

Word & Spirit Bible Study Notes on The Gospel of John

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John 1:1-5

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 were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. 4 In him was life, and the life was the light of men. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

The Word

The opening verse of the gospel of John introduces us to a mysterious character called “the Word”. Of course, those of us who have read the gospel beforehand know that John is talking about Jesus. But put yourself in the shoes of someone reading this gospel for the first time. They must piece together the clues to work out who John is referring to. With language reminiscent of the first chapter of Genesis, we see that the Word was *with* God from the very beginning, and not only that, but he *was* God. This gets us right to the heart of the mystery of the Trinity, and we’re still in the first verse.

The Creator

The Word wasn’t just present at the time of creation, but the one *through whom* all things were made. Genesis tells us that God created by speaking forth his word, and John goes one stage further by showing us that Jesus, the Word of God, was responsible for the very act of creation. He also makes it very clear that Jesus himself was not part of creation. He has existed eternally with the Father.

The Life

When John explains that *in him was life*, he is saying that Jesus himself did not need to be given life by an act of God’s creation, but he himself was the source of life for others. As the gospel of John progresses we see that this is true in more ways than one. Jesus did not just give humanity physical life in creation, but he offers a new kind of life to those who believe in him. This life is described as “life to the full” and “eternal life”.

The Light

Jesus was also the *light of men*, another reminder of the creation story where God commanded “let there be light”, and the darkness was illuminated. When Jesus came into the world as a man, he brought light into a world of darkness, showing the way back to God. The forces of darkness tried to extinguish his light, but as we see later in the story, they could not do so.

The subject of the Gospel is Jesus. Unless we truly understand who Jesus is, and what he has done, we will miss the point altogether. So as we study John’s gospel, we must rediscover the truth that Jesus was no ordinary person; he was in his very nature God, existent before time, creator of the universe, and the source of life and light. Without him, we are nothing, and we have nothing.

John 1:6-7

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

The Witness

Suddenly the focus of this passage has changed. We've not even been told who "the Word" is, and now we're looking at John the Baptist. John was sent by God with a special task – he was to *be a witness*. Basically, his job was to make sure that people knew who the light was, so that they could come to believe in him. John himself was not the light – all he had to do was to point people towards Jesus.

John had a very special and unique place in history, but in many ways our commission is similar to his. John told people to get ready for what was to come; we tell people that the light has already come. John was a pointer to the light; as Christians we are to be mirrors of the light.

Even in this section, which on the surface is about John, we find ourselves being directed to Jesus again. He is the one that people must believe in. He is the one that brings spiritual enlightenment. He is the source of truth; we are simply witnesses. This takes the pressure off us somewhat – we are simply to be witnesses to what we have seen in Jesus. We can't force people to see, but we can urge them to look.

John 1:9-13

9 The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. 10 He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. 11 He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. 12 But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, 13 who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

Rejecting the Light

Again John takes us back to think about “the Word”, but he still has not told us who he is talking about. This person, whose light can bring light to everyone, was *coming into the world*. We might expect that someone described in these terms would be easily recognised by everyone. After all, it’s not hard to see a light in the darkness. But the world did not receive him. Amazingly the people of this world were so blind they could not even recognise their own creator come to live among them.

What’s more, he came to the people of Israel – those who were God’s chosen people; the ones most likely to recognise and receive him. But even they did not accept him. These sobering facts underline just how far we have fallen as a human race. Even when the answer is right in front of us, we don’t see it, and carry on our own way.

Children of God

But it was not all doom and gloom. There were those who did receive him. The way they did this was by believing “in his name” – which essentially is the same thing as believing in him. They didn’t merely believe theological facts about him; they *trusted* him enough to follow him and believed that he could indeed give them the new life he promised to them.

In return those who believe are given the right to be children of God. All of us are God’s creation and citizens of his world, simply by virtue of our natural birth. But John here tells us of a second birth, by which we become God’s children. Our relationship to God is no longer as criminals before a judge, but children before a father. Believing in Jesus opens the door for us to taste God’s kindness, rather than his severity.

John 1:14-15

14 And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. 15 (John bore witness about him, and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me.'")

Lived Among Us

Imagine if the son of a millionaire, who had lived his whole life in great luxury and wealth, was to leave all his money behind and live in the slums, begging for food in a third-world country where no one even knew who he was. It would be a strange, almost inexplicable decision. But here we are told that the one who was with God from the beginning, who was responsible for creating the universe, actually became part of his own creation. He left the splendour of heaven where he was being worshipped constantly, and came to live among people who didn't recognize that their Creator was in their midst. The story of Christmas should fill us with wonder, yet so often the traditions of the season can get in the way of real reflection on the meaning of the incarnation.

Grace and Truth

We have seen that not everyone recognised him, but John tells us that he, along with others had seen the "glory" of Jesus. There might be many people who have achieved something glorious in their lives, or lived in a particularly noteworthy or excellent way, but the glory of Jesus was on a different level to anyone else. He was the only Son of God. He was full of *grace and truth*. Everything he said was true, but more than that he *was* the truth - and therefore one who can be implicitly trusted. But he was not just full of truth, for truth alone does not save - in fact it condemns because of our sin. He was also full of grace - this was the very purpose for which he had come to earth - to bring God's grace to a world in need of a saviour.

This description of Jesus reminds us of what we, in a lesser sense, are called to be. Now we are sons of God, called to display his glory and to bring his grace and truth to all those we come into contact with. John the Baptist was well aware of this fact. Although in human terms he was older than Jesus, the fact was that Jesus existed before he did. John knew who Jesus really was, and so could point away from himself to the one who was so much greater.

John 1:16-18

16 And from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. 17 For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. 18 No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known.

Grace Upon Grace

What was the most significant gift that God had given the world up until the time of Jesus? A Jew may well have said that it was the law, given through Moses. The law revealed God's character and requirements to people. It detailed the punishments that various sins deserved. But now God has given a gift far greater than the law, and it came through the person of Jesus. John has finally revealed the identity of "the Word": it is Jesus, who is the Christ. "Christ" simply means Messiah – Jesus was the promised saviour, prophesied throughout the Old Testament. He was in fact the one that the law pointed to.

John has already told us that Jesus was full of grace and truth, but he didn't keep it to himself. From that fullness he poured it out liberally on everyone who would receive. God is not stingy with his grace, but delights to lavish it upon us, not just giving us a bit better than we deserved, but bestowing us with far more blessing than we can hope for or imagine.

If the law revealed something of God's character, Jesus revealed it to a whole new level. Jesus was God himself, and like his Father in every respect. Those who saw Jesus, had in a very real sense, also seen the Father. If we want to know what God is like, we need to look at Jesus' life. As we read the gospels then, we are not just looking for instructions on what we should be doing, but learning more about God as he is revealed through Jesus.

John 1:19-23

19 And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" 20 He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ." 21 And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" And he answered, "No." 22 So they said to him, "Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" 23 He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said."

Who Do You Think You Are?

It was obvious to all who heard his preaching that John the Baptist was no ordinary person. He was a prophet of some type, a man on a mission from God, with a message from God. The religious leaders wanted to know who exactly he thought he was. He was gaining quite a following, and before long, they feared, he might start claiming to be the Christ. But when asked, John firmly rejected any idea that he was the Messiah, and he also refused to associate himself with the prophecies of Elijah returning in Malachi¹, or "the Prophet" like Moses prophesied in Deuteronomy².

But John did know that he had a very special role, and it was about him that Isaiah prophesied³. John was a voice, crying out in the wilderness for people to get ready for the Lord. Though those asking the questions had not yet heard of Jesus, pretty soon they would, and needed to be ready. If they were not ready, they could end up missing out on the grace and truth Jesus came to offer. One of the ways in which John encouraged people to be ready for Jesus was to *repent* of their sins and be baptised.

Our hearts often need to be prepared first, before God can do a new thing in us. We can become stuck in a rut, dry spiritually, and content with little of God, but we need to stir ourselves up, to be expectant and eager for what God is wanting to do in us. There may be sin that we need to repent of and turn away from, before new adventures of faith may be embarked upon. Readiness is something that should always characterise our spiritual walk.

¹ Mal 4:5. It is interesting that Jesus does view John the Baptist as fulfilling Malachi's prophecy that Elijah would come (see, for example Matt 11:14; 17:12). However, John the Baptist was not a "reincarnation" of Elijah, and also was not one to want to seek honour for himself, which may lie behind his refusal to associate himself with this prophecy.

² Deut 19:15-18

³ Isa 40:3

John 1:24-28

24 (Now they had been sent from the Pharisees.) 25 They asked him, "Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?" 26 John answered them, "I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know, 27 even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie." 28 These things took place in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

Why are you Baptising?

Baptism is a strange ceremony. To be plunged fully dressed into a river is more than a little odd. But its significance was known in those days. It was an initiation ceremony. Those who were baptised were aligning themselves with John the Baptist, believing his message and turning from their old way of thinking and living. But if John was playing down his own significance, then why was he baptising people?

The Pharisees sent some people to ask this very question, but John the Baptist wouldn't give them a direct answer. Instead, he pointed them to the one who was greater than him. John was just baptising with water, but Jesus would baptise people with the Holy Spirit⁴. This water baptism of repentance wasn't the full thing, but it was an important first step to be ready to receive Jesus.

The order is slightly different for us today. Jesus has already come, and so at the point of baptism we not only leave the old way behind, but we know who it is we want to follow. We must reach the point of realising as John did, that Jesus is not just a special person, a bit better than the rest of us, but that compared to him, we are utterly unworthy. It would be a mistake to think that following Jesus involves us simply trying really hard to become like him. We need to realise that our only hope of imitating him is with divine help. We need to be baptised with the Holy Spirit.

⁴ See John 1:33

John 1:29-34

29 The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! 30 This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks before me, because he was before me.' 31 I myself did not know him, but for this purpose I came baptizing with water, that he might be revealed to Israel." 32 And John bore witness: "I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. 33 I myself did not know him, but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' 34 And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God."

The Lamb of God

John the Baptist was a relative of Jesus, so this would not have been the first time he saw him. But it would appear that this was the moment that he knew it was right to announce to the world who the person of whom he had been speaking really was. This is the person who he had said was "before" him (even though humanly speaking he was older than Jesus), and the one before whom he felt utterly unworthy.

John's description of Jesus is striking. He calls him the "Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world", bringing to mind the sacrificial system of the Old Testament, where a lamb would be slaughtered as an offering for sin. Even then, the prophets knew that the blood of animals could never take away sin⁵. But here was someone who would really be what the sacrifices could only point to. In this sense Jesus was the fulfilment of the Old Testament.

Taking away the sins of the world is presented as the main reason why Jesus came. He did other things too, but this was the essence of his mission, to solve the problem we could not solve ourselves. The use of the word "world" should make us take notice as well. Jesus was not just going to save Israel, but the whole world – a world in sinful rebellion against its creator.

The Baptiser in the Holy Spirit

Although John the Baptist did know Jesus, it had not been revealed to him until this point who Jesus really was. John was simply being obedient to his calling to baptise people and prepare people for the Lord, when Jesus came to be baptised. God had already told John that he would specifically indicate who the person was, and as Jesus was baptised, John saw the Holy Spirit descend upon him and remain, like a dove.

This was proof to John that Jesus was not just the Lamb of God, but also the Son of God, and the one who would baptise with the Holy Spirit. As Christians we too know Jesus as the Lamb of God who took away our sins, the Son of God who is worthy of our worship, and the one who baptises us with the Holy Spirit. When John speaks of being baptised with the Holy Spirit, he compares the way that a person who is baptised in water is completely soaked, with the abundant outpouring of the Spirit that Jesus gives, completely drenching us with his Holy Spirit.

⁵ See Heb 10:4 where the author of Hebrews is explaining what the Psalmist understood in Ps 40:4-6

John 1:35-42

35 The next day again John was standing with two of his disciples, 36 and he looked at Jesus as he walked by and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God!" 37 The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. 38 Jesus turned and saw them following and said to them, "What are you seeking?" And they said to him, "Rabbi" (which 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 Jesus was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. 41 He first found his own brother Simon and said to him, "We have found the Messiah" (which means Christ). 42 He brought him to Jesus. Jesus looked at him and said, "So you are Simon the son of John? You shall be called Cephas" (which means Peter).

A New Teacher

John the Baptist had said many times that he was merely pointing to the one who was far greater than him. Here we see that he really meant what he said, as he was happy to lose some of his own disciples as they set off and followed Jesus. As Christians we must not lose sight of the fact that our primary loyalty is to Jesus, not to a particular denomination or local ministry. This will enable us to release people to serve Jesus in new places with joy, knowing that the kingdom is advanced, rather than being focused on what that will mean for us.

Jesus asked these two new disciples what they were looking for. Perhaps they themselves were not exactly sure, but they wanted to learn and they wanted to be with Jesus. Jesus is always willing to receive those who want to spend time at his feet, learning from him. In fact, we are likely to learn more from him when we lay down our own agendas, and simply listen to what he wants to teach us.

A New Convert

These disciples spent the whole day with him, and were profoundly affected. Andrew was sure that they had found the Messiah and eagerly sought his brother, Simon. This is the essence of evangelism, simply telling people what we have found in Jesus and inviting them to meet him for themselves. Since Jesus has ascended and is now in heaven, bringing people to Jesus now involves ourselves becoming more like him, so that as they encounter the church, people will see evidence of the transforming grace of God at work in our lives.

A New Name

When Simon met Jesus, he was immediately given a new name – Peter. This unexpected encounter with Jesus was literally going to make him into a new person. His whole destiny and identity would now be shaped by Jesus. For us, following Jesus may not mean a new name, but it will mean a complete change of life. What we are as followers of him is a world of difference from what we were without him.

John 1:43-51

43 The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, "Follow me." 44 Now Philip was from Bethsaida, 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 anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see." 47 Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward 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 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 him, "Because I said to you, '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 heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man."

Come and See

We have another example here of someone inviting a friend to see Jesus. This time it was not so easy - Nathanael was a sceptic. He believed in the one promised in the law and prophets, but it seemed ridiculous to him that he would get the chance to meet him. And Nazareth of all places – not where Nathanael was expecting anything important to happen. But Philip asked him to at least come and see.

Nathanael's scepticism was blown away rather quickly. What Jesus said to him indicated that he knew more than he could have done naturally. Perhaps while under the fig tree Nathanael had been thinking about Jacob, whose name means "deceitful", and who had seen a vision of angels ascending and descending. In any case, Nathanael knew that Jesus had been able to see not just what he was doing in private, but what he had been thinking. At the very least then, Jesus had a remarkable prophetic gifting, with knowledge of things that God alone could know.

You Will See Greater Things

This was enough for Nathanael to acknowledge Jesus as the "Son of God" and the "King of Israel". He was under no doubts that Philip had been right – this was the very person who the Old Testament had been speaking of. But Jesus seems surprised at how easily Nathanael is convinced. Perhaps in later years he would be tempted to doubt if this was all the evidence he had. But there would be more. Nathanael would one day see Jesus in such a way that would utterly convince him of Jesus' true identity.

We don't know the exact way in which this prophecy about heaven opening was fulfilled. In a very real sense it was fulfilled as Philip witnessed Jesus' life and ministry, but perhaps most of all, seeing him die, rise again and ascend. This truly was a display of Jesus' glory. Though we are not eyewitnesses to all that Philip saw, God's Spirit must work in each one of us so that we know who Jesus really is, bringing inner conviction. Just as Jesus indicated that Philip's faith would not rest on his remarkable "conversion experience", so we need to be those regularly experiencing the work of God in our lives and in our world, rather than harking back to a special occasion in the past, valuable as that may be.

John 2:1-5

1 On the third day there was a wedding at Cana in Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. 2 Jesus also was invited to the wedding with his disciples. 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 this have to do with me? My hour has not yet come." 5 His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you."

No More Wine

Jesus and his disciples had been invited to a wedding. Much is often made of his attendance at a wedding to indicate his approval of them, but given Jesus' track record of eating with sinners and Pharisees, we should be careful of reading too much into this. There are other places where we can see how highly Jesus regarded marriage.

For the wine to run out at any wedding is a cause of great embarrassment to the hosts. But before the guests realised what had happened, Mary took the problem to Jesus. How did she know he would be able to do something? She had certainly seen his wisdom and compassion at work throughout his life, and maybe had even witnessed him performing some miracles. She knew that if anyone could help, Jesus would.

Not My Time

Jesus' reply sounds a bit rude to us, although it should not be understood this way. The time had not yet come for everyone to publicly see Jesus perform miracles. Throughout his ministry he consistently wanted people to understand his message and who he really was, before letting them jump to wrong conclusions based on a mistaken understanding of what the Messiah should do.

But although Jesus was not going to help in a very public way, he did have compassion for the plight of the family who had organised the wedding, and was willing to help. The way he chose to act meant that only the servants and a select few others knew that a miracle had taken place, and doubtless their tale would sound like a tall story to many.

Do Whatever He Tells You

Mary's example is worth considering. First, she saw a need and brought it to Jesus. Taking our problems to God in prayer should not be a last resort but our first course of action. Second, she tells the servants to "do whatever he tells you" - wise advice indeed. Though God's way sometimes seems hard or strange to us, the best possible course of action is always obedience. When we commit ourselves to doing whatever he tells us, we will never be put to shame, and we will witness God at work in our lives and circumstances.

John 2:6-11

6 Now there were six stone water jars there for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. 7 Jesus said to the servants, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them up to the brim. 8 And he said to them, "Now draw some out and take it to the master of the feast." So they took it. 9 When the master of the feast tasted the water now become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the master of the feast called the bridegroom 10 and said to him, "Everyone serves the good wine first, and when people have drunk freely, then the poor wine. But you have kept the good wine until now." 11 This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory. And his disciples believed in him.

Water into Wine

The water jars available were huge, and filling them would have been no small task. However, it appears that the servants obediently fulfilled Jesus' request. Then they were to take some to the "master of the feast" – presumably the chief caterer for the occasion. He was surprised that the bridegroom had got some reserves of wine he didn't know about, and even more surprised that he had saved the best until last. This was a mistake in his opinion, as normally you would wait until people who had plenty to drink before you bring out the cheap quality wine. But the bridegroom himself didn't even know where this new wine had come from.

