to move God to raise you to eternal life?

Or do you know, do you see that you have not been good enough. Your behavior is not going to force God's hand in your favor. Do you trust yourself or do you trust his mercy and his grace? Do you personal believe in Jesus Christ? That he is the Resurrection and the Life? Do you believe that in him God is holding on to you?

If you do, as you imagine yourself lying in death, can you hear him calling your name?

"Wake up my child." And you rise up. And he tells those around you, "Take off the grave clothes. Unbind him. Set him free." "Take off her grave clothes. Unbind her. Set her free."

Can you hear it? Can you imagine your body being transformed, the dead body being transformed into a glorified new body free from sin, free from corruption, free from death at the call of your name?

Thomas, Martha, and Mary model for us aspects of experiencing life through relationship with Jesus. In this life, we experience his life. Abundant life is experienced through a walk of faith with Jesus. Lazarus models for us the reality that our life really is completely in the hands of someone else in the hands of Jesus.

This passage ended with two different responses to the sign of Jesus raising Lazarus from death. There are two responses in 45-46.

- ⁴⁵ Therefore many of the Jews who came to Mary, and saw what He had done, believed in Him.
- ⁴⁶ But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them the things which Jesus had done.

Some of them didn't believe and they went to tell on him. This sign proved to be a tipping point for the opposition to Jesus. It is the end of his public ministry. Let's conclude our lesson from today with the verses that end the chapter. These are verses 47-57.

Conclusion (11:47-57)

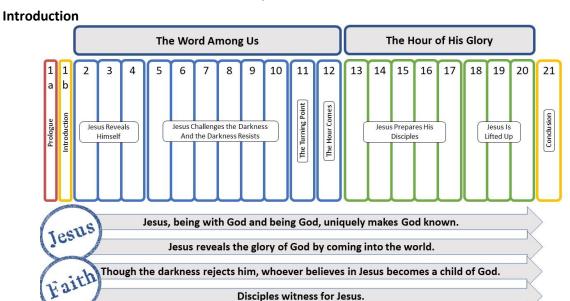
⁴⁷ Therefore the chief priests and the Pharisees convened a council, and were saying, "What are we doing? For this man is performing many signs. ⁴⁸ If we let Him *go on* like this, all men will believe in Him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation." ⁴⁹ But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, "You know nothing at all, ⁵⁰ nor do you take into account that it is expedient for you that one man die for the people, and that the whole nation not perish." ⁵¹ Now he did not say this on his own initiative, but being high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus was going to die for the nation, ⁵² and not for the nation only, but in order that He might also gather together into one the children of God who are scattered abroad. ⁵³ So from that day on they planned together to kill Him.

⁵⁴ Therefore Jesus no longer continued to walk publicly among the Jews, but went away from there to the country near the wilderness, into a city called Ephraim; and there He stayed with the disciples. ⁵⁵ Now the Passover of the Jews was near, and many went up to Jerusalem out of the country before the Passover to purify themselves. ⁵⁶ So they were seeking for Jesus, and were saying to one another as they stood in the temple, "What do you think; that He will not come to the feast at all?" ⁵⁷ Now the chief priests and the Pharisees had given orders that if anyone knew where He was, he was to report it, so that they might seize Him.

The intense opposition has coalesced now into a determined plan to kill Jesus. Knowing this, Jesus ends his public ministry. He withdraws to the city Ephraim, a town about 12 miles or about 20 kilometers from Jerusalem. The priests and Pharisees plan to arrest him. The people wonder if Jesus will show up at the Passover just now about to be celebrated in Jerusalem. And, as always, Jesus waits on the Father's timing, entrusting his life and his mission into the hands of God.

Reflection questions

- 1. Read John 11:1-16. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing in Jesus interaction with his disciples?
- 2. What does it mean for you to walk while it is day?
- 3. Read John 11:17-29. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing in Jesus interaction with Martha?
- 4. What significance do you see in Martha calling Jesus the Christ? Does Jesus call himself Christ in John? Who has called him Christ?
- 5. Read John 11:30-46. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing in Jesus interaction with Mary and Lazarus?
- 6. What significance do you see in the fact that Jesus wept?
- 7. Take a few moments of silence and imagine yourself dead in a tomb and you hear Jesus call your name. What impressions or thoughts come to you as you imagine yourself in that situation?
- 8. Read John 11:47-57. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing in the aftermath of the resurrection of Lazarus?



Lesson 20: John 12 The Hour of Glory has Come

We could approach John much more slowly than I have done, taking smaller passages for each lesson. Chapter 12 breaks down into five scenes or sections. We could do a lesson on each, giving more attention to detail and application. That's a good approach. I have taken a different approach to John's Gospel. I've covered larger sections in each lesson to give us more context each time.

My purpose is for us to gain a strong sense of John's flow of thought, to understand his structure and to keep in mind the major themes. It does mean that we have moved over a good bit of detail and insight. There is much still in John to notice and reflect on in your own personal study of the text the next time you come back to it.

John 12 is an important transitional chapter in the Gospel. John is typically divided into two major parts. Nobody agrees on how to title these parts. I called the first part *The Word Among Us*. That part covers chapters 2 to 12. The second I titled *The Hour of His Glory*. That part covers chapters 13-20. Scholars disagree about whether chapter 12 belongs at the end of the first part or is really the beginning of the second part. And it is worth considering why.

We could understand John 12 to end the first part because of different factors that connect us back to the first half of the Gospel. Chapter 2 began with Jesus telling his mother, "My hour has not yet come (2:4)." In 12:23 Jesus announces, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified." That's a connection. These two statements create bookends for the larger part. In chapter 3 we hear for the first time that the Son of Man must be lifted up. We hear that again in chapter 12 for the third and last time. That's another connection. Chapter 12 also includes the symbolism of walking in the light that has been so important as a theme in John, starting in the prologue, and recurring in chapters 3 and 8 and 9 and 11. There will be no reference to Jesus as the light or to walking in the light after chapter 12. So, that is going to end here. Finally, this is the end of Jesus' public ministry. He is going to have comments to one of those crowds that consistently gathered around him, but after this he is not going to speak in public in that way again.

Even with all this connection to what has come before in the Gospel, we still also see connections pointing ahead to part II. The biggest is this idea that Jesus hour has come. He does not say his "hour will come", like he did in chapter 2. Or "my time is not yet", like he said in chapter 8. No in chapter 12 he says, "The hour has come." And it is the hour of the Son's glorification. That's what chapters 13-20 are all about, "the hour of glory." So, this could easily be the beginning of that part.

But whether the end of the first part or the beginning of the second part, chapter 12 is definitely a transition. It is transitioning us from the public ministry of Jesus where he revealed himself through

his teaching and through the seven signs. Now, we are being bridged over to the hour of his glory where he will reveal himself in an even greater final sign which also provides for us our salvation.

The five sections of chapter 12 all point us to the glory of Jesus. These are the sections.

- 1) Mary anoints Jesus (12:1-11).
- 2) The multitude glorify Jesus (12:12-19).
- 3) Greeks seek Jesus (12:20-36).
- 4) Isaiah explains the Jewish response to Jesus (12:37-43).
- 5) Jesus testifies to himself (12:44-50)

1. Mary anoints Jesus. (12:1-11)

We begin with the beautiful act of devotion of Mary anointing Jesus. This is verses 1-11.

¹ Jesus, therefore, six days before the Passover, came to Bethany where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. ² So they made Him a supper there, and Martha was serving; but Lazarus was one of those reclining *at the table* with Him. ³ Mary then took a pound of very costly perfume of pure nard, and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped His feet with her hair; and the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. ⁴ But Judas Iscariot, one of His disciples, who was intending to betray Him, said, ⁵ "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and given to poor *people?*" ⁶ Now he said this, not because he was concerned about the poor, but because he was a thief, and as he had the money box, he used to pilfer what was put into it. ⁷ Therefore Jesus said, "Let her alone, so that she may keep it for the day of My burial. ⁸ "For you always have the poor with you, but you do not always have Me." ⁹ The large crowd of the Jews then learned that He was there; and they came, not for Jesus' sake only, but that they might also see Lazarus, whom He raised from the dead. ¹⁰ But the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death also; ¹¹ because on account of him many of the Jews were going away and were believing in Jesus.

Mary sees Jesus. Mary loves Jesus. The resurrection of her brother Lazarus could only increase her awe of Jesus. She pours out her adoration in an act of humble, authentic, extravagant devotion.

Looking through the other Gospels, this seems to be the second time that Jesus is anointed in Bethany, possibly both at the house of Simon the Leper. We are not told that the dinner here is actually in the house of Mary, Martha and Lazarus even though Marth as serving. It could be more a community affair in the home of Simon. Just as I believe that the two clearings of the temple that get reported in different Gospels, one at the beginning and the other at the end, just as I believe that those are actually two different events, I also believe the stories of an anointing by a woman were really two different events. The woman in Luke 7 is not named. She is identified as a sinner who is forgiven. And that is the focus of that story, the forgiveness and the gratitude that comes from experiencing that forgiveness. That account occurred before the feeding of the five thousand, a year before this story. Here, just like in Mark 14, the woman is named as Mary and the account occurs just before the last supper. And the focus is not on forgiveness but on devotion.

In Mark 14 Mary pours the perfume on Jesus' head. It does not say here in John that she does not pour the ointment on Jesus' head. John simply does not mention the head. He is focused on the feet. And in doing so, John brings up a past image and a future image. At the beginning of this Gospel, John the Baptist described Jesus as, "He who comes after me, the thong of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie (1:27)." But then in chapter 13 it is going to be Jesus who washes the feet of his disciples. And in both instances, the reference to feet conveys a humbling, a humbling of John the Baptist in his view of himself in relationship to Jesus. He is not worthy to touch his dirty feet. And a humbling of Jesus the master who kneels down and serves his disciples. So, also here with Mary, pouring perfume on his feet and wiping his feet with her hair. She shows this deep sense of awe in her relationship with Jesus. She gets that he is so great and glorious that it is an honor for her to wipe his feet with her hair. It is an act of humility.

Her choice of ointment communicates extravagance. Mary pours out 11 ounces or about 300 grams of pure nard, a very expensive perfume thought to come from India. Judas evaluates it at 300 denarii which would amount to a year's wages for a laborer. We do not know whether the family of Mary, Martha and Lazarus was that wealthy or whether this perfume was like a family heirloom that had been passed down, but it is worth an enormous amount.

Judas remarks with false piety that the sum would have better served the poor. And then Jesus makes that interesting comment, "the poor you will always have with you." And that might strike you a little funny. That is kind of a strange thing for Jesus to say. It is right to question ourselves as believers in the use of our wealth and in our contribution to care for the poor. Are we really caring for the poor? At the same time, it is also right to praise God with our whole heart and to do things for God, to spend resources in devotion of God. Judas is making a false distinction as though the two must be mutually exclusive. Jesus receives the humble, extravagant, loving devotion of Mary with approval. She has done well. When we see the glory of God and humble ourselves in worship and make sacrifice from the heart for him, we do a good thing. And you can be sure that it was not the amount of the perfume that moved Jesus but the heart of Mary. And the heart was shown in the extent of her sacrifice. And he receives her devotion because he is glorious. And it is right to give him glory.

Jesus further points out that whether Mary knew it or not, her actions symbolize a loving preparation of his body for death. In really only a few days, two men are going to take Jesus' body down from a cross and bind it up along with spices, according to the Jewish custom of burial. Jesus recognizes Mary's action as foreshadowing the hour of his glory.

The last verses of this section add to our understanding of the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. The other gospels do not tell us about the resurrection of Lazarus, so we did not know that was part of the excitement that was going on. We see here that the wonder surrounding this miraculous sign adds to the excitement of his arrival into Jerusalem at this time of Passover.

2. The multitude glorifies Jesus. (12:12-19)

In our second section, the multitude glorifies Jesus. These are verses 12-19.

¹² On the next day the large crowd who had come to the feast, when they heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem, ¹³ took the branches of the palm trees and went out to meet Him, and *began* to shout, "Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel." ¹⁴ Jesus, finding a young donkey, sat on it; as it is written, ¹⁵ "Fear not, daughter of Zion; behold, your King is coming, seated on a donkey's colt." ¹⁶ These things His disciples did not understand at the first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things were written of Him, and that they had done these things to Him. ¹⁷ So the people, who were with Him when He called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead, continued to testify *about Him*. ¹⁸ For this reason also the people went and met Him, because they heard that He had performed this sign. ¹⁹ So the Pharisees said to one another, "You see that you are not doing any good; look, the world has gone after Him."

The crowd cries "Hosanna!", which means "Save us!" The cry fits exactly with the hour of glory. Jesus has come to save through death on a cross. But we should not read back our later understanding of Jesus on to this crowd. How do they think Jesus is going to save them? What do they want Jesus to save them from? They acknowledge his coming in the name of the Lord, and they call him King of Israel, that is Christ. They see Jesus as the Messiah. They want salvation from Rome. Though I think it is even more than that. I think they have the vision of the prophets in mind that the Messiah is going to free them from outside rule and usher in a new era of peace and security and prosperity and wipe away pain and crying. As in the Isaiah 2 vision there will be an end to war, and Gentiles will stream into Jerusalem to learn the word of God. So, they have this great positive vision of this earthly kingdom and a strong leadership.

They desire deliverance from foreign rule. They do not understand that their celebration foreshadows an even greater, a much greater deliverance, a greater salvation that has to come through the death of the Messiah. In their minds, they lift Jesus up in glory with praise, "King of Israel." But in reality, they help prepare him for his lifting up on the cross.

Jesus chooses to fulfill the prophecy of Zechariah 9:9 by riding into Jerusalem on a donkey. It was said that the king would come on a donkey. Some prophecies you cannot choose yourself to fulfill, such as being born of the line of David in Bethlehem, or growing up in Galilee, or being betrayed for thirty pieces of silver. You can't choose to fulfill those prophecies. But this is not one of those. Jesus chose to fulfill this prophecy, and in doing so, shows that he recognizes himself to be the Messiah. Jesus rightly receives the shouts of acclamation even though he knows there is a twist to the story that this crowd does not understand.

The final verses of the section verify that the resurrection of Lazarus has added considerably to the enthusiasm of the crowd. The people who witnessed that miracle are giving testimony to what they saw. Verse 18 tells us, "For this reason also the people went and met Him, because they heard that He had performed this sign."

3. Greeks seek Jesus. (12:20-36)

Our third section foreshadows the coming reign of the Messiah as applying to the peoples of the earth. This is 12:20-36.

²⁰ Now there were some Greeks among those who were going up to worship at the feast; ²¹ these then came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida of Galilee, and *began to* ask him, saying, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." ²² Philip came and told Andrew; Andrew and Philip came and told Jesus. ²³ And Jesus answered them, saying, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. ²⁴ "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. ²⁵ He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it to life eternal. ²⁶ If anyone serves Me, he must follow Me; and where I am, there My servant will be also; if anyone serves Me, the Father will honor him. ²⁷ Now My soul has become troubled; and what shall I say, 'Father, save Me from this hour'? But for this purpose I came to this hour. ²⁸ Father, glorify Your name." Then a voice came out of heaven: "I have both glorified it, and will glorify it again."

²⁹ So the crowd *of people* who stood by and heard it were saying that it had thundered; others were saying, "An angel has spoken to Him." ³⁰ Jesus answered and said, "This voice has not come for My sake, but for your sakes. ³¹ Now judgment is upon this world; now the ruler of this world will be cast out. ³² And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself." ³³ But He was saying this to indicate the kind of death by which He was to die. ³⁴ The crowd then answered Him, "We have heard out of the Law that the Christ is to remain forever; and how can You say, 'The Son of Man must be lifted up'? Who is this Son of Man?" ³⁵ So Jesus said to them, "For a little while longer the Light is among you. Walk while you have the Light, so that darkness will not overtake you; he who walks in the darkness does not know where he goes. ³⁶ "While you have the Light, believe in the Light, so that you may become sons of Light." These things Jesus spoke, and He went away and hid Himself from them.

The two Greeks who come to see Jesus might be from Greece, but the term applies to any of the Gentiles living in the Greek-speaking world controlled by Rome. The important fact is that they are not Jews. We met Andrew and Philip in the introduction of chapter 1, bringing others to Jesus. Now they want to bring the two Greeks to Jesus, but Jesus holds them off, he gives them an answer that doesn't seem like an answer, and that's not unusual with Jesus, it seems like he changes the subject. But he does not really. We're going to come back around to the Greeks by the end of the passage.

In response to Andrew and Philip's request, Jesus declares, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified." That would seem apparent by the great reception he's just received entering

Jerusalem. The crowd is glorifying Jesus. It's his hour. But that is not what Jesus means. After announcing his hour has come, Jesus speaks of the necessity of a grain of wheat to fall to the earth and die in order to produce fruit. He is using that metaphor for himself. His purpose requires him to die if others are to be gathered in. He knows he must die to bring in his sheep. The hour of his glory is the cross, his death.

The next verse shifts quickly from Jesus' death to the followers of Jesus who must also give up life to gain it. Jesus knows the hour of his glory is one of darkness and calls those who believe in him to follow him even into the darkness.

Jesus then acknowledges his own troubled soul. He is not distracted by the acclamation of the crowds; he's not jubilant. He knows that God brought him to this Passover to fulfill the symbolism of the Passover Lamb. He will not ask the Father to save him out of it. As he declares, "For this purpose I came to this hour." He came into the world to save the world by giving up his life for all people. This has been the plan all along. This is the timing of God.

Jesus declares that this is the hour of his glorification, but he also declares that he is not seeking his own glory. And Jesus has been firm in this throughout, that his desire is the glory of God; he has submitted himself to the will of God. His own glory is wrapped up in the Father's glory. Jesus asks, "'Father, glorify Your name.' And a voice came out of heaven: 'I have both glorified it, and will glorify it.'" The Father has continually glorified himself by revealing his glory through Jesus; the teaching and the miracles, the power of Jesus. And he's going to continue that to the end, through the cross, he's going to continue to bring himself glory even through the willing sacrifice of the Son.

It will first appear that the ruler of the world has won; Satan, the thief who comes to kill and steal and destroy. But what looks to him like victory will instead be his downfall. The cross declares judgement on the world and conquers the evil one. He will be cast out. Jesus does not explain the how or when of this. But we get this image of a mighty ruler removed from his throne and cast out of the kingdom.

Following the image of a ruler cast down, Jesus declares the contrast with himself, "And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself." Jesus will be lifted up to take the place of the vanquished ruler. It's the language of the reigning king. And when he does, he will draw all men to himself. He will fulfill the Messianic vision of nations streaming into Zion. But since his throne will be established for now in heaven, the men and women drawn to him will not gather in a fixed place like Jerusalem. But drawn to Jesus Christ, they will bow down among all the peoples of the earth to lift him up in praise and glory.

But there's an irony here. Yes, Jesus ought to be immediately lifted up in glory. But the need for the cross turns everything upside down. It appears to be the failure of Jesus and the victory of Satan, but instead becomes the ruin of Satan and the glory of Jesus. It will be a towering sign established on earth for all peoples to see: the cross declares the love and justice of God and is an invitation to come and believe and enter into the kingdom of our Lord.

And so, Jesus has come back around to the Greeks. It is not their time yet to meet the Lord Jesus. They cannot see him, not yet. First, he must be lifted up in glory, the glory of the cross. Then, by this sign, they will come to him. Jesus is the seed of Abraham who fulfills God's promise that through him all the nations will be blessed.

I believe that Jesus draws on the prophetic book of Isaiah in the declaration that he must be lifted up. And I believe John was aware of this. Isaiah is a long and complex book with many themes and key terms. Three of those key terms are light, standard and sign. All three show up in the Gospel of John.

Isaiah connects light to the Messiah. Consider these three passages which could easily be at home, they could fit right in into the writing of John.

Isaiah 9:1–2 "... on the other side of Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles. The people who walk in darkness will see a great light; Those who live in a dark land, the light will shine on them."

Isaiah 42:6–7 "I am the Lord, I have called You in righteousness, I will also hold You by the hand and watch over You, and I will appoint You as a covenant to the people, as a light to the nations, to open blind eyes, to bring out prisoners from the dungeon and those who dwell in darkness from the prison."

Isaiah 50:10 "Who is among you that fears the Lord, that obeys the voice of His servant, that walks in darkness and has no light? Let him trust in the name of the Lord and rely on his God."

The second key term, "standard", is not repeated in John. But I believe it provides background to the idea of Jesus being lifted up for the peoples to see. In Isaiah, the standard is a banner, it's a flag that is lifted up over an army to identify their allegiance. You know, who are you following? You follow the one who is depicted on your standard. The first use of a standard lifted up in Isaiah has the idea of Assyria and Babylon rallying to the standard of God calling them to come and judge Israel. It's a standard of judgement. But that image shifts. The Messiah himself is the standard in Isaiah 11:10.

Then in that day the nations will resort to the root of Jesse, who will stand as a standard for the peoples; and His resting place will be glorious.

The standard is also raised to gather the people of Israel back from exile as in Isaiah 11:12.

And He will lift up a standard for the nations and assemble the banished ones of Israel, and will gather the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth.

Later, the standard is raised up for all the redeemed of every nation, as in Isaiah 62:10.

Go through, go through the gates, clear the way for the people; build up, build up the highway, remove the stones, lift up a standard over the peoples.

This language of lifting up a standard connects with the third key term of "sign" in Isaiah. And that's definitely a term that connects with the book of John. The standard is a sign. The first sign mentioned in Isaiah is Messianic. It is one we're familiar with. Isaiah 7:14,

Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name Immanuel.

The last sign in Isaiah is the one that connects even more with this lifting up of Jesus. It links to our passage in John. This is Isaiah 66:18-19.

For I know their works and their thoughts; the time is coming to gather all nations and tongues. And they shall come and see My glory. I will set a sign among them and will send survivors from them to the nations...

God is going to set up a sign, and in the sign they are going to see his glory, and it's going to gather in people from every nation. Jesus has just declared here in John 12 that his hour has come, his hour of glory, when the Son of Man will be lifted up and so he will draw all men from himself. Jesus' words fulfill the prophetic vision of Isaiah who declared that a standard will be raised up and it will be a sign to the nations, proclaiming the glory of God and drawing all peoples to him. That sign of glory to the nations prophesied by Isaiah is the cross.

But the people don't get this. As has happened consistently, Jesus' listeners do not connect his words with Old Testament truth. They have a narrow view of the Messiah. They pick and choose the verses they want to focus on, and they're confused. Jesus' proclamation does not sound like what they expect of him. They expect the Christ to establish an eternal reign for the kingdom of Israel. "The Christ must remain, right? But Jesus is saying the Son of Man must be lifted up. Lifted up how? Where? Does this mean the Christ will not remain? But we know he does. So then, are the Christ and the Son of Man two different people? Jesus is the Christ. We have proclaimed him such. So then, who is this Son of Man that must be lifted up?"

They're confused but Jesus calls them to walk in the light. And just as at the beginning of chapter 11 and just as at the beginning of chapter 9, walking in the light does not necessarily mean that you understand what is going on. It is not your inner light that guides you. To walk in the light is to walk

with Jesus. He's the light. Over time as you walk with Jesus his light enables you to see more clearly, to understand life. But often, walking with Jesus means trusting that he knows where he is going even when you have no idea. You walk in the light without understanding exactly why or where it will all lead. Because it's his light. He's the one that sees clearly. Walk with him and you will be in the light whether it makes sense to you or not.

So Jesus said to them, "For a little while longer the Light is among you. Walk while you have the Light, so that darkness will not overtake you; he who walks in the darkness does not know where he goes. ³⁶ While you have the Light, believe in the Light, so that you may become sons of Light." These things Jesus spoke, and He went away and hid Himself from them.

4. Isaiah explains the Jewish response to Jesus. (12:37-43)

Our fourth section calls on a witness from the word of God to explain to us this great lack of understanding, this lack of belief among God's own people. They believe in the Jesus they want, not the Jesus who is. How can they be so stubbornly misguided? John reminds us that we should not be surprised. He came to his own and his own did not receive him. That's what John told us. That reality was foretold even long before. Let's read John 12:37-43.

³⁷ But though He had performed so many signs before them, *yet* they were not believing in Him. ³⁸ *This was* to fulfill the word of Isaiah the prophet which he spoke: "Lord, who has believed our report? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?" ³⁹ For this reason they could not believe, for Isaiah said again, ⁴⁰ "He has blinded their eyes and He hardened their heart, so that they would not see with their eyes and perceive with their heart, and be converted and I heal them." ⁴¹ These things Isaiah said because he saw His glory, and he spoke of Him. ⁴² Nevertheless many even of the rulers believed in Him, but because of the Pharisees they were not confessing *Him*, for fear that they would be put out of the synagogue; ⁴³ for they loved the approval of men rather than the approval of God.

In his Gospel, John has emphasized the witness of Moses to Jesus and the witness of Abraham to Jesus, now he reminds us of the witness of Isaiah to Jesus, particularly to make this point that the Jewish rejection of the Messiah was foretold. The first Isaiah reference comes from the famous suffering servant song in Isaiah 53. It is 53:1, "Lord, who has believed our report? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?" 700 years before the birth of Jesus Christ Isaiah 53 declared that the Messiah would come. He would be pierced through for our transgressions. He would be led like a lamb to the slaughter. He would be assigned to a grave among the wicked. And the report of him would not be believed.

The second reference to Isaiah comes from chapter 6 which records the calling of Isaiah. It is Isaiah's testimony to his vision of the glory of the Lord. Seeing the glory of the Lord fill the temple Isaiah cried out, "Holy, Holy," He also saw his own sin and cried out, "Woe is me, for I am ruined!" And he saw God touch his lips with a burning coal and say, "your iniquity is taken away, and your sin is forgiven."

This is what happens when we see the glory of the Lord. We are at the same time made all the more aware of our own inglorious state, our own sin. But the glory of the Lord includes his love for us, so that he makes a way to take away our sin. Isaiah saw God, saw himself, and saw that he was forgiven.

Isaiah saw all this, and so, when God asked, "Whom shall I send [as my witness]," Isaiah responded, "Here I am send me." But it would not be an easy task to witness to the glory of God to this generation that Isaiah was called to. After calling him, God tells Isaiah this. This is the truth that John draws on also for his generation. The words John quotes are from Isaiah 6:10,

He has blinded their eyes and He hardened their heart, so that they would not see with their eyes and perceive with their heart, and be converted and I heal them.

This is a hard truth. God does not only say their eyes are blind. He says that he has blinded them, he has hardened them. One of the ways that God blinds is by shining the light. Taking Jesus' metaphor from chapter 3, those in the darkness hate the light. Giving more light does not open their eyes but

moves them to screw theirs shut even more tightly. The light itself brings about a response of willful blindness. It brings about clarification of the judgement that has already been proclaimed.

The hardening here, though, seems more complex than that. It may be in part a negative response to the light of Jesus but that does not fully explain God's sovereignty in the matter. People are responsible. God is sovereign. God planned not to open the eyes of these Jewish hearts. He allowed them to continue in their darkness in order to bring about the rejection of Jesus and ultimately the cross. Israel has rejected her Messiah because of the hardness of the human heart. God did not choose to do anything about that, he did not open their eyes. Their rejection of Jesus became the blessing of the world (Romans 11:11).

John writes in verse 41, "These things Isaiah said because he saw His glory, and he spoke of Him." Isaiah "saw his glory." Quite literally in chapter 6 he sees the glory of God filling the temple. But through his prophecy you see that he sees the glory of the Messiah, the Messiah is all the way through. John also says that Isaiah "spoke of Him." That is through the book of Isaiah, he speaks of the coming Messiah, it's quite clear in chapter 53, which John quotes here. Isaiah saw his glory and Isaiah spoke of him.

In spite of the overwhelming blindness of Israel, John can tell us in 42-43,

⁴² Nevertheless many even of the rulers believed in Him, but because of the Pharisees they were not confessing *Him,* for fear that they would be put out of the synagogue; ⁴³ for they loved the approval of men rather than the approval of God.

The word for "approval" in that last verse is actually the Greek word for "glory". We could translate the verse this way, "they loved the glory of men rather than the glory of God." It is hard to say whether this belief was real or not. It sounds real at the beginning of the verse, it doesn't sound real at the end of the verse. And that's this ambiguity that we have to struggle with in John; we don't really know.

Jesus is the one who accepts the shame of the cross to magnify the glory of God. Yet, these who are said come to believe in him hold on to the glory of man instead of giving it up for the glory of God. They're not following in the way of Jesus. So, what does their belief mean? We're not sure but Jesus said in verses 25-26,

²⁵ "He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it to life eternal. ²⁶ "If anyone serves Me, he must follow Me; and where I am, there My servant will be also; if anyone serves Me, the Father will honor him.

5. Jesus testifies to himself. (12:44-50)

In our final section, Jesus testifies to himself. This testimony includes a promise and a judgment.

⁴⁴ And Jesus cried out and said, "He who believes in Me, does not believe in Me but in Him who sent Me. ⁴⁵ He who sees Me sees the One who sent Me. ⁴⁶ I have come *as* Light into the world, so that everyone who believes in Me will not remain in darkness. ⁴⁷ If anyone hears My sayings and does not keep them, I do not judge him; for I did not come to judge the world, but to save the world. ⁴⁸ He who rejects Me and does not receive My sayings, has one who judges him; the word I spoke is what will judge him at the last day. ⁴⁹ For I did not speak on My own initiative, but the Father Himself who sent Me has given Me a commandment *as to* what to say and what to speak. ⁵⁰ I know that His commandment is eternal life; therefore the things I speak, I speak just as the Father has told Me."

It is fitting for this first part of the book of John to end with Jesus' own self-witness. As the Word who is with God and is God, he alone has truly intimate knowledge of the Father, he knows God. Jesus is the light and the light provides its own witness. No one can really adequately witness for him.

In these final words, Jesus sums up for us several themes of his public teaching. This summary is our conclusion to this lesson. Four things:

- 1) Jesus reaffirms the truth that belief in the Son is intrinsically tied to belief in the Father. You cannot truly believe in the one and reject the other. If you believe in the Son, you truly believe in the Father. If you believe in the Father, you will believe in the Son.
- 2) Jesus affirms himself as light to the world. He makes truth concrete by coming as a human being. If you believe in Jesus as he presents himself to be, then you have accepted the most fundamental truth of all reality. You do not remain in darkness if you start with Jesus.
- 3) We also get a restatement of the tension between salvation and judgment. As Jesus has said before, "I did not come to judge the world, but to save the world." At the same time, just as before, he clarifies that the world has already been judged and whoever rejects him now will be judged when they stand before God. Jesus does not need to be the one who judges because as he says here, "He who rejects Me and does not receive My sayings, has one who judges him; the word I spoke is what will judge him at the last day."
- 4) And finally fourth, this is the claim of Jesus: that the word of God is eternal life. And that word is what Jesus has spoken in perfect harmony with the will of the Father. It is left to us to believe or to not believe.

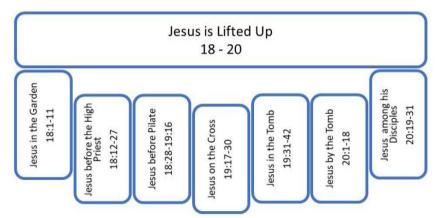
With these words Jesus completes his public ministry. We've seen the devotion of Mary, which gives honor, true honor to Jesus. Then the shouting of the crowd, "Hosanna. King of Israel", an honoring of Jesus in word that's true, though it wasn't in heart from the crowd. Then the coming of the Greeks provided Jesus with an opportunity to look ahead to the act of glory that must come and which will stand as a sign and draw all peoples to himself. Then the words of Isaiah remind us not to be surprised at the inability of Jesus' own people to see his glory. That was foretold. And with this final testimony of Jesus we receive a public promise and a warning.

The cross is a sign, a standard that will be raised up for all to see. It brings a promise of salvation to all who believe. It also establishes the just judgment on all who refuse to trust in him for salvation that they accept on themselves their own penalty of death. The hour of his glory has come.

Reflection questions

- 1. Read John 12. If you have time, pause after each section (12:1-11; 12-19; 20-36; 37-43 and 44-50) and write down what stands out to you as important or confusing or interesting. If you do not have time, then read the chapter as one whole and write down what stands out to you keeping in mind the relationship between the five parts.
- 2. What adjectives would you associated with Mary's action towards Jesus?
- 3. What adjectives would you associated with Judas?
- 4. What adjectives would you associate with the crowd in 12-19?
- 5. What adjectives would you associate with the Greeks and with the two disciples in 20-36?
- 6. As you think back over the Gospel of John, what passages come to mind when you think about Jesus' hour of glory? What is Jesus' hour of glory? How is it connected with this third statement about the son of man being lifted up?
- 7. Though Jesus does not seem to address the issue of the Greeks right away, how does he come back to them?
- 8. What significance do you see in John quoting from Isaiah 53 and Isaiah 6? What is the immediate theological point John is answering? What other themes might he be drawing in with these quotes?
- 9. Thinking back over the Gospel of John how does the reference to light in 44-50 help to appropriately sum up Jesus' public ministry?

Lesson 21: John 13:1-20 Jesus Sanctifies His Disciples Introduction



The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified, John 12:23, so I want to say that we have come to the end of John, but we are really just past half-way. We have come to the second major part of John, "The Hour of His Glory." The second half of the Gospel. And at the same time, it is the end. The whole second half is the end. The first part of John covered a little over two years. This part is going to take place in only a few days. This is a record of the end. And knowing this is the end, Jesus prepares his disciples. That is our title for this first section of this second part of John. This section covers chapters 13-17.

In titling this section "Jesus Prepares His Disciples", I have in mind that Jesus is preparing them for the shocking tragedy of the cross that is just about to happen, but even more that Jesus is preparing them for a life of service lived out with him. It is just not going to be lived out with him physically present among them. And that's going to be a huge transition for these men. Jesus has sent them out in pairs to do ministry. But they always reported back to him. He was always there to plan the direction and strategy of the ministry. He answered all the tough questions. He did the crisis management. He led. Now he is going away.

In some ways what is coming is like the death of a parent. Jesus, who could always be relied on, who was always the adult in the room, is leaving. And he is not coming back. In another way what is coming is like the transition of a child moving to college. Jesus has so much to tell his disciples. These are the most densely packed chapters in the Gospel. If you have a red-letter Bible showing you the words of Jesus in red, half of chapter 13 is red. And then, pretty much everything else is red, from 14 all the way through 17. Just a few questions from the disciples. Jesus has a lot to say here. And yet, like with a child going off to college, you can never say enough. These things have to be lived through. You can't do it for them. Really, Jesus has been preparing them for this moment all along. This is the final moment of preparation. But preparation is still only preparation. They've got to live it out. Understanding, growth, wisdom - these are going to come from living out life, from success and failure and coming back to reflect on the word of Jesus and then heading out again for more success and failure.

The value of this section for us is tremendous. This is Jesus' perspective on discipleship. That's what we're looking at here. And this preparation is not just for them, it's also for us. This is the nature of discipleship, this is how you follow Jesus. And just like for them, the fruit's going to come not from studying this; we have to take it in so we can live it out. And if we apply what we see in these chapters, we will grow in our ability to live with Jesus. We will grow in understanding and wisdom. Jesus promised in 10:10 that he came that we might have life and have it abundantly. How do we experience that abundant life? Does it just come? He promised in 8:31 that if we abide in his word, then we are truly his disciples, and through abiding in his word we will come to know the truth and the truth shall make us free. We experience freedom and abundance by abiding in the word of Jesus, the specific words that he has for us disciples. To abide is not just to reflect on, but is also to live out.

We reflect, we chew on his word but then we live out his word, that's how we abide in the word. These chapters provide concentrated teaching from Jesus on the true nature of discipleship. True disciples reflect on these things and put them into practice. The fruit is abundant life.

So, how does Jesus prepare his disciples for what comes next? To take in Jesus' teaching in these five chapters, we need to recognize what genre of literature we are dealing with and what structure is being used to order the text. First, the genre. Studying through the Gospel of John when you get into chapter 13 everything slows down considerably. If you are not mentally prepared for that, reading these chapters is difficult. That's because there is a genre shift. Except for the prologue, everything we have studied in the first twelve chapters fits into the genre of narrative. It has been action and dialogue. Jesus is either performing a miracle or he is speaking to an individual or to a crowd. And narrative is the easiest genre to read in large chunks. It is as though our brains are hardwired for story. We love story. We will have two scenes of action and dialogue in chapter 13, but after that Jesus is going to start teaching, and he's going to teach all the way through the end of chapter 17. We have shifted from the narrative genre to the genre of prose discourse. Prose discourse is a sermon or an epistle, like one of Paul's letters. And as you know studying one of those letters, you have to slow down and pay closer attention to the logical flow of the teaching. Your brain needs you to follow the thought more carefully if it is going to keep up. So for the lessons in this section I'm going to shorten the amount of scripture that we go over each time, so that we can pay more attention verse by verse.

If you do not adjust to the change in genre, you'll just keep reading through these chapters at the same speed that you read narrative and when you are done you will find that you can remember hardly any of it. It just can't stick to the brain. One of the reasons I have kept us moving through the first twelve chapters is so that when we get here we can now slow down and pay attention to this prose discourse, this teaching of Jesus on discipleship.

Along recognizing the genre switch, it helps a lot to recognize the structure of the lesson. Just like our previous two sections of John, this section is structured chiastically. And it is even more important to recognize that this section is chiastic than it has been for the past two; I think with the narrative sections you can get by without noticing that, but in this teaching section it really helps your brain grab hold of it if you understand the order.

After I first becoming familiar with these chapters as a younger believer, I knew this is where Jesus promised to send the Holy Spirit. So, when I wanted to refer to that or get back to the sending of the Holy Spirit, I'd just flip to John, and I knew it was around John 15 somewhere, I could usually find it, but often it was not exactly the words I was looking for. And I've had this experience more than once. Time would pass, and I'd come back and I thought I knew what the words were and I knew there was a promise around John 15 and I would find it, but they weren't exactly what I expected to find. It was a little off. It literally took me a couple of decades before my brain finally realized Jesus promises to send the Holy Spirit twice in these chapters. And I was getting confused, I thought there was one and it was never quite right. They are both near chapter 15, one is in chapter 14 and the other is in chapter 16. And this is the center of our chiastic structure. Chapter 15 is the middle of the whole section.

It's sandwiched right in the center of these two promises of Jesus to send the Holy Spirit and it is the metaphor of the vine and the branches. It also contains Jesus' seventh "I am" statement, "I am" with an object: "I am the true vine." This central metaphor of the vine and the branches with these two flanking promises of the Holy Spirit provides our foundational understanding for what it means to be a disciple of Jesus after he has returned to heaven, how do walk with him now. We need to understand the Holy Spirit and we need to understand this metaphor of the vine and the branches. So that's in the center.

Moving from inside out in our structure, on either side of the promises to send the Holy Spirit, Jesus addresses with emotional terminology the sorrow that is coming on the disciples. And he comforts

them, and he repeats on both sides, in each frame, "Whatever you ask in my name, that I will do." These two frames are the beginning of chapter 14 and the end of chapter 16.

Moving out one more time, we come to the outer frame of chapters 13 and 17. In these two frames Jesus sanctifies or sets apart his disciples for service. In both, he affirms their belief in him. In chapter 13 he declares them to be clean. And in chapter 17 he declares that they have known him, received him, believed in him. Sanctification in chapter 13 takes place through the washing of their feet. Sanctification in chapter 17 takes place through a prayer that Jesus prays over them.

So that's our structure: on the outside we have Jesus sanctifying his disciples; then we move in one step, we have Jesus comforting his disciples. Move in one more step, we have Jesus promising to send the Holy Spirit and then right in the center we have the metaphor of the vine and the branches. If we abide in him, we will bear fruit. Our theme for this section is the nature of discipleship, what is true discipleship. The genre is prose discourse so we have to pay a little more careful attention, and the structure is chiastic. Jesus is going to teach us about discipleship. We begin with a symbolic act of sanctification, the washing of the disciples' feet. Jesus has three lessons here for us to remember. We start in verses 1-4 with an introduction, and then I will move on to the three lessons.

Introduction to the second half of John (13:1-4)

The introduction, 13:1-4:

¹ Now before the Feast of the Passover, Jesus knowing that His hour had come that He would depart out of this world to the Father, having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end. ² During supper, the devil having already put into the heart of Judas Iscariot, *the son* of Simon, to betray Him, ³ *Jesus*, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come forth from God and was going back to God, ⁴ got up from supper, and laid aside His garments; and taking a towel, He girded Himself.

It begins with this phrase "Now before the Feast". That's an indication that this foot washing is happening right before the specific Feast of Passover that we also call the Last Supper. Jesus will be arrested later this night and then he's going to be crucified. Telling us this, John directs our attention back to the theme of Passover. It started in chapter 1, John the Baptist declared publicly Jesus is the Lamb of God, he's the Passover lamb. By his atoning death, Jesus will satisfy the wrath of God just as lambs sacrificed 1500 years before symbolically turned away the angel of wrath in Egypt from Israelite homes. Well now, after 1500 years we have arrived at the final Passover. Jesus is the fulfillment. Jesus is the Passover lamb who dies in our place.

Jesus' own awareness "that His hour had come that He would depart out of this world to the Father" motivates what he is about to do next for his disciples. Jesus is preparing to depart. His death will be a brief departure bit's going to be followed by a much longer departure. He still hasn't come back yet.

As Jesus faces the cross, his mind and heart are on his disciples - I love this part - "having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end." He's still loving them. Loving "to the end" certainly climaxes in the cross, that's the supreme act of love. He's going to go all the way through with the plan, he's going to go through with the cross, he's going to love us to the end. But "loving to the end" also includes this teaching right now that Jesus is doing for his disciples in these last moments, his heart is for them. And he's preparing them for what's getting ready to come. He's teaching them, loving them all the way to the end.

Then John provides a contrast for us, drawing our attention to Judas and the fact that Satan has already at this point entered into him. And Jesus is still going to wash his feet. Jesus is going to wash the feet of the one who he knows is going to betray him. Jesus loves them. Then when we think about this thief Satan who comes to kill and steal and destroy (10:10), we're reminded that Jesus is the Good Shepherd. He's the one who's going to lay down his life for the Sheep. Satan does not care about any of the sheep, he certainly doesn't care about Judas, not anybody. He is a leader who uses

people for his own agenda, his own plan to overthrow what God is doing. He doesn't care about the followers. Jesus' view of his followers is communicated through what he does next.

³ *Jesus,* knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come forth from God and was going back to God, ⁴ got up from supper, and laid aside His garments; and taking a towel, He girded Himself.

With the cross looming before him. Jesus turns his thoughts to his disciples, to what they need to hear from him, and what they need to see him do.

You are clean (13:5-11).

The first lesson Jesus has for them, "You are clean." This is verses 5-11.

⁵ Then He poured water into the basin, and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel with which He was girded. ⁶ So He came to Simon Peter. He said to Him, "Lord, do You wash my feet?" ⁷ Jesus answered and said to him, "What I do you do not realize now, but you will understand hereafter." ⁸ Peter said to Him, "Never shall You wash my feet!" Jesus answered him, "If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me." ⁹ Simon Peter said to Him, "Lord, *then wash* not only my feet, but also my hands and my head." ¹⁰ Jesus said to him, "He who has bathed needs only to wash his feet, but is completely clean; and you are clean, but not all *of you*." ¹¹ For He knew the one who was betraying Him; for this reason He said, "Not all of you are clean."

As usual Peter speaks what is in his heart. Others might have been really uncomfortable with what Jesus was doing but Peter says it out loud: you can't do this, Jesus, you can't do this, Lord.

Can you pause your thinking about Peter for a moment and just imagine for yourself what it might be like to have your feet washed by Jesus? It helps to close your eyes. Just imagine yourself leaning back on a couch or in a lounge chair in the yard. Your shoes and socks are off. Jesus himself comes to you and he gently lifts one of your feet over a water basin that he's holding. And he pours soothing water onto your foot. And then he carefully wipes your foot dry with a clean towel. He places that foot down and he gently lifts up your other foot, and he also pours that refreshing water over that foot as well, and wipes it dry.

Can you imagine that? Can you imagine Jesus doing that to you?

As I imagine Jesus washing my feet, I realize that I do not quite connect with the experience of the disciples. I don't come from the same culture, I don't come from a foot washing culture. My primary feeling when I imagine Jesus washing my feet is embarrassment that someone would be washing my feet. I would be embarrassed to have anybody touch my feet. I would not enjoy the process. I don't know how it is for you. That is not quite where Peter was emotionally. I think it quite probable that he would like the idea of someone washing his feet. He would be for that. It's a normal custom. They all wore sandals and their feet got dirty. And they reclined on couches with their feet directed out behind them as they were eating. It made sense to wash your feet before eating. But it was a task for someone of lower class or rank to do for someone of higher class or rank. If there was a slave, a servant, they should do it. That's their job. If not, you can imagine the youngest disciple, it falls on him to go around and wash everybody's feet. But never the teacher. That would be shameful.

When I close my eyes and imagine Jesus washing my feet, I am embarrassed to have my feet washed. Peter was offended for Jesus. John the Baptist had proclaimed in relation to Jesus, "I am not worthy to tie his sandals." John communicates he is not worthy to do the job of a slave of Jesus, he's less than a slave. I imagine Peter feels the same, he is not worthy to touch the feet of Jesus. Mary shows similar humility. She does touch his feet but she pours out expensive perfume on him, the best she has, and she's wiping his feet with her hair. These actions are sentiments, they're not shameful because Jesus has such great honor. But to switch it around, to have Jesus take the role of touching Peter's feet, It would be shameful for Peter to allow such a thing to happen. He loves Jesus. He honors Jesus. Jesus is Lord of all. How can Peter stay quiet as though it is right for this to happen, for

Jesus to wash his feet? That's not the way it should be and Peter says it. Peter is embarrassed for Jesus, not for himself.

And so again I close my eyes and imagine Jesus as King of kings, Lord of Creation, worthy of every honor and every act of service. He does not exist to serve me. Jesus exists for me to glorify him. And I say to him, "Lord, this is not right. I am your servant. I am not worthy to wash the feet of the one who ought to be washing your feet."

But he says back to me, "If I do not wash you, you have no part with me."

"Oh, then Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head." I am not worthy but I love and I want to be with you, and if you're willing and that is the only way, then yes, please, wash me. And that's Peter.

Jesus' words to Peter that he would understand later what is happening points to the cross: after the cross you're going to understand this. By washing the disciples' feet Jesus is taking a humble position of a servant. But in reality Jesus is going to lower himself much further still, this is a symbolic act. Jesus is going to go through a real act of shame and sacrifice on the behalf of his disciples, as Paul writes of Jesus in Philippians 2:7-8,

[He] emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, *and* being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

This is the first lesson of foot washing. Jesus communicates his love to his disciples by modeling the sacrificial act of the cross through which he will make each one truly clean.

If you can imagine Jesus washing your feet, can you imagine him going to the cross for you? This is what he has done. This is how he is able to look you in the eye and declare you do not need to be washed. You are clean.

Confess your sin (Same text)

Our second lesson from the foot washing comes from this same passage, particularly verse 10. Jesus tells Peter, "He who has bathed needs only to wash his feet, but is completely clean; and you are clean." Our first lesson is that you are clean. This is an essential truth of discipleship. If you are his, you are already clean. Discipleship is not a process by which you make yourself clean. That's not what you're doing in following Jesus. If Jesus has died for you, and you have accepted the gift of his sacrifice, you stand in his grace. You are no longer judged under the law. He took the judgment himself so that you might be declared clean. One of the great errors of many Christians is this sense that they must work to attain their own righteousness through a mix of faith and moral behavior and religious ritual, that through that they can somehow make themselves clean. That's every other religion in the world. That is human religion. That is not Christianity. It's not Old Testament and it's not New Testament. Just like Abraham was declared righteous by his faith in Genesis 15:6, you are declared righteous in Jesus Christ. You do not make yourself clean. That's not what discipleship does. Peter does not need to be made clean. Jesus declares: you are already clean, you don't need to wash again.

But what does it mean when he says, "He who has bathed needs only to wash his feet, but is completely clean,"? I believe Jesus is making a reference to confession of sin here. I must admit that in this lesson that's not absolutely clear. Jesus could simply be emphasizing the fact that Peter is already clean, and we should not make a spiritual point out of the need to wash the feet.

Maybe the washing of feet is just part of the metaphor and it doesn't have a spiritual parallel. But I think it does. I think there's a second lesson here in the washing of the feet. You may have heard me refer to the two questions of covenant in my teaching in John or if you've listened to the Romans or the Pentateuch podcast. The first question of covenant has to do with the basis for our relationship with God. This is the question, "What makes me righteous enough to be in relationship with holy God?" And that's the first question we have to ask if we're going to enter into covenant, "How do I

have relationship with him when he's so holy?" There is only one answer to this question from the Christian, Biblical point of view. You are made righteous by grace through faith. Nothing in yourself can make you righteous. Nothing can lift you up to a level of holiness by which you can enter into relationship with God. You can't do it, it's the whole point of the cross. The wages of sin is death. And everybody has sinned and fall short of the glory of God. Your thoughts, words and actions have made you unclean and you can't make yourself clean. The only way to be righteous enough to enter into a relationship with our holy God is to receive from him a righteous standing that you don't really deserve. If you placed your faith in Christ that's what you have. You are 100% clean, 100% forgiven, 100% secure as a gift of grace that you received by faith. He takes the punishment for your sin and declares you clean. This is what it means for Peter to have already been washed. He's already clean because he has believed. Paul says it this way in Titus 3:4-5,

⁴ But when the kindness of God our Savior and *His* love for mankind appeared, ⁵ He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit,

So, the answer to the first question, "What makes me righteous enough to be in relationship with God? What makes me clean enough?" is 100% the gift of grace that comes from Jesus. That's what makes you righteous.

Now, we can ask the second question of covenant which is this, "Now that I am secure in my relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ, how then should I live?" The disciple of Jesus does not ask, "How should I live so that I might become acceptable to God or make myself acceptable and clean and lovable?" No! It's, "How shall I live now that I am accepted, now that I am clean? How should I live?" "Having been washed clean, how shall I live?"

This question, "How shall I now live?" is the question of this whole section. As a disciple of Jesus, how shall I live?

And chapters 13-17 address this. So we're going to address different facets as we go on. The question we are addressing right now is how to be washed clean from sin. Peter says, "Jesus wash all of me." Jesus says, "If you have been washed you do not need to bathe again. Just clean your feet."

When you sin as a believer that sin does not now make you unclean. You have been washed clean by Jesus as a legal declaration over you. All your sin, past, present and future is already paid by the cross.

But even though the penalty of sin is completely paid for in full, sin can still have an effect on your life. And we're all aware of this. We know there are consequences to sin. Sin damages us, sin damage people we love. Sin damages random people, people we don't even know. Sin also damages your fellowship with your Heavenly Father. And that's primary, that's the primary effect of sin. No matter what sin it is, somebody's always hurt. It always affects your relationship with your heavenly Father. You are not kicked out of the family when you sin. He does not love you less. He does not reject you. Jesus has said in chapter 6, "Not one of these that my Father has given me am I going to lose but I will raise all of them with me up on the last day." Sin doesn't get you kicked out. But unconfessed sin does build up a wall between you and God that affects your ability to enjoy the fruit of relationship with him.

I love the analogy I was taught as a young believer. Let's say my Dad had a day off, and he planned to go fishing. Thinking it would be nice to spend time together he invited me to go with him. And I said, "Sure Dad, let's do it." The night before I stay out so late with my friends and I only vaguely remember my Dad calling me to get up at four in the morning. I just mumble, "I'm feeling sick. You'll have to go without me." And I feel when I'm saying that and I feel as I'm falling back to sleep. But he goes off. And what do I do when I wake up? I don't really want to face him so I leave the house and go somewhere, anywhere. For the next four days I make sure I am out of the house when he is around, so I do not have to face him. I just want to avoid him and give him time not to think about it. But it's a heavy weight on me and it's just kind of building up in me. Sometimes I blame him. "Why

would he want to get up so early on a day off anyway?" But mostly I blame myself, "What am I doing? I lied. I'm a lousy son. Is it that hard to get up?" And the longer I wait to say anything the worse it gets. This wall of regret builds up in my heart.

Finally, I do get up in time to meet him at breakfast. "Dad, on your day off when you called me to go fishing and I said I was feeling bad, I wasn't. That was not true. I had just stayed out late. I am really sorry for lying to you, I'm sorry for letting you down. I am sorry for the time I missed you. Will you please forgive me?"

He responds, "Son, I am glad you came to me. I could tell that something was bothering you. And yes, I forgive you. In fact, I was pretty sure that's what happened, and I forgave you while I was out fishing." Now, I had been forgiven as a son for days but I wasn't able to experience the fruit of this forgiveness or the blessing of relationship because I was holding on to that sin unconfessed.

This is how it is with God. When we sin as believers, we have already been forgiven through the death of Christ. But we carry that unconfessed sin in our heart and our mind and Satan uses it to accuse us. One, we feel bad for what we did but Satan then just piles it on in our minds, and what kind of a Christian are you that you would do that and you would hold on to it. And it builds up a wall up between us and God. It does not affect the status of our relationship. He never stops loving us or seeing us as son or daughter. But it does affect the ongoing experience of our relationship with Him. We could say it damages our fellowship even while we remain in relationship as his child.

I believe this is the idea Jesus is alluding to here when he says to Peter that he has no need to bathe again, he's really clean. Just wash your feet. When we truly place our faith in Christ, we are washed clean of the penalty of sin. That is a first question issue, how do I get into relationship with God in the first place. Jesus does that for us. But in our ongoing life with God, when we sin, we need to wash our feet. We need to confess that sin to God, to be honest, to call it sin, to recognize that he's already forgiven us, and to move on with him. This is a second question issue. Jesus does not do this for us. If we carry that unconfessed sin, we will feel the effect of it in our relationship with God. This is a responsibility of a disciple, to confess sin whenever we recognize that we have sinned and in this way keep our relationship with God fresh, and honest, and open.

So these first two lessons go together. If you believe, you are clean. That is lesson number one. And if you are clean, it is still important to confess your sin whenever you are aware of it. So that's lesson number two.

The next lesson really goes in a different direction. Jesus wants us to model our attitude as disciples after his own attitude that he's expressing here.

Lead from of a servant's heart in care of one another (13:12-20)

He wants us to lead from a servant's heart in care for one another. This is John 13:12-20.

¹² So when He had washed their feet, and taken His garments and reclined *at the table* again, He said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? ¹³ You call Me Teacher and Lord; and you are right, for *so* I am. ¹⁴ If I then, the Lord and the Teacher, washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. ¹⁵ For I gave you an example that you also should do as I did to you. ¹⁶ Truly, truly, I say to you, a slave is not greater than his master, nor *is* one who is sent greater than the one who sent him. ¹⁷ If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them. ¹⁸ I do not speak of all of you. I know the ones I have chosen; but *it is* that the Scripture may be fulfilled, 'He who eats My bread has lifted up his heel against Me.' ¹⁹ From now on I am telling you before *it* comes to pass, so that when it does occur, you may believe that I am *He*. ²⁰ "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who receives whomever I send receives Me; and he who receives Me receives Him who sent Me."

We are now talking about the attitude of service. Jesus has a position of authority over his disciples. "You call me Teacher and Lord; and you are right, for so I am." Jesus is the leader. He does not deny

that. He has the right position of authority. But Jesus was willing to lower himself to serve the needs of his disciples. And Jesus expects them to do the same for one another.

If you have a position of authority and honor, you should not consider yourself as the one who must be served. That's not the point of leadership. The leader who cannot serve with humility is not a Christian leader. It is an attitude that runs contrary to the values of leadership typically ingrained in us through society. It's a lot easier to say, "Yes, yes, servant-leadership" that it is actually to do servant-leadership because we tend to fall back to our old assumptions of how we've been brought up, that a leader deserves to be served.

Being a disciple of Jesus includes a willingness to serve one another just as Jesus is willing to serve. What does that look like? Does Jesus mean that we need to wash one another's feet? Is that what he's saying?

The point is not literal. Jesus is not literally telling his disciples to wash each other's feet. In their culture that might be a way to apply what Jesus is saying. They could rotate foot-washing duties among themselves, so as not to suggest any one person is better than another. They could do that, it doesn't always have to fall on the youngest.

That example reminds me of my Granddaddy Ebert. My family grew up on the same street as our church. So, Grandmother and Granddaddy, they would come to church and then to our home for dinner after the service. And we tipically lingered at the table talking, we liked to talk after we ate, especially us kids when we got older. We'd like to sit there and spend time with each other. At some point, though, Granddaddy would just disappear. Before we noticed it he would be in the kitchen and he'd start washing the dishes. Every Sunday, the man at the table who deserved the most honor, not only because of his age and position in the family, but also because of his character, his kindness, his intelligence, he was the man who deserved most honor but every Sunday he was the one who went into the kitchen and washed the dishes.

That's the kind of attitude I believe Jesus is talking about. It is not about foot literal washing. It is about valuing people, and caring for people and being willing to serve people, and not seeing service as something beneath you.

Wash one another's feed does not mean the person who's in the leadership role does all the work. It does not mean the pastor of a church should be the one washing the dishes or mopping the floors. Or the manager of a business should be cleaning up the trash and making all the coffee. Or that parents should always mow the lawn, make the beds and load the dishwasher. The pastor, the manager, the parent shouldn't disdain that kind of work. But that's work that needs to be done for everything to run, but those responsibilities do not necessarily go with the role of pastor, manager or parent.

Consider Jesus' time these past few years with his disciples. Do we see him in those roles? Is he the one washing the dishes? No, that's Martha. Jesus is teaching. They call him teacher because that's primarily what he was doing, he took that on himself as his ministry role. He taught. He did not wash feet. That was not his role. I am reminded also of these disciples later, after Jesus left and the numbers of believers began to grow, when distributing food to widows becomes a problem. The disciples did not stop what they were doing and take on the responsibility of feeding the widows. They required that other leaders be chosen to take that role, so that they could focus on their ministry of teaching the word and prayer. They were called to the role of apostle. So they didn't put aside the role of apostle to care for the needs of the widows. Of course the needs of the widows were important but that's not how they were to serve. That was not how they were to love people.

Jesus is not saying that leaders should spend massive significant amounts of time in support roles because then they're not doing the role of leadership. He is saying that leadership is a service. He is teaching a new perspective that he wants all true disciples to adopt in their view of each other. To quote again from Philippians 2, a few verses earlier, verses 3-5,

³ Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; ⁴ do not *merely* look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others. ⁵ Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus.

This humble considering others better than yourselves, considering the needs of others with the humility of our mind. Paul says, "this we saw in Jesus, this we are to do." Jesus does not recognize leadership that places the agenda of the leader over the followers. The followers are the agenda of the leader. Jesus served his followers by leading well and by being concerned for their care, their development and their personal involvement in the mission. The washing of feet is symbolic. Dying on a cross was real. As a leader, Jesus was truly prepared to do what he needed to do, what his role said to do, what the Messiah must do for the good of his followers.

Jesus is teaching his disciples servant-leadership. Just as he communicated in John 10 with the shepherd analogy. The hired help does not really care about the sheep. The Good Shepherd loves his sheep and he seeks their good, and he gives up his rights, even his life, for their blessing. That's the attitude Jesus is calling leaders, pastors and elders and managers and team leaders and teachers and parents to adopt in their leadership roles. We are shepherds of the people Jesus has given us as followers. The people and the mission are integrated. The good leader cares about both, he sees them both together.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this passage ends with another reference to Judas and another "I am" statement. Jesus wants his disciples to know that he knows one will betray him. They should not be surprised. It is to fulfill Scripture. Jesus says he tells them this prophecy now, so that "when it does occur, you may believe that I am he." That last phrase "that you may believe that I am he" that's another place my English Bible has filled in the word "he" which is not present in the Greek. Jesus literally says, "so when it does occur, you may believe I am." This is the sixth absolute "I am" statement in John. You remember, that means it's not, "I am the bread of life" or, "I am the light of the world"; it's just, "I am." Jesus has seven of each. Jesus continually prepares his disciples to grow in their belief of him as he has revealed himself to be. He knows they do not understand now all that he is saying. But they're going to remember that he spoke the Word to them. He said, "this is prophecy." And it's going to bring them back to Scripture. And the Word is going to help them understand these things, bringing into better and better focus the true nature of Jesus. They believe, but they still have so much to learn.

Jesus points them back to Scripture ahead of time in order to strengthen their belief in who he truly is as the "I am." Jesus ends this teaching with these words, "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who receives whomever I send receives Me; and he who receives Me receives Him who sent Me." This is an indication that ministry is getting ready to change for the disciples. Just as Jesus was sent from God, soon he will return to his place with the Father and these disciples will be the ones sent out in his name. They will take the memory of Jesus washing their feet with them. And they need to. The three lessons here are critical to following Jesus as his disciple. This is what they needed to know, and this is what you need to know if you want to follow Jesus as a disciple. The three lessons. Let's end with the three lessons of the foot washing.

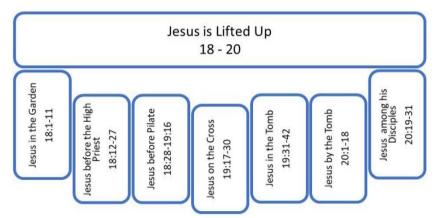
- 1) To be a disciple of Jesus, you need to continually remember he has already washed you clean from the moment you first believed. You are clean in his eyes.
- 2) To be a disciple of Jesus, you need to keep your relationship with God fresh by confessing sin as soon as you become aware of it. When you know you have sinned, go to God with it, call your sin sin, and thank him for forgiving you.
- 3) And to be a disciple of Jesus, you need to have this attitude in yourself that the people are the mission. You are above no one. Everyone is worthy of your respect, love and service, according to the role God has given you to fill. Wash one another's feet.