Through doing this miracle, even though it was performed in such a way that not everyone knew it, Jesus displayed his glory to his disciples. They saw that he had supernatural power, and because of this they believed in him. That is to say that they put their trust in him – here was someone they would gladly follow and obey.

Fill the Jars

It is interesting that Jesus involved the servants in the way he did in this miracle. After all, with the miraculous power that was operating within him, why did he not simply fill the jars with wine straight away? The answer lies in the fact that Jesus is always seeking to get people to trust in him. The servants were first asked to do something that seemed pointless – fill the jars with water – and then asked to do something that seemed silly – presenting water to the master of the banquet. But their reward for obedience was participating in a miracle, and seeing Jesus' glory.

The same is possible for us – it is only when we humble ourselves and become totally obedient to Jesus, that we allow his power to work through us, and his glory to be visible at work in our situation.

Saved the Best Until Now

Though on one level, this miracle could be viewed as simply Jesus using his miraculous powers to help some friends of the family out of an embarrassing situation, John wants us to know that this miracle was actually a *sign*. It points to something about *who Jesus is*. As the disciples pondered the meaning of the miracle, perhaps they saw that these water jars, normally used for purification, symbolised the Jewish law and customs. Jesus therefore surpasses what the old covenant had to offer with something even better - the new wine of his kingdom.

John 2:12-17

12 After this he went down to Capernaum, with his mother and his brothers and his disciples, and they stayed there for a few days. 13 The Passover of the Jews was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. 14 In the temple he found those who were selling oxen and sheep and pigeons, and the money-changers sitting there. 15 And making a whip of cords, he drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and oxen. And he poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. 16 And he told those who sold the pigeons, "Take these things away; do not make my Father's house a house of trade." 17 His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me."

The "Temple Tantrum"?

The story of Jesus turning water into wine at a wedding is one that is easy to love – Jesus helping people to have a good time. But now we see a less palatable side of Jesus – his anger. Was he just in a bad mood, or was there good reason for what he does here? It is worth thinking of the symbolic significance of these two incidents. In the water into wine miracle, we saw that Jesus has something to offer of superior quality to the old ceremonial cleansing rituals. Now we see Jesus places himself above the temple itself – the focal point of Jewish worship.

Different suggestions have been given as to why Jesus got so angry. Later in his ministry, he would again enter the temple and throw out the traders⁶, but this first time he was an unknown figure. Was he angry because of unfair trade going on in the house of God - exploitation of the poor? Or perhaps simply the commercialisation of worship? Maybe it was that the part of the temple that the Gentiles were welcome to enter had been taken over and they were left excluded. Or maybe Jesus was prophetically enacting what would soon happen – the whole temple way of worship was going to be overthrown, and replaced with a new and living way. I do not think we necessarily need to choose just one of these reasons - such a strong action may have come from the combination of a number of provocations.

Zeal for God's House

What we can say about what he did? First, it shows the authority he assumed for himself. It was his Father's house, and he considered it his right and responsibility to deal with any misuse of it. The disciples remembered the Psalm about zeal for God's house⁷, and Jesus showed that he passionately cared about what went on there. What Jesus saw was not bringing true honour or worship to his Father.

Though Jesus action was violent, we should note that he didn't actually harm any people, and that using a whip was a fairly standard way of moving cattle along. He may have been angry, but this was righteous anger, motivated by a passion for the glory of God. This wasn't the action of an out of control maniac, but a powerful prophetic statement. He left it three years before he came back and repeated his actions. He gave them time to mend their ways, but they did not learn their lesson.

It is appropriate for us to have a "zeal for God's house" like Jesus did. This is not about caring for church buildings, but caring that God is rightly honoured in the place of worship. We cannot sit idly by if our churches become places where human agendas and man's glory are promoted. We must firmly take a stand to say that we want our Father to be honoured in our gatherings. The

⁶ See Matt 21:12,13

⁷ Psalm 69:9

modern church in the West needs to take special care in a materialistic society that we do not allow our churches to operate merely as businesses - existing simply to make money, pandering to the whims and preferences of their “customers”.

John 2:18-22

18 So the Jews said to him, "What sign do you show us 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 has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?" 21 But he was speaking about the temple of his body. 22 When therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the Scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

How Dare You?

"How dare you!" This is what we say to someone who has overstepped their authority. "Who do you think you are?" And this is how the Jews felt about what Jesus did. He ought to provide some kind of "sign" to demonstrate that he was a true prophet. But Jesus' reply is cryptic – at least to his original hearers. Of course they were not going to destroy the temple, just to give Jesus the chance to show his power.

The True Temple

But we know that Jesus was speaking of himself, making himself the replacement for the temple. His body would in fact be destroyed, and by the Jews themselves. And in three days he would rise again. The real temple however was also destined to be destroyed, only 40 years later and to this day has not been rebuilt. Now the church, as the body of Christ, essentially constitutes the temple of the new covenant era. We can worship God wherever we gather, meeting with him and experiencing him, since we gather in the name of Jesus, who is the true temple.

So why did Jesus say all this if no-one would understand? It was actually calculated to benefit the disciples later, as they saw that Jesus' death was not some awful tragedy, but part of God's plan. This plan was revealed in the Old Testament Scriptures and through Jesus' own words. As they looked back on how events had happened, it gave them increased faith in God's word. They saw that what was prophesied had been fulfilled, and this in turn gave them confidence in those promises yet to be fulfilled.

John 2:23-25

23 Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. 24 But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people 25 and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man.

Seeing the Signs

While he was in Jerusalem, Jesus apparently performed a number of “signs”. These probably include some miracles as well as symbolic actions like the one in the temple that all served to point to who Jesus was. There were many people who did not have a stubborn resistance to Jesus, and were more than happy to believe in him. In other words, they sensed that he was someone special, someone to be listened to, and perhaps the one who would fulfil their hopes for the future of Israel.

Seeing Inside

We would expect Jesus to be very pleased about this, but it would appear that he kept his distance from them. He knew that this new-found loyalty was not that deep, and had yet to be tested. Jesus knows our hearts better than we know them ourselves. Just as Peter thought that he would never deny Christ, sometimes we overestimate our capacity for faithfulness. This makes his grace all the more amazing, that he would allow fickle people like us to become his followers.

Jesus also did not need affirmation from other people to validate who he was and what he had come to do. He felt no desire to gather a crowd of people who would sing his praises. It was God himself who bore witness about Jesus, saying “this is my son, with whom I am well pleased”. This was what mattered to Jesus. In any case, these people had much to learn about who Jesus really was, and what he had come to do.

We are in the privileged position of seeing the bigger picture of Jesus’ divine person and saving mission. This means that we can put our faith in him in an informed way, and with his Spirit’s help, follow him in a truly loyal way.

John 3:1-4

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 are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him." 3 Jesus answered 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? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?"

A Teacher From God

It's never easy to ask an amateur for help in an area in which you are a professional. Nicodemus was a highly qualified religious teacher, with an important position, but he realised that Jesus might have something to teach him. He approached Jesus respectfully, recognising that the miraculous signs revealed the presence and power of God. Yet despite this, there is a tentativeness about Nicodemus' faith. John has just told us that some people were believing in Jesus, but in such a shallow way that Jesus was not trusting them to remain loyal. It is hard to say whether this might be the case with Nicodemus. There is perhaps a clue in the fact that he came at night - he was not yet ready to be seen publicly learning from someone he would normally be teaching.

Seeing the Kingdom

Jesus gets straight to the point. If you want to see the kingdom of God you have to be born again. To see the kingdom of God is something that Nicodemus would have understood and wanted. The kingdom of God is when God's rule comes to bear on the earth - his enemies are destroyed, his laws are obeyed, his favour enjoyed and his presence manifest. For Nicodemus this might have included the Romans being removed from Israel, and the Old Testament laws and ceremonies being adhered to. The nature of the kingdom of God however was different from Nicodemus' expectations. It is seen as the gospel of Jesus goes out to the nations, transforming lives and reconciling people to God. Though we await the return of Jesus for it to come in its fullest sense, it is nevertheless here now.

You Must Be Born Again

But if Nicodemus is to see the kingdom in the future, and perceive its arrival in the present, he needs to be "born again". It is clear that Nicodemus doesn't quite know what Jesus is meaning here. His answer betrays not so much stupidity (as if he thought Jesus was talking literally), but mild consternation. "What exactly do you mean Jesus? And why should I have to do anything at all?" He was after all, a devoutly religious man. The message that he needed a new start was not what he expected. And yet, without a completely new work of God in his heart he would be excluded from the new thing that God was about to do through Jesus.

The message of being born again will always meet with resistance. People don't always feel the need for a new start - they're doing quite well already thank you very much. What's more, the suggestion that they are blind to God's kingdom purposes insults them. They may well be much better educated than those simple "born again" folk. But the fact remains; we are all outsiders until God does his supernatural work in us. Meditating on this should keep us humble and grateful.

John 3:5-8

5 Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter 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 marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' 8 The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

Born of Water and the Spirit

Jesus now reiterates what he said about being born again: without this new birth, you cannot enter the kingdom of God. In other words, the future hope of salvation was not available to Nicodemus simply because of his standing as an Israelite religious leader. The phrase "born of water and the Spirit" is a little bit hard to decipher. The water part may refer to natural birth and the Spirit to the new birth, or perhaps the water has spiritual significance too (baptism, or purification perhaps). But in any case, the next verse stresses that it is important to be born of the Spirit.

Born of the Spirit

The new birth is the work of the Holy Spirit, and is not something brought about by merely human work. Nicodemus is rebuked for being surprised at what Jesus had told him about the new birth. He should have known from the Old Testament about the need for a new heart and a new spirit (especially the famous passage in Ezek 36:25-27). Becoming a Christian is not like making a new year's resolution where we decide to change an aspect of our behaviour. We need something much more radical than that. We need a supernatural work of God in our hearts.

These words of Jesus teach us something important about the nature of the Holy Spirit. We can't control him or predict him, and yet when he works it is plain enough. The evidences of his working in our lives should be obvious to all who look on, even if they are somewhat mysterious and defy simple explanations. Our unbelieving friends should be able to see that there is something different about our lives. We have had a new start, and live in a new way. They may not understand how this has happened, but there should be evidence of the new birth.

It is important that we continue to stress the need to be born again. People might assume that when they start going to church that they have become a Christian, but religious activity is not an evidence of the new birth. Whether very religious like Nicodemus, or completely pagan, people need the Spirit's work in their hearts if they are to enter the kingdom of God, and enjoy eternal life in God's new world.

John 3:9-15

9 Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" 10 Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? 11 Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. 12 If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? 13 No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. 14 And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

Don't You Understand?

Despite his excellent knowledge of the Scriptures, Nicodemus was surprised at what Jesus was teaching. Jesus himself seems surprised as well. Surely one of the leading teachers of the Word of God would have grasped the importance of the new birth.

Jesus highlights three problems Nicodemus and his fellow religious leaders had. First, he had an attitude of unbelief, refusing to accept Jesus testimony. True, Nicodemus was a seeker, but he needed to go further than that. He had seen the 'signs' Jesus had performed, and yet had not seen what they pointed to. Second, unlike Jesus, Nicodemus taught on subjects that he didn't really know about. Jesus had actually come from heaven, and was speaking of what he knew by first-hand experience, while Nicodemus could only speak of what he read about. Third, his failure to understand the new birth meant that he had no hope of comprehending any deeper "heavenly things" that Jesus could teach him about.

Snake in the Wilderness

Nicodemus had authority because of his job, but Jesus had authority because of who he was. When Jesus looked into the Old Testament, he saw what it was truly pointing to – himself and his death on the cross. As an example, he uses story of the serpent in the wilderness, where the Israelites were saved from dying from a dreadful disease if they would only look at a bronze serpent lifted up on a pole.

It is a little surprising for Jesus to see a serpent as representing himself. After all, in Genesis the serpent represents the devil and was cursed. But perhaps this is the point – Jesus bore the curse of sin when he was lifted up on the cross to die. Now all people have to do is to "look to him", believing that he can save them, and they will receive eternal life.

The tragedy of both incidents is that some people were insulted at the foolishness of what they were asked to do. How could looking at a serpent heal you? How could trusting a man being executed save you? And so in unbelief they refused to receive the salvation that was readily available to them. Pride and unbelief often go together, and rob us of receiving the grace and blessings that could be ours. We need to humble ourselves to believe and obey God's word.

John 3:16-18

16 "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. 17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. 18 Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.

The Father's Love

Sometimes we become so familiar with a Bible verse that we cease to appreciate what it says. In this most famous verse in the Bible, we learn something about God, something about Jesus, and something about ourselves. First, we are asked to consider the immensity of God's love for us, that he would give his only Son. What greater sacrifice could the Father have given? When we meditate upon this we realise that we should never doubt the Father's love for us. We are also humbled when we remember that this "world" that the Father loved so much was a world that had turned its back on him in rebellion.

The Only Son

Secondly, we see Jesus' unique relationship to God the Father. He was the only Son, and here we catch a glimpse of the mystery of the Trinity. It is because Jesus was himself one with the Father, that he could be punished on our behalf without it being cruel and unfair of God. Jesus himself willingly came and laid down his life to save us.

Life or Death

Third, we see the shocking truth that we were headed for condemnation and eternal death. We might have expected that when Jesus came into the world he would pronounce the judgement on us that we deserved, but he didn't. He came to offer a way of escape, through believing in him. If we accept him then we can enjoy eternal life, but if we reject him our condemnation remains.

Make Your Choice

Some critics of the Christian faith misrepresent this verse as teaching that we are condemned for not knowing about Jesus. But the fact of our sin is enough for us to stand guilty before God. Jesus is the only way we have of being saved, not the reason for which we are in peril of judgement. However, it is true to say that when people are faced with the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ, they are forced to make a choice. We cannot be neutral towards him. Hence we do not help people by refraining from evangelising people. They are already lost; we are simply bringing them the hope of salvation.

It is an audacious rescue plan, and one that only a fool would refuse to accept. But sadly not everyone does want to receive Jesus' offer of salvation. That should not stop us searching for those who do recognise their need of a saviour, and we will want to do so all the more as we contemplate the amazing grace that has been shown towards us.

John 3:19-21

19 And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil. 20 For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. 21 But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his deeds have been carried out in God."

I'm Fine Thanks

It is a common human characteristic to refuse to accept help, either because we are too proud to realise we have a problem or because we are happy with the way things are. The amazing thing is, that even when the greatest answer to our greatest problem comes into the world, our instinctive reaction is to reject that as well.

Coming Into the Light

Coming to Jesus means two difficult things for us. First, we must come into the light – a place where the true sinfulness of our hearts is revealed. But sometimes we are happier to be in denial about the state we are in. It is painful and humbling to accept how much we need to change. We prefer to think of sin as a problem that affects really bad people - those worse than ourselves. We prefer to make excuses for our own sin - we were tired, we made a "mistake", we were provoked.

Second, after coming to the light, we must leave behind our former behaviour. Our most shameful sins are committed in secret, where (we imagine) no one knows what we are doing or thinking. But the person who exposes his life to God's light knows that he sees everything. Now we must live to please him.

Living in the Light

These two actions, acknowledging our sinfulness and changing our behaviour are the two parts of repentance. And we can see why it is daunting, because neither of these are easy for us. But John encourages us with the thought that those who do come to the light are happy to be in the light, because now the things that they do are not done in their own strength any more, but through God's enabling. In other words, there is no longer any need for shame, because we can do things that are pleasing to God with his help.

John 3:22-30

22 After this Jesus and his disciples went into the Judean countryside, and he remained there with them and was baptizing. 23 John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because water was plentiful there, and people were coming and being baptized 24 (for John had not yet been put in prison). 25 Now a discussion arose between some of John's disciples and a Jew over purification. 26 And they came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, he who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you bore witness--look, he is baptizing, and all are going to him." 27 John answered, "A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven. 28 You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, 'I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.' 29 The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete. 30 He must increase, but I must decrease."

Popularity Contest?

Although John the Baptist had identified Jesus as the Messiah, he still had a job to do. He continued calling people to repent and prepare for the new thing God was doing, and demonstrate it by baptism. Baptism is symbolic of a new beginning, washing away the stains of the old way of life and starting a new one. It speaks of the purification from our sin resulting from God's forgiveness of those who repent.

But John's disciples were concerned that Jesus was becoming more popular, and that their leader was losing prominence. Their loyalty to him was misguided though, and he has to set them straight. John was only who he was because of the ministry given to him by God. Although it was an important one, it was not on a level with Jesus' calling. We need to learn to accept the calling that God has given us, and not be jealous of those whose ministry seems to be more high profile.

It's Not About Me

John likens himself to the best man at a wedding. It is an important and honoured role, but if the best man starts acting as though he is the centre of attention then something is wrong. It is not his day, and his focus is supposed to be on making sure that the bridegroom is served in the best possible way. This humble attitude should characterise all Christians, especially those in positions of leadership. It is not about us, it is about Jesus, and we should be glad to focus attention away from ourselves and onto him.

Until now, John's ministry had been more prominent than Jesus', but now things were going to change. John would decrease, and Jesus would increase. Before long there would be thousands of disciples of the risen Jesus, and only a handful of John's who were to convert to follow Jesus later anyway. If our idea of success in life revolves around making a name for ourselves then we will end up as failures in the long term, but if we want to glorify Jesus, then our lives find their true purpose and significance.

John 3:31-36

31 He who comes from above is above all. He who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks in an earthly way. He who comes from heaven is above all. 32 He bears witness to what he has seen and heard, yet no one receives his testimony. 33 Whoever receives his testimony sets his seal to this, that God is true. 34 For he whom God has sent utters 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 Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.

Above All

These verses explain why John the Baptist is happy for Jesus to supersede him. It's not that he feels inadequate in the presence of a better preacher or a more charismatic leader. It's that while John is simply an ordinary person, Jesus is from above. He is not just commissioned from heaven, he has actually come from heaven.