Reflection questions

- 1. Read John 13:1-20. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What are some questions that come to mind?
- 2. Imagine yourself as one of the disciples. Imagine that you had walked this journey with Jesus. Imagine watching him dress as a servant, kneel before you, and take your feet one by one, washing the dust and grime away and then drying your feet with a towel.
- 3. What feelings and thoughts come to mind imagining Jesus wash your feet?
- 4. Knowing that Peter came from a different culture where washing feet may not be so unusual, but where honor/shame feelings would affect his feelings about what Jesus was doing, how do you imagine Peter feeling?
- 5. How does the symbolism of what Jesus has done foreshadow what he is about to do on the cross?
- 6. Jesus refers to washing the whole body and washing just feet. In verse 10 he declares Peter clean. What do you think about the possibility that Jesus' metaphor refers to both initial faith in Jesus that results in complete cleansing from sin and ongoing confession that deals with the problem of sin in our fellowship with God? Does washing your feet represent ongoing confession to stay fresh in your secure relationship with God? Or is that reading too much into the metaphor?
- 7. How do you understand Jesus' command to wash one another's feet? What attitude does Jesus model? What attitude is he asking of you in your relationship with other believers?
- 8. What are two or three examples from your life that you could describe as someone washing your feet?

Lesson 22: John 13:21-38 A New Commandment

Introduction



We are looking at the second half of John 13. John is giving us a fresh perspective on the Last Supper. The three synoptic Gospels followed one another closely in reporting this final Passover meal. John includes some of the same detail, such as the fact that the disciples were all together with Jesus celebrating the Passover and during the meal Jesus foretells his betrayal by Judas. John does not change history. There is overlap in the accounts. But he leaves out some significant parts reported in Matthew, Mark and Luke, while also providing newly related details.

We might wonder how John could leave out what seems the most important part of the Last Supper reported in all three of the other Gospels. Matthew 26:26-28 tells us,

²⁶ While they were eating, Jesus took *some* bread, and after a blessing, He broke *it* and gave *it* to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is My body." ²⁷ And when He had taken a cup and given thanks, He gave *it* to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you; ²⁸ for this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins."

How could John leave out this theologically significant declaration by Jesus, which institutes the Christian practice of the Lord's Supper? Well, he could leave it out if it had been a common practice among believers for the past 60 years, and he understood the record in the synoptic Gospels to be sufficient. John didn't need to build on what was already a solid foundation. John could assume that Jesus' words were common knowledge among Christians, begin regularly proclaimed at Christian worship. A seeker or new believer who did not know these words would soon learn them. It is not necessary for John to repeat something so well established and regularly taught in the church.

And we might remember that John does not leave out the symbolism of the Lord's Supper completely. John is the only one to supply in his Gospel, and this was in chapter 6, the discussion with the crowd after the feeding of the 5000, where Jesus first declares, "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in yourselves." As we saw in that context, eating and drinking were analogous to believing in Jesus. John did leave out the declaration at the Last Supper, but he also filled in the background that had been left out of the other Gospels.

And while John left out the words Jesus used to institute the Christian ritual of symbolically celebrating the Lord's Supper with bread and wine, John added into his account the washing of the disciples' feet, which was left out by other Gospel writers. I wonder they left it out so as not to overshadow the central significance of Jesus fulfilling Passover as the Passover lamb. When Jesus made that declaration at the feast, "This is my body" and "This is my blood" he changed history forever. No longer would believers celebrate the Passover with bread and wine, looking back to the Exodus as the great rescue from Egypt as the defining moment of their faith. From now on they would celebrate the Lord's Supper with bread and wine, looking back to the cross as the great rescue from sin and death as the defining moment of their faith. These words of Jesus truly were the climax of that Passover. That point was made clear by Matthew, Mark and Luke.

It seems to me that John, having the benefit of that point being solidly established through three Gospel witnesses and the benefit of years of Christian worship, was in his writing able to focus on a different perspective of this Last Supper, on a more personal perspective. And this may be another reason the others felt it okay leaving out the washing of the feet. Not only might the washing of the feet have distracted form the central point of the Lord's supper, but it was also a very personal interaction between Jesus and his disciples. It was just for them, in a sense. John now feels the freedom, even the compulsion of the Holy Spirit, to give Christianity this more personal account as part of how Jesus prepared his disciples both for the cross and for future ministry. It's another true perspective on what happened that night at the Last Supper.

Following the washing of the feet, so now in the second half of chapter 13:21-38, Jesus gives his disciples a new commandment. This new commandment is sandwiched between the foretelling of two acts of betrayal. Let's read the whole text, John 13:21-38.

²¹ When Jesus had said this, He became troubled in spirit, and testified and said, "Truly, truly, I say to you, that one of you will betray Me." ²² The disciples *began* looking at one another, at a loss *to know* of which one He was speaking. ²³ There was reclining on Jesus' bosom one of His disciples, whom Jesus loved. ²⁴ So Simon Peter gestured to him, and said to him, "Tell *us* who it is of whom He is speaking." ²⁵ He, leaning back thus on Jesus' bosom, said to Him, "Lord, who is it?" ²⁶ Jesus then answered, "That is the one for whom I shall dip the morsel and give it to him." So when He had dipped the morsel, He took and gave it to Judas, *the son* of Simon Iscariot. ²⁷ After the morsel, Satan then entered into him. Therefore Jesus said to him, "What you do, do quickly." ²⁸ Now no one of those reclining *at the table* knew for what purpose He had said this to him. ²⁹ For some were supposing, because Judas had the money box, that Jesus was saying to him, "Buy the things we have need of for the feast"; or else, that he should give something to the poor. ³⁰ So after receiving the morsel he went out immediately; and it was night.

³¹ Therefore when he had gone out, Jesus said, "Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in Him; ³² if God is glorified in Him, God will also glorify Him in Himself, and will glorify Him immediately. ³³ "Little children, I am with you a little while longer. You will seek Me; and as I said to the Jews, now I also say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.' ³⁴ "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. ³⁵ "By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."

³⁶ Simon Peter said to Him, "Lord, where are You going?" Jesus answered, "Where I go, you cannot follow Me now; but you will follow later." ³⁷ Peter said to Him, "Lord, why can I not follow You right now? I will lay down my life for You." ³⁸ Jesus answered, "Will you lay down your life for Me? Truly, truly, I say to you, a rooster will not crow until you deny Me three times.

Jesus is communicating to his disciples that things are about to change. He is leaving. They cannot come. The leaving will not be a smooth transition. It will include betrayal and denial. Jesus foretells this at the beginning and ending of the section. In between he gives a new commandment.

Foretelling the betrayal of Judas

We begin with the betrayal of Judas in 13:21-30. It is a significant emotional shift from the atmosphere Jesus had just created through washing the disciples' feet. He communicates his own willingness to humbly serve by washing their feet, and then exhorted the disciples to model their own leadership after his in humble service to one another. Humility is the attitude of Christian discipleship and Christian leadership. That's what Jesus wants.

Jesus teaches this principle through a powerful, personal, experiential lesson. Having complete the lesson, Jesus voices the trouble in his heart.

²¹ When Jesus had said this, He became troubled in spirit, and testified and said, "Truly, truly, I say to you, that one of you will betray Me."

You remember back in chapter 11, surrounded by Jews mourning the death of Lazarus, John used a similar phrase to describe Jesus' emotional response. In my Bible version, it said, "He was deeply moved in spirit (11:33)." The Greek word translated "deeply moved" there literally means, "angry" or "indignant". That expression would fit well in this context. We could easily understand Jesus being angry or indignant in spirit knowing that one of his disciples at this meal with him is preparing to betray him. But that is not the Greek word used here. The word here means to be "unsettled in spirit," "disturbed." The waters of Jesus' soul are stirred up as in a storm. Jesus is troubled. It weighs heavy on his heart. He communicates this emphatically to his disciples. "Truly, truly, I say to you, that one of you will betray me." He's got their attention.

Interestingly, the disciples do not all immediately look at Judas. We would, you know, we all know the story but they didn't. Judas the pious who rebuked Mary for wasting expensive perfume which could have gone to help the poor has concealed his heart well. We might wonder when his heart turned from devotion to bitterness. I assume Judas began as a disciple who believed Jesus to be the Christ. But he wanted Jesus to be a certain kind of Christ. At what point was Judas expectation of Jesus shattered? What kind of interaction with Jesus or with the people around Jesus would turn Judas away in disillusionment? When did he begin to steal from the money bag? Did greed lead him to reject Jesus? Or did he justify the sin of thievery as a result of his bitter disillusionment? And in all of this how did he hide himself from the other disciples? Through pious expressions or good-natured humor or efficiency in logistics? What mask did he choose to wear?

Whatever mask he wore, he wore it well. The disciples do not look to Judas as a prime suspect. They look around wondering who Jesus could be talking about. Peter, of course, is the first to speak up. He has something to say. Though he is a little more muted than a few moments before when he refused Jesus' offer to wash his feet, but then declared, "Wash all of me!" That's Peter that we're used to. In this more somber, troubling mood, Peter does not blurt out his question. Instead, sitting further from Jesus, he gets John's attention and tells him to ask. Let's read that part again, 22-26,

²² The disciples *began* looking at one another, at a loss *to know* of which one He was speaking. ²³ There was reclining on Jesus' bosom one of His disciples, whom Jesus loved. ²⁴ So Simon Peter gestured to him, and said to him, "Tell *us* who it is of whom He is speaking." ²⁵ He, leaning back thus on Jesus' bosom, said to Him, "Lord, who is it?" ²⁶ Jesus then answered, "That is the one for whom I shall dip the morsel and give it to him." So when He had dipped the morsel, He took and gave it to Judas, *the son* of Simon Iscariot.

To get what is going on, we need to imagine a different way of sitting around the table. The text does not say in verse 12 that Jesus sat at the table but that Jesus reclined. The low table would have had cushions around it instead of chairs. Jesus and his disciples would each recline on the cushions, leaning towards the table on their left arm. Their legs would have stretched out away from the table and leaning on that left arm would leave the right hand, the right arm free to take food or drink. In that position you would most naturally be looking at across the table, at others across from you, and to your right you're looking at the person's back. This would be the same all the way around the table. Using the right hand is what's culturally appropriate for eating so everybody's leaning on the left. It also means that if you leaned backwards across your left shoulder, your head would be at the chest of the person behind you.

Having this image of reclining at the table, we can imagine John leaning back to his left, such that his head was close to the chest or bosom of Jesus. This is what Peter gestured for John to do, since John was in that prime position to lean back and quietly ask Jesus the question. In the prologue, very early on, in 1:18 John alluded to this image at table of leaning back on the chest of someone to share personal information when he wrote, "No man has seen God at any time; the only begotten God, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has explained him." We need this expression explained to us: being in the bosom of the Father. For them it was a natural image of everyday life. God and Jesus are not literally reclining at table with Jesus leaning back. It is a metaphor of close fellowship, they're

eating together, and they're close and Jesus is at that preferred position where he can lean back on the chest of the Father. It's the position through which personal knowledge is shared. Jesus has taken that personal knowledge and He has revealed it to us; it comes from his intimate relationship with the Father.

Here in John 13 the image is quite literal. They really are at table and John really does lean back to quietly question Jesus, "Who is the betrayer?" Jesus quietly answers. Only John hears. Then Jesus takes bread, dips it, and gives it to Judas.

As the text informs us, John has no time to act or to communicate to Peter before Jesus sends Judas off. Verses 27-30,

²⁷ After the morsel, Satan then entered into him. Therefore Jesus said to him, "What you do, do quickly." ²⁸ Now no one of those reclining *at the table* knew for what purpose He had said this to him. ²⁹ For some were supposing, because Judas had the money box, that Jesus was saying to him, "Buy the things we have need of for the feast"; or else, that he should give something to the poor. ³⁰ So after receiving the morsel he went out immediately; and it was night.

Jesus tells Judas to act quickly. He does. He gets up and leaves, which does not seem unusual to the disciples because Judas handles finances and arranges logistics.

We are told that at this very moment when Jesus handed the morsel to Judas, Satan entered him. I see two ideas worth considering here. The idea of Jesus handing the morsel to Judas and the idea of Satan entering Judas.

Does Jesus handing the morsel to Judas somehow cause Satan to enter into Judas or does it remove Jesus' protection from Judas? I do not think that is the implication. Handing Judas a morsel is an offer. It implies closeness and a willingness to accept Judas as a companion. Yes, it is an identification for John. Jesus is giving the answer to John's question, but I think he is doing more. A host of a meal might reach into a common bowl and take out a desirable portion and hand it to someone else as a gesture of honor. There was also a moment in the Passover feast when bitter herbs were dipped into a fruit sauce and then passed. Whatever the specific nature of the act, the gesture shows the mercy of Jesus even knowing what kind of man Judas is and what he had planned.

Judas knows now that Jesus knows. In the knowing, Jesus hands Judas a morsel of food. This final act of reaching out to Judas, follows a history with Jesus. Judas was accepted as his disciple. Judas witnessed his teaching and miracles in close contact. Judas just experienced the washing of his feet, Jesus touching his feet. And now Jesus hands Judas the morsel. And Judas in his heart rejects the offer, rejects the invitation. He is committed to his path.

I believe it is that hardened conviction in the rejection of Jesus, not by what Jesus does but by what Judas does in turn. That's what opens the door of his soul to Satan. He had been called a devil back in back in 6:70-71,

⁷⁰ Jesus answered them, "Did I Myself not choose you, the twelve, and *yet* one of you is a devil?" ⁷¹ Now He meant Judas *the son* of Simon Iscariot, for he, one of the twelve, was going to betray Him.

That does not mean Judas is a demon. He is human. But the sin of his heart hardens him against Jesus. He is acting as a devil. He will act in allegiance with Satan, whether he sees it that way himself or not. Jesus recognizes the reality of the supernatural world. Angels exist. Demons exist. Satan is real and he's active. Satan has set himself up as ruler of the world. He is an illegitimate ruler but he still acts with power. God created Adam and Eve and gave them the charge to rule over the earth. The world is given to humankind, not to Satan. Satan's rule is illegitimate. Still, he is a powerful force at work in human society. Human beings who refuse Jesus, the second Adam and rightful King both as Creator and as Son of David, whoever rejects Jesus for whatever reason is understood in the Gospel of John to be in league with Satan, whether knowingly or unknowingly. That was Jesus' charge to the crowd at the Feast of Booths in John 8. To oppose Jesus is to oppose life. To oppose the

legitimate king is a rejection of the light. To oppose Jesus is to walk in the darkness of rebellion. It does not mean that those specific human beings are in active agreement with Satan. It does mean that human beings are open through the sinfulness of their own hearts to the influence of Satan, and even if they act self-servingly or for some other human cause, religion or nation or family, if that cause opposes Jesus then that cause is allied to the overall agenda of Satan. Whether the tyrant rules a nation or a congregation or a family or just himself, to oppose Jesus as the right and glorious king is to align with Satan. This is his aim to keep human beings bound in the dark under the reign of death. When we sin, we participate in that aim.

Judas' role in opposing the rightful reign of Jesus closely aligned with the plan of Satan to oppose God's will for humankind, to oppose light and life. So, he is called a devil in chapter 6. Then at the beginning of this present chapter we are told the devil put into Judas' heart the plan to betray Jesus. And now, even more, not only has the Devil put this idea into his heart, Satan himself has entered into Judas. A moment before Jesus made an offer. He held out his hand to Judas. Judas took the morsel with his own hand but rejected the Lord of Glory with his heart. And Satan entered in.

In chapter 3 we were introduced to a man named Nicodemus. "It was night." But that man entered into the light, into the presence of Jesus. We are going to see after the death of Jesus that that man ends up in the light. It was a long road before he fully came into the light and believed in the light but he comes to believe in Jesus. Judas walked the opposite road, also a long road. He spent two years walking in the light of Jesus. But now he has hardened himself against the light. He has not understood the light. And he is going to try to help overcome the light. The text tells us this. "After receiving the morsel, he went out immediately; and it was night." The one man came from the night into the light; the other man left the light and went out into the night.

Jesus expressed trouble in his heart over the betrayer. Though troubled, Jesus, as always, is in full control. He knows who the betrayer is. He even commands the betrayer to go do quickly what you're planning to do, and the betrayer obeys. Jesus does not lose his life. The darkness cannot overcome Jesus. Jesus lays his life down at the hour of his own choosing.

The hour is not truly Satan's. He schemes for the execution of Jesus, the second Adam, believing that by removing the Messiah he can maintain the rule of death through which he has bound mankind ever since the failure of the first Adam. But Satan does not understand the deeper ways of God. The cross is not going to be victory. The seeming failure of the Messiah on the cross will be the Messiah's victory. This hour of darkness, normally the domain of Satan, will turn into the hour of Jesus' shining glory.

Giving a new commandment

In this hour of glory, Jesus gives a new commandment to his disciples. This is the middle of our passage, verses 31-35.

³¹ Therefore when he had gone out, Jesus said, "Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in Him; ³² if God is glorified in Him, God will also glorify Him in Himself, and will glorify Him immediately. ³³ Little children, I am with you a little while longer. You will seek Me; and as I said to the Jews, now I also say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.' ³⁴ A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. ³⁵ By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."

Jesus speaks again about his glorification. Let's think about that for a moment. What does it mean to be glorified? We could say that to be glorified is something others do to you. When people lift you up in praise and honor, they glorify you. We could also say that to be glorified is the result of something you have done. When you reveal yourself as praiseworthy, you have been glorified. Through some action you are glorified. Both are true of Jesus. His action reveals him as glorious and he is declared glorious. And though he is declared glorious by human beings, that declaration is not primary to

Jesus. That's not the glory Jesus seeks. Jesus is declared glorious by God. The Father glorifies Jesus because Jesus has glorified himself through his own action.

We also need to recognize that glory is attached to these other ideas of name and nature. A person is truly glorious when his nature is truly glorious. Jesus is glorious in power, beauty, goodness, truth because Jesus' nature is one of power, beauty, goodness, and truth. His actions reveal his nature which is praiseworthy, therefore glorious. When we truly see Jesus as he is, the right response is one of praise and glory.

The idea of believing in the name of Jesus is the idea of believing in Jesus according to his true nature. As human beings, we cannot know his true nature. We cannot define him. He must reveal his nature to us. So we've got this in the prologue. It's Jesus who comes down in the flesh and then John can say, "And we beheld his glory, we saw him, we heard from him, he revealed his glory to us."

This idea of glory is also connected to the idea of light. Glory is often depicted as shining light. Light reveals the true nature of things. Light is an appropriate physical and metaphorical representation of the nature of Jesus, of power and beauty, of revealing truth. These ideas are all related in John: glory, name, and light.

One way that Jesus revealed his glory in his ministry on earth was through the miracles he did. We saw this through the first half of John. The miracles alone showed his power and his compassion. They showed his nature. They showed glorious things about Jesus. The miracles also served as signs, pointing to other truths about who Jesus is. He fed the 5000 in that miracle, he declared himself the bread of life. The miracle, the sign points to the fact that Jesus is the source and sustainer of life. He healed a blind man and declared himself the light of the world. The sign points to the fact that Jesus is the revealer of truth. If we want to know things about God, things we cannot know about God, about heaven, about hell, about goodness, about our own nature, we have to receive the truth that Jesus reveals to us. He is the light. He declared himself the light by opening the eyes of a blind man. Jesus also raised Lazarus from the dead and proclaimed himself, "I am the resurrection and the life." He holds life in his hands. We overcome death through Jesus. We experience resurrection through Jesus. This power of life that he has in himself was pointed to by the sign of Lazarus' resurrection. The miracles are called signs because the miracles reveal to us the nature of Jesus, the glory of Jesus.

The supreme act revealing the nature of Jesus is yet to come in the story. It's about to come. We're at the hour of glory, the hour when his true nature will be most supremely revealed. The cross is a statement of judgment. This is what humankind deserves. The one who is just, who is holy, who is righteous must demand the penalty of sin or he is no longer just. By insisting on the cross Jesus insists on judgment. Sin cannot be ignored. But the cross is also a statement of mercy. This is what Jesus offers to do for us, to take on himself that which we deserve. The one who is merciful, gracious and loving gives himself as a substitute. Jesus is glorified through the cross because it shows what he's willing to do according or out of his nature because he is supremely just and holy, because he is so loving and merciful he is willing to take on himself the shame of the cross on our behalf. We're talking about this glory of the cross to help us to understand these words in 31-32,

³¹ Therefore when he had gone out, Jesus said, "Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in Him; ³² if God is glorified in Him, God will also glorify Him in Himself, and will glorify Him immediately.

Judas goes out to betray Jesus. What he's going to help accomplish is the glorification of Jesus. The revealing of his nature through the supreme act of salvation. The Son of Man is glorified, that is, his nature is revealed, and he is exalted by God. And God is glorified in Jesus as Jesus submits himself to the will of the Father.

The disciples will not have understood what Jesus was talking about here. They remembered these words and they gained new insight after they experienced the cross and resurrection. They needed

to see the cross and the resurrection to understand the true nature, the true glory of Jesus. They will see, and they will understand, and they will lift him up in praise.

The point that the disciples would have caught on to here is that God is going to glorify the Son immediately, whatever that means, but it's immediate. As a result, he is only with them a little while longer. As he said to the crowds at the Feast of Booths back in chapter 7 and then again in chapter 8, "You will seek me [but] Where I am going, you cannot come." What are you talking about, Jesus? Going away and we can't come?

There has been a lot of emotion already this evening so far. You can imagine it. It's normally a festive environment, the Passover feast. Jesus then does something strangely touching, moving, but also unsettling when he washed their feet. Then the tone became very somber when Jesus announced the trouble in his spirit coming from the fact that one of them is a traitor. Now again, the troubling emotion shifts from the sinister idea of betrayal to the hollow fear of loss. Jesus is going. They will see him no more. They cannot follow.

In the midst of this emotion, Jesus declares, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another." The emotion of the moment, I imagine, makes the commandment quite serious. Things are heavy. Jesus is leaving. There's a betrayer. It's emotionally difficult, troubling kind of atmosphere. And Jesus looks at them and says, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another even as I have loved you that you also love one another." I'm reminded right now of the trouble that is in our entire world right now with the Covid-19 virus. These are heavy, serious times. And we can imagine Jesus looking at us and saying, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another even as I have loved you that you also love one another. You need this now. This is the essence of your discipleship, that you love one another." In a sense, this is not a new commandment. "Love your neighbor as yourself" is Leviticus 19:18, an essential idea of Torah Law. Leaders of Israel knew enough to affirm Jesus when he said the greatest command is to love your God and a second one like it to love your neighbor. The command to love one another as fellow creatures made in the image of God and beloved by him is not a new commandment. What is new is the added phrase "even as I have loved you." Jesus does not say, "Love your neighbor as yourself." I mean, he did say that, he said that earlier and holds to that, but here he elevates that to "Love one another even as I have loved you." Don't just love your neighbor as you would love your own self. No. Love your neighbor as I have loved you. And how has Jesus loved you? Jesus loved by giving up his life in great humility on a cross. To love like Jesus is the highest of callings, to love sacrificially, truly unconditionally. To value the life of someone else so much that you're willing to give up your own. The love of Jesus is impossible to fully and consistently attain. That does not mean we ought not strive towards obedience. He gives us this commandment so that we may strive towards something that really is beyond us. We have never been fully and consistently obedient. But Jesus has now given us a new vision to pursue. This is true discipleship. Follow me in this, that you love one another in sacrificial humility. That's what I've done for you, that's what I want you to put into practice. That's what it means to follow me.

This is what Jesus wants us to be known for. "By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another." Jesus sets the standard impossibly high in light of the cross and in the light his own perfection. But perhaps that is one reason he chose to wash their feet. The cross is our model but it's such a high model, truly sacrificial. Don't think of going to the cross as the only way to show your love. Yes, that's an image to strive for. Maybe start more simply. Think of washing one another's feet, just that. Just in your daily life take on the role of a servant to show kindness and care to one another. Ask, "How can I serve you?" Think, "What need can I meet today?" Start where you are. There are so many needs. I look around the world and I'm so overwhelmed with the needs. We have to start where we are. Think about who God has made you, how God has gifted you, what you can do to serve, the relationships you have already. Start with those close to you. "How can I serve you? How can I meet a need you have today? Jesus has called me to love sacrificially in humility. How

do I do that today?" This is what Jesus wants you and your family and your church to be known for. When people are around you, do they sense that you have love for each other?

Jesus' disciples are going to need love for one another when Jesus is leaving. Jesus is the bond holding them together. They will continue to love Jesus. They are going to need to be able to love each other, to forgive each other. Peter is going to need that from his fellow disciples.

The tone quickly turns once again. This must be very painful for Peter to hear. And I suspect, pretty surprising for the disciples. Judas was not named out loud. Peter is. Jesus foretells his denial.

Foretelling the denial of Peter

This is John 13:36-38,

³⁶ Simon Peter said to Him, "Lord, where are You going?" Jesus answered, "Where I go, you cannot follow Me now; but you will follow later." ³⁷ Peter said to Him, "Lord, why can I not follow You right now? I will lay down my life for You." ³⁸ Jesus answered, "Will you lay down your life for Me? Truly, truly, I say to you, a rooster will not crow until you deny Me three times.

Peter's question, "Lord, where are you going?" shows us the disciple did not understand what Jesus was talking about. Jesus tells Peter he will follow later. Jesus goes to be with God. Peter will follow. He does not understand where Jesus is going, but if it is to death, Peter declares he will follow Jesus even there. "I will lay down my life for you."

Jesus answers him back, "Will you... Will you lay down your life for me? Truly, truly, I say to you, a rooster will not crow until you deny Me three times."

In fact, Peter will give up his life as a witness for Jesus. Tradition teaches that Peter was crucified like Jesus. That is confirmed at the end of this Gospel. When Jesus tells Peter, he will stretch out his hands and be lead where he does not want to go. Peter will lay down his life. But not this Peter, the one who stands before Jesus right now. Peter is not yet the kind of person who is going to willingly give up his life.

In this chapter Jesus has called his disciples to an attitude of humility, to be willing to wash one another's feet. And he has called them to the motive of love that they would act out of love in caring for one another. This is the path of discipleship, an attitude of humility like Jesus Christ and a heart of love like Jesus Christ.

But can we do it? Can we be like Jesus? Peter is not going to be able to be like Jesus. Peter wants to be like Jesus. He wants to be able to lay down his life out of love for Jesus. But he's not going to be able to do it. He needs more than teaching. Telling people to love one another and care for one another, to be sacrificial and to be humble does not work. It might work a little. But not so much. Teaching and commandment is not enough. Peter must be changed so that he might be the kind of person who can keep the commandments.

And this is a problem of discipleship. Without some kind of transformation, the new commandment of Christ is not a grand vision to pursue, it is a hopeless mirage.

Jesus' rebuke of Peter is a rebuke to us all. Remember what stuff you are made of. Following Jesus cannot merely be a new vision of morality. If it is, we are in trouble. We all deny him. We all fall short. We are all afraid. We are all self-motivated.

Christianity as a moral program cannot succeed. To follow Jesus, we are going to need another way, a new way, not just a moral path. We need more than a commandment to be humble and a commandment to be loving. We need to be made humble. We need to become loving.

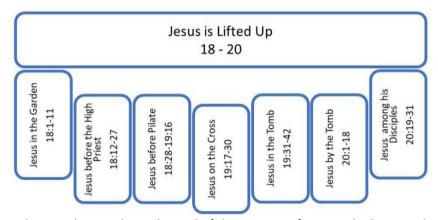
Jesus has set before us a new commandment. "Love one another as I have loved you." But that cannot be the end of discipleship. There must be something more to it. We have to pay attention to what Jesus is going to say next.

Reflection questions

- 1. Read John 13:21-38. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What are some questions that come to mind?
- 2. Why do Peter and the other disciples not react when Judas gets up to leave the table just after Jesus has passed him the morsel? Did they not hear Jesus? How not? How does the placement at the table and the cultural way of reclining for a meal enable this information to remain between Jesus and the beloved disciple?
- 3. Who is the beloved disciple? Can you identify him?
- 4. How do you understand Satan coming into Judas? How is this different from 13:2?
- 5. Why was Judas not suspected by the other disciples? What does Jesus say about the state of Judas' heart in 6:64-65? How do you think Judas was able to carry out his role without anyone suspecting that he did not truly believe?
- 6. How does the command to love another relate to the command to wash one another's feet. Is it the same command or slightly different?
- 7. Why does Jesus call this command a new commandment?
- 8. From your own experience, when have you felt the authenticity of an individual or a group because their love for one another was evident?
- 9. How does Jesus' interaction with Peter relate to the previous narrative about Judas and the commandment to love one another?

Lesson 23: John 14 Jesus Comforts His Disciples

Introduction



In John 14 we pick up perhaps right at the end of the Passover feast. In the last words of the chapter Jesus says, "Let us go from here." So, they'd been in a room and they'd had a meal, and maybe this is the end, and Jesus is speaking. The context is emotionally charged. Jesus will address that. He is also going to move us along in our understanding of discipleship. Jesus repeats the central message to which his followers are to give as a witness. He also calls his disciples to a submission modeled after his own. Between these two ideas of message and submission, Jesus makes several enigmatic statements. We are going to consider all of this.

As an introduction to set up the tone for the chapter, let's first pay attention to the emotional context and how Jesus speaks to that emotion.

"Let not your heart be troubled." That's how John chapter 14 begins. "Let not your heart be troubled." Why are the hearts of the disciples troubled? Jesus has just said, "I am going away and where I go you cannot come." Jesus is leaving. For good. Have you had a friend leave for good? A parent or teacher or mentor leave? For good? You can empathize with the emotion gripping their hearts. Jesus is leaving. And that's not the only stressful factor. Jesus has just announced that one of the men is a traitor. And in addition to that Jesus added that Peter, the leader, will deny the Lord before the sun comes up. "Let not your heart be troubled."

John told us that earlier in the meal Jesus "became troubled in spirit" thinking of the one who would betray him. Jesus understands the unsettledness of soul, the heaviness of spirit they are feeling. He is not discounting that. He speaks to comfort.

That's how we should approach these next verses. If your heart right now is troubled, then listen to these verses with your own burden in mind. If your heart is not troubled, imagine how these men felt after hearing these things from Jesus. Let's read the first four verses of John 14.

¹ "Let not let your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me. ² In My Father's house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. ³ If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, *there* you may be also. ⁴ And you know the way where I am going."

Does that comfort you? It may, it may not. Words, even words of truth, do not always touch the soul in the right way to ease the current pain. Would these words have comforted the disciples? Maybe. Maybe not right away. Being told that things will be better in the future does not easily remove the worry of present trials. The betrayal, the denial and the death of Jesus are the present reality just now pressing in on to the minds and hearts of the disciples.

This has all come up at this meal. The comfort that Jesus is giving them might be more for the days to come. After these hard things happen, during the ongoing process of grief or regret or loss, the disciples will be able to bring back these words, and as they reflect on the words, they're going to hear Jesus. Jesus is not just saying just that things are going to be better in the future. The comfort is

not "you're going to get a big house, you're going to get to live in a mansion." The comfort is not "life goes on after death."

The comfort's more specific than that. The comfort Jesus offers is relational. The comfort is "where I am you may be also. Believe in me. Believe in my Father. If I didn't have a place for you, if I didn't want you, I would have told you that. I would not have led you along." And he has said, "where I'm going you cannot come." And as words of comfort Jesus promises a reunion. "I am going there, and I'm going to come back again and receive you." Jesus is telling them that this is not the end of relationship. Think of Peter and his love for Jesus. Peter wants to be with Jesus. Peter is losing Jesus. What would comfort Peter? "I'm going, Peter. But I have a place for you. I am not going to forget you, Peter. I could never forget you, Peter. I will come back, and I will receive you and bring you to me."

When I focus in on my love for Jesus, the words written here make my heart smile. Going to heaven is not about living in a big house and it's not about feasting. Going to heaven is about living in a big house with Jesus, feasting with Jesus, you know, or living wherever with Jesus. Eternal life is about knowing God and being in relationship with God so that you enjoy that knowledge. I know I do not love God with much of my being. I certainly don't love God with my whole mind, and my whole heart, and my whole strength. But I have this kernel of love in my heart. I have this seed. I have enough in my soul that I can imagine this, and this comforts me, the joy of relationship with Jesus.

One other thing comforts me here. It is not only the idea of relationship with Jesus, but the invitation to relationship with Jesus. Jesus has a place prepared. Jesus has gone ahead to make things ready to receive you in. He's not going to be surprised or put out when you arrive. He's not going to have to make a place for you on the couch. You do not have to wonder if you are expected or wanted. Jesus knows you. He makes a place for you ahead of time. He anticipates your coming with joy because he loves you. You are wanted. Jesus desires relationship with you and he invites you home with him. He's going to come and get you.

This is the emotional context for the chapter. And we'll keep that in mind. These are words of comfort. And we'll keep that in mind, too. At the end, Jesus is going to say, "My peace I leave with you." And they may not experience that during the cross, but they will later. Jesus also here is continuing to prepare his disciples for the life and ministry that is to come. He began this preparation in the beginning of the evening in chapter 13. And through the symbol of foot washing, he impressed on his disciples his expectation that they represent him with an attitude of humility, motivated by a heart of love. You want to be my disciples. You want to represent me. And the attitude of the disciple is humility, the motive of the disciple is love. Here in chapter 14 we are going to add to our understanding of discipleship with the message and submission of the disciple. And we start with the message.

The Message of the Disciple

Jesus' words of comfort seem to miss the disciples, or all of the disciples. They are confused by his assertion, "You know the way where I am going." No. They do not believe they do. Jesus' words raise questions from Thomas and from Philip. Jesus' clarification points them to the central truth of their message. This is John 14:5-11.

⁵ Thomas said to Him, "Lord, we do not know where You are going, how do we know the way?" ⁶ Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me. ⁷ If you had known Me, you would have known My Father also; from now on you know Him, and have seen Him." ⁸ Philip said to Him, "Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us." ⁹ Jesus said to him, "Have I been so long with you, and *yet* you have not come to know Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; how *can* you say, 'Show us the Father'? ¹⁰ "Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father is in Me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on My own initiative, but the Father abiding in Me does His works. ¹¹ "Believe Me that I am in the Father and the Father is in Me; otherwise believe because of the works themselves.

Thomas is the first to ask, trying to get his head around what Jesus is saying, "How do we know the way?" They know the way. They have just not put it all together, yet. Jesus' sixth "I am" statement

with an object summarizes all other "I am statements" with objects. Let's think about way and truth and life separately.

I am the Way

Jesus says, "I am the way." How do you get to the Father? Jesus declared, "I am the door." You get to the Father by going through me. How does Jesus provide a way? "I am the good shepherd." The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. Jesus' love and care for the sheep goes to the extreme of giving up his life as a substitute to pay the penalty of death. By laying down his life, Jesus made a way. He is the way.

That's why Jesus can say, "No one can come to the Father except through me." There are many, many religions in the world. Are there many, many ways to God? Not according to Jesus. Jesus is very exclusive. "No one can come to the Father except through me." How can Jesus say that? How can Jesus be so exclusive? Notice that Jesus is not exclusive regarding who can come, only about how to get there. Jesus is very inclusive about who can come. He is universally inclusive. Consider the Samaritan woman. Is anyone excluded based because of race? Because of gender? Because of social status? Because of financial status? Because of gender? Because of moral ability? Because of intellectual ability? Because of any dividing factor at all? No. Everyone who believes in Jesus Christ will receive the gift of eternal life. But there is only one way. There is only one cure. There is only one solution, because there is only one God and there is only one payment for sin. Mohamed is not God and he did not die for your sins. Moses is not God and he did not die for your sins. Buddha is not God and he did not die for your sins. Your inner self is not God and your inner self cannot pay for your sins. Jesus, who is God and who came as man, died in your place. Jesus rose again. Jesus is the solution. There is only one way. These are the words of Jesus, "No one can come to the Father except through me."

Jesus is the way.

I am the Truth

Jesus also says, "I am the truth." There are so many questions that we can ask and even answer ourselves about the creation through our own observation and experimentation. God has made us really, exceptionally good at discovering truth about the material universe. It's amazing what people can do, what we can learn and what we can understand. But there are so many other questions that cannot be answered by us who live inside the created world as part of the created world. Questions like: what is the nature of our Creator? Is there a spiritual realm? What is the nature of the spirit? What is the spiritual nature of human beings? What is the purpose of our existence? Is there life after death? What is the problem of humanity that leads us to constant war and strife and poverty? What's the real problem? Can that problem be overcome? What is the source of our universal feeling of guilt? Why does everybody feel that? Can that that guilt be paid for? What is the source of the beauty and love and goodness we see and sense that goes beyond the physical?

Human beings have been driven for always to speculate upon these questions. But these questions are beyond our ability to answer decisively. We can speculate, theorize, rationalize. But we cannot know the answers to these questions without help from the outside. Jesus declared, "I am the light of the world." Jesus reveals truth because he is the Word, "And the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being by him, and apart from him nothing came into being that has come into being. In him was life, and the life was the light of men." Because of his own nature, because of his own participation in the creation of this universe, because of his intimate relationship to the Father, Jesus is able to answer with true knowledge all of the unanswerable questions.

Even more than that. Jesus not only explains the truth. Jesus is the truth. Jesus is at the very center of reality. If you begin your understanding of all things with Jesus at the center, you are standing on the most solid ground possible because he is at the very center. Jesus is the truth.

I am the Life.

Jesus also said, "I am the life." Your existence finds full expression in relationship to Jesus. Vitality is in Jesus. Meaning is in Jesus. Human nature is only fully alive in relationship with the Creator. You cannot be fully alive as a man or as a woman and be separated from Jesus. Apart from relationship with Jesus, you are a shadow, a husk of what you are created to be. To be good and beautiful and true, as a human being ought, perfected as a human being, you must be spiritually connected with God. Because that's who you are created to be. Humans are created to be spiritually connected with God. That is what human life is. You are meant to display love and compassion and rationality and leadership and servanthood over the created order. God made man and woman in his own image to rule over his creation. You are meant to reflect his nature and in so doing participate in the display of his glory. That is life. There is no life apart from Jesus. And so, he declared, "I am the Bread of Life. I am the resurrection and the life. I am the true vine." I am where your vitality comes from.

The true disciple who believes that Jesus is who Jesus claims to be embraces him as the way, the truth and the life and that disciple proclaims that message to others. Just like Jesus, we proclaim that there is only one way to the Father. And everyone is invited to come. The gift is free to all who will receive Jesus by faith.

Jesus is our message.

Does this detract from the Father? Does putting Jesus in the center remove God from the center? Not when we rightly understand the nature of the Son and the Father.

Jesus said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me. If you had known Me, you would have known My Father also; from now on you know Him, and have seen Him." Jesus tells them that they have seen the Father. They do not understand.

Philip says, "Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us." Philip's confusion makes sense. As much as they believe in Jesus, the disciples still struggle to grasp the implication of who he has revealed himself to be. Remember, they are not starting with any developed understanding of God as three in one. They don't know about the Trinity. There are hints and foreshadowings and suggestions in the Old Testament, but no developed teaching of God as three in one.

Even if the disciples can claim by this point to believe in the divine nature of Jesus and the unity of Jesus with the Father, they still are just beginning to work out in their minds what that means. John will have it worked out before he writes this Gospel. But not there, not at the Last Supper yet, and that's why Philip says, "Show us the Father."

Jesus' next words strongly affirm his claims throughout the Gospel to equality with God. Jesus says,

"Have I been so long with you, and *yet* you have not come to know Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; how *can* you say, 'Show us the Father'? ¹⁰ Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father is in Me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on My own initiative, but the Father abiding in Me does His works. ¹¹ Believe Me that I am in the Father and the Father is in Me; otherwise believe because of the works themselves.

The union of the Father and the Son is so complete that to see Jesus is to see the Father. When we present Jesus according to the way he has revealed himself, we are presenting the Father. When we model our own human lives according to the humility and love and wisdom of Jesus, we are modeling ourselves according to the nature of the Father.

Making Jesus central and presenting him as our message, does not detract from the Father when we do so, according to the teaching of Jesus. Jesus reveals the Father. Jesus came to glorify the Father. When we place the Son at the center and teach what he taught, and see who he is, then we also placing the Father at the center. As we point to the glory of the Son, we point to the glory of the Father.

You who are a disciple of Jesus, what way do you proclaim? Jesus. What truth do you assert? Jesus. What life do you offer? Jesus. What is the message of the disciple? Jesus.

Having established this message, we can now move on to the submission of discipleship. But before we do that, we need to recognize three enigmatic statements clustered together in the middle of the chapter 14.

Three Enigmatic Statements

Here are the three statements. Verses 12-15.

¹² "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do, he will do also; and greater *works* than these he will do; because I go to the Father. ¹³ Whatever you ask in My name, that will I do, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. ¹⁴ If you ask Me anything in My name, I will do *it*. ¹⁵ If you love Me, you will keep My commandments."

I am only going to give my answer for one of these enigmas in this lesson. I am not sure enigma is even the best word. I think Jesus made these statements with the intention of driving us towards a deeper understanding of relationship with him. We might come up with a surface answer for each one right now. But without some mental wrestling, without considering the fuller context of what Jesus is saying about discipleship, about the Christian life, I do not believe we will get to the place Jesus is leading us to. He intends for us to reflect more deeply on these statements. We don't want an easy answer.

Greater Works

First Jesus says, "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do, he will do also; and greater works than these he will do; because I go to the Father." This is our first enigma. What can Jesus possibly mean in telling us that the one who believes will do greater works? Jesus has raised the dead. A few have followed him in that - Peter and Paul. But that is a very, very few. This sounds like a promise given to whoever believes, not just to an elite few. Is the problem our lack of faith? Is Jesus saying that if we truly believed we could raise the dead on command? "Lazarus come out!" And he comes out.

That seems the wrong way to go with this, especially since raising Lazarus is not even the greatest work of Jesus. Jesus is going to lay down his own life and raise it up again. No human being has ever done that. Even on top of that, Jesus' death is not merely death. He is taking on himself the punishment for all human sin. That's an unmatchable work. We cannot seriously believe that Jesus is saying we're going to do something greater than the atonement on the cross.

Jesus must be saying something else. We have to ask, "What are the nature of the great works we will do?" We will be able to address that question better after we continue on through the next couple of chapters with the nature of discipleship. The next chapters will add to our idea of the works disciples are called to perform. So, I leave the question with you for now. What works is Jesus talking about? And what does he mean that we will do greater works than he?

Answered Prayer

What Jesus says next is just as enigmatic.

Whatever you ask in My name, that will I do, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask Me anything in My name, I will do it.

That just does not seem to be true. I have made a long list of requests through my life that Jesus has not answered. Ask me anything, I've done it. I will do it. No, he hasn't. Most of them are selfish, but some of them might have been selfless and some were concerned with the eternal well-being of other people. So why didn't Jesus do what I requested? Just at literal face value, I could test this promise right now in the most mundane way. Here, I'll do it. "Lord, please give me one million dollars this month. I pray in the name of Jesus. Amen."

Will Jesus really give us anything we ask if only we truly believe when we ask? I know I did not really believe right now when I asked for a million dollars. I can't make myself believe he's promising to do that. But if I did, if I could make myself believe, if I can ask in faith, "Jesus, give me a million dollars,"

is he promising to give me a million dollars? No. That is not the point here. Something else is going on. Something to do with the nature of prayer and the nature of our relationship with Jesus.

This promise is going to be made by Jesus two more times, once in chapter 15 at the very center of our chiastic structure, and again at the end of chapter 16, which is our chiastic parallel to this section. What Jesus is saying is important enough for him to repeat three times. So, it must really have something to do with discipleship. Prayer is fundamental. We will come back to the question in chapter 16 after we see what else Jesus adds that might help us in understanding this promise and how it relates to living for Jesus.

With both of these enigmas, Jesus makes us stop and think because of the way he has phrased them. At the same time, the topic of both promises is clear to us. You will do great works. That's one. And ask me, and I will answer you. And that's two. Both promises fit Jesus' desire to comfort his disciples in the present emotional circumstances.

At the beginning of the chapter, Jesus comforted the disciples by telling them they will see him again, he will welcome them home. Adding to that comforting hope for the future, Jesus now also tells them, "Though I am gone, you are going to do great things. Your remaining here without me is not to no purpose. You have something wonderful ahead of you to do. Your life is significant."

And in addition to this, "I will not be fully gone. You can speak to the Father in my name. That is a guarantee of relationship. You are my disciple. As you go about my business and your life, ask me for whatever you need. There are no limits. I am listening. I am acting on your behalf. You are not alone."

This is the comfort of Jesus, hope for the future, significant work in the present, and the promise that you are not alone. He is listening and acting on your behalf.

The third and final enigma is also the second idea about discipleship I wanted to address in this chapter. We considered the disciples' message - Jesus. Now we consider the disciples' submission. I am holding off on the third area of discipleship, the promise of the Holy Spirit. That's a major idea here at the second half of chapter 14 but the promise is too big for this lesson. We will come back to the Holy Spirit in our next lesson.

The third enigma is this, verse 15, "If you love Me, you will keep My commandments."

Maybe that sounds straight forward, but there are two very different ways to take this. Jesus states it as a conditional, an if/then statement. If you love me, then you will keep my commandments. What exactly is the relationship between the "if" part and the "then" part? If we get that wrong, it's going to lead us to a distorted view of submission, a distorted view of the Christian life.

The Submission of the Disciple

The submission of the Disciple. This is John 14:16-31. I will read the whole, but then we'll just focus in only on a few verses that deal with commandment, that deal with submission.

¹⁶ "I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever; ¹⁷ that is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not see Him or know Him, but you know Him because He abides with you and will be in you. ¹⁸ I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. ¹⁹ After a little while the world will no longer see Me, but you will see Me; because I live, you will live also. ²⁰ In that day you will know that I am in My Father, and you in Me, and I in you. ²¹ He who has My commandments and keeps them is the one who loves Me; and he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and will disclose Myself to him."

²² Judas (not Iscariot) said to Him, "Lord, what then has happened that You are going to disclose Yourself to us and not to the world?"

²³ Jesus answered and said to him, "If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our abode with him. ²⁴ He who does not love Me does not keep My words; and the word which you hear is not Mine, but the Father's who

sent Me. ²⁵ These things I have spoken to you while abiding with you. ²⁶ But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you. ²⁷ Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Do not let your heart be troubled, nor let it be fearful. ²⁸ You heard that I said to you, 'I go away, and I will come to you.' If you loved Me, you would have rejoiced because I go to the Father, for the Father is greater than I. ²⁹ Now I have told you before it happens, so that when it happens, you may believe. ³⁰ I will not speak much more with you, for the ruler of the world is coming, and he has nothing in Me; ³¹ but so that the world may know that I love the Father, I do exactly as the Father commanded Me. Get up, let us go from here.

So, before I get into this idea of submission, did you hear the language of comfort again? He says, "I'm not leaving you as orphans. I'm going to come back for you. I'm going to prepare a place and I'm coming back for you. You have something important to do. He also said, "Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you. Do not let your heart be troubled." And he repeats that, "Don't let it be fearful." He's comforting them. But he's also teaching them about discipleship, and we have this important mission of submission, of obedience to commandment. And the language comes in verse 21, 23 and 24. I'll read those again just so that we can have our minds on it.

²¹ He who has My commandments and keeps them is the one who loves Me; and he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and will disclose Myself to him."

²³ Jesus answered and said to him, "If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our abode with him. ²⁴ He who does not love Me does not keep My words; and the word which you hear is not Mine, but the Father's who sent Me.

Earlier in verse 15, we simply had this, "If you love Me, you will keep My commandments." Now we have added to that in verse 23, "If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our abode with him."

We can simplify these two conditional commands this way, "If you love God, then you will keep his commandments" and "If you keep his commandments, he will love you."

There is a legalistic way to take those words and a non-legalistic way to take those words. The human heart is naturally legalistic. Something in us naturally believes that we must perform in order to be loved. So, it is quite easy for us to hear or believe something that is not really being communicated here. We have to be careful.

The legalistic idea is that you prove your love by being obedient. If you love God, you prove it, you show it through your obedience. And when you do, you become worthy for God to love you back. He withholds his love until you obey. Then, conditioned on your obedience, he extends love to you.

If you love me, then you will do <u>blank</u>. And if you do <u>blank</u>, I will love you. What does that sound like to you, "If you love me, then you will do <u>blank</u>. And if you do <u>blank</u>, I will love you"? It sounds like manipulation to me. Imagine a young man saying that to a young woman. If you love me, you will do <u>blank</u>. And if you do <u>blank</u>, then I will love you. Fill in the blanks with whatever comes to your mind. If you love me, you will do <u>blank</u>. And if you do <u>blank</u>, then I will love you.

Is Jesus saying God is like that?

No. That's manipulation. That's not the love of God. It will help us to not take this in a legalistic way by returning to the idea I have mentioned before regarding the two questions of covenant. With every biblical covenant, there are two essential questions to ask. And it is critical that we learn to separate out the answers to these two questions in order to understand the difference between grace-based obedience and legalistic obedience.

Question number one is this, "What makes me acceptable to be in relationship with God?" There is only one biblical answer to this question. It was true for the Abrahamic covenant. It was true for the

Mosaic covenant. It is true for the New Covenant. What makes you acceptable to be in relationship with holy God? The grace of God received by faith. Nothing you do makes you acceptable enough, righteous enough, loveable enough. If it were dependent on you, then you would be in huge trouble. Fortunately for us all, our acceptability is based 100% on the grace of God which we receive by faith.

"God demonstrates his own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:8)."

A second question then follows the first, "Having been made acceptable, how then shall I live?" That's the question of the true believer. If you have come to believe in God, then something in you desires to know how to live for God. You have been born again. Something has happened to you. And it's mixed up with your fleshly motives, it's not pure in you, but it's there. A seed has been planted in your heart. When you ask this question, "How then shall I live?", when you're asking it from that new heart the Spirit has put in you, then you know the answer. The Spirit speaks to your spirit that you should live according to the will of God. You love God and desire to live in obedience to his commands.

That is how love manifests itself in a relationship that contains rightful authority. And our relationship with God is one in which God bears rightful authority. You are not in a relationship with an equal. You're in a relationship with someone who deserves your obedience. He is Lord. He is King. He is Father. You worship your Lord. You serve your King. You love your Father. Worship, service, love, they all reflect the same heart for God, and they manifest in obedience to his commandments.

Trying to express this right response to God makes me think of Deuteronomy 10:12-13, where Moses uses a lot of words to exhort the people to the same idea,

¹² "Now, Israel, what does the Lord your God require from you, but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all His ways and love Him, and to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, ¹³ and to keep the Lord's commandments and His statutes which I am commanding you today for your good?

"If you love me, you will keep my commandments." Jesus' words are not manipulation. Jesus' words are a statement of fact about your new nature. If indeed you truly do love God, if that is a true statement about you, then you will be moved to keep his commandments.

My wife and I have a running disagreement about the word, "duty". I like the word. She does not like the word. She doesn't like when I do things and then say, "Well, it's my duty." For her the word "duty" implies grudging obedience. It is enforced submission, like with Cinderella and her step-mother. And I can see that. I can also see another meaning for the word "duty" that probably comes from reading King Arthur and Lord of the Rings as a teenager. I see myself as a knight with knee bowed before my Lord. I hold my sword up stretched across both palms. And I exclaim, "Command me, my King." That is my image for the word "duty." It's this love for my Lord, and he sends me out, my image as knight on errands and I'm living for him and I'm doing his will. So, you can see, Brenda and I have two very different images in mind. The idea of Christianity as grudging obedience, you know, Cinderella Christianity, is a sad idea. Living life doing something you don't really want to do to convince God to love you, so that you can get a reward that doesn't have anything to do with God in the end.

That's not the Christianity of Scripture. The Christian life that Jesus talks about is a process of growing love for God from a heart that is motivated to obey. And God himself is the reward.

You can take the word "duty" or toss it out, either way. The idea is what's key. There is a right obedience toward God that comes from a heart of love. Obedience to commandment is not an answer to the first question of covenant. We don't earn acceptability; we don't earn love. We do not obey to get him to accept us. We obey because he has accepted us and has put love for him into our heart.

We cannot do away with the word "submission." That word appears too much in the Bible. We do need to place the word in a right and positive context. God is not calling us to grudging submission. He is calling us to willing submission. He calls us to humbly submit to the truth of who we are and the truth of who he is.

If that is where your heart is, then you will obey his commandments. And if you do obey his commandments, if you willingly submit to them, then you will be able to experience his love for you as his child. That's what it means that he will then love you. He has loved you as a sinner, but you will experience his love and him coming to you when you submit in relationship to him. The true disciple submits. And even in this we model ourselves after Jesus. Jesus waits on the voice of the Father. He does not act or speak on his own accord. As the incarnate Son, he willingly submitted to the will of the Father. He says at the close of this chapter, "but so that the world may know that I love the Father, I do exactly as the Father commanded Me."

Having been declared righteous by grace through faith, how then shall we live? Moses understood loving obedience. He saw it as the key to life. "Choose life in order that you may live, you and your descendants, by loving the Lord your God, by obeying His voice, and by holding fast to Him; for this is your life and the length of your days...(Deuteronomy 30:19–20)."

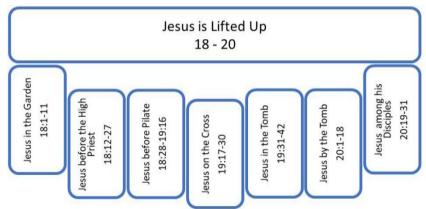
Moses understood loving obedience, but he also understood that was a lot to ask of sinful human beings. God allowed Moses to see ahead to the New Covenant. In Deuteronomy 30, Moses explains what he has seen; the failure of Israel, that leads to the exile of Israel, that leads to the restoration of Israel that leads to a new thing that God must do. Moses saw God must do something. "Moreover the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, so that you may live."

Jesus echoes the words of Moses. Abundant life comes from choosing to live out of a heart of love for God in obedience to his commandments as an act of worship. That is the way of the disciple. As a result of walking in right relationship with God, we experience the fruit of relationship. We experience life. What Moses saw from far off, Jesus is now promising his disciples. I said in our last lesson we have a problem. We are called to an attitude of humility and a motive of love. This lesson has not solved that problem. If anything, we have added to the problem by declaring the way of the disciple as one of submissive obedience. Humility, love, obedience, all out of a right heart. That is beyond human capability. Israel taught us that. You can tell us how to love, how to serve God. We just can't do it. We need heart surgery. Something has to change inside.

Reflection questions

- 1. Read John 14:1-15 and 27-31. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What are some questions that come to mind?
- 2. What words or phrases indicate to you the emotional atmosphere Jesus is speaking into?
- 3. Jesus tells his disciples that the trouble of their hearts will be eased if they believe. What is the main cause of their troubled hearts? What does he ask them to believe? How do the promises of Jesus offer comfort?
- 4. How do Jesus' words to Thomas and Philip further the themes of the Gospel of John?
- 5. What is odd about verse 12? How do you understand what Jesus is saying?
- 6. What is odd about verses 13-14? How do you understand what Jesus is saying? Are there any clues in the text?
- 7. What is odd about verse 15? How do you understand what Jesus is saying?
- 8. Read John 14:16-31 noticing what stands out to you in connection to Jesus' statement, "If you love me you will keep my commandments." (We will focus on observations about the Helper/Holy Spirit in our next lesson.)
- 9. Agree or disagree with this statement, obedience should be understood as the fulfillment of one's duty towards God?
- 10. Describe two or three situations where you either obeyed out of a heart of love or you obeyed out of some other motive? How would you describe the difference?

Lesson 24: John 14:16-31 and John 16:5-15 The Promised Holy Spirit Introduction



The two great themes of John's Gospel are the nature of Jesus and the nature of faith. The intersection of those two themes brings about a third theme, the nature of discipleship. When we see Jesus for who he really is and when we follow him in faith, we are a disciple. What does that look like? What does it mean to be a true follower of Jesus? What is the essence of discipleship?

Jesus has been talking about that in chapters 13 and 14. He exhorts his disciples to an attitude of humility, "If I then, the Lord and the Teacher, washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet (13:14)"; and to a motive of love, "a new commandment I give, even as I have loved you (13:34)"; and to submissive obedience, "if you love me you will keep my commandments (14:15)." You are a disciple of Jesus if you humble yourself like Jesus, love like Jesus and obey like Jesus.

But can human beings, in their fallen state, practice humility, love and obedience, according to the model of Jesus? Some might fake it for some time, apparently Judas did, but then he walked away. What about those who are really serious and excited about Jesus, and they want to live for Jesus? Can they live in humility, love and obedience Jesus is calling for? Peter's not going to make it through the night without denying Jesus.

This was the problem through the Old Testament with the Mosaic law. God can hand down holy and righteous and good commandments. And the Israelites can proclaim, "All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient (Exodus 24:7)!" But can they? Before Moses comes down off that mountain, they're going to have broken a range of commandments in their celebration of a golden calf that they produce.

The Old Covenant is a long lesson in human nature under good law. It is a lesson about the effectiveness of providing human beings with an external law and expecting them to live up to that law. The law, working from the outside in, does not empower human beings to live up to the moral vision of that law.

Can disciples of Jesus live up to a vision of humility, love and obedience? No, they cannot. You cannot live the Christian life, not on your own. Not unless something happens to you, something changes.

So, now we come to a core reality of the gospel of Jesus Christ. True belief in Jesus does not leave the follower unaffected. To be born again is not merely to have a new perspective on life. Faith is not merely a matter of the will. Moses and Jeremiah and Ezekiel, they all saw something, they prophesied that with the New Covenant God would do something inside of us. We would not be asked, not be required like Old Covenant believers, to live outside in, the law outside of us working into the heart. Instead, we are to live inside out. The law is to be written on our hearts, transforming our outward behavior from an internal reality. The prophets spoke of a new heart.

Alone, we do not have the power or ability to live according to the vision of life that Jesus is teaching. But he does not leave us alone. He promises to us the internal presence of the Holy Spirit. This is why he called it a new birth. It is Jesus in us, it is a new reality; Jesus living through us.

Calling us to this new reality, Jesus is going to empower us for the journey. This is the truth at the center of John's exposition on discipleship in these chapters, in 13-17. The promise of the Holy Spirit is given in 14 and 16 and then, at the very center of the section, Jesus describes the Christian life through the vine and branches metaphor. We will address that central metaphor in our next lesson. In this lesson we will consider the promise of the Holy Spirit by asking these three questions:

- (1) What is the promise?
- (2) Who is the Holy Spirit?
- (3) What is the role of the Holy Spirit?

What is the promise?

So what is this promise? When Jesus told the disciples in chapter 14 they would do greater works than he had done, he added, "because I go to the Father (14:12)." He also says in chapter 16, "I tell you the truth, it is to your advantage that I go away (16:12)." How can that be true? If you could choose between your pastor and Jesus, who would you choose? Your pastor. Jesus. If you could choose between listening to a podcast by me and a podcast by Jesus, who would you choose? If you could be discipled by anybody or by Jesus, who would you choose? If we were to pick between Peter to lead the early church or Jesus, or to pick Paul to take the gospel to the Gentiles or Jesus or any leader of a Christian movement or Jesus, who do you choose? It's Jesus all the way, right? Jesus, Jesus, every time: Jesus.

I am certain that for these disciples who had enjoyed the presence and fellowship even friendship of Jesus they could not imagine how it could be better for Jesus to go away. Yes, he's got to die on the cross or all hope is lost. But he's going to raise again to new life and he's going to be with us. Why then leave? How can it be better if Jesus leaves?

I would never choose for Jesus to leave. But Jesus has said that if he does not go he cannot send the Holy Spirit. He does not explain that. He doesn't explain why we can't have both. We take him at his word. Either Jesus stays or he sends the Holy Spirit but not both. When we understand that, we begin to see the wisdom in the choice of Jesus going and sending instead in his place the Holy Spirit. I can see three points of wisdom in that.

First and foremost, by leaving, Jesus is able to live inside of us in spiritual union through the Holy Spirit. Instead of the Law outside of us, molding us from outside in, we now live by the Spirit in us, transforming us inside out. Disciples cannot live for Jesus while Jesus is with them because they need a work of the heart. And that only happens if Jesus goes.

Second point of wisdom, if Jesus remained physically on earth, do I really believe that he would be the pastor of my particular church or the leader of my movement or even teach in my language? Jesus would be limited physically to one place if he was still here. By going Jesus is able to be with each one of us through the Holy Spirit no matter who we are, how insignificant we might feel, Jesus is with us and he is in us. No matter where we are, no matter when we are, Jesus is able to be there.

Third, by going Jesus puts responsibility on us. Other than the presence of the Holy Spirit, nothing has the power to transform more than responsibility. If Jesus is here, everybody looks to him to make the decision. But if Jesus is gone, who is going to feed the sheep? Who is going to do the ministry of teaching and prayer? Who's going to do the ministry of service and care? Who is going to lead worship? Who 's going to display the humility and love and obedience of Jesus to my family, in my workplace, at my school, in my community? Who will take the gospel to the nations? Who does all these things? You. You are the parent, you are the husband, you are the wife, you are the child, you are the friend, you are the neighbor, you are the leader, you are the servant, you are the presence

and wisdom and love of Jesus in your sphere of influence. Jesus is in you. You take Jesus with you. Jesus loves through you. People experience Jesus through your presence. People experience Jesus through you if you take up the responsibility to live for Jesus.