When John speaks, he is just passing on the message that God has given him, but Jesus speaks of what he knows about first hand. To accept Jesus then is to accept God himself. John mentions three things about Jesus, that mark him out from any other great teacher.

Marks of True Greatness

First, he always speaks the word of God. Not just because he has received the occasional prophetic message, but because as the Son of God, what he says has the same weight as what the Father says. Jesus always spoke the truth, and only spoke what he knew his Father wanted him to say.

Second, he has the Spirit of God without measure. Whatever Jesus did and said, he did through the power of the Holy Spirit, who was upon him in his fullness. This amazing truth should remind us that if we would follow in Jesus' example then we need to be filled with the same Holy Spirit that he was.

Third, he is so loved by God that he has been given all authority. In particular, he can grant those who believe in him eternal life, while those who don't obey him remain under God's wrath. Notice how belief and obedience are linked in this verse. Disobedience is the opposite of belief in Jesus. We can't claim to believe in him if we don't do what he says.

By God's grace, as Christians we are able to exercise some of these ministries of Jesus in a lesser measure. We can speak God's word, be filled with his Spirit, and exercise his delegated authority. But we must remember that we are what we are because of who Jesus is, and what he has done for us. We are becoming more like him not that we should get glory for ourselves, but that he might be glorified in us.

John 4:1-6

1 Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John 2 (although Jesus himself did not baptize, but only his disciples), 3 he left Judea and departed again for Galilee. 4 And he had to pass through Samaria. 5 So he came to a town of Samaria called Sychar, near the field that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. 6 Jacob's well was there; so Jesus, wearied as he was from his journey, was sitting beside the well. It was about the sixth hour.

Through Samaria

We now come to the famous story of Jesus meeting a Samaritan woman at a well. Jesus had got some unwanted attention from the Pharisees, now that he had become more popular than John the Baptist, and so he headed back towards Galilee. John tells us that Jesus had to pass through Samaria since it was en route, but many Jews preferred to take a long detour rather than go through the territory of the hated Samaritans⁸.

But Jesus here shows himself remarkably free of racial and (as we shall see later) sexist and social prejudices. He came to an historic spot, the site of Jacob's well. How sad that the Jews and Samaritans, who had so much religious history in common, now had nothing to do with one another. Similar breaches of fellowship have occurred since, throughout church history.

Later, Jesus would challenge the woman at the well to come back to the true way of worship. He didn't ignore the theological differences between Jews and Samaritans, but he was willing to dialogue with them. His example of how we can show love and respect towards those who are different in culture and beliefs to us is worth considering.

Weary

We see more than a glimpse here of Jesus' humanity. He was tired and thirsty, even though John has only just told us that Jesus had the Spirit *without limit*. He didn't use his divine power to float around with no effort, but fully experienced the limitations of our human bodies. He is able to sympathise with our weakness, because he has himself lived as one of us.

The life of following Jesus therefore is not one of escape from our humanity but one of being truly human. God's power doesn't take away our weakness, but rather forces us to rely on him all the more.

⁸ Although D A Carson rejects this idea. However, it is almost certain that if they did have to pass through Samaria, they would want to get out of there as quickly as possible.

John 4:7-12

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 The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?" (For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.) 10 Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." 11 The woman said to him, "Sir, you have nothing to draw water with, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? 12 Are you greater than our father Jacob? He gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did his sons and his livestock."

Building Bridges

It is hard for us to appreciate how counter-cultural Jesus was being in talking to this Samaritan woman. Not only did her race and gender mean that Jesus would have been expected to avoid her, but there are more than a few clues here that this woman was not fully accepted even by her own community due to her immoral lifestyle. Being caught alone with her would leave Jesus open to all kinds of slanderous accusations in a culture that had very strong ideas about what constituted appropriate behaviour. But he has something to offer her of tremendous value, and therefore refused to bow to the pressure to conform to social expectations.

In asking the woman for a drink, Jesus opens a door of friendship. We can often build stronger relationships with those who are non-Christians as we humble ourselves to ask them for help. In giving, they become more open to receive. She was expecting him to judge her and view her as "unclean", and yet he surprises her with acceptance. Despite the fact that other Jews would refuse to drink from a cup handled by a Samaritan for fear of it making them unclean, Jesus was not afraid of "catching" any impurity from her - in fact, he had something to offer her.

Going Deeper

Jesus doesn't directly answer her question. Instead, he introduces the intriguing concept of "living water", which naturally provokes her curiosity enough for her to ask another question. Jesus is of course making a significant claim about himself, but initially she thinks he is talking about a way to get spring water without using the well. Again, we can see that in evangelism we do not always have to tell people everything all at once. Jesus wanted to awaken an interest that would cause her to seek more information. Until she recognised her spiritual thirst, she would have no use for the living water.

John 4:13-15

13 Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, 14 but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty forever. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life." 15 The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I will not be thirsty or have to come here to draw water."

Living Water

So if Jesus is not talking about ordinary, physical water, what exactly does he mean by "living water"? What kind of thirst does it quench? How do we drink it? Jesus responds to the Samaritan woman's misunderstanding by describing some of the qualities of this living water he offers.

First, the living water has the power to quench all thirst forever. The deepest yearnings of our hearts can be satisfied in Jesus. It is not so much that one drink means that we never thirst again, but that within us we have streams of living water so that we can always drink from them. If we find ourselves spiritually thirsty it is because we have stopped drinking, not because the living water has stopped flowing.

Second, the living water is life-giving. Just as our bodies will surely die if we deny them water for too long, so spiritually we cannot live without the water Jesus offers. The good news is that since Jesus offers an inexhaustible supply, we can live forever by continually drinking it. This is not to deny that our bodies will one day die. Jesus knows this, and promises that our life will continue even beyond the grave. But this is more than just a future hope. The living water is available now, and can be tasted now. Our thirst for God, and for eternal life in his presence can begin to be satisfied as we drink of the Spirit even in this life.

Give it to me

All this was too much for the woman to take in. Like Nicodemus, she expresses the fact that she doesn't understand by taking Jesus literally. She calls his bluff. "OK then, if you have this water, give me some now". It was the ultimate opportunity to explain who he was, but she was not quite ready yet. Jesus shows great patience in making sure she properly appreciates the significance of what he is offering.

Jesus has no interest in manipulating people into making shallow or half-hearted commitment. This woman needed to reach the point where she saw that Jesus himself was the fulfilment of all her longings and desires. He was the one in whom she could find true satisfaction. If she simply viewed him as a means to an end, or as an interesting and inspiring spiritual leader, the living water would be of no benefit to her.

John 4:16-20

16 Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come here." 17 The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; 18 for you have had five husbands, and the one you now have is not your husband. What you have said is true." 19 The woman said to him, "Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. 20 Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship."

Get Your Husband

Jesus has just been asked by the Samaritan woman for the living water he is offering. This presented him with the ideal opportunity to explain that he was the living water, clearing up her misunderstanding of what he was talking about, and calling her to put her faith in him. But his response is not what we are expecting. It is not what she is expecting either. He asks her to get her husband. This living water he had to offer her was not just going to be for her, but to share with her friends and family.

But of course, this presented a problem for the woman, as she does not have a husband. Though she answers truthfully, she withholds the full story. But if she thought that this answer would keep her shameful past hidden she had a shock coming. Jesus, by means of supernatural knowledge revealed that he knew of the five husbands who divorced her, and the adulterous affair she was now in the midst of.

You are a Prophet

All at once the woman realises that Jesus is a prophet and wants to change the subject. Dwelling on past failures and present sins is not something that comes comfortably to any of us, but when we come face to face with Jesus, our sin will inevitably be exposed and confronted.

The woman's next question is probably no more than a red herring, trying to draw Jesus into debate on the differences between Samaritan and Jewish teaching on worship. Theological debates have their place, and Jesus does go on to answer her question, but the fact of sin cannot be passed by so quickly. Though it is painful, we need to be open to Jesus revealing to us the truth about ourselves. It is only when we are willing to confess our sin that we can receive the forgiveness he offers, and begin to live the new life he calls us to.

It is futile to ever imagine that we can sin without anyone knowing. However well hidden our actions might be, there is a God who sees not only what we do, but what we think. The amazing thing is that despite the sin he sees in our hearts, his love for us remains.

John 4:21-26

21 Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on 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 the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. 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 he comes, he will tell us all things." 26 Jesus said to her, "I who speak to you am he."

The Place to Worship

After Jesus confronted the Samaritan woman with her sin, she quickly changed the subject by introducing a religious question. The Jews and Samaritans had different understandings of where true worship should take place. Jesus' answer yet again takes us by surprise, because instead of simply saying that the Jews are right, he claims that the place of worship is very soon going to be an out of date question.

The Way to Worship

In this new worship that Jesus introduces, what defines a true worshipper is not *where* he worships, but *how*. The worship must be in spirit and in truth. In other words it cannot just be an outward ritual, without your heart being in it. Those whose worship is acceptable to God are those who approach with sincerity, and wholeheartedness. So our worship is with our spirits and not just our bodies, and is true rather than hypocritical. But also this worship flows from someone who is filled with the Holy Spirit, and grounded in the truth of God's Word⁹.

Of course worship here entails more than merely attending church to sing some songs. Worship is the way we honour God both with our words and with our lives. So a worshipper is not just an enthusiastic singer, but someone whose whole life is presented as an act of worship to God. This is, as we are told here by Jesus, what the Father is looking for. He longs for a people whose worship is not superficial, but real and intense. This is a people who don't just sing "I love you" but demonstrate it by their obedience to his commands.

The One to Worship

The Samaritan woman suspects that Jesus might be talking about a future age when the Messiah comes. Things may well be different then, she supposes, and the Messiah (that is the Christ) will be able to explain everything then. But yet again, Jesus response surprises her. He doesn't say "he's coming soon", or "I know who he is", but "It's me". In the most unexpected place she had met the prophesied Messiah. God still meets people at unexpected times and in unexpected ways. There must be openness on our part if we are to see Jesus for who he really is, and not just walk on by leaving him merely as a stranger with some interesting things to say.

⁹ I have avoided choosing between two possible meanings of spirit, and two possible meanings of truth. Both options make good sense, and both are true, even if Jesus likely wasn't using a calculated ambiguity here.

John 4:27-30

27 Just then his disciples came back. They marvelled that he was talking with a woman, but no one said, "What do you seek?" or, "Why are you talking with her?" 28 So the woman left her water jar and went away into town and said to the people, 29 "Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?" 30 They went out of the town and were coming to him.

Don't Judge

The disciples were shocked to see Jesus speaking with a woman in public, especially a Samaritan woman of dubious character. But they had perhaps learned enough already about Jesus not to be quick to judge. We need to be open to God doing things that challenge our presumptions and prejudices. Like the disciples, we should be willing to listen first, before we launch out in criticism.

Come and See

The woman herself probably sensed the awkwardness of the situation, and took the opportunity to call other people to Jesus. Leaving her water jar behind shows just how eager she was to spread the good news – she didn't want to be slowed down in any way. The routine tasks of daily life must of course be done, but there are times when it is right and proper that we leave these aside to fully give ourselves to the mission and person of Jesus.

On arriving in the village, she no doubt surprised everyone with her sudden excitement, especially if they knew she had been avoiding them. She told them about Jesus' prophetic knowledge about her, and suggested that he might be the Messiah. Most importantly, she invited people to come and see him for themselves. This is the essence of evangelism – telling people what God has done for you, and inviting them to find out more. Her simple testimony, shared with such enthusiasm, was all that was needed to send the people of the village on a journey to meet Jesus for themselves.

John 4:31-38

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 said to one another, "Has anyone brought him something to eat?" 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, then comes the harvest'? Look, I tell you, lift up your eyes, and see that the fields are white for harvest. 36 Already the one who reaps is receiving wages and gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. 37 For here the saying holds true, 'One sows and another reaps.' 38 I sent you to reap that for which you did not labour. Others have laboured, and you have entered into their labour."

Dinner Time

The reason that Jesus had been left alone at the well was because he was so tired and weak that he couldn't continue. Naturally, the disciples were eager to revive his strength by getting him to eat something. But strangely enough, he doesn't need it now - he is feeling much better. For Jesus, doing the will of his Father was what sustained him more than anything else. We too can be sustained through periods of hardship in life when we know that we are doing God's will. When we have confidence that what we are doing is of lasting value, we will have the strength to persevere.

Harvest Time

Jesus then describes the work he was doing as being like a harvest. For a harvest there must be sowing first, and later reaping. We often think of our evangelistic efforts in terms of sowing - spreading the truth of God's word and hoping it will take root in people's lives. But Jesus wanted his disciples to see that there was already a harvest waiting for them. The meeting with the Samaritan woman had demonstrated how hungry these people were for God. One conversation later and a whole village had come to hear the good news.

Whether we are the ones to sow or reap, the joy should be shared when someone comes to believe in Jesus. By participating in this process, we are storing up "wages" and "fruit" for eternal life. It is sometimes hard for us to believe that the fields are ready for harvest, and our evangelistic efforts can seem to bear little fruit. But this should not cause us to be discouraged and give up. Like Jesus, we should find strength in knowing that we are doing the will of God.

John 4:39-45

39 Many Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me all that I ever did." 40 So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them, and he stayed there two days. 41 And many more believed because of his word. 42 They said to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is indeed the Saviour of the world." 43 After the two days he departed for Galilee. 44 (For Jesus himself had testified that a prophet has no honour in his own hometown.) 45 So when he came to Galilee, the Galileans welcomed him, having seen all that he had done in Jerusalem at the feast. For they too had gone to the feast.

Kingdom Priorities

We see here the amazing results of this divine appointment that had started off simply with Jesus asking a woman for a drink. The curiosity of the whole village had been aroused, and Jesus stayed two days there, teaching them. He shows a remarkable flexibility in his plans here. He was willing to leave his original plans on hold while he took the opportunity God had given him. In our busy lives and schedules we can often feel that we have no time for the unexpected, but Jesus' priority was the kingdom of God first. The disciples themselves had likely not spent two days as honoured guests in a Samaritan village before, and the experience would have gone some way towards removing their anti-Samaritan prejudices, in preparation for their own future missionary work.

During the time in the village, some of the more reserved or sceptical people were starting to believe. They had been unsure of accepting the woman's testimony, but now they had seen for themselves. Very often our unbelieving friends will not see our testimony as good enough reason to believe, but if we can get them to encounter Jesus, then the door to real faith will open.

Universal Saviour

The Samaritans here came to the wonderful realisation that Jesus was not just the Saviour of the Jews, but the Saviour of the whole world. However, when Jesus headed back to Galilee, things were not quite so easy. Having been accepted in the most hostile place, Jesus comes to his home town, which should be the most welcoming place. But Jesus knew that "a prophet has no honour in his hometown". We can be too proud to accept what God is doing, particularly when it comes through people we know, or those we consider ourselves to be superior to in some way. We need to resist this temptation if we are to receive all he has for us.

John 4:46-54

46 So he came again to Cana in Galilee, where he had made the water wine. And at Capernaum there was an official whose son was ill. 47 When this man heard that Jesus had come from Judea to Galilee, he went to him and asked him to come down and heal his son, for he was at the point of death. 48 So Jesus said to him, "Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe." 49 The official said to him, "Sir, come down before my child dies." 50 Jesus said to him, "Go; your son will live." The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and went on his way. 51 As he was going down, his servants met him and told him that his son was recovering. 52 So he asked them the hour when he began to get better, and they said to him, "Yesterday at the seventh hour the fever left him." 53 The father knew that was the hour when Jesus had said to him, "Your son will live." And he himself believed, and all his household. 54 This was now the second sign that Jesus did when he had come from Judea to Galilee.

An Unbelieving People

The last time Jesus was in Cana, he had performed the miracle of turning water into wine. The sad fact was though, that despite people knew he could perform miracles, they still didn't put their trust in him. They wanted to see more before they were willing to commit themselves. But of course, if Jesus were to simply perform another sign, doubtless they would want yet another.

An Urgent Request

But there was someone who desperately needed Jesus. He couldn't afford to take a policy of wait and see. He could only ask Jesus to come and help save his child's life. It is interesting to see how Jesus responds to him. He does so in a way that puts this official's faith to the test. Is he willing to believe that Jesus can heal at a word and at a distance? Or does he stay and insist that Jesus come with him?

An Obedient Faith

Thankfully, this man was ready to take Jesus at his word, and headed off back home. Did his heart sink as he saw his servants coming towards him with news, or did he dare to believe that a miracle had happened? As he celebrated the good news, he had to consider an important question. Was this simply coincidence, that his son had got better, or was it in fact Jesus that had healed him? The official was eager to find out - and sure enough he discovered that his son's healing had been exactly at the time that Jesus sent him.

This incident was the means of not just this man coming to faith in Jesus, but also his whole family. He had come to Jesus in desperation for his son to be healed, but finally he saw that Jesus had so much more to offer him. But sadly, there is no mention of the rest of the people. They were still waiting to see just one more miracle before they were willing to trust. Now perhaps we can understand Jesus' slightly exasperated comment "Unless you see signs and wonders, you will not believe". As it happened for this man though, it was the other way round - he believed, saw signs and wonders, and that led him to a more wholehearted belief in Jesus.

John 5:1-9a

1 After this 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, in Aramaic called Bethesda, which has five roofed colonnades. 3 In these lay a multitude of invalids--blind, lame, and paralyzed. 5 One man was there who had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. 6 When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had already been there a long time, he said to him, "Do you want to be healed?" 7 The sick man answered him, "Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up, and while I am going another steps down before me." 8 Jesus said to him, "Get up, take up your bed, and walk." 9 And at once the man was healed, and he took up his bed and walked.

Losing Hope

Thirty-eight years is a long time to be ill. We don't know whether the man had been an invalid all his life, or whether he could remember a time when he was able-bodied. But after thirty-eight years we can imagine he held out little hope of living a normal life again. He fully expected to see out his days living with the other people in a similar unfortunate state. He could dream that one day, the supposed magical powers of the water would heal him, but he realised that with no close friends, it would always be someone else who got to the water first; someone who had friends and family who cared for them.

Into this hopeless situation comes Jesus. And Jesus' question is telling. "Do you want to be healed?" At first glance it is a stupid question. But it is a strange fact of human nature that we don't like change, even sometimes when it is good change. The man's reply is telling too. He clearly didn't see Jesus as a possible solution to his plight. He simply informed Jesus that he felt that the chance for healing would never come to him.

We can find ourselves in a similar state. A problem in our lives has gone on for so long that we have assumed it will always be there. We don't ask Jesus for help, we just complain about our situation. But with Jesus we should never lose hope. Though the years of waiting may be real and long, this does not mean that the healing is denied. Whether we face battles with illness, adverse circumstances or even sin, we should not take a defeatist attitude with Jesus around.

The Breakthrough

Jesus' response to this man is astonishingly gracious. He doesn't wait for a great profession of faith, but just freely gives him an undeserved gift. This doesn't mean that the man was passive in his healing. After all, he wouldn't have truly known he was healed unless he tried to get up and walk, and in doing so he risked a cruel and humiliating disappointment. Though his faith was small and his hope was all but gone, this man stands as testimony to the grace of God to reach out and rescue us from our predicament.

John 5:9b-15

Now that day was the Sabbath. 10 So the Jews said to the man who had been healed, "It is the Sabbath, and it is not lawful for you to take up your bed." 11 But he answered them, "The man who healed me, that man said to me, 'Take up your bed, and walk.'" 12 They asked him, "Who is the man who said to you, 'Take up your bed and walk'?" 13 Now the man who had been healed did not know who it was, for Jesus had withdrawn, as there was a crowd in the place. 14 Afterward Jesus found him in the temple and said to him, "See, you are well! Sin no more, that nothing worse may happen to you." 15 The man went away and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had healed him.

The Fault-Finders

After witnessing such a wonderful miracle, you would imagine that everyone would be happy. But the religious leaders had developed a fault-finding mentality. Their critical spirit meant that they were more happy pointing out the bad than rejoicing in the good. We need to beware that we do not pick up a similar habit. It is easy to get into, and hard to break out from. As it happens, the man was hardly doing something that went against a right understanding of the Sabbath laws. But the Sabbath laws had been turned into a series of restrictive regulations that you could break almost by accident if you weren't careful.

The man may have been in trouble with these Jews, but their real annoyance was aimed at Jesus. He wasn't "one of them", and they viewed him with great suspicion. Rather than being open to God working through someone who wasn't officially part of the "in crowd", they felt threatened. He was even encouraging people to break the rules they so zealously enforced.

It is easy for us to point the finger at these pedantic Jews, and yet we often justify our own judgemental attitudes. We like to impose the standards that we keep onto others, while excusing ourselves of our own shortcomings. What's more, our censure of other people's behaviour often reveals a hidden jealousy or envy of them. We feel they ought to be "brought down a notch or two". We need to learn humility if we are to rid ourselves of a jealous or critical spirit.

Ungrateful

Things do not get any happier when Jesus meets the man who he healed again. The man hadn't even bothered to find out who it was who had healed him, and now Jesus needs to give him a warning. He may have been physically healed, but his problem of sin had not gone away. And the hard lesson we all need to learn is that the consequences of sin are much worse than mere physical illness. To receive physical healing but not forgiveness is to miss the heart of what Jesus came to offer.

We might be tempted to ask whether Jesus' words indicate that this man's illness was punishment for some sin he had committed. Or perhaps it was the result of his sin. We can't say for sure, but it is a sobering thought that God sometimes allows misfortune to come our way because we have sinned. And yet even this can be a means of grace - if we allow our suffering to cause us to repent and return to God.

John 5:16-18

16 And this was why the Jews were persecuting Jesus, because he was doing these things on the Sabbath. 17 But Jesus answered them, "My Father is working until now, and I am working." 18 This was why the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God.

Workaholic?

When the Jews finally get round to confronting Jesus for "working" on the Sabbath (i.e. healing someone), Jesus refuses to back down. He is simply doing what his Father was doing. His Father was constantly at work, doing good, and so was Jesus. He was not scorning the principle of a special day of rest and worship, but was using every day for its God given purpose – to do works of love.

The principle of Sabbath is one that we need to recover in our day. So many people are burned out with the busyness of their work. And even when we are supposedly enjoying "leisure time" we can exhaust ourselves even more. The answer comes in letting go of living for ourselves - whether to earn more money, or to seek pleasure through spending it. We need to realign ourselves with kingdom priorities. We live to glorify God, and to do his works, because this is what Jesus did. We need to be those constantly asking "what would you have me do, Father?" just as Jesus did. It will result in us "working" all the time, and yet we will at the same time find ourselves more rested.

Heretic?

Jesus got himself in a lot of trouble with the Jews for 'working' on the Sabbath, and encouraging someone else to 'work' on the Sabbath. Of course, in reality he had not broken the Sabbath, as neither healing nor carrying a mat constituted the work that the Scriptures forbade. Jesus was not afraid to break their man-made legalistic rules. He lived by the Word of God.

But what he said in his defence made them livid. He not only called God his Father, but put himself on an equal standing with God by saying that like his Father, he was exempt from keeping the Sabbath. The Jews saw this as heresy, and therefore determined that he had committed a crime punishable with death. In one sense they were right – a claim by a mere mortal to be equal to God would indeed be heresy. But it never crossed their mind that Jesus might in fact be telling the truth. They had simply failed to see where all the signs were pointing.

John 5:19-24

19 So Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise. 20 For the Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing. And greater works than these will he show him, so that you may marvel. 21 For as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom he will. 22 The Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son, 23 that all may honour the Son, just as they honour the Father. Whoever does not honour the Son does not honour the Father who sent him. 24 Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.

Equal with God

Jesus has been accused of the heresy of claiming equality with God. How will he respond? Will he play down who he is, and say something like "Oh no, I didn't mean *that*. Of course I'm not equal to the Father." But his answer does nothing of the sort. He states clearly four things about who he is.

Man on a Mission

First, we see that Jesus did everything at his Father's initiative. He was not on earth to please himself, but to do what his Father had sent him to do. He was living to see God's will be done on earth. The Father's love for his Son resulted in him revealing the details of what he was planning to do. Jesus had the inside story of what his life was for, and where it was heading. The opposition he was facing didn't deter him from pursuing his calling. He was a man on a mission, and determined to accomplish it.

Giver of Life

Second, we see that Jesus has the power to give life. This is an incredible statement. The Jews believed that God could raise the dead, but Jesus claims that he also has both the power and the freedom to give life to those he chooses to. And Jesus promises that this life that goes beyond the grave is given to whoever hears his word and believes it. When we "put our faith" in Jesus, we are believing that he is indeed able to give us this life that he promises.

Judge of All

Third, we see that Jesus has the authority to judge. Yet again, Jesus is claiming to do what the Scriptures tell us is God's prerogative. This is the double-edged message of the gospel – we will either be given life by Jesus, or given the sentence our sins deserve by Jesus. The gospel is indeed "good news" because it offers us a pardon for our sins that means we can be rescued from our condemnation.

Equal with the Father

Finally, we see that Jesus receives the same honour as the Father. Failure to honour Jesus is an insult to the Father. The Father is gladly willing to allow his Son to be honoured in exactly the same way he is, as both judge and giver of life. This is why Christians must share the gospel with those of other religions. They must come to accept and honour Jesus for who he is and receive the life he offers, or they will be judged by him.

So we see in this passage the supreme importance of Jesus. Our salvation revolves around him. It's not about us simply saying sorry to God, trying to turn over a new leaf and please him,

necessary as those things may be. Ultimately our salvation depends on whether we will look to Jesus as the only one who can give us life.

John 5:25-29

25 "Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. 26 For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself. 27 And he has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man. 28 Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice 29 and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment.

Back From the Dead

In this passage, Jesus reiterates what he has just said – the Father has given him the *power to give life*, and the *authority to judge*. He now links these two things in with our resurrection – our coming back to life after we are dead and buried in our graves. Jesus was quite clear that the death of our physical bodies is not the end for anyone. We will all come alive again either to receive life or condemnation.

In one sense the time when Jesus will bestow eternal life or judge people is future. It will happen after we have died. There will then be a great resurrection where those who have done the good works he taught his followers to do, will receive eternal life. But those who have not believed in him, will be raised to be judged for their behaviour. Believing and behaving always go together in the Bible. Those who believe in Jesus demonstrate it by living righteous lives. Our salvation cannot be earned by good works but always bears the fruit of good works.

The Hour Has Come

But there is an unexpected twist in the timing of this event. The granting of life isn't just a future event – Jesus says that the hour has now come. In other words, the eternal life Jesus has to offer *begins now* for all who receive it. He brings spiritual life to us in the present, and this is a sign to us that in the future we will be raised to life, rather than to judgement.

This is not to say that Christians won't have to give an account of their lives. But what Jesus is promising them is that they can be sure of a resurrection to eternal life, rather than to eternal judgement. Again, this displays the awesome authority and power of Jesus. It is his voice that will bring the dead to life, and his verdict that will send people to their eternal destinies. In God's grace he offers us new life in the present, and in his mercy he holds back from condemning unrepentant sinners until the future.

John 5:30-38

³⁰"I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge, and my judgement is just, because I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me. ³¹If I alone bear witness about myself, my testimony is not deemed true. ³²There is another who bears witness about me, and I know that the testimony that he bears about me is true. ³³You sent to John, and he has borne witness to the truth. ³⁴Not that the testimony that I receive is from man, but I say these things so that you may be saved. ³⁵He was a burning and shining lamp, and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light. ³⁶But the testimony that I have is greater than that of John. For the works that the Father has given me to accomplish, the very works that I am doing, bear witness about me that the Father has sent me. ³⁷And the Father who sent me has himself borne witness about me. His voice you have never heard, his form you have never seen, ³⁸and you do not have his word abiding in you, for you do not believe the one whom he has sent.

Equal but not Independent

We have seen how Jesus has claimed for himself equal honour with the Father, as well as the power to bring the dead to life and the right to judge all people, both prerogatives of God himself. But it is important to note that he is not setting himself as a separate deity on a par with God. He is not independent; he doesn't work alone, he doesn't do whatever he pleases, but instead, is working with his Father.

Witnesses

Jesus is aware of the big problem with the claims he is making. How can anyone take his word for it? He acknowledges that we normally want some external evidence to back someone's claims up before we believe them. In one sense of course, who could be a more reliable witness than the Son of God himself? But even so, Jesus is willing to list three witnesses, the very number of witnesses normally required in a Jewish court of law to establish a fact.

The Prophet

First up in the witness stand is John the Baptist. Everyone accepted that he was a prophet sent from God. Even the Jewish leaders had acknowledged this. And yet John has explicitly pointed Jesus out as the one sent from the Father. Were they prepared to accept John's testimony and believe in the one he had prophesied was about to come?

The Power

Second, the miraculous works that Jesus was doing bore witness to who he was. His power had to come from *somewhere*. How could he turn water into wine and open the eyes of the blind? Were they prepared to accept that the power of God was at work in Jesus?

The Parent

Third, the Father bore witness. What exactly was Jesus referring to? Perhaps it was his baptism, where a voice spoke from heaven identifying Jesus as his beloved Son. But whatever exactly was meant, he warns that these Jews had not heard this voice. Because they did not believe in Jesus, they could neither *hear* nor *see* God. In other words they were blind to who God really was and deaf to what he was saying. They knew their Scriptures alright, but they were not illumined by them, because the word did not *dwell in them*.

The Verdict

The witnesses are there for those who have ears to hear and eyes to see. It is sad but true that many of these Jews rejected these witnesses, and rejected Jesus. But those who do believe in Jesus are able to both hear and see the Father. Indeed it is only through Jesus that we have such access to the Father. We can truly come to *know* God because of Jesus, as he makes the word of God come alive to us and live within us, bringing us revelation of the Father's character and will.

John 5:39-47

³⁹You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, ⁴⁰yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life. ⁴¹I do not receive glory from people. ⁴²But I know that you do not have the love of God within you. ⁴³I have come in my Father's name, and you do not receive me. If another comes in his own name, you will receive him. ⁴⁴How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the only God? ⁴⁵Do not think that I will accuse you to the Father. There is one who accuses you: Moses, on whom you have set your hope. ⁴⁶If you believed Moses, you would believe me; for he wrote of me. ⁴⁷But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words?"

You Search the Scriptures

Jesus has just shocked the religious leaders by telling them that God's word does not live in them. But he doesn't mean that they don't study the Scriptures. Far from it. They were avid students of the Bible, reading it regularly, memorizing it, discussing it and pondering how to apply it. And they did so because they believed it contained the key to eternal life. So why does Jesus find fault in them?

The problem was that even though they were looking in the right place, they had missed the answer. The Bible does contain the key to eternal life, but that key is Jesus. The whole Old Testament points to him, and yet these Jews refused to come to him and receive the life he had to offer. At the final judgement they would not need Jesus to condemn them. Moses would be able to do that, for they claimed to believe what Moses wrote and yet refused to believe in the one he was writing about.

We should take seriously what this passage teaches us about studying the Bible. First, we miss the whole point if we do not discover Jesus as the central character of the whole Bible. Second, loving the Bible is not the same as loving God. Jesus says forthrightly that the love of God was not in these religious Jews.

You Do Not Believe

We might be tempted to think that Jesus is being overly harsh on the Jews here. After all, weren't they just sincerely trying to do what is right and live according to God's law? Well they may well have been sincere and zealous, but they were also wrong. They didn't need a gentle correction; they needed to be confronted with the solemn fact that they had turned their backs on God. Jesus was being hard on them, but it was motivated by a genuine desire to rescue them from a way of life that was headed for destruction. Unbelief is not a minor character flaw, it is what keeps us from receiving salvation.

John 6:1-9

1 After this Jesus went away to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, which is the Sea of Tiberias. 2 And a large crowd was following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing on the sick. 3 Jesus went up on the mountain, and there he sat down with his disciples. 4 Now the Passover, the feast of the Jews, was at hand. 5 Lifting up his eyes, then, and seeing that a large crowd was coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?" 6 He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he would do. 7 Philip answered him, "Two hundred denarii would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little." 8 One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, 9 "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish, but what are they for so many?"

Why Bother?

Have you ever felt that a problem is so great that there is no point you even bothering to try to make a difference? It's how the disciples felt on this occasion. Sure, they recognised that the hunger of the huge crowd was a problem, but how could they be expected to meet it? They certainly didn't have the financial resources. Philip made that clear with a quick mental calculation of the huge amount of money that would be needed to feed so large a crowd. And the resources they did have were derisory. With one boy's lunch they would be able to give half a dozen people a small snack, but still leave thousands hungry.

Where is Your Faith?

Jesus, we are told, already knew what he was going to do. What looked like a hopeless situation to the disciples was already solved in his mind. But he wanted to test them. Perhaps he wanted them to express faith that he could perform a miracle. Perhaps he wanted to challenge them to do the little that they could to help meet the need. But they did neither. They just expressed their belief that there was no way they could feed so many. It is ironic that here their faith is less than that of the crowds. The crowds were following because they were expecting to see the miraculous - but the disciples themselves didn't appear to be anticipating anything out of the ordinary.

Whose Resources?

It's easy to criticise the disciples. Had they forgotten the water into wine miracle already? But we all have the same tendency. When faced with huge problems of suffering in the world, we can shrug our shoulders and admit that the problem is beyond our personal resources to solve. But that would be to forget that we have Jesus with us. Perhaps he has already got a plan, and perhaps it includes us in some way. The extent of our financial resources doesn't limit him. Our lack of imagination about how things could be put right doesn't limit him.

Take the First Step

So the next time we see a big need, and feel unable in any way to do something, how about at least acknowledging that Jesus is able to meet it. And then let us offer ourselves to at least start by doing the little we can. Who knows, perhaps we will be part of an amazing demonstration of the power of God. We need to rid ourselves of unbelief and the fear of failure that so often prevents us from doing anything in the face of human need. Let us take the attitude of William Carey who said "expect great things from God, attempt great things for God".

John 6:10-15

10 Jesus said, "Have the people sit down." Now there was much grass in the place. So the men sat down, about five thousand in number. 11 Jesus then took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated. So also the fish, as much as they wanted. 12 And when they had eaten their fill, he told his disciples, "Gather up the leftover fragments, that nothing may be lost." 13 So they gathered them up and filled twelve baskets with fragments from the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten. 14 When the people saw the sign that he had done, they said, "This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!" 15 Perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself.

Meaning of the Miracle

This incredible feeding of such a large crowd did more than just prove that Jesus had miraculous powers. It was a *sign*, pointing to the fact that Jesus is able to meet the hunger of people spiritually, a truth that he will elaborate on later as he teaches his disciples. But we also can learn some lessons from the way that Jesus performed this miracle.

First, he began with *thanksgiving*. Jesus wanted people to see that it was in cooperation with the Father that he was working. Even before a miracle had taken place, he expressed gratefulness to God for the little he did have. We need to learn to thank God for the blessings we currently enjoy, and not just wait until a particular need has been met before we will express gratefulness. In fact, thanking God when we have nothing is itself a powerful declaration of faith in his ability to provide for us.

Second, he *involved his disciples*. His miraculous powers didn't render the disciples redundant; rather it provided them with work to do. God does not use his power so that we can sit idly by and applaud. He wants us to be co-workers with him. Jesus was looking for faith and action from his disciples. This is God's regular way of feeding the hungry - rather than pour food from heaven on them, he calls his people to go and do what they can, trusting him to work miracles of provision.

Third, he provided *more than enough*. This was not an example of him being wasteful – after all they collected up the leftovers no doubt to put to good use later. Rather, it graphically demonstrated how much greater Jesus' power is than our problems are. He is able to provide not just all we need, but more than enough. He is the God of abundance, able not just to fill the hunger of a crowd of first century Jews, but all people in every place and generation.

Responding to the Miracle

The response of the people showed both perception and misunderstanding. They were right to recognise that Jesus was the "Prophet" spoken of by Moses in Deuteronomy. The religious leaders had just been chastised for failing to see that Moses spoke of Jesus, yet this crowd were ready to believe it.