Jesus says he is going. And he promised to send the Holy Spirit. He has fulfilled that promise. And according to Jesus, it is better that he has gone, so that the Holy Spirit might dwell in us.

Who is the Holy Spirit?

That's the promise. So, who is the Holy Spirit that Jesus promises? Let's read verses of promise in chapters 14 and 16. We'll start with John 14:16-19 and 25-27.

¹⁶ "I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever; ¹⁷ that is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not see Him or know Him, but you know Him because He abides with you and will be in you. ¹⁸ I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. ¹⁹ After a little while the world will no longer see Me, but you will see Me; because I live, you will live also.

²⁵ These things I have spoken to you while abiding with you. ²⁶ But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you. ²⁷ Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Do not let your heart be troubled, nor let it be fearful."

Now John 16:7-8 and 13-15.

⁷ "But I tell you the truth, it is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I go, I will send Him to you. ⁸ And He, when He comes, will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment;

¹³ But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak on His own initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak; and He will disclose to you what is to come. ¹⁴ He will glorify Me, for He will take of Mine and will disclose *it* to you. ¹⁵ All things that the Father has are Mine; therefore I said that He takes of Mine and will disclose *it* to you."

Who is this Spirit Jesus promises to send? Jesus also identifies the Spirit as Holy, that's in 14:26. The Holy Spirit is not an impersonal power source. Jesus speaks of the Holy Spirit as a person. He abides. He teaches. He convicts. He guides. He glorifies. Jesus establishes a very close connection between the Spirit, himself and the Father. Jesus speaks of the Father sending the Spirit, but he also says that he sends the Spirit. Jesus parallels his relationship to the Father and his relationship to the Spirit. Just as the Father sent Jesus, Jesus sends the Spirit. Just as Jesus spoke what he heard from the Father, the Spirit speaks what he hears from Jesus. Just as Jesus glorified the Father, the Spirit glorifies Jesus. There is a tight connection.

The term Jesus first used in his promise was not "Holy Spirit" but "parakletos". That is in 14:16 and then again at the beginning of the parallel passage in 16:7. My Bible translates parakletos as "Helper". Other English Bibles use "Counselor" or "Comforter" or "Advocate". The word literally means to "call alongside." "Para" is "alongside" and "kaleo" is "to call". In Greek, the term was most commonly used for one who comes alongside to give legal assistance. That is the sense of the translation of Advocate or Counselor. It is not camp counselor but a legal counselor. This meaning comes out in chapter 16 when Jesus speaks of the Spirit as convicts the world of sin. That's a little bit more of a legal context.

The translations "comforter" and "helper" have to do with the more general sense of the word as "one who comes alongside". All three ideas, Advocate, Helper and Comforter give us a sense of the role of the Holy Spirit. And all three could lead us into some kind of misunderstanding. The Holy Spirit is our Advocate, praying on our behalf and convicting the world of sin, but he is more than that. He is also our helper, but he is not our servant. He does not exist to meet our needs. He's not a genie in a

bottle. He does not obey our commands. And he is our comforter, but he also calls us to brave action and convicts us when we sin. He doesn't just tell us what we want to hear.

We cannot understand all of who the Holy Spirit is through this one word "parakletos". The word helps. But we need to understand that word in the rest of the context of the chapters. There is a very helpful phrase in the first words of the promise. Jesus says in 14:16, "[the Father] will give you another helper." Catch that? "[the Father] will give you another helper." The Holy Spirit is our helper, our comforter, our advocate, but he is not the first. He is being sent as another helper. Another parakletos. Who is the parakletos that precedes the Holy Spirit?

In this context it is Jesus. Jesus is teacher and Lord. He is also the good Shepherd who comforts and advocates for and helps his sheep. Jesus is now going away. And so, he sends someone else to walk alongside with the disciples. He does not walk alongside as a fellow sheep. He walks alongside as a shepherd. The Holy Spirit is equal to God the Father and God the Son. He is God the Spirit, equal, yet mysteriously separate. We owe him our love and allegiance, just as we love and serve Father and Son as a distinct member of the trinity. So, we have this promise that the Son is going to send the Holy Spirit to continue alongside of us. And we come to understand who he is, he is the third member of the Trinity. So, what is his role? What is the role of the Holy Spirit, especially in this context of discipleship that?

What is the role of the Holy Spirit?

Just looking at what Jesus is saying here about the Holy Spirit, we could say that the role of the Holy Spirit is to extend relationship with Jesus to everyone one of us who believes through his internal spiritual presence with us.

And I'd like to break that down into three more specific roles that I see Jesus indicating here.

The Holy Spirit guides us into truth. The Holy Spirit empowers us for service. And the Holy Spirit transforms our hearts. These are all three suggested in Jesus' teaching here in the Gospel of John and more fully developed later in the epistles of the New Testament. I will refer a little bit to other texts outside of John to affirm what we see here but mostly I'm limiting myself to John. We are not trying right now to be comprehensive. We are trying to understand the theology John is giving us.

The Holy Spirit guides us into truth.

I am starting with the role the Holy Spirit fulfills in guiding us into truth. I will spend most of my time on this role, which will set us up for shorter consideration of the other two roles.

Jesus gives the Holy Spirit the title, Spirit of Truth, in both chapter 14 and 16. Jesus says he will teach the disciples all things and bring to their remembrance what he has said. He also says that the Spirit will guide us and disclose to us that which he takes from Jesus. There is a special sense in which this promise applied only to the apostles and a few close associates of the apostles. The Spirit inspired these men to remember the words of Jesus and to write down for us the four Gospels. And the Spirit further led other apostles and men connected to them in understanding and application of these New Covenant truths. And they wrote letters, Luke wrote a history, John wrote a revelation and the result is the New Testament. Peter writes about the Holy Spirit's role of revelation in the Scripture in 2 Peter 1:20-21,

²⁰ But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is *a matter* of one's own interpretation, ²¹ for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.

Jesus's promise here to his disciples that through the Holy Spirit they would remember his words and that the Holy Spirit would further take from Jesus and give to them can be understood in this specialized sense of biblical revelation. This is special inspiration of the Holy Spirit that bears unique authority as the word of God. No one speaks like this anymore. This is special. This is unique. This is Bible.

Then we ask, do the words of Jesus here about the Holy Spirit have an application for every disciple who is to come, not just for the special few who authored biblical books, who remembered the truth and who were guided into the truth? Does the Holy Spirit guide us into truth?

I believe the answer is, "Yes. Yes, the Holy Spirit does guide us into truth." This is the initial experience of every believer. We cannot believe in Jesus if the Holy Spirit does not open our eyes to the truth of who Jesus is and who we are and of what our need is. Jesus declared this in 6:65, "No one can come to me, unless it has been granted him from the Father." The Spirit must work in each of us. He must open our eyes to the truth.

Paul speaks of a subjective experience of the Spirit in Romans 5:5 when he writes of God pouring out his love in our hearts by the Holy Spirit and also in Romans 8:16 when he writes of the Spirit testifying with our spirit that we are children of God. What I mean by the word "subjective" is that this is an internal experience of a believer that cannot be proved to anyone else. The Spirit reveals to you the truth of God's love and the truth of your adoption. That is revealed internally to you. Disciples of Christ experience the subjective opening of the eyes of the heart to certain truths by the Holy Spirit.

I believe we also experience the Holy Spirit guiding us into action. I believe that's part of our subjective spiritual experience. We have this sense that we ought to do something. And it's the Spirit nudging us.

I remember once after getting married and moving into our new apartment, I was home alone. And I got a strong sense that I ought to go knock on my neighbor's door. I had seen him on the balcony when I came in. Being a strong introvert, I resisted that feeling for a long time. But believing it was the guidance of the Holy Spirit, I finally gave in and went and knocked on my neighbor's door. I felt weird and I awkwardly introduced myself. He said, "Do you have a car?" I said, "Yes." He said, "Something happened to my ride, and I need to get to the airport to catch a flight." I said, "I'll take you." So, I gave my neighbor a ride to the airport. He did not place his faith in Jesus on the way. And he did not become a good friend. I still don't know why God wanted me to take him to the airport. But I believe that it was the Holy Spirit that led me to his door. God knows why, I don't know why. But we have these moments of sensing that it is the Spirit of God leading us to do or leading us to say. He guides us, subjectively and internally. And he opens our eyes, he teaches us subjectively and internally.

While affirming the subjective work of the Holy Spirit to guide us and teach us, I also feel the need to warn you about automatically defining subjective experience as the Holy Spirit. I get a little nervous around Christians who make no place in their lives for the daily work of the Holy Spirit. I also get a little nervous around Christians who too quickly identify their feelings and ideas as coming from the Holy Spirit.

It is wise to learn to walk in faith and trust in the leading of the Holy Spirit. It is also wise to learn to recognize our own emotions in such a way that we can step back from these emotions and ask how God might or might not be at work in them.

Christianity without emotion is severely problematic. The fruit of the Spirit includes love, joy and peace. These are subjective experiences. They are things that happen in you. You experience them. You know if you feel love. You know if you have joy. You know if you experience peace. And I should wonder about my walk with Jesus if I never feel moved or if I never feel calmed by the presence of his Spirit.

At the same time two clear realities give me caution in automatically equating my own emotion with the work of the Holy Spirit. The first reality is that I am quite aware that many different factors affect my emotional state. Exercise, a good meal, a haircut, kind words, mean words, the crunch of leaves on an autumn day, the laughter of a little girl, the smell of lavender, a thousand different things create different emotions in me. The next time you watch a movie, pay attention to how the

soundtrack is trying to change your emotional state. They use music to get us on the side of the hero. They use music to get us to agree with things that we don't agree with, to set us against the villain, to create excitement or nervous anticipation. Producers use music as a tool to create nostalgia, or melancholy, or romance, or happiness all hopefully at the right moment, when they want you to feel what they want you to feel. And just thinking about that makes me say how easily music can move me emotionally. I am susceptible to music. When I reflect on the multitude of other factors besides music that affect my internal state, I become more cautious about attributing the thoughts I have or feelings I have to the Holy Spirit.

The second reality that gives me caution in attributing my emotional state to the Holy Spirit is the reality of emotion as part of worship in every religion. When you study different religions, every major religion seems to have proponents that lean away from emotional experience and proponents that lean toward emotional experience. There are Muslims, and Hindus, and Jews, Mormons, and New Age practitioners who participate in emotional worship experiences that closely mimic pretty much every emotional experience claimed by various Christian groups, from the lightly emotional to the very emotionally expressive. You can find all of that in other religions.

Recognizing this, how do we wisely evaluate this recognition that a multitude of influences affect our internal state, even in our religious practices of worship?

Well, we do not reject emotion. Love, joy, peace are fruits of the Spirit. The Psalms probably express in prayer to God any human emotion you can think of. We love God with heart, mind and soul as whole people. That includes our mind and our emotions and our actions. We do not want to turn away from expressing our emotion in relationship with God, simply because we cannot clearly define the source of our emotion or because we know some other religious groups also experience emotion in a similar way apart from the Holy Spirit.

So, what do we do? I believe we humbly accept that we cannot always clearly define our subjective experience. We embrace relationship with God. We embrace the love, the joy, the hope, the sorrow that come from the Holy Spirit. But we do not define emotion as equivalent to the Holy Spirit. We recognize that some of the emotional experiences that we have are not from the Holy Spirit or might be mixed, the Holy Spirit might be working in us but there might be other things in us creating emotion. We do not seek emotional experience as a defining factor of our spirituality. We do not glorify emotion as though emotion is the Spirit. You know, do you feel the Spirit in this place? Well, maybe. That might not be what I'm feeling, though. I don't know.

I have two recommendations here. First, according to John 16:14, the Holy Spirit comes to glorify Jesus. If the worship experience is more about my personal emotion or more about the work of the Holy Spirit going on to give people experience; if it's more about those things than it is about glorifying Jesus; if I'm not hearing the name of Jesus and the clear Gospel of Jesus, then something is off in that experience. The Spirit does not glorify himself. The Spirit glorifies the Son. Worship of Jesus is not about my emotional experience. It is about the Son and I need to learn to discern the difference. I want to have the right emotion in my joy of who Jesus is, and in the character of Jesus, and actions of Jesus, and in the truth of Jesus. That's what I want my emotion to line up with.

Second, the Holy Spirit works in conjunction with the Word of God in a community of believers. So then in worship I want to hear the Word of God. I want the Holy Spirit to be revealing truth to me and I don't want just popcorn bits of the Word of God all spread out; I want the Word of God in passages; I want the Word of God taught; I want my mind to be engaged with my emotions to be engaged with my spirit in the understanding of truth. And when I have a subjective experience that seems to be guiding me into some course of serious action - knocking on my neighbor's door is not so serious so if I get a nudging there I just act on it - but we're talking about life change or some kind of serious sense of the will of God for my life, then I bring that experience to the Word of God. I'm not going to make a life change based on an emotional response that I have that I think is the Holy Spirit. It may be the Holy Spirit but I'm going to bring it to the Word of God, I'm going to discuss it with

other wise believers, I'm going to seek the will of God in the Word of God through the Holy Spirit. I am not left to my subjective experience. That would be dangerous because my experience goes up and down. Right after Paul wrote that the Spirit of God pours out his love into our hearts, he also wrote, "But God demonstrates his own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us (Romans 5:8)." I enjoy the subjective experience of God's love in my heart. I enjoy that joy. But I have to confess that that experience is not constant. Sometimes I feel far away from God. Sometimes I feel unlovable by God. Sometimes I feel angry or disappointed with God. I am not feeling the love in those moments. Does that change the fact that God loves me? No, not at all. The reality of God's love is established in the objective truth of his word. How do I know God loves me? Is it based on my subjective experience? No! No. Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so. It is based in his objective Word. He has said it. It is true. And I want to feel that. But when I don't I still embrace it as true.

The Holy Spirit guides us into truth through the objective Word of God. And yes, he works in us separately, individually, subjectively. But growth in our understanding of truth, in our ability to discern God's will does not come from the Holy Spirit apart from the Word of God. The Word of God is the tool the Holy Spirit uses to guide us into truth.

We got a glimpse of this in the Samaritan woman's story. In John 4, Jesus told her that the true worshiper of God worships in spirit and in truth (4:23). This statement is followed by the example of the villagers who ask Jesus to stay with them. After two days many believe because of the teaching of Jesus. These new believers said to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves and know that this One is indeed the Savior of the world (4:42)." They had some kind of initial experience, they heard this woman telling her story and something had changed in her and she says, "He knows everything about me", and she tells how he knew about her husbands and the man she was currently living with, and from listening to her something happened in them, and they have this experience where they believe in Jesus. But now, after two days, they're hearing the Word of Jesus. So the Spirit may or may not have been working in their initial experience, we don't know, but the Spirit has been guiding them through the teaching of Jesus. So now they stand on this stronger foundation. They've had their subjective experience but it's grounded on the objective truth of the Word of Jesus.

Later, speaking in Jerusalem to many Jews who had believed, Jesus declares, "If you abide in My word" - it's very similar language, we're getting ready to look at abiding in his Spirit and abiding in Jesus - "If you abide in My word *then* you are truly disciples of Mine; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." The experience of the Christian life comes both from abiding in Jesus and his Spirit, and from abiding in his Word in the truth of the Bible. The Spirit does not guide us into the knowledge of truth apart from the Bible but in harmony with our ongoing commitment to learning the truth of the Bible. And that's both in our own study and reading of the Word, and also in communication with other people in our community with listening to preaching and being in small group and being in Bible discussion, the Spirit works through the Body and the Bible to guide us into truth.

The Spirit alone is not God's solution. He has given us the Word for the renewing of our mind. And the Bible alone is not God's solution. We walk in darkness without the help of God. The most biblically trained men of his age were among those who hated Jesus the most. So it's not just Bible. We need the Spirit of God to open our eyes to see the truths of the Bible. Man in his natural state cannot understand the Word of God, will not accept the Word of God. We need the Holy Spirit to free us from the bondage of our sin and the darkness that we live in.

We need the Spirit and the Word together.

To sum up this role, the Holy Spirit fulfilled a special role of revelation in the lives of those men who God chose to write down the Words of Scripture. Apart from that special work in that select few, the Spirit works to guide all believers into truth through knowledge of God's word.

When I say that I feel the need to add something. The Spirit works to guide all believers into truth through knowledge of God's word. That's true; it feels separated from application and that's never the right way to take the Bible. I should say that the Holy Spirit works to guide all believers into truth through knowledge of God's Word and through the application of his Word. That is more accurate to the spiritual process of growth. We really need a bit of Mary and a bit of Martha in us. We need to sit at the feet of Jesus and we need to get active in our service. We commit to learning the Word of God in the power of the Holy Spirit, so that we can apply the will of God in the power of the Holy Spirit. This brings us to the second role of the Holy Spirit in these passages. We'll be much shorter with the second and third roles. The second role is that the Holy Spirit empowers us for service.

The Holy Spirit empowers us for service.

That idea will be pronounced clearly when we talk about the branches depending on the vine to produce fruit. And that's the idea of power through us. We can do nothing apart from him. He must empower us for service. But that idea is woven through chapter 14. First, the disciples are told, "you will do greater works." Then they are told, "ask anything in my name and I will do it." And then, "If you love me you will obey my commandments." So this is about doing.

And it is easy to make the connection between great works, prayer and obedience. If we are going to attempt to do the great works that God has prepared for us to do, we're going to have a lot to pray about. We need help. Jesus is announcing ahead of time that we already have the help we need to do the great works he is going to call us to do. The Holy Spirit not only guides us, he also empowers us to perform the works that he's guiding us into.

So we have this need to know the truth and we have this need to be empowered to do the truth. But we have another need. God's desire is that we be freed from our bondage to sin so that we might serve him willingly from a heart of love. God wants followers who love him. The Holy Spirit performs this third role in our lives as well. He guides us into truth, he empowers us, and he transforms our hearts.

The Holy Spirit transforms our hearts.

At the beginning of his ministry, Jesus told Nicodemus about the need for internal spiritual change, "You must be born again." Being born again by the Spirit is like having a seed of love planted in our hearts. The Spirit in us enables us to see God truly and to love him. We still struggle with the domination of our own self-love. But the Spirit of God has begun something in us, and he is calling us to grow into it.

When we place our faith in Christ, the penalty of our sin is paid for and a new work of the Spirit has begun. We have been saved and we will be fully glorified with Christ in heaven. He has promised to keep his hold on us. Nobody can snatch us out of the Father's hands and he says, "And I will lose not one, I will bring you there." But we live between those two realities. We have been born again and we will be glorified with a new body in heaven. But we are not there yet. We live between the already and the not yet. There is still a process going on, this process that we're involved in as disciples. And God is calling us to join by faith the work he is doing in us. He calls us to participate in the working out of the salvation that we already have.

Paul put it this way, writing to the Philippians 2:12,

¹² So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling; ¹³ for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for *His* good pleasure.

God is at this work in us not just to empower us to do but it says, "to will and to work for his good pleasure." He is changing our very will, he's changing our heart. Transformation is a process. We are called to obey. And he will transform our hearts that we might become the kind of creatures who enjoy doing the righteous works he has called us to do. He said, "If you love me you will keep my commandments." And he is freeing our hearts to do exactly that.

Conclusion

Jesus has promised to send the Holy Spirit. This is part of his comfort for the disciples as he prepares to leave. He's not going to leave them alone and that is great encouragement to us as well. We are not alone in our walk with God. He is present with us.

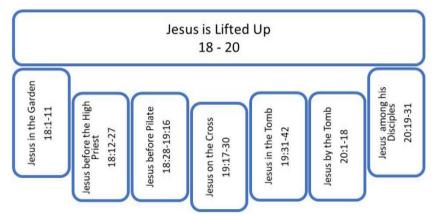
The promise of the Holy Spirit is one of the wonderful new things about the New Covenant. Not only did Jesus Christ finally pay the penalty of sin that had been promised so long before. He also fulfilled this other promise to do a work in the heart of the followers of God. The Holy Spirit has now been sent. And the Holy Spirit guides us into truth, empowers us for service, and transforms our hearts to love. Through the Holy Spirit, Jesus makes it possible for us to live for God, not according to laws from the outside pressing in, but from new heart working from the inside out. In our next lesson, as we focus on this wonderful metaphor of the vine and the branches we're going to consider how practically do I walk in the power of the Holy Spirit; what is my part to see this reality, to participate in the working out of my salvation?

Reflection questions

- 1. Read John 14:16-31. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What are some questions that come to mind?
- 2. Now read John 16:5-15. What stands out to you in this passage?
- 3. When you compare John 14:16-31 and John 16:5-15, what repetition do you see, either in repeated language or repeated ideas?
- 4. When you compare the two passages, what stands out as different? What is added in the second passage? How is the focus of the second passage different than the first?
- 5. In John 14:6, Jesus says that he is sending another helper. He is referring to himself as the first helper. The Holy Spirit is another helper. How do you understand Jesus as helper or parakletos? How does comparing the Holy Spirit to Jesus help you think about the nature and role of the Holy Spirit?
- 6. How do you define the role of the Holy Spirit as seen from these two passages?
- 7. How did the Holy Spirit work in a special way to the guide the apostles in the truth?
- 8. How have you experienced the Holy Spirit in your life guiding you in truth, empowering you for service or transforming your heart?

Lesson 25: John 15:1-11 Abiding in Christ

Introduction



Jesus' seventh "I am" statement with an object, "I am the true vine" made a lasting impact on Brenda during her college years. Yesterday, I asked her, "What about that metaphor affected you so much?" She responded, "I am a visual person. I can see the image of the vine and the branches and the fruit. It made so clear to me that I can do nothing apart from Jesus. A branch cut off from the vine can do nothing. At the same time, I was learning in John about the Holy Spirit. We do not live the Christian life apart from Christ in our own strength but through his Spirit in us."

Jesus can teach. He is the expert at communicating vital truth through simple, everyday-life images. Simply recognizing and putting into practice the key idea of this image will transform your life: understanding and putting it into practice. At the same time that he is making a few limited clear points through this strikingly simple image, Jesus is also weaving together a number of themes that he has already raised concerning discipleship. And so, no matter how close we are to Jesus, his teaching about the vine and the branches contains enough depth to draw us further into relationship with him.

Jesus gives this metaphor central place in the long sermon that is John chapters 13-17. In this lesson, I simply want to walk through the text verse by verse, considering the metaphor and paying attention to how Jesus is drawing in and moving forward themes he has already introduced. Let's read the passage, John 15:1-11.

I am the True Vine (John 15:1-11)

¹ "I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. ² Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away; and every *branch* that bears fruit, He prunes it so that it may bear more fruit. ³ You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. ⁴ Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither *can* you unless you abide in Me. ⁵ I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing. ⁶ If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire and they are burned. ⁷ If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸ My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and *so* prove to be My disciples. ⁹ Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you; abide in My love. ¹⁰ If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love; just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love. ¹¹ These things I have spoken to you so that My joy may be in you, and *that* your joy may be made full.

There is one vine, one vinedresser, and two kinds of branches. (1-2)

This is the first I am statement in which Jesus includes the Father. Jesus is the vine. The Father is the vinedresser, the one who cares for the vine by removing branches that do not bear fruit and by pruning branches that do bear fruit. The image of a grape vine being tended by a vinedresser would

have been very common to Jesus' hearers. And it's common enough to us. In the least, we've seen pictures.

A thick vine grows upward out of the soil. Smaller branches grow out from the main trunk, and leaves and fruit grow from shoots out of those branches. The goal of the vinedresser is to produce plump, sweet grapes full of juice. Branches that do not produce fruit hoard resources with no beneficial result. The vinedresser cuts away those worthless branches so that the vital nutrients coming from the vine will be channeled to the fruit bearing branches. Those branches produce many offshoots, too many. So, the vinedresser prunes, or cuts off, a number of those shoots, reducing the number of grapes to be produced. Too many grapes reduce the quality of the fruit and can even break the branch under the stress of the weight.

Jesus keeps his metaphor simple. Fruitless branches are removed. Fruitful branches are pruned. The pruning is done to ensure continual bearing of more fruit. From that simple image, I know that I do not want to be a fruitless branch. I do not want to be cut away. I also know that I want to be pruned, even if that does sound a little painful. I want the Father's active involvement in my life, shaping me with his loving, expert hands, so that I might produce even more fruit.

We are already clean. (3)

In verse 3, Jesus tells his disciples, "You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you." In vine imagery, to be clean is to be pruned. All those little shoots have been cut away. There is an ongoing activity of the Father's pruning in the image, but also an initial cleansing that comes by the Word of Jesus. The disciples are not to fear that they are the kind of branch to be cut away. The have an assurance in their response to the Word of Jesus and Jesus is giving them this assurance now: he's telling them, "You are clean."

This assurance is delivered with almost the same words Jesus used to assure the disciples in the midst of the foot washing example. After understanding that he must allow Jesus to do the work of service, Peter wanted a full bath. You know, "wash all of me." Jesus said to him, "You don't need a full bath. You just need to wash your feet." Jesus went on to say, "You are clean, but not all of you." Those are almost the exact same words he uses here in this different context, different metaphor. There Jesus made an exception for Judas, that's the difference. Now he makes no exception. The idea is that these disciples, having been forgiven through faith in the Word of Jesus, because of their response to his word, they are clean. They are not the branches that are going to be fruitless and broken off. And Jesus will assure them again in verse 16, saying, "You did not choose me, but I choose you...that you should go and bear fruit."

Jesus doesn't mean for this image to take on a purely passive understanding of the work of the Spirit in us. In verse 4, he gives us an imperative, this is what we are to do, "Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither *can* you unless you abide in Me." Grape branches do not normally choose to abide in the vine. They just do. Human branches, however, seem to have a willfulness that resists abiding. We have to make an intentional choice to abide in the vine. Jesus must command us to abide.

In the next verse Jesus repeats his "I am" statement, though he highlights our role as the vine instead of the Father's role as vinedresser. He says, "I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing."

We can do nothing on our own. (4-5)

There's this repetition in verses 4 and 5 that we can do nothing apart from Jesus. That repetition makes it emphatic. "Apart from me you can do nothing." That's a clear point of the image. There is a vine that rises out of the ground. Through that vine water and nutrients provide sustenance to the branches that allow for the production of fruit. The fruit hangs on them, hangs on the branches but the power, the nutrients, that bring about the fruit, comes from the vine. Without that sustenance, the branches are no more than dead wood on the vine. There is no true life in them. The branch can do nothing without the vine. We can do nothing apart from Jesus.

But how do we understand that? Can we really do nothing apart from Jesus? Don't we do things all the time apart from Jesus? Non-believers are wildly active. They are doing things. Actually, even though this is not the point of this image, the answer is still, "No. You cannot do anything apart from Jesus. You would not exist apart from Jesus. And you cannot continue apart from Jesus. Jesus is Creator and Sustainer of all things. Paul wrote in Colossians 1:15-16, "He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation. For by him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible." And the writer to the Hebrews declared in 1:3, "He is the radiance of [God's] glory and the exact representation of his nature, and upholds all things by the word of his power." In light of Colossians 1 and Hebrews 1 and remembering back to how we began this Gospel, "All things came into being by him," it is not possible to overstate the fact that we can do nothing apart from Jesus. Jesus is God. But that universal sense is not the sense of this metaphor. God created human beings in his image, he enabled us with a mind to understand the material universe, he gave us the freedom of choice to act. We can do all kinds of wonderful things, including building towers up to heaven, all apart from yielding to God and entering into personal relationship with him through Jesus. We can do stuff.

We can do nothing of lasting value in all of our doing. What does all our doing really matter at the end of the day when the lights are turned off and the universe has run its course. What have we done?

We are created for relationship with God. We are created to image him in his goodness and beauty and his truth. We are created to help each other come to know God. We are fallen from relationship. We are fallen from our purpose. Life is living out of a relationship with our Creator. We cannot do that independent of the Spirit of God. We cannot glorify him. We cannot know him. We cannot help other people know him. We cannot love like he loves, truly unconditionally. We cannot make an eternal difference on our own heart or in the lives of other people: in our spouse, in our children, in our parents, in our neighbors. We can do nothing of everlasting value apart from him. Two things matter forever: God and people. And we cannot produce the kind of fruit that lasts.

The opposite is also true. In him we can do great things. We can love our spouses, our children, our parents, our God, like we want to love them with lasting, eternal impact. We can become who we have been created to be, transformed from the inside out if we abide in him.

Worthless branches (6-8)

In verse 6 Jesus comes back to a problem: he comes back to the worthless branches. We'll connect that to verse 7 and the idea of prayer. Here are those two verses.

"6 If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire and they are burned. ⁷ If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you."

Jesus sets up a strong either/or in this vine metaphor. Either you produce fruit or you are broken off and thrown into the fire. Different Christian traditions understand this image quite differently. We might ask the question this way, "What happens to those who do not persevere in their walk with Jesus?" On one side of Christian tradition, you get an interpretation that declares the fruitless branches as unredeemed in the first place. They never knew Jesus. If you do know Jesus and have been chosen by Jesus, you will bear fruit. That interpretation has support in the promise of verse 16, "I chose you...that you should go and bear fruit." So any branches that do not bear fruit were never truly in Jesus in the first place. That's why they are broken off, that's why they're fruitless. On another side of Christian tradition, you get an interpretation that declares the fruitless branches as apostate Christians. They don't persevere because in their own free will they chose to walk away. They truly believed but they refuse obedience. They become hardened, they become fruitless, and eventually they're removed from relationship with Jesus. And just looking at this metaphor that seems like a valid interpretation. It seems to fit well with verse 2 and verse 6. Worthless branches broken off and thrown in the fire.

The first interpretation may not leave much room for active involvement in producing fruit. It is all up to God. God chooses, you produce fruit. The second interpretation might give a lot of room for the believer's involvement in producing fruit, but too much, it takes away the sense of dependence, it's a working or struggling in the self to ensure salvation, to ensure fruit.

I believe that Jesus intentionally sets up the metaphor without addressing the question of the possible fruitless believer. The focus of John up to this point has been to reveal the nature of true faith - well, to reveal the nature of Jesus, but then the human response; what is true faith. And John has been distinguishing that from false belief. There are people who believe in Jesus, but Jesus doesn't entrust himself to them because he knows what's in their heart. There are people who claim to be disciples but they refuse to accept Jesus' teaching, refuse to abide n him, they walk away or they pick up stones to kill him at the end. They don't want to hear what he has to say. And John's setting these people up, these are the people who claim to believe, claim to know, claim to receive, claim to see but they don't truly believe. They don't really know. They don't truly receive Jesus or see Jesus. John sets up a dichotomy between false belief and true belief. A person who declares himself a believer but is not, has not truly been born again, will not produce fruit. He will be a worthless branch. I believe that is the correct way to understand this metaphor in the context of John. The worthless, fruitless branches are those who come to the end of life, or who come to the end of their experiment with Jesus like Judas, like those disciples in John chapter 6, and they walk away. They never really knew Jesus.

But even if that's the right way to take the metaphor that fits best the context of the book, does that mean that true believers will automatically produce fruit? I do not think it does. And I do not believe Jesus addresses that issue here. Jesus' words serve as a warning to anyone who feels secure in relationship and yet fails to produce fruit. We have that. If there is no fruit, we must seriously address the question of whether we have true faith at all. But what about the struggling Christian? Is it possible to be in Christ and not experience transformation? We at least have to ask the question because Jesus has given us an imperative. Abiding does not seem automatic. Loving one another does not seem automatic. Jesus feels the need, the importance of commanding his disciples to do both. That would imply that it's possible to truly believe and yet not automatically do these things.

The two questions of covenant

Let's consider the issue from the perspective of two questions of covenant. Does our forgiveness and acceptability depend on our ability to produce fruit? No. The first question of covenant is answered only one way in the Bible. What makes me righteous enough, acceptable enough to be in relationship with God? I am declared righteous only by the grace of God received by faith. My acceptance is based 100% on grace, not on my ability to abide in Christ and to produce fruit. I could never produce enough fruit to be good enough. I could never abide consistently enough to be righteous in the eyes of God. It's not attainable.

Where then does the command to abide fit in? It's not an issue of the first question of covenant. We're talking about the second question of the covenant. "Now that I have been 100% accepted by God through faith in Jesus, how ought I live?" Abide in Jesus! That's what we're talking about. This is how you live as a true believer. I want to worship my God, serve my King, love my heavenly Father. I did nothing to gain acceptance. I received it. My righteousness is not mine. It is the righteousness of Christ. But now that I have been granted his righteousness, I want to become what he's declared me to be. I want to live for God.

And how do I do that? Well it doesn't begin with me and the effort of my flesh. That's the big mistake. Even though I want to live for Christ, I can do nothing for Christ if I do it in my own power and in my own strength. It begins with abiding in Christ. We can do nothing of true spiritual value for him out of ourselves. But through faith in him, through the Holy Spirit, we are able to participate in our own growth and in our own service. We are able to do good. We invest into our relationship with God through our own actions. We are working out of the salvation that he has already provided for us, but it's still not in our own flesh. It's out of the strength of the Spirit, we're the branch, and the

vine - the nutrients, the source of power and life comes from him. And we approach the second question of covenant, "How then ought I live?" as a relational question. It's not a business question. It's not primarily a religious question, even a moral question. It's a relational question.

We are in relationship with our heavenly Father. How do we live out that relationship? God is going to give us 100% of himself to the relationship. And God is calling on us to give 100% of ourselves to the relationship. I call this the marriage conference answer to the second question of covenant. How much is God's part? 100% How much is my part? 100%. I know that is bad math. But it is good relationship. Love relationship does not work by investing 50/50. That's a business partnership. Nobody is ever truly satisfied. It doesn't work with 80/20. Each partner is called to give their whole self to the relationship. God gives 100% but that does not mean God does 100%. He gives all of himself that he ought to give to relationship. But if he does everything for us, that's not relationship, and there would be no growth in that if we have no responsibility, if we have no part to play; if we're not reaching back towards him. God enables us through the power of the Holy Spirit that we might respond by giving of ourselves to him. We love him back. We will never successfully give anywhere near 100%. It's not a requirement. It is a vision we strive toward. It's a goal. It's an aim. We look at what Jesus is like and we're pursuing to live out our relationship with God just as Jesus did. He gave 100%. We're never going to arrive anywhere near 100%, but we still strive towards giving ourselves fully in relationship with God.

The starting point with "How then shall I live, now that I have been accepted into relationship with God by grace?" is that you live by faith, abiding in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit. That's how you live. That is what it means for you to be in him and him to be in you. That is the spiritual truth of your relationship. You are connected with Jesus through a spiritual union. You live this relationship through prayer, through a constant conversation with God.

The carnal Christian

I mentioned before, I think there is a third option that Jesus does not highlight in this metaphor. He talks about the worthless branches thrown away. I think those are people who claim to be believers but aren't really. He talks about true believers who are abiding in Christ and producing fruit. And I believe it is possible for true believers to live life apart from abiding in Jesus. Maybe because nobody has even taught them that you don't do it in your own effort. Maybe because of their sin or their own lifestyle. Maybe because of other struggles. But I do believe it's possible, even though Jesus doesn't address it here. Paul teaches this idea when he writes the struggling believers at Corinth who were experiencing powerful gifts of the Holy Spirit but were not growing in the fruit of the Holy Spirit. Their inner lives were not being transformed. Paul describes three different types of people. In 1 Corinthians 2:14 he speaks of a natural man who does not understand the things of God. In 2:15 he speaks of a spiritual man who does understand the things of God because he has the mind of Christ. I think we've got those people in this metaphor here that Jesus has given us. But then in 3:2-3 Paul also speaks of the Corinthians as neither the natural man or the spiritual. He says,

² I gave you milk to drink, not solid food; for you were not yet able *to receive it*. Indeed, even now you are not yet able, ³ for you are still fleshly. For since there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not fleshly, and are you not walking like mere men?

That word, "fleshly", is the word that means, "carnal" in Old English, and it could be easily used to describe a non-believer. So, what's interesting is that here, Paul is applying it to people he has already called believers. He says that the works of the Spirit, the miracles and speaking in tongues and prophecy, these things are all real and they are coming through them by the Spirit of God, but they have not experienced internal transformation. They look like everybody else. They look like any other Greek assembly. They do not look like an assembly of Jesus Christ. So, in this sense they're carnal Christians. And sometimes that term is misapplied. Sometimes "carnal Christian" applies to those who claim to believe but never have believed. But in this sense with Paul the term applies to true believers who are not seeing transformation in their life. They are not abiding in Christ and they are not experiencing the fruit of the Spirit in their lives.

Paul starts with the natural person and the spiritual person. We know how a person moves from being natural to being spiritual with this terminology. That's new birth. You place your faith in Jesus Christ. It's the issue of the first question of covenant. How do we enter into spiritual relationship with God? By grace through faith. When we place our faith in Jesus, we are forgiven and indwelt by the Holy Spirit. That's all that Paul means by the natural person and the spiritual person.

The Corinthians Paul is addressing, however, do not look like spiritual people. They're of Christ. Christ has indwelt them but they are not abiding in Christ and producing the fruit of the Spirit. So, Paul calls them carnal Christians or fleshly Christians. What happened to them? How did they become carnal? If they are truly spiritual, then why do they look and behave like mere men, mere women, like anybody else?

When we place our faith in Christ, we yield to Jesus as Lord. We yield to him the throne of our life. We submit our will to him. And yet, we have not yet been transformed to the degree that we can consistently yield that place to Jesus. Even if we're not classified as carnal, we still regularly sin. The fleshly part of us constantly wants to retake the throne. We all know this experience. We can't persevere 100% in doing what is right. Yes, we claim Jesus as king, but we constantly decide to do things our own way that do not honor Jesus. When we settle into a state of living out of our own flesh instead of living out of the Spirit of Jesus, then we are in a state of carnality or fleshliness. I don't think there is a need to precisely define that state. If you are struggling to walk with Jesus and at times you're experiencing success in dependence on him, not all the time but you're choosing to trust in him and walk in his power and you're trying to obey him, if you're growing; and we can't determine this by where somebody is at, some people just start with less problems, some people start nicer, so it's not how nice you are, you just might have this nice, pleasant, easygoing personality whether you're a believer or a non-believer, and somebody coming from a really harsh, really difficult background they may not be anywhere nearly as nice as you but they may have been transformed three times as much as you, we can't tell this in comparison to other people. Not everybody has the same struggles. But if you are confessing your sin and you are daily placing your faith in the Spirit, then you might still feel like you're struggling but I wouldn't call you carnal, not in the sense that Paul is talking about. But if you have no fruit in your life as a believer and you lack desire to live for God, you're not really into struggling, you're beginning just to kind of level out, and you don't really confess or pray, your Christianity is primarily certain rituals or habits you've gotten yourself into, if your behavior mirrors other people in society and you're not seeing that positive growth wherever you start from, you're not seeing over time growth, then you need to think seriously about your spiritual state. Something is off.

How do we get there? How do we move from being in a place where we are in that struggle to live for Christ and we're trying to abide by faith and we're praying and trying to trust him, how do we get the point where we just don't care that much anymore, where we're making the choices out of our own mind and flesh? We might be very active, but we're not doing it out of dependence on Christ. Is it simply sin? Is it that simple? We get there by sin. That's probably overall true, but I think it is messier than that so we'll break it out a bit. I just that there's this gunk, that's my theological term, this gunk, this crud that gets in our lives and it weighs down our heart and mind, and we drift from God. I think there are a number of factors that can get us there. Here are four factors.

- 1) First, unconfessed sin builds up a wall in our relationship with God. And the more we do it, the higher and stronger the wall gets. Jesus told Peter, "You just need to wash your feet." You are clean but keep washing your feet. You are 100% forgiven. But when you sin and hold that inside, you fail to experience the reality of God's forgiveness. Something comes between you and God. You draw away from him. You hide part of yourself. You stop depending on him. And that unconfessed sin is part of that gunk that gets between you and God.
- 2) Second, passivity also leads to a spiritual lethargy. You just don't feel like doing stuff. If all of our Christianity is attending church or listening to other people, if we're just a passive receiver and we have not found ways for active obedience, if we're not striving to obey God or serve God, then we

don't really need God. It's really more about us. We're not being challenged. We need to be stretched and moved out of our comfort zone. We need reason to pray. Sometimes when we're passive God brings something hard into our lives with a child or a spouse or a job and then we become spiritual again, because we need to pray, we need to depend on God. We need something in our life by which we're saying, "Jesus, help me. Holy Spirit, please, work through me." And if it's not through positive obedience, then it might be through some pain. But when we're passive in our faith, we forget our need for Jesus and we just kind of coast. And as in any relationship, passivity leads to drifting away in the heart. Passivity is part of that gunk that gets in our relationship.

3) Third, good works in our own strength can prevent us from experiencing the fruit of the Spirit. This is a tricky one, because this is how most people view religion. You know, we put in effort. We use our gifts, we have abilities as human beings. We gain experience, that's how we become better at things. We do those things, but when we do them out of our flesh, we're not experiencing the work of the Spirit. It can be that what used to be out of my comfort zone might become quite natural to me. Whenever you think, "I can do this with my eyes closed," be careful because you might start doing that. You might start doing that with your spiritual eyes closed. It's one of those challenges of as we grow, we might start getting a little pride, start depending on ourselves and so then we need to be put into a different environment. We need to be challenged again so that we'll depend. Whether it's serving or teaching or leading or caring, we don't want to get to the point where we just do it by rote, out of our own strength.

I mentioned before, it could be that we're working out of our own strength not because we've become confident and we've forgotten to depend on the Spirit. It might be that we never heard of the Holy Spirit. You could grow up in church and nobody talks about the Holy Spirit, or not in this way of simply having conversation with Jesus. "Jesus, I depend on you. Work through me. I believe your spirit is in me. Fill me with your spirit and work through me." Learning to the depend on the filling of the Holy Spirit in us, abiding in Christ. If you never knew that, if you don't know any other way, you've just been reading the Bible in your own strength and praying in your own strength and going to church in your own strength, it can become very boring, easily burn out or you can gain religious pride that way. Because it's religious works. Those good works can be part of that gunk that prevents us from abiding in Christ.

4) Fourth, A bad diet makes us lethargic. Have you ever seen that documentary, "Super Size Me", about the Morgan Spurlock who ate McDonald's food three times a day for a month? His cholesterol and weight sky-rocketed. His weight shot up. So, we can ask, that's the metaphor, Where am I in my culture? Where is my spiritual diet coming from? What conversations do I have week by week? What movies, what music, what books, what am I putting into my mind and heart? What is the conversation among friends or among family? Do I have any small group of Christians I meet with? When we meet, what do we talk about When I do have free time, do I use it all for fun or exercise or home improvement? None of that's bad but I just need to be asking, "where is the healthy input coming from and how much am I getting?" Without healthy input from friends and from church and from reading and from my music, my mind is gonna slip away from Jesus. Bad spiritual diet is part of that gunk that messes up my relationship.

Unconfessed sin, passivity, good works done in the flesh, a bad spiritual diet, these are all the things that lead us away from dependence on Jesus, and the result is that we look just like we've always looked. We kind of plateau out. We look fleshly, as Paul says. You look like mere men, mere women. We 're acting like sinful human beings and that growth chart that we were on, we were moving up from wherever we started, it plateaus out. And we lack the transforming power of Jesus in our lives.

So, the big question is, if I feel like I'm trending there, or I know I'm stuck there, how do I come back to abiding in Christ? We come back through faith. Just like we enter relationship with Jesus through faith, we remain in relationship with Jesus through faith. This is how we express our faith. We acknowledge our desire, we confess any known sin, we receive his forgiveness, because that's what we believe, he's already forgiven us, we state our belief that he is in our lives because we believe

him; he said he's come into our life and we believe it; and we offer ourselves to him, asking him to guide us and empower us through the Holy Spirit he has sent to us.

And we communicate this to him, and when we communicate in faith what we're doing is praying. To remain in Christ, we need this practice of ongoing prayer with him every day, through the day. "Guide me, Lord. I'm going to work. Help me to live at work for you. I'm going to school. Help me to encourage people in your name. Help me to be courageous. Meeting with these people, help me to speak words of love. Help me to speak up, Lord." Or, "Help me to hold my tongue, Lord." It depends. "Love through me, Lord. I want to be kind, but I want even more that they experience your spirit through me. Help me do this service, this thing I'm doing for your glory. Even if nobody notices, Lord, let it be for you."

So, we're having this conversation of abiding. By faith I'm expressing dependence on Christ and his Spirit in me. He's the vine. I want to be the branch abiding in the vine. As we abide in Jesus, we begin to make a difference for him by the fruit that he bears through us, as we have this kind of conversation. Because Jesus is bearing the fruit through us, he is glorified by what we accomplish because we're accomplishing it through dependence on him. So, Jesus can say in verse 8, "My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples."

Heart, Acts and Fruit of Abiding (9-11)

Now, we don't want to get our eyes too fixed on the fruit of abiding. That's the end of the process. We don't want to get things out of order. Every Christmas I am reminded how much people would like to have the fruit and yet, how they don't want to really do anything to get the fruit. Apart from Jesus Christ we can do nothing. But countless secular TV shows, and songs, and news announcers, and greeting cards wish everybody peace and love and joy. You know, all the fruit. But where is the power to bring that about? Are people doing the kinds of things at Christmas that result in peace and love and joy or are they doing the kinds of things that lead to strife and anxiety and exhaustion?

The fruit of abiding does not come with that acts of abiding. What are the acts that Jesus is calling us to in this passage?

In verse 7 Jesus made a connection between prayer, the word and abiding. "If you abide in me, and my words abide in you ask whatever you wish, and it shall be done for you." So these are the acts of abiding. We abide through an ongoing conversation of prayer. We also abide through ongoing study and reflection in the word of Jesus. We get another in verses 9-11. Jesus brings obedience back into the discussion.

⁹ Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you; abide in My love. ¹⁰ If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love; just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love. ¹¹ These things I have spoken to you so that My joy may be in you, and *that* your joy may be made full.

I see Jesus connecting three acts of abiding here: prayer, obedience and the word. These acts bring about bring about the fruit that we want: the fruit of abiding. But we still have to take another step back. It is so easy to get Christianity wrong at this point. Spiritual fruit does not come from religious works or religious acts or religious disciplines if the heart of the individual is not in the right place. The fruit of abiding follows the acts of abiding when the acts of abiding follow the heart of abiding. This is really where we need to start. We don't start with the fruit, we don't start with the acts. We start with the heart.

In verse 11 Jesus tells us he spoke these things that his joy may be in us and that our joy be full. So he says he wants us to obey so that we might experience joy. But joy does not come from all forms of obedience. Obedience doesn't automatically lead to joy, not when it's grudging obedience where you feel forced to obey out of fear, or where you're just obeying to get something else, to get some kind of reward. That's not where joy comes from. Joy comes from obedience performed out of a heart of

love. When obedience is an expression of love for God, then we experience joy in the service of our heavenly Father. But if you don't have a heart for love, don't expect the joy.

Along with love, a heart of humility is necessary for bringing about the fruit of abiding. Jesus impressed the importance of humility on his disciples through his example of foot washing. We know we must abide in Christ because we humbly accept that true, lasting fruit is produced through him. We can do nothing on our own. We abide in dependence out of a heart of humility because we recognize our low state compared to his high state. And he is Lord God and that brings humility out of our heart, and that heart of humility is going to lead to acts of abiding and fruit of abiding.

And I'd add one more. We abide out of a heart of faith. In 14:1 Jesus said, "Let not your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe in me." Later, he says, "My peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you." The fruit of peace is experienced through faith in Jesus. I would even say that a heart of faith precedes a heart of love. As a fallen person who still struggles with the flesh, I am sometimes motivated to obedience out of a heart of love. But not always. When I am not, I can still obey out of a heart of faith. I can choose to obey even when I'm not feeling it because I believe it. And one day, when God remakes me in heaven, I will experience constantly the heart motivation of love. But for now, in this already, but not yet state of redemption, I do not always experience the right response of love toward God. But I can still choose to act out of a heart of faith.

The fruit of abiding follows the acts of abiding, which follows the heart of abiding. We do not want to get that order wrong. We start with faith, love and humility. From this heart, we do the acts of prayer, obedience and word. And through these acts we experience the fruit.

So, our last question for today, "What is the fruit of abiding? What's the fruit that comes from abiding in the vine?"

The fruit of abiding includes both the transformation that the Spirit brings about in us and also the transformation brought about in others through our witness. I am going to talk about witness in our next lesson, so I will limit my focus now to that fruit of internal transformation. What are those fruits? Paul gives us a list in Galatians 5:22-23 "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control..."

Do you recognize the beginning of that list in our current context, love, joy and peace? We have mentioned all three so far in this lesson. All three are repeated in this section of John, chapters 13-17. Jesus mentions peace three times, starting in chapter 14 with, "My peace I leave with you." He mentions joy seven times, starting with this reference in verse 11, "that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be made full." If he mentions peace three times and joy seven times, how many times do you think he mentions love in John 13-17? How often is love mentioned? Thirty-four times. "A new commandment I give to you that you love one another just as I have loved you." Love is essential to Jesus' teaching on discipleship here in John 13-17. Love really fits all three of the categories I've created. We are called to live out of a heart of love, to do acts of love, and to experience the fruit of love. But since I have a nice balance of three elements in each category, I'm going to keep love in the categories of heart and fruit. You can add it to acts if you like, I don't mind.

To sum up Jesus' teaching on abiding here in these 11 verses, we recognize the importance of the heart in living out life with Jesus. The heart of abiding is a heart of faith, humility and love. Out of an abiding heart flow the acts of abiding, prayer, obedience, the word. And through these acts of abiding, we experience the fruit of abiding, love, joy, peace, transformation in our hearts.

I want to close in prayer to give you an opportunity to put into practice an ongoing conversation with God. I will pray slowly, giving you opportunity to pray with me right now. Or you can take a moment after the podcast and pray on your own.

Let's start by communicating our faith in Jesus. If you are not sure if you have ever placed your faith in Christ Jesus, then this is where abiding starts. Let's pray, and if these are the words of your heart, you can pray them after me.

Lord Jesus, I believe that you are God. I believe that you came to die for the sins of the world. I confess that I am guilty of sin. I know I can't live a life good enough to pay for my sin. I believe you offer me forgiveness through your death for me on the cross. I accept your wonderful gift. Thank you for loving me. Thank you for dying for me. Thank you for forgiving me. I acknowledge you as my Lord and as my Savior. Please make me into the kind of person you created me to be.

Now let's confess any specific sin is on our heart or mind.

Lord please help me to confess my sin to you and to accept your forgiveness. Help me to be honest with you. Whatever sin you bring to my mind I confess to you now.

Thank you, Lord, for forgiving me of that sin. Please help me to seek restoration with anybody I have hurt. Now let's pray a prayer of abiding.

Lord God, I want to live for you. I believe that you indwell me with your Holy Spirit. Please, guide me today. Please, help me see truth. Please, love through me. Give me courage to live for you. You are my Lord. You are my life. Fill me with your Holy Spirit for your glory. I believe in you. I believe in you in me. In Jesus' name, Amen.

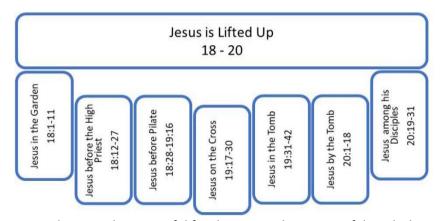
Amen! Walk by faith in the Holy Spirit! Jesus be with you!

Reflection questions

- 1. Read John 15:1-11. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What are some questions that come to mind?
- 2. This passage is placed centrally in this section of John. Jesus intends for his followers to reflect on this metaphor as an aid in understand discipleship. Draw a vine including all the elements you notice in this metaphor. Visualize for yourself the roles of Father, Son, Holy Spirit and you, a disciple.
- 3. How important is it to you that Jesus declares his disciples as already clean at the beginning of the metaphor in verse 3 (which he also declared in 13:10 during the symbolic act of washing their feet)?
- 4. How do you understand the declaration that you can do nothing apart from me in 4-5? How do you express this truth in your own life? How do you express your dependence on Jesus?
- 5. In the context of John, do you believe that the worthless branches in 6-8 could be true believers who have failed to depend on Jesus? How do you understand the worthless branches?
- 6. How would you describe a heart of abiding according to verses 9-11? What concepts stand out to you?
- 7. Take time to pray to Jesus, expressing your dependence on him using the language of his own words here in this passage.

Lesson 26: John 15:12-17 Fruit That Remains

Introduction



John chapter 15 provides us with a powerful focal point on the nature of discipleship. Jesus is not going to say everything there is to say on discipleship in such a short amount of speech, but he sure packs in a lot. There are three parts to the chapter: the introduction of the vine metaphor, the further development of themes already introduced, and the disciples' relationship to the world.

Jesus' teaching here is masterful. The vividness of the vine and the branches metaphor gives us a picture of spiritual dependence essential to the very beginning of discipleship. This is a foundational idea, clearly expressed through a powerful image. Stay connected to Jesus, and he will produce fruit in your life. Then Jesus restates his new commandment from chapter 13, "love one another, just as I have loved you." That's a great start to discipleship. Stay in relationship with Jesus, spiritual dependent on him to work in you and through you as you try to love your brothers and sisters in Christ with the sacrificial love of Jesus. He is the vine. You are the branches. Love one another.

We get that message from our first read through the text. It's right there on the surface. Connected to Jesus, love each other. It provides us with plenty of real life application to struggle with as new believers. Abide in Jesus. Love one another. Abide in Jesus. Love one another. Let's just focus on that. You want to be a good basketball player? Dribble. Pass. Dribble. Pass. Dribble. Pass. Become an expert in those two things. You want to be a disciple of Jesus? Abide. Love. Abide. Love. Abide. Love. Practice those things in every situation through every moment of the day. Become an expert at talking with Jesus through your life situations, expressing your spiritual dependence on him in all things. Get it into your mind in all things, this call to love as Jesus loves. These are fundamentals. Some people depend on their gifts and their drive to play the game. They show talent for organization or planning or teaching or evangelism or singing or playing an instrument or leading kids. All great things. But so many push ahead in the Christian life in their own flesh, in their own ideas without learning the fundamentals. Abide in Christ. Love one another. Abide in Christ. Love one another. We need a coach to help us unlearn all our bad mistakes of doing Christianity out of wrong motives, or out of the wrong strength, out of our flesh. We make some baskets, we win some games, we receive some praise. But we really can only go so far playing the game our way, in our own strength.

Abide in Christ. Love one another.

This is not all there is to discipleship. But this is where you start. Just like dribbling and passing are not all there is to basketball. To play the game, you are going to have to learn to shoot and defend. There is more to discipleship. We start with the basic ideas of abide in Christ and love one another. We recognize these are not just ideas. These are skills that my Christian life must be built on. I need to learn to abide and I need to learn to love and I need to practice abiding and practice loving in my daily life. That's what makes me a disciple.

And with that functioning base, I build my understanding and practice of the Christian life. And Jesus has given us so much of that here in John 15. So, let's continue to unpack the chapter with some review from our last lesson. There is more to discipleship. There's a lot more. And Jesus has given us so much of that here in John 15, even if on the surface we have the clear instruction to abide and to love, there's a lot here. So, let's continue to unpack the chapter with some review from our last lesson but also moving forward to see what Jesus is developing here.

Let's start with a reminder of the structure of John 15. Do you remember? The content of the second half of chapter 14 parallels the first half of 16. The key idea in both is that, though Jesus is going away, he is sending a "parakletos" or Helper to be with the disciples who is the Holy Spirit. Both sections connect the going of Jesus and the sending of the Holy Spirit. Both sections refer to the Spirit as the Helper and the Spirit of truth.

These two passages about sending the Holy Spirit create a sandwich around our central passage of John 15:1-16:4 which has three parts: the vine and branches metaphor, that was our last lesson; the themes Jesus further develops, you know, we were getting into that some in our last lesson and more now; and the disciples' relationship to the world, which we're going to consider in our next lesson. In this lesson, we continue to unpack the themes Jesus has come back to. Three issues especially. These were three issues stated in John 14:12-15 that caused us to pause and think. How do these things really work in the Christian life? The first was Jesus' claim that his followers will do greater things than he does. The second was that if we ask anything, he will do it, and the third was that, if you love him, you will obey. Jesus has brought all three issues back at this point of his teaching. With promise of the Spirit and the metaphor of abiding, we are better prepared to consider these issues, to understand what Jesus means by these things. Our text for this lesson is John 15:12-17. Verse 12 is the repetition of the commandment to love one another. I'm going to start back a little bit, I'm going to start at verse 7 to remind us of the context. So let's read John 15:7-17.

The Context of Abiding: Heart, Works and Fruit

⁷ "If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸ "My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and *so* prove to be My disciples. ⁹ "Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you; abide in My love. ¹⁰ "If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love; just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love. ¹¹ "These things I have spoken to you so that My joy may be in you, and *that* your joy may be made full. ¹² "This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you. ¹³ "Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends. ¹⁴ "You are My friends if you do what I command you. ¹⁵ "No longer do I call you slaves, for the slave does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you. ¹⁶ "You did not choose Me but I chose you, and appointed you that you would go and bear fruit, and *that* your fruit would remain, so that whatever you ask of the Father in My name He may give to you. ¹⁷ "This I command you, that you love one another.

The three issues raised in 14:12-15 were, "You will do greater works...ask anything in my name...if you love you will obey." These ideas come together in this abiding metaphor. To unpack the teaching of Jesus, it's helpful to create some kind of organization, some extra boxes to put all these ideas into. I did that in the last lesson by creating three categories of abiding: the heart of abiding, the acts of abiding, and the fruit of abiding. Everybody wants the fruit of abiding, the fruit of an abundant life. But we do not always recognize that the fruit of abiding comes from acts of abiding. To use the basketball analogy again, you don't increase your free throw shooting percentage without practicing shooting free throws. The fruit doesn't just happen. There are certain actions that lead to the fruit.

Christianity is not, however, merely a moral or religious system through which you bring about positive effects in your life through your actions. It is not fundamentally about acts that lead to fruit.

Christianity is a relationship with your Creator through Jesus Christ. The heart matters. There is a heart of abiding.

So what is the heart of abiding? What are the acts of abiding? What are the fruit of abiding? These categories help us sort out what Jesus is teaching in these chapters, from chapter 13 up through 15. We've already filled these out in our last lesson, so I'll just give the quick review here.

If you love you will obey. Love is a heart motive of abiding in Christ. The acts of abiding are meant to be acts that flow from a heart of love. Surveying chapters 13 and 14, we can also add humility and faith. These are the heart attitudes of the one who truly abides in Christ. We abide out of love, humility and faith.

Think back to Mary at the beginning of chapter 12 when she poured out a year's wages in perfume on Jesus and she wiped his feet with her hair. Faith, love, humility. That is the heart of a disciple, the heart of one who abides in Jesus.

When we have this heart of abiding, we are moved to action, as Mary was moved to act in extravagant worship. If you think of the other story about Mary and Martha from Luke 10, you see more action. At that moment, Mary is committing herself to learning and Martha is committed to service.

What acts does Jesus call us to in these chapters here in John? He repeated in verse 7, "ask whatever you wish, and it shall be done for you." That is a promise given to the one who abides in Jesus. It is also a call to action. The fundamental action of the one who abides in Christ is prayer. We acknowledge our relationship to him. We pray in the name of Jesus. We ask the Spirit to guide us and empower us for the glory of the Father. Prayer is relational. And I'm not just talking about prayer times, like the prayer before you go to bed, or a prayer at the meal, or a prayer meeting in church. I'm talking about ongoing, through-the-day prayer. It is conversation with God. We ask about all things. We acknowledge our dependence on Christ. We agree that we can do nothing truly good and lasting apart from Christ. We want to be branches receiving nourishment from the vine. Prayer is a fundamental act of a disciple as he or she expresses dependence on Jesus through the day.

Along with prayer and the Word we commit to acts of obedience. We obey whatever we believe Jesus has called us to do. And these are our three acts of abiding: prayer, Word, obedience. These acts of abiding out of a heart of abiding produce the fruit of abiding. The act of the word is reading, studying, and reflecting on the Word of God. We're abiding on the Word of God. This is also an act of dependence. Jesus is the light. We acknowledge that. We are dependent on him for our understanding of who God is, of who we are, of what life is. Along with prayer and the word, we commit to the act of obedience. We obey whatever we believe Jesus has called us to do. And these are our three acts of abiding: prayer, Word, obedience.

These acts of abiding out of a heart of abiding produce the fruit of abiding. In verse 11 Jesus said, "These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full." The fruit of abiding includes internal transformation and external transformation. My life is changed but I'm also involved in helping other people's lives change. The three examples of fruit spoken by Jesus in these chapters are love, joy, and peace.

Two Summary Ideas

These are the two big ideas we have so far.

First, the concept of abiding in Christ is fundamental to life as a disciple of Christ. Abiding in Christ is an expression of spiritual dependence in ongoing relationship with Jesus. And I'd say that the Biblical idea of being filled with the Holy Spirit in Ephesians 5 or walking in the power of the Spirit from Galatians 5, those are essentially the same idea of abiding in Christ. Abiding in Christ is being filled with the Holy Spirit. It is walking in the power of the Spirit. So this is our first big idea from this chapter: abiding in Christ fundamental to being a disciple.

The second big idea recognizes that the concept of abiding in Christ brings together several themes of discipleship that can be helpfully organized under the categories of heart, acts, and fruit. This second idea is not presented in the text but serves as a way to organize and understand the themes that are introduced in the text.

With those two big ideas established, we are ready to consider Jesus' teaching in verses 12-17.