The trouble was, they were not willing to let go of their own preconceived ideas of what this Prophet should do for them. In their minds he should become their king and lead them into a battle of liberation against the Romans. But this was not the predicament that Jesus came to save people from. He came to save them from their sins. So while we have seen that Jesus is more than able to meet whatever needs we have, we must remember at the same time that we

need to surrender our own agendas and let him diagnose what our real needs are. To truly make Jesus king, is to submit our lives to his agenda. While Jesus does indeed have the power to provide healing and food to those in need, he wants to offer so much more than this. He offers forgiveness and eternal life.

John 6:16-21

16 When evening came, his disciples went down to the sea, 17 got into a boat, and started across the sea to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. 18 The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing. 19 When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were frightened. 20 But he said to them, "It is I; do not be afraid." 21 Then they were glad to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat was at the land to which they were going.

After the Miracle

The disciples' emotions must have been all over the place. They had just witnessed an incredible miracle, and a boat trip across the lake was the perfect opportunity to take it all in. But now there was a storm brewing and suddenly they felt alone and unsafe. Perhaps they started saying, "If only Jesus were here, he'd know what to do. We would be OK". It is amazing how quickly we can go from faith to fear.

Who Is This Man?

It wasn't long before their hopes for Jesus to be with them were answered, but in a way that they could never have expected. For seeing Jesus walking on the water didn't at first reassure them. Seeing him display such power over nature terrified them, almost more than the storm itself. Now there could be no doubt in their minds that this was no ordinary man. Though they had spent much time with Jesus, they now realised how little they really knew him. Part of the process of coming to know Jesus is seeing him at work in our lives and world. The more we see, the more we appreciate his power and character.

Receiving Jesus

But Jesus didn't want them to be afraid. There is an appropriate response of reverent fear when we see the awesome power of the living God. But it should not cause us to back away and distance ourselves from him. It is when, despite our fears, we embrace him into our lives that he brings peace and reassurance to us. Often Christians can be afraid of fully opening themselves up to God. We do not know exactly what he might do! But we cannot receive his blessings if we keep him at arm's length.

From the moment Jesus appeared on the scene the disciples were safe. His presence in our own lives will bring peace to us as well, when we feel afraid and alone. But we need the courage to call on him and receive him into our circumstances if we are to benefit from the peace he brings. We need not be afraid of letting him in to our lives.

John 6:22-29

22 On the next day the crowd that remained on the other side of the sea saw that there had been only one boat there, and that Jesus had not entered the boat with his disciples, but that his disciples had gone away alone. 23 Other boats from Tiberias came near the place where they had eaten 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 boats and went to Capernaum, seeking Jesus. 25 When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, "Rabbi, when did you come here?" 26 Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. 27 Do not labour for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you. For on him God the Father has set his seal." 28 Then they said to him, "What must we do, to be doing the works of God?" 29 Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent."

In Search Of Jesus

How eager the crowd were to see more of Jesus. They had taken careful note that he had not left in the boat with his disciples, and yet here he was on the other side of the lake. Finally they had caught up with him, and they wanted to know how he had managed to avoid them.

We might expect Jesus to have been pleased by their eagerness to see him. But Jesus doesn't seem to take their enthusiasm as such a good sign. He is concerned about their real motives for coming. Was it just because they saw a miracle that catered for their physical hunger? If Jesus could feed them and heal them, then the future was bright. He could be their leader and sort out any problems that they got into with his amazing powers. Perhaps they were still thinking what a great military leader he would make - their army could travel light, because Jesus could miraculously provide food; and they need not worry about casualties with his ability to heal.

See the Sign

But Jesus had wanted them to see a *sign*, not just a miracle. What he had done was pointing to something, or more accurately, pointing to someone. Jesus had more to offer than a quick fix to their hunger. He had something of eternal value to give. And the miracle was pointing to the fact that the Father had marked him out as his Son, the Messiah. The great gift that Jesus wanted to offer people was eternal life, and yet they were still focused on what they thought their needs were.

Even today there can be a temptation to seek God's power to give us the things that would make us most comfortable and fulfil our agendas. We want God to give us healing when we are ill and prosperity when we are in financial need. And He is of course able to give us these things if he so desires. But Jesus' warning here is not to simply ask God for those things which cannot last, when there are eternal treasures on offer.

What Must We Do?

The crowd do at least now realise that Jesus is criticising them, because they are "working" to secure "food that spoils" rather than the eternal food that he can offer them. So they ask him, what are the "works" that God requires of them. In other words, what must they do for God to give them what they are seeking? Jesus' reply is stunning. The "work of God" that they must do is not work at all. It is simply to believe in Jesus, which is to say that we are to trust him completely. We're saved by faith, not works. This is not to deny that followers of Jesus will and should do all sorts of good works, but the first and most fundamental of those works is to

believe in him. Without that, we're simply working for food that perishes, and missing out on the food that endures to eternal life.

John 6:30-34

30 So they said to him, "Then what sign do you do, 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 from heaven to eat.'" 32 Jesus then said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. 33 For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." 34 They said to him, "Sir, give us this bread always."

Why Believe?

Jesus has just told the crowds that all God requires of them is to believe in him. They cannot earn the gift of eternal life by doing the right things, they must simply receive it by faith in Jesus. But their response to this is disappointing. They want him to perform yet another "sign" in order to believe. How could they be so dull? Jesus had just rebuked them for failing to see the sign he had just performed, and now they think they have the right to demand whatever sign seems a good idea to them. So they decide that Jesus ought to prove that he is the "greater prophet than Moses" by doing a more impressive miracle than Moses. Could Jesus do something more spectacular than the provision of manna?

Better than Moses

Well, yes and no. Again, these people were looking for a temporal miracle – a quick fix to their immediate problems, but Jesus was offering the eternal – a lasting fix to their most serious problem. Whereas Moses had given them food for their stomachs, now the Father had sent a new type of bread. This is the "true" bread, and eating it brings life – eternal life – and not just for a crowd, but for the whole world.

Here again, we see how Jesus stirred up people's curiosity and hunger. They didn't yet realise he was speaking of himself. But they wanted to know more. We too need to be stirred up to want more than just temporary blessings. The greatest thing the Father has to offer us is not some kind of material blessing, but it is Jesus himself. He will not only meet our present hunger but satisfy us forever.

John 6:35-40

35 Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst. 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 whoever comes to me I will never 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 And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. 40 For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day."

The Bread of Life

Now we come to the heart of what Jesus wants to say about himself on this occasion. He has told the people that they must believe in the "true bread" that comes down from heaven, which the Father has sent. Though he had surely said enough to make it obvious, he spells it out for them by saying "I am the bread of life". The words are so familiar to us that we can forget quite how strange this must have sounded when it was first said. What exactly did Jesus mean by this?

Well we know that our bodies need to eat to live, but what Jesus is saying is that this is true of our souls as well. If we are willing to "feed on Jesus", then we will live, and our hunger and thirst (which represent our greatest needs and desires), can be satisfied in him. This is not a one-off quenching of hunger and thirst - Jesus is able to continually feed us so that we will never again be lacking. But that still leaves a question. How exactly do we feed on him? Jesus provides the answer: it is by *coming* to him, *looking* to him and *believing* in him. This means we need to accept that it is only in Jesus that we find true life, and willingly submit ourselves to whatever he asks of us.

Promises

How could anyone turn down an offer of life like this? But Jesus realises that the crowd were not willing to believe. Unbelief comes naturally to all of us - we need a sovereign work of God to open our hearts to who Jesus is. And Jesus had confidence that despite the prevailing atmosphere of unbelief, the Father would cause people to come to him. In this passage he makes four promises to all who do come to him. These promises are on the basis that they are his Father's will – which Jesus is absolutely committed to do.

First, he promises not to turn anyone away. No one who turns to Jesus for salvation will get rejected. Second, he promises not to lose anyone. This is a powerful declaration of our security as believers - Jesus is able to guard us. Third, he promises to give us eternal life which starts now. Eternal life literally means "life of the age to come". Though we are still resident on planet earth with all its sickness and sin, we can begin to enjoy some of the benefits of the age to come even now. Finally, he promises that after death, he will raise us to life. Death, our greatest enemy, is rendered powerless to rob us of the eternal life that Jesus gives. These promises give us assurance and hope which allow us to live with confidence and joy. We need not fear that Jesus will reject us, or lose his grip on us. He is fully committed to us, not just in this life, but even beyond the grave.

John 6:41-47

41 So the Jews grumbled about him, because he said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven." 42 They said, "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How does he now say, 'I have come down from heaven'?" 43 Jesus answered them, "Do not grumble among yourselves. 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. 45 It is written in the Prophets, 'And they will all be taught by God.' Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me-- 46 not that anyone has seen the Father except he who is from God; he has seen the Father. 47 Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life.

The People's Doubt

We don't usually take too kindly to people who make grandiose claims about themselves. We accuse them of being proud and conceited, and exaggerating or even lying. But this can sometimes be a reflex reaction, without us properly considering whether the person is in fact telling the truth. The Jews were shocked that Jesus could claim to have come from heaven and to have seen the Father. As far as they were concerned, he was simply Joseph and Mary's son.

How does Jesus respond to their scepticism? We have just seen that even though Jesus had performed a sign, they had failed to see what it signified. But Jesus himself realises that it needs more than a sign for people to come to him. They need the Father's intervention. Jesus describes two ways in which the Father brings people to belief in him.

The Father's Initiative

First, the Father draws people to Jesus. Our natural tendency is actually the same as these Jews – unbelief. But that does not stop God. He is able to draw us to come to Jesus. Some people will be concerned that this seems to override what is called our "free will". But God does not drag us kicking and screaming. He is able to work in us in such a way that we are drawn to Jesus. He opens our eyes to our great need of a Saviour, and causes faith to rise in our hearts that Jesus is indeed the one who can give us new life.

Second, the Father teaches people about Jesus. I see this as a reference to the Father illuminating our minds to understand the Scriptures, which Jesus insisted pointed to him. Those who listen to God's voice in the Bible will learn that Jesus is the Messiah. They are inwardly illuminated by him as they prayerfully seek to understand what his word says. But again, we notice God's work in this. Many of the Pharisees of Jesus' day knew their Scriptures very well. Yet unless God opened their eyes to see what his Word was truly saying, they remained ignorant of its true message.

The Son's Promise

Once more Jesus repeats his promise of eternal life to those who believe in him. By eternal life, he doesn't mean that we will not physically die, but that he will raise us up on the "last day". In other words, just as he rose bodily from the dead, he will raise us from the dead too. But eternal life is also something that we have now. It is the spiritual life that Jesus gives to all his followers, allowing us to enjoy now a foretaste of the blessings of heaven.

John 6:48-51

48 I am the bread of life. 49 Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. 50 This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. 51 I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."

Greater than Moses, Greater than Manna

Jesus now turns to directly address the challenge that the people had set before him. They had wanted him to perform a more impressive miracle than Moses feeding the Israelites with manna. If Jesus could beat that, they would be willing to accept that he was a prophet greater than Moses. Or at least, so they claimed.

But Jesus isn't contrasting himself with Moses, so much as himself with the manna. He claims that like the manna, he has been sent from heaven by God, but unlike the manna, his purpose is to satisfy our spiritual hunger. Those who ate the manna all died, but those who feed on Jesus receive eternal life, which includes the promise of resurrection. Those who eat the bread of life will live forever.

Eat and Live

There is a curious mixture of metaphorical and literal speaking in verse 51. How exactly could the people 'eat' the bread of life if Jesus himself was the bread? He even goes on to say that the bread is actually his flesh. But though he is literally speaking of his body, what he is talking about is how he will lay it down in sacrifice.

So "eating" the bread of life includes realising that the death of Jesus was for us, and believing in him. When we eat the communion meal, the bread speaks to us of the same thing – that Jesus literally gave his body for us. And as we eat it, we remember that it is in him we have eternal life, and that it was his death that purchased our salvation.

John 6:52-59

52 The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, "How can this man give us his 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 you. 54 Whoever feeds on 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. 56 Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him. 57 As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever feeds on me, he also will live because of me. 58 This is the bread that came down from heaven, not as the fathers ate and died. Whoever feeds on this bread will live forever." 59 Jesus said these things in the synagogue, as he taught at Capernaum.

Eat My Flesh

We now come to the closing words of Jesus' teaching that he is the "bread of life", and this is probably the hardest part to understand. Certainly his hearers were struggling to make sense of his words at this point. If he is speaking metaphorically, why then does he seem to be insisting that people should take him literally?

How can his blood be "true" drink, and his flesh "true" food? He obviously was not trying to promote cannibalism. What he is trying to say, is that we shouldn't think of what Moses gave as *real* bread, and Jesus as merely *symbolic* bread. No, the true bread is that which gives eternal life to its eaters. Physical bread sustains our bodily lives, but the life that Jesus gives is no less real - in fact it is more so, as it is eternal, unlike everything in our physical universe which will one day cease to exist.

Drink My Blood

The reference to blood is to Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross, where his blood was poured out. Quite plainly, he insists that unless we receive what he did for us on the cross, we will not receive eternal life. His death brought us life. It is this truth that we remind ourselves of when we drink the wine at the Lord's Supper. The imagery is gruesome, yet it powerfully brings home to us both the immense cost at which our salvation was procured and of our own need to fully receive it as being for us personally.

Jesus is also emphasising here an ongoing relationship with him. We don't just accept him as Saviour and forget about it. Those who feed on him are said to *abide* in him. Our life is now lived in his presence. What's more Jesus says that he will live in us. He is describing the close and ongoing relationship that believers can enjoy with him right through their lives, even before we get to see him face to face.

John 6:60-65

60 When many of his disciples heard it, they said, "This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?" 61 But Jesus, knowing in himself that his disciples were grumbling about this, said to them, "Do you take offence at this? 62 Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? 63 It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is of no avail. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. 64 But there are some of you who do not believe." (For Jesus knew from the beginning who those were who did not believe, and who it was who would betray him.) 65 And he said, "This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father."

Who Can Accept It?

Most Christians know that the word "gospel" simply means "good news". But just because it is good news, doesn't mean that it is easy to accept. We see here that even people who could be described as Jesus' "disciples" really struggled to come to terms with what he had been saying. Basically Jesus was making himself the most important person in the world, claiming that life was only found in him. It's a message that causes offence now, and it caused offence then too.

Jesus realises that the disciples are finding it difficult. It would be easier for them to accept if they could see Jesus ascend to heaven (which some of them will in due course). But for now they must simply believe on the basis of the signs that Jesus had been performing.

The Spirit Gives Life

So how can people come to a point of believing in Jesus, when they have not seen incontrovertible evidence with their eyes? Jesus explains that this is the role of the Holy Spirit. He is the one who brings the words of Jesus to life and causes faith to rise in us. The Father must grant that someone can come to Jesus, and the Spirit must give them life. This too is a hard teaching to accept, but for different reasons, since it hurts our pride. By ourselves, without God, we cannot do anything. What we can achieve in the flesh, that is, in our human strength, counts for nothing with God.

Because Jesus understood this, he wasn't discouraged that some didn't believe in him, and wasn't even thrown off course knowing that Judas would betray him. He had a strong sense of the sovereignty of God – the Father was in control, working all things to his plan. We need to remember this in our own evangelism too – we are charged to proclaim the gospel, and to be witnesses to the work of the risen Christ in our lives. But it is the Spirit's work to bring life. A right understanding of the sovereignty of God doesn't lead us to passivity but gives us faith and confidence because nothing is too difficult for God.

John 6:66-71

66 After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him. 67 So Jesus said to the Twelve, "Do you want to go away as well?" 68 Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, 69 and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God." 70 Jesus answered them, "Did I not choose you, the Twelve? And yet one of you is a devil." 71 He spoke of Judas the son of Simon Iscariot, for he, one of the Twelve, was going to betray him.

Seeker Insensitive?

We often like to think about what a wonderful teacher Jesus was, and what a great person he would have been to be around. But here we see something surprising – Jesus losing followers. He wasn't willing to make his teaching more palatable just so he could be popular. Even his own disciples had found the teaching hard. Jesus' question to them is shocking – "would you like to leave too?" He had no interest in gathering a group of people who were only nominally committed to him. He wanted those who would trust him enough to devote their lives to following him. In fact, at some time or other, all Christians will face a similar choice. It is when the going gets tough, when it's not easy, that we must ask the question "where do my loyalties really lie?"

The Response of Faith

Two disciples are contrasted in this passage - Peter and Judas. Peter's response is one of faith. Though his understanding is doubtless incomplete at this point, here we see he that he has some very profound insights. First, who else is there to go to but Jesus? He is the only Saviour – what good could anyone do for themselves by turning their back on him? Second, Jesus has the words of eternal life. Peter has understood that it is only through believing in Jesus, the living word of God, that we can receive eternal life. Third, Peter has come to believe with confidence that Jesus is the Messiah – the Holy One sent by God. He has seen what the signs were pointing to in a way that the crowds hadn't.

The Response of Unbelief

Though Judas doesn't speak at this point, he is contrasted with Peter. Jesus already knew that Judas was not a believer like Peter. Judas' outwardly followed Jesus but lacked true inward commitment. He was even willing to betray Jesus. So we see that it is possible for someone to appear as though they are a follower of Jesus, when in fact their loyalties lie elsewhere.

We need to examine our hearts to make sure that we are those like Peter who are ready to follow Jesus even when he says hard things. We also need to ensure that our loyalty is truly to Jesus, putting our faith in him, rather than like Judas, who kept up appearances while secretly holding to his own agenda.

John 7:1-9

1 After this Jesus went about in Galilee. He would not go about in Judea, because the Jews were seeking to kill him. 2 Now the Jews' Feast of Booths was at hand. 3 So his brothers said to him, "Leave here and go to Judea, that your disciples also may see the works you are doing. 4 For no one works in secret if he seeks to be known openly. If you do these things, show yourself to the world." 5 For not even his brothers believed in him. 6 Jesus said to them, "My time has not yet come, but your time is always here. 7 The world cannot hate you, but it hates me because I testify about it that its works are evil. 8 You go up to the feast. I am not going up to this feast, for my time has not yet fully come." 9 After saying this, he remained in Galilee.

Fame

After Jesus' miracle of feeding the five thousand, he was becoming a very well-known figure. Everyone was talking about him, and everyone wanted to see and hear from him for themselves so they could decide what to make of this strange new prophet on the scene. And yet at the same time, Jesus' popularity was at an all-time low. Large numbers of his disciples had just walked away from him, and the Jewish leaders felt that his teaching was so heretical and dangerous that Jesus must be killed.

Unbelief

It is at a time like this that Jesus needed his own family to stick close to him and offer him support, but even they had missed the point. John tells us that even though Jesus' brothers knew that he could perform miracles, and wanted him to become more popular, they themselves were not believers. It is shocking - these are people who had grown up with Jesus and surely if anyone would believe in him, they would. But like the crowds, they only saw miracles and not the signs that were right in front of their faces. There is something about our stubborn, proud human natures that makes us predisposed to reject Jesus and his message. We need the Father to draw us, and the Holy Spirit to work in our hearts.

Popularity

Despite not truly believing in him, Jesus' brothers pointed out to him that the upcoming feast was an ideal time to gain a big following. They challenged him to make a big appearance at the feast. Perhaps they thought that they too could be minor celebrities if they accompanied him. But Jesus didn't want to make a big entry. In fact, he wasn't even going to go to the feast with his brothers. He knew that he had a message that was deeply unpopular - he was testifying to the sinful behaviour of humanity. This message would eventually cause such resentment, that he would be put to death, but that time had not yet come.

As it happens, Jesus did actually go to the feast, but again we see that he would not let people set his agenda. He knew that God had given him a mission and that he needed to stick with his Father's timetable. What may have seemed good advice from his brothers needed to be rejected in favour of obedience to the plan and timing of God.

John 7:10-13

10 But after his brothers had gone up to the feast, then he also went up, not publicly but in private. 11 The Jews were looking for him at the feast, and saying, "Where is he?" 12 And there was much muttering about him among the people. While some said, "He is a good man," others said, "No, he is leading the people astray." 13 Yet for fear of the Jews no one spoke openly of him.

Mixed Opinions

Jesus had previously told his brothers that it wasn't the right time for him to go up to the feast, but when the Father told him to go, he went. He had the advantage of initially being inconspicuous, and as he wasn't with his brothers, people couldn't so easily find him. As we might expect, Jesus was the topic of much discussion, and there was a variety of opinions.

First, some thought he was a good man. They had perhaps recognised his compassion and integrity, and were willing to consider that he was a man of God. But even this positive response should not be confused with true faith. It is not enough to be merely positive about Jesus. He demands our undivided loyalty and our life-long allegiance.

Second, some thought he was leading people astray. Perhaps they took issue with some of his statements about himself, or perhaps they simply didn't like the way he wasn't going through the official channels. Whatever the reason, they needed to have their eyes opened, to drop their prejudice and see Jesus for who he truly is.

Third, there were the Jewish leaders. Their opposition to Jesus was notorious, and it was because of them that many felt afraid to even express admiration for Jesus. Their idea of a Messiah was not someone who criticised them, and didn't agree with their interpretation of how to keep the Sabbath properly. If any of them were to come to faith in Jesus, they would need a miracle in their hearts, as there was a huge obstacle of pride in the way.

Even today, there is much talk about Jesus, and opinions range from angry rejection through to quiet admiration. As his witnesses, we are not simply calling people to like Jesus, and think well of him, but to throw themselves upon his mercy, and devote themselves to being his followers. We need to watch ourselves that we are not guilty of simply speaking positively about Jesus, rather than living a life of obedience and discipleship. We are his ambassadors to the world; if people are to know the person and message of Jesus is like, they need to be able to see it and hear it from us.

John 7:14-18

14 About the middle of the feast Jesus went up into the temple and began teaching. 15 The Jews therefore marvelled, saying, "How is it that this man has learning, when he has never studied?" 16 So Jesus answered them, "My teaching is not mine, but his who sent me. 17 If anyone's will is to do God's will, he will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own authority. 18 The one who speaks on his own authority seeks his own glory, but the one who seeks the glory of him who sent him is true, and in him there is no falsehood.

Jesus the Teacher

When Jesus did finally make a public appearance, it was not in the way that his brothers had envisaged. Rather than performing a miracle, he started teaching in the temple. This gave the people the perfect opportunity to hear what Jesus had to say for himself.

Their response was one of astonishment. They were hearing the most profound teaching they had heard in their lives, and yet it came from someone who had not been to theological college. Jesus' knowledge had come from his own meditating on the Scriptures and communing with the Father. He viewed his teaching not as an opportunity to get glory for himself, but simply as an opportunity to pass on the message his Father had given him.

How incredibly humble this attitude of Jesus is. He of course could rightly have spoken on his own authority and for his own glory, but chose not to. It is a lesson to all who would teach others from the Bible. When we tell others what God's word says, we remember that it is not our own authority, but the authority of the Scriptures that must convince people. And we seek not to bring glory to ourselves, but to point away from ourselves to the Lord Jesus.

Knowing the Truth

Jesus also explains how people can come to know that his teaching is from God. Interestingly, it is not by being persuaded by its rationality, nor by how it makes us feel, nor even by checking it against the Scriptures. No, it is as we place God's will as our highest priority, and begin to live in obedience to him that our minds are opened to see the truth of what Jesus says. This is a paradox – only as we come with an attitude of faith, do we receive the faith to believe. Those who are hardened in unbelief can hear the message of Jesus without being affected. Those who simply want to analyse, but with no desire to obey, will never discover the truth.

John 7:19-24

19 Has not Moses given you the law? Yet none of you keeps the law. Why do you seek to kill me?" 20 The crowd answered, "You have a demon! Who is seeking to kill you?" 21 Jesus answered them, "I did one deed, and you all marvel at it. 22 Moses gave you circumcision (not that it is from Moses, but from the fathers), and you circumcise a man on the Sabbath. 23 If on the Sabbath a man receives circumcision, so that the law of Moses may not be broken, are you angry with me because on the Sabbath I made a man's whole body well? 24 Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgement."

None of You Keeps the Law

Where we left this story, everything seemed to be going nicely for Jesus. He has been teaching, and the crowd are very impressed with what they hear. Then he says something which changes the mood drastically. He argues that not one of the people kept the law of Moses. How outrageous that would have sounded in such a religious setting. He was speaking in the temple no doubt with many Pharisees and devout Jews present. They were expecting to be congratulated for being the people who were faithfully obeying the law.

Their reaction is telling. Rather than being convicted of sin, they turn the accusing finger. They deny that there is any plot to kill Jesus, and yet at least some present probably knew that that was exactly what the Jewish leaders were beginning to talk about. They even had the audacity to accuse Jesus of being demon-possessed. It goes to show how far we can go in self-deception to deny the truth about the sin in our hearts.

Hypocrisy

Jesus knew that his healing of the lame man on the Sabbath had been the catalyst for all this hatred. He now points out the hypocrisy of their approach. If circumcision was acceptable to perform on the Sabbath, then how could healing someone not be? They were judging Jesus according to their own outward standard, but they needed to re-evaluate their whole approach to the law. If they truly knew what its requirements were, they would see that Jesus had not broken it.

In our own day, there is a tendency to the same legalism that these Jewish leaders showed. We try to help things along by making rules people must follow, and judging them for not following them, while at the same time, imagining we are righteous because we manage to keep them ourselves. If we were truly honest, we would admit that none of us attains to God's perfect standard of righteousness, and we are all equally in need of a saviour.

John 7:25-31

25 Some of the people of Jerusalem therefore said, "Is not this the man whom they seek to kill? 26 And here he is, speaking openly, and they say nothing to him! Can it be that the authorities really know that this is the Christ? 27 But we know where this man comes from, and when the Christ appears, no one will know where he comes from." 28 So Jesus proclaimed, as he taught in the temple, "You know me, and you know where I come from? But I have not come of my own accord. He who sent me is true, and him you do not know. 29 I know him, for I come from him, and he sent me." 30 So they were seeking to arrest him, but no one laid a hand on him, because his hour had not yet come. 31 Yet many of the people believed in him. They said, "When the Christ appears, will he do more signs than this man has done?"

Who is this man?

Jesus caused quite a stir at the temple. People didn't know what to make of him. They had heard that he was controversial and that some wanted to arrest him, but why wasn't he being arrested? People were also beginning to ask the big question. Could this be the Messiah?

In some ways Jesus fitted what they expected of the Messiah. He was performing miraculous signs and teaching with great authority. And yet at the same time he wasn't exactly fulfilling all their expectations. As far as they were concerned they knew where he had come from. He was just an ordinary person just like everyone else.

Who sent him?

But Jesus called them to look deeper. Though he was truly a human being, there was something they didn't know about where he had come from. They didn't realise he was none other than the second person of the Triune God, come to dwell amongst his own creation. He insists that though they may know the town he came from, they didn't know the one who sent him - his Father. What a terrible indictment on these people who had come to Jerusalem for a religious festival. They didn't even know the one they had come to worship. This was the fundamental problem that Jesus had come to solve.

There were those who resisted the atmosphere of scepticism and put their trust in Jesus. They realised that the many miracles he had performed constituted a series of *signs* from God, authenticating Jesus' message. It is not clear though how deep this faith commitment really was. Their understanding of what the Messiah would do still needed to be challenged. Others refused to believe, still waiting for just one more sign, one more confirmation before they were willing to accept him at all.

Still today, many miss the point of who Jesus is, acknowledging his humanity but denying his deity. But it is only as we accept him for who he is that he will be able to lead us to the Father.

John 7:32-36

32 The Pharisees heard the crowd muttering these things about him, and the chief priests and Pharisees sent officers to arrest him. 33 Jesus then said, "I will be with you a little longer, and then I am going to him who sent me. 34 You will seek me and you will not find me. Where I am you cannot come." 35 The Jews said to one another, "Where does this man intend to go that we will not find him? Does he intend to go to the Dispersion among the Greeks and teach the Greeks? 36 What does he mean by saying, 'You will seek me and you will not find me,' and, 'Where I am you cannot come'?"

You Cannot Come

Jesus had a habit of saying things that people misunderstood. In this instance, he is talking about his return to the Father, which would take place after his death and resurrection. But that would only become clear with hindsight. Jesus said these things so that after the event, his followers would see that he knew what was going to happen to him, and that it was all within the plan of the Father.

The religious leaders were already so angry with Jesus that they were trying to arrest him, and if they could have understood this they would have been even more furious. Jesus was saying that soon they would not be able to find him or come to him.

He was not simply talking about the fact that he would not be physically present on earth any more. What he was warning them was that their opportunity to accept him would soon be past. Once they had rejected Jesus as Messiah and put him to death, how would they find salvation and a way to the Father?

Their guess at where he was going was ironic. They thought we would escape trouble by heading off to the dispersed Jews living amongst the Greeks. And Jesus did intend for his message to go out not just to scattered Jews, but all nations. But he would not take the message personally. Instead, his disciples would be commissioned to take the good news of Jesus' death and resurrection to the ends of the earth.

The root of the Pharisees' problem was pride. They didn't like what Jesus was saying – convicting all people, including them of evil. They also didn't like what he was doing – refusing to submit to their self-appointed roles as law-makers. It is only by humbling ourselves that we are able to find Jesus and follow him to the Father.

John 7:37-39

37 On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. 38 Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.'" 39 Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.

Come To Me

It had been an eventful feast for Jesus. It started with people talking about him, then with people being impressed with his teaching, and then with people getting so upset they wanted to arrest him. Who would have blamed him for leaving Jerusalem and never coming back? But despite the danger he was in, he wanted to say one last thing. It wasn't a pronouncement of judgement. It was an invitation of grace.

He called all those who were thirsty to himself. We should first notice the centrality of Jesus as he makes this offer. He is not calling people to get religion, to go to church, to read the Bible. He's not even calling them to change their behaviour. First and foremost, Jesus calls people to himself. He is what we need. He is indispensable if we want our thirst quenched. The church therefore must point people to Jesus as the very heart of the gospel.

Drink

The imagery of thirst is powerful. The thirstier a person is, the less able they are to focus on anything but getting a drink. He is the only one who can truly satisfy the deepest longings and desires in our hearts. He doesn't offer just a small drink to alleviate our thirst a bit, but to allow us to drink so much that we overflow ourselves.

What exactly does he mean by drinking? His next comment explains it for us. It is about believing in him. When we say 'believe in Jesus', we don't just mean believing that he existed, or even that he is God. What we mean is that we trust in him as the one who can save us and we commit ourselves to following him.

Living Water

And what will be the result if we are willing to come to him and drink? Jesus here promises that the Holy Spirit will fill us and overflow within us. It is this gift of the power and presence of God living within us that will truly bring us refreshment for our spiritual thirst. Now that Jesus is ascended in heaven, his Holy Spirit has been poured out on the church, and is available to all who believe. If we are feeling dry and thirsty, let us again come to Jesus and receive more of his Spirit, as we commit ourselves wholeheartedly to him.

This living water is promised to flow out from us. This is surely a reference to the way the Spirit doesn't just move within us, but also moves us on to preach the good news to others, and to minister the love and compassion of Christ to others. How we need the living water of the Spirit to flow in our lives and in our churches in greater measure if we are to be the people God desires and intends us to be.

John 7:40-44

40 When they heard these words, some of the people said, "This really is the Prophet." 41 Others said, "This is the Christ." But some said, "Is the Christ to come from Galilee? 42 Has not the Scripture said that the Christ comes from the offspring of David, and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David was?" 43 So there was a division among the people over him. 44 Some of them wanted to arrest him, but no one laid hands on him.

Decision Time

When you examine the teachings of Jesus, it is not long before you realise that he is offering more than just good ideas. He is offering himself to us. So to accept or reject his teaching is to accept or reject Jesus himself. The people were beginning to realise that they must make a decision. Was Jesus someone special? Was he one of the people prophesied in the Old Testament, that God would send – the Prophet, or the Christ¹⁰? Some people were ready to accept it.

But there was a problem. There were also some sceptics. They were quick to find objections. For one, they said, the Christ ought to come from Bethlehem, but Jesus comes from Galilee. Little did they know that Jesus had in fact been born in Bethlehem, and was a descendant of David. John doesn't actually point this out for us. He expects his readers to know from Matthew and Luke. However, it is probable that even if these sceptics knew that Jesus was from Bethlehem, that they would come up with another reason to doubt him.

The different opinions about him caused division among the people. Sadly the same is true today. Those who accept Jesus as the Saviour will find it puts them at odds with others. And still today there are the sceptics who not only doubt Jesus themselves, but want to sow seeds of doubt into others' minds.

The fact remains that Jesus challenges all who hear him to make a decision about him. To receive the gift he offers, we must pledge our loyalty to him, believing in him, trusting him and following him.

¹⁰ In their minds, the Prophet promised by Moses and the Messiah may have been two separate people. But the New Testament identifies Jesus as the fulfilment of both promises.

John 7:45-52

45 The officers then came to the chief priests and Pharisees, who said to them, "Why did you not bring him?" 46 The officers answered, "No one ever spoke like this man!" 47 The Pharisees answered them, "Have you also been deceived? 48 Have any of the authorities or the Pharisees believed in him? 49 But this crowd that does not know the law is accursed." 50 Nicodemus, who had gone to him before, and who was one of them, said to them, 51 "Does our law judge a man without first giving him a hearing and learning what he does?" 52 They replied, "Are you from Galilee too? Search and see that no prophet arises from Galilee."

Pride and Prejudice

What happens here would be comical if it wasn't so sad. The religious leaders had sent some officers to arrest Jesus, but the officers couldn't bring themselves to interrupt Jesus. They were astounded by the wonderful authority and insight with which he was teaching. It seemed criminal to them to stop him. But the religious leaders react with scorn. Only stupid people would let themselves be deceived. After all, *they* hadn't believed in Jesus. Their pride and prejudice was such that they refused to accept that they could be wrong about someone. They had already made their minds up, and nothing was going to persuade them to back down.

It is here that Nicodemus, a respected religious leader himself spoke up. He wasn't perhaps quite ready to align himself fully with Jesus, but he was embarrassed by the judgemental approach his fellow leaders were taking. He suggested that they ought to do a fair and impartial investigation into what Jesus was doing and saying. If only these Pharisees and chief priests had been willing to do this, then perhaps some of their barriers of prejudice would be broken down. But once again their pride got in the way. They respond with an insult. Nicodemus must be stupid to believe that someone from Galilee could be a prophet. How ironic. They had forgotten that Jonah had come from Galilee.

In our own day, we see prejudice against Jesus in many forms. There are well educated people who refuse to accept the possibility that they might be wrong about who Jesus is, and so refuse to give him a true hearing. And even as Christians, we need to be on our guard against the same type of pride and prejudice when God works and speaks through those who we do not consider to be 'official' leaders. Do we dismiss these things out of hand, or are we willing to give a fair hearing?

John 7:53-8:6a

53 They went each to his own house, 1 but Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. 2 Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him, and he sat down and taught them. 3 The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery, and placing her in the midst 4 they said to him, "Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. 5 Now in the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?" 6 This they said to test him, that they might have some charge to bring against him.

Justice?

We see in this story¹¹ how the Pharisees and scribes had already made up their minds against Jesus. They were closed towards him, and were now simply looking to build up evidence against him. As they bring the woman to Jesus, we see even further evidence of their hypocrisy. Where was the man? If she had been caught in adultery, then there must have been a man too. They were pretending to be concerned with justice, but actually had a completely different agenda.

Compassion?

We also see their lack of compassion for the woman. They would be quite happy to see her stoned to death. And with their question to Jesus, their motive becomes clear. They want to put him in an impossible situation. He could either affirm the law of Moses and condemn this woman to death, or he could deny the law of Moses to show compassion on her. If he did the first, they could get him in trouble with the Romans, as they didn't have the authority to execute people. If he did the second, they could denounce him as a heretic.