Fruit that Remains (John 15:12-17)

The New Commandment (12-13)

And we start with the new commandment. Jesus teaching about abiding, that metaphor flows right into the new commandment that he gave his disciples earlier in 13:34. He repeats it here in 15:12, "This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you." And we noted in an earlier lesson that this commandment doesn't really seem new. Moses commanded in Leviticus 19:18, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Jesus taught this as the second great commandment that sums up the Law. You know, love the Lord your God, love your neighbor as yourself.

But there is something new about the way Jesus words the commandment. He does not encourage us to use self-love as our motive. That was before, "Love your neighbor as yourself." How do I love my neighbor? Well, I love myself, and I'm supposed to treat my neighbor just as I would treat me. Instead, Jesus is encouraging us to use him as our model. "Love one another, just as I have loved you." And this is something new with the New Covenant. We don't have the vision of God's ultimate self-sacrifice on the cross until we have Jesus. So, this is new. We are to love as he loves. That's a different focus. That's also a higher standard. Jesus loved unconditionally, sacrificially, all the way to the cross. We see that he has his own sacrificial example in mind in verse 13 when he says, "Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends." That's the love Jesus is thinking about, that kind of sacrificial love. And it doesn't mean the glorious jumping on the hand grenade kind of love, either. It means day by day that you're willing to give up your own needs, rights, desires in order to serve a brother or sister in Christ, in order to serve your wife, or your children; that you're giving of your own life, that you're laying down your own life into care for their life, to speak words of love into their life, to do acts of love in their life.

Another possible new aspect about this command, a reason Jesus said this is new: maybe that it envisions a new way of formulating the people of God. The command to love your neighbor was given in the civil code of Israel: the Law of Moses. In the Old Covenant the people of God were defined geo-politically as the nation Israel. Loving your neighbor makes a lot of sense in a command from God about the social context of a nation. How is the nation going to work? It's going to work as people love their neighbor.

Jesus does not just say here, "love your neighbor." He says, "love one another." I do not think this is supposed to undo the command to love your neighbor. You still love your neighbor. That command is repeated in Romans 13:10 as a fulfillment of our obligation in society. I think the change in words here gives an emphasis to the new community of New Covenant believers that begins with these disciples. Our center is no longer the physical temple in the physical city of Jerusalem. The people of God is not defined geo-politically in the New Covenant. Our center is Jesus Christ. We are defined spiritually by those who believe in Jesus Christ and those who follow Jesus Christ. We are a spiritual body of brothers and sisters. We are to be marked by love for one another. That love is to extend out to our neighbors, even to our enemies. But the focus here is on a new body of disciples who love one another, who are all branches abiding in the same vine. We enjoy a special relationship with one another because of our special relationship with Jesus. So, Jesus commands us to love one another in the sacrificial way that he has loved. In chapter 13, he said, "This is how the world will know that you are truly my disciples." You know, abide in Christ. Love one another. That's fundamental.

Intimate Relationship (14-15) Jesus adds in 14 and 15, "You are My friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you slaves, for the slave does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you."

We can still envision ourselves as slaves to the master. That's not completely wrong. Paul calls himself several times a bond-servant. He's a willing slave of Jesus. But there are so many negative connotations with slavery that it is easy to misconstrue the nature of our relationship with God when we use that metaphor. We can take the slave metaphor and develop this vision of Christianity as this moral religious system that's imposed on us from the outside, it's not something that we really want to do so we do it grudgingly or without joy. We just do it to get to the next stage, just to get to heaven.

Jesus elevates his disciples in relationship with him from the position of mere servants to a the more intimate, loving position of friend. I can easily see how this has applied to these men who walked with Jesus. The spent a time with him and they went from place to place together, and they're doing ministry with each other, and they're eating together, and they're sitting around the fire together. And they've become friends over time.

Amazingly, I think Jesus is saying this about us as well. He desires that we come to be his friends. Friends of God. Friends of Jesus. When we abide in Christ as his disciples our relationship is meant to grow into a friendship. And yet, just like with the slave metaphor, we can take this wrongly, we can misconstrue this. It depends on our cultural understanding of friends and what we leave out. Friendship for Jesus does not mean "acquaintance." It is not someone you see once in a while and say, "Hey, there's Jesus!", or somebody who you've allowed to view your social media posts. Friend means friend, somebody you're close to. Somebody you trust, somebody you would invite into your confidence, somebody you share your life with, somebody you tell things that you don't tell anybody else. Friend.

Friend also doesn't have to mean, equal. You can have friendship with those who are your equals. That's a parity relationship. You're on the same level. You can also develop friendships with people who have authority over you. That is maybe a rare thing. And it is a different kind of thing, a different kind of relationship. But Jesus is not saying that he's on an equal level with the disciples. Jesus is still Lord and Teacher, just as he said in 13:13. His expression of friendship does not equate to equality in authority any more than it equates to equality of nature. We are not equal in nature with Jesus. He is still God. We are still human. He is still King. We are still his subjects. But we are not merely subjects. This is what's beautiful here. There is loving relationship between us and him. He expresses that relationship by calling you friend.

It is truly a radical way of envisioning relationship with God. Can you imagine God calling you friend? That idea should unsettle you I think, in a positive way, joyfully. But it shouldn't feel quite right that God would call me friend; that Jesus wants me to be friend - that my King would die for me. That's incredible and unbelievable. That my King would call me friend. I have no words. What do you say?

But as you walk with Jesus day by day, inviting him into your life, in every moment of life, this idea of friendship takes shape. As you seek to serve him and enter into the work he has for you to do, you become his companion. He has made the will of the Father known to his disciples, known to you. He has work for you to do. There is purposefulness in this designation. You could be merely slaves he commands. No. He invites you to understand the commission he gives, for you to embrace it and to freely join him. He wants you to understand what he is asking you to do, so that you participate not just with your hands and not just with your feet but also with your mind and with your heart. That is what he said here, "No longer do I call you slaves, for the slave does not know what his master is doing but I have called you friends, for all things that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you." He invites you into his understanding and into his purposes.

Jesus continues on in 16 and 17, "You did not choose Me but I chose you, and appointed you that you would go and bear fruit, and *that* your fruit would remain, so that whatever you ask of the

Father in My name He may give to you. This I command you, that you love one another." People tend to get uncomfortable with the idea of Jesus choosing. We want to have the free will. We want to be the ones who choose. I'm very comforted by the idea of choosing. I didn't choose following Jesus around just as a fanboy and I want him, this great person, to be my friend. Jesus chose me. Jesus wants me to be in relationship with him. That encourages me. He also chose me with purpose. "I chose you to go bear fruit, that your fruit would remain." And that, to me, is encouraging, that I am not in control of producing the fruit. This is the goal and as long as I abide in Jesus, he's going to be producing fruit through me. It's not coming out of my mind, or my strategies, or my plans, or my human effort. And as I grow with him, those things all matter, and I begin to learn how to plan and strategize and I'm using my gifting and my effort for Jesus. But regardless of that, that's not the primary thing. The primary idea is that Jesus desires to produce something through me. He's got a plan. He's got fruit to produce and if I abide in him and walk with him, he'll do it. So, I'm quite comforted by the fact that I didn't choose Jesus. Jesus chose me. This is his plan. It also gives me some pause to consider and think, "Okay, the purpose here is not my purpose. He chose me. It's his plan that I produce fruit. What does he want me to do?" "This I command you, that you love one another. Okay. I've got to, in some sense, bite into that, because this is the whole plan. I didn't choose him. It's not my plan. I'm not the one who produces the fruit. It's through his strength. Loving my brothers and sisters in Christ is not optional: that's the plan. Now, how is Jesus calling me to do that?

Greater works (16-17)

You remember we have those three challenging issues from 14:12-15, "You will do greater works...ask anything in my name and I will do it...if you love you will obey." So, three things. We considered "if you love me you will obey" in our first lesson on chapter 14. Jesus is not manipulating us. Jesus is stating a fact about the human heart. If indeed you do love God, that will come out through active obedience. I did not address the other two issues, or these problems with the other two issues. I am not yet ready to talk about "ask anything and I will do it." That is going to come up a third time in chapter 16. We will wrestle with that idea then.

But now that we've had the vine and the branches metaphor and we have Jesus saying that he chooses to bear fruit that will remain through us, it is a good time to address what Jesus means by saying we will do greater works than he did.

This is how he said it in 14:12, "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes in me, the works that I do shall he do also; and greater works than these shall he do; because I go to the Father." What is Jesus talking about? What kind of works? Well, even though the word "works" does apply to the miracles of Jesus through the Gospel of John, I have already said that I do not think Jesus speaks about miracles here. What he says here he says for all the members of the body of Christ. One of Jesus' greatest works was to raise Lazarus from the dead. Do we all do greater works than that? Raising the dead is a miracle limited to a tiny number of followers of Jesus, such as, Peter or Paul. And no one raises himself from the dead like Jesus. That was a greater miracle. Greater works cannot mean greater miracles. We don't do greater miracles than Jesus.

I think the meaning is connected to the condition Jesus expresses at the end of the statement. You will do greater works, "because I go to the Father." What changes when Jesus goes to the Father? He sends the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit enables us to do the work that God commands for us to do. What is that work the Holy Spirit intends to work through us? What does God command? What obedience is he calling us to? The one commandment Jesus has repeatedly highlighted is: love one another. Love is saturating these chapters.

The greater works that every member of the new community is called to are not miraculous works. The greater works are not the gifts of the Spirit but it's the fruit of the Spirit. The greater works are works of love. That is the new commandment.

But in what sense do we love greater than Jesus? We still have the problem that no one can love greater than Jesus. I believe we are to understand greater works as greater in scope. The acts of love Jesus accomplished for other people during his life on earth were limited both by his short time with us and by the very small geographical area he operated in.

Did Jesus wash the wounds of lepers in North Africa? Did Jesus feed migrants in North Carolina? Did Jesus care for coronavirus victims in Italy or New York? Did Jesus teach children Bible stories in Estonia or in Lithuania? Did Jesus share the gospel in Zagreb or Tehran or Daytona Beach? No. When Jesus was here, he never left Israel. His words of love, his touch of love was limited to the people he encouraged, the children who sat in his lap, the sick he healed, the lost he preached to.

Now Jesus says, "Because I go away, you will do greater things."

Who have you loved in the name of Jesus? You personally? How many people have you loved? How many people have you spoken words of encouragement to? Shared the Gospel with? Cared for? How many people have you loved in the name of Jesus? Multiply that love, the love that you have extended in the name of Jesus by the millions of Christ followers who have lived throughout the world over that last two thousand years, since the cross. You will do greater things.

Even as I say this, you may pick up that there's a catch in it all. When we love in the name of Jesus by the power of Jesus with a love that has lasting effect, it is still Jesus doing it after all. You do not do greater works apart from Jesus. Maybe apart from Jesus physically being present in the moment. But apart from Jesus spiritually you can do nothing. You do greater works because your life flows from the spiritual life of Jesus. And in that sense, yes, Jesus has cared for the leper in North Africa, and the child in Estonia, and the grandmother in Zagreb, and the migrant in North Carolina, and the college student in Tehran. Jesus has loved you through his people. And he has loved, through you, other people.

And you are invited to participate in the greater works. Your love matters, even though it is not you doing it in your human strength. We love with Jesus. It's something we do together.

Jesus chose you to bear fruit that remains because you have your own family. And you have your job, and you have your neighborhood, and you have your calling from Jesus. There are people in your sphere of influence that Jesus wants to touch. Jesus wants people to be loved and he wants you to participate in doing that. He wants you to produce fruit that remains. The fruit that remains is fruit that comes about through the power of the Holy Spirit. That is why he says, "ask that it may be given you." Anything that has lasting value is something that's come from him. And it comes from him when we express spiritual dependence and ask. And so also, he receives the glory for it. As he said in verse 8, "By this is my Father glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be my disciples."

So, I'm going to add this to the heart of the disciple. We have a heart of love, a heart of humility, a heart of faith, and a heart of glory. I need to explain that just a little bit, but I think you get it. We are motivated by the desire to magnify the glory of God. It's not about me doing greater things than Jesus. It's Jesus doing greater things through me that, ultimately, he is glorified. I believe that he is the source of all beauty, all goodness, all truth, and I want to glorify his nature. I want him to be known, I want him to be seen. I want people to praise and give glory to God just like I praise and give glory to God. And that gives me joy. And it brings purpose to my life. There is purpose in my life in the fruit that lasts. There's my changed life, other people's changed life. That brings purpose but ultimately the greater purpose is shining the light of God's glory through the production of lasting fruit, as he works in us through us, his goodness, his beauty, his truth is revealed. It is all the better that my love is not by itself, but the love of Jesus through me, so that the glory is not mine alone but more rightly his. So, my heart is beginning to desire his glory. Let them know Jesus and give him praise!

I think this is a good place to stop this lesson. Jesus has called us to produce fruit that lasts. That fruit follows acts and acts follow from the heart. Fundamentally, living for Jesus is about abiding in Christ and loving one another. We give ourselves in dependence on him and he produces something lasting and glorious.

To illustrate that, I love the old story, even if we can't verify it, it's a great illustration. It's a story of a young mother living around 1900 who sought to inspire a vision for piano in her son. She had just started him on lessons when the famous Polish pianist Jan Ignatius Paderewsky booked a tour that included her city. So she paid the money to for seats right up front, front row, so her son would get this full experience, this vision of what piano music can be, you know, the beauty of it, so he can see the fingers of the master moving across the keys.

She happily settled into her front row seats with her son on the concert day. She chatted pleasantly with her neighbor as the orchestra warmed up in the pit below. When another sound, the sound of muffled laughter rippled through the audience the young mother looked up just in time to see her son sit down at the piano on stage. Horrified, two things happened at once. Her son began to play Chopsticks with two fingers, the only piece he could play. And Paderewsky strolled on stage behind the boy.

Clueless, the boy continued to bang away at the piano. When the master reached the boy, he leaned down from behind and whispered into his ear, "Keep playing," which he cheerfully did. Paderewsky then reached his arms around the boy and began to weave in Mozart into the boy's Chopsticks.

And the master produced a masterpiece around the work of the child.

This is how I still feel. After 30 years of walking with Jesus, I am just banging out Chopsticks. I look at the way I love and how I abide in Christ. I am giving what I know, what I can do. I can't love anything like Jesus. I can't teach like Jesus. I can't produce lasting fruit like Jesus. I can offer up who I am. I can offer up me to Jesus. And I can trust him to wrap his arms around me and to take what I offer and to turn it into a masterpiece.

Love one another while abiding in Christ and the Master will work a masterpiece through you. He will produce fruit that lasts.

Reflection questions

1. Read John 15:12-17. What stands out to you as	interesting, important,	strange or confusing?	What
are some questions that come to mind?			

2. Thinking over chapters 13-15, how important is the new commandment as an aspect of Christian

discipleship? How im	portant is it to you in your understand	ing of living for God?	
3. What is your relati	onship to God when you recognize Go	d as Father? You are then	?
How about when you	ı recognize God as King, you are	? And when you recognize	God as
Lord, you are	? We understand our relationship	with God through a combinatior	ı of
different comparison	is. When you think of these three relat	ionships, what is added to your	
understanding when	you also consider yourself friend? How	w might you incorrectly understa	ınd your
relationship with God	d by focusing on being his friend witho	ut also recognizing these other a	spects of
your relationship wit	h God? On the other hand, what do yo	u lose when you avoid allowing	Jesus to
call you friend?			

- 4. How does consideration of the promise to send the Holy Spirit and the language here in this passage help you to put into context Jesus' declaration in 14:12, "He who believes in me, the works that I do shall he do also; and greater works than these shall he do"?
- 5. What fruit has God produced in you and through you that has the potential to remain forever?

Lesson 27: John 15:18-16:15 Witness in the World Introduction

Jesus in the Garden 18:1-11 Jesus before the High Priest 18:12-27 Jesus before Pilate 18:28-19:16 Jesus before Pilate 19:17-30 Jesus in the Tomb 19:31-42 Jesus by the Tomb 20:1-18 Jesus by the Tomb 20:1-18 Jesus among his Disciples 20:19-31

The world. The last third of John 15 is about the world. In the central section of Jesus' teaching on discipleship we first got the defining metaphor of the vine and the branches, challenging us to abide. That is what disciples do. They abide in Christ. That is what disciples are, they are those who abide in Christ.

The middle section of John 15 brings in other themes Jesus has already introduced. We can add a word to the basic call of the disciple: abide and love. That's what disciples do. They abide and love. Those are the fundamental skills to be mastered by the follower of Jesus. Abide and love. We also begin to recognize how many themes Jesus weaves back into his explanation of the vine metaphor. The more we reflect on the text the more overwhelming it can be. There is a lot going on here. We have been organizing these themes in this way: Jesus calls to a heart of abiding, to acts of abiding and to fruit of abiding.

All of this focuses on our relationship with Jesus and our relationship with one another. Abide in Jesus, love one another. The command to love presented here is not a command to love those outside the body of Christ. That is not the focus. The focus Jesus gives his disciples here is to love each other. That is how he phrased the new commandment in 13:34 and that is how he repeated it in 15:12. It is not "love the world." It is "love one another." Jesus makes the point that we have a special calling, a special familial responsibility to love our brothers and sisters in Christ. If we cannot love fellow believers, can we really love outside of our family at all? Loving one another is not optional for the disciples of Christ. Jesus wants us to be known by this. This is our branding. It's often hard. There are a lot of very not lovable Christians, or at least they are not lovable to us, or we don't feel loved back. It's not easy. Still, this is the vision our master has cast for us to pursue. This is the path of growth, the path of becoming more like Jesus. The is the way to God's heart. Abide in Christ and pursue love for one another.

What about the world? Jesus does not leave out the world in this central section. Our relationship to the world is also placed here in chapter 15 as a central concern for our understanding of discipleship. And he doesn't just address the idea of the world in this central section, it's through chapters 13 to 17. He refers to the world 39 times in these chapters. The only term he references more than the world is "Father". Just as it is critical that we learn to abide in Jesus and love one another, we've also need to understand our relationship to the world.

It is not an easy relationship. There is a right separation from the world. And we have this responsibility to first love one another. We see the separation in Jesus prayer in chapter 17. It is specifically for believers. Jesus is going to pray, "I do not ask on behalf of the world but on behalf of those you have given me out of the world." His concern in that prayer is for the community of believers, for all those who have become children of God. They are born again into a new family. That family exists in special relationship to God the Father and in relationship to one another, separate from everyone else in the world. There is a right separation of disciples from the world.

There is also a right engagement with the world. John 3:16 tells us the Father so loved the world, he sent his only begotten son to die for the world. John 3:17 goes on to tell us that the Father did not send the Son into the world to judge the world but that through him the world might be saved. God has a heart for the world. The special call to love one another is not an exclusion from love for the world. Just as the Father loves the world and the Son loves the world, the disciples of Jesus share his heart for the world. So there is right separation from the world. There is also right engagement with the world.

The engagement Jesus has in mind here in this text is witness.

We have two passages to consider. The disciples' relationship to the world is addressed in both this last part of chapter 15 and also in the first section of chapter 16. We will take these two sections in turn. We start with John 15:18-16:4a. Let's read the whole passage and then we'll walk through the text.

The World's Opposition to Witness (John 15:18–16:4a)

¹⁸ If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you. ¹⁹ If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, because of this the world hates you. ²⁰ Remember the word that I said to you, 'A slave is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you; if they kept My word, they will keep yours also. ²¹ But all these things they will do to you for My name's sake, because they do not know the One who sent Me. 22 If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have sin, but now they have no excuse for their sin. ²³ He who hates Me hates My Father also. ²⁴ If I had not done among them the works which no one else did, they would not have sin; but now they have both seen and hated Me and My Father as well. 25 But they have done this to fulfill the word that is written in their Law, 'They hated Me without a cause.' ²⁶ When the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, that is the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify about Me, ²⁷ and you will testify also, because you have been with Me from the beginning. ¹ These things I have spoken to you so that you may be kept from stumbling. ² They will make you outcasts from the synagogue, but an hour is coming for everyone who kills you to think that he is offering service to God. 3 These things they will do because they have not known the Father or Me. 4 But these things I have spoken to you, so that when their hour comes, you may remember that I told you of them.

Witness to the world is not going to be an easy mission. The word, "hate", dominates this section as much as love dominated the previous section. It creates a stark contrast. Consider the first three verses 18-20.

¹⁸ If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before *it hated you*. ¹⁹ If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, because of this the world hates you. ²⁰ Remember the word that I said to you, 'A slave is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you; if they kept My word, they will keep yours also.

John announced the antagonism of the world against Jesus in the beginning, in the prologue. "He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him."

What is meant by "World"?

We need to clarify what we mean by the term, "world." "World" in John usually refers to people or to society, not to a physical place. John is rarely talking about the earth when he says "world." To some degree the physical place is included when Jesus talks about coming into the world or leaving the world and going back to the Father. Jesus speaks of himself in chapter 3 and in chapter 6 (3:31, 6:33, 38, 51) as descending from heaven to the world. The Spirit descends as a dove out of heaven (1:32). The voice of the Father comes from heaven (12:28). We do not quite understand the

relationship between heaven and physically reality. Jesus in his glorified body ascends into heaven. It might be better to say that heaven is supra-material or beyond the material, rather than understand heaven as purely spiritual. We don't know for sure. We can only speculate but we do not consider heaven to be a specific location in the material universe. We think of heaven as up, not because heaven is physically above the earth but because God is above us is authority and nature, in all things he is more, he is beyond us. So, we look up to God. We imagine God coming down to us.

Though we struggle to understand what it means to exist in heaven, we have a fairly clear idea of what it means to exist on earth. This is our realm. We can understand the world as a place of existence distinct from that existence, whatever it is, in heaven. Jesus came from that state of existence into our state of existence, into our physical, time-bound reality.

Even when we are using the word "world" this way - the place to which Jesus came - it means more than physical location. Jesus coming into the world means that Jesus comes into physical human society. John does not emphasize in the prologue that Jesus came to live on the earth as a location. John emphasizes that Jesus came and dwelt among us. Jesus came to live among people. The physical world is not said to not know Jesus, or to reject Jesus. It's people that don't know Jesus, or people that reject Jesus. The standard use of "world" in John is the indication of human society. The world is a collection of individual human beings that come together in community and wield power and influence over one another.

When we are told that God so loved the world, we are being told that God loves the individual human beings that make up the nations and cultures of the world. That Jewish culture of Israel made up the localized aspect of the world that Jesus was interacting with. In that sense, the world can refer to Israel. It is a different way of thinking for a Jew. The Jew would think of Israel as God's people and everybody else as the world. They are the Gentiles, the pagans. Jesus' usage includes Jewish society as one of the societies that make up the world and is fundamentally opposed to God.

The world consists of a complex of set of values, desires and perspectives that oppose the values, desires and perspective of heaven. Among the Jews of Jerusalem, the Sadducees, Pharisees and Hellenists all represented a different set of values and perspectives, and yet are all included as belonging to the world because their values, desires and perspectives flow from human and Satanic sources.

We have to include Satanic because this is the perspective Jesus has given us here in the Gospel of John. Human society is influenced by the serpent. He is the ruler of the world mentioned in 12:31. Though Jesus mostly interacts directly with human beings without reference to Satanic influence, his discussion with the crowd in chapter 8 revealed Satan's influence as did his comments about Judas in chapter 13. Satan is behind the scenes, influencing the desires and the outlook of foaming rebellion against God.

But even without the influence of Satan, the values, desires and perspectives of human society is inevitably opposed to the values, desires and perspective of heaven. Jesus' teaching will not be accepted because fallen human nature, separated from God, desires evil more than good, what is false more than what is true. We are each broken. As a result, our societies are broken. This is the truth of 3:19, "The light is come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the light; for their deeds were evil."

The world Jesus came to save hates the truth Jesus brings. The world does not hate all the truth of Jesus. The world shaves it down to an acceptable form. But as Jesus presses into our bondage to sin, as he rejects the fashionable immoralities of our societies, as he claims exclusive authority over absolute truth, as he demands submission, his message draws out the resistance. Jesus' word understood inevitably offends.

That has been the pattern in this Gospel. Miracles are great. Everybody loves being fed. Everybody loves healing. Not everybody is going to like the teaching that comes with the miracles. John

described ever increasing tension, beginning with the Jewish leaders at Passover in chapter 2 all the way through the official plan to kill Jesus at the end of chapter 11. Jesus was not content to build a large and happy following. Jesus forced followers in Galilee to come to terms with what he was saying by pushing towards them the offensive declaration, "eat my flesh, drink my blood. Listen to what I am saying to you." Jesus then challenged a crowd in Jerusalem by calling them slaves to sin. They claimed that they believed. Jesus forced the issue. "You are slave to sin. You are children of Satan." Jesus did not begin his teaching with the intent of creating offense. But Jesus would also not allow self-deluded followers to twist his message for their own comfort. Jesus came to save. He did not bring sugar water or a placebo or a band-aid. Jesus brought a diagnosis and offered real medicine to save the sick from coming death. But who needs a doctor when they deny the disease?

The world closes its eyes and its ears to the dire judgment of Jesus. His good news has the smell of death. Most would rather shut out the light to reject the true problem than to face it. And that is the world of human beings about which Jesus speaks.

Sent to Witness in a Hostile Environment (18-20)

Let's read verses 18-20 again with this explanation of the term "world" as human society made up of human individuals committed to a complex set of values, desires and perspectives derived from human sources and influenced by Satan. That's our understanding of the world. As such, the world is fundamentally opposed to the values, desires and perspective of heaven. This is 18-20 again,

¹⁸ If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before *it hated you*. ¹⁹ If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, because of this the world hates you. ²⁰ Remember the word that I said to you, 'A slave is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you; if they kept My word, they will keep yours also.

There is a kind of encouragement here. It is a hard truth, a hard encouragement. Jesus lets his disciples know, "It's not you. It's me." If we are faithful to the message of Jesus, we will experience opposition, hatred, even persecution at times from the world. There is also an assumption of witness here. "If they kept my word they will keep yours also." Jesus assumes his disciples are going to be speaking into the world. Jesus glorified the Father and showed love to the world by speaking truth to the world. He took from the Father and gave to the world. The disciples of Jesus continue that mission. We take what Jesus has given us from the Father and we speak that truth into the world.

The Hostility is Against the Father and Son Represented by the Witness (21-24) Jesus continues in verse 21-22,

²¹ But all these things they will do to you for My name's sake, because they do not know the One who sent Me. ²² If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have sin, but now they have no excuse for their sin.

There are two points here. Opposition to Jesus is opposition to the Father. "Because they do not know the one who sent me." It's opposition to the Father. And the message of Jesus forces a choice. "If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have sin, but now they have no excuse for their sin." When faced with Jesus, when faced with the Gospel message, the human being is now responsible for how they respond to that Gospel message. These two points are repeated in 23-24, even stronger language, so let's go ahead and read that,

²³ He who hates Me hates My Father also. ²⁴ If I had not done among them the works which no one else did, they would not have sin; but now they have both seen and hated Me and My Father as well.

Again, opposition to Jesus is opposition to the Father. I have emphasized before how Jesus connects faith in himself with faith in the Father. There is no true religion that proclaims a belief in God and yet, rejects Jesus Christ. To know Jesus is to know the Father. To reject Jesus is to reject the Father. The expression of that truth here is the strongest we have encountered so far, "He who hates me

hates my Father also." Jesus is the touch point. Lots of people believe lots of things about God. By coming into the world, God focuses the truth about himself onto Jesus. To hate the Gospel of Jesus Christ with its condemnation of sin, claim of authority, exclusive way of salvation, is to hate God. Jesus does not allow for an alternative position.

Jesus is a catalyst. He creates a reaction, whether positive or negative. Jesus is repeating here what he said of the Pharisees at the end of chapter 9. The Jews of Israel did not have opportunity to commit the specific sin of rejecting the Messiah until the Messiah came. His coming revealed truth about the hearts of most of Israel's leaders and citizens. Before the coming of Jesus everybody could be really happy about the idea of the Messiah. We all want the Messiah! Let the Messiah come! They carried on the ritual worship of Yahweh. But when faced with Yahweh in the flesh, they want no part in him, revealing the falseness of their religion all along. Jesus offended them. Jesus, the fulfillment of the promises of the heart of the Old Covenant offended them. Did they really believe in the Old Covenant? No! His presence drew out the sin of their own belief, their own self-righteousness, their own false understanding of Scripture. The true state of the heart is revealed by their response to Jesus. Now, I have to be careful about this.

As Christians, we can do and say all kinds of things in the name of Jesus that are offensive. We can miscommunicate the Gospel. Last week a friend of mine posted a picture of a church sign, you know, one of those signs outside of the church, and it read, "Don't let worries kill you let the church help." Yeah, the church is not always the lighthouse she is meant to be. So, opposition is not always opposition against Jesus. Sometimes it's opposition against the behavior, the words, the attitudes, the actions of the people who claim to be disciples of Jesus.

When we encounter opposition from the world, wisdom demands that we pause for some self-reflections to consider our own part in the tension. What offends? My insensitivity, my politics, my poor communication, my poor timing? Or is it not me? Has this person been hurt by the church? By someone else? Have they grown up under legalism? Have they been injured by a Christian parent or rejected by a Christian leader or so-called Christian friend? Do they really hate Jesus, or have they been hurt by followers of Jesus so that they developed a false image of Jesus? Jesus' words here are not meant to give us a free pass from critique. We can't assume that all opposition is against our pure explanation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And Jesus is not trying to validate in us a victim complex.

He does mean to equip us with the truth that no matter how loving you are, how aware, how patient, how clear, the Gospel message rightly understood is going to create opposition. In fact, even though your goal is to be kind and gentle, if you never produce opposition in your witness then something is off with your Gospel. Something's not being said. Are you avoiding calling sin - sin? Are you avoiding the idea of hell? Are you avoiding the truth that Jesus is the only way? Are you avoiding challenging wrong perspectives about Jesus? In Jesus' own message, sin, hell, the truth of his nature, the exclusivity of his claims are all essential to the good news he preached. When we leave these things out, we're giving a partial Gospel.

When Jesus told the Samaritan woman, she had five husbands and her current man was not her husband, he was bringing her sin into the conversation. She embraced his message. When Jesus told the crowd at the Feast of Booths, "You are slaves to sin," they hated him and rejected his message.

Jesus is not surprised by the hatred of the world. He tells us in verse 25 the Psalms foretold it, "But they have done this to fulfill the word that is written in their Law, 'They hated Me without a cause."

This expected opposition is not an excuse for complete separation. Our response is not to cut ourselves off from the world. Just as he willingly came to a world that would reject him, Jesus expects his disciples to continue to engage with the world. Verses 26 and 27 state his expectation.

Opposition Does Not Remove the Expectation for Witness (15:26-16:4a)

²⁶ When the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, *that is* the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify about Me, ²⁷ and you *will* testify also, because you have been with Me from the beginning.

The reference to the Spirit here links us to the next passage. We will consider more the role of the Spirit in witness in just a moment. It is enough here to recognize that the Spirit continues on the work of Jesus Christ. And we play a part in that. The role of human witness now shifts from the incarnate Jesus to the disciples he has prepared. We are his body. We assume the responsibility of human witness to the human world.

That is what disciples do. Disciples witness. John the Baptist is introduced in the prologue as the one who came as a witness to the light. John the writer gives us this Gospel as his witness, telling us at the end, "this is the disciple who bears witness of these things and wrote these things (21:24)." We read about Andrew going to get Peter, exclaiming, "We found the Messiah." And we read about Philip going to get Nathaniel, announcing, "We found him whom Moses wrote about (1:45)." We even see a Samaritan woman running to tell her village, she thinks she may have met the Messiah.

Disciples witness. John the Baptist testifies, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" Peter testifies, "We have believed and come to know that you are the Holy One of God." Martha testifies, "Yes, Lord; I have believed that you are the Christ, the Son of God." Mary Magdalene testifies, "I have seen the Lord." Thomas testifies, "My Lord and my God." Disciples testify to what they believe about Jesus.

As a student in college my brother and I helped lead a small group Bible study. One night a local Christian pastor asked if he could attend. I was nervous because we knew each other and I knew we did not see eye to eye on faith in Jesus as the only way to God or on the importance of sharing the Gospel or on the Bible as literally God's Word. But he said he had a visitor with him from Tanzania who he'd like to introduce to us. So, I said, "Okay. Come on." I did not feel like I could say no.

We went ahead with our planned study about the ministry of reconciliation in 2 Corinthians 5. And here are some of the things Paul says in that passage,

For we must all appear before he judgment seat of Christ, that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he had done, whether good or bad. Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade men (10-11)...[and he says]...For the love of Christ compels us, having concluded this, that one died for all, therefore all died (14)...[and]...Therefore we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were entreating through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. He made him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in him (20-21).

This stands out to me in Paul's language here, "We persuade men." "The love of Christ compels us." "We are ambassadors of Christ, entreating you to be reconciled to God through Jesus Christ." My brother and I began to talk about the idea of being trained to share our faith. How do we do this? How do we entreat? How do we persuade? And I knew the visiting pastor disagreed with us, the need for evangelism, the exclusivity of the Gospel, but the text from Paul seemed so clear.

And I'll never forget what happened next. Instead of saying anything himself, the pastor turned to the guest he had brought from Tanzania and asked him, "Brother John, how do you train people to do evangelism in Tanzania?" I have no idea what he expected Brother John to say. Brother John paused and then he said, "We do not train people to share their faith." That's not what I hoped he would say. But Brother John continued, "We do not train people to share their faith. We just do it. If you are traveling on the bus, you talk about Jesus. If you are at a wedding, you talk about Jesus. If you are at a funeral, you talk about Jesus. You do not need training. You just tell people about Jesus."

Amen! Thank you, brother John! A disciple is a witness. A witness is someone who gives testimony to what he or she has seen or heard. You just share what you know about Jesus.

Jesus told his disciples these things to prepare them for what he knows is coming. Jesus knows how quickly society can turn from calling out, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord" to "Crucify him, crucify him." The praise of society can turn on you quickly. Jesus concludes the section in 16:1-4a.

¹ These things I have spoken to you so that you may be kept from stumbling. ² They will make you outcasts from the synagogue, but an hour is coming for everyone who kills you to think that he is offering service to God. ³ These things they will do because they have not known the Father or Me. ⁴ But these things I have spoken to you, so that when their hour comes, you may remember that I told you of them.

Recognizing how much opposition Jesus experienced from his own people and recognizing how strongly the values, desires and perspectives of the world are set against the Word of God and the Gospel of Jesus Christ, it is a wonder not that we receive opposition, but that anyone would ever believe our message. There will be opposition. Will there be any reception?

I've often felt that way. Why would anybody believe me? But that feeling runs contrary to the world-wide evidence that God is at work, bringing people to himself from every culture and every walk of life. God is creating a remnant in every people, every tribe, every nation. So against all odds, against the opposition of the world, of secular society and nationalistic religions, against apathy and relativism, people are placing their faith in Jesus Christ.

Jesus is not surprised by opposition to the Gospel. He is also not surprised by the success of the Gospel. He said in 15:16, "You did not choose me, but I chose you, and appointed you, that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain." How is it that we produce fruit that remains? Well, we don't. The branches do not produce the fruit. The life-giving power that comes from the vine produces fruit. It is not on us to convince people to believe in Jesus. We abide in Christ. And we give witness to the hope we have in him. And we trust him to work in the hearts of people to convict them of their need for a savior.

The Holy Spirit's Work of Witness to the World (John 16:4b-15)

This assurance that we do not bear responsibility for changing hearts through our witness comes in the next section. It comes in John 16:5-15. I already addressed this section in a previous lesson. I am not going to go through it in-depth now. I just want to focus on this one idea in the passage that we do not witness alone but in harmony with the Holy Spirit. First, I'm going to make a comment on our structure. Then I will read the passage. Then I will highlight that one point.

First, a word on our structure. Remember that chapters 13-17 are arranged chiastically. Our center is chapter 15, or more precisely 15:1-16:4a. That's the central section. The two inner sections that frame this central section, are the second half of chapter 14 and the first half of chapter 16. These are the pair of passages in which Jesus promises the Helper, the Holy Spirit. We addressed both of these passages together in an earlier lesson, focusing on that idea of Jesus going away and sending the Holy Spirit.

Chiastic pairs share common words or common themes, but often provide distinct information about the shared theme. For example, in chapter 14 the idea connected to the sending of the Holy Spirit is showing love through obedience. The idea has to do with the believer's heart. The true believer loves God, therefore obeys. This is a work of the Holy Spirit. That focus in chapter 14 lead right into the vine and branches metaphor in chapter 15, which provides an image for our spiritual relationship with Jesus. Abiding in Christ is walking in the Spirit. We depend on him to work in us, to guide us, to empower us, to transform us from the inside.

We are now coming to the second passage on the Holy Spirit in chapter 16. This passage parallels the first in regard to Jesus sending the Spirit and calling the Spirit our Helper, our Counselor and in calling him the Spirit of truth.

And with all the parallel information, there is also new information. The focus in chapter 16 is not on the Spirit's work in us as believers, but on the Spirit's witness to the world. Just as the focus in the end of chapter 14 led right into the language of abiding at the beginning of 15, so also, the focus of chapter 16 flows naturally from Jesus' conversation about the disciples' relationship to the world at the end of 15. So there's a natural flow. We move from Holy Spirit into the language of abiding, and than we move to the language of the world, and then we move to the Holy Spirit witnessing to the world. The world hates Jesus and hates those who speak the words of Jesus. Still, the disciple is given the mission to speak the words of Jesus to the world. How can our witness have any fruit if the world hates our words?

The fruit comes because it is not our words alone, but our words in harmony with the work of the Holy Spirit. Let's read the passage. This is John 16:4b-16:15.

And these things I did not say to you at the beginning because I was with you. ⁵ But now I am going to Him who sent Me; and none of you asks Me, 'Where are You going?' ⁶ But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your heart. ⁷ But I tell you the truth, it is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I go, I will send Him to you. ⁸ And He, when He comes, will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment; ⁹ concerning sin, because they do not believe in Me; ¹⁰ and concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father and you no longer see Me; ¹¹ and concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world has been judged. ¹² I have many more things to say to you, but you cannot bear *them* now. ¹³ But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak on His own initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak; and He will disclose to you what is to come. ¹⁴ He will glorify Me, for He will take of Mine and will disclose *it* to you. ¹⁵ All things that the Father has are Mine; therefore I said that He takes of Mine and will disclose *it* to you.

Let's focus in on verses 8-11. This is the part I did not address in the previous lesson on this passage. The main idea is in verse 8. When the Holy Spirit comes, "He will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment." This is that one idea I want us to focus on, that our witness is not our witness alone. Our witness is in harmony with the work the Holy Spirit is doing among people of the world. Where we have previously concentrated in the work of the Holy Spirit in the believer, this text indicates the Holy Spirit's work is among non-believers, among people who have yet to believe in Jesus Christ. It is a work of conviction. What does that mean? What is the Holy Spirit doing?

We have noted that Jesus used the term "parakletos" in referring to the Holy Spirit. In my Bible that's translated as "helper." In normal Greek usage it was a legal term, meaning "someone who gave help, assistance or counsel in a legal case." The word "convict" here in verse 8 is also a legal term. A person charged with a crime is convicted when the judge declares him guilty. Verse 8 could mean that the Holy Spirit declares the world guilty as a judge presiding over a case.

That seems to fit with verse 8, but once we move on to the explanations in 9-11 the idea of the Spirit proclaiming the sentence of guilty over the world does not match up exactly. I agree with Carson that what's in here is something more personal. The Holy Spirit is working in the hearts and minds of individuals to convict them that they have come up short in regard to sin, righteousness and judgment; to convict them that they need a doctor, that they need a Savior, that they're in trouble.

We have a huge barrier as witnesses to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. How are we going to proclaim the Gospel in such a way that brings individuals to repentance and faith when those people hate the message of Jesus and have rejected him? The more clearly they hear it, the more they reject it. If the moral state of human beings is corrupted to the point that they claim to be on fine terms with God even while slaves to sin and lost in darkness, how does a person in that state ever come to see his need for a savior and the truth that Jesus is that savior? How do I convince the apathetic or self-satisfied Muslim, Hindu, cultural Christian, atheist, agnostic, relativist? How do I convince them that they are lost without hope, guilty of sin and in desperate need of the grace of Jesus Christ?

In the end, I don't. I can't. I can't bring anybody to faith in Jesus Christ. I can give witness. I can learn to address emotional stumbling blocks and intellectual barriers. I can learn to communicate the Gospel clearly. I can ask good questions. I can build relationship. I can put in effort to become better at my part. But in the end, I can produce nothing apart from Jesus. The Holy Spirit must open the eyes of the heart. The Holy Spirit must do the work of conviction. So, Jesus tells us, "And He, when He comes, will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment."

Jesus goes on to explain those three ideas.

In verse 9, He says the Holy Spirit convicts the world "concerning sin, because they do not believe in Me." The primary sin of the Jews who interacted with Jesus was their denial of him as Messiah. They rejected his words and they rejected the miraculous works he did through the power of the Holy Spirit. And without recognizing him, they cannot move towards receiving him as their Savior. And now this is true of the whole world. God has died on a cross to save the world from its sin. And as long as a person remains in rebellion against Jesus Christ, they cannot receive him as their Savior. They need to be convicted of their sin of rejecting Jesus.

In verse 10, Jesus says the Holy Spirit convicts the world "concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father and you no longer see Me." Not only does the Gospel message need people to open their eyes to their own sin, the Gospel message also needs people to see the emptiness of their own righteousness. Paul eventually saw all of his righteous works as a Pharisee as dirty rags. He's quoting from Isaiah. Isaiah uses the same language. What is our righteousness in the end? National religions blind people to the reality that you are not okay. Those natural religions make us feel okay, gives us stuff to do so that we can feel righteous. And if we go to church and pray and do some extra ritual and try to behave morally to some degree, then our religious systems give us a pat on the back, saying "good job" and leads us to imagine that our ritual and morality and faith has somehow overcome the great deficit of sin, that we have our own righteousness. Non-religious people play a similar mental game by which they convince themselves that they are basically good and basically decent, that they're sincere and their pet causes prove them to be righteous. As long as I'm sincere and I care about something, I'm a good person. There's no problem.

When Jesus was present among the Jews, he himself convicted them of their faulty sense of righteousness. He was God's righteousness among them. Consider the healings Jesus performed on the Sabbath. That challenged the religious people. "This is righteous to do these rituals! How dare you heal?" The Pharisees could not get past the fact that he made mud on a holy day, even when it led to healing a man born blind **from birth (42:55)**. Jesus' word pierced through the false assurance of human ritual and morality. And now, as he is leaving, Jesus is telling us the Holy Spirit will continue this work of conviction "because I am returning to the Father and will no longer be present among you to do it myself."

In verse 11, Jesus says the Holy Spirit convicts the world "concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world has been judged." Paul described human ability to judge moral and spiritual truth this way,

"Walk no longer as the Gentiles walk, in the futility of their mind, being darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness of their heart (Ephesians 4:17-18)."

That's the judgment that comes out of the human heart, and that is influenced by Satan. The world cannot judge moral and spiritual truth rightly. It might get some things right occasionally but it cannot come with a true system of values and desires and perspectives. Jesus challenged the crowds in Jerusalem, "Do not judge according to appearances, but judge with righteous judgment (7:24)." And he claimed of himself, "My judgment is true (8:16)." The word of Jesus sanctifies. The word of Jesus sets us free. But before we accept the authority of Scripture, we must recognize the darkness, the futility of our own human judgments. We must accept that we are blind before we're going to seek help to see.

The conviction of our judgments is connected here to the judgment of this world's ruler. The world is influence in its sense of value and desire and truth by the thief, the liar, the murderer who is Satan. He began his influence with Eve, turning her against the good Word of God. He has been at work ever since the fall of the first Adam to keep humankind bound and separated from the life of God. He failed to tempt or thwart the second Adam. Satan has been shown false and has been condemned by the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus could not be kept down because Jesus was true and righteous. He is the one who really holds authority. The world aligns with the values of Satan in rebellion against heaven. The world has been judged with its ruler for rejecting and murdering the Son whom God sent, the true King Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit is at work in the hearts of men and women to convict them of their false values, false perspectives, false judgments.

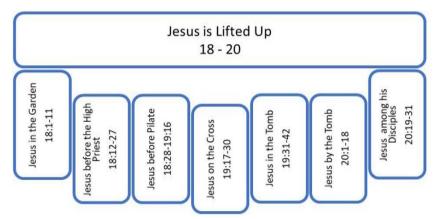
Can we expect blind people, blind to their own sin, their own sense of righteousness, their own false judgments, can we expect them to believe a word we say about Jesus Christ? Yes, we can. Because it is not up to us to overturn their blindness. That is the work of the Holy Spirit. We witness to the hope we have in Jesus and entrust the results to God. He produces the fruit.

Reflection questions

- 1. Read John 15:18-16:4a. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What are some questions that come to mind?
- 2. How does this passage help develop John's description of conflict between Jesus and the world from the prologue, specifically 1:5, 10-11?
- 3. In a quick survey of the Gospel what are three examples of opposition to Jesus' own self-witness?
- 4. How does John 15:18-16:4a help you understand your place in the conflict between the light of Jesus and darkness of the world?
- 5. Read John 16:8-11. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What are some questions that come to mind?
- 6. How do you understand the role of the Spirit, specifically in each of the three statements in 9, 10 and 11?
- 7. How does this passage help you to understand the hope of 1:12 and 15:16?
- 8. In a quick survey of the Gospel what are three examples of positive response to Jesus' own self-witness?
- 9. How would you summarize the work of witness in the world in a way that recognizes the negative reality and the positive reality? What should a disciple who engages in witness expect?
- 10. How have you seen both sides of this reality in your own life?

Lesson 28: John 16:16-33 Ask the Father in My Name

Introduction



In John 16:16-33, Jesus shifts from witness to the world back to the great sorrow about to fall on his disciples. Our lesson consists of two main parts. First, we will walk through the text with a focus on the disciples' confusion. Then we will address the tricky issue of prayer that I have been putting off since chapter 14. Let's get right into the text.

Jesus Comforts His Disciples (John 16:16-33)

¹⁶ "A little while, and you will no longer see Me; and again a little while, and you will see Me." ¹⁷ Some of His disciples then said to one another, "What is this thing He is telling us, 'A little while, and you will not see Me; and again a little while, and you will see Me'; and, 'because I go to the Father'?" 18 So they were saying, "What is this that He says, 'A little while'? We do not know what He is talking about." 19 Jesus knew that they wished to question Him, and He said to them, "Are you deliberating together about this, that I said, 'A little while, and you will not see Me, and again a little while, and you will see Me'? 20 Truly, truly, I say to you, that you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice; you will grieve, but your grief will be turned into joy. ²¹ Whenever a woman is in labor she has pain, because her hour has come; but when she gives birth to the child, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy that a child has been born into the world. ²² Therefore you too have grief now; but I will see you again, and your heart will rejoice, and no one will take your joy away from you. 23 In that day you will not question Me about anything. Truly, truly, I say to you, if you ask the Father for anything in My name, He will give it to you. 24 Until now you have asked for nothing in My name; ask and you will receive, so that your joy may be made full. ²⁵ These things I have spoken to you in figurative language; an hour is coming when I will no longer speak to you in figurative language, but will tell you plainly of the Father. ²⁶ In that day you will ask in My name, and I do not say to you that I will request of the Father on your behalf; ²⁷ for the Father Himself loves you, because you have loved Me and have believed that I came forth from the Father. ²⁸ I came forth from the Father and have come into the world; I am leaving the world again and going to the Father." ²⁹ His disciples said, "Lo, now You are speaking plainly and are not using a figure of speech. 30 "Now we know that You know all things, and have no need for anyone to question You; by this we believe that You came from God." 31 Jesus answered them, "Do you now believe? ³² Behold, an hour is coming, and has *already* come, for you to be scattered, each to his own home, and to leave Me alone; and yet I am not alone, because the Father is with Me. 33 These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world."

Jesus reconfirms the sad news of his departure (16-19)

Jesus returns here to the theme that has run through these chapters, the theme of his departure. This passage in the second half of chapter 16 parallels the first half of chapter 14. Jesus acknowledged the sorrow and confusion the disciples were beginning to experience by his

announcement. Jesus is preparing them for anguish that is to come very soon. He said in the first verse of that previous section, "Let not your heart be troubled; **believe** in God, **believe** also in Me." Belief is the most fundamental heart attitude of the disciple. When we struggle, when we are confused, when we don't feel love or humility or the desire for God's glory, when our heart is not with God, when our own circumstances close about and the positive emotions of the Spirit leave us, we have left the choice to believe. "Let not your heart be troubled; **believe** in God, **believe** also in Me."

Here in this section Jesus affirms that his disciples have indeed believed, "You have loved me and have believed that I came forth from the Father." But even as he affirms the reality of their belief, he also questions the extent or clarity of their belief, asking questioningly, "Do you now believe? Behold, an hour is coming and has already come, for you to be scattered."

There is real belief here. There has been a true, initial yielding to Jesus as Lord and Savior. They have passed the crucial moment. Still, that moment is only the beginning of belief. All of us who have believed in Christ know the reality of tension in our belief. Like the man who cried out to Jesus, "I believe, help my unbelief!" Belief describes both that absolute starting point when you place your faith in Jesus, you have seen him, you spiritually see him, he's opened your eyes. But we can also use this idea of belief to describe the ongoing process of trusting God. The moment we truly believe, we are forgiven of our sins and made eternally secure in Christ. We're born again. At the same time, it is a new birth that begins a lifelong process of growth in faith.

These disciples are at the beginning. Their struggle to understand Jesus is apparent. Jesus repeats the announcement of his going. "A little while, and you will no longer see Me; and again a little while, and you will see Me." The disciples still do not understand clearly what Jesus is talking about. And that lack of understanding explains a comment I skipped over in our last section. Jesus said in 16:5, "But now I am going to Him who sent Me; and none of you asks Me, 'Where are you going?'" That's a curious thing for Jesus to say. It doesn't sound quite right, does it? And it's exactly what Peter asked back in chapter 13, verse 36. He did ask, "Lord, where are you going?" And now Jesus is saying, "None of you ask where I'm going."

We understand this by understanding that there is a progression of dialogue going on through this evening. Peter asks. But then he is immediately told he is going to deny Jesus. And then in a little bit Thomas asks, "How can we know the way?" And Jesus says, "I am the way to the Father." And Philip says, "Show us the Father." Jesus responds, "Do you not know me, Phillip?" And then Jesus goes on to teach. Peter spoke up, and Thomas spoke up, and Philip, and they all show that they do not quite get what Jesus is saying. And as Jesus continues to teach, no one comes back for clarification to the question, "But where are you going? You never answered, Jesus, where you are going. We don't get it." So Jesus doesn't mean that no one has asked this question at all when he says that in 16:5. He means, "You just let the question drop and you still do not understand. Are you not going to asking me? Are you not going to pursue understanding?" You know, nobody is asking me where am I going.

At the very end of chapter 14, they had left the upper room. Perhaps Jesus is teaching as they walk. We don't really know the setting of this dialogue, or this teaching. It's more teaching than dialogue. By chapter 18, they're getting ready to cross over the Kidron valley out of Jerusalem to the Garden of Gethsemane. So maybe they're walking through Jerusalem as Jesus is teaching. And we can imagine as they walk that the disciples begin to talk among themselves. You know, Jesus is teaching but then they're talking about it, wondering what Jesus is saying, without asking him directly. And they are confused. He is going away to the Father. But they do not understand how, or where exactly, or even when. What does he mean in a little while? That's the specific detail they are discussing here. Let's read verses 17 and 18.

¹⁷ Some of His disciples then said to one another, "What is this thing He is telling us, 'A little while, and you will not see Me; and again a little while, and you will see Me'; and, 'because I go

to the Father'?" ¹⁸ So they were saying, "What is this that He says, 'A little while'? We do not know what He is talking about."

Jesus hears them, or he just knows what they're talking about because he is Jesus. So we have verse 19,

¹⁹ Jesus knew that they wished to question Him, and He said to them, "Are you deliberating together about this, that I said, 'A little while, and you will not see Me, and again a little while, and you will see Me'?"

The disciples do not know what "a little while" means. We who read the story know. We know that Jesus is going to be betrayed this night. He's going to be arrested and he's going to be crucified on the next day. "A little while" means it's really a little while.

Why didn't Jesus just tell them that? I don't know but I can imagine. I doubt they would have been able to pay attention to anything that Jesus has been telling them if they knew he was getting ready to be arrested and crucified. So, Jesus has more to say. He's not ready yet to reveal to them the extent of the anguish that is about to happen.

Jesus gives the disciples a metaphor of joy (20-22)

Instead of telling the disciples directly what trial was coming, Jesus gives them a metaphor of hope through suffering. This is verses 20-22,

²⁰ "Truly, truly, I say to you, that you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice; you will grieve, but your grief will be turned into joy. ²¹ Whenever a woman is in labor she has pain, because her hour has come; but when she gives birth to the child, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy that a child has been born into the world. ²² Therefore you too have grief now; but I will see you again, and your heart will rejoice, and no one *will* take your joy away from you."

My wife Brenda and I recently read this with our teenage daughter Claire. And afterwards, Claire commented, "Well, mom is the only one here qualified to judge this metaphor." Claire was right. And Brenda responded, "It's true. For me, I do not remember the pain when I think about it. I just remember my babies."

Brenda did not forget the pain because it was minor. The pain was intense. But the pain was not lasting. And great joy waited on the other side. Not only did the joy push aside the memory of pain when the baby came, but before that the anticipation of joy, the anticipation of the baby provided strength to go through the pain. And that's what Jesus is saying, that there is a great joy. You're going to see me again. There will be restoration. But you have to pass through some intense suffering to get there.

He does not deny the suffering of grief and loss that is getting ready to come onto the disciples. He does not say, "If you believe, you will not hurt, you will not feel loss, you will not grieve." That's not the picture of discipleship Jesus gives. He's telling us we will suffer. Jesus does not say that faith takes away the pain. He does not say you're going to enjoy the pain. You're not going to enjoy suffering. He says the world will rejoice. The world is against you. You'll have to suffer that, you'll be opposed. There will be some who are glad at your pain. And you will grieve. You will suffer anguish. But your anguish will turn into joy and you will forget your grief. Darkness will fall. But Sunday is coming.

Jesus has more than one application for his followers. The immediate anguish is the anguish of betrayal, fear, shame, loss, the death of Jesus. And they are getting ready to suffer. But in only three days they will see Jesus again. They will see him after he raises from the dead. So that really applies to the baby metaphor. There's this short, intense pain and then, joy and the realization that Jesus has defeated death. And that's the first, immediate application of this metaphor. The second application will be after Jesus ascends into heaven. That leave taking will not be full of anguish but will include loss. Jesus will be gone. And he's going to be gone for a long time. But when they see him again in death, their joy will be made full.

A third application of this metaphor has to do with a general principle for our life with God. You know, we lose someone we love. There is real suffering that Jesus doesn't deny. But there is also going to be joy, if that person is a believer, we are going to meet them again in heaven. This life has its trials and its struggles but if we know Jesus, we have tasted some joy of knowing him, whatever that is, there is a hope we have that, when we are with Jesus, as intense and as long as the suffering is here, we can't deny it here and it's very real here and it feels like forever here; whatever it is here, when we are there with him we will forget it because the joy of being with Christ will overwhelm, will shove aside the memory of suffering. Jesus' next words to the disciples here apply to that longer separation. He says, "In that day you will not question Me about anything." That statement alone is a tough one to understand. "You will not question me about anything." What's he talking about? Why will they not ask Jesus anything? Because he is gone? Yes, that's the simple explanation. "That day" refers to the next stage of history: in that day, the day after Jesus has come, died on the cross, returned to heaven; that day or period of time before he comes again. "In that day you will not question Me about anything." Why not? Well, one, because Jesus is not going to be present with them, and two, because Jesus is telling them, "Address your prayers to the Father." Jesus makes that clarification. This is 23b-28. It's a bit longer passage.

Jesus reconfirms his promise to answer prayer (23-28)

Truly, truly, I say to you, if you ask the Father for anything in My name, He will give it to you. ²⁴ Until now you have asked for nothing in My name; ask and you will receive, so that your joy may be made full. ²⁵ These things I have spoken to you in figurative language; an hour is coming when I will no longer speak to you in figurative language, but will tell you plainly of the Father. ²⁶ In that day you will ask in My name, and I do not say to you that I will request of the Father on your behalf; ²⁷ for the Father Himself loves you, because you have loved Me and have believed that I came forth from the Father. ²⁸ I came forth from the Father and have come into the world; I am leaving the world again and going to the Father."

This is one of those new things that comes with the new covenant. Jesus has already adjusted the second great commandment, "Love your neighbor as yourself," to the new commandment, "Love one another as I have loved you." Everything for the believer in God is adjusted by the new reality of Jesus having come, having died on the cross, and having returned to glory. Our understanding of love for others is adjusted in light of the model of Jesus. Instead of, "Love your neighbor," it's "Love as Jesus has loved you." So we define love according to Jesus. So also, our prayer is adjusted. Before this nobody prayed in the name of Jesus. They prayed directly to Yahweh or to Elohim. We still pray to God. But the new reality of Jesus having come to the Earth changes how we pray to God. Jesus invites us to pray to him as Father. That wasn't unheard of in the Old Covenant but that becomes the norm in the New. And Jesus tells us to pray in the name of Jesus. Pray in my name. And that's completely new. Nobody prayed in the name of somebody else before, not any good Jew. But now we're praying in the name of Jesus.

What does not change is that we don't pray to somebody else. We are still praying to Creator God alone. We don't have any other mediator. We pray to God. Jesus does not even instruct us to pray to him. He accepted worship during his life. He is God. He would hear our prayers. We could pray to Jesus. Still, in teaching us about prayer, he does not say, "make your requests to me." He directs us to the Father. We all know the famous way he taught his disciples to pray, "Our Father who is in heaven..." This is the emphasis Jesus gives here. He wants the glory to go to the Father. He wants us to know we have access to the Father. We have the love of the Father. He says here he's not going to request of the Father on our behalf. You see, Jesus is saying, "Don't pray to me to make a request to the Father." I'm certain he never had in mind, "pray to Mary," or "pray to the saints." That's totally foreign to the Bible. And Jesus here is even saying, "Don't pray to me to pray to the Father for you." He says, "You pray to the Father for the Father himself loves you, because you have loved Me and have believed that I came forth from the Father." Jesus assures us that God the Father wants us to bring our questions and our requests directly to him. And whenever we pray to somebody else as

mediator, even if it was another human being, and we don't feel like we can go to God and we feel like we have to ask somebody else, a priest or somebody to pray for us, then we're missing who God is. And we're missing the relationship that Jesus has established for us. It's okay to ask somebody to pray for you. I'm not saying that you shouldn't and I understand that we're all insecure. What I want to make sure is that we see what Jesus is saying. "The Father loves you. You don't even have to pray to me to pray to the Father for you. The Father wants to hear from you for he loves you."

We will come back to these words about prayer in a minute. First, let's finish out with the confused belief of the disciples. Jesus does acknowledge that he has been speaking in figurative language that may not be easily understood. Jesus would do this during his ministry for different reasons. He did it to as a teacher to create cognitive dissonance, that is, to create a kind of mental tensions that his listeners would learn from because they would be forced to wrestle with what he's saying. That's part of what I think he's doing here. He also does it as a faith challenge. If you really want to Jesus, he's told some kind of metaphor about the Kingdom, or a pearl, or spreading seed and you want to know what he's saying, you have to lean in, you have to seek after him, you have to ask. It's a faith challenge. He also did it when he judged that his followers did not have the capacity to understand more direct terms: Messiah or Christ, you know, Son of God. Jesus avoids those terms in reference to himself because he knows they would be misunderstood, so he speaks more figuratively, less directly. Here, Jesus tells his disciples, "an hour is coming when I will no longer speak to you in figurative language, but will tell you plainly of the Father."

The Disciples over-estimate their understanding (29-31)

If you take seriously without a smile what the disciples say next, then you're going to have trouble making sense of it. We need to smile here. Jesus just said,

 28 I came forth from the Father and have come into the world; I am leaving the world again and going to the Father."

Then his disciples say, ²⁹ "...Lo, now You are speaking plainly and are not using a figure of speech. ³⁰ Now we know that You know all things, and have no need for anyone to question You; by this we believe that You came from God."

Really? After all the confusion the disciples have expressed in their comments, Peter and Thomas and Philip, all Jesus has to do is say is, "I came from the Father and I've come into the world and I'm leaving the world again and going to the Father," and now somehow the disciples can claim, "Now, we know." What they say about Jesus is true. He knows all things and has no need to be questioned by anyone. His own witness of the Father is authoritative. It's true what they say. But what has Jesus just said to justify their claims, "Now we know" or "by this we believe", you know, "you're speaking plainly now"? The disciples are close to being like all the others in the Gospels who have claimed to know without really knowing, to see without seeing. They have gotten caught up in the moment, thinking they have insight when, in reality, they're still just as clueless as they were before.

Jesus' promise to speak plainly is for a future time. He says, "an hour is coming." And I can think of that time. After his resurrection, it's reported in Luke 24:44-45 when Jesus appears to his disciples he says,

"These are My words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled." Then He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures...