Hypocrisy?

Before we move on to consider Jesus' response, we need to reflect on the depravity of the human heart. We can so often be lacking in compassion, hypocritical and even having sinister motives in what appear to be innocent and righteous actions. Though we may not stoop to quite this level, we need to recognise the tendency in our own hearts to behave in this manner. We need the grace and mercy of God to forgive us and change us.

¹¹ It seems certain that this story of the woman caught in adultery was not actually part of John's original gospel, but has been added later. However, it does seem to have an authenticity about it, reflecting accurately the character of both the scribes and Pharisees, and Jesus himself. Therefore, though we may not be able to say with confidence that this story ought to be part of our "Bible", it still bears careful thought and reflection.

John 8:6b-11

Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. 7 And as they continued to ask him, he stood up and said to them, "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her." 8 And once more he bent down and wrote on the ground. 9 But when they heard it, they went away one by one, beginning with the older ones, and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. 10 Jesus stood up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" 11 She said, "No one, Lord." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more."

Cast the First Stone

Many people have wondered what Jesus was writing on the ground. Perhaps he was writing a list of sins, reminding those present that they too were not completely innocent in God's sight. When he does finally respond to the question, which had been designed to trap him, his answer is so brilliant that it has become one of Jesus' most famous sayings.

"Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her". In this one sentence Jesus spoke volumes. He acknowledged, that yes, the woman had sinned, and according to Moses' law should be punished. But he also questioned who they were to demand and execute this severe judgement. These religious leaders themselves were sinners. In a powerful way, Jesus pointed out their own need for mercy. If they would deny forgiveness to this woman, how could they expect it for themselves? They had been so aware of the sin of the woman, and yet had been blind to their own sin.

Mercy Triumphs Over Judgement

As Jesus returned to write on the ground again, the genius of his answer slowly began to sink in. The older ones backed off first, showing at least some wisdom, while the younger leaders, perhaps at first ready to claim that yes they were worthy enough to condemn someone to death, now realised their own sin.

Finally, Jesus is left alone with the woman. Her experience had been humiliating and frightening. Jesus now asks her where all those accusers had gone. To her great relief, they have all left, but she has one problem. The only one who could legitimately cast the first stone is standing in front of her. And yet in his reply we see the grace of God. He pardons her, and encourages her to begin a new life of purity. His forgiveness didn't mean that she could go on sinning with impunity; it set her free to live a life pleasing to God.

Judgement Day

In one sense, this scene is a picture of us as we stand before God the judge. Satan stands there to accuse us, and yet his accusations are not heeded by God. Satan himself must be judged. And yet, even when our accuser is dismissed, we know that we still stand guilty before a holy God. And yet we find that he offers us a second chance – made possible by the sacrifice of Jesus, that we can not only be forgiven, but that we can begin a new life characterised by holiness.

John 8:12-14

12 Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." 13 So the Pharisees said to him, "You are bearing witness about yourself; your testimony is not true." 14 Jesus answered, "Even if I do bear witness 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."

Light

To be without light is effectively to be blind. You can't tell where you are or where you are going. The Pharisees did not consider themselves to be in the dark though. They had the law of God, and knew that it was a "lamp for their feet and a light for their path." And yet spiritually they were still blind. Though they treasured the law, they had not followed its light. If they had, it would have led them to Jesus.

So when he says "I am the light of the world", Jesus makes a highly provocative statement. By doing so, he implies that his hearers are in darkness without him. Light exposes things hidden. Coming to the light of Jesus will expose our sinfulness, but Jesus' light also illuminates and reveals the Father to us.

Those who recognise that Jesus is the light will *follow* him. This entails believing in him, trusting in him, and living according to his teachings. He promises that his light will lead people into *life*. Following Jesus is the only true path to life. The Pharisees were following religion, the people were following their own ideas and desires; Jesus calls everyone, both then and now, to step out of the darkness and into his light.

Witness

On the face of it, the Pharisee's objection makes sense. Declaring oneself to be the "light of the world" is a grandiose claim unless it can be substantiated somehow. It can't simply be true just because Jesus says so. They need some kind of evidence. But they had already deliberately ignored the many signs he had already performed. Jesus' response to them is that just because he speaks for himself, it doesn't make his testimony false. In fact, their judgement of him was erroneous because they assumed they knew more about him than they actually did.

They were wrong about where he had come from on two levels. First they thought he originated from Galilee, when in fact he was born in Bethlehem¹². Secondly, they were completely ignorant of his heavenly origin. What's more, they had no idea what the true nature of Jesus' mission was. He knew exactly what he was called to do, and where he was going. They, on the other hand, were completely in the dark.

¹² See John 7:52, which occurs immediately before these verses in the original version of John's gospel.

John 8:15-20

15 You judge according to the flesh; I judge no one. 16 Yet even if I do judge, my judgment is true, for it is not I alone who judge, but I and the Father who sent me. 17 In your Law it is written that the testimony of two men is true. 18 I am the one who bears witness about myself, and the Father who sent me bears witness about me.” 19 They said to him therefore, “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; but no one arrested him, because his hour had not yet come.

Judgement

These Pharisees’ problem was that they were too quick to pass judgement, and they based their judgements “according to the flesh”. In other words, were judging merely by human standards, and ignoring the witness of God himself in the signs and the Scriptures to who Jesus really was. Jesus, on the other hand was not rushing into judgement, or judging with the shallow criteria that the Pharisees were using. His first coming into the world was not for judgement, but to bring salvation¹³. Any judgements he made would be made in full agreement with his Father and at the appropriate time.

Father

Having introduced his Father, the Pharisees again demonstrate that they are thinking merely in human terms. They ask Jesus where his father is, perhaps assuming that Jesus is claiming that his father is a notable person who could lend credence to his claims. But Jesus is referring of course to God the Father, and this leads him to pronounce a tragic judgement on these Pharisees - they did not know the Father.

What does it mean to know the Father? How can we “know” God who we have never seen? Jesus gives us an answer here: it is through him that we come to know the Father. To recognise Jesus as the light of the world, and to follow him, is the only way we can be brought near to God. Without Jesus we can have religion and learn *about* God, but we cannot come to *know* him. Jesus is the revealer of the Father.

Now at last, the Pharisees understood. Doubtless they felt insulted. Tragically, it would appear that most did not choose to humble themselves and come to the light. Instead their anger with him grew and their desire to see him executed for heresy burned within them. And yet, John points out the complete sovereignty of God as he tells us that “no one arrested him, for his hour had not yet come.” God was in control of the very hour at which Jesus would die. It would not come a moment too soon or too late.

¹³ See John 3:17

John 8:21-25

21 So he said to them again, "I am going away, and you will seek me, and you will die in your sin. Where I am going, you cannot come." 22 So the Jews said, "Will he kill himself, since he says, 'Where I am going, you cannot come'?" 23 He said to them, "You are from below; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world. 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." 25 So they said to him, "Who are you?" Jesus said to them, "Just what I have been telling you from the beginning.

I Am Going

Jesus has presented himself as the one who is the Light of the World, the one who gives access to the Father. The Pharisees and religious leaders sadly did not know the Father, and were not willing to accept Jesus. It was this that caused Jesus to speak words of judgement and appeal. He warns them of the urgency of the situation. Soon he would be gone. Soon their moment of opportunity to believe in him would be lost. If they didn't take it they would "die in their sins".

This is the solemn and awful truth of our need for the gospel. Indifference to Jesus, rejection of Jesus, ignorance of Jesus all result in dying without being freed and forgiven of sin. While in verse 21 it seems that Jesus has given up on these people, in verse 24 we see that he still holds out an offer to them –if they are willing to believe in him.

But in order to receive this offer of grace, they must come to the point of recognising who Jesus really is. He is no ordinary person, but he is "from above", and "not of this world". He has come into the world on a mission to reconcile the world back to the Father. This is what he has repeatedly tried to communicate about himself.

You Don't Get It

Astonishingly, they still don't get it. In verse 25, they act as though Jesus hasn't said a thing about who he is. You can sense the exasperation in Jesus response – haven't you been listening to all that I have been saying about myself? The issue is not that they need more information – Jesus has nothing more to say to them than what he has said from the beginning. The issue is stubborn unbelief. This is the polarising effect of Jesus – those who hear his claims must make a response, either of faith, or persistent demanding of more information.

John 8:26-29

26 I have much to say about you and much to judge, but he who sent me is true, and I declare to the world what I have heard from him.” 27 They did not understand that he had been speaking to them about the Father. 28 So Jesus said to them, “When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own authority, but speak just 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.”

The Faithful Messenger

Jesus refuses to be drawn into the Pharisees’ endless requests for more signs and more witnesses. He appeals to the fact that he has been faithfully passing on the message from his Father - Jesus came as a Prophet with a message from God of hope and salvation. To reject the message was to reject the God who sent the message. And it wasn’t just the message they rejected. They rejected the messenger - who was himself the content of his own message.

Lifted Up

Jesus then speaks prophetically again, this time of his impending death, when he would be “lifted up” on a cross. The Jews had wondered whether Jesus was planning to kill himself (v22), and indeed he would die, but that wasn’t the reason they couldn’t come to the place he was going. They couldn’t come because he was going back to the Father, and only those who believed in him could follow.

Amazingly, in the gospel of John, the cross is portrayed as Jesus’ moment of triumph and vindication. He would be seen for who he was at the cross. Of course there were few if any who understood it as it happened. But after the resurrection, the event was to take on a whole new meaning. Now we can look back at the cross and see that Jesus was not some eccentric or egocentric individual, but he was indeed the one he claimed to be - sent by the Father, speaking the words of the Father, doing the will of the Father, bringing pleasure to the Father.

John 8:30-38

30 As he was saying these things, many believed in him. 31 So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, 32 and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." 33 They answered him, "We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, 'You will become free'?" 34 Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. 35 The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. 36 So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed. 37 I know that you are offspring of Abraham; yet you seek to kill me because my word finds no place in you. 38 I speak of what I have seen with my Father, and you do what you have heard from your father."

Abiding

In the gospel of John, we see a repeating pattern of people "believing" in Jesus, and yet that belief proving to be shallow and those people quickly turning against him. We see the same thing again here - there are "many" who believe in Jesus, and yet he starts teaching them about how to be a "true" disciple. The way that this happens is that they must "abide" in his word. In other words, becoming a disciple of Jesus is not about a one-off believing of certain propositional truth, but an *ongoing* believing his word, an ongoing trusting and following.

Freedom

For those who do abide in his word, Jesus promises that they will know the truth and this truth will set them *free*. But as nice as this sounded, it presented Jesus' hearers with a problem. In what sense did they need to be free? They weren't (as far as they were concerned) slaves of anyone. Jesus tells them bluntly that they are slaves to sin.

He wasn't singling out this particular audience as being particularly bad sinners compared to others. Far from it; he denies that there is anyone who can sin without becoming a slave to sin. This is the fundamental human predicament that he had come to save us from. The "truth" that can set people free is not that "actually you are a good person deep inside", or "you can find the resources within yourself to overcome sinful patterns of behaviour". Rather, the truth is that Jesus is the one sent by the Father to save the world. Those who believe him and accept the salvation he offers, are promised freedom from sin.

The nature of the freedom from sin Jesus offers is best explained in terms of its past, present and future aspects. We have been saved from the penalty of sin - Jesus paid the price for our sins on the cross, so we no longer fear condemnation. We are being saved from the power of sin - the gift of the Holy Spirit is given to sanctify us and empower us to break sinful habits. And ultimately, we will be saved from the presence of sin - living for eternity with God.

Sonship

To explain further what it means to be free, Jesus contrasts the status of a slave with that of a son. A slave has no permanent home in the house in which he works. One day, he will be released. But a son has a home forever because he is part of the family. Jesus is speaking here of the adoption as sons into God's family that he offers to all believers. It was no use these Jews merely appealing that they were "sons" of Abraham; Jesus says that they are not sons, but slaves. This is the state of every one of us before we become a Christian - we are slaves to sin, with the devil calling the shots, whether we realise it or not.

In every generation people have wanted “freedom”. The trouble is, we look in the wrong places for the wrong type of freedom. Jesus is the only one who offers us true freedom, which is freedom from slavery. And once we are free, he doesn’t just leave us on our own to fend for ourselves, he invites us to be adopted forever as sons in his royal family.

John 8:39-47

39 They answered him, "Abraham is our father." Jesus said to them, "If you were Abraham's children, you would be doing what Abraham did, 40 but now you seek to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. This is not what Abraham did. 41 You are doing what your father did." They said to him, "We were not born of sexual immorality. We have one Father--even God." 42 Jesus said to them, "If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and I am here. I came not of my own accord, but he sent me. 43 Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word. 44 You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies. 45 But because I tell the truth, you do not believe me. 46 Which one of you convicts me of sin? If I tell the truth, why do you not believe me? 47 Whoever is of God hears the words of God. The reason why you do not hear them is that you are not of God."

Sons of Abraham

The atmosphere is getting more and more heated. Jesus is making provocative claims about who he is, and the religious leaders are getting increasingly angry. Jesus has contrasted his Father, with their father, and so they are eager to point out that actually, they are descendants of Abraham. Jesus had better not be rude about their "father", because Abraham was one of the most revered men in Israel's history. Jesus answered to tell them that the important thing was not physical descent from Abraham, but spiritual descent. To be his children, they should emulate his faith. But in fact they were plotting the murder of a prophet - Jesus himself. So Jesus insinuates again that their father is not in fact Abraham but someone else.

These Jews respond in two ways. First, they insult Jesus. How dare he lecture them on "fathers" when it was common knowledge that Jesus had been conceived out of wedlock. People weren't stupid in those days. They could do the maths. Jesus was born less than nine months after Mary and Joseph were married. Evidently these Pharisees had been digging for dirt and had discovered this juicy gossip. On top of this, they up the stakes. It's not just Abraham they will claim as their father, but God himself.

Sons of Satan

Things have now reached crisis point. Jesus will say plainly what he has been building up to throughout this conversation. These Jews cannot claim God as their Father, because they have rejected Jesus. Jesus was sent by the Father to speak the truth of the Father. Therefore those who know and love the Father will accept and love the one he sends. Their rejection of Jesus indicates who their true father is - the devil.

Now this would be an insult even to someone who doesn't believe in the devil! How outrageous that Jesus would call these devout religious men sons of the devil! But they are proving it by their actions. They have the devil's attitude, and are carrying out the devil's agenda. The devil hates Christ and so do they. The devil is a murderer, and they are plotting murder in their hearts. The devil hates the truth and they have rejected the truth. The devil is a liar, and they have believed those lies. The devil is a slanderous accuser, and they are accusing Jesus of sin, even though they have no evidence. It is evident who is pulling the strings in their lives.

We might think that Jesus was being overly harsh here, but even his strong words here are evidence of his grace. He confronts their sin, and tells them plainly what their state before God

is. Though it is unpleasant to hear, unless they are told of their need to repent and believe in Jesus, then there is no hope for them at all. It is the same gospel message that the church is commissioned to take to the world. People are living in bondage to Satan, believing his lies, and acting unwittingly as his agents.

Sons of God

There is hope, though. Not everyone has to be a son of the devil. Those who receive the message of salvation Jesus offers can “belong to God”. The way we can come into God’s family is to repent of our rebellion against him and turn to receive the forgiveness and new life Jesus offers. Even this takes a work of God in our lives. Jesus says in verse 47 that it is God himself that enables us to hear and receive the good news of the Gospel of Jesus.

John 8:48-59

48 The Jews answered him, "Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon?" 49 Jesus answered, "I do not have a demon, but I honour my Father, and you dishonour me. 50 Yet I do not seek my own glory; there is One who seeks it, and he is the judge. 51 Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death." 52 The Jews said to him, "Now we know that you have a demon! Abraham died, as did the prophets, yet you say, 'If anyone keeps my word, he will never taste death.' 53 Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died? And the prophets died! Who do you make yourself out to be?" 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 But you have not known him. I know him. If I were to say that I do not know him, I would be a liar like you, but I do know him and I keep his word. 56 Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. 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?" 58 Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am." 59 So they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple.

Demon Possessed Samaritan

The conflict with the Jews has reached its climax. Jesus has plainly stated that their father is Satan, and all they can come up with in response is an outlandish insult. Jesus must be demon-possessed himself to be making these claims, and so theologically wrong that he must be a Samaritan. Rather than escalating the insults, Jesus responds to their point. He doesn't have a demon, and he honours God. They, on the other hand, are dishonouring him (and of course, as the one God has sent, they dishonour God by dishonouring Jesus).

But Jesus points out that he is not primarily looking for them to give him glory. God is the one they should be honouring, and God is the one who will judge them. And when they stand before God the judge, it will be whether they have accepted and obeyed Jesus' words that will determine whether they receive life or death.

Glorified by God!

The Jews are not impressed with this response and they take Jesus' words very literally. Abraham and all the prophets physically died, and now Jesus seems to be claiming that his followers would never die! It is more than obvious that Jesus is speaking of eternal life again, and so he doesn't directly respond to their deliberate twisting of his words.

Jesus instead responds by talking of glory. He does not plan to "glorify" himself; rather he lets the God the Father do so. This is the same God who these Jews claim to worship and glorify. How can they be giving glory to God, when they insult the one whom God is giving glory to by saying he is demon-possessed? Their real problem is that they do not know God at all. If they did, they would have been able to see who Jesus really was.

Born Before Abraham!

But how can Jesus so boldly claim that these Jews do not know God? How well does he know God himself? Jesus here gives one of the clearest statements about his pre-existence with the Father. He first says that Abraham himself, though living centuries before, was looking forward to when Jesus would come. But he then speaks in a strange way, he says "before Abraham was born, I am". This claims more than pre-existence, for in saying this, Jesus takes the name of God, "I AM", and applies it to himself! This was such an outrageous claim that the Jews wanted to

stone him to death on the spot, but it was not God's timing for Jesus to die and so his life was preserved at this point.

How are we to respond to this conversation? It teaches us some amazing truths about Jesus. He lived in heaven with God the Father before he ever lived on earth. He is the one who was prophesied about throughout the Old Testament. He is the climax of God's saving plan for the world. And most significantly, he is part of the godhead, equal with the Father and the Spirit. But also this exchange with the Jews reminds us that the message of Jesus is not going to be popular. Today's society may not object strongly to the concept of Jesus' divinity, but the idea that he is the *only* way to the Father is deeply unpopular. Though we try to share the good news of Jesus with as much love and grace as possible, we must prepare ourselves for some to angrily reject him, and determine in our hearts that we will not compromise on the truth.

John 9:1-7

1 As he passed by, he saw a man blind from birth. 2 And his disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" 3 Jesus answered, "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him. 4 We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work. 5 As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." 6 Having said these things, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva. Then he anointed the man's eyes with the mud 7 and said to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). So he went and washed and came back seeing.

Who Sinned?

The question these disciples asked Jesus is a common one. Why is this person suffering in this way? We encounter suffering and sickness on a daily basis in our world, and the question "why" is one that we all ask. If God is good, why is there suffering? The disciples had in fact gone a bit further than asking "why". They had made an assumption - that this man was blind as the punishment for a particular sin. But there was still a mystery in their minds. If this man had been *born* blind, then what sin could he have committed while still in his mother's womb to be punished so severely? Or could it be that his parents had sinned in some way, and this was the punishment. Either way, it all seemed unfair.

Jesus' answer reveals that they have grossly oversimplified the problem of suffering. It is true that sometimes a particular sickness is a direct consequence, or even punishment from God, for a particular sin. But that doesn't mean we can jump to conclusions. Jesus denies that this man's blindness is punishment for any sin in particular, either his parent's or his own. In fact, Jesus goes much further. Rather than simply saying "we don't know why", he sees the sovereign plan of God behind this apparently meaningless suffering. God was planning to turn this situation around for his glory.

This response from Jesus teaches us about our approach to suffering and sickness. We shouldn't be quick to point a judgemental finger. Suffering and sickness is indeed the result of the fallen sinful world we live in, but it is not by any means fair and proportionate in this life. Most of us live with far less suffering than we *deserve*, and all of us must face the judge of all the earth who will right every wrong and repay every deed. We should be humbled at God's mercy on us that he has spared us from similar suffering. But we also need to approach suffering with an attitude of hope. It presents an opportunity for the love and power of God to be demonstrated through us.

And this is exactly how Jesus approaches this situation. Rather than philosophise about *why* this situation has occurred, he is looking to ask his Father what he is doing. Jesus realises that he has work to be done, and that he needs to get on and do them, for time is short. This summarises the way Jesus went about his life on earth - he found out what the Father would have him do and say, and he got on and did it.

Light of the World

This man's physical blindness is a picture of the spiritual blindness of the Pharisees Jesus has just been debating. The light of the world is standing in front of them and they do not see it. Why? Because they are blind. Sin may not have been the cause of this man's blindness, but it is the cause of all spiritual blindness. We can't simply look at Jesus to see who he is without first receiving a miracle that opens our eyes.

There is no indication that this man asked Jesus to heal him. It appears to be simply a gracious act of kindness to him. However, the man was not passive in the process. First he had to let Jesus rub mud into his eyes, and second he had to go to the Pool of Siloam to wash. Both required him to exercise faith. How did he know that this wasn't some kind of cruel joke being played on a blind man? Without sight, he was vulnerable to all kinds of exploitation. But his faith in Jesus was wonderfully rewarded, as he came home seeing.

His healing is a picture of salvation. God reaches out to us in his grace, and we respond in faith. As we do so, our eyes are opened. We don't know how old this man was, but surely this day would have been like the start of a new life for him. Everything had changed. It is the same with regeneration - we begin a new life, a richer and fuller life, with new challenges, joys and opportunities. He had new work to do, too. He was no longer a beggar, but able to earn his own money and provide for himself and others.

John 9:8-17

8 The neighbours and those who had seen him before as a beggar were saying, "Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?" 9 Some said, "It is he." Others said, "No, but he is like him." He kept saying, "I am the man." 10 So they said to him, "Then how were your eyes opened?" 11 He answered, "The man called Jesus made mud and anointed my eyes and said to me, 'Go to Siloam and wash.' So I went and washed and received my sight." 12 They said to him, "Where is he?" He said, "I do not know." 13 They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. 14 Now it was a Sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. 15 So the Pharisees again asked him how he had received his sight. And he said to them, "He put mud on my eyes, and I washed, and I see." 16 Some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath." But others said, "How can a man who is a sinner do such signs?" And there was a division among them. 17 So they said again to the blind man, "What do you say about him, since he has opened your eyes?" He said, "He is a prophet."

It's Me

What happens after this man's healing would be comical if it wasn't so tragic. Jesus had performed a remarkable miracle. Sometimes, a cynic will dismiss a miracle, perhaps claiming that the healing didn't really take place, or even that the sickness wasn't genuine in the first place. But no one fakes being blind for their whole life! And a blind person doesn't stand a chance of fooling people into thinking he has been healed when in fact he remains blind! So the cynics must take a different approach. They deny that this is the same person! All the poor man can say in response is "it's me"!

Having been convinced that this really is the man who was blind, the Pharisees don't start praising God. They decide to have an inquest! Quite why they should have a problem with this wonderful event is beyond most people, but they were natural fault-finders, and all the more so when Jesus was involved. The man's testimony is admirable. He is straightforward, honest, and humble. He simply says exactly what happened, and freely admits to what he doesn't know.

He is a Prophet

One can sense the growing bewilderment of this man. He's having the best day of his life, and for some reason the Pharisees want to spoil the party. He's ready to celebrate! But they won't let him get away. They couldn't fault his version of events, so they decide to put him into a theological dilemma. What does he make of the man who healed him? The man who, by the way, doesn't obey the Sabbath. Now only the most pedantic, petty-minded of people could construe what Jesus had done as "breaking the Sabbath", but somehow these Pharisees managed to interpret Jesus making mud and telling a man to go and wash as having either "worked", or encouraged "work" on the Sabbath. So eager were they to dismiss Jesus, that any excuse, no matter how far-fetched, would do.

Their logic ran like this. A person who breaks the Mosaic law is not a godly person. And therefore, he could not be a prophet, because God would not be with a lawbreaker. The reasoning was so flawed that some in their own ranks found it hard to go along with. Jesus was undeniably performing signs. Surely they pointed to God being with him. Yet even the undecided Pharisees would not go so far as to take Jesus' side. The blind man however will not be cowed into saying what they want him to say. He neither rejects Jesus, nor expresses doubt. He says simply "he is a prophet". In other words: "I believe that God is with this man". This is the essence of becoming a Christian - we align ourselves with Jesus - "I'm with him".

This blind man knew almost nothing about the One who had healed him. But he knew enough to give his testimony that once he was blind and now he could see. And he also knew that the power of God had done this. His simple testimony stands as a glowing example of the type of witness believers are to give to a critical, cynical and even hostile world. We tell them that we may not know much, but what we do know is that Jesus, a man sent by God, has opened our eyes, and now we see.

John 9:18-27

18 The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight, until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight 19 and asked them, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?" 20 His parents answered, "We know that this is our son and that he was born blind. 21 But how he now sees we do not know, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself." 22 (His parents said these things because they feared the Jews, for the Jews had already agreed that if anyone should confess Jesus to be Christ, he was to be put out of the synagogue.) 23 Therefore his parents said, "He is of age; ask him." 24 So for the 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." 25 He answered, "Whether he is a sinner I do not know. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." 26 They said to him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?" 27 He answered them, "I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?"

Not Our Problem

The story gets even more farcical as the formerly blind man's parents are called in for interrogation. They seem terrified. They insist that all they know is that this is indeed their son who was born blind. They plead ignorance as to how he came to see and tell the Pharisees to ask him instead. This is quite disappointing. You would have hoped that they would be more willing to take sides with their son, but John reveals that it was fear that kept them from saying anything positive about Jesus.

The Jewish leaders had already made up their minds on Jesus. He was not the Christ (Messiah) because he didn't behave in the prescribed manner, or do things through the official channels. They wanted to ostracise anyone who supported the idea that Jesus was the Messiah. All this goes to show what a sham the trial was. These religious leaders weren't interested in having an open-minded investigation, this was an inquest designed to intimidate those who were siding with Jesus.

One Thing I Know

So with his parents having weaselled their way out of trouble, the blind man himself is hauled back in for a second time. They tell him straight what they want him to say - he is to declare that Jesus is a sinner. They warn that failure to affirm this would be dishonouring to God. His response shows that he refuses to be intimidated. He wants to get back to the facts - "I was blind, now I see". He will not play their theological games.

The Jewish leaders are clearly irritated by his refusal to comply and ask him to repeat his story about how Jesus healed him. Perhaps they think that it will become obvious to him that Jesus had somehow broken the Sabbath if he will only think about it long enough. But the man is in no mood to cooperate with their agenda. He has told them once, and that should be enough for them. Unless, of course, they are interested in becoming disciples of Jesus!

Courage and Witness

This passage highlights three groups of people, each with three different attitudes to Jesus. First, *the religious leaders*, who were hostile and prejudiced against Jesus. They had closed their minds and were not interested in the facts any more. Their hearts were hardened against the gospel. It is a matter of utmost importance that we guard our hearts against becoming hardened towards God. We need to cultivate a humble and open attitude towards him.

Second, *the blind man's parents* were weak and fearful. They knew deep down that Jesus had done a wonderful thing for their son, but the cost of aligning themselves with him was too great. Jesus warned elsewhere that there was a cost to following him. We need to count that cost and determine to take our stand publicly as followers of Jesus even if that means others will oppose and reject us.

Third, *the blind man* himself stands as shining example of courageous faith. He not only stands up for Jesus, but he is willing to be provocative and challenge others as to why they are not disciples. Though he still had much to learn about who Jesus was, he at least knew enough to give testimony to his power to heal.

John 9:28-34

28 And they reviled him, saying, "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 comes from." 30 The man answered, "Why, this is an amazing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. 31 We know that God does not listen to sinners, but if anyone is a worshiper of God and does his will, God listens to him. 32 Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a man born blind. 33 If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." 34 They answered him, "You were born in utter sin, and would you teach us?" And they cast him out.

Disciples of Moses

The formerly blind man has just cheekily suggested that the religious leaders must be interested in becoming Jesus' disciples since they can't stop asking questions about him. This did not go down at all well. They responded by insulting him, beginning to lose control of their tempers, which is often what happens when people recognise they are on the losing side of an argument. They decide that by this response the healed man has declared himself to be a disciple of Jesus. They scorn his choice of master, claiming that they are disciples of the far superior Moses. How ironic. If they truly understood the revelation Moses brought, they would know that he was in fact pointing to Jesus. They were not disciples of Moses at all.

A Man From God

The healed man now goes on the offensive. His courage is admirable - his parents were too scared to speak up on behalf of Jesus. He argues that God had clearly performed this healing as an answer to a prayer of Jesus. But if Jesus was the sinner the Jewish leaders made him out to be, then why on earth would God validate him by answering his prayer? Jesus must therefore be a godly man. The miracle he performed was no cheap trick. The healed man knew of no person born blind who had ever had their sight restored.

Again we see the Jewish leaders struggling to respond to the arguments they are hearing, so they insult him. They are quite clear that his blindness meant that he was utterly sinful even from the time he was born. And because of this they considered him unworthy of teaching them anything. Jesus has told us that this man's blindness was not in fact a punishment for sin. The Pharisees were wrong about that. They were right about something though. This man was sinful from birth. What they didn't know, was that so were they. All people are born with the same sinful nature and tendencies that every human being since Adam has had, and as a result, we are all born spiritually blind. This is why we need Jesus, the light of the world so much. Without him, we are in darkness. The religious leaders had shut their eyes to the light, and shut their ears to the truth, and so cut themselves off from hope.

Had they eyes to see it, these Pharisees would have noticed that by opening the eyes of a blind man, Jesus stood before them as one who fulfilled Isaiah's prophecies such as the one in Isaiah 35:5-6:

*Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped.
Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy.
Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert.*

John 9:35-41

35 Jesus heard that they had cast him out, and having found him he said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" 36 He answered, "And who is he, sir, that I may believe in him?" 37 Jesus said to him, "You have seen him, and it is he who is speaking to you." 38 He said, "Lord, I believe," and he worshiped him. 39 Jesus said, "For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind." 40 Some of the Pharisees near him heard these things, and said to him, "Are we also blind?" 41 Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would have no guilt; but now that you say, 'We see,' your guilt remains.

Do You Believe?

The man who had been born blind has emerged as something of a hero in the preceding verses. He stood up to the hatred and prejudice of the Jewish leaders and refused to agree that Jesus was a sinner. For his trouble, he was thrown out of the synagogue. But actually, despite his bold defence of Jesus, this man knew relatively little about him. So Jesus graciously sought him out again. Healing wasn't all that this blind man needed. In fact, it wasn't even his biggest need.

Jesus' question may strike us as a bit strange. "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" Jesus was asking not whether the healed man merely believed in the existence of someone called the "Son of Man". He was asking whether this man would be willing to trust and follow this person. The blind man's response indicates that he is ready to follow, he just needs to know who! It would seem that until this point, this man wasn't completely sure that he was talking to the one who had healed him. Jesus reveals himself by saying "you have seen him". This of course refers to more than physical seeing. This man's physical and spiritual eyes had been opened, enabling him not only to see Jesus the human being, but to see Jesus the son of God, the one who fulfils the Old Testament prophecies of a "Son of Man".

The man not only makes a profession of faith, but he responds in worship. This is the authentic response of all believers to the work of the Spirit in regeneration. We not only declare our new allegiance to Jesus, but we desire to honour him and bring him glory. The beginning of the Christian life is faith and worship, and the ongoing life of discipleship to Jesus is a continuation of that faith and worship.

Are We Also Blind?

So the story of the healed man has a wonderful happy ending, which is for him just the beginning of a new life as a disciple of Jesus. But for the Pharisees, the story has a more solemn ending. Jesus announces that his coming into the world brings not only salvation but *judgement*. This may surprise us, for Jesus has said previously that he hasn't come to judge, and that is indeed the case, for the time of final judgement must wait until his second coming. But in their rejection of Jesus, the Pharisees had brought judgement upon themselves. The blind man's eyes were opened to the light of Jesus, while these religious men were closing their eyes - making themselves blind.

The Pharisees are naturally offended at being called "blind", but that wasn't the real issue as far as Jesus was concerned. Their problem was not just that they were blind, but that they refused to admit it. How could they be healed if they insist they are not in need of healing? And how can they receive forgiveness if they insist they are guiltless? Confession of our sinful rebellion against God is an essential step to becoming a Christian, and a natural ongoing process in the Christian life. Only the proud and spiritually blind refuse to admit they are in need of God's

grace and forgiveness. He does not force them upon us, but as our hearts are softened by his Spirit, and we acknowledge our need of his forgiveness and restoration, then he mercifully and generously pours his saving grace upon us.

John 10:1-9

1 "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber. 2 But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. 3 To him the gatekeeper opens. The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. 4 When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. 5 A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers." 6 This figure of speech Jesus used with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. 7 So Jesus again said to them, "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 listen to them. 9 I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture.

The Shepherd and the Thief

In this passage, Jesus tells a story, which is one of his favourite ways of teaching. It sticks well in the mind, and causes you to think. Often you can reflect for quite some time on a parable and discover new things as you do so. In this one, Jesus talks about a sheepfold with a door, or gate. It's not a scene we are that familiar with, but we can get the sense of what Jesus is saying by thinking of an ordinary house in our street. If you see someone climbing in through a window, or over the fence, you know they are a robber, but a person who lives in the house simply goes in through the front door. If anyone is already in the house, they will open the door for the owner and welcome them in.

In Jesus' story the shepherd goes in via the gate, and then he calls his sheep to follow him. He knows all their names, and they know his voice. In my house I can call my children by name and they will come running to me. If someone who doesn't know them and doesn't even know their names tries to call them, they will not want to come. Indeed they may even be fearful and run away. Jesus promises that those sheep that are his will come. There is an implication that this sheep pen may contain some sheep that are not his, and do not follow.

I Am The Door

The imagery in this story is vivid, but it can be hard to figure out exactly what Jesus means. Is he the door or the shepherd? Who is the gatekeeper? Is the sheepfold the church? What does it mean that the sheep go out of the sheepfold? The Pharisees also found this parable hard to decipher. Thankfully, Jesus explains the main things he is teaching here. It is not so much that the story is an allegory, as that he is more generally using the imagery of shepherds and sheep to make a variety of points.

The first thing he draws out is that he is the *door to salvation*. It is only through him that people are protected and nourished. Sheep that follow a robber will find themselves being killed and eaten. Sheep that follow a shepherd will be led to good pastures. Here Jesus presents himself as the only way of salvation, and the only way to find fullness of life. His "sheep" will be kept safe by ignoring the voices of others and following only him. More than that, Jesus presents himself as one who is calling out a flock for himself. It will not include all those in the sheep fold (that is, Judaism), but those he calls he already knows by name, and they will respond.

We are also warned here that there are robbers and thieves. These represent all who would call God's people to follow anything or anyone but Jesus. They may come in the form of religious leaders, or temptations to live selfish hedonistic lifestyles, or with human philosophies. We must

take care that we are those who know the voice of Jesus and are able to reject the voice of another. We also need to help other Christians to cultivate discernment, that they would not be led astray. Ultimately, we know the Shepherd's voice because we spend time with him and we belong to him.

John 10:10-15

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 does not own 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 cares nothing for the sheep. 14 I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, 15 just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep.

Abundant Life

Continuing his analogy of a shepherd and sheep, Jesus now pictures himself as a shepherd. While a thief only has harm for the sheep in mind, the shepherd is concerned with their welfare. Jesus does not simply promise safety, but life in abundance. Following Jesus is the only true path to life. Even when following him is hard, we still have in him a fullness of life that cannot be found elsewhere. Like a good shepherd who leads his sheep to places where they can rest and feed, Jesus brings