That's when, I imagine, Jesus is speaking plainly. After the resurrection, he's going to reveal to them truth from the Old Testament. He's going to show them things that they could not understand before the experience of the cross. They had to go through this first. So the disciples' claim of insight at this point is not credible and we have to smile there. They're a little over-excited, you know. They get this one little thing clearly that Jesus is going to the Father and now they think they know. And that's why in verse 31, "Jesus answered them, 'Do you now believe?'"

Jesus does not take time to correct them. They will soon see things differently. They have a heavy weight to bear. Nothing like his but still heavy. The experience is going to enable them to see. So Jesus doesn't really need to challenge their claim to belief. He'll just wait and let it play out. He gives a final word to strengthen them. This is 32-33.

Jesus reconfirms his promise to provide peace (32-22)

³² Behold, an hour is coming, and has *already* come, for you to be scattered, each to his own *home*, and to leave Me alone; and *yet* I am not alone, because the Father is with Me. ³³ These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world."

As when Jesus confronted Peter with the truth that he would deny Jesus, telling disciples here that they would scatter and leave him alone, that must have been hard from Jesus. And Jesus goes on to tell them these things so that they might have peace and take courage. How does telling them they will abandon him, that they will scatter promote peace and courage?

It does because it's hard truth. Jesus is not giving them false optimism. He said, "The truth is, you're going to fail." And so this doesn't give peace and courage now. It will after they scatter. After they fail. After they leave Jesus alone. They will remember that he knew they would fail. They will remember that he did not reject them for it or cast them out. Jesus knew it was coming. Their courage does not depend on their own success but on the fact that Jesus has overcome the world in spite of their weakness. They're strengthened by their faith in Jesus. And they are going to fail this time. But these men will grow from this failure. Every one of them will live to face of persecution. They will all die for Jesus. Everyone, except John, will go to his death, refusing to deny the name of Jesus. They are going to learn and grow and become courageous because when they do fail, they know from the words of Jesus that he invites them to come back.

They will also learn this truth, that on the other side of trial is joy. The metaphor is going to make a lot of sense to them afterwards. They will learn that the world may rejoice, but Jesus overcomes. They will learn there is peace in Jesus that the world cannot explain. They do not know that now. Jesus knows that. There are truths we simply must grow into through failure.

Interpreting the Promise of Prayer - Ask anything and I will do it.

Understanding prayer is another one of those truths we must grow into. This is the big question I have put off. It is one of the big questions of chapters 13-17. Jesus again promises again here that, if we ask for anything, the Father will give it to us. And that is a problem. Because we have asked for all kinds of things in our lives. We're prayed to God and he has not done it for us. We could say, "well, we have to ask according to his will. That's simple." But that makes it sound like a guessing game. You know, I will get it if I guess what his will is. If I pick the right box, I'll get what I want if what I want is in the box. Or we might say, "you have to ask with enough faith. You have to somehow drum up enough faith in you to kind of have power over God." If you have enough faith, or pure faith God will give you whatever. There is something to these answers about faith and the will of God, but it just comes out as a pat kind of truism. And I don't even think further about what Jesus has said here. You know, if I just try to give a quick, simple solution to the problem, then I'm missing completely the point of what Jesus is doing. That would be to act just like the disciples in this passage, to claim a truism, like, "You have to pray according to God's will." And I say, "Oh! Now I fully get prayer! Now I understand! Now it's all clear. You just have to pray according to God's will and then he answers. I get it." And then we forget about prayer and move on and act like we know what we're talking about. That's exactly what we must not do. Jesus expresses his words the way he expresses them to draw us in, to make us question, to make us confused and to create a problem that we now have to think about and reflect on. What does he mean, all we have to do is ask and God will answer whatever? How does that really work? What then is prayer?

I have resisted addressing the problem of this promise, three times already because we haven't had enough of what Jesus is saying to put it in the context. Here is our fourth opportunity and now Jesus has given us to think about. So, let's think about it.

We read the first promise of prayer in 14:13, the passage parallel to this one, "And whatever you ask in My name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son." Jesus repeated the promise twice in the central "abide" passage, first in 15:7, "If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it shall be done for you." And also in 15:16, "You did not choose Me, but I chose you, and appointed you, that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain, that whatever you ask of the Father in My name, he may give to you." We have the final version here in 16:23-24,

²³ ...Truly, truly, I say to you, if you ask the Father for anything in My name, He will give it to you. ²⁴ Until now you have asked for nothing in My name; ask and you will receive, so that your joy may be made full.

With four repetitions, we have to see that prayer is important to Jesus. The problem that arises from Jesus' teaching comes from the way he phrases the promise without qualification or condition. Jesus simply says, "If you ask anything in my name, he will give it to you." The phrasing changes slightly, but is essentially the same, "Whatever you ask, that I will do...ask whatever you wish, and it shall be done for you...if you ask anything in my name he will give it to you." You ask, he gives. That's what it seems to be saying.

We know these words have to have a qualification. They must. Because we do not get everything we ask for or everything we wish, certainly not. Jesus' words are drawing us into further consideration. He seems to be speaking plainly, not figuratively, but plainly is probably not the right word. I think he is speaking plainly to us as though we have a mature heart and mature faith, as though we have already become who he is making us to be. I think then this would make complete sense to us. He has put words in front of us that we have not yet grown into.

Before coming to Christ and early on in our relationship with Christ, the desires of our sin nature, the habits we have built up, the way we perceive God all affect how we understand and approach prayer. God is inviting us into conversation with himself. We can begin that right away. We can all talk. And in some way, I imagine God enjoys very much the talk of a baby Christian in prayer. It's very honest, very simple. Just like we enjoy the words of a toddler, the words of a four year old, or the words of a ten year old. The words of a 13 year old or 18 year old, in that range we're starting to have some ups and downs. When a young person becomes smart enough to have clever conversation but lacks the wisdom to see how much he or she does not know, despite their intelligence, that conversation is not always enjoyable. We have all been that young person. There is a move from innocence and openness in conversation, when we just say whatever, when ignorance comes across as wonder and delight and honesty that shifts to more knowing conversation, and as we grow the conversation is skewed by fear and pride and self-focus. Growing up as human beings, we learn to hide our true selves. We put on fig leaves. We cover up. We also become more self-centered and not always more self-aware. At the same time in our conversation we hold back, we don't reveal everything inside, and we also overreach, we say too much. This is true with people and it's definitely true of our relationship with God.

The disciples have just overreached with Jesus. They claim, "Now we know that you know all things." That may be a true statement, but they still do not understand why it is true or to what extent it is really true or even what's motivating their hearts to proclaim it. They don't really know why they're saying it. They speak out confidently from minds that are still dark and hearts that are still mixed. We can't come to God any other way. We come to God broken, and immature, and affected by our sin nature. He doesn't say, "Get right first, then come talk to me." Conversation, prayer, must start somewhere. It will grow as we grow, as we come to see ourselves clearly, as we come to know God truly.

What basic ideas underly Jesus' promise of prayer?

That's my basic premise. These plain and simple words of Jesus must be grown into to be understood. The clear problem that we do not get all we ask for alerts us to this reality that there's something that we don't get initially. There is something here that we must grow into.

My second basic premise is that the invitation stands whether we understand prayer or not. God has invited us to communicate with him. We are to pray. We are to ask for things, as a child to his Father. God wants us to communicate with him through all stages of our development.

My third basic premise is that prayer is an essential component for relationship with God in that through prayer we express our dependence on God. Our physical dependence, our spiritual dependence, our emotional dependence. We are dependent on God but we don't always express it. We want to be independent or self-reliant. Prayer is the way we communicate we are not self-reliant. Apart from Christ we can do nothing. Regular prayer acknowledges a need for God. We depend on him for life. He is our shepherd. He makes us lay down in green pastures. He leads us by quiet waters. He restores our soul. And he does it for his name's sake, that is to lead us into purpose and into glory. We depend on him.

Prayer is communication with God by which we express our love for him and our dependence on him. God invites us to this communication, knowing full well that we need to grow into it. Because that's basic.

What else do we see here? What ideas in these promises about prayer or in the surrounding context suggest to us the direction our growth needs to take? How do we need to grow in prayer?

How must we grow in order to understand prayer?

First, Jesus refers to God as Father. God is not a genie. God is not a power source that we tap into. God is not a being we try to manipulate. That's is the natural course of human prayer, that's the tendency, is to see prayer as a means to get what we want from God, rather than seeing prayer as a mode of loving communication with God. So we have to re-frame how we're understanding these verses. Prayer is not about me getting what I want. Prayer is about me entering into loving relationship with God and communicating to him.

Growing in prayer as relational communication

In the Old Testament, the third commandment is really about prayer. "Do not take the Lord's name in vain." We often hear that means, don't cuss and use God's name, and that is forbidden, too. But that's not what it's really about. If you think about the origin on the cussing, if somebody were to say, "God damn you," that's not some random explicative or frustration or anger. That is an attempt, originally, to call God as a power, "God, would you, please, damn this other person?" It's a call to harm somebody. That's what a curse is. At heart, it is an attempt to harness the power of God to carry out a personal agenda. And that is what it means to not take the God's name in vain. Do not try to harness the name of God as magic for your personal goals. That is not what prayer is meant to be, though that is so often what human prayer becomes: God exists for me to get done what I want to get done. It is the natural direction of our sinful flesh. We want some kind of spiritual power, even if he's greater than us we can manipulate him or control him or get him on our side, then that will help us to accomplish what we want to accomplish in life. It will give us control, or power, or safety, or security.

God as Father means he is the right authority over us. We submit to him. We make requests, not demands. We are trying to obey his will. We trust him with his answer, whether it is yes, or no, or maybe. God as Father also means he loves us, and we love him. Prayer is not magic. We're not trying to use words to harness spiritual power. Prayer is communication in a love relationship between heavenly Father and human child. In prayer we speak to God.

I have often been asked, "Why pray if God knows what is going to happen anyway?" It is an interesting question. And I think it is off the mark because it goes at a wrong human assumption of

prayer. It assumes that the real reason to pray is to get stuff. So if he's going to give it whether I pray or not, why should I pray? Because God really exists just as a power source for me to get stuff from. Isn't that really what the question is saying? Why pray if God knows stuff already? Well, why pray? Well, we talk to God to express our love and dependence on him. We talk to God that our perspective might change, that we might see as he sees. We talk to God because we don't really understand how it all works, we just know he told us to bring our requests. We talk to God because it is not all about getting stuff. It is about bringing ourselves, our heart, our mind, our soul to him. It's through prayer that we yield. It's through prayer that we cry out. It's through prayer that we unload burdens. It's through prayer we stop looking at our circumstances and we begin to see him, and our perspective changes. Prayer is communication with our heavenly Father. Of course he knows what's going to happen and of course he knows what he is going to do. But we don't. We don't even know what we really want. And it's not all about getting stuff from God. And maybe in the asking we will find out what we want. Regardless, we trust him in his will to accomplish what he wants to accomplish. We enter into prayer as communication between a son or a daughter, and their father. Doesn't matter if he knows what's going to happen or not.

Growing in prayer in the name of Jesus

So, first, we see Jesus inviting us in these promises to pray to God as Father. That's huge. Second, and what stands out as really new, we see Jesus inviting us to pray in his name. There is something simple here and something very deep here. By praying in the name of Jesus, we are stating something about who we believe God to be. If I pray in the name of Jesus, I'm not praying according to God's prophet Mohamed. I'm not praying to Mother God. I'm not praying to Krishna. I'm not praying to Saint Francis. All of those prayers indicate a certain belief about God that is contrary to the teaching of Jesus. When we pray in the name of Jesus to God the Father, we show our allegiance to Father and Son. This is what we believe. We show that we have believed in and yielded to the vision of who God is proclaimed by Jesus Christ. He is our Father and he receives prayer in the name of Jesus.

That is the simple basic idea. To pray in the name of Jesus is to make a statement of faith regarding who we believe God to be. The idea goes deeper. To pray in the name of Jesus is to pray according to the nature of Jesus. And this has something to do with our mind and our heart as we come into prayer. If you remember in the prologue in chapter 1, verse 12 and the purpose statement, chapter 20 verse 31, eternal life is not said to come does not come from belief, but to come from belief in the name of Jesus. It's to those who believe in the name of Jesus. That's a way of saying belief in Jesus according to who Jesus has revealed himself to be. Or to say, true belief in who Jesus really is. That's what it's meant by belief in the name of Jesus. Many have claimed belief in Jesus through this Gospel when their belief actually rests in a misconception of who the Messiah or the Prophet is. They believed in their version of Jesus. You can say you believe in Jesus, but if you deny that he is God and man, you don't believe in Jesus. If you deny he is the Word who has always been, you do not believe in Jesus. If you deny that he died in your place as the true sacrifice of atonement and there is no salvation apart from him, if you deny that, you do not believe in Jesus. You are rejecting something essential about his nature. You are not believing in his name as he has revealed it: the "I am." Name is not just the word "Jesus." Jesus is his name. But here, name means, "the nature of Jesus." To believe in his name is to believe in the fundamental truths about who he is.

To pray in the name of Jesus is a similar idea as believing in the name of Jesus. It is not simply a formal way to end a prayer, "...in the name of Jesus. Amen." We do that all the time without thinking about it. What we need to grow into is making a connection between the nature of Jesus and the requests we are making to God. If I'm going to end my prayer with, "In the name of Jesus," I seriously need to be thinking about can I really ask this in the name of Jesus? Do I believe that what I just asked for is in harmony with his nature? Jesus could ask that the Father remove the cup of suffering that was the cross. Jesus could ask that. But at the same time he could not bring himself to ask it if it was against the will of the Father. That was the nature of Jesus. Because of who he is, he added, "not my will but your will be done." And that wasn't just this formula Jesus came up with because that's

the right way to speak to God. That was the authentic expression of his heart. On one level, he did not desire the pain of the cross. Of course, he didn't. But on a deeper level, he desired the glory of God, he desired the salvation of humankind. He desired the strength and courage to carry out the will of God. That is what he truly wanted because that is his true nature. We're trying to pray according to that nature when we pray in the name of Jesus.

And that has an intellectual component. I am thinking as best I can with my mind whether I can honestly ask my request in light of who I know Jesus to be. I am thinking with my mind, can I pray this according to his name? Prayer is not merely an intellectual exercise. Prayer has a heart component. When I consider the wishes of my new heart, "What is it that I truly want?," I begin to find that deep in me I want the glory of God. I want to love God with my obedience. I want the courage, and goodness, and honesty that is Jesus. I want my heart to be in harmony with the name of Jesus.

I have these other wants that come out of my flesh. I have other perspectives that come out of my mind. But when I see who I am becoming in Jesus, I have a new set of desires and perspectives. I have a new vision for what life really is. This abundant life that Jesus spoke about does not come from my fleshly desires and habits and perspectives. I have a lot to learn about new life in him. I can see that in my soul. I need to reject, to put to death, the desires and perspectives and deeds of the flesh. I am learning to turn away from those desires of the flesh and turn towards the desires of the Spirit. This is to pray in the name of Jesus. It's to be walking in the Spirit of Jesus so that what I pray for comes out of my heart relationship with him.

In 15:7 Jesus said, "If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it shall be done for you." To pray in the name of Jesus, according to his nature, I need to abide in him and in his word. So it's walking in the Spirit and this continually understanding his Word so that I can have a clear vision of what it means to live for Jesus so that I can pray in his name, according to his nature.

Abiding in Christ makes me into the kind of person who prays in his name. And the person who prays in his name is the kind of person who is able to experience joy and peace from his relationship with God. That's why, when I pray in his name and he answers those prayers, and those prayers bring glory to God, then my joy is made full because I love God. And I love the idea both of God meeting my needs, but also of me successfully producing fruit for him.

Growing in prayer as an act of abiding intertwined with heart and fruit

All three of our tricky issues from chapter 14:12-15 are intertwined. Jesus declared that we will do greater works, you know, greater works than he did. He tells us to pray and ask, and God will do it for us. He says, "If you love me, you will be obedient." It's all connected. Because I love God, I want to be obedient. I want to do these great works. And he said I'm going to do great works. But if I'm going to do the great works God wants me to do, I've got to pray. Because that great work is to love, and I can't love like he loves. So it's all connected.

We can sum up all the truths of abiding that we've been talking about, just to remember. Because it's in this context that we have to understand prayer, that there is a heart of abiding. And it is fundamentally a heart of faith, of belief. It is a heart of love for the Father. It is a heart of humility. And it is a heart of glory. I want to bring glory to the Father. That's our heart. Belief, love, humility, glory.

And that leads us to acts. We want to act for God. And the fundamental act is prayer. That's first. We have to pray to show our dependence on Christ because without him we can do nothing of value. We pray, we're in his Word, we're obeying, and we're witnessing.

That's the acts of abiding coming out of our new heart, and from that we experience the fruit of love, of joy, of peace, of new life.

Let's sum up. Let's conclude the three basics of prayer. Do we understand prayer? Does a child understand communication before he starts to talk? No. Jesus invites us to pray before we

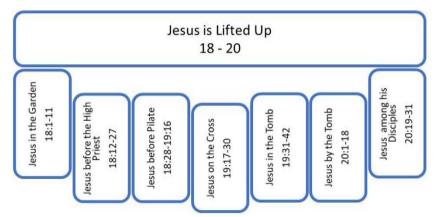
understand prayer so remember the three basics. First, prayer is a relational act of communication by which you express your love for and dependence on God your Father. That's what prayer is. Second, God your Father invites you to come into his presence no matter where you are in maturity or understanding. Come, come freely because you are in Jesus. If you have guilt, come, confess and be forgiven. If you have sorrow, come, be comforted. If you are confused, come, learn from him. If you have joy, come and worship. Come enjoy him. Just come. And third, prayer is something you grow into. You don't have to understand it to do it. You're going to grow into prayer over your life as you walk with God and as you keep talking to him.

Reflection questions

- 1. Read John 2:16-33. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What are some questions that come to mind?
- 2. How would you imagine the present emotional state of the disciples as Jesus is speaking with them? How do you imagine potential variation in their emotional states as the next 24 hours proceed through arrest, trial, and crucifixion and then through resurrection, appearance and ascension?
- 3. How might the metaphor of joy benefit the disciples through the immediate leaving of Jesus (death) and the future leaving of Jesus (ascension)?
- 4. Can you relate to the over-estimation the disciples make to their understanding of Jesus' teaching? When have you thought you understood only to later realize you barely understood or misunderstood? How are you doing now? Do you feel like you have life with Jesus all figured out?
- 5. Does Jesus' promise to answer prayer in 23-28 bother you at all, intellectually or emotionally, or not? Explain.
- 6. What is the difference between a magical/controlling view of prayer and a relational view of prayer? What does it mean to take God's name in vain?
- 7. What does it mean to pray in the name of Jesus and how is this connected to the abide language in chapter 15?
- 8. Do all of your prayers get answered? In light of the context here surrounding Jesus' promise, how would you explain the reality that not all your prayers get answered?
- 9. Do you need to be able to answer question 8? Could the answer be, "I am not quite sure. I think I need to keep praying and trust God that I will grow into the answer"?

Lesson 29: John 17:1-5 Jesus Prays for His Glory

Introduction



John chapter 17 begins, "These things Jesus spoke; and lifting up his eyes to heaven, he said..."

"These things Jesus spoke." At the beginning of chapter 13 Je sus laid aside his garments, took up a towel and washed his disciples' feet. He challenged them to wash one another's feet, be humble. Troubled in spirit, he then announced that one of them would betray him. When Judas had left, he charged the others with a new commandment, "Love as I have loved you." Jesus then commenced to speak. From chapter 13 to 16, we have the words of Jesus preparing his disciples for life after his crucifixion, resurrection and ascension.

Jesus spoke to them of a new reality that would be framed by belief in him. Followers of God love as he loves, pray in his name, abide in him. They would see the Father through seeing Jesus. They would love the Father by loving Jesus.

Much would remain the same. God is the same yesterday, today and forever. His nature has not changed. His moral character has not changed. The God of the New Testament is a God of justice, just as the God of the Old Testament is a God of grace. God's character does not change, ever. He's always been a God of grace and justice. He always will be a God of grace and justice. But he had given promises that were only now finding fulfillment in Jesus Christ.

In the Old Covenant God spoke his name to Moses,

⁶ Then the Lord passed by in front of him and proclaimed, "The Lord, the Lord God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; ⁷ who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave *the guilty* unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations." Exodus 34:6–7

God proclaimed his name, proclaimed his character. In the New Covenant we behold his name in Jesus, "The Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth."

In the Old Covenant, the Law was given externally to the people of God who were then called to live up to it. In the New Covenant, God sends his Son through the Spirit and we live through him. Abiding in Christ becomes our central metaphor for what it means to live in a dependent relationship with God. Apart from him we can do nothing. In him we produce fruit that lasts.

"These things Jesus spoke." He spoke to them of a new reality; a new paradigm for following God. And now, in chapter 17, having finished speaking to the disciples, Jesus gives them into the hands of the Father through prayer.

The Prayer of Sanctification

Let's read Jesus' prayer in full and then we will address it in two lessons. It is truly amazing to stop for a moment and just consider the fact that John has written down here words prayed from the soul

and heart of Jesus to God the Father concerning us. We are listening to Jesus pray for us. This is John 17:1-26,

¹ Jesus spoke these things; and lifting up His eyes to heaven, He said, "Father, the hour has come; glorify Your Son, that the Son may glorify You, ² even as You gave Him authority over all flesh, that to all whom You have given Him, He may give eternal life. ³ This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent. ⁴ I glorified You on the earth, having accomplished the work which You have given Me to do. ⁵ Now, Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was.

⁶ I have manifested Your name to the men whom You gave Me out of the world; they were Yours and You gave them to Me, and they have kept Your word. ⁷ Now they have come to know that everything You have given Me is from You; ⁸ for the words which You gave Me I have given to them; and they received *them* and truly understood that I came forth from You, and they believed that You sent Me. ⁹ I ask on their behalf; I do not ask on behalf of the world, but of those whom You have given Me; for they are Yours; ¹⁰ and all things that are Mine are Yours, and Yours are Mine; and I have been glorified in them. ¹¹ I am no longer in the world; and *yet* they themselves are in the world, and I come to You.

Holy Father, keep them in Your name, *the name* which You have given Me, that they may be one even as We *are*. ¹² While I was with them, I was keeping them in Your name which You have given Me; and I guarded them and not one of them perished but the son of perdition, so that the Scripture would be fulfilled. ¹³ But now I come to You; and these things I speak in the world so that they may have My joy made full in themselves. ¹⁴ I have given them Your word; and the world has hated them, because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. ¹⁵ I do not ask You to take them out of the world, but to keep them from the evil *one*. ¹⁶ They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. ¹⁷ Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth. ¹⁸ As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world. ¹⁹ For their sakes I sanctify Myself, that they themselves also may be sanctified in truth.

²⁰ I do not ask on behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word; ²¹ that they may all be one; even as You, Father, *are* in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that You sent Me. ²² The glory which You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one, just as We are one; ²³ I in them and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, so that the world may know that You sent Me, and loved them, even as You have loved Me. ²⁴ Father, I desire that they also, whom You have given Me, be with Me where I am, so that they may see My glory which You have given Me, for You loved Me before the foundation of the world. ²⁵ O righteous Father, although the world has not known You, yet I have known You; and these have known that You sent Me; ²⁶ and I have made Your name known to them, and will make it known, so that the love with which You loved Me may be in them, and I in them."

Jesus sanctified his disciples when he washed their feet. To be sanctified is to be cleansed for use by God and set apart for special purpose. It means, to be made holy. Jesus uses the language of holiness in this prayer when he asks the Father in verse 17 to sanctify the disciples in truth. This prayer is an act of sanctification that parallels the washing in chapter 13. It is a setting apart of his disciples for holy purpose. It is an act that does not apply only to these 11 men. Jesus expands his prayer in verse 20. Did you hear that? He prayed not only for them, but "for those also who believe in me through their word." That's you and me. We're the ones who have believed in Jesus through the word of the apostles. So, this prayer is for us also.

To be set apart does not mean narrowly to be set apart in a special Christian leadership role as an apostle, or preacher, or missionary. The prayer here is to be set apart in life in this world for God. This prayer of sanctification is for everyone who believes and receives the good news about Jesus. I love the way Ephesians 2:8-10 brings together the gospel message and the call to live it out for God.

⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, *it is* the gift of God; ⁹ not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.

It's basic Gospel message. You are not saved by what you do. You are saved as a gift of grace. So where, then, do works fit in? Well, verse 10,

¹⁰ For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.

If you have been born again, created anew in Christ Jesus, then God has works prepared for you to do - among your family, among your neighbors, among the people you interact with, with your children, with your spouse. He has chosen you to go and bear fruit for his glory as you walk with him through life abiding in Christ. There are good works for you to do. And Jesus prays this prayer of sanctification for you, that God would set you aside and enable you to live for him.

Jesus prays for us, but we not only for us in this prayer. In fact, his first request is going to be for himself. That request is in verses 1-5, and that's our focus for this lesson. We will cover the rest of the prayer in our next lesson.

The First Request: Glorify Me. (John 17:1-5)

What is Jesus requesting in his request for glory?

Jesus begins his prayer with a request for himself. In verse 2, Jesus asks, "Father, the hour has come, glorify your Son." He repeats the request in verse 5, "Glorify me in your own presence."

Glory is one of the oft repeated words in John 13-17. It shows up 17 times. Of course, Glory is a theme not just in these chapters but of the whole Gospel. John declared in the prologue, "We have beheld his glory." More recently, in Chapter 12, the chapter that transitioned us from the first half of the gospel to the second, Jesus announced, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. There Jesus spoke to God, asking, "Father glorify your name." Here Jesus asks that he himself be glorified.

Jesus makes an astounding claim to go along with the request. It's right up there with some of the most astonishing things he has said about himself so far. He specifically prayed, "Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed." This is Jesus' self-concept. This is who he considers himself to be: the one who shared glory with the Father before the Universe came to be. This isn't just a claim to predate Abraham, if that wasn't audacious enough. This is a claim to predate creation. "Restore the glory I had before the world existed." Remember John 1:1. John gets this from Jesus, "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God." Jesus has always existed.

The request to be glorified with the glory he had before the world, suggests that Jesus set aside his glory or covered over his glory when he came to earth. We can only approximately understand what that means, since this is getting us into the mystery of the nature of God. What does it mean to be Trinity? What does it mean for Jesus to be fully God, fully man? It's mysterious. We can think about it rationally, but ultimately it is super-rational. It is beyond our reasoning ability. It's beyond our experience. I am reminded of Philippians 2:7 where Paul says Jesus "emptied himself" when he came to earth as a man. Somehow, in some sense he gave up his glory, or set it aside during his time on earth, which is how we understand some of the things that Jesus said about his relationship to God, his submission to God, his not knowing all things, that only the Father knows all things. Well, how can that be if Jesus is God? There's a setting aside during his period on earth where he is not omniscient, he is not omnipresent; he's not everywhere, he is somehow contained in a human body, in the flesh. He dwelt in the flesh and so he had to empty himself, give up his glory. Peter, James and John got a glimpse, and nothing like the full glory of Christ but when other Gospels report going up on the mountain, and the three of them are with Jesus and he's transfigured before their eyes, that's just a peak of the glory of God.

God can reveal his glory along a continuum, something like using a dimmer switch with a light. We are told that God spoke face to face with Moses. Moses returned from those conversations with his own face shining. We are also told that no man can look upon God. God allowed Moses only to see a corner of his robe. "You can't see my glory, Moses." So, can we see God in his glory or not? That one's not so difficult. We cannot see God in his full glory. We can see God somehow in his veiled or filtered glory, when it's dimmed down for us.

But then what even do we mean when we talk about seeing God's glory? Glory is often related to light. Glory shines. God's glory was seen as a pillar of fire and it was seen as shining out from the tabernacle.

Is glory light? Well, no. It's manifested in light, but it's more than light. The connection of glory with God's name in Exodus 34:6-7, which I read before, takes us further in our understanding. The name of God is the essence of who he is, gracious, compassionate, slow to anger, just. When John says, "We beheld the glory of Jesus", he goes on to say, that Jesus is the only begotten, full of grace and truth. That's his name. That's who he is. It's his nature. Glory is connected with his nature, with his attributes, with the character of who he is.

If our nature is praiseworthy, then it is glorious. That which is beautiful and good and true about the name is the glory of the name. Your praiseworthy characteristics are your glory. God's praiseworthy nature, characteristics, attributes, that's his glory. And we can speak of that glory in two ways. His glory is the praiseworthiness of his character. It is an attribute that God, or it's a statement about the attributes of God. His glory is the praiseworthiness of his nature, of his character. We can also speak of God's glory as the manifestation of his character. In that sense, his glory is seen. It radiates out.

The sun provides a concrete example that can help us think about this. The sun exists as a gaseous ball of incredible power. That power extends out as both light and heat are released. When we consider the nature of the sun, we can say it is glorious. We can also say that the visible manifestation of the sun is glorious. You know, both when we think about the awesome power contained in it, and also when we're just talking about the phenomena that we witness, what we see. Both its attributes are glorious, but also that which emanates from it: we see the glory.

The manifestation of the sun's power, you know, just the tiny bit that we see, prevents us from viewing the sun directly for much more than a few seconds without harming our eyes. It is much better to view the sun through filtered glasses or even to take a video and watch the video instead of directly viewing the sun. That will protect our eyes from the light and the heat. If we were taken into space to stand before the sun, we would disintegrate in its presence. It's power, it's glory would overwhelm us. We can only view the sun from millions of miles distance. Even then, we have to filter the sun.

Imagine, then, the full exposure to the power, the glory of the one who made the sun. Imagine not only the physical power of God but the moral holiness of God. Standing in the presence of God's uncontained power would disintegrate us. Likewise, how can we stand in the presence of God's holiness unfiltered? It would undo us. Isaiah, exposed to that holiness, even filtered through a vision, cried out after saying, "Holy, holy, he's glorious," Isaiah then cried out, "I am cursed, I am ruined for I am a man of unclean lips and my eyes have seen the Lord of Hosts." He could feel, he could sense the holy glory of God. And it was overwhelming. Peter, exposed on a fishing boat to the glory of Jesus when Jesus calmed the waves and Peter though for a second about what just happened and realized who he was in a boat with, even with that glory filtered as it was, even as Jesus had emptied himself and this is his incarnate form, Peter could sense not only his power, but his holiness, and he cried out, "Away from me Lord, I am a sinful man. Get away from me."

God's glory is the praiseworthiness of his name and the manifestation of that praiseworthiness. Humans cannot stand in the presence of that glory without being undone. The Son alone has seen the Father fully revealed (1:18).

What is this glory of God that Jesus makes known?

In verse 4 Jesus says, "I glorified You on the earth, having accomplished the work which You have given Me to do." And in verse 6 he says, "I have manifested Your name to the men whom You gave Me out of the world." This is pretty significant because Jesus has not only asked for glory. He is indicating that his purpose on earth has been to reveal the glory of God.

I do not mean to say that his purpose was not to come and save, that he only came as a witness to reflect the glory of God. His purpose was to save through his atoning death. That's John 3:17. But the two purposes are one and the same or, at least, they are intricately intertwined.

Jesus' purpose was to come as the light of the world to make God known to people, not only through teaching, but also through action. He's not making God known only symbolically. He's making God known by acting as God acts, by loving, and sometimes in miraculous ways. And though Jesus speaks here as though he has completed his mission - "I have done the work you have called me to do" - he's including, he's looking ahead to what is getting ready to happen. So it's as good as done. This is the hour of the cross and that cross is the ultimate witness to the glory of God. And it is not just symbolic. The cross is not just a symbol of unconditional love, where a person gives up his life for no reason, as representative of how much God loves us. No, this is God's love in action. This was a necessary act to procure forgiveness for us. This is the manifestation of his glorious nature through his saving righteousness. He is saving us as he displays his glory.

Through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we witness his love. We also witness his justice. He will not leave sin unpunished. But he will take the punishment on himself. We also witness his power because death cannot hold him. And we witness his wisdom. This is what God has been planning through the ages. Even before he created mankind, he knew that he would have to save. It's the whole plan, from re-robing Adam and Eve after their expulsion, he can re-inherit them at that point because he knows what he's going to do through Jesus. In the call of Abraham, in the cutting a covenant with Abraham in Genesis 15 and walking through those pieces of those animals God is saying, "The only way you keep covenant with me is if I die. You sin, I die." Through the Passover lamb God is announcing that the Angel of Wrath must come because God is just and holy. But God himself will become the lamb who will die and by his blood the Angel of Wrath is turned away. Symbol after symbol, through the history of Israel, all of the promises to bring the people back, to bring them close to his, the promise to work in their hearts so that they would love him with their heart, mind, and soul, all of those promises come to fruition in Jesus Christ. God's wisdom, his power, his love, and his justice is all made known on the cross. The cross is the banner that stand for the world to see: this is your God. He is holy and just, and he is incredibly loving.

Jesus manifests, makes known, the glorious name of God. The Father is glorious. The Son is glorious.

So, we understand what the glory of God is - the praiseworthiness of his nature made manifest. And we understand that Jesus came to earth with the purpose of making God's glory visible. Jesus wants to magnify the glory of God to us so that we might truly know him. We get that. There is one thing here we might have trouble with. There is a potential problem here in this prayer, and it comes with the question, is it right to pray for your own glory?

Is it right for Jesus to pray for his own glory?

It does not feel right to us, does it? Do you pray for your own glory? "God, let me be glorified." You want to have glory, you just don't want to pray for it. A good person does not pray for his own glory. That would be self-centered. Though, to be honest, we have to admit that we are constantly seeking our own glory. We want to believe that we have praiseworthy qualities, and we love it when other people believe it; when other people praise us, when they recognize our goodness, our qualities, our smartness, our strength, our beauty, whatever. We want our glory made manifest to our parents, to our friends, to that special guy or that special girl, to our colleagues, we want our enemies to know how much better we are, to our employees or students, or children if you have them, to our friends, to the world. We dream about it and plan for it. We go about it in different ways. Some of us strive to

be liked. Some of us strive to be needed. Some of us strive to win, but there is this similar motivation behind it all, whatever your personality is like: we want our qualities to be known, and we want to receive affirmation and praise for who we are. This is something we crave. We crave to be glorified.

But we still know not to pray for it. You don't pray for this. That would be self-centered. And yet, Jesus' first request here in chapter 17 is this prayer for his own glory. So is Jesus self-centered?

I could defend Jesus' request here by saying there might be something right about a human being desiring that God make him known for who he is. And Jesus happens to be glorious. So for Jesus to pray for his glory is okay. It's right. But I don't think it really answers the problem. We still have the problem. Should God, if he is really good, should he be centered on himself? Should he want focus to be on him? Should he want to have glory, and should he want his glory manifested?

Thinking of God from a human perspective I think the answer is, "No." But that would be a mistake, to think of God from human perspective because God is absolutely not human. I think I have said this before in John, it is worth repeating. We are not the center of all things. That's a huge difference. God is. God is that which is most good, most true, most beautiful. We want to be the center of our little world. But God actually is the center of every world. All beauty, truth and goodness have their source in him.

And because God is good, he is obliged to magnify that which is most good. And in this case, and only in this case, God himself is that good, which he is obliged to magnify. He is the center and the source. He is the reality of all that which ought to be highlighted, which ought to be magnified and made known. If there's anything that should be praised, it is God. And well benefit from the magnification of the characteristics, attributes of God. Just as we ought to seek the praise of God's glorious nature, so God ought to seek the praise of his glorious nature.

We might ask, why God created angels and human beings? This is a question that often comes into this discussion when we're talking about God pursuing his glory. In fact, I was just asked this by a college student after my online Bible study I do on Sunday afternoons. This college student who hung around happened to be my daughter, Anna, who is in her first year of college, and some of the other students stayed online with her. She had been having this discussion with some friends, and the discussion was, why did God create? Did he create for love or did he create for his own glory?

Well, we know God did not create out of a lack of love. The Father has always loved the Son who has always loved the Father. God is complete in himself. He does not lack. But it does seem that he was moved to magnify his glory by making known the overflowing abundance of his love by creating creatures who he can let that love of Father and Son and Spirit flow out upon. And these two things seem quite closely connected. The recognition of God's love - that's glorious! So in a sense, God created both for his glory and to expand his love because expanding his love magnifies his glory; who he is.

I will say for me, just personally the way I think about it is that I put God's pursuit of his own glory prior to anything else. God created to display his glory. And I think that is prior to his desire to manifest of his love, because I think he was manifesting equally all of his attributes: his love, his justice, his holiness.

So I think God does pursue his own glory and I think that's why he created everything, and I struggle sometimes to think about that as a human but when I think about God being God, it is right for him to magnify his glory. So Jesus, being God, it's right for him also to seek his own glory.

We, not being God, do not seek our own glory. Our glory is in his glory. He the sun, we're the moon. We exist to reflect him. So we wouldn't make the same request that Jesus is making. We would ask that God would use us to bring him glory.

Okay, let me wrap this up on talking about the theme of glory using a passage from Isaiah. The first verse I think of when I think about God's pursuit of his own glory is Isaiah 42:8, "I am the Lord, that is my name, I will not give my glory to another." I just looked that up to get the quote and was reminded, I'd forgotten that this quote comes from one of the servant passages in Isaiah. It's a foreshadowing of Jesus, so it fits so well with the focus on the glory of the Father and Son that we have here in this prayer. So I want to read a little more of the context to you. This is Isaiah 42:5-8.

The prophet begins, introducing God and something about his nature. This is verse 5,

⁵ Thus says God the Lord,

Who created the heavens and stretched them out, Who spread out the earth and its offspring, Who gives breath to the people on it and spirit to those who walk in it,

Then In verses 6-7, Isaiah reports God's words to his servant, who is the Messiah.

- ⁶ "I am the Lord, I have called You in righteousness, I will also hold You by the hand and watch over You, and I will appoint You as a covenant to the people, as a light to the nations,
- ⁷ to open blind eyes, to bring out prisoners from the dungeon and those who dwell in darkness from the prison.

and those who awen in darkness from the prison.

Then after speaking of the servant to come, that's when God speaks of his own glory in verses 8-9.

8 I am the Lord, that is My name; I will not give My glory to another,

nor My praise to graven images.

⁹ Behold, the former things have come to pass, now I declare new things; before they spring forth I proclaim *them* to you."

God is jealous for his own glory, "I am the Lord, that is my name; I will not give my glory to another." And then he says, "I have proclaimed to you what has come to pass already, now I proclaim a new thing." This is 700 years before Jesus Christ. But he has just been talking about the Messiah who is coming as a light to the nations and to open blind eyes.

God's pursuit of his own glory is intertwined with his righteous salvation for us in Jesus Christ. Jesus makes known the glory of God both because it is good to magnify the One who is most good, but also because that glory, that nature, is a nature that loves to the degree of pursuing us, even to the cross. That is the glory of God.

How does God's pursuit of his own glory bring about good for us? I skipped over verse 3. So, we are ready to come back to it.

"Father, the hour has come; glorify Your Son, that the Son may glorify You, ² even as You gave Him authority over all flesh, that to all whom You have given Him, He may give eternal life.

Now this is verse 3.

³ This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent."

The Father is glorified in the Son by giving eternal life to those who are his. This eternal life is essentially relational. The way of eternal life is relational, and the essence of eternal life is relational. I'm sure you've heard it quoted that Christianity is not a religion; it's a relationship. And that's exactly what we're seeing here. Human religion tends to miss on both of these truths. Human religion tends to make some kind of way to the afterlife that is distinct from relationship with God. It's stuff we have to do. And then human religion makes the afterlife about us, distinct from relationship with God. Whereas Jesus here declares, "this is eternal life", knowing God and knowing Jesus. It's about our relationship with God through Jesus.

Considering the way, human religion usually defines a path of ritual or moral code or something mystic that we have to do. It can range from asceticism to self-fulfillment. Whether it's Hinduism, or New Age, or cultural Christianity, or Islam, or Judaism, or just being a spiritual person, whatever it is, all religious conceptions promote some kind of way that is going to lead you to the next step of your self-realization, or lead you into paradise, or help you escape reincarnation so that you become one with God. So whatever the concept of eternal life is, the way you get there is by doing or being something. And in that sense, all religion is ultimately legalistic, whether it's a strict legalism, it's very moralistic, or whether it's this kind of heart legalism, just follow your heart, there is this code that you have to live by to prove yourself worthy and hopefully gain whatever reward there may be. So the path is not about relationship with God. The path is something else.

Jesus says that the way of eternal life is through knowing God and you come to know God through faith in Jesus Christ. Jesus is the way. You can't come to him through works or though ritual. You cannot make yourself worthy. You can only accept his gracious offer of relationship by faith and then, unified with him you die to sin and are raised to new life in relationship with him (Romans 6:4).

Not only is Jesus the way to eternal life, Jesus is eternal life. We have to think about that. Eternal life is an everlasting relationship with God. This is eternal life, to know God and to know Jesus. God is the reward. There's not some other reward. Whatever your conception of heaven is, if it's not about relationship with God then you've missed the nature of heaven. Eternal life, in a sense, is the result of that relationship. Eternal life without God is not eternal life at all. It is eternal existence. And it's a very sad existence. Life is only truly experienced through God, in relationship with him. We get a taste of it on this earth even when we are separated from God and we don't yield to God. We're still in the creation that he has made and there's this image of him that shines out through people. And so we get, on this earth, while we're alive, at the very least a limited temporary of the goodness of life that God makes present in our reality through his common grace. He lets us all experience life. We don't give him credit for it all the time, for the harmony, the music, the beauty, the color, the relationship. Everything that you find good, beautiful, and true is because you exist in God's creation, and you experience his nature through what he's made or through who he's made.

After death, the reality of our separation from God becomes acute as a separation from all good things. We lose all goodness and beauty that we potentially experienced living in his world. We lose the warmth and light, the truth, the harmony, companionship. This is not taken away from us when we die. Rather, we are taken away from it. All the goodness we have tasted in this world remains with God. Everything that is true to life is in him. To walk away from relationship with God is to walk away from all that can be properly called life. We may continue to exist apart from God, but it is an existence of eternal death, not eternal life.

To enter into relationship with God is to know him. This is eternal life. God himself is our reward. God himself is heaven. Without the love for God, there can be no joy of heaven. With love for God, the joy is potentially endless.

Jesus has requested the full restoration of his glory. That was his first request in his prayer. The next three requests are going to be about us. Though we can say that we are also included even in this first request of Jesus for his own glory, because as the Father and Son make manifest the glory of their name, the great abundance of their love, as they make that known, overflows to us. The cross is an example of the magnification of the glory of who they are.

And as we come to love God, as we return his love back to him, we begin to know him and see the glory of who he is, the beauty of his goodness, the elegance of his wisdom, the abundance of his love, when we really begin to get God and to love God, the idea of magnifying his glory makes all the sense in the world. Like, of course that is my purpose. There is no one near as praiseworthy, or as intriguing, or as worth knowing than God. If I've ever wanted anybody to know about a soccer team or a particular soccer player, or if I've ever wanted to talk about who's the greatest basketball player of all time, or I have a band that I just have to promote, or a style of music, or something I saw on America's Got Talent, or a favorite course of study; if you've been around somebody who loves chemistry; or our friend Daniel is over tonight and he loves birds, and there were birds flying over our balcony, and he's so excited about birds that you get excited with him and he points them out and he takes these awesome photos, and you think, "He's right. Birds are awesome! They're beautiful!", and he's an evangelist for birds and it's effective because birds really are cool. But anything you've had that you just wanted to magnify to other people, there is noone near as praiseworthy, or as intriguing, or as worth knowing than God. Why would I not want my life to be about magnifying his glory and pointing other people to him? So I pray with Jesus, "God, magnify the glory of Jesus' name. Let the cross be a banner planted for the world to see. And help me in my little sphere, however I can, to point people to how beautiful and how good, and true, and loving you are."

Reflection questions

- 1. Read John 17:1-26. Identify the specific requests Jesus makes in this prayer.
- 2. Read John 1-5 more closely. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What are some questions that come to mind?
- 3. How do glory, light and name relate to one another in the Gospel of John? Compare the prologue to these five verses.
- 4. John proclaimed in 1:14 that he and others beheld the glory of Jesus while he was on earth. What are some of the stories in the Gospel that provide concrete examples for this abstract idea?
- 5. Is it right for Jesus to pray for his own glory? Would it be right for you to pray for your own glory?
- 6. God's pursuit of his own glory conflicts with God's loving redemption of mankind. Do you agree or disagree with that statement?
- 7. Which would do you believe comes first? God's pursuit of his own glory or his redemption of people? How do the two relate?
- 8. How do you understand Jesus' declaration, "This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent"? In what way is this truth counterintuitive to human religion?

Lesson 30: John 17:6-19 Jesus Prays for His Disciples Introduction

Jesus in the Garden 18:1-11 Jesus before the High Priest 18:12-27 Jesus before Pilate 18:28-19:16 Gn Jesus on the Cross 19:17-30 Jesus in the Tomb 19:31-42 Jesus by the Tomb 20:1-18 Jesus by the Tomb 20:1-18 Jesus by the Tomb 20:1-18

Jesus began the prayer of John 17 with a request for his own glory. As the center of all that is good and beautiful and true, Jesus rightly desires the magnification of his own glory through the cross and the restoration of the glory he has always shared with the Father. If you love Jesus, your heart sings when his name is lifted up in honor and praise. You yearn for his glorification, that the whole world would know him as he truly is.

Let's read again this first request at the beginning of his prayer. This is John 17:1-5,

¹ Jesus spoke these things; and lifting up His eyes to heaven, He said, "Father, the hour has come; glorify Your Son, that the Son may glorify You, ² even as You gave Him authority over all flesh, that to all whom You have given Him, He may give eternal life. ³ This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent. ⁴ I glorified You on the earth, having accomplished the work which You have given Me to do. ⁵ Now, Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was.

The glorification of Jesus works out for our best as well. God is love. Love is essential to his very nature. When his nature is magnified, his love is magnified. The magnification of his love is the magnification of his care for our well-being. Jesus makes God known and in coming to know God we enter into life. That's the connection between his glory and our good. This is eternal life, that you know God and that you know Jesus Christ whom God has sent. When God's glorious nature is made known, people enter into relationship with him and experience life.

The rest of the prayer is a mix between supplication for the disciples and an expression of the heart of Jesus. Preparing this lesson, I came to realize I need two more lessons to cover this prayer in full. We will address the middle of the prayer right now in this lesson and the end of the prayer in the next lesson.

In the middle section, verses 6-19, Jesus makes three more requests of the Father. These requests are all for his disciples. Jesus asks the Father to (1) "keep them in your name," (2) "keep them from the evil one," and (3) "sanctify them in truth." We will consider each request in turn.

The First Request For the Disciples: Keep them in your name. (John 17:6-12)

The first request for the disciples is in verse 11. Jesus asks the Father to "keep them in your name." What does that mean for you, that you are kept in God's name? What does Jesus mean by that? Let's read verses 6-12 and consider the words that lead up to this first request.

⁶ I have manifested Your name to the men whom You gave Me out of the world; they were Yours and You gave them to Me, and they have kept Your word. ⁷ Now they have come to know that everything You have given Me is from You; ⁸ for the words which You gave Me I have given to them; and they received *them* and truly understood that I came forth from You, and they believed that You sent Me. ⁹ I ask on their behalf; I do not ask on behalf of the world,

but of those whom You have given Me; for they are Yours; ¹⁰ and all things that are Mine are Yours, and Yours are Mine; and I have been glorified in them. ¹¹ I am no longer in the world; and *yet* they themselves are in the world, and I come to You. Holy Father, keep them in Your name, *the name* which You have given Me, that they may be one even as We *are*. ¹² While I was with them, I was keeping them in Your name which You have given Me; and I guarded them and not one of them perished but the son of perdition, so that the Scripture would be fulfilled.

Jesus begins verse 6, "I have manifested your name to the men you gave me out of the world." The first great theme of this Gospel is the nature of Jesus Christ. That theme was not John's idea. Jesus came into the world to reveal God, to manifest his name, to make his nature known. There is a double effect of manifesting God's name. Jesus is both magnifying God's glory and bringing people into true relationship with God. To truly know God and enter into relationship with him is to participate in his life. Jesus came to manifest the name of God. He is the light who has come into the world. He makes God known.

How do men and women enter into true knowledge of God? That's the second great theme of John, the nature of faith. What does it mean to truly believe? Three words in this prayer highlight this theme. They are the words "know," "receive," and "believe." John has used these three words interchangeably throughout the Gospel. He introduced them in the prologue. I'll read from the prologue and then from the prayer, so you can catch the repetition.

Firs, this is the prologue, John 1:10-12.

¹⁰ He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not **know** Him. ¹¹ He came to His own, and those who were His own did not **receive** Him. ¹² But as many as **received** Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, *even* to those who **believe** in His name,

And this is the prayer, John 17:7-8.

⁷ Now they have come to **know** that everything You have given Me is from You; ⁸ for the words which You gave Me I have given to them; and they **received** them and truly understood that I came forth from You, and they **believed** that You sent Me.

We have encountered in John Gospel people who claim to know Jesus without knowing him, to receive Jesus without receiving him, to believe in Jesus without believing in him. John has maintained this tension between true belief and false belief. This is that second theme: what does it really mean to believe in Jesus? What is the nature of faith?

He set the tension up immediately in chapter 2, right when we begin the story. After the water to wine miracle in chapter 2 John summarized in verse 11.

¹¹ This beginning of *His* signs Jesus did in Cana of Galilee, and manifested His glory, and His disciples **believed** in Him.

This is true belief. It is based on the self-revelation of Jesus. Jesus manifested his glory. They saw it, they saw something of his true nature, and they believed. The nature of that belief is not explained here yet. It's just stated. We are getting this example of true belief to set up the tension with what's getting ready to come.

Later in the chapter, at the Passover in Jerusalem, we are told in verse 23, "...many **believed** in His name, observing His signs which He was doing." That sounds positive. Here are more who believed. But then we read verses 24 and 25.

²⁴ But Jesus, on His part, was not **entrusting** Himself to them, for He knew all men, ²⁵ and because He did not need anyone to testify concerning man, for He Himself knew what was in man.

There is a problem. We do not know what the problem is, yet. Something is wrong with the belief of the many at Passover. They claim to trust in Jesus, but Jesus does not entrust himself to them. Jesus sees into their hearts. Jesus knows something we do not know. Jesus knows that something is wrong with their belief.

These believed without really believing. As the Gospel narrative progresses, we encounter Nicodemus in chapter 3 who claims to know but does not know. We encounter Galileans in chapter 4 who claim to receive, but do not really receive. We see disciples turning away in chapter 6, unable to accept Jesus' challenge to eat his body and drink his blood. We see so-called believers in chapter 8 bristling at the suggestion that they need to be set free. We hear a crowd of people in chapter 12 shout "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD," but we doubt the faith of this entire crowd. And we see finally in chapter 13 one of the twelve go out into the night with betrayal on his mind.

Belief is a tricky thing. If you've been around church, around Christians long enough you know this. People can profess anything and a lot of us learn to profess things at a young age before we've grown into it. Claiming to believe is not the same thing as truly believing on Jesus' terms. True belief requires a work of God in the heart and begins a process of spiritual transformation. The one who has truly believed has been born again. That true belief is not always easy to discern.

What about these eleven men? Jesus say they're going to scatter when he is taken. Do they truly believe? Well, Jesus is here indicating that, yes, they actually do truly believe. In spite of the failure that's getting ready to happen, these men are true believers. And he indicates that both from the perspective of what God has done and the perspective of how these men have responded.

Notice that in verse 6 Jesus said, "I have manifested your name to the men whom you gave me out of the world." From the human perspective we use the terms "know," "receive," "believe," "see" to describe the human response to Jesus. That's what the person does. But from God's perspective we are those whom God gave out of the world to Jesus. Jesus describes further, "they were Yours and You gave them to Me, and they have kept Your word." The action of God precedes the response of man. The believer is one who has been set apart from the world for the family of God.

Jesus also describes the disciples from the perspective of their own action. "You gave them to me and they have kept your word." To keep the word of Jesus is a mark of the true disciple. To keep the word means to accept the truth of Jesus about God and about yourself and to keep God's commandments, applying his word to life.

This is not all Jesus says about these disciples. Not only do they keep his word; he also applies all three key words from the prologue. He says, "They have come to **know**...they **received** [your word]...they **believed** that you have sent me." You can't affirm it any stronger than that. Jesus had already affirmed their faith of his disciples in chapter 13. He told Peter, "You don't need to be washed because you are all clean." And that affirmation is being repeated here. These men have believed, they have received, they know.

Affirmation is necessary. We still have question about the disciples. Peter is going to deny Jesus. Everybody's going to run away in the garden. They are going to feel like they don't believe. And in a Gospel that's raising this question about people who believe without believing we're not sure, either. Do the disciples believe or do they don't believe? Jesus said, "If you love me you will obey." We might wonder about these men. They don't obey. They run away. Have they truly believed? We know that grapes grow out of the true vine. If you abide you produce fruit. So, what does it mean that you claim to believe and run away, or deny Jesus? You don't produce fruit? True belief produces fruit, right? Yes, but apparently not with perfect consistency.

The disciples' faith is messier than that. We might say this is because the Holy Spirit has not been given and just wait until Pentecost. And that is a good point. The coming of the Holy Spirit significantly increases the potential of changed life. The Spirit brings power and relational access to

God. Does the coming of the Spirit remove the mess? You know it doesn't, right? Not completely. I am reminded of Galatians chapter 2, which reports the time Peter gave into Jewish pressure and stopped eating with Gentile believers. This is the Peter whose life was so dramatically changed at Pentecost, who courageously accused the Jewish crowd of murdering the Messiah and who, as a result, led 3000 people that day to place their faith in Jesus. And yet, here by pressure of what's called the Circumcision Party, here he is rejecting brothers and sisters who are gentiles, here in Galatians 2, and he gets rebuked by Paul and rightly so. Apparently, failure and mess continue even for Peter as part of the Christian experience.

I believe that's one reason Jesus is affirming the disciples here in this prayer, so that they will hear from him, from his perspective, from the one who sees into the heart: you have truly believed. In spite of what is getting ready to happen, you are mine. You are secure because God gave you to me, even though you fail. Even though you're going to run away. God gave you to me. You are mine. You have believed truly.

We exist in transition. We are in an "already, but not yet" state of having been born again, but not yet fully restored into who we are meant to be. We wait for that completion in Heaven. We who truly believe still struggle to live in line with the new birth that has already begun in us.

The growth of these men will mark them as true believers. But what makes them truly secure is the work of God on their behalf. We cannot come to Jesus unless it has been granted by the Father (John 6:65). So, while he affirms their response to him from the human perspective, Jesus also emphasizes their salvation from God's perspective, "They were yours and you gave them to me." It is not the consistency or strength or purity of your faith that keeps you secure. It is the fact that God has indeed taken you out of the world and placed you in his hand. It is the reality that, indeed, you have believed. You are now free to pursue him in all the ups and downs of faith, secure in the strength of his hands, secure in his grace, secure in his love.

We might then describe these men as born-again. I am not sure if that is the right language to use before the cross, before Jesus sends the Holy Spirit. It is definitely the right language for us. We who have believed in this era of the New Covenant, we have been born again. But even though it is right to describe ourselves this way, as born-again, that is not the focus of Jesus in this prayer. Jesus focuses on the idea of a realm change. This is the idea he keep repeating. They have been removed from the world and given to Jesus. He's going to pray to God as Father, so they've been removed from the world and brought into a new family. The next few verses give us the actual request. Listen for the request and also listen for this idea that we have been taken out of the world. That's who they are now, that defines them. These are verses 9-12,

⁹ I ask on their behalf; I do not ask on behalf of the world, but of those whom You have given Me; for they are Yours; ¹⁰ and all things that are Mine are Yours, and Yours are Mine; and I have been glorified in them. ¹¹ I am no longer in the world; and *yet* they themselves are in the world, and I come to You. Holy Father, keep them in Your name, *the name* which You have given Me, that they may be one even as We *are*. ¹² While I was with them, I was keeping them in Your name which You have given Me; and I guarded them and not one of them perished but the son of perdition, so that the Scripture would be fulfilled.

The disciples are God's. They have believed in Jesus and have truly entered into relationship with God. That objective truth is the foundation of their security. They are safe because God has them in his hand.

But they are not home, yet. Jesus is going home. Jesus can say, "I am no longer in the world." But of the disciples he says, "they themselves are in the world." Earlier, Jesus said they had been given to him out of the world. That means their allegiance is no longer to the ruler of the world, or the values of the world, or even their own flesh. They belong now to God. They are members of his family, his kingdom. But unlike Jesus, they are not going away. They continue to live in the world.

It is not an easy existence. We still have habit patterns and values and desires formed by our existence as sinful human beings in sinful human society. That all affects us and goes with us into the family of God. We have belonged to the world. And we now continue to live in the world, and that's a problem. We have attraction to the world. And when we do try to change or live differently, we experience opposition from the world, when we reject values of the world and try to live according to the values of Heaven that we see in the Bible, then that creates tension, opposition with the world. And that resistance is outside of us, with people who oppose these new values we're trying to live, and it's inside of us, our own flesh, our own thought patterns, we still want to go with the world.

So, this is what we have. We have disciples given by God to Jesus who have truly believed. And though set apart from the world system they grew up in, they still physically live in that world system. And in light of that reality, what does Jesus pray? What do we need as disciples if we're going to live for Jesus in this world? Jesus prays, "Holy Father, keep them in your name." That's his prayer. It's a little bit odd at first.

We need to think about that request. First, Jesus prays to God as Father. So that's in line with everything we know about the Lord's prayer. You know, "Father in Heaven, hallowed be your name." Wow, both of these things connect, right? There he says, "Let your name be made holy." Here, he's calling him "Holy Father." So this is who you are now. You are a son or a daughter who used to be an enemy of God by nature, a child of wrath, but who has been born again into a new family relationship. God is your Father. Jesus calls him "Holy Father." God is himself set apart from the world system. He is pure and good, without sin or evil. You have been accepted into a holy family. And this is what you need from your holy Father: you need to be kept in his name. Jesus says that he did this himself for his disciples when he walked on earth. It is a need that needs to be met. But Jesus is going. And he asked the Father to continue to meet this need. What is the need? What does it mean to be kept in his name?

To word "to keep" normally means in John "to observe" or "to do" as in "to keep the Sabbath," you're observing the Sabbath, or "to keep God's Word," or "to keep the commandments." The meaning here, though, is slightly different. Here, "to keep" means "to guard" or "to hold in place."

Verse 12 helps us understand the request. Jesus goes on and says,

While I was with them, I was keeping them in Your name which You have given Me; and I guarded them and not one of them perished but the son of perdition, so that the Scripture would be fulfilled.

To keep the disciples is to guard them, to keep them safe. How are they kept safe? They are kept safe "in God's name." When the world tempts you, when life is a mess, when you fail, when you are confused, when you suffer, when you doubt, what keeps you safe?

When the world tempts you to a series of behaviors, it stars with a small step, then another small step and then another small step that leads you to a place you don't want to be, what keeps you from taking that first step, that seemingly innocent step leading ultimately to sin? Your knowledge of the character of God gives you strength to stand. You stand by faith in who God is even if you don't understand the wisdom at play; you don't understand why it's good to stand and not take that step, you obey because you trust his character. You trust in the true nature of his name and who he is.

Or how about when you suffer? When you suffer and your suffering shatters your assumptions about the Christian life and you become disoriented, what keeps you from disillusionment or bitterness? Your conviction that God is good keeps you safe. Even when you don't feel that God is good, you hold onto his name by faith. "I know you're good." And you hold on until you naturally believe it again with your heart. But you need to be kept in the name of God. He is good.

When the world assails you with challenges to your faith, what helps you withstand the storm of doubt and confusion? You may not know whether you have the science right. You may not understand the justice of it all. You don't know how to argue or reason your way out. You may not be there, yet. But

you know God. You know his name is love. You know he is Creator. You know he is real. And you hold on to him, according to how he has revealed himself to you, and that keeps you safe.

All these trials, whether it's lust or suffering or doubt, they all tempt the human heart to redefine the nature of God. That's a way to resolve this. Some people come up with the extreme redefinition and reject God's existence altogether. But most people come up with a definition of God that fits their personal needs and societal norms. We can come up with a God who does not mind our sin so much, or who does not even call a certain behavior - sin. We can come up with a God who is not really good enough or powerful enough or involved enough to stop our suffering. Maybe that's the answer. We can come up with a God who fits all the modern theories of science. We can come up with a God who fits our ideas of justice or love or morality. We can come up with a God who fits our scheme or racial superiority. We can come up with a God who includes all religions. We humans are very good at coming up with names for God. And that's the temptation. When relationship with God does not fit life as we see it, when it creates some barrier to our understanding or to our behavior, we can just simply redefine the nature of God to resolve the problem.

Jesus prays, however, that God would protect you from that; that he would keep his own in his name. When you doubt, when you suffer, when you are tempted, when you are bored, Jesus knows you need to be kept in God's name. And Jesus prays that you would not fall into the trap of solving life by giving God a name of their own choosing. "Protect them from the human sin of making you in their image. Keep them in your name." Jesus has steadfastly refused to let people define him. That's what we've seen through this Gospel. We do not name Jesus. Jesus names us. We derive our definition from him.

This is eternal life, to know God as Jesus has revealed him to be. Life is found in accepting the self-revelation of Jesus. Christian religion that seeks to name God in some other way, other than that revealed in Scripture, is removing the most basic principle of life from its followers, from people who call themselves Christian, and you're not seeking God according to the Gospel delivered in his word; according to the truths about the Creator, the Holy One, the Just One, the Moral One. If you don't accept the name of God revealed by God, you reject life. Abundant life is found in hard times by holding on to the name of God as he has revealed himself to be. Keep them in your name. That's the prayer of Jesus.

The second request made by Jesus is related.

The Second Request For the Disciples: Keep them from the evil one. (John 17:13-15)

Jesus also prays, "Keep them from the evil one." That request is in verse 15, so let's read 13-15.

¹³ But now I come to You; and these things I speak in the world so that they may have My joy made full in themselves. ¹⁴ I have given them Your word; and the world has hated them, because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. ¹⁵ I do not ask You to take them out of the world, but to keep them from the evil *one*.

Jesus makes clear the opposition of the world. Christians should not intentionally provoke the world to hatred. We are called to live in love and gentleness. And yet, we are also called to live according to the truth of who God is. God defines for us what is right and good. Living according to the values of heaven will bring us into conflict with the world. If there is no conflict at all then something is quite likely wrong with the way we live for God. We are no longer of the world. We are in it, but our worldview, our sense of right and wrong, our moral behavior must at points diverge from the morality and values of our society.

Jesus knows that when we come to him, we become at odds with the world. Still, he does not want to remove us from the world. He came into the world himself to save the lost. He has given us this same task. We are to emulate Jesus by living in the world and yet, not being of the world.

The prayer to keep us in God's name is mirrored by the prayer now to keep us from the evil one. We need God to protect us from Satan, from the Evil One.

Jesus said earlier in John 12:31, "now the ruler of this world will be cast out." He was speaking of Satan, that's the ruler of this world, the Evil One referred to in this prayer. But if Satan is cast out, why does Jesus pray to God to protect us from the Evil One? Is that prayer necessary? You assume it is if Jesus prayed it and it's a good example of why we have to keep reading the whole context. One verse might reveal just part of the story. We have to keep reading to get more of the story.

So, like us, Satan exists in something of an "already, not yet" state. We might think of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus as D-Day, like the invasion of Normandy that spelled the end of the Third Reich. The end was sure. Hitler was going to be cast out. But a lot more fighting happened because the enemy refused to accept defeat. And so, V-Day was still yet to come.

Paul writes in Colossians 2:14-15 that through the cross Jesus canceled our debt and "disarmed the rulers and authorities...having triumphed over them." The term "rulers and authorities" in Paul can refer to human powers but extends beyond that, also to the spiritual powers behind human rulers, all the way up to the primary spiritual power of Satan. God triumphed over and disarmed Satan through the cross by canceling the debt owed by human beings. Satan has already lost the war. He just refuses to admit defeat. He battles on. And for his own reasons, God allows him to continue to exist in this fallen world. The full realization of Satan's defeat is yet to come. Jesus will return. Satan will be bound and cast into consuming fire.

But for now, the Evil One is still active, and we need God's protection. I think it is worth asking what kind of protection we can expect. Two things have helped me to think this through. One is Psalm 23 and I just keep thinking back to Jesus as our Shepherd in **chapter 10 (at 31:05 - chapter or verse?)**, and the other is the experience of Jesus, what happens in the life of Jesus.

Jesus is our good Shepherd. He makes us lie down in green pastures. He leads us beside quiet waters. He restores our soul. He guides us in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. That means we live for his glory because that is real life. But living for his glory in this world means that we don't remain beside the green pastures and the quiet waters all the time.

We also walk through the valley of the shadow of death. We suffer. And we struggle. We have enemies. God does not keep us from all the suffering. Does he keep us from the Evil One? How does God answer this prayer?

Let's consider Jesus. Did God keep Jesus from the Evil One? In John 14:30 Jesus said, "I will not speak much more with you, for the ruler of the world is coming." Jesus was speaking about his pending arrest and crucifixion. The Evil One would participate in the suffering and death of Jesus. He had entered into Judas and lead Judas out to betray. Did God keep Jesus from the Evil One? Did he?

I have to say yes and no. God allowed the Evil One to bring suffering and death onto Jesus. God did not, in that sense, fully keep Jesus from the power of the Evil One. But Jesus never gave in to the Evil One. Jesus remained steadfast through the cross. And in the end, his suffering brought about complete victory. Jesus was raised from the dead and ascended to Heaven at home with God. Did the Evil One overcome Jesus? No!

Your greatest calling in life is to continue with God through to the end. Whatever he's called you to do, wherever he's called you to live, your greatest calling is to hold on to God and to live for him. We represent God in this world. This world is broken. We are going to experience some rest and restoration, green pastures, God working in our soul. We experience good from God in this world. We also experience the valley of the shadow of death. Satan is going to oppose us and God is not going to protect us from all of the suffering.

I do believe that God constantly protects us from the Evil One. God has put some kind of restrain in our flesh, in our societies and on Satan. Maybe I think about this because I'm quite a melancholy personality, but I think about how much more broken our societies could be, how much more chaotic, how much more evil. The order that exists in society, however flawed, reflects God's protection to some degree. I feel like if God just totally removed his image, if Satan was given

complete freedom to steal and kill and destroy, I believe we would live in just complete chaos and evil and pain and suffering. Some societies begin to approach that but not most of the societies we live in. So, I think God is constantly protecting us from the Evil One.

I also believe that we who are in Christ experience more specific protection and we are just simply not aware of it; that Satan opposes us, and he would harm us. We know the suffering we do experience. We do not know what he has protected us from. As a teenage boy, I wonder how many near-death experiences did I really have? It's amazing how many of us make it into adulthood. But if Satan is working spiritually to oppose us, I think that God is protecting us much more than we're aware of. And that's not a battle that he wants us to focus on, but he wants us to be aware that there is spiritual opposition behind evil that we see in the world. I do not believe that Satan is free to exert his malice on us.

And yet, even though God is protecting society in general, and he's protecting believers specifically, God does allow us to participate in the sufferings of Christ. Just as Jesus entered into a broken world and experienced the reality of that brokenness, God wills that we live in the brokenness of the world. Sometimes we open the door for Satan with our own sin. But sometimes God allows suffering in our lives to bring about good for us and for others ultimately. God has his purposes. It's a story of Job. It wasn't Job's sin. God allowed it.

God calls us to walk paths of righteousness for his name's sake. We live to bring glory to God and sometimes that means we walk through the valley of the shadow of death. He does not always protect us from that. He does always walk with us through the valley. His rod and his staff protect us as we engage in the battle against the Evil One. But sometimes we're injured.

God's plan is to bring us out again on the other side. He does desire that we experience joy in this life through our relationship with him. In verse 13 Jesus said, "But now I come to you; and these things I speak in the world, that they may have my joy made full in themselves." Jesus wants us to see things as he sees things; he wants us in relationship with God to experience joy. In our next lesson we will talk more about the heart of Jesus to better understand this joy he desires for us. At this point, I think we understand that joy comes from our relationship with God, whether we lay down in green pastures or walk through the valley of the shadow of death. This is life, to know him. This is our need, to remain in the truth of his name. And it's in this relationship that we experience joy.

Psalm 23 ends this way, "Surely goodness and lovingkindness will follow you all the days of your life." I believe this goodness and lovingkindness consists of blessings in life. God gives us good things. But even, God gives us himself. That's what this goodness and lovingkindness consist of. They consist of knowing God. And whatever this life brings, the good shepherd leads us on to ultimately "dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

Jesus' prayer for us ought to be sobering. We need to be kept in God's name. And we need God to protect us from the Evil One. Finally, we need God to sanctify us in truth. That is the third request. Let's read 16-19.

The Third Request For the Disciples: Sanctify them in truth (John 17:16-19)

¹⁶ They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. ¹⁷ Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth. ¹⁸ As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world. ¹⁹ For their sakes I sanctify Myself, that they themselves also may be sanctified in truth.

Some English translations add in the word "consecration" here, I think just for style, to change things up. I like that my version keeps the text consistent with three references to "sanctify." Jesus repeats that three times. It would help further if English would show us the connection between the adjective "holy" and the verb "sanctify." The connection is clear in John's Greek. It is the same root word. To sanctify literally means "!to make holy."

Jesus addressed God as Holy Father in verse 11. "Holy Father, keep them in your name." Now he asks the Holy Father to make the disciples holy. We belong to a holy family. And to be made holy is to be

cleansed and set apart for divine work. We addressed that idea in the introduction to the prayer in our last lesson. This is a prayer prayer of sanctification, of being set apart. We are being commissioned to go into the world. God takes us out of the world, he makes us new in Christ, and sends us back into the world to the good works that he prepared in advance for us to do. Our good works all vary according to our calling, and our giftedness, and our opportunities, our sphere of influence. We have different good works to do. You have your family. You have your workplace. You have your school. That is where you do your good works, according to who God has made you to be. What we share in our good works is this sense of we exist to bring glory to God and to help others come into relationship with him. And we do these good works as a body. We are one family. So each one of us shares this need to be cleansed and set apart for our works, whatever those works are, for our participation in the family of God in this world.

So how are we sanctified? How does God set us apart? The prayer is that we be sanctified in truth. Initially, you need to know the truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ so that you can enter into him.

This connects closely to the request that we be kept in his name. To live for God in this world, we need to hold on to his name, not according to our definition of who God is, but according to his own self-revelation.

This request makes explicit what we've already said, and that request: we need to hold on to God's name as he has revealed it: to his true name, to his true nature. This request makes our our need to be set apart in the truth more explicit, and it tells us what truth we are talking about. Jesus says, "Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth." And that connection between word and truth is the same connection that Jesus made previously in that famous text, I mentioned it already several times, John 8:31-32,

³¹...If you continue in My word, *then* you are truly disciples of Mine; ³² and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.

This is one of those really quotable Bible verses that gets misused all the time because a critical part is usually left off. The first part of the text is usually dropped out, about continuing in the word of Jesus. The part that is kept that you often hear is, "You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." And we've always got to ask, what truth? What truth will set you free? What truth has the power to do that? Truth is such an abstract concept. Are we talking about his truth, or her truth, or that truth, or this truth? What truth? Jesus defines the truth for us as "my word." The word of Jesus that's the truth that has the power to set you free. No other truth has the power to set you free. The truth of Jesus has the power to set you free. The crowd listening to Jesus specifically rejected that truth. They refused to believe they needed to be set free. They remained in bondage. The truth doesn't always set you free. It's the truth of Jesus that you have to receive that sets you free.

And here, it's that truth that sanctifies you, that truth that makes you clean and that makes you useful for the service of God, and that truth is the Word of God. And Jesus didn't not only mean here, when he said, "my word," he doesn't mean only the words he spoke in his ministry. He means the words of Scripture, the whole of his Word.

A follower of Jesus Christ is one who is set apart by the truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and who is continually growing in the knowledge and application of the truth of Scripture. You're set apart by the Gospel and you're growing in the truth of Scripture. This is the only way to not be of the world and yet live in the world as a witness for Jesus. If you're not committed to being set apart by truth, the holding on to the worldview of God, and growing in your understanding of that worldview, if you're not committed to that, you will become of the world again. But Jesus intends for us to live in the world but separate from the world in how we see things. He asks the Holy Father to set us apart as holy so that he might send us into the world just as he was sent into the world. He was the sent one. Now we are the sent ones. We are not sent to live and proclaim our own version of truth. That sets nobody free. That doesn't bring us life and it doesn't help anybody else. We are sent to live by and proclaim his truth: the truth he has revealed.

Just as Jesus connects our being sent with his having been sent, he also connects our being sanctified with his having been sanctified. This is in verse 19, and this is the last verse in our lesson, "For their sakes I sanctify Myself, that they themselves also may be sanctified in truth." Jesus sanctifies himself by setting himself apart for the work of the cross. That makes it possible for us to be sanctified. By the atonement Jesus made for us on the cross, we are set apart as clean and made useful for service.

Do you think of yourself in that way? Do you think of yourself as having been set apart by Jesus as clean and useful for service? Do you think of yourself as a sent one? If you are a disciple of Jesus Christ that is how he would have you think of yourself. You are set apart. You are sent out. You have been separated from the world and sent back into the world.

To pursue the purpose God has for you, you need these three things. You need God to keep you in his name, you need God to protect you from the Evil One, and you need God to sanctify you in truth.

The prayer of Jesus implies a response on our part. We don't just sit around and wait for God to do all that. If he has prayed these things for us, then it stands to reason we ought to also pursue these same things. We ought to hold onto his name, pursuing relationship with him as he has revealed himself to be. We ought to stand against Satan's schemes, holding on to the shield of faith and the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God. And we ought to seek sanctification through growing knowledge of the Scripture.

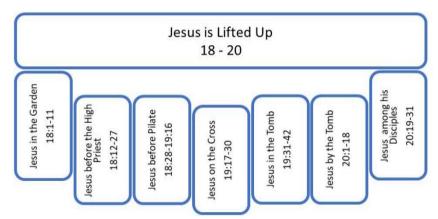
I think our study of John lines up great with these three requests. And so we pray, just as Jesus prayed: God help us to know you as you have revealed yourself to be. Keep us in your name. Protect us, Father, from the Evil One. Give us courage and strength to continue on in the works you have called us to do. And sanctify us, Lord, in your truth. Make us clean, set us apart for useful service. Help us to understand your Word and live by it, for your glory. Amen.

Reflection questions

- 1. Read John 17:6-19. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What are some questions that come to mind?
- 2. How does Jesus describe his disciples? What words does he use to communicate their spiritual state?
- 3. Again, the concept of name appears. John uses the concept in 1:12 of the prologue teaching that being a child of God depends on "believing in his name." In the preparation of his disciples, he tells them as they pray to "ask in my name." In the purpose statement of John 20:30-31 he says that he has written so they may have "life in his name." And here in this prayer for his disciples Jesus asks God, "Keep them in your name." As you think about the concept of name through John, what is Jesus asking God to do? What do you think it means to keep believers in the name of God?
- 4. How does the request in 17:15, "Keep them from the evil one," relate to keeping them in God's name? What danger is implied?
- 5. What does the third request in 17:17, "Sanctify them in truth mean"? What does it mean to "sanctify"? How is Jesus sanctified? How are we sanctified? What is the connection to truth?
- 6. How does this request relate to the other two? How is it similar? What does it add or how does it develop our understanding of being kept in God's name?
- 7. As you consider yourself as one who is sent to live in the world as a witness for Christ, how important is it that God fulfill these requests for you?
- 8. Pray to the Father, using and agreeing with the language of Jesus here to make your requests.

Lesson 31: John 17:20-26 Jesus Prays for Us

Introduction



I have experienced John 13-17 differently this past week. My father, Scott Brent, was called home to his Father last Tuesday. He ran his race with his eyes fixed on Jesus.

Right now, for me Jesus' words, "Where I go you cannot come" are poignant. Also his words, "I will come again, and receive you to myself; that where I am, there you may be also." As I read these words and I think about Jesus going away for a long time, and now he's preparing his disciples for that absence of his presence, and I am experiencing the absence of my father's presence - I know he's not gone for good, I know he's gone to be with the Heavenly Father, but that experience is drawing me relationally, emotionally into the text as Jesus speaks to his disciples. The joy and sorrow that my dad has travelled home to Jesus prepares me for thinking about the joy and the sorrow that the disciples feel at Jesus going home. "Where I go you cannot come." Not yet. I have good works for you to do. You stay here, and then you will come and be with me. My longing to be with Jesus is now merged together with my longing to be with my Dad. He has gone home. I will follow. Not yet. I still have good works to do before I go home.

Jesus prays in John 17 a prayer of sanctification for his disciples. As he prepares to go, he is setting them apart to serve in this world: to serve him.

Jesus began the prayer by asking the Father to glorify him in his final hour and then restore the glory that he had set aside when he came in the flesh. After praying for his own glorification, Jesus made three requests for the disciples gathered around him. He concludes the prayer with a request for those who were going to later believe. It is a prayer for us who have come to believe because of the witness of that first generation.

Jesus does not actually make a new request for we who follow. He applies to us the requests he just made for his disciples. This is how he starts the section. This is John 17:20, the first part, "I do not ask on behalf of these alone," meaning his disciples, "but for those also who believe in Me through their word..." Jesus does not add new requests. The requests for the disciples were not for them alone but for us, also. And instead of adding new requests for us, Jesus expands in this section on why he made those requests in the first place. He tells us what he wants to become true because of those requests. Jesus has a vision for oneness in Christian community and for witness based on the truth of his name. This is what he wants to come about out of the prayer requests he has already made for his disciples and for us. This is his vision for future communities of Christ-followers.

Let's remind ourselves of the three requests he made for the disciples which also apply to us. First, Jesus asked the Father to guard the disciples in his name. This is the name Jesus made known by coming to the earth. It is the name of God, which is his true nature, his character. Jesus is asking the Father to keep the disciples in true knowledge of who you are. Second, Jesus asked the Father to guard the disciples from the Evil One. He acknowledges that his disciples were going to be in the world but not of it, and they're going to need protection from Satan, who is at work to pervert and

corrupt. He is the thief who comes to kill, steal, and destroy. They will try to take the disciples away from the name of God. Third, Jesus asked the Father to sanctify the disciples in truth. It's very similar to those other two prayers. It adds the idea that they are to serve God in the world, so they must be set apart as holy, sanctified. And they are set apart according to truth: the truth of Jesus. And this truth makes them clean and pure and free to do the good works the Father has prepared for them to do, has prepared for us to do.

Jesus' Prayer for Us (John 17:20-26)

These are the three requests Jesus made for his disciples and for us; guard them in your name, guard them from the Evil One; sanctify them in truth. Why? What is Jesus' vision for the communities of those who would respond to the message of the disciples? Let's read the end of the prayer. This is John 17:20-26.

²⁰ "I do not ask on behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word; ²¹ that they may all be one; even as You, Father, *are* in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that You sent Me. ²² The glory which You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one, just as We are one; ²³ I in them and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, so that the world may know that You sent Me, and loved them, even as You have loved Me. ²⁴ Father, I desire that they also, whom You have given Me, be with Me where I am, so that they may see My glory which You have given Me, for You loved Me before the foundation of the world. ²⁵ O righteous Father, although the world has not known You, yet I have known You; and these have known that You sent Me; ²⁶ and I have made Your name known to them, and will make it known, so that the love with which You loved Me may be in them, and I in them."

Jesus prayed that we would be guarded in God's name, guarded from Satan, sanctified in truth in order that we might share together in a oneness based in our relationship with Jesus Christ. Abiding in Christ is an individual experience. It is also a shared community experience.

Oneness (20-21)

Let's think about the oneness. The first two verses.

²⁰ "I do not ask on behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word; ²¹ that they may all be one; even as You, Father, *are* in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that You sent Me.

The first goal Jesus states as vision for this new community is oneness among believers. "That they may all be one." And this oneness is a reflection of the Trinity; the relationship that is already truly harmonious, that is one in the Godhead. He says, "that they may all be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You." It is not a Hindu type of oneness by which we lose our individuality as we enter into God. We are not a drop that falls into the lake and dissolves into the great oneness. The Christian vision, the Old Testament, the New Testament vision maintains our individuality as we come into relationship with the Father. It is similar to the distinctive persons of the Trinity: Father, Son and Spirit, who share relationship while maintaining distinction. It is similar; it's not the same. The oneness of Father and Son goes farther. It's more of a mystery to us. But it provides a model of oneness for us as human beings who are in community. Jesus' prayer that we be kept in God's name was "that they may all be one" and then "that they also may be in Us." Being kept in the truth of who God is, we abide in him. Abiding in him is a spiritual and relational reality. So, the Trinity is not just a model for us to follow. We are invited into him and so we are called to live out the reality of oneness that we already share in a spiritual way by being together in Christ. Even though we are already one in Christ, oneness is something that we have to struggle towards because of our independence, our fallen nature that still pulls at us, our individuality.

Consider Christian marriage as a fundamental example of Christian community. Two people. Our personal desires and motivations and goals and values can easily drive us in different directions on all

kinds of issues. Not towards oneness but away from it. Disagreements about money, disagreements about in-laws, disagreements about free time, working around the house, careers, parenting, service at church, the way we personally feel about these things, the values we bring into marriage, our own selfishness - all of this can propel two married people onto very different paths, moving away from each other's mind, away from each other's heart, away relationally, away from oneness.

If we make our marriage relationship the number one objective, we will fail. It's in our nature. We are like two magnets connected on a straight line attempting to move toward one another. And sometimes there is very strong attraction. But at other times we spin around, and we are repelling. We're like magnets that keep spinning, sometimes attracted, sometimes repelling, unable to overcome our own nature.

Instead of making an approach to one another our primary goal, when we turn to Jesus and believe him and make him our number one goal, the competition we have with each other is reduced to some degree, because our eyes are not focused on what we want from the other. Our eyes begin to be focused on Jesus. We fix our eyes on Jesus. And then we try to model ourselves after him. We want the heart of abiding in Christ. We want a heart like his, a heart of humility, of faith, of glory, of love. And that heart motivates us to the acts of abiding, which result in the fruit of abiding. If we're acting in our relationship in Christ then we're coming closer to him, we're becoming more like him. And as we both move toward Jesus, we are like objects, instead of being on a line that are repelling or attracting, we're like the two base corners of a triangle, and Jesus is the apex. And we're moving towards him, and as we move towards, we necessarily are moving towards one another. So abiding in Christ is both our model for oneness in relationship, but it's also what enables oneness with each other.

It's not automatic. We have to seek Christ. But it's not easier than that. We can't do it apart from abiding in Christ. Abiding in Jesus Christ, seeking to be one with him, one with the Father, this is the basic blueprint for oneness in Christian community, whether we're speaking of two people, or three people, or fifty people. We find our oneness by abiding together in Christ.

Witness

Jesus' vision for our oneness comes back to his vision for the glory of God to be made known in the world. He says to the Father that he desires this oneness for us. This is what he says, "So that the world may believe that You sent Me." Oneness is a community fruit that gives witness to Jesus Christ. Do you remember from chapter 13 after Jesus set apart his disciples by washing their feet; here he's setting them apart, sanctifying them by praying for them; there he sanctified them with action, by washing their feet. What fruit in that chapter did Jesus say would give witness to the fact that the disciples are truly his? How does the world know that we belong to Jesus? "Love one another as I have loved you. By this all men will know that you are my disciples."

So, there is a parallel here, these are parallel passages. There's a connection between loving one another and being at one in relationship with one another. And both of those things, love for one another and oneness with one another, gives witness to the fact that we belong to Jesus and that Jesus is real. The aim of Jesus Christ is a transformation in us and in our communities. He doesn't just want to change you without having an impact on your Christian community. And he wants it to be noticeable in the world. This is not a top down oneness where everybody is told to believe the same thing and to practice the same kind of ritual, that somehow there's going to be a world-wide institution that creates a formal oneness. This is a oneness that arises out of transformed hearts that indicates some power at work. Look at who they love each other. Look at their relationships, their common purposes, their oneness. They're not perfect but there is something really different here that I don't experience in my family room, my school and my job. Could it be that the Jesus they proclaim is real?

One of the messages my mom received this past week after my dad died was a note of Christian encouragement from a fellow named John. John was on dad's track team in high school. He became

homeless in high school, so dad offered for him to come and live at our home. We the three boys had all graduated and left. It was just mom, dad and John. And John did not believe in Jesus in those days. He once told my parents that they were fake because they never yelled at each other. You know, it is not normal. He knew it didn't make sense. They became - even maybe without him putting it all together - they became his model for oneness in Christ. And they were not a perfect model. He got to see the challenges in their relationship and in their communication. Their lack of oneness. But there was something real and something different, something apparent. Something unusual. Years after leaving my parents' home, John came to know Jesus and he was able to understand what he saw different in my parents. It was the witness of Christ in them.

Glory (22-23)

Jesus has given us something to enable our oneness. He says in verse 22, he's still speaking to the Father, "The glory which You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one, just as We are one..." What does that mean? "The glory which you have given me I have given to them." What does it mean for Jesus to give glory to us? What is the glory of Jesus? Let's go all the way back to the prologue. There are three concepts there and when I mention them, you'll be able to see how they play throughout the whole Gospel. John 1:4, "In him was life, and that life was the light of men." Two things there. His glory is life and his glory is light. Two major themes of John. There is a principle of life in Jesus, and it's holistic. It's our physical life. Through him all things were made. Nothing was made without him. So, we owe our biological life to him, but the focus of the Gospel of John is our spiritual life and our relational life, which are enabled by Jesus. In chapter 7, he stood up in the temple and proclaimed, "He who believes in me, as the Scripture said, 'From his innermost being shall flow rivers of living water." Then in chapter 10, he promised, "I came that they might have life, and might have it abundantly." In chapter 14, "I am the way, the truth, the life." Chapter 15, he gave us the image of the vine and the branches. We do not have the vitality of spiritual life within ourselves. Apart from Christ we are spiritually dead. But when we are connected to him, yielded, obedient, dependent, his life flows through us to produce fruit by the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus is truly alive. We are truly alive in him. This is a glory that he has given us. The glory of his vitality. Like Lazarus out of the tomb, we embody a new kind of human life. We are able to take off the grave clothes.

Along with the glory of life there is the glory of light. Jesus makes the truth of God known. And Jesus has shared this glory with us. We are able to see, to know. And then we are in turn able to participate in making God known.

With light and life there is also the goodness of his name. John 1:14, "The Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth." This is his glory, his character. His name is grace and truth, love and justice, courage and humility, patience and conviction. The life and light of Jesus at work in us begins to make us like him. This glory he has given us, it's a change of our nature. We become good.

The glory the Father gave Jesus: life, light, goodness, he has given us. And this glory enables both our oneness and our witness. So, we've already mentioned these two in the prayer and we come right back to them in verse 23. I'll read 22-23. See the connection with glory.

"22 The glory which You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one, just as We are one; 23 I in them and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, so that the world may know that You sent Me, and loved them, even as You have loved Me."

This sums up what we have said so far, the two goals of Jesus. The prayer request he's made for us have these two major goals for the Christian community. Jesus has given us his glory by dwelling in us through the Spirit. Glory of life and knowledge and goodness enables us to the vision of oneness; to a way that models the relational unity of the Trinity. That's the first vision of Jesus, that we would be increasingly one in Christian community. But that gives rise to the second goal. That oneness of community gives witness. It gives witness here. It's two truths it gives witness to: that Jesus was sent

from God; that if the people of Jesus are truly different then that gives witness to the reality of Jesus. But here he mentions another thing. He says, "They will know that you sent me and loved them. It gives witness. The story of Jesus, and if this is real, gives witness to the fact that God truly loves his own. We are loved by God. And how does oneness show that we're loved by God? Because he's transforming us, he's making us alive, but also because he's invited us into relationship with him. And this experience of God shows his love for us, and that's a witness. It's a witness to us. It's a witness to the world.

With Jesus

In verse 24 Jesus states his desire that we would see his glory. And that can sound a little odd as you get into it, but not if you love Jesus. When you love somebody, you enjoy seeing their glory. You want to see their goodness and their beauty. And you want to see it displayed. Jesus truly is glorious. And he desires for his disciples to have the joy of experiencing him in all of his beauty and goodness and truth; to experience him much more fully than they ever did on earth. They beheld his glory. But it was still a glimpse. Jesus expresses this desire this way, "Father, I desire that they also, whom You have given Me, be with Me where I am, so that they may see My glory which You have given Me, for You loved Me before the foundation of the world." Jesus is our focus. Our eyes are fixed on him and on his glory. As we draw towards him, we draw together with each other. We have the shared aim: this desire for the glory of God, the glory of Jesus. He is our joy and we rejoice together. And that brings us closer.

Because Jesus loves us and knows that we love him, he desires for us to know the joy of his seeing him in his glory.

Known in the world (25-26)

But not yet. Jesus wants us to see his glory. But before that, he wants us who believe to be his hands, his feet, his mouth, his word in the world. He's left us here for a purpose. This is how the prayer concludes in verses 25-26.

"25 O righteous Father, although the world has not known You, yet I have known You; and these have known that You sent Me; 26 and I have made Your name known to them, and will make it known, so that the love with which You loved Me may be in them, and I in them."

Jesus ends the prayer as he began the prayer. He began with a request to be glorified and with the statement that eternal life is knowing God Jesus Christ whom God sent. Similarly, Jesus has ended his prayer with a desire for us to see his glory and a statement about knowing the Father and the Son. So he started with glory and knowing God, and now it ended with glory and knowing God. The word "know" appears five times in these two verses.

The world had not known the Father.

Jesus has known the Father.

These who believe have known that the Father sent Jesus.

Jesus has made the Father's name known to these who believe.

And Jesus will continue to make the name of the Father known.

To know God as he is in a truthful, experiential, relational way, this is eternal life. Jesus makes God known, according to his true nature. We who believe have come to know the Father, according to his true nature. And Jesus will continue to make the name of God known. We can truly come to know God. And at the same time, we will never come to the end of knowing God.

And in these last words of this prayer it's not a mere philosophical knowing of God. It's not sitting in some classroom debating all the characteristics of who God is and facts about God. That's part of it. To know someone, you need to know truths about who that person is. But this knowing that's being spoken of here, the knowing that is eternal life, this is relational knowing. And that's how the prayer ends. Jesus has made God known and here he's speaking to God, and he says, "I've made you known

so that the love with which You loved Me may be in them, and I in them." God wants to indwell us and transform us with the love of his presence.

This is the prayer of Jesus, that we might experience God in a way that transforms us as individuals, but then also transforms our relationships together with believers. He wants us to experience oneness with each other, such that our love and unity becomes a reflection of the love and unity of the Trinity: of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, so that even more people will see and believe and enter into his love and enter into the community of his family, of his Kingdom.

Further Reflection On Jesus' Prayer for Christian Oneness

So, "What has gone wrong? Where is oneness among Christians?" We can't read over this prayer without... This is the huge elephant in the room. As I reflect on that question, so many different ideas and problems pile up in my mind. There's conflict in missionary teams, animosity in churches, the split-up of churches, there are thousands of Protestant denominations, there's racial and ethnic division, there are black churches and there are white churches, there's Protestant, Roman Catholic, Orthodox, there's religious wars scattered throughout history. Where is the oneness? What's wrong with the vision of Jesus?

And this oneness of believers, as I think about it, is not a topic I can handle fairly right now as I'm speaking to you. This is a topic for a book. But I do not want to avoid the topic, either. I want to give some thoughts, recognizing that I cannot develop my thoughts thoroughly and I'm certainly going to miss some important truths that you'll think of that need to be considered in talking about Christian oneness.

I'm going to give you five observations, kind of to get the discussion going. Here are five things I observe about Christian oneness as I reflect on this prayer of Jesus.

First observation

Christian oneness cannot be separated from the truth of who Jesus is and truth of who we are.

Oneness is grounded in reality. Jesus defines God. Jesus defines us. To reject that is to reject God. If we do not yield to the authority of God's Word, there is no valid basis for Christian unity. We might find other ways to be unified as human beings, but Christian unity must accept Jesus at his word.

Various denominations and movements, they hold on to this name, "Christian," but they completely redefine the Word of God, some by elevating tradition up to, even above the level of Biblical authority, and others by making God's Word out to be relativistic. It changes over time. It doesn't really mean what it says.

But for Christian oneness to exist according to the terms that Jesus has laid within his words - and I don't know why we would elevate this prayer and want to accomplish it as Jesus' word and then reject everything Jesus said that leads us up to this point. The oneness Jesus is talking about is dependent on what he has been teaching. It's a full package. It's dependent on these two things, (1) the reality of Jesus Christ who is God, became flesh and died on our behalf: you cannot have Christian oneness without accepting that reality; and (2) the authority of God's Word contained in the Bible. This is the Word of Christ that he has left with us. This defines for us the oneness that we're seeking. This is the message of John. True disciples abide in the Word of Christ. True Christians receive his revelation of himself. They accept that he defines us, not the other way around.

Now let's just think about the three requests Jesus made for his disciples. They're all about truth. Guard them in your name. Your true name, God. Hold them in the truth of who you are. Guard them from the Evil One who would pervert that name, and unfortunately often does it in Christian circles. Sanctify them in truth. We're set apart for service according to the truth: the reality of things that Jesus has made known. When we go back through the Gospel and consider how Jesus did this, how he guarded the truth, we are reminded in chapter 6 how the crowds tried to define Jesus as prophet and as king. They had their own vision of Messiah. Jesus pushed them back with the words "eat my flesh, drink my blood." He rejected the definition of the crowd that they wanted to put on him, but

he gave affirmation to Peter who testified, "You have the words of eternal life. And we have believed and have come to know that you are the Holy one of God." Truth. We are also reminded how in chapter 8, just after Jesus said, "If you abide in my word, then you are truly disciples of mine; and you shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free," just after that the crowd pushed back against Jesus' assertion that they were slaves to sin, and they defined themselves as children of Abraham. They would define themselves. But Jesus said, "No. You are the children of the Evil One." Jesus would define them very differently than how they thought they ought to be defined. And he refused to accept their self-identification. You do not give yourself identity. Jesus defines himself. Jesus defines us. We yield to the truth of his word. That's the basis for Christian unity.

I have a personal example that stuck with me for much of my life. I have one famous relative. You can check out his Wikipedia page, my great, great uncle Bishop Charles Henry Brent. He was a Bishop in Episcopalian Church in Buffalo, New York. He was also head chaplain of the allied forces in World War I. Christian historian Bruce Shelley considers him one of the pillars of the ecumenical movement of the mid-twentieth century. At that time three initiatives for Christian unity converged.

According to Shelley's book, *Church History in Plain Language*, John R. Mott, founder of the World's Student Christian Federation exhibited "a passionate zeal for unity based on the love of Christ (443)." I admire Mott, and I find value in the idea that our unity comes from true relationship with Jesus. I think that is true. At the same time, a great variety of Christians can claim subjective experiences with Jesus. In fact, that's a basis for Mormon witness, you know, what you feel in your heart to be true. And I've learned there are Muslims who pray to Jesus and claim heart-warming experiences from that prayer. So a testimony of love for Jesus is too subjective to be the basis, or the ground of our Christian unity. We need something more objective.

And two of the initiatives competed at that time with one another as a basis for ecumenism, that is, bringing together different Christian groups. The World Conference on Life and Work argued for unity based on action. Our oneness is in our joint causes. And Bishop Brent was all for joint action. He is credited for leading the fight to end the opium trade to China. But he rejected the idea that common action is a basis for Christian oneness.

He led the World Conference on Faith and Order, as distinguished from the Conference on Life and Work, and he argued for unity based on doctrinal truth. Shelley says, he "believed that cooperation among churches was possible only on the basis of agreement on essentials of the faith (444)." And I agree. Without agreement on essential Christian truths we cannot have Christian unity. And it begins with these two things I've already mentioned. It begins with an acknowledgment that Jesus Christ is God and he came and died for us. And second, with the acceptance of the Bible as our authority. The Bible is true.

Unfortunately, the Conference of Faith and Order lost the argument and the Worldwide Council of Churches accepted the position of the Conference on Life and Work that unity is based on what we do, not on what we believe, which essentially allowed them to invite everybody in. So, then you have Christian leaders, or so-called Christian leaders who deny the divinity, deny the incarnation, deny the atonement, deny the resurrection of Jesus Christ. And how in the world someone can actually call themselves Christian with a straight face while denying all the essential truths Jesus Christ taught about himself, is beyond me. I struggle to comprehend that. I wish co-called Christian leaders would be honest and drop the name, "Christian."

Are the words of Jesus true or are the words of Jesus not true? It's really not that hard, as twisted as we might make it. When we claim the words of Jesus are true, we're still going to have disagreements with each other, but at least we have a basis for our disagreement. And the point is not simply to have agreement on propositions. What we're saying is that belief in these truths brings about change. It brings about the oneness. To reject the truth is to reject the way that leads into spiritual life.

If Jesus truly is the way and the truth and the life, and no one comes to the Father but through him, then to reject that truth is to not come to the Father. You cannot have oneness if you refuse to come to the Father, according to the way of Jesus. If, as Jesus says, we must be born again to enter the Kingdom of God but we reject the idea of being born-again then, according to Jesus, we don't enter into the Kingdom of God and we cannot have Christian unity. Because we're not there, we're not in. We're not part of his family. If Christian unity is based on being alive in Jesus and indwelt by his Spirit as Jesus clearly describes in this prayer, then those who reject these ideas cannot, according to what Jesus is describing, have unity.

See, the argument is not that we must all have unanimity of thought to have unity. It's not that we all get our truth lined up and doctrine in agreement. The argument is that new birth and inclusion into the family of God depends on faith in Jesus as he has revealed himself. To use the words of Jesus, we must believe in him, we must receive him, we must know him. And when we do, we enter into him. And that's the basis of our unity: belief in the core truths that bring us into the family of God.

After having yielded to the truth of Jesus, we then share this subjective experience. We begin to take on shared priorities. We desire his glory. These are the types of things that build up and make possible our unity through our joint faith in Jesus.

Let me make clear an implication of what I am saying. Just as the Gospel of John deals with many in the crowds who claim to believe without believing, we recognize the same reality among Christian denominations all over the world today, and particularly among whole nations that claim to be Christian. Nationalistic Christianity does not produce true Christian oneness. Christian institutions do not produce true Christians oneness. Old Christian denominations, by maintaining their ritual and their culture do not produce Christian oneness. Not automatically. True Christian oneness can only exist among those who have truly been born again and entered into the kingdom of God through faith in the essential truths of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. I believe it is generally correct to say that there is a remnant of true believers throughout Christian denominations. There are true believers. And it is among this remnant of believers that this oneness spoken of by Jesus Christ has potential to exist.

There can be value in different Christian organizations working together, even if we have significant even if we're wondering if they're really Christian or even if they reject doctrine that we consider essential - we can still have a kind of unity on causes for social justice, for humanitarian care. We can come together to argue against abortion, to stand up for marriage, to care for refugees, to argue an end to racism. We can stand together, and there is a kind of unity there. It is a unity of case, however, and that's good, but it's not what Jesus is talking about here. It's not Christian oneness through being in God. You have to be born-again for that.

I've got four more observations and I could develop them all like this first one but for the sake of time I'm going to be more brief on these next four.

My first observation was that Christian oneness depends on accepting the truth of Jesus: what he says about himself and what he says about us.

Second observation

My second observation is that Christian oneness already exists in a real way that guarantees the future realization of Jesus' vision. This is part of the good news.

If I were writing the book on Christians oneness, one of the first places I would turn to in addition to this prayer right here would be the letter to Ephesians. The first part of Ephesians 2 describes how all of us who believe have been made alive in Jesus Christ, and in him we have been raised up, we've been seated in the heavenly places in Christ (Ephesians 2:4-6). There is something already true about our position with Jesus. We're one with him.

And then the second part of Ephesians 2 repeats that idea, but in a corporate way. Not only are we already in Jesus as individuals. We are also in Jesus as a community. Focusing on the often hostile

division between Jew and Gentile, Paul declares that Jesus tore down the dividing wall so that he might make the two into one new man, reconciling both in one body through the cross (Ephesians 2:14-16).

I have more unity in my being in who I am in Jesus with my black brothers and sisters in Christ than with my own relatives who have rejected Jesus Christ. I share spiritual life, the life and vitality of Jesus with all of my brothers and sisters who have believed in him. I can't share that, even with my biological blood who reject him. That spiritual unity has already been achieved whether I acknowledge it or not, whether you accept it or not. To believe in Christ is to be in Christ. All who believe in Christ are in Christ. That is true of Jew and Samaritan, black and white, Croat and Serb. All who are in Christ share a spiritual oneness.

Our great sin is our failure to live out that unity which Jesus has already accomplished for us. But our sin cannot thwart the ultimate realization of that vision for his people. Jesus will bring us together with him in glory.

I grew up in the Moravian Church in the Southern United States. My church experience was almost 100% white. And yet, there are 20 times more Moravians in the African country of Tanzania than in the whole of the United States. Me and my white Moravian brothers and sisters would do well to seek unity with our black brothers and sisters in Christ here on earth because they're going to way outnumber us in Heaven. I guarantee that the Moravian choir of Heaven is going to look a whole lot different than the typical Moravian choir in North Carolina. That's my second observation, that Jesus has already accomplished a spiritual oneness by bringing us into himself, and it will be realized.

Third observation

My third observation is that Christian oneness is a dynamic vision to be pursued, not a static state we fully achieve on earth.

Even though Jesus Christ has accomplished oneness for us in him and even though his disciples already shared a certain amount of oneness, they had a long way to go. We always have a long way to go. There is continual room for growth. You get a hint of that in verse 23 when Jesus communicates his desire that we be perfected in unity. This is a process.

There is a parallel between our individual experience and our corporate experience. Just as we need to learn to give ourselves grace as we press towards Christ, as we grow in Christ, and we're going to fail a lot but we're moving towards Christ, so also we need to give our communities grace, because our communities are made up of people who are going to fail a lot. But our hope is that we're pressing together towards a vision of oneness.

As individuals, we exist in an "already, but not yet," state. We are already in Jesus, already forgiven, already secure, but we are not yet complete, not yet whole, not yet free of this body of sin. We will be. One day we will be glorified with Jesus. But for now we live in a messy middle. We are in process. We have been sanctified, we will be fully sanctified, but right now we're even participating in our sanctification. We're becoming.

If this is true of individual believers, this is also true of communities of individuals. We who believe already have spiritual unity in Christ. We are all in him. And we look forward to that day when that unity will be whole and complete; perfect unity. Though for now, we live in the mess between the "already" and the "not yet." This is the messy middle with the call of Jesus to engage and to pursue that oneness that he has already accomplished for us.

Whether we are speaking of our marriages or our Bible study group or our Christian band or our missionary team or our local church, we exist in communities that are "already-not-yet." So there's something already true in Christ and we have this beginning of oneness, but we're not yet complete.

Fourth observation

My fourth observation is that Christian oneness cannot be experienced apart from loving like Jesus loved.

There are two emphases of Jesus in these chapters that are sometimes held up in conflict with one another which are really meant to work in harmony. And those two emphases are truth and love. Do we build our unity on truth or do we build it on love? Well, both. We enter into unity when we yield in faith to the truth of Jesus. The goal of that truth is to transform us into a people who love God with all our heart and who love one another as Jesus has loved us. That is the new commandment. I have emphasized truth earlier, in my first observation. Now I am coming back around to love.

There is an ugly smelliness to propositional truth divorced from loving action. As a result, there is a lot of very smelly Christian doctrine on social media. It just stinks. It's true, but it stinks. Statements of truth expressed with hate or impatience or lack of gentleness deny the reality the truths are intended to establish. If I insist that God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son and I insist on that truth with condescension, sarcasm, or prideful words, then I'm denying the very reality that I'm insisting on: that God loves. God loves but his children, apparently, don't.

If it is true that Jesus is both grace and truth, he is both light and love, then what am I communicating about the power of Jesus to transform lives when I communicate in a smelly, abusive, legalistic, judgmental way? And you see this a lot in differing communities with different, polar positions.

If I, as a Christian, cannot seriously put aside my thoughts, and just shut up, and listen, and put myself into another person's shoes, and admit to the complexity of values and experiences and needs that drive people differently; if I can only dogmatically insist on my own perspective, what does that communicate about the truth of who Jesus is? It's a very immature truth that can't be quiet. Jesus knew when to be quiet and when to speak, and it's amazing how many sinners enjoyed gathering around Jesus.

We do hold on to certain spiritual and moral truths without apology. And yet, if we cannot do it in love, then we might all just keep quiet. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 13:1, "If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal." The truth of Jesus without love is an irritating noise.

The solution, however, is not the avoidance of conflict. Rather, it is conflict in love. Speak truth with love. If you've tried, you know how hard that is. It's a lot harder than it sounds. It is not easy to live in Christian community. We are not really good at loving like Jesus loves. On top of that, God puts some very unlovable people in our communities. Maybe that's us? We must learn to love. It's something we learn, and we're not going to learn to love if we are surrounded by like-minded people who constantly agree with our thoughts and our desires. To learn to love, we need challenge. I thought I was pretty selfless until I got married. And then I realized, I am a bit selfish. Then we had children, and that I realized, I'm really selfish. I need challenge to wake me up to the change that needs to happen in my life.

I guarantee, if you have not gotten mad or hurt by somebody in your Christian community, then you are lacking in your Christian oneness. Until you open up to the point that you get frustrated each other, until you enter into that space, you're limited in your oneness of relationship. Love calls forth a sacrifice of self that is given opportunity when there is conflict of needs, and desires, or perspectives. It's that conflict that gives you opportunity to love.

Fifth observation

One last observation. Christian oneness is lacking even more than you imagine, and yet, present more than you might hope for. There is bad news and there is good news. The bad news.

Those who have truly believed in Jesus Christ and have been indwelt by his Spirit still struggle with all the sins common to humanity. We are self-centered and tribal. We struggle to be truly authentic in community. We do not easily yield to others in humility and love. We judge one another. And we hide behind masks that make us feel safe.

We develop identity in our communities that compels us to judge those who are part of some other community. Our tribalism forms around doctrine or practices or ritual or race or politics. It makes us

feel safe because we're same. We're all alike and we're all fighting to keep it the same. We're fighting for a certain set of perspectives and values, a certain shared history. We develop a sense of unity that is not the same thing as Christian oneness, but it's based on prejudices, or fear, or pride, or selfishness, or unwillingness to go to extra effort to understand those who are not like us. It is easier to be of Paul or to be of Apollos, to rally around a denomination or a culture or charismatic figure than to honestly face the good and the bad in our own group while also honestly acknowledging the good and bad in other groups. To see truly is exhausting.

Adam and Eve shared a oneness of experience when they hid from God. You know, they were one in their hiding. The people of Babel shared a sense of oneness when they came together to make a name for themselves, to create their own identity. The Jewish leaders were together in oneness when they kicked the formerly blind man out of their community. Oneness of thought and action is not the goal. Christian oneness is the goal, a growing intimacy based on the reality of being in Christ.

It is hard, and we're not good at it. And we've sinned. Our communities have sinned. And that's bad news. Here is some good news.

Unity is not the same thing as uniformity. Christians are commonly criticized for the multitude of movements and denominations. I admit that one of the reasons for all these diverse groups is sin in the hearts of Christians. We know that history. There is bad news here. But just as we are a mixed bag of motives as individuals, so also the history of our churches, and movements, and communities are a mixed bag. It's always a mixed bag. Every community, every individual is mixed in motive. There's good and there's bad. And to be honest, there is much good in our diversity. Thousands of denominations and churches is not a complete problem.

We do not want uniformity. That is not the goal. We do not want everybody to communicate in the exact words and the exact same way. We do not want every worship service to look the same, for all Christian music to sound the same; for every church to have the exact same priorities.

We have a variety of gifts, a variety of ministries enabled by the Holy Spirit, which shines through a myriad of personalities. And that's not bad. We don't want to all be the same. Our varied communities arise out of history and culture and a gift mix that belongs to that community. And it develops priority, a leading by God for that community. The Gospel was freed from Jewish culture, not to reproduce the same culture among every people group, but to infuse every people group with the truth and life and goodness of Jesus Christ, his glory, in order to produce a variety of expressions of the local church within one people group variety and across cultures variety.

And there is good news in great variety. Since the ground of our oneness is in the personal relationship with Jesus based on faith in his Word, there is more oneness across movements in churches and people groups than might at first seem apparent. I've experienced oneness with brothers and sisters in Christ who are very, very different than I am, and yet when the Gospel is spoken, when Jesus is declared, the joy in their eyes is the same joy in my heart. And there's an immediate sense of oneness in Jesus. And I've experienced that oneness in a black church in Durham, North Carolina that was pastored by an African missionary. I've experienced it at youth camp in Czechoslovakia back when it was still called Czechoslovakia. I've experienced it going to a Mexican church in Bakersfield, California, greeted at the door by tattooed elders wearing black leather vests. I have experienced the oneness of Christ with thousands of college students in South Korea, in a poor farm house in Croatia, at my home church in North Carolina, in small groups on the Outer Banks. I have experienced oneness with believers teaching through Central and Eastern Europe in Albania, and Macedonia, and Bosnia, and Slovenia, and Ukraine, and Poland, and Czechia, and Slovakia, and Moldova, and Estonia, and Lithuania. I have experienced oneness across denominations, preaching to Presbyterians, and Pentecostals, and Methodists, and Moravians, to Baptists, to Brethren, to Bible churches. I have experience oneness in my Croatian church, oneness with my Croatian colleagues, oneness with the dear Iranian couple I mentor. It is the real joy of Jesus through being born-again in him.

Across Christian denominations, throughout the cultures of the world there is a remnant of believers about whom the last words of this prayer apply. Verse 25-26,

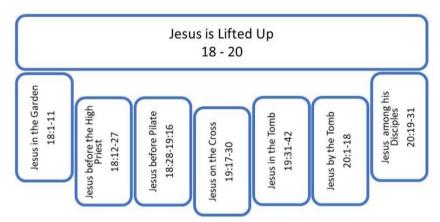
²⁵ "O righteous Father, although the world has not known You, yet I have known You; and these have known that You sent Me; ²⁶ and I have made Your name known to them, and will make it known, so that the love with which You loved Me may be in them, and I in them."

The prayers of Jesus Christ do not go forth without fruit. He is already accomplishing his vision for oneness through all of us who are in him. He will bring about this oneness fully when he gathers us together in his kingdom. We are called to work out this oneness in the here and now, in our own communities by abiding in Jesus Christ and seeking to love one another. Abiding in Christ is not something we do one on one with Jesus. Abiding in Christ is individual, yes, but also communal. As we abide in Christ together, we grow in him together with the goal of reflecting his love to the world that they might know the glory of his name and come to know him, too.

Reflection questions

- 1. Read John 17:20-26. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What are some questions that come to mind?
- 2. How do the previous requests in the prayer relate to the oneness Jesus prays for among future followers? What connections do you see between oneness and his glory, his name, truth, and being sent into the world as witnesses?
- 3. Considering the new commandment given in 13:34 and 15:12, what should be sacrificed in order to pursue oneness among Christians?
- 4. What cannot be sacrificed for the sake of unity if Christian oneness is to actually remain Christian? (Remember the promise of opposition and the prayer to be guarded from Satan.)
- 5. Consider the five observations provided in this lesson for further reflection on oneness. Which one stands out as most helpful in your own reflections right now in your life? Which one do you find least helpful with or disagree with?
- 6. What practical action could you take to promote Christian oneness in your family, church or community? How can you participate in the fulfillment of Jesus' prayer?

Lesson 32: John 18:1-27 The Arrest of Jesus Introduction



With this lesson we begin the fourth and final section of John. The first part of the Gospel we titled, *The Word Among Us.* That was John 1:19 all the way through the end of chapter 12. It contained two sections. In the first section Jesus began to reveal himself publicly beginning at the wedding in Cana. We were introduced this problem that many were believing in him without truly believing in him. In the second section, chapters 5-10, opposition increased as Jesus continued to reveal his nature publicly. Opposition intensified. That section ended with an attempt to kill Jesus, and Jesus withdrew from public ministry. But then, in the transitional chapters 11 and 12, at the sickness and death of Lazarus, Jesus again enters into public ministry that leads into his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, before finally pulling away again to focus his final hours on private instruction for his disciples.

So, with chapter 13 we moved into the second half of the Gospel which we titled, *The Hour of His Glory*. His hour has come. In the first section of this part, Jesus was mostly speaking, and he was speaking to his disciples. He was preparing them for life and ministry without him physically present among them. This was going to be a huge change for them. Those chapters, chapters 13-17, have proven to be quite dense. As I said, it is almost 100% Jesus speaking. And in that speaking, as he teaches, he weaves together multiple significant themes that get repeated throughout. So we have to pay very close attention, and we have to slow down and take our time with those chapters. We focused on the idea of abiding in Christ as a heart reality, that we abide in our heart, but also as action. There are acts of abiding, and that all leads to fruit of abiding. Life without Jesus physically present is not going to be life without Jesus. But it's going to be a new and different way of walking with Jesus, who is not going to be walking physically present, but spiritually present through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

Before we can get to that reality, Jesus must be lifted up. The Spirit is going to be sent after the cross. So now we enter into the final section of John, chapters 18-20. So far, each of our four sections, two in the first half of the Gospel, two in the second half of the Gospel, have divided nicely into 7 subsections with clear parallelism in the text. It is not hard to recognize a chiastic arrangement in these first three sections. This final section also divides nicely into 7 sub-sections, though the parallelism is less apparent. The outer scenes of this section both show Jesus with his disciples. At the beginning, Jesus is with his disciples in a garden and then, and then at the end he's with his disciples in a closed room. The two scenes that come right after the garden depict the trial of Jesus: first before the high priest and then before Pilate. The two scenes that come just before the closed room depict Jesus in the tomb. First, he is laid in the tomb, and then he's risen and he's beside the tomb. The middle section then is going to show us Jesus lifted up on the cross.

We're beginning this lesson with the first two sub-sections: Jesus in the garden and Jesus before the high priest; the arrest of Jesus and the Jewish interrogation, or Jewish trial of Jesus. From the start, right here in chapter 18, John introduces a theme that is particular to John, and it's going to carry through these chapters. This is something that makes his Gospel different from the three synoptic

Gospels. That theme coming through the Passion, through the arrest, through the trial, through the crucifixion this is that Jesus is in control. The synoptic Gospels faithful describe for us the meekness of Jesus as he goes to the cross, fulfilling the imagery of Isaiah 53:7, "He did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is lead to slaughter, and like a sheep that is silent before its shearers, so he did not open his mouth." That does not mean Jesus didn't speak at all; it means that he did not oppose his arrest. He did not argue for his release. He submits to the arrest, to the abuse, to the crucifixion without arguing his case. And the image of meekness is a correct image. Jesus goes meekly. But John would remind us not to confuse meekness with weakness. Jesus is not a helpless victim. His meekness comes from a willing restraint of power. He is a victim, but he allows that. There is abuse of power against him and he goes with it. And if we have misunderstood this by the images given to us by the synoptic Gospels, John's witness is helping us to focus our perspective more accurately. He's showing us that, yes, Jesus went meekly, but he has power and he has control over the entire situation as he's going.

We might make the mistake of seeing Jesus as weak and helpless. We might also make the mistake of seeing Jesus as a helpless victim unwillingly or unknowingly given up by his father to a horrible death. Like Jesus is some child and God allows his child to die in order that we might be saved. He doesn't rush in to save his child. And that might create a powerfully moving illustration, but it also gives the wrong image. Jesus is not a little child who is given over by his Father. Jesus is God the Son. He's not unwilling. He is acting in full harmony, in full agreement with his Father. He goes to the cross by an act of his own will. He declared in John 10:17-18, "I lay down my life that I may take it again. No one has taken it away from me, but I lay it down on my own initiative. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This commandment I received from the Father." Even as Jesus allowed himself to be taken to the cross, the behavior and the speech of Jesus as he goes to the cross reveals that he is actually in control throughout.

Jesus in the Garden (18:1-11)

We start in the garden. The first 3 verses set the scene. This is John 18:1-3,

¹ When Jesus had spoken these words, He went forth with His disciples over the ravine of the Kidron, where there was a garden, in which He entered with His disciples. ² Now Judas also, who was betraying Him, knew the place, for Jesus had often met there with His disciples. ³ Judas then, having received the *Roman* cohort and officers from the chief priests and the Pharisees, came there with lanterns and torches and weapons.

Jesus had gotten up to leave the room of the last supper at the end of chapter 14. Presumably, he was walking through the city. He was moving to the outer gates of Jerusalem. Here we see him now exiting the city with his disciples and entering into a garden. From the other Gospels we know this as the Garden of Gethsemane. And we know that Jesus' purpose for coming to this garden was to pray. He will pray deep into the night as his disciples fall asleep. He will express his wish to not drink this cup of suffering and shame that is coming upon him with the cross, while at the same time affirming his commitment to do exactly that. He doesn't look forward to it, he doesn't relish the suffering, but it is the plan, and it is his full commitment. John does not repeat this prayer but he's already reported the same message in the words Jesus spoke earlier in 12:27,

²⁷ "Now My soul has become troubled; and what shall I say, 'Father, save Me from this hour'? But for this purpose I came to this hour. ²⁸ "Father, glorify Your name."

So, instead of telling us about the prayer, which we already know from the other Gospels, John takes us into the garden, and he moves straight to the betrayal. Judah knew the garden. He knew Jesus planned to go there or maybe had someone watching and easily was able to figure out where Jesus was headed. The time and the place make an ideal spot for an arrest. The garden is outside of the city. It's a secluded place. There are no crowds about. Jesus is alone with his disciples. It is night. Judas comes with armed temple officers and Roman soldiers. If at full strength, the reference here to a cohort of soldiers would indicate 1000 men. A Roman battalion, however, was rarely at full strength. And even if the battalion was at full strength, the reference most likely refers only to a

representation of that battalion. It's not the full cohort. But considering other writings we have from Pilate regarding unruly mobs at the main Jewish feast, Roman caution in providing soldiers fits the times. The arrest of a popular, public figure like Jesus would warrant significant back-up.

But though they come in strength, John describes Jesus as the one who takes the initiative. Here is the complete account of the arrest. This is John 18:4-11,

⁴ So Jesus, knowing all the things that were coming upon Him, went forth and said to them, "Whom do you seek?" ⁵ They answered Him, "Jesus the Nazarene." He said to them, "I am *He*." And Judas also, who was betraying Him, was standing with them. ⁶ So when He said to them, "I am *He*," they drew back and fell to the ground. ⁷ Therefore He again asked them, "Whom do you seek?" And they said, "Jesus the Nazarene." ⁸ Jesus answered, "I told you that I am *He*; so if you seek Me, let these go their way," ⁹ to fulfill the word which He spoke, "Of those whom You have given Me I lost not one." ¹⁰ Simon Peter then, having a sword, drew it and struck the high priest's slave, and cut off his right ear; and the slave's name was Malchus. ¹¹ So Jesus said to Peter, "Put the sword into the sheath; the cup which the Father has given Me, shall I not drink it?"

John begins by asserting, "Jesus, knowing all the things that were coming upon him, went forth." Now, I have no idea of the exact feelings of Jesus when he saw Judas coming towards him with a band of Jewish and Roman soldiers, except that I'm sure surprise was not one of the feelings. None of this is a surprise to Jesus. Jesus, knowing all things that were coming upon him, went forth. He knows. He is in control.

And so, he takes initiative with the soldiers. They're coming to get him. He moves forward to them and he asked the first question, "Whom do you seek?" It's a question that is strikingly similar to the very first words of Jesus in this Gospel, way back in chapter 1, when two disciples were following John the Baptist and then they started following Jesus. Then Jesus turns around and he sees them. He says, "What do you seek?" The irony of John is in full play when Jesus, speaking to this group: to Judas and the soldiers and the high priest, "Whom do you seek?" That's the question we're supposed to be asking when we're reading this. Who really is Jesus? Who is he? But the soldiers, they name him without really knowing his name. They only know Jesus from Nazareth. They call him "Jesus the Nazarene."

Jesus responds by revealing a more telling name. Like my Bible, your Bible probably has Jesus responding, "I am he." What Jesus literally says in the Greek is, "I am." He speaks his name to them, the name he's been using through his ministry. It is the name of God revealed in Exodus 3 to Moses. "I am." Speaking this name, Jesus allows - he hasn't allowed this up to that point - but at this moment he allows the power of his glory to momentarily overwhelm the soldiers. "When therefore he said to them, 'I am,' they drew back, and fell to the ground." Jesus is in control.

The soldiers were knocked to the ground by the power of Jesus which he unleashed with the declaration of his name. He is the "I am." He is Creator God. Every knee will bow and every knee will confess that Jesus is Lord, whether willingly or unwillingly. And they fall to the ground. They are blind. They do not see him. They do not know who he is. But just for this brief moment they get a taste of the reality of Jesus. But then, in meekness, he veils his power.

He cannot be forced to submit but he can choose to submit. So he asks again, "Whom do you seek?" And they repeat again, "Jesus the Nazarene." Then Jesus commands, "I told you that I am; so if you seek Me, let these go their way." And if we don't catch the idea of control and power here, we could read this as a request: Jesus is asking, "Please, just take me and let them go. They don't have anything to do with it. Just take me." But in light of the power that has just been expressed, and the knocking of the soldiers to the ground, when Jesus says, "I told you I am; so if you seek Me, let these go their way," that's not really a request. That is a calmly spoken command.

And the soldiers obey. They don't take the disciples, they just take Jesus. John adds that this was to fulfill Jesus' earlier words, "Of those whom You have given Me I lost not one." And you might

remember that it sounds like what was said in chapter 6, which had a more spiritual meaning. Jesus would lose not one but raise all the Father had given him to eternal life. So, that losing not one doesn't mean arrest or death; it means he's going to get us to heaven. So this reference perhaps is better connected to what he just prayed in 17:12, "While I was with them, I was keeping them in your name which you have given me; and I guarded them, and not one of them perished." That's similar but that's a little different. That could apply to the physical realm. Jesus has guarded the disciples. The plan was for him to go to his death, but the plan was for these disciples to give birth to the new Christian movement. They are the foundation of that movement. And Jesus, showing his control, protects the disciples. They do not get arrested. And there is a connection between physical protection and spiritual protection. It may be God's will to not physically protect us in this life: to bring us home to Heaven after violence. It is possible. But in this sense Jesus' sovereign power to protect these unarmed disciples in the face of a Roman cohort, it reminds us, it reassures us that Jesus, he really does have the power to safely bring us home to heaven, just as he promised in chapter 6. He will lose not one.

Now, in contrast to the control of Jesus, who acts in harmony with the will of God, Peter impulsively strikes out. He shows his desire to prove Jesus wrong about the denial. Jesus says, "You will deny me." Peter says, "I'd go to the death for you." Jesus says, "No, you won't." "Well, yes I will!" He is willing to go to the death, and he shows it by pulling out a sword and striking off the ear of a servant. But at the same time, he's showing that he lacks insight and he lacks trust in the plan of God. So this is coming out of his flesh. And Jesus rebukes him. "Put the sword into the sheath; the cup which the Father has given Me, shall I not drink it?"

Peter's disoriented in the midst of this crisis contrasts, in his impulsiveness, in his acting out the flesh. He's a strong contrast to Jesus' calm control. Jesus knows what he is about. He understands the will of God. He is going willingly as a lamb led to the slaughter.

Jesus before the High Priest (18:12-27)

We move from the arrest of Jesus to the trial of Jesus depicted in John 18:12-27. Again, we see Jesus in control. Let's read that whole passage.

¹² So the *Roman* cohort and the commander and the officers of the Jews, arrested Jesus and bound Him, ¹³ and led Him to Annas first; for he was father-in-law of Caiaphas, who was high priest that year. 14 Now Caiaphas was the one who had advised the Jews that it was expedient for one man to die on behalf of the people. 15 Simon Peter was following Jesus, and so was another disciple. Now that disciple was known to the high priest, and entered with Jesus into the court of the high priest, ¹⁶ but Peter was standing at the door outside. So the other disciple, who was known to the high priest, went out and spoke to the doorkeeper, and brought Peter in. 17 Then the slave-girl who kept the door said to Peter, "You are not also one of this man's disciples, are you?" He said, "I am not." 18 Now the slaves and the officers were standing there, having made a charcoal fire, for it was cold and they were warming themselves; and Peter was also with them, standing and warming himself. ¹⁹ The high priest then questioned Jesus about His disciples, and about His teaching. 20 Jesus answered him, "I have spoken openly to the world; I always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all the Jews come together; and I spoke nothing in secret. ²¹ "Why do you question Me? Question those who have heard what I spoke to them; they know what I said." ²² When He had said this, one of the officers standing nearby struck Jesus, saying, "Is that the way You answer the high priest?" ²³ Jesus answered him, "If I have spoken wrongly, testify of the wrong; but if rightly, why do you strike Me?" ²⁴ So Annas sent Him bound to Caiaphas the high priest. ²⁵ Now Simon Peter was standing and warming himself. So they said to him, "You are not also one of His disciples, are you?" He denied it, and said, "I am not." 26 One of the slaves of the high priest, being a relative of the one whose ear Peter cut off, said, "Did I not see you in the garden with Him?" ²⁷ Peter then denied *it* again, and immediately a rooster crowed.

The soldiers take Jesus to the father-in-Law of the high priest. Apparently, the Roman soldiers had just been tagging along as backup to the temple officers. The arrest is a Jewish arrest, leading to a Jewish trial. The language of high priest here can be confusing. Is Annas high priest or is Caiaphas high priest? Annas is no longer the current high priest. His son-in-law is. But just as a former president retains the right to be addressed as Mr. President, a former high priest retains the right to be addressed as high priest. They are at his home. That's not unusual. It is not unusual that a large household of a prominent citizen served both as his dwelling and as his place of official business.

Now, Jewish trials were not legally held at night. So this seems to be an off-the-books interrogation. And perhaps this is why Jesus is taken first not to the high priest but to the house of the former high priest, and then only officially later turned over to Caiaphas.

Before getting into the interrogation, John's attention turns briefly to Peter. One of the disciples, we do not know which one, is connected and is able to get Peter into the courtyard. Peter is confronted by a slave-girl, the girl at the door, "You are not also *one* of this man's disciples, are you?" And I doubt Peter was afraid of the slave-girl. Peter is afraid to be found out by the soldiers. They're all standing right inside with a bunch of other servants, gathered around a charcoal fire to warm themselves. And Peter, as he enters the door, he sees that he's in enemy territory.

He's just struck the high priest's slave. It's an impulsive moment of the flesh and there was adrenaline pumping at that time, and it seems to have kept Peter going. He's compelled to stay with Jesus and he courageously follows him and finds his way into the courtyard. Hes' standing outside till the other disciple comes in and gets him and brings him in, but now finally his courage has left him as he stands in the darkness, surrounded by the enemy. He does not want to be found out. He is afraid. And so he answers the girl, "I am not." And you notice the irony, the contrast.

Jesus is "I am." Peter says, "I am not." It is a rejection of his true identity. We can only become who we were truly created to be in relationship with our Creator God. This is eternal life, that we know him and the one he sent: Jesus Christ. So, with devastating negation of the truth that he has accepted Peter refuses to be identified by his right relationship with Jesus Christ. "I am not."

This night Peter has swung from one extreme to the other. First, he denies the plan of God through mislaid courage. Now, he denies the plan of God through overwhelming fear. Again, he is a contrast to calmness, to the control of Jesus. Jesus continues the straight and true path of God towards the cross.

¹⁹ The high priest then questioned Jesus about His disciples, and about His teaching. ²⁰ Jesus answered him, "I have spoken openly to the world; I always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all the Jews come together; and I spoke nothing in secret. ²¹ Why do you question Me? Question those who have heard what I spoke to them; they know what I said." ²² When He had said this, one of the officers standing nearby struck Jesus, saying, "Is that the way You answer the high priest?" ²³ Jesus answered him, "If I have spoken wrongly, testify of the wrong; but if rightly, why do you strike Me?"

Jesus is in control. He is faithful to Jewish law and he's correctly challenging his accusers to produce witnesses to confirm what they're saying. "I have had a public ministry. I've spoken in synagogues, I've spoken in the Temple." So, this very well might be a challenge to the illegality of the proceedings that are taking place during this night time interrogation. Jewish law demands a trial with witnesses. And the striking of Jesus just affirms the dishonor of this interrogation of the Jewish officers. Jesus is the one in the right. He says, "If I have spoken wrongly, testify of the wrong; but if rightly, why do you strike me?" They strike him because they're not in pursuit of justice. They are the darkness that seeks to overcome Jesus; the darkness of the human heart. They want to shut him out. He's come to his own, and they have rejected him.

Failing to get anywhere with Jesus, Annas sends him to Caiaphas. John then in the story returns to Peter.

Now Simon Peter was standing and warming himself. So they said to him, "You are not also one of His disciples, are you?" He denied it, and said, "I am not."

Again, that negation of his identity.

²⁶One of the slaves of the high priest, being a relative of the one whose ear Peter cut off, said, "Did I not see you in the garden with Him?" ²⁷ Peter then denied *it* again, and immediately a rooster crowed.

We expect the Judases and the Caiaphases of the world to reject Jesus. But Peter? If we did not know the story so well, we would be shocked. Peter is as close to Jesus as anyone. Peter is a true believer. Before we are too hard on Peter, we have to step by and recognize that nobody is with Jesus. There's just one disciple who got in, and Peter. Everybody else has scattered and run away. Peter is there, but he's denying him. He's come this far, but he's failed.

Peter is not just Peter here. Peter is you. You are Peter. Peter is me. I am Peter. In our best days, in our best moments we stand up and give witness to Jesus. "Where else would we go? You're the one with the words of eternal life." And we would say with Peter, "Lord, I would not deny you. Don't think such a thing. I might sin and mess up in a lot of ways, but I'll never deny you. I know who you are. You are the holy one from God. I am holding on to you till the end." And that's the heart we want to have for Jesus, and sometimes that is the heart we do believe we have for Jesus, and sometimes it's shown. Sometimes we're pushed and we stand up for Jesus.

But where the spirit might be strong the flesh is often weak. And as we grow with Jesus as believers we're going to pass through a lot of darkness, a lot of stumbling, a lot of disorientation. And when things go dark, we stumble. We need to accept the reality that any one of us, we're not even likely to have made it into the courtyard with Peter. He got that far, and then he failed.

Peter continues his denial of Jesus. And he says, "I am not" again, and then he denies again. Three times. Just as Jesus said.

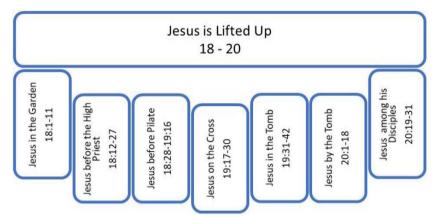
That is the flesh we still carry with us as a believer. And if our salvation depended on our own constancy, we would be lost. If the promise depended on our own faithfulness, we would stand condemned. The promise would be broken. Grace would be emptied of power. If grace depended on my ability to remain true through the disorientation of darkness and fear and suffering, I would have no hope. The promise would be rendered null and invalid if it depends on me.

This is truly a dark night of the soul moment for Peter. He has failed. And he's left alone in the darkness. He's been tested and he appears to come up empty. And for the moment John just leaves it there. Peter fails to stay true. So, Judas and Caiaphas, men like that, they're giving this contrast to Jesus as the darkness contrasts the light. Peter is giving us a different contrast in this story. He does not show us the rebelliousness of flesh as a non-believer. He shows us the weakness of flesh as a believer. Even when we want to believe, we want to do right, we can't. Apart from Jesus, we can do nothing. Human flesh fails this night. Jesus is going to have to go to the cross alone.

Reflection questions

- 1. Read John 18:1-11. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What are some questions that come to mind?
- 2. How do you perceive Peter at this moment? How do his actions relate to his declaration in 13:37?
- 3. Read John 18:12-27. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What are some questions that come to mind?
- 4. How do you perceive Peter at this moment? How do his actions relate to his declaration in 13:37?
- 5. How does John's witness to these events affect your perception of Jesus as the meek lamb willing to go the slaughter?
- 6. Compare Jesus and Peter. What stands out to you in this contrast, particularly in regard to their understanding of who they are and how that affects their emotions or actions?
- 7. How do you understand your own identity? In what ways are you striving to create your own identity and in what ways are you receiving the identity that Jesus would give you? And how does your sense of identity affect your emotions and behavior when you are under stress or in need?

Lesson 33: John 18:28-19:16 The Trial of Jesus Introduction



Peter has denied him. All the rest have scattered. Jesus continues the road to the cross alone. He goes meekly as a lamb to the slaughter. But meekness is not the same thing as weakness. Moving from the Jewish arrest and interrogation to a Roman trial, John continues to bring out the theme of Jesus' sovereign control over events as they unfold. Jesus' meekness comes only by the veiling of great power and authority.

I am in a debt to my colleague Nolan Sharp for helping me see the honor/shame dynamic in this trial before Pilot. In the sociological sense honor and shame are bestowed by culture. You receive honor through societal affirmation of your achievements and shame through failure in the eyes of the community. Jesus encounters numerous honor/shame tests during his ministry. In our lesson on the woman caught in adultery, we recognized the motive of those who brought the woman to Jesus had nothing to do with justice or morality. They did not care about the woman or what she had done. Their objective was to trap Jesus by presenting him publicly with a no-win situation. To advise her release would be to go against the law of Moses. To call for her death would be to go against the law of Rome. Either way, Jesus would lose honor as a rabbi. Jesus seemed trapped, until he turned the tables on those who came to trap him by challenging them to pick up stones and execute her.

The question of who should pay taxes is another well-known example of an honor/shame duel. To encourage payment of taxes is to sympathize with Rome. To go against paying is to oppose Rome. Failing to detect and avoid the trap would result in the loss of public honor. Refusing to answer or answering wrongly would shame Jesus. Even if his opponents did not succeed in getting Jesus in trouble with the authorities, they could still win the honor/shame duel by causing Jesus to lose prestige among the people and among his followers. But they never won. Jesus always came out on top. In this case he said, "Bring me a coin. Whose picture is on the coin? Caesar. Well then, give to Caesar what is Caesar's. Give to God what is God's." Jesus always comes out with his honor intact.

Honor and shame are at play in this story of Jesus' trial before Pilate. But it is not a duel between two parties. The honor/shame struggle is primarily between the Jewish leaders and Pilate. Jesus, the third party, is the assumed loser already. He's the one on trial. He's lost. He has no power in this situation. Quickly in the dialogue, we recognize tension between the Jews and the Roman governor. The Jews stand outside in spiritual superiority while the Roman continually bullies them with reminders of his superior political authority. From the honor/shame perspective, we are to ask ourselves: who comes out on top when the trial is over? Who will be judged as having accrued honor? Who will be shamed? These questions are going to drive our observation of the passage.

Also driving our observation is the recognition that this whole passage is organized chiastically. There are nine parts to the chiasm. The beginning of the section has the Jewish leaders handing Jesus over to Pilate. The ending of the section is going to have Pilate handing Jesus back to the Jewish leaders. In the inner frames, Pilate goes out to the Jews, then Pilate goes back into the Praetorium, then

Pilate goes out to the Jews again. That sequence is repeated. Pilate goes out, Pilate goes in, Pilate goes out. In the central section, Pilate enters the Praetorium and has Jesus beaten.

Let's read the whole passage to establish our context. Then we'll come back and go through the chiastic pattern part by part. This is John 18:28-19:16.

- ²⁸ Then **they led Jesus from Caiaphas into the Praetorium**, and it was early; and they themselves did not enter into the Praetorium so that they would not be defiled, but might eat the Passover.
- ²⁹ Therefore **Pilate went out to them** and said, "What accusation do you bring against this Man?" ³⁰ They answered and said to him, "If this Man were not an evildoer, we would not have delivered Him to you." ³¹ So Pilate said to them, "Take Him yourselves, and judge Him according to your law." The Jews said to him, "We are not permitted to put anyone to death," ³² to fulfill the word of Jesus which had spoke, signifying by what kind of death He was about to die.
- ³³ Therefore **Pilate entered again into the Praetorium**, and summoned Jesus and said to Him, "Are You the King of the Jews?" ³⁴ Jesus answered, "Are you saying this on your own initiative, or did others tell you about Me?" ³⁵ Pilate answered, "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests delivered You to me; what have You done?" ³⁶ Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, then My servants would be fighting so that I would not be handed over to the Jews; but as it is, My kingdom is not of this realm." ³⁷ Therefore Pilate said to Him, "So You are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say *correctly* that I am a king. For this I have been born, and for this I have come into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice." ³⁸ Pilate said to Him, "What is truth?"

And when he had said this, **he went out again to the Jews** and said to them, "I find no guilt in Him. ³⁹ But you have a custom that I release someone for you at the Passover; do you wish then that I release for you the King of the Jews?" ⁴⁰ So they cried out again, saying, "Not this Man, but Barabbas." Now Barabbas was a robber.

- ¹ **Pilate then took Jesus and scourged Him**. ² And the soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on His head, and put a purple robe on Him; ³ and they *began* to come up to Him and say, "Hail, King of the Jews!" and to give Him slaps *in the face*.
- ⁴ **Pilate came out again** and said to them, "Behold, I am bringing Him out to you so that you may know that I find no guilt in Him." ⁵ Jesus then came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. *Pilate* said to them, "Behold, the Man!" ⁶ So when the chief priests and the officers saw Him, they cried out saying, "Crucify, crucify!" Pilate said to them, "Take Him yourselves and crucify Him, for I find no guilt in Him." ⁷ The Jews answered him, "We have a law, and by that law He ought to die because He made Himself out *to be* the Son of God."
- ⁸ Therefore when Pilate heard this statement, he was *even* more afraid; ⁹ and **he entered into the Praetorium again** and said to Jesus, "Where are You from?" But Jesus gave him no answer. ¹⁰ So Pilate said to Him, "You do not speak to me? Do You not know that I have authority to release You, and I have authority to crucify You?" ¹¹ Jesus answered, "You would have no authority over Me, unless it had been given you from above; for this reason he who delivered Me to you has *the* greater sin." ¹² As a result of this Pilate made efforts to release Him, but the Jews cried out saying, "If you release this Man, you are no friend of Caesar; everyone who makes himself out *to be* a king opposes Caesar."
- ¹³ Therefore when Pilate heard these words, **he brought Jesus out**, and sat down on the judgment seat at a place called The Pavement, but in Hebrew, Gabbatha. ¹⁴ Now it was the day of preparation for the Passover; it was about the sixth hour. And he said to the Jews, "Behold, your King!" ¹⁵ So they cried out, "Away with *Him*, away with *Him*, crucify Him!" Pilate said to them, "Shall I crucify your King?" The chief priests answered, "We have no king but Caesar."

¹⁶ So he then handed Him over to them to be crucified.

Let's go through each element of the structure focusing on the interactions between the three parties involved: the Jewish leaders, Jesus and Pilate. The introduction to the section is verse 28.

A 18:28 Then they led Jesus from Caiaphas into the Praetorium

²⁸ Then **they led Jesus from Caiaphas into the Praetorium**, and it was early; and they themselves did not enter into the Praetorium so that they would not be defiled, but might eat the Passover.

John mentions Jesus being taken from Annas to the current high priest Caiaphas, but he does not give us details of the Jewish trial. Matthew tells us Jewish lawyers produced false witnesses against Jesus, the very thing Jesus had challenged Annas to do - produce witnesses. The witnesses did not prove to be credible. Nevertheless, the Jewish officials decide to ask Pilate for permission to execute Jesus. John does not give us any detail of that trial. He begins this section with the Jews bringing Jesus from Caiaphas to the Praetorium, the official residence and office of the Roman governor.

Ceremonial Jewish law prevents the Jewish leaders from entering the governor's residence because to do so would render them unclean. They would not be able to participate in Jewish ceremony for 24 hours. The text tells us they would not be able to eat the Passover. That sounds like an odd comment, since the Passover meal was eaten one night earlier when Jesus was with his disciples, when he washed their feet. The Passover meal was then immediately followed by the Feast of Unleavened Bread. In Jesus' day, the term "Passover" became a way to refer both to the meal and to the week that followed: to the week of Unleavened Bread. The whole period was referred to as "Passover." And during the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the priests ate the meat of daily sacrifice. So the comment here about not eating the Passover cannot refer to the Passover meal. That's already passed. So most probably it refers to this ceremonial eating that these priests would participate in that takes place every day during the Feast of Unleavened Bread, generally being called here, Passover.

The important point in this text, for the sake of John's narrative, is that the Jews have a ceremonial reason for not entering the Praetorium. They stop outside to hand Jesus over. That ceremonial requirement sets up almost a comical nature to this trial which forces this respected, powerful Roman governor Pilate to constantly go in and out of his own courthouse. He comes out to speak to the prosecutors, he goes in to speak to the defendant, he comes out again, he goes in again, and it just keeps going. He first comes out to the Jewish leaders in the second element of the chiasm, verses 29-32.

B ^{18:29-32} Therefore Pilate went out to them

²⁹ Therefore **Pilate went out to them** and said, "What accusation do you bring against this Man?" ³⁰ They answered and said to him, "If this Man were not an evildoer, we would not have delivered Him to you." ³¹ So Pilate said to them, "Take Him yourselves, and judge Him according to your law." The Jews said to him, "We are not permitted to put anyone to death," ³² to fulfill the word of Jesus which He spoke, signifying by what kind of death He was about to die.

Judaism was a recognized religion in the Roman empire with certain privileges, particularly the right to maintain ceremonial observance. In spite of his pride as the Roman governor and in spite of what he might have thought of Jewish religion, Roman law allowed the Jews to refuse to enter into Pilate's Praetorium. And the historical record suggests that Pilate did not appreciate at all accommodating Jewish sensibilities. He's Roman. They should accommodate to him. Josephus writes that prior to this trial of Jesus Pilate had provoked outrage by setting up the imperial standards in Jerusalem. The imperial standards depict Caesar. And because Romans recognized Caesar as divine, images of him in Jerusalem smack of idolatry to the Jews. Josephus also makes the charge that Pilate used funds from the temple treasury to build a new aqueduct in Jerusalem. There was no love lost between Pilate and the Jewish leadership. Pilate walked this line between his own sense of Roman superiority and potential riot. In this case, Pilate submits to Jewish sensibilities, but he does not submit graciously.

When Pilate asks for the accusation against Jesus, the Jewish officials, they're not gracious, either. They give him a snarky response, "If this Man were not an evildoer, we would not have delivered Him to you." In essence, they are saying, "We have already tried him. We are just here for you to sign off on his execution. Let's get on with it." They do not want to validate Pilate's judicial role. They don't see any reason for a Roman trial.

Not appreciating the response, Pilate pokes them where it hurts. "Take Him yourselves, and judge Him according to your law." Pilate knows they cannot get what they want without him. Rome holds power. Rome has the honor here. The Jews are the subjected people. They're subservient to the will of Rome and being reminded of that is shameful. The Jews are permitted by Rome to hold court, to judge cases, to assign punishment, but with limits. They are not allowed to carry out a death sentence. They have to come and ask for permission from the governor. Everybody knows this. But Pilate makes them say it. He makes them say, "We are not permitted to put anyone to death." Probably, feeling an affront that these Jewish leaders would not come into his court, and certainly not appreciating their response when he asked about the accusation, Pilate bullies them into admitting their dependence on Rome.

John points out that this historic dynamic leads to the death foretold by Jesus. The Jews would have stoned him for blasphemy if the death penalty were in their power. But three times in this Gospel Jesus has said, "The Son of Man must be lifted up." And since the Jews don't have power to execute a death sentence according to their law, it must be carried out by Rome's permission in the way Rome chooses to carry it out. Jesus will not be stoned by Romans. He will be crucified. He will be lifted up, just as he said. He will be as the serpent lifted on a pole as in Numbers (21:8), cursed by hanging on a tree as in Deuteronomy (21:23), and pierced through for our transgressions. according to Isaiah (53:5). God is the one in control here.

Pilate decides not to just trust the word of these Jewish officials. He's not just going to give them what they want. So, we have Pilate going back into the Praetorium to question Jesus himself in verses 33-38a.

C $^{18:33-38a}$ Therefore Pilate entered again into the Praetorium

³³ Therefore **Pilate entered again into the Praetorium**, and summoned Jesus and said to Him, "Are You the King of the Jews?" ³⁴ Jesus answered, "Are you saying this on your own initiative, or did others tell you about Me?" ³⁵ Pilate answered, "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests delivered You to me; what have You done?" ³⁶ Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, then My servants would be fighting so that I would not be handed over to the Jews; but as it is, My kingdom is not of this realm." ³⁷ Therefore Pilate said to Him, "So You are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say *correctly* that I am a king. For this I have been born, and for this I have come into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice." ³⁸ Pilate said to Him, "What is truth?"

At some point, it was told to Pilate that Jesus claimed to be the Jewish Messiah, the King of the Jews. He heard that accusation. When Jesus asks Pilate whether this was his own idea or whether it comes from others, Pilate responds as though the designation, "King of the Jews," is an accusation. "I did not accuse you, your own people delivered you over. What have you done?" It is a practical question. Pilate wants to know whether Jesus has started to arm followers, or he's attacked Roman sympathizers, or done any politically or militarily suspect act.

Interestingly, this Gospel was written by John, and John's purpose is to show us the signs that Jesus did so that we might believe that he truly is the Messiah, the Son of God. That's what Jesus has done. He's done miracles. But Pilate is asking - he's assuming there must be some criminal activity here somewhere. That's what he needs to judge. Jesus distinguishes his actions from the actions of a typical political ruler. He does not deny that he is a king. He says, "My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, then My servants would be fighting so that I would not be handed over to the Jews; but as it is, My kingdom is not of this realm." Even though Jesus uses the

terminology of kingdom, there is something fundamentally different about his kingdom and the kingdoms of the world. His one example is that his followers would fight if he were a worldly king, but they do not fight. He stopped Peter from fighting in the garden, "Put away your sword." Jesus is not attempting to establish a nation with an army and a political system.

This is one of the ways the New Covenant is very different from the Old Covenant. The Old Covenant included civil law for the organization of a political society on earth. Israel was intended to be a geopolitical reality organized according to Mosaic law. God granted land to Israel. Their first major act after receiving the Mosaic Covenant was to go in militarily and secure the land God had given them.

The New Covenant does not include any criminal or civil law that we find in the Old Covenant. The church is not intended to be a political government. The reign of Christ is to spread in the hearts of men and women through the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The commandments of the New Covenant focus on our moral behavior, our relationships with each other, our worship. We are to have an effect on government and society. It's not supposed to just be our individual, private behavior. It's our behavior in society. But we are not to be a political body. We influence the political bodies in our culture, but the church is not a political body.

Jesus does not - we can't go on much more here - Jesus doesn't develop that idea, but his words establish a principle that we have to consider as we move forward in the New Covenant. This is a new wine wineskin. And it's distinct from the Old. When we say "kingdom", we don't mean what we meant when we said, "kingdom of Israel." This is a spiritual kingdom.

In his conversation with Pilate, his words deny a claim of sedition against Rome. He is the king of a spiritual kingdom. His kingdom will spread but he is not raising an army to overthrow Rome. And much to the chagrin of so many of his followers who were hoping that was what he's about, it's not what he's about.

Jesus has acknowledged obliquely that he is a king. Still, consistent with his practice through his ministry, we notice that he does not take for himself the title of king. Pilate asked to press the question, "So You are a king?" Jesus affirms that he is a king, but still without directly saying it. He doesn't say, "I am a king, yes. I am a king." Instead, he puts the declaration back into Pilate's mouth, "You say *correctly* that I am a king. For this I have been born, and for this I have come into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice." This does not sound like seditious politics to Pilate. It sounds very much like religion.

He is not able to hear the voice of Jesus. As a pragmatic politician he responds to Jesus' claim about truth and he just says, "What is truth?" It sounds like a conversation-ender for Pilate. He does not want to go there with a Jew.

Jesus has taught about himself, as we see through the Gospel of John. He is the truth. And it's one of the audacious claims that Jesus makes that we've been encountering in John. It's a claim of divinity. To understand reality as it truly is, we have to begin with Jesus. If you don't have Jesus at the center of your worldview, your worldview is fundamentally flawed from the very beginning. And Jesus is not speaking in the abstract. He is speaking of concrete, objective truth. His words are spiritual, but they are not theoretical. The spiritual truth Jesus speaks about profoundly affects both our hope for a real eternal future, and also every area of our life that we live in here and now: our personal life, and our communal life. It's all affected by recognizing that Jesus is the source of truth. It changes how we speak and how we think and how we behave, but this would be way too much for Pilate at this moment. He's concerned with just figuring out, "Are you some kind of rebel I need to be concerned with?", and when it goes towards the spiritual and the religious, Pilate ends it.

His response - "What is truth?" - could be coming from a philosophical turn of mind. Pilate is familiar with the religious disagreements between Roman and Jew. He is also aware of the different Greek philosophical schools. And he can have some kind of conversation on truth if he wanted to. I imagine, for him, "What is truth?" is less philosophical but more pragmatic. He is a politician ruling an

unwieldy Roman possession. Truth is what it needs to be to get the job done. He is not interested in pursuing this line of thought with Jesus. So, he ends the conversation, "What is truth?" Ironically, at the moment he asks the question, truth is standing on trial right in front of him. Pilate doesn't see it. He can't hear it.

He is done with this trial and he goes out to tell the Jews so. This is 18:38b-40.

D ^{18:38b-40} He went out again to the Jews

And when he had said this, **he went out again to the Jews** and said to them, "I find no guilt in Him. ³⁹ But you have a custom that I release someone for you at the Passover; do you wish then that I release for you the King of the Jews?" ⁴⁰ So they cried out again, saying, "Not this Man, but Barabbas." Now Barabbas was a robber.

Jesus was not tripped up by Pilate's questioning. He didn't incriminate himself. And Pilate affirms what we already know, "There is no guilt in him." But instead of just letting Jesus go, it seems that Pilate cannot resist poking at the Jewish leaders again by asking, "Would you like me to release the King of the Jews?" It is meant to antagonize them. Pilate latches onto this idea that Jesus is King of the Jews and he enjoys that it antagonizes these religious people who think they're superior to him. And he's going to refuse to it let go, all the way to the cross. He's going to put a sign on the cross that says, "King of the Jews" because he's just enjoying pushing this in the face of these officials.

The Jews refuse Jesus. They don't want Jesus, and they ask for the release of a thief, a robber. The word means more than it probably sounds to us and we see that in the other Gospels, which indicate that Barabbas was involved in murderous sedition of Rome. His name is highly ironic. Have you thought about what Barabbas means? Bar means "son of." Abba - you know what Abba means. "Father." Barabbas means "son of the father." So, imagine this. Pilate gave the Jews a chance to set free the king of the Jews, who actually truly is the king of the Jews. They reject Jesus, the true king, and instead secure forgiveness for a rebellious murderer. The murderer's name is, ironically, "son of the father." The true Son of the Father is condemned. And in the end, this one that is handed over unjustly is the one who is going to secure forgiveness for the ones who refused to secure it for him.

Now, Pilate has created a problem for himself. He wanted to release Jesus. He could have released Jesus. But he could not resist antagonizing the Jewish leaders once more, by asking, "Would you like me to release your king?" And when they say, "No," their rejection of Jesus prevents Pilate from releasing him. He's put himself in the corner. Now he's got to keep Jesus. He is not ready to execute Jesus, so he has him beaten. This is 19:1-3.

E ^{19:1-3} Pilate then took Jesus and scourged Him

¹ **Pilate then took Jesus and scourged Him**. ² And the soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on His head, and put a purple robe on Him; ³ and they *began* to come up to Him and say, "Hail, King of the Jews!" and to give Him slaps *in the face*.

The soldiers do not just beat Jesus. They shame Jesus. They are clueless that their mockery is another ironic recognition of Jesus' true identity. The crown of thorns, the purple robe, the cry, "Hail, King of the Jews", they are all befitting the true King of heaven who has given himself over to be executed by men for the sake of men. They violently and cruelly attempt to shame Jesus. But is Jesus shamed? He is only shamed if we accept the attempts of Romans and Jews to do so. When we consider the words and behavior of Jesus to this point - you know, what has he said, what has he done? - we see one who calmly maintains his honor in the face of persecution. He has brought no shame on himself.

With the beating of Jesus, Pilate considers his duty done. He goes back out to inform the Jews. This is 19:4-7,

D' 19:4-7 Pilate came out again

⁴ **Pilate came out again** and said to them, "Behold, I am bringing Him out to you so that you may know that I find no guilt in Him." ⁵ Jesus then came out, wearing the crown of thorns and

the purple robe. *Pilate* said to them, "Behold, the Man!" ⁶ So when the chief priests and the officers saw Him, they cried out saying, "Crucify, crucify!" Pilate said to them, "Take Him yourselves and crucify Him, for I find no guilt in Him." ⁷ The Jews answered him, "We have a law, and by that law He ought to die because He made Himself out *to be* the Son of God."

There is an odd juxtaposition here of Pilate sustaining Jesus' honor by declaring, "I find no guilt in him" and then, right beside it, the shame imposed on Jesus by the crown and the robe. You find no guilt in him, but he's standing here bloody and beaten with a crown of thorns and a torn robe on his body. Pilate's, "Behold the man!" may have been meant to point out the punishment Jesus had undergone, as though Pilate is saying, "Here, I have whipped him. Behold! That should be enough. Look at him bruised and bloody before you. We can be done. You brought him to me. I beat him. That's it." However, whether it was intentional or unintentional, the crown and the robe may have just antagonized the Jews further. It's as though Pilate is saying as one of Rome, saying, "Behold, this is how we treat the king of the Jews." And the Jewish leaders respond by sticking to their single-minded objective of eliminating Jesus. It just stirs them, and they cry out all the more for crucifixion.

Pilate wants the matter over. But again, Pilate pokes back at the Jews, telling them to crucify Jesus on their own, knowing that they are impotent to do so. And the Jews answer, "We have a law, and by that law He ought to die because He made Himself out *to be* the Son of God." That comment strikes home with Pilate. He's afraid. So, he goes back into the Praetorium. He needs to think this through. This is 19:8-12.

${\rm C}^{\prime}$ 19:8-12 he entered into the Praetorium again

⁸ Therefore when Pilate heard this statement, he was *even* more afraid; ⁹ and **he entered into the Praetorium again** and said to Jesus, "Where are You from?" But Jesus gave him no answer. ¹⁰ So Pilate said to Him, "You do not speak to me? Do You not know that I have authority to release You, and I have authority to crucify You?" ¹¹ Jesus answered, "You would have no authority over Me, unless it had been given you from above; for this reason he who delivered Me to you has *the* greater sin." ¹² As a result of this Pilate made efforts to release Him, but the Jews cried out saying, "If you release this Man, you are no friend of Caesar; everyone who makes himself out *to be* a king opposes Caesar."

The text says Pilate is "more afraid," not just that he's afraid. He's "more afraid." Apparently, there is underlying unease that John has not reported to us. We know from the other gospels that Pilate's wife had a dream and warned him not to have anything to do with this Jesus. The Jews commented just now that Jesus claimed to be "the Son of God," and that seems to stir that unease that Pilate already feels It makes him afraid. And by that, Pilate loses honor. He is the Roman governor, and he is trying this poor Jewish rabbi, and yet he's the one who's afraid. Jesus shows no fear.

And his fear motivates him to question Jesus further. Pilate is now not so dismissive of Jesus claims to a spiritual kingdom. He asks, "Where are you from that you claim to be Son of God? Where are you from?" When Jesus refuses to speak, Pilate makes a claim to authority, "You do not speak to me? Do You not know that I have authority to release You, and I have authority to crucify You?" Jesus is not afraid. Jesus remains calm and in control, and he tells Pilate, "You only have authority because God has allowed you to have authority." We can remember the garden when a cohort of Roman soldiers came to arrest Jesus and fell to the ground at the declaration of the name, "I am." Jesus is in control here and he's submitting to the authority of Pilate, but that's an authority that Pilate gets from God.

Interestingly, Jesus indicates that the guilt of the Jewish leaders is greater than Pilate's guilt. Pilate will still be held responsible. God uses evil to bring about good. But still, he punishes evil for the evil that was done. An example from the Old Testament that stood out to the prophet Habakkuk was God's use of wicked Babylon to punish Judah. "That doesn't seem right!" And it wasn't right. God used Babylon to bring about justice for Judah, but then Babylon, after carrying out its role in an evil way was punished. And the Bible holds these truths to be compatible. (1) God is sovereign in all things, even able to use evil to bring about good, and (2) people are still accountable for their actions.

Pilate's action is going to lead to salvation for the world. That does not absolve Pilate. He is participating in the condemnation of an innocent man. The Jewish leaders, however, are charged with greater responsibility, greater sin. They are the stewards of Israel. They know the prophecies of the Messiah. They should be able to see that Jesus is fulfilling those very prophecies that they have memorized. But they refuse to see. They are blinded by their desire to hold onto their positions of authority and their view of Jewish religion. They don't want to hear what Jesus has to say. They refuse to give up their stewardship to the rightful King.

The Jewish leaders continue to press their accusation., "If you release this Man, you are no friend of Caesar; everyone who makes himself out *to be* a king opposes Caesar." They know what to say to a Roman governor. They're speaking in his terms.

Pilate comes out one last time bringing Jesus with him.

B' 19:13-15 Therefore when Pilate heard these words, he brought Jesus out

¹³ Therefore when Pilate heard these words, **he brought Jesus out**, and sat down on the judgment seat at a place called The Pavement, but in Hebrew, Gabbatha. ¹⁴ Now it was the day of preparation for the Passover; it was about the sixth hour. And he said to the Jews, "Behold, your King!" ¹⁵ So they cried out, "Away with *Him*, away with *Him*, crucify Him!" Pilate said to them, "Shall I crucify your King?" The chief priests answered, "We have no king but Caesar."

The day here is called the preparation for the Passover. Some have thought this creates a chronology problem, and it does if you interpret the day of preparation as the day before the Passover meal. Because, that meal was celebrated the previous day as reported in John 13. So that would be a conflict. The timing doesn't work out if designated this to be the day before that meal. But that would be a curious use of the term, "day of preparation." We actually don't have that in the Bible, and we don't see it in extrabiblical writings about the Passover. The day before Passover is not called the Day of Preparation anywhere, as far as we know. We have the record of the term being used, though. It's a very common term. And the day of preparation is the day before the Sabbath.

And the perceived problem can be resolved by, as we did the earlier problem about eating the Passover, if we understand Passover to indicate not only the Passover meal, but the whole feast of Unleavened Bread. So, the Passover becomes the meal plus the next week. And since that feast lasts a week, it always includes one Sabbath. The dating of Passover is not like our Easter, that always occurs on Sunday. It is like our Christmas, that occurs on a certain date, you know, December 25th, can be any day of the week. Year to year it changes. So also, the Passover meal was designated by a specific date and a specific month, and so the day of the week changes with every year. Every Passover is on a different day. A Sabbath would occur sometime during that week after Passover, some years it's earlier, closer to the Passover meal, some weeks it's later. But there's always a day of preparation during the Passover time. That's the day of preparation before that Sabbath that occurs during Passover. And it is always Friday. The day of preparation is always Friday, because Sabbath is always Saturday. And this is how we know Jesus was crucified on a Friday, because he was crucified on a day or preparation, and his body needs to be taken down before the beginning of Sabbath.

Pilate pokes again the Jews one last time, "Behold, your King!" Angry at Pilate and fixated on their aim, they respond, "Away with *Him*, away with *Him*, crucify Him!" Pilate asks, "Shall I crucify your King?" And then listen to how the priests answer, "We have no king but Caesar." The leaders of Israel deny their king. They deny Yahweh. They deny the Messiah. "We have no king but Caesar." And though Jesus is on trial, the Jewish prosecutors just incriminated themselves. We have to stand a moment in silence, hardly believing did they just say what I heard them say? "We have no king but Caesar?" Did that just come out of the mouths of these Jewish stewards over God's people? "We have no king but Caesar." Shame. Shame.

By the end of this trial, Pilate is shown to be afraid, unwilling to act justly on his repeated claim to find no guilt in Jesus but he doesn't do anything about it. He's afraid but he's impotent. He is

shamed. And the Jewish leaders are shown to be hypocritical in their single-minded crusade against Jesus. They go so far as to reject the sovereign rulership of Yahweh over their nation, and they claim Caesar just to get what they want: to get Jesus crucified. Only Jesus maintains his honor throughout. Even though there's this attempt to severely shame him in the middle of the section: he's beaten; he's robed; he's slapped, and a crown of thorns is put on his head. So the society is doing all they can do to shame him. But we look at what he says, and we look at how he behaves, and we look at his control throughout. And we see who is in charge. Nevertheless, he does allow the injustice to continue. He is not going to halt the road to the cross. He continues on. And our concluding verse is 19:16.

A' 19:16 So he then handed Him over to them to be crucified.

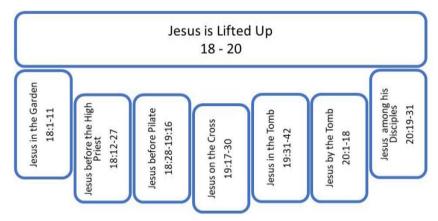
¹⁶ So **Pilate then handed Him over to them** to be crucified.

Pilate stamps the death order and hands it over, giving Jesus back into the hands of the Jewish leaders. They got what they came for. And Jesus continues on to the cross alone.

Reflection questions

- 1. Read John 18:28-19:16. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What are some questions that come to mind?
- 2. Consider the structure of the text. How often does the text indicate that Pilate went out or that Pilate went in?
- 3. Consider the interaction between Pilate and the Jews. What language appears to indicate frustration or that indicates tension as either the Jews push Pilate or Pilate pushes the Jews?
- 4. Why do the Jews refuse to go into the Praetorium? How do you think Pilate feels about their refusal? Why does he allow it?
- 5. Why are the Jews making this request to Pilate in the first place? How do you think they feel about that?
- 6. How does the reputation of the Jewish leader's fare by the end of the trial?
- 7. How does Pilate's reputation fare by the end of the trial?
- 8. How does Jesus' reputation fare by the end of the trial?
- 9. What stands out to you about Jesus' conversation with Pilate in 33-38? What light do Jesus' words shed on his program for the church?
- 10. How does the religious Jew's view of spiritual truth show up in your community or society? How does the pagan Pilate's view of spiritual truth show up in your community or society? What stance does the Gospel of John suggest regarding truth in our modern times?

Lesson 34: John 19:17-42 The Crucifixion and Burial of Jesus Introduction



The Roman statesman Cicero said, "[the word 'cross' should be] far removed from not only the bodies of Roman citizens but even from their thoughts, their ears, and their eyes." The purpose of crucifixion was not death. Rome knew a hundred other ways to kill a man. The purpose of the cross was to eradicate the reputation of the person, to render his memory so shameful that anyone who spoke his name would feel that shame. There are names we recognize from history that would never receive honor. The name of a traitor invokes shame: Judas, Brutus, Benedict Arnold.

This is the kind of shame Rome intended to attach to the person forced to die on a cross. Death was not necessarily dishonorable. How one dies is the question. A Spartan mother is famously quoted as telling her son to return with his shield or on it. You either fight well or you die. Death can be honorable but not death on a cross. The victim of the cross is judged a criminal. He is displayed nakedly in public. He is forced to cry out in pain. He relieves himself, bodily fluids run down his legs. He is wounded enough to cry out but not enough to die, so he just continues to cry. He might live for a day or two hanging on the cross. And as a final act of humiliation birds come to peck away the flesh of his dead body. Shame. Shame is the point of the cross.

In the day of the Romans, the cross would have brought up feelings similar to an electric chair, or the hangman's noose, or the guillotine but with greater consequence to the reputation. It is an instrument of death and torture, but it's one that's intended to maximize public shame, to erase the name. Nobody identifies with a man who has died on a cross. Not until Jesus. Jesus reversed the shame of the cross. He took the guilt, the sin, shame, the humiliation that we deserve. He took it on himself, both spiritually and literally as a man nailed to a cross. He took that shame and showed us his glory. He showed us the extent of his love in the face of his own pure justice.

On the way to the cross, through his arrest and his trial, he remained in control of events and in possession of his honor. He was never shamed by his words, by his actions, not on the cross, not in his death. We have already considered his arrest and trial. Now let's consider his crucifixion and burial according to the witness of John. Let's start with John 19:17-30.

The Crucifixion of Jesus (19:17-30)

¹⁷ They took Jesus, therefore, and He went out, bearing His own cross, to the place called the Place of a Skull, which is called in Hebrew, Golgotha. ¹⁸ There they crucified Him, and with Him two other men, one on either side, and Jesus in between. ¹⁹ Pilate also wrote an inscription and put it on the cross. It was written, "JESUS THE NAZARENE, THE KING OF THE JEWS." ²⁰ Therefore many of the Jews read this inscription, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city; and it was written in Hebrew, Latin *and* in Greek. ²¹ So the chief priests of the Jews were saying to Pilate, "Do not write, 'The King of the Jews'; but that He said, 'I am King of the Jews.' " ²² Pilate answered, "What I have written I have written." ²³ Then the soldiers, when they had crucified Jesus, took His outer garments and made four parts, a part to every soldier

and *also* the tunic; now the tunic was seamless, woven in one piece. ²⁴ So they said to one another, "Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it, *to decide* whose it shall be"; *this was* to fulfill the Scripture: "They divided My outer garments among them, and for My clothing they cast lots." ²⁵ Therefore the soldiers did these things. **But** standing by the cross of Jesus were His mother, and His mother's sister, Mary the *wife* of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. ²⁶ When Jesus then saw His mother, and the disciple whom He loved standing nearby, He said to His mother, "Woman, behold, your son!" ²⁷ Then He said to the disciple, "Behold, your mother!" From that hour the disciple took her into his own *household*. ²⁸ After this, Jesus, knowing that all things had already been accomplished, to fulfill the Scripture, said, "I am thirsty." ²⁹ A jar full of sour wine was standing there; so they put a sponge full of the sour wine upon *a branch of* hyssop and brought it up to His mouth. ³⁰ Therefore when Jesus had received the sour wine, He said, "It is finished!" And He bowed His head and gave up His spirit.

Pilate makes one final stab at the honor of the Jews. Annoyed by the whole procedure of this trial and execution, he has this criminal sentence nailed to the cross of Jesus, and it says, "JESUS THE NAZARENE, THE KING OF THE JEWS." Pilate does not believe that Jesus is king. He is frustrated with the Jewish leaders, and his sign communicates, "This is what Rome does to Judea. It crucifies her king." Jewish leaders ask him to change the charge so that it reads, "He said, 'I am King of the Jews.'" Pilate refuses. Ironically, in his stubborn pettiness, Pilate affixes the true title of Jesus to the cross. He has, indeed, helped the Jews crucifying their king.

Jesus foretold three times that he must me lifted up. In 3:15, he declared, "the son of man [must] be lifted up that whoever believes may in him have eternal life." In 8:28, he declared, "when you lift up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am." And in 12:32, he declared, "If I be lifted up I will draw all men to myself." In unknowing anticipation of that fact that the cross would become a beacon of hope to all people, Pilate affixes the charge to the cross in Hebrew and Latin and Greek. This is just the beginning. People from every tribe, every language, every people will come to bow down before Jesus as King. Pilate foreshadows that.

The soldiers gamble for Jesus' meager effects. And they unwittingly fulfill the prophecy of Psalm 22:18, "They divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots." God had planned long before for the Messiah to walk this road to the cross. That same Psalm also says in verse 16, "They pierced my hands and my feet." God was not surprised by the cross. He is not improvising. He is not caught off guard. Jesus knew when he came to his own that his own would reject him. The Father remains in control.

After noting this prophetic behavior by these callous guards, John points out another group standing by the cross. The text makes most sense when we understand that there are four women present. Jesus' mother, her sister, another Mary who is the wife of Clopas and Mary Magdalene. That is a lot of Mary's. I'm guessing, if you were making that up, you would have thought of some different names besides "Mary" for the women. Sometimes history is just odd that way. These are women who love Jesus. They love him as family, and they love him as Lord. John is there with them.

Back in the 90s when our ministry was showing the Jesus Film throughout Croatia, a repeated complaint was how the film left out the report of Jesus speaking to Mary from the cross. It was left out because the Jesus film was based on Luke, and John is the only one to mention it.

It was hard to explain that to people, but John mentions this brief interaction, perhaps because it has personal significance for him. But this interaction also fits his theme that Jesus remains in control and Jesus continues to act with honor. What could be more honorable on a personal level than for a dying son to express care for the ongoing welfare of his mother?

²⁶ When Jesus then saw His mother, and the disciple whom He loved standing nearby, He said to His mother, "Woman, behold, your son!" ²⁷ Then He said to his disciple, "Behold, your mother!" From that hour the disciple took her into his own *household*.

There are people who love the world as an abstract concept, who might be willing to die for a cause that benefits mankind, who yet, when you get to know them, do not seem to really like individual people that much. Jesus is not one of those saviors. He is not just a savior of an abstract world. Jesus is the Savior of individual people. And at the same time, he's bearing the weight of everybody's sin, he remains aware of this one woman and her needs. We do not have any references to Joseph during Jesus' adult ministry, presumably because Joseph has died. Jesus, as the eldest son, is responsible for the well-being of his mother. So, with honor and with compassion, he cares for her even while he's on the cross.

I do think this is a special case of a son, not just showing love for individuals, but showing love for his mother. But at the same time, I think it is an example of Jesus' awareness of people as people. Jesus died for all of us in general. He also died for you specifically. He is the good shepherd who knows the individual name of every one of his sheep. He knows your name, and he loves you. Not just mankind; he loves YOU. He died for the you.

²⁸ After this, Jesus, knowing that all things had already been accomplished, to fulfill the Scripture, said, "I am thirsty." ²⁹ A jar full of sour wine was standing there; so they put a sponge full of the sour wine upon *a branch of* hyssop and brought it up to His mouth.

This is another prophecy fulfilled. This one is from Psalm 69:21. There is a difference here. The prophecy of the soldiers gambling for Jesus' clothes is a prophecy Jesus does not make a choice to participate in. It is a result of choices others make. Those kinds of prophecies, that Jesus would be born in Bethlehem, or that he would grow up in Nazareth, that a friend would betray him for 30 pieces of silver, that in his death he would be pierced through, those prophecies show us that God is in control of all things and they affirm that Jesus is indeed the true Messiah foretold.

Here though, Jesus participates in the fulfillment. He says he is thirsty in order to initiate being given drink by the soldiers. This is similar to his choice to ride a donkey into Jerusalem. He chose to do that. The fulfillment of prophecies like these, where Jesus choices to enact the fulfillment, affirm who Jesus believes himself to be. On the cross Jesus did not doubt. Jesus did not give up. Jesus understood what was happening and he chose to speak in such a way to fulfill the prophecy. He understood himself to be the true Messiah foretold.

This passage ends with these words,

³⁰ Therefore when Jesus had received the sour wine, He said, "It is finished!" And He bowed His head and gave up His spirit.

At the very end, Jesus chose the time of his passing. He has fulfilled the prophesies of old. He has borne the shame of men. He has been afflicted in our place for crimes he did not commit. Having done what needed to be done, he ends it. He bows his head and gives up his spirit. Jesus told us in John 10, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his own life and he will take it up again."

Jesus remained in control through the crucifixion. The Father continues to exert control after his death. Let's consider the burial of Jesus. This is John 19:31-42.

The Burial of Jesus (19:31-42)

³¹ Then the Jews, because it was the day of preparation, so that the bodies would not remain on the cross on the Sabbath (for that Sabbath was a high day), asked Pilate that their legs might be broken, and *that* they might be taken away. ³² So the soldiers came, and broke the legs of the first man and of the other who was crucified with Him; ³³ but coming to Jesus, when they saw that He was already dead, they did not break His legs. ³⁴ But one of the soldiers pierced His side with a spear, and immediately blood and water came out. ³⁵ And he who has seen has testified, and his testimony is true; and he knows that he is telling the truth, so that you also may believe. ³⁶ For these things came to pass to fulfill the Scripture, "Not a bone of Him shall be broken." ³⁷ And again another Scripture says, "They shall look on Him whom they pierced." ³⁸ After these things Joseph of Arimathea, being a disciple of Jesus, but a secret *one*

for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus; and Pilate granted permission. So he came and took away His body. ³⁹ Nicodemus, who had first come to Him by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds *weight*. ⁴⁰ So they took the body of Jesus and bound it in linen wrappings with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews. ⁴¹ Now in the place where He was crucified there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb in which no one had yet been laid. ⁴² Therefore because of the Jewish day of preparation, since the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.

We could expect Jesus' body to hang on a cross to be picked over by birds or at best to be taken down and hastily covered in a shallow grave. Neither of these happen. In death he is honored. God ordered the events of the crucifixion to take place on the day before the Sabbath. The Jewish leaders did not care about Jesus. But they did care about appearing outwardly to follow the Law of Moses. Moses' forbade leaving an executed body hanging on a tree overnight. To do so would be even worse on a Sabbath, and even worse on a High Sabbath. It's a special day during the Feast of Unleavened Bread. So, they ask for the removal of the body. It's not out of compassion, but to fulfill purity laws.

Pilate is not friendly to the Jews. But by coming out of the Praetorium repeatedly during the trial of Jesus, we did see that he is willing to give in to Jewish ritual, probably as a pragmatic move to avoid Jewish uprising. And so, he gives in to this request. He's not going to leave the bodies on the Sabbath, and he orders the removal of the bodies.

Before removing the bodies, the soldiers make sure they are dead. Two thieves hanging with Jesus have not yet died. Death on a cross comes through suffocation. Hanging down on the nails that pierce the hands, victims cannot breathe. The nail through the feet is part of the cruel ingenuity of the cross. Victims push up on that nail, the nail in their feet to get a breath, often causing them to cry out in pain. Further shame. Victims then suffocate when they can no longer bear the pain, or they no longer have the strength to push up on that nail through their feet. Breaking the victim's legs is a quicker way to bring about that suffocation and death.

By giving up his spirit after only a few hours on the cross, Jesus is already dead when the soldiers come for him. They believe him to be dead, so they don't break his legs, but to ensure this assumption they make a quick spear thrust into his chest. Medical professionals have observed that water coming out with the blood could be fluid from the lining in the lungs. Jesus' executioners would recognize this as a death wound and be satisfied that they had fulfilled their responsibility. He was dead before they removed his body from the cross.

This sequence of events fulfills two more prophecies. John points this out to us. Psalm 34:20 says, "He keeps all his bones; not one of them is broken." And John may also intend for us as a connection to the Passover lamb. Speaking of that lamb, Exodus 12:46 instructs, "You are not to bring forth any of the flesh outside the house, nor are you to break any bone of it." Jesus is the Passover lamb. His bones are not broken. And not breaking these bones also further prevents unnecessary indignity to the body of Jesus, that his body might be honored in death.

The thrust of the spear and the nails in the hands and his feet fulfill passages that speak of the piercing of the Messiah, such as Zechariah 12:10, "I will pour out on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the Spirit of grace and of supplication, so that they will look on me whom they have pierced." Fulfillment of these prophecies after Jesus' death continues to show that God is in control of these events.

John is an eyewitness of this, and he reminds us of that in verse 35,

And he who has seen has testified, and his testimony is true; and he knows that he is telling the truth, so that you also may believe.

John rarely breaks into the narrative to speak directly as himself, the author. He did speak, using first-person plural in the first chapter, "The Word became flesh and **we** beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten son of God full of grace and truth (1:14)." He is going to refer to himself again in

the last chapter, the second to last verse in the whole book. He is going to say, "This is the disciple who bears witness of these things and wrote these things; and we know that his witness is true (21:24)." So we have this claim as an eyewitness, appropriately at the very beginning of the Gospel, chapter 1, and then at the end of the Gospel in chapter 21, but then we have it again right here. This is a third reference to himself as eyewitness. And we might ask, "Why here? Why does John choose this chapter, this place to break into the story into claim that he has seen this; that this is true, his testimony is true?"

He breaks in here because of the central truth of the crucifixion and the resurrection to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Jesus did not come only to make God known to us. His purpose is not only revelation. His purpose is atonement. He did come to reveal the nature of God, supremely through his saving action of offering himself as a real sacrifice of atonement in our place. This is substitution. And if Jesus did not die for us, then we have no hope, and none of this matters. John assures us that Jesus did need to die, and he's telling us, "I am giving witness to this. I was standing there at the cross and I saw it, and I'm telling you this so that you might believe." And we remember that his purpose statement - why does he want us to believe? He wants us to believe that we might have eternal life. This is a central point of his witness and so he breaks in here to remind us, "I am an eyewitness. I saw this."

And he was not the only disciple involved in these events. The disciples had scattered, but some, apparently, were at the cross. John is there, and Mary his mother is there, and Mary Magdalene is there. Two other men are mentioned here. Sometimes God controls events through the rebellious action of wicked men, like these Jewish leaders and like Pilate. At other times God guides events through the willing participation of faithful men and women. That is what happens next.

³⁸ After these things Joseph of Arimathea, being a disciple of Jesus, but a secret *one* for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus; and Pilate granted permission. So he came and took away His body. ³⁹ Nicodemus, who had first come to Him by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds *weight*. ⁴⁰ So they took the body of Jesus and bound it in linen wrappings with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews. ⁴¹ Now in the place where He was crucified there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb in which no one had yet been laid. ⁴² Therefore because of the Jewish day of preparation, since the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.

We have not heard from Nicodemus in a while. He came to Jesus early in Jesus' ministry. But Nicodemus could not follow the teaching of Jesus. He kind of drops out of the conversation and then we don't hear from him. And John compared him in the structure of his text to another person: to a woman at the well, a poor, uneducated, non-Jewish, sinful woman who no one would expect to be able to follow what Jesus was saying, to be able to understand anything. And to our surprise, the eyes of her soul were opened in an instant only after a short conversation with Jesus. That is how it is with the gospel. Some people believe immediately while others take quite a bit of time to come to faith. She came quickly. Nicodemus is going to take time. He came that night mentioned in chapter 3. In chapter 7, he spoke up for Jesus at the Feast of Booths, saying Jesus should not be condemned without being given the opportunity to speak for himself. At that time, other Pharisees ridiculed Nicodemus. And from then on, we don't hear about him anymore, then all of a sudden he's here.

There is another man here, Joseph of Arimathea, and he is identified by John as a secret believer, which is a problematic designation. It fits with our questions about faith in this Gospel. Can a person truly be a secret believer? John told us back in 12:42-43,

⁴² ...many even of the rulers believed in Him, but because of the Pharisees they were not confessing *Him,* for fear that they would be put out of the synagogue; ⁴³ for they loved the approval of men rather than the approval of God.

It's another one of those challenging questions about belief that John introduces for us to think about. Can a person truly believe and yet, refuse to confess that belief? Is a secret believer a real believer? And we've already seen in the Gospel of John that just because somebody is called a

believer that doesn't mean that they have truly placed their faith in Christ. So, the answer of whether a secret believer can be a true believer is not immediate, it's not obvious. John seems to be allowing for some complication. Because we might question the belief of those in chapter 12, because John emphasizes they "loved the approval of men rather than the approval of God." They're not like the blind man of chapter 9, who goes all in with Jesus. But now what we see here at the cross in Joseph is a man who is called a disciple but who had remained secret out of fear but then, at this point his faith finally compels him to act. So, then we're asking, "Okay, so did he truly believe secretly, and his fear just kept him from confessing that belief? Or did he finally come to believe and when he came to believe he then acted?" John does not clarify for us. I think he believed in secret. I think it's possible to truly believe in Jesus and yet have this fear that prevents you from confessing it. But it's messy.

We do not know how privately Joseph and Nicodemus went about approaching Pilate. Maybe they tried to be private in their request. But this is the kind of request that can't be hoped to be kept secret. In asking for the body of Jesus, Joseph and Nicodemus are taking a huge step, placing their reputations in great jeopardy. And they could lose everything. They could lose their position in the Sanhedrin, they can lose their wealth, their contacts, they can be cast out of the Synagogue. They could be cut out of society. And they are doing this even before the resurrection. That says something, too. This is at the death of Jesus. They make this decision to identify with him before he's risen. They believed in Jesus enough to come and honor his body.

They give him honor in death. He is not going to be buried in a shallow grave. As Isaiah prophesied long before, "his grave was assigned with wicked men, yet he was with a rich man in his death." Joseph and Nicodemus brought an abundance of spice, probably with servants to carry it, and they buried Jesus with the honor and expense that belong to a rich man.

The Great Reversal

The crucifixion of Jesus is the great reversal. What was meant to bring him shame and eradicate his name instead revealed to humankind his true nature and magnified his name. Jesus walked with honor to the cross and maintained that honor on the cross. He is righteous and without sin. His character is true. He has fulfilled the plan that he and the Father established before the world began. Before the first Adam was brought forth or even had a chance to sin, the second Adam had already planned to die for his sin and to restore what was lost. He shows his absolute commitment to justice and the incredible depth of his love.

His final vindication will come in three days. Death cannot keep him down because he himself is life.

The author of Hebrews tells us to fix our eyes on Jesus, "the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God (Hebrews 12:2)." What man intended as shame, Jesus despised. Jesus did not consider the cross capable of bringing him shame. It boggles my mind. To be naked, to cry out in pain, to be mocked, to be falsely accused, all these things would destroy my sense of self. Jesus is so secure in who he is and the righteousness of his mission that he despises man's attempt to bring him shame.

Back in chapter 5, verse 44, we read how Jesus chastised his opponents, "How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another and you do not seek the glory that is from the *one and* only God?" As human beings we create elaborate structures of affirmation in our family life, our schooling, our careers, our relationships, our religion where so much of what we do is about getting affirmation for who we are, to feed our sense of worth. Think about just a simple case. Think about Facebook. The language - Facebook - you're putting forward your face. It is a forum for you to put your best face out into public to - what? To receive likes and dislikes. This is the ancient Roman Colosseum: thumbs up, thumbs down. Honor, dishonor. We can create our own public persona. We brag about our accomplishments and our kids and our travels. I've seen some of my daughters' selfies. We can take a hundred selfies to get just the right one to put up on Facebook, to put into the public forum. And Facebook has got its positive qualities. I am not trying to get down on Facebook. I am only pointing out how easy it is to still find examples of honor and shame in our own society. We care what people think

about us. We crave social affirmation to give us a sense of worth. And it feels great if you succeed. You know, if you're an intellectual, or you're a jock, or you're beautiful and you're getting all this affirmation. Then it works for you. You have this false sense of self that really feels good. It doesn't feel so good if you don't fit in, or if you feel like a failure, or you mess up all the time.

Jesus received his glory from God. He knew his own worth as established by his relationship with the Father. That's what matters. Do I know God? Am I in his will? And Jesus despised the shame of men. You can try to shame him, but he rejects our social structures. And because he was able to despise the shame of men, he was able to look past himself to the needs of others. He looked to the other side of the cross and he saw the joy of bringing many brothers and sisters into relationship with the Father as a result of his sacrifice.

His Shame Enables our Honor

The great reversal: Jesus turned what was meant to be shame into glory. And that great reversal now applies to us. Jesus turned the shame of the world into an occasion for glory with absolute conviction that his own honor was in knowing the Father and obeying his will. That can be true of us. Our value is not determined by our success, our failure, our approval or disapproval, our place in society, the affirmation of parents and teachers and coworkers. All these things we crave to give us a sense of worth. That doesn't give you worth.

The writer of Hebrews continued. He said, "Consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart." Look to Jesus, who despised the shame of the cross. Look to him. And just as he looked to God for honor, you look to God for honor. You are created in his image. He has placed value on you. This is what you're worth: You are worth the cross to God. He was willing to die for you. And if you believed in him, you are his child, you are a daughter of the King, a son of the King. That's is who you are. He took your shame on himself, all these ways that you've felt guilt, because of sin you've done, shame because of things people have said, failure, all your lack of success, Jesus has taken that on himself and he gives you in exchange the honor of being in his family.

In the very worst of human circumstances, we can fix our eyes on Jesus. We can recognize the truth of the cross and despise the shame that the world would try to force on us. A friend of mine wrote this observation about holocaust survivor Corrie Ten Boom as she began to understand her own abuse in light of the cross.

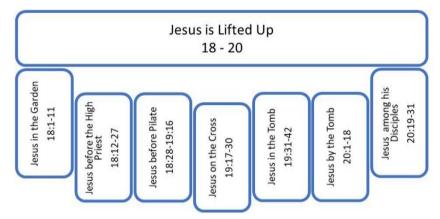
Corrie Ten Boom wrote of reading the Bible while in a Nazi concentration camp: "It was new; it had just been written. I marveled sometimes that the ink was dry...I had read a thousand times the story of Jesus' arrest--how soldiers had slapped Him, laughed at Him, flogged Him. Now such happenings had faces and voices." She and her sister Betsie, who did not survive the war, were forced every Friday to stand in line naked for a so-called medical inspection. On one morning as they waited in line, Corrie writes, "another page in the Bible leapt into life for me. He hung naked on the cross. The paintings, the carved crucifixes showed at least a scrap of cloth. But this, I suddenly knew, was the respect and reverence of the artist. But oh, at that time too, on another Friday morning, there had been no reverence. No more than I saw in the faces around us now." So Corrie Ten Boom spoke to her sister as they waited in line: "'Betsie, they took his clothes too.' Ahead of me I heard a little gasp. 'Oh, Corrie. And I never thanked him for that.'" (Nolan Sharp)

Jesus despised the shame. He knew his honor was in God. He looked past human suffering to the joy that comes from being in the will of the Father. Success and glory as defined by the world is found wanting. The shame, guilt, disgrace, failure of this world all lose power to define us. The cross is empty. Jesus has won. He has secured our forgiveness. He invites us to put aside our failure and sin. To put aside our grave clothes and dress ourselves in the righteousness he would give us. He invites us to find our worth in the Father, to take on his name, to be defined by God, and to live in the honor of belonging to him.

Reflection questions

- 1. Read John 19:17-42. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What are some questions that come to mind?
- 2. How is the sovereign control of Jesus even over his own death shown in John 19:17-30?
- 3. How does Jesus' concern for Mary speak to you?
- 4. What do you know about Nicodemus? Why do you think he chose to participate in the burial of Jesus?
- 5. From a legal standpoint, why is the crucifixion of Jesus critical to your faith as a sinner?
- 6. From an emotional standpoint, how does Jesus' willingness to take human shame on the cross provide you with a new basis for honor?
- 7. Take some time in prayer to thank Jesus for what he went through for your and for what he has accomplished for you, both in the removal of your sin and conferring on you the honor of one received into relationship with God (1:12-13).

Lesson 35: John 20 The Empty Tomb and Risen Lord Introduction



He is risen! He is risen indeed! This is one of our exuberant Easter proclamations. He is risen indeed! We have come to the end of John's Gospel. We have just this conclusion in chapter 20 and then an epilogue in chapter 21. This conclusion is John's report of the resurrection of Jesus. Reading through the chapter again, I am left a bit surprised at its brevity, especially on the details about the resurrection. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is incredibly essential to our faith. Not only is there no exuberant proclamation or embellished, worship language here, but the reverse seems to be true. Concerning just the resurrection the language is very simple and straightforward. Jesus was dead and buried. The tomb is empty. He is now alive. It is as though the text is saying, "These are the facts, just the facts."

That does not mean there is no excitement or tension here. The energy in this text is not in the description of the resurrection but in the response of the witnesses to the news, or the reality of the resurrection. John tells us about Mary Magdalene finding the tomb empty and weeping at the tomb. He tells us about himself and Peter running to the tomb. He tells us about the disciples huddled in fear. And he tells us about Thomas refusing to believe without touching the wounds. There is some struggle here to come to terms with the reality of an empty tomb.

And by focusing on the responses of these individual believers, John uses the occasion of the resurrection to challenge us, the readers, in our own response to the reality of the empty tomb. It's as though he is asking, "What about you? How do you assess the reality of the empty tomb? The report of the resurrection? Faced with this witness regarding Jesus Christ, you must make a choice. Do you believe? Do you need to continue to seek? Do you turn away?"

Let's take these four short accounts one by one. We start with the response of Peter and John in chapter 20, verses 1-10.

Peter and John (20:1-10)

¹ Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came early to the tomb, while it was still dark, and saw the stone *already* taken away from the tomb. ² So she ran and came to Simon Peter and to the other disciple whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken away the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid Him." ³ So Peter and the other disciple went forth, and they were going to the tomb. ⁴ The two were running together; and the other disciple ran ahead faster than Peter and came to the tomb first; ⁵ and stooping and looking in, he saw the linen wrappings lying *there;* but he did not go in. ⁶ And so Simon Peter also came, following him, and entered the tomb; and he saw the linen wrappings lying *there,* ⁷ and the face-cloth which had been on His head, not lying with the linen wrappings, but rolled up in a place by itself. ⁸ So the other disciple who had first come to the tomb then also entered, and he saw and believed. ⁹ For as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that He must rise again from the dead. ¹⁰ So the disciples went away again to their own homes.

The scene starts with Mary Magdalene coming early to the tomb on the first day of the week. The other Gospels also tells us that the tomb was found empty on the first day. Joseph and Nicodemus buried Jesus on the day of preparation of the Sabbath, so that would have been a Friday, Sabbath is of course Saturday, the last day of the Jewish week, and then Mary then is coming on first day, which is our Sunday. When we speak of Jesus being in the grave three days, we are using the Jewish system of inclusive counting. This is how they would count it. Each part of a day counts as a day. So, part of Friday, the day he was crucified and then buried; all of Saturday; and then part of Sunday. He, apparently, rose early on Sunday morning. So that's three days in inclusive counting. All the Gospels agree with this witness. And this is why we worship as Christians on Sunday. The Sabbath is the sign of the Mosaic covenant. We do not worship on the Sabbath. We worship on the day of our risen Lord, on Sunday.

The three Gospels agree that it is Sunday, but they all give a different report on who shows up to care for the body of Jesus. John just mentions 1 woman. Matthew mentions 2 women, Mark mentions 3 women, and Luke, while naming 3 women indicates there were other women also. Luke's report helps us make sense of the different women present. There is not a disagreement among the Gospels. There is simply a limiting of the detail by each writer. So according to Luke we know there were actually quite a number of women present. A group of women came to the tomb with spices for the body of Jesus. And each author chooses which of these women name according to the purpose of his witness. None of the writers felt it was necessary to name every woman present. And that is typical of narrative throughout the Bible in which the names and details of individuals are given sparsely and in accordance with the point that is being made.

John's narrative of the resurrection is very short. And he carefully chooses the detail he relates to make specific points. He has a point to make that relates specifically to Mary Magdalene. So, he only mentions her. Similarly, he only mentions the responses of Peter and John running to the tomb, though there very well may have been other people present when Mary came to Peter and John. So we will come back to Mary in a minute.

Hearing Mary's report of an empty tomb, Peter and John take off running. So, let's focus in this first story on them. I love how John, still not using his own name, reports that he outran Peter to the tomb. It just sounds like something a guy would point out, that he got there first. Though I think the real reason is not to brag about being faster, but to emphasize the different ways that each disciple processes the report of Mary and the scene of the empty tomb.

John arrives first, but he pauses at the entrance to the tomb. He sees the grave clothes laying in there, on the ground, but he is more hesitant, more reflective, perhaps more unsure. Early in our marriage Brenda and I were on our way to a conference in Georgia. I was driving. The car in front of us drifted to the left into the passing lane and then swerved sharply to the right, off the highway, down a grassy slope, crashing into a tree. I pulled over onto the grass, coming to a stop past the wrecked car and my mind was racing. I just sat there, thinking, "What if the driver is dead? What if they are seriously injured? What do I do? Who should I call?" And I sat motionless for several seconds before my mind finally said, "Just go see." When I got out and turned to the other car, I remember the surprise of seeing Brenda already there at the driver's door of the other car. I had not even noticed her get out of our car. It is a fitting difference in our temperaments. I am not the guy you want for immediate split-second action in a crisis. My mind is going to stop me and I'm going to be thinking. Brenda jumps into action.

This helps me understand John and Peter at the tomb. John stops at the entry way to think about what he might find. He's hesitant to go in. Peter flies right by. He never even slows down. That is the more action oriented, impulsive Peter that we have come to know from the Gospel account. As a result, Peter was the first to see really the full empty tomb and the linen wrappings there, and especially the face cloth rolled up and placed to the side. If someone had come and taken the body, they would not take off the linen wrappings. Why would they do that? That makes no sense. And

why would they wrap up the face cloth nicely and place it there, on the side with care? What has happened here in this scene?

Well, when John enters, and he has thought, he has reflected, he has looked, we are told that he sees and he believes. That's a key sentence here, that's in verse 8. He saw and believed. "What did John believe?" Verse 9 tells us. "For as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that He must rise again from the dead." Looking into the empty tomb, John does not agree with Mary that somebody came and took the body. John sees the empty tomb, the cast-off linen, the rolled-up face cloth, and he believes that Jesus has risen from the dead.

That is what he believes. What does the fact that he has just now believed this tell us his faith? Is this his saving faith moment, standing here at the tomb? John sees and believes. Had John not truly believed before this moment? We do know that it is possible to follow Jesus, believing something about Jesus or what you want Jesus to be without truly believing in Jesus as Savior and Lord. That has happened often in this Gospel. Is John just now experiencing that spiritual sight of true faith by which a person is forgiven for their sins?

No. That does not fit, actually, what we have already been told, especially in the previous section of the Gospel as Jesus was preparing his disciples for what was to come. That section is chapter 13-17. Jesus told the disciples in chapter 13 that they were clean, all of them except for the one who would betray him. That was in the context of washing their feet. He tells them again that they are clean in chapter 15 in the context of the vine and the branches. And then in chapter 17, he declares that they have known, they have believed, they have received. Jesus is almost emphatic about it. They have already believed. John's faith has been affirmed by Jesus. So, this believing and seeing at the tomb is not his moment of saving faith. He has already believed in Jesus.

This is the belief of a believer who has just come to see clearly a truth that he did not understand before. It can be surprising to us that such a basic truth as the resurrection would be something a true believer would not yet have realized or understood. But that is because we live on the other side of the cross. Even with the indication from Jesus about his death and about his resurrection, the disciples were in a time of major transition, of theological transition and personal transition. We're moving Old Covenant to New Covenant, to having Jesus with us, to not having Jesus with us and they just haven't gotten it. And even though the resurrection was indicated by the God, it had not sunk in to them what's really going to happen. And Jesus did not push it. He gave indication, but essentially, he trusted that the reality of his resurrection would make things clear pretty soon enough. And that's what happens to John, that he sees and he believes.

And here is a principle of faith for us. Belief in Jesus Christ calls us to further belief as we grow in our understand of his Word. We are constantly challenged or faced with new understanding or realities to believe in. We are born again in a moment when the eyes of our heart first truly see Jesus. We are now saved. We're new. We are in his Kingdom. But after this moment of belief, we continue to be challenged by the truth of God as we learn and grow. We continue to have opportunities to believe.

All right. Moving from Peter and John in this first scene, we now return to the account of Mary. This is in verses 11-18.

Mary Magdalene (20:11-18)

¹¹ But Mary was standing outside the tomb weeping; and so, as she wept, she stooped and looked into the tomb; ¹² and she saw two angels in white sitting, one at the head and one at the feet, where the body of Jesus had been lying. ¹³ And they said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "Because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid Him." ¹⁴ When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing *there*, and did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵ Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?" Supposing Him to be the gardener, she said to Him, "Sir, if you have carried Him away, tell me where you have laid Him, and I will take Him away." ¹⁶

Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to Him in Hebrew, "Rabboni!" (which means, Teacher). ¹⁷ Jesus said to her, "Stop clinging to Me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to My brethren and say to them, 'I ascend to My Father and your Father, and My God and your God.' " ¹⁸ Mary Magdalene came, announcing to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord," and *that* He had said these things to her.

Mary's response contrasts John's response. John saw the empty tomb and believed. Mary, also a believer in Jesus, has not yet understood what has happened. She knows something is terribly wrong. The hatred against Jesus that led to the cross has motivated evil men to come and desecrate his body. That is her fear. She loves Jesus. She came this morning to honor him in his death. But his body is gone.

I wonder if John kept his realization to himself. He believed, but in the shock of the moment, being a reflective soul, he turned home, mind churning, not ready into put to words what was rolling about in his mind and in his heart; what he saw as true. For whatever reason, he does not seem to have spoken to Mary. She is left by the tomb in grief, weeping. And she looks into the tomb and she sees two angels. John gives us little of that encounter, just enough to emphasize that Mary remains focused on this fear. She says, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not now where they have laid him." She sees angels, but that's her focus. She's very fixed.

Unexpectedly, she becomes aware of another presence, a man. He is standing nearby and he speaks to her. And she does not recognize him as Jesus. We are not told whether this is because his face just isn't clearly visible. You know, he's standing outside the tomb. It's believable, especially considering Mary's emotional state and her assumption about Jesus. He is dead. She is looking for a body. She is not looking for a living man. Another explanation could be that Jesus actually veils himself in his risen form, so that she does not recognize him until he is ready. But whichever, she doesn't get that it's Jesus.

And then Jesus asks a question and that question communicates on more than one level. He says, "Whom are you seeking?" Whom are you seeking? And she just takes it to mean the body of Jesus, but this is the question of the Gospel, right? Whom are you seeking? Are you seeking the Jesus that you want to define yourself, the Messiah you want, or the prophet, or the king you want; or are you seeking Jesus as he truly is? Whom are you really seeking? It is the question that Jesus asked in chapter 1 when the two disciples from John the Baptist started following him and he turns around and asks them, "What are you seeking?" Or those who came to arrest him in the garden in chapter 18, and he asked them, "Who do you seek?" It's John's question for the readers of his Gospel, "Whom do you seek?"

Still not understanding, Mary asks for the man's help in finding the body of Jesus, "Sir, if you have carried Him away, tell me where you have laid Him, and I will take Him away." Then Jesus opens her eyes to see by speaking her name, "Mary!" He is the good shepherd. He knows his sheep by name. And his sheep recognize his voice. She responds, "Rabboni (teacher)," and she clings to him.

Jesus has a task for Mary to do. He sends her to the disciples as the first witness of his resurrection. That is significant. In the Greek and Roman world of Jesus, the witness of a woman was not counted as valid if not supported by the witness of a man. Jesus rejects that idea as does John. The strongest witnesses in the Gospel along with the testimonies of John the Baptist and Peter are women. In chapter 4, we get the witness of the Samaritan woman who recognizes Jesus as Christ and shares the news with her village. We get the clearest statement that Jesus is the Christ from Martha in chapter 11. And then in chapter 12 Martha's sister Mary performs an extravagant act of worship, anointing the feet of Jesus. And now here we have Jesus entrusting his first appearance not to Peter, not to John who had just left this very spot. They were just there. But instead, Jesus waits for them to leave and then reveals himself to Mary. And he entrusts to Mary this incredible role to be the first witness of the resurrection, to go and tell the brethren. And Mary obeys. She goes and announces to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord."

Jesus' specific words to Mary provide us with another principle of faith. He said this,

"Stop clinging to Me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to My brethren and say to them, 'I ascend to My Father and your Father, and My God and your God.' "

We have listened to Jesus continually hold in tension two realities, that he is equal to God and distinct from the Father. We're going to see both in this chapter. Here with Mary he is emphasizing a distinction. And so, we have this principle. Belief in Jesus Christ calls us to relationship with God the Father.

Jesus does not replace relationship with the Father. Jesus establishes our relationship with the Father. And he points us to that relationship. You remember, in other Gospels he teaches us to pray, "Our Father who is in heaven, holy be your name. Your will be done on earth as in heaven." Jesus does say pray in his name, but he teaches us to pray to the Father. So we see him distinguishing, making a distinction between himself and the Father, and then directing us to the Father.

After this scene with Mary, next we find Jesus revealing himself to his disciples as a group. This is in verses 19-23.

The Disciples (20:19-23)

¹⁹ So when it was evening on that day, the first *day* of the week, and when the doors were shut where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in their midst and said to them, "Peace *be* with you." ²⁰ And when He had said this, He showed them both His hands and His side. The disciples then rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹ So Jesus said to them again, "Peace *be* with you; as the Father has sent Me, I also send you." ²² And when He had said this, He breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ "If you forgive the sins of any, *their sins* have been forgiven them; if you retain the *sins* of any, they have been retained."

Jesus' appears miraculously in the midst of his disciples. It's still the first day. This is still Sunday. And you can imagine the shock. They haven't even had the time to process the words of Peter and John and of Mary. They're still huddled, they're in fear, and his first words are, "Peace be with you." It is easy to take this as a common, religious greeting and just move on with the story. But I do not think so. I think we need to pause. I think by saying, "Peace be with you," Jesus is bringing to mind the whole conversation he had with them, chapters 13-17, the night of his arrest. He had forewarned them of coming trouble, and he had promised peace. He said it would be like the labor pains of a woman giving birth; intense trial followed by joy.

And that's what they experienced. They experienced the intensity. And then they are gathered here in fear, basically waiting for a knock on the door that's going to signal their own arrest and execution. They're afraid the Jews will come for them. And then Jesus appears, and he says, "Peace be with you," and they rejoice. The trial is over. The time for joy is come.

And he had proclaimed before to them peace twice. "Peace, I leave with you; my peace I give to you; not as the world gives, do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, nor let it be fearful (John 14:27)." He also said, "These things I have spoken to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation but take courage; I have overcome the world (John 16:33)."

How did the disciples do, applying that teaching they had just received from Jesus? You know, receive my peace. "Let not your heart be troubled, nor let it be fearful...take courage." Yet, it's like they immediately forgot everything. They forgot the sermon immediately. They heard the sermon and then, immediately, the tribulation happens and then all the teaching just goes out of their mind. And they don't have peace. Jesus promised them peace. They don't have peace. They have fear. He promised courage, they have fear. And this is often the way of Christian growth. The initial teaching finds reception in our heads. You know, we're all nodding as the preacher is preaching. This is great stuff! We "amen" it. It's great! It's awesome! But when circumstances of fear or stress or temptation overcome us, we completely forget the lesson and we act instead out of our human flesh. It's our

fear response. It's our stress response. It is not unusual to fail more than once before that truth we believe in intellectually finally takes hold strongly enough in our heart and our character to guide us successfully through times of trouble. And Jesus knew this was going to be the case. He knew, when he was giving them this teaching that they weren't going to be able to live by it over these next three days. But he is setting the stage. You know, they have got to fail before they can succeed.

The disciples lacked experience. Two other things they lacked. They lacked conviction that Jesus had indeed overcome the world. They just hadn't seen it yet. But Jesus is here giving them that conviction. This is going to be a different group of men now that they've seen Jesus. He has gone to the cross and he has come back. Death could not hold him down. He has overcome. He provides them with powerful assurance, showing them the actual wounds in his hands and in his side. Jesus strengthens them with the conviction of his victory over death. He has won.

That's not all they lack. At this moment they also lack the Holy Spirit. Jesus had told them he would not leave them alone but would send the Helper. The Holy Spirit would work in them and would work as a witness to the world to empower their witness. And the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, and peace. So, there's no wonder they haven't yet received that peace that surpasses understanding. They haven't yet received the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. That is a reality that they are lacking in their current situation. The Spirit has not yet been sent. Jesus reminds them of this promise by breathing on them and saying, "Receive the Holy Spirit." And that breathing is a powerful image. In Genesis chapter 2 God breathes into Adam and he becomes man. It is by the Spirit of God that we truly become alive, we truly become who we are created to be as human beings. And here, by breathing on them it's as though Jesus is saying he's restoring humanity. This is the beginning of the restoration into that image that we were created to be. Something new is beginning, a new creation as he breathes on them. We should not misunderstand what Jesus is saying here. This is a foreshadowing. They are not at this moment receiving the Holy Spirit. Jesus is reminding them of what is soon to come. The Book of Acts makes clear that Spirit comes on the disciples at the Feast of Pentecost, and Pentecost is fifty days later, fifty days after Passover.

The Spirit will empower the disciples as the new creation, the new body for their ministry of witness. Jesus reminds them here of their calling, "Peace be with you; as the Father has sent me, I also send you." The disciples need to calm down and face their fears. They need to receive the peace of the Holy Spirit because they have a mission to accomplish. They are to be his witnesses in the world.

And let's think a little bit about the words Jesus uses here in describing that mission. He uses words that sometimes cause confusion. He says, "If you forgive the sins of any, their sins have been forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they have been retained." Some traditions have taken this promise to mean that the leaders of the church, that high-up authorities have this special right or responsibility to dispense forgiveness, that they can actually, through ritual or just through the rite of their office, say who is forgiven and who is not forgiven. And Jesus said something similar with slightly different language in Matthew 16:19, "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven."

The keys of heaven imply stewardship, and this sounds like they are opening the doors of Heaven, or they are shutting the doors of Heaven. These men are to be stewards on behalf of Jesus their king. On what basis, how is it that they open and shut the door of heaven or that they give or hold back forgiveness? John does not explain it specifically here.

We still have good grounds for interpretation. First, we recognize that Jesus is giving these words in the context of commissioning the disciples as sent ones. You're going to be sent ones, and those you forgive are forgiven and those you don't forgive are not forgiven. All the gospels include language of a great commission, Matthew 28:18-20 is the longest. So, our next step of interpretation, we have noticed this context, these words were given in the context of commission, so we go look at all of these passages in the different Gospels to clarify, to find out more about that mission. What is Jesus

sending the disciples to do? He is sending them to "go and make disciples, baptizing them and teaching them all I have taught you." That's the Great Commission.

And after we compare those passages in the Gospels, we can then look through the Book of Acts and the Epistles to observe how the disciples actually carry out this commission. They are to go and make disciples. They are to proclaim forgiveness. How to they do that? Did they set up a priesthood with ecclesiastical institutions with the authority to forgive or to deny forgiveness? No. Does it come through ritual? They set up all these rituals people have to follow. No! That is actually what you really don't see in the Book of Acts or in the Epistles. It is quite absent from the spread of the Gospel in the first century.

What they did was proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And this is throughout John's Gospel. How does somebody gain eternal life? John 3:16, it's by believing in Jesus. That's how you gain eternal life. It is repeated throughout by John. They affirm forgiveness to all who believe and receive Jesus. It's not some ecclesiastical power or authority. It's not some ritual that people have to go through. They proclaim a message and when people believe in Jesus, according to the Gospel, the apostles proclaim over them forgiveness. And for those who refuse, who reject Jesus, the apostles proclaim what is true: that everybody who denies the Son is already judged. So, it's not in their power to give or take forgiveness; it's in their power to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ. That's the trust he has given them. And when they proclaim that, people have a choice to receive it or to reject it, and then that's how they establish who is forgiven and who is not forgiven.

Taking this whole story, here is another principle of faith for you. Belief in Jesus Christ calls us to live as a witness of Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. That's what I see Jesus saying here. He's breathing on them, receive the Holy Spirit, peace be with you, may the power of the Spirit be working in you. And now go as sent ones. So belief in Jesus Christ calls us to live as a witness to Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit. Living in the will of God, dependent on Jesus Christ is the source of our peace. And then the spiritual and emotional well-being, this peace "shalom" that we experience through dependent relationship on Jesus, that enables us for service in the world. We are not seeking peace for ourselves to have a comfortable life. We are seeking the spiritual and emotional strength and well-being to make a difference.

The final scene of the chapter is a famous one. It is the story of doubting Thomas. This is verses 24-29.

Thomas (20:24-29)

²⁴ But Thomas, one of the twelve, called Didymus, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵ So the other disciples were saying to him, "We have seen the Lord!" But he said to them, "Unless I see in His hands the imprint of the nails, and put my finger into the place of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe." ²⁶ After eight days His disciples were again inside, and Thomas with them. Jesus came, the doors having been shut, and stood in their midst and said, "Peace *be* with you." ²⁷ Then He said to Thomas, "Reach here with your finger, and see My hands; and reach here your hand and put it into My side; and do not be unbelieving, but believing." ²⁸ Thomas answered and said to Him, "My Lord and my God!" ²⁹ Jesus said to him, "Because you have seen Me, have you believed? Blessed *are* they who did not see, and *yet* believed."

We are familiar with doubting Thomas, so we probably need to actually redeem here our traditional view. He gets associated with this adjective of "doubting" by refusing to believe the disciples' report and wanting to see and touch the wounds of Jesus. Let's remember that in chapter 11, when all the disciples were dismayed by Jesus' declaration they were going back into Judea, where people wanted to kill them, it was Thomas who spoke up and said, "Let's go and die with him." So, he may be doubting Thomas, but he also seems to be courageous Thomas. He is not one-dimensional.

We also need to remember the scene we just left. Who just refused to believe in the witness that Jesus had risen from the dead? I mean, Mary had come and told them that Jesus raised from the

dead, but they were all staying hidden in the room and stayed hidden in the room in fear of the Jews. And to whom did Jesus already offer the visible proof of his wounds? It seems to me the disciples don't fare much better in the telling of the story than Thomas. He just was not there when it happened.

This scene with Thomas does provide an opportunity for John to emphasize two more points about faith. First, belief in Jesus Christ calls us to believe that Jesus is God. These are the words of Thomas, "My Lord and my God." Just like when the blind man fell at his feet to worship him, and just as he has taught of himself, Jesus receives this declaration that he is God. This is Jesus' own teaching. To Mary Jesus indicates his distinctiveness from the Father. You know, "I am going to my Father and your Father." By Thomas we are reminded of Jesus' equality with the Father. Belief in Jesus is both a call to relationship with the Father and a call to recognize the Son as God. Both ideas together are part of this mystery we call the Trinity. Father, Son and Spirit are all distinct and are all equal, rightly recognized as one God. We began this Gospel with that mystery. The Word was with God. The Word was God. Two truths in tension that speak to the mystery of the Trinity, of the nature of God.

We are given another principle here. Belief in Jesus Christ calls us to believe in a spiritual reality that we have not confirmed with our physical sight. All the disciples had this benefit that their physical sight confirmed their spiritual sight. All the disciples had this benefit that their physical sight confirmed their spiritual sight. They actually saw Jesus risen from the dead. And we do not have the same benefit. In fact, Jesus speaks of the vast majority of all believers here, including us, when he says, "Blessed *are* they who do not see, and *yet* believe." And John knew that this was the message that was going forward. This is what most are going to have to do: to believe without seeing.

In this chapter, in John 20, by focusing on the interaction of these different believers as they are confronted by the empty tomb and as they are confronted by the risen Christ, John has emphasized the two great themes of his Gospel: the nature of Jesus and the nature of faith. We can take away several principles from these interactions. I have mentioned to you five that stand out to me. Let me repeat them.

Belief in Jesus Christ calls us to further belief as we grow in our understand of his Word.

Belief in Jesus Christ calls us to relationship with God the Father.

Belief in Jesus Christ calls us to live in the world as a witness of Jesus empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Belief in Jesus Christ calls us to believe that Jesus is God.

And belief in Jesus Christ calls us to believe in a spiritual reality that we have not confirmed with our own physical sight.

These are aspect of the belief that we are being called to. In this last chapter we have been confronted with an empty tomb and a risen Savior. Entering into the story ourselves we are challenged along with Mary to consider the question from Jesus, "Whom do you seek?" Are you seeking to know God the Father through God the Son? Are you seeking the Jesus who is, the God who is? Are you willing to believe even though you have not seen?

John is very clear on his purpose for writing this Gospel. Let's end with this purpose statement, the last two verses of the chapter, John 20:30-31.

John's purpose (20:30-31)

³⁰ Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; ³¹ but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name.

What did John write about? The signs Jesus performed in the presence of the disciples.

Why did he write about these? That you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.

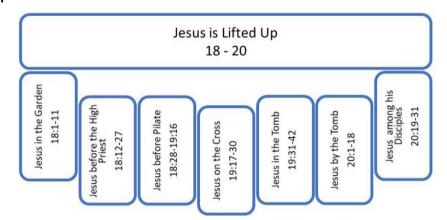
And why does he want you to believe this about Jesus? That believing you may have life in his name.

Reflection questions

- 1. Read John 20:1-10. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing particularly in regard to Peter and John?
- 2. Read John 20:11-18. What stands out to you in regard to Mary?
- 3. Read John 20:19-29. What stands out to you in regard to the disciples and Thomas?
- 4. Does Jesus' declaration "Peace be with you" communicate more than just a simple greeting? What state are the disciples in when Jesus arrives? What promises had Jesus made about peace in chapters 14 and 16?
- 5. Jesus connects sending, the Holy Spirit and the right to forgive in his commission of the disciples. How are these three realities connected in other commission passages, such as Matthew 28:18-20 and Acts 1:7-8?
- 6. Considering the story of Acts and the Epistles, how do the disciples practically carry-out Jesus words that who they forgive is forgiven and who they do not forgive is not forgiven? Do they do this according to their ecclesiastical authority as church leaders? If not, how do you see the communication of forgiveness carried-out?
- 7. Compare the appearance to Thomas with the appearance to the disciples. What was the state of the disciples' faith before Jesus appeared? What did Jesus say or do? How about Thomas?
- 8. Considering all the people in this chapter, who believes without seeing the risen Lord? (Notice the repetition of the word "see".)
- 9. Read John 20:30-31. Who is John writing this for? What is John's purpose for his Gospel?

Lesson 36: John 21 The Journey of Faith

Introduction



John ends his Gospel witness with an epilogue. The conclusion came in chapter 20. Mary Magdalene, John, Peter, Thomas, all the disciples were confronted with the reality of an empty tomb and a risen Lord. They had believed and were challenged to further belief. Yet, these things were not written for them but for us. John lived his life inviting people to believe without having seen what he had seen. He ends the conclusion with the comment to Thomas, "Blessed are they who did not see yet believed." Then he stated clearly his motivation for writing out his Gospel. John 20:30-31,

³⁰ Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; ³¹ but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name.

This concluding chapter emphasizes the call to belief in Jesus Christ, our Messiah, our risen Lord, the source of life. John does not stop there with this call to faith. He continues on with one more chapter. Where chapter 20 gives more focus to the act of belief, chapter 21 draws our attention to the journey. "You have believed, follow me."

Saving faith takes you through the door, it puts you on a path. In this epilogue, John offers us Peter's journey with Jesus as an example to help us think about our own journey with Jesus.

Let's walk through the passage together interpreting as we go. Here is the introduction. John 21:1-3.

Introduction: Apart from Jesus we can do nothing (21:1-3)

¹ After these things Jesus manifested *Himself* again to the disciples at the Sea of Tiberias, and He manifested Himself in this way. ² Simon Peter, and Thomas called Didymus, and Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, and the *sons* of Zebedee, and two others of His disciples were together. ³ Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing." They said to him, "We will also come with you." They went out and got into the boat; and that night they caught nothing.

The scene begins with a gathering of seven disciples. Three disciples are named. Peter has played the most consistent role throughout the Gospel. As usual, John mentions himself indirectly as one of the sons of Zebedee. Two others are just unnamed. This epilogue is paired with the introduction to the Gospel that we have in the second half of chapter 1.

There we also encountered a group of disciples and they were just beginning to gather around Jesus. Two of John the Baptist's disciples began to follow Jesus. They gathered three more. One of the disciples remained unnamed. Peter is there. Nathanael is there.

This epilogue, when we catch the connection back to chapter 1, draws our attention to the reality of a journey. Three years have passed since that first gathering at the beginning of the Gospel. These are the same men, but they are not the same, are they? In those early days they did proclaim Jesus "Messiah." And they claimed to have found the one "of whom Moses in the Law and also the Prophets wrote." But they hardly knew what they were talking about. They gave Jesus the titles of

Scripture without having experience or insight into the deeper meaning of the theology that they claimed. We discover later that these men did truly believe. That's going to come out through the story. But this is only the very beginning of that belief.

Remember how Nathanael was at first skeptical of any prophet coming from Nazareth, and yet, when Jesus merely claimed to have seen him from afar under a fig tree, Nathanael gushed, "You are the Son of God; You are the King of Israel." Jesus knew then how little Nathanael really understood.

⁵⁰ Jesus answered and said to him, "Because I said to you that I saw you under the fig tree, do you believe? You will see greater things than these." ⁵¹ And He said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see the heavens opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man."

When we first come to believe in Jesus, it's like putting on stiff, new pants that are too big for us to fit into. We accept as true realities we barely understand. Our faith may be real. But it is young, very new. And we need to grow into our theological pants. In part this simply requires time: time for growth, time for maturity. In part it requires breaking in our pants through some hard work, and some suffering and quite a bit of failure. Our pants become part of who we are especially after having torn some holes in them. And not the fashionable kind that come prefabricated, but the kind that come after long wear and hours spent on your knees. That's when the pants are really broken in. That's when our faith becomes broken in. These men speak truths that they have yet to grow into.

This Nathanael in chapter 21, at the end, now he has seen some things, just as Jesus said, "You will see angels ascending and descending on the Son of Man." He has seen some things. He has rejoiced, he has been afraid, he has witnessed the cross. This Nathanael is not the same as that Nathanael who was sitting under a fig tree three years ago. He has been on a journey with Jesus. He has both believed and he has begun to live out that belief. And you know what I am talking about if you have believed in Jesus Christ for any number of years. You can think back to your original moments, the sweetness of coming to understand the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And at the same time how naive you were in the beginning, or how much you needed to grow and to learn.

And that truth about Nathanael that he is a changed man can be said about each one of these here. They have all walked together. In some sense, their journey is similar. And yet they also have all walked in their own individuality with Jesus. Peter's journey with Jesus overlaps in some sense with Nathanael's, but it was also very distinctly Peter's. And his experiences and his personality and his successes and failures through this Gospel that form and shape him in a way that's different than Nathanael. And John is taking Peter's journey. We're going to focus on Peter as an emphasis here, as an example. Your journey is not going to be like Peter but we can still learn from his journey.

The disciples are at the Sea of Tiberias which is just another name for the Sea of Galilee. They were in Jerusalem in chapter 20 right after the resurrection when they were in that room when Jesus appeared to them and he let them touch the wounds in his hands. And we know they are going to be at Jerusalem again, they're going to be there for the Feast of Pentecost when the promised Holy Spirit comes.

But between those two moments in Jerusalem, right after the resurrection and at Pentecost, there is going to be a period of about forty days. Acts 1:3 tells us that Jesus appeared to them over this period. And we also read in Matthew 20:7 that Jesus had instructed them to meet in Galilee. They are where Jesus wanted them to be. He wanted them to return to their home territory where they had conducted so much of their ministry together with Jesus.

So, these disciples have gone there. And yet, they apparently do not know what they are supposed to be doing. And Peter, not being very good at just sitting around and waiting, does what he knows how to do.

[So], Peter said to them, "I am going fishing." They said to him, "We will also come with you." They went out and got into the boat; and that night they caught nothing.

The story continues in verses 4-8.

Lessons for the Journey (21:4-23)

Remember Where Fruitfulness Comes From (4-8)

⁴ But when the day was now breaking, Jesus stood on the beach; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. ⁵ So Jesus said to them, "Children, you do not have any fish, do you?" They answered Him, "No." ⁶ And He said to them, "Cast the net on the right-hand side of the boat and you will find *a catch*." So they cast, and then they were not able to haul it in because of the great number of fish. ⁷ Therefore that disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord." So when Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put his outer garment on (for he was stripped *for work*), and threw himself into the sea. ⁸ But the other disciples came in the little boat, for they were not far from the land, but about one hundred yards away, dragging the net *full* of fish.

I love this part of the story. They go back to what they know. They fish all night. And they catch nothing. After that, the last thing you want is for some old guy on the beach to yell out, "How's the fishing? Did you catch anything?" They gave him a short, dismissive answer, "No." It's like they didn't say, "No! Shut up!", "No! Leave us alone!" It's just, "No." But like so many other guys who have not been out all night fishing, this guy on the beach has advice for them. And it is really stupid advice. "Children, throw the net on the other side of the boat." Like the fish just hang out on one side of the boat. To professional fishermen it is such dumb advice.

But for some reason they do it. Maybe they are humbled and dejected. The one thing they really know how to do on their own without help from anybody is catch fish. They were catching fish before they met Jesus. They're good at catching fish. And yet, they spend all night fishing and catch nothing. Maybe just to shut the guy on the beach up, they cast the net on the other side of the boat. And they catch so many fish they can't even pull the net in.

John, our insightful, reflective disciple, recognizes immediately, "It is the Lord!" This has happened before. John does not tell us about it in this Gospel, but it is a well-known story. Everybody knows the story. When the disciples first met Jesus, the same thing happened. They were out fishing and Jesus said, "Cast the net on the other side of the boat!" and they all knew it was Jesus when he said it, and they did it because Jesus said to do it. And then they caught a ton of fish. And then Jesus told them, "Follow me and I will make you fishers of men."

Well, three years into the journey, after the terrifying and disorienting experience of the arrest and crucifixion, Jesus reminds them of their purpose. This is Jesus saying to them, "I told you that you would be fishers of men. I told you that you would be fruitful. I told you that apart from me you can do nothing." Peter, our action-oriented disciple, dives into the sea. He is not going to wait for the over-burdened boat to struggle back to land. He swims to his Lord. When he gets there, Jesus has breakfast ready, verses 9-14,

Respond to the Invitation to Fellowship with Jesus (9-14)

⁹ So when they got out on the land, they saw a charcoal fire *already* laid and fish placed on it, and bread. ¹⁰ Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish which you have now caught." ¹¹ Simon Peter went up and drew the net to land, full of large fish, a hundred and fifty-three; and although there were so many, the net was not torn. ¹² Jesus said to them, "Come *and* have breakfast." None of the disciples ventured to question Him, "Who are You?" knowing that it was the Lord. ¹³ Jesus came and took the bread and gave *it* to them, and the fish likewise. ¹⁴ This is now the third time that Jesus was manifested to the disciples, after He was raised from the dead.

It is not unusual for me to be asked when I'm teaching John about the significance of the number one hundred and fifty-three fish. We can come at that from several different levels. On the first level, the number simply draws us into a story that is real. You know, real detail makes you feel like it's a real story. And the right kind of fisherman is surely going to count the number of fish in a haul too big to put into the boat. "We were out there. And we caught nothing. And he said, 'Cast the net on the other side.' And we hauled in a hundred and fifty-three fish!" You're going to count it to tell the story. So, on one level, this is just real.

On a second level, the number of fish emphasizes the truth that we are the branches and Jesus is the vine. If the disciples are to be fishers of men, fruitfulness for them will depend not primarily on their knowledge, or their skills, or their hard work, but on Jesus. Apart from him we can do nothing. Abiding in him we can become fruitful in our labor to the glory of God.

There may be another level of importance to the numbers. 153 is a triangular number. You can google that if you want to know what it means. It is the kind of number that numbers people notice. Math people, people who like symbolic numbers would like at the number 153 and it would click, "Oh, this is one of those numbers." Augustine noticed it. I have read a couple of interesting papers on possible symbolism from the number. Scholars come up several different ideas on what the underlying symbolism might mean. But that's sort of a problem. When people have all these different ideas, then it's hard to teach what the symbolism really is because there are different options. When numerical symbolism shows up in a biblical story, the point is always going to be to support the story, not to convey hidden meaning. If you're looking for hidden meaning in the numbers in the Bible, then that's conspiracy theory. Really, you can make numbers show up and you can make them mean what you want them to mean and that's not Biblical truth being communicated. When there are symbolic numbers, like when the number 40 becomes symbolic or 10 is symbolic or 7 is symbolic, these are teaching us about the perfection of God. Or if Peter says, "How much should I forgive somebody? Should I forgive them seven time?" Well, seven is the perfect number. So, Peter thinks he's really gracious saying, "Should I forgive them seven times?" And Jesus says, "No! Seventy times seven." That's seven tens times seven. That's not only perfection but overabundance. You should be very ready to forgive people. And so, if you think about the numbers, the numbers add to the story. So, whatever this number means if it has symbolism, it is not something hidden that you should be searching for. It is most important that you have the main idea down, and whatever meaning it has, it's not going to detract from the story. So, we can just focus on the story. That's more apparent that this number makes the story real, and the fruitfulness. So, let's not get sidetracked by trying to go through what are potential symbolisms of the number. Let's just take it as a huge haul of fish that reminds us that we're not going to be fruitful in ministry apart from Jesus, but with Jesus we can do some great things.

Jesus set up a second scene after the miraculous catch of fish. It's a breakfast scene, a fellowship meal. These disciples are to be fruitful fishers of men. But we need to talk about something. What happens when they fail? And I am not talking about the failure to catch fish. It's not just when we try to do good things and we fail. What happens when they sin, or they fail to be faithful? That kind of failure. We are sinful men and women and we're on a journey with Jesus. And he is holy and perfect, he is fully committed to the will of God, and we are just so-so committed to the will of God. He is our king and Lord. What happens when we break trust with him? Is there a way back fully into his grace or are we set aside as marred, not so useful, a disappointment to our heavenly Father?

Jesus invites all the disciples to sit down to breakfast. He invites them into this fellowship meal. And there is a detail to this meal that is aimed specifically at Peter. When they came up to Jesus, John writes that they saw a charcoal fire with fish laid on it. A charcoal fire. That is an interesting detail. Why does John point that out?

A charcoal fire has only been mentioned only one other time in this Gospel. Do you remember where that was? Does that strike any memory for you? Where was there a charcoal fire? When Peter entered the courtyard of the high priest after the arrest of Jesus and he was asked whether he too was a disciple of Jesus. He saw a bunch of slaves and officers standing around a charcoal fire, warming themselves and he answered the question, "I am not." Then he went over to that fire and he joined the circle. And before the roster crowed, he denied Jesus two more times, as he warmed himself by a charcoal fire.

You know how smell can take you right back to a time and place in your memory? I think in the fall, when leaves start coming down there is a specific smell and I'm thinking of high-school football games. It just takes me right back to those memories. Jesus has created a charcoal fire and he asked

Peter to sit with him, in a circle with other men. This is a place of fellowship, but it is also a place of remembrance. Jesus is calling up the memory of Peter's greatest failure, his greatest shame.

Jesus set up this scene around a charcoal fire to restore Peter. Let's read verses 15-17.

Why would Jesus do that? Different human leaders bring out our failures for different reasons. A leader might point out your failure to shame you into better behavior. Parents do this, teachers do this, pastors do this. And that is often how we picture God. Even if we would not say it that way, we feel it inside. We use our failure to provide a negative motivation for us. We say it to ourselves in different ways, depending on our personality, but it's something like, "Come on Michael. What kind of a Christian are you? Look how you screwed up. You can be better than that! Do better. Be better, Michael. Come on!" That is not what Jesus is doing here. He is not shaming Peter to motivate Peter. This is not shaming.

Receive the Restoration of Jesus After Sin (15-17)

¹⁵ So when they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, *son* of John, do you love Me more than these?" He said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You." He said to him, "Tend My lambs." ¹⁶ He said to him again a second time, "Simon, *son* of John, do you love Me?" He said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You." He said to him, "Shepherd My sheep." ¹⁷ He said to him the third time, "Simon, *son* of John, do you love Me?" Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, "Do you love Me?" And he said to Him, "Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You." Jesus said to him, "Tend My sheep.

What's going on here? I have heard a few sermons that focus on the different words for "love" that are used in the Greek. I do not think that in this instance the difference between *agapao* and *phileo* is the main point. John does not reserve *agape* as a special type of God love, unconditional love. Both Greek words are used to describe the Father's love for the Son in John's Gospel. John even uses both words when he is giving his self-designation of the disciple whom Jesus loved. He might use *agape*, and in some places he uses *phileo*. John uses them more as synonyms. And John enjoys using synonyms. In fact, just in this one passage we have two words for love, two words for knowledge, two words for the verb of caring for sheep and two words for the sheep.¹⁵

Rather than focus on the two words for love and some technical difference between those two words, I think it is better to focus on how this interaction is an example of Jesus' love for Peter. What is Jesus doing here? How is he loving Peter? And it's going to be tough love. Like the pain of a doctor washing out a deep wound or resetting a bone, Jesus is going to cause pain in order to heal. Jesus is giving emphasis to the denial, the three times that Peter denied Jesus. And this is a painful memory. One of the reasons for the painfulness of this restoration is the public nature of the denial. Peter's denial of Jesus was public in front of a group gathered around a charcoal fire. That public denial brought shame onto Peter. Jesus is now affirming Peter publicly in front of a group around a charcoal fire in order to restore his honor. So, the pain is necessary.

We can view Peter's failure through both an honor/shame lens and also an innocence/guilt lens. Both ideas are at play in whatever society we live in, though one society might lean more strongly to one side and another more strongly to another. Western morality tends to focus on law breaking. If you break a moral law as an individual, you are guilty of breaking that law. You feel you are a bad person because you broke a moral law. Justice demands from you some kind of punishment or penance in order that you feel better about yourself. In Eastern cultures, morality commonly takes on more of an honor/shame bent which relates more to the group. When you fail to uphold your obligations to the group, then socially you become an unfaithful person. That's how people see you. And that creates a sense of shame in you. You feel you are a bad person because you failed to uphold the obligations recognized by society.

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¹⁵ D. A. Carson, Pillar, 676-677.

Peter has failed here on both accounts. Denying Jesus, he broke the greatest commandment of all, to love God with his heart and mind and strength. He is guilty of law breaking. Denying Jesus, he has also shown himself unfaithful to his master and to the whole community of believers. He is shamed as an unfaithful disciple.

As a Jew with a strong sense of moral obligation who lives in an honor/shame society, I assume Peter would have felt both shame in his relationship to society and guilt in his own internal understanding of moral law. He has got both going on. I also assume that we are all affected by both. We judge our moral worth according to the sense of approval in our group. That is more of an honor/shame perspective. You feel shamed because of how people view you. You feel like you have somehow failed socially or failed the community. We also judge our moral worth according to our ability to keep moral rules. And that is more of an innocence/guilt perspective. This is internal standard conscience that you're struggling with. Our upbringing and culture affect how strongly one of these perspectives may play out in our lives. So, one may be stronger than the other, but we all deal, to some degree, with both.

We do not know if Peter discussed his denial of Jesus privately during one of the previous times Jesus appeared to the disciples. Maybe they were all together. You know how you can all be together in a group when Jesus shows up and it becomes difficult to talk about personal, individual things. So maybe Peter hasn't had a chance to confess to Jesus and ask for forgiveness. It's not recorded, so we have no way of knowing whether Peter had had this conversation with Jesus yet in a private way.

Here Jesus is the one taking the initiative to restore Peter, and it's going to be both: both as an individual and also as a member of a community. As the denial was public before a gathered group and had become known, so too, the restoration is public before a gathered group.

The restoration began this way.

Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love Me more than these?" He said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You." He said to him, "Tend My lambs."

This cycle is repeated three times. Jesus will ask the question, "Do you love me?" Peter will respond, "Yes, you know I do." And Jesus will charge him to "Tend my lambs" or, "Shepherd my sheep." In each of the three cycles the parallel the phrases are pretty much synonymous. Jesus asks the same question. Peter gives the same response. Jesus delivers the same charge.

There are two slight additions to the language. The first is here in the original question. Jesus does not just ask, "Do you love me?" He asks, "Do you love me more than these?" That is an interesting question, "Do you love me more than these?" That's a question I would never ask one of my daughters. "Julia, do you love me more than Ana? Do you love me more than Claire?" Why would I ask that? Why would I encourage that kind of competition among my daughters? Why would I want that?

So, why does Jesus ask that here of Peter? Does Jesus want us to think of ourselves in competition with each other to try to outdo proving to God which one of us loves him more?

No. That is not what Jesus is doing. The question is rhetorical. The question is getting at how Peter might see himself. "Peter, do you really see yourself as loving me more than these other men love me? More than John? More than Nathanael? More than Thomas? Is that how you view yourself, Peter? Did I choose you as a leader among the Twelve because you are better than they are?"

Of course, we all know that we're not supposed to feel that way, and yet whenever we have some kind of honor or position over other people, we feel that way. We somehow feel that we are chosen, selected because we are better. We are smarter, we are more faithful, we love more. But the question takes Peter back to the night of the arrest when Jesus was speaking to the disciples just after the last supper.

³⁶ Simon Peter said to Him, "Lord, where are You going?" Jesus answered, "Where I go, you cannot follow Me now; but you will follow later." ³⁷ Peter said to Him, "Lord, why can I not follow You right now? I will lay down my life for You." ³⁸ Jesus answered, "Will you lay down your life for Me? Truly, truly, I say to you, a rooster will not crow until you deny Me three times.

Peter had spoken out in front of all the disciples, this vow that he, Peter, whatever else all these other guys do, I will lay down my life for you, Jesus. That is how much I love you. Does he see himself as loving Jesus more than others? Does he see himself as somehow better or more favored? Because he is the out one, the impulsive one, the active one. Does he somehow feel that means that he loves Jesus more deeply than maybe the more reflective John? Just because you're extroverted and you're out there, do you think of yourself as better than those who are more introverted, reflective, and quiet? Or if you're more introverted, reflective, and quiet, do you think of yourself as better than the more impulsive Peters?

Does God give you gifts or favor or position or opportunity or fruitfulness because you are better than other Christians, because you love more? Maybe Peter thought that before. I don't think he's thinking that at this moment, sitting across from Jesus with this group of men. You know, maybe in chapter 6, when he was the one that said, "Where are we going to go? You are the Holy One with the words of life." He was the one who spoke out when everybody left and that was a high point, and maybe he felt better then, but now he is the one who denied. Apart from Judas, he is the worst.

Peter does not answer, "Yes, Lord. I love you more than these." He does not frame his love in a comparison with the others. So maybe he has learned his lesson because he simply responds, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You." Then Jesus commissions him, "Peter, tend my lambs." Jesus accepts Peter's profession of love and then he gives him responsibility. That means so much. When you fail, and then your leader - he is not trying to shame Peter. He is giving Peter opportunity to state his heart. And then he is giving Peter responsibility.

Three times Jesus asks, Peter responds, Jesus commissions.

Why three times? Is Jesus requiring Peter to pay penance for his sin? You know, you denied me three times, to you make up for it, you have to confess me three times? No. No. This is because Peter needs his wounds washed away. This is not a payment of sin. This is not to satisfy the anger of God. Jesus is not punishing Peter. Jesus took the punishment for that denial on the cross. Jesus took the punishment. This is something Peter needs. Peter needs to be able to proclaim his love for Jesus three times. Jesus is giving him the opportunity to reject his denials. Jesus is allowing him to say, "I know you love me, Peter. I'm going to get you to say it so we're good with each other." Three times is powerful for Peter. Jesus is giving the gift of restoration. Jesus is enabling Peter to feel restored in relationship. Sometimes we need to say it out loud and we need the other person to hear us say it out loud. And we need to see them smile at us.

Peter's shame was public. The restoration is public. Jesus honors Peter here three times in front of these other men. If they are wondering is Peter set aside, is somebody else going to lead now? No! Not only does Peter know he is forgiven. They know he is forgiven. Not only forgiven but restored. And sometimes this kind of public restoration needs to happen and it's painful, and we don't like conflict so, we don't do it. But then the wound doesn't get fully cleaned out. This was public sin by a leader. That wound, we need to clear this out. And it needs to be done with the others who were involved.

The wound is still going to smart, it hurts, and it is going to continue to hurt after this conversation. Peter is going to continue, I imagine, to regret his denial and his failure, and to wish, "I wish I had never done that!" But even though it still smarts, it is now clean, and it is well bandaged. And it will heal in time. Jesus has forgiven Peter's guilt. He has restored Peter's honor. Peter can see himself as good in eyes of Jesus, as valuable because Jesus sees him that way. He sees him as good and as valuable. He sees him as a guy who can tend to his sheep. And Peter can say that. "Jesus sees me as somebody who has something to offer."

Earlier, Jesus declared, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." But this interaction assures us that Jesus understands this is messy for us. Jesus knows that even if we love him as Peter loved him, we are still going to struggle to obey. We love. But that love is countered by other motivations, by selfishness, by fear, by lust. There will be times that we choose sin over obedience. Does that mean we never loved Jesus or that we don't love him at all? At those times, we will be

loving something else more than Jesus. That does not mean we do not love Jesus, or we haven't loved Jesus. It means there's a competition for our affection. It means we love Jesus incompletely, weakly, not exclusively. And it is messy. We have begun a journey that is changing us, but we are not going to be complete until the end of that journey, until we are glorified and made whole in Heaven.

Jesus is not looking for an opportunity to cast us away when we fail. Jesus understands that failure can be used for growth, that sin can be turned into a learning moment. He has made a way to forgive that as Holy God so that the penalty, the guilt doesn't have to remain on us, so that we can get up and move forward and grow. That is the great tragedy of Judas. Like Peter, Judas came to regret his unfaithfulness towards Jesus. He took the money back. He tried to give it back. But he did not know what to do with his guilt and shame. He did not come back to Jesus. He didn't know he could. He did not know Jesus well enough, and not knowing Jesus he became one without hope. Overwhelmed by despair he hung himself.

As low as Peter got, Peter knew enough to hold on to Jesus. Peter came back to the community of disciples and as a result, he experienced the restoring power of the love of Jesus.

I wonder if Peter had this experience of Jesus meeting with him over this breakfast, over this fire, I wonder if he had that in mind when he wrote 1 Peter 4:8. And the told the sheep, the flock of Jesus, he told them, "Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins." 1 Peter 4:8. Peter knew what it meant for love to cover over a multitude of sin. Jesus' love had covered his denials. Jesus' love covers our sin on the cross. The love of Jesus in a theological, spiritual justice way, it covers our sin. But the love of Jesus also can cover our sin in a concrete, specific interaction. This is a human covering over sin, when we truly treat people honorably and with respect, with kindness and grace after they fail. That has the potential to cover over sin, the pain of sin and the fruit of sin and the ongoing sin. Love is a powerful restorative.

Even when our theology teaches us that we are forgiven and loved, we need reminders. We need human voices, human interaction. We need other people to remind us that we are loved and that we are forgiven and that we have so much to offer even after we fail. That is the truth about you. Failure is not an end. Sin is not an end. It's an opportunity to get up and to learn more about who you are, and more about who your gracious Savior is. And through those wounds maybe become more compassionate and more insightful in your ability to care for other people.

Jesus went to extra effort to show Peter honor in front of the other disciples. He could have shamed Peter, he could have wagged his head, narrowed his eyes, and spoken to him sternly. He could have set Peter off to the side, giving his position to another disciple. Instead, Jesus took the time to create a scene that would allow Peter to be restored. Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could learn to restore like Jesus restores?

Love covers over a multitude of sin. Peter knew what that felt like. He got it from Jesus. He sought to live it out himself. And he exhorts us to do the same.

There is one more lesson here that Jesus wants to drive home. Let's read verses 18-23. And this is Jesus talking directly to Peter.

Run Your Race with Eyes Fixed on Jesus (18-33)

"Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were younger, you used to gird yourself and walk wherever you wished; but when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands and someone else will gird you, and bring you where you do not wish to go." ¹⁹ Now this He said, signifying by what kind of death he would glorify God. And when He had spoken this, He said to him, "Follow Me!" ²⁰ Peter, turning around, saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them; the one who also had leaned back on His bosom at the supper and said, "Lord, who is the one who betrays You?" ²¹ So Peter seeing him said to Jesus, "Lord, and what about this man?" ²² Jesus said to him, "If I want him to remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow Me!" ²³ Therefore this saying went out among the brethren that that disciple would not die; yet Jesus did not say to him that he would not die, but only, "If I want him to remain until I come, what is that to you?"

Jesus has gone on here to give Peter some very difficult information. He tells him how he will die. It is difficult to hear on the one hand and yet, oddly affirming on the other. Peter had declared his willingness to die for Jesus. You remember that. That was the night of the arrest. "I will die for you!" And he failed epically, proving unfaithful. Now, immediately after being restoring, Jesus informs him, "And by the way, you will grow to be the kind of person you wished to be. You will be courageous enough to go to death for me. You will be faithful. You will stretch out your hands in your death, just as I stretched out mine. Your time will come to lay down your life for me. But you have got a lot to do before then. You must first lay down your life in daily service to my flock."

Then Jesus ends it with this direct commission, "Follow me."

Then Peter does what we always do. Jesus said, "Follow me," and He looked around and spotted John and asked, "What about him?" We are so driven to compare. Jesus had just warned Peter of that danger when he asked, "Do you love me more than these?" There are two lessons about comparison here. Do not define your value through comparison with other people. That is what we already addressed. It's not, "I love you more than he loves you." It's, "Yes, Lord, I love you." And now the lesson here, do not judge your journey in comparison to the journeys of other people.

We each have our own race to run. You can learn from the journeys of other people. You can gain wisdom and you can gain insight into your own experience. And that's what we are doing right now that we are looking at Peter's journey, we are learning things. But we are not going to have the same experience as Peter. God takes each one of us on different paths. You might suffer a lot more on your path, on your journey, than somebody else, than another brother or sister in Christ, and that doesn't mean you are more approved by God nor does it mean you are more judged by God. You are running the race that God has marked out for you. Don't try to determine whether it is fair or not. It is certainly not fair in any human sense of the idea. I know it is not fair I was born with the family, with the parents I was born with. That is not fair. We are always going to have more than somebody else, depending on who we compare ourselves to. Fairness is such a human way of looking at things. Our path is not fair because God is not fair in the human sense, not in the sense of getting everybody the same. But what God is, is good. He is always good. And he is always just. And he is always loving. Do not seek to understand your journey in comparison to others. You seek to understand God on your journey, to hold on to the truth that God is good, and God loves me, no matter how hard or dark things might get.

So, when Peter tries to compare himself to John, Jesus turns Peter's eyes back to himself. Don't be looking at all the other brothers and sisters, and judging fairness or not fairness, or saying, "I'm more worthy," or, "I'm less worthy." Verse 22, "Jesus said to him, 'If I want him to remain until I come, what *is that* to you? You follow Me!'"

Can you hear Jesus saying that to you? Stop looking around at everybody else. You follow me. Fix your eyes on Jesus and run the race he has marked out for you.

Conclusion: We know his witness is true (21:24-25)

The Gospel ends with verses 24-25.

²⁴ This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and wrote these things, and we know that his testimony is true. ²⁵ And there are also many other things which Jesus did, which if they were written in detail, I suppose that even the world itself would not contain the books that would be written.

John lived a full life for Jesus. Before his life ended, after years of preaching the good news of Jesus, he wrote down his witness for us to exhort us to believe in Jesus and live. And I want to end with this one little aspect of this witness that I have not addressed through the series, which is: why did John call himself throughout, "the disciple whom Jesus loved"? I did explain that he didn't name himself as the author because he doesn't want his witness to be his own biography. His testimony is not about him. His testimony is about Jesus. But I didn't talk about why did he chose to describe himself in this way, "the disciple whom Jesus loved?"

Did John sense that Jesus loved him more than these others? If Jesus had asked him the question, he asked Peter, "John, do you love me more than these?", would John say, "Well, yes, Lord. You love me more. I'm the one you love." And there is probably a little problem with the article, the "the" article in Greek that comes across stronger in English - he is THE disciple Jesus loved, and that throws us off a bit because that is not what John is saying.

And we have seen here Jesus reject that kind of comparison. Jesus wants each one of us to see himself or herself according to their relationship with the Father and the Son. And that is what John is doing. He is simply saying, "I am one who is loved." That is what I am. I am the disciple that Jesus loves. And he doesn't mean for us to make it exclusive to John. He is not the only disciple Jesus loved. This is who I am. I am a disciple loved by Jesus.

And I think that John wants for each one of us to be able to embrace that title ourselves, that we would come to know Jesus and we would come to know ourselves.

Who is Jesus? The Son of God, Savior of the World.

Who am I? I am the disciple Jesus loves.

Do those words express your own convictions? Can you say that from your heart?

Who is Jesus? The Son of God, Savior of the World.

And who am I? I am the disciple who Jesus loves. That is who I am. I am one who is loved.

We end here our series *Interpreting the Gospel of John*. As usual, I will take a break before starting the next series. This time the break will be a little longer. I will start up again in October 2020 with a new series called *Interpreting the Book of Acts. Interpreting John* has been my third full series. First, we did *Interpreting Romans* and then *Interpreting the Pentateuch*. Both of those series are available at observetheword.com or through itunes or podbean or whatever app you use for podcast listening. Just search or scroll to the earlier lessons.

Thank you for joining me in this study of John. May God the Father bless you as you walk with Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit and in the fellowship of believers. To his glory, amen.

Reflection questions

- 1. Read John 21:1-17. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What are some questions that come to mind?
- 2. How does this live fishing metaphor relate to the abide in the vine metaphor?
- 3. If you had denied Jesus and Jesus then invited you to enjoy a meal with baked over an open fire beside a lake, what are some emotions you might experience?
- 4. Jesus creates a moment of restoration for Peter that he will never forget. What kind of impact do you imagine this moment had on Peter through his later life? How might that been different if there was no meal and no three-time repetition of "Do you love me. Feed my sheep"? What if Jesus had just said, "Don't worry about it." Or "Let's just move on and not talk about it?" What would have been lost for Peter?
- 5. Read John 21:18-25. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What are some questions that come to mind?
- 6. Thinking about Peter's desire to compare his experience to John, how often would you say you compare your journey to other believers' journeys? What are a couple of examples when you have done that?
- 7. What are some of the dangers of thinking about your journey with Jesus in comparison t0 others?
- 8. Think about John's designation of himself through his Gospel. Can you imagine yourself in relationship with Jesus as a beloved disciple intent on following him?
- 9. End this study with time in prayer, asking Jesus to continue his work of helping you see him and helping you see yourself. Commit to following him as a child of God and witness to the truth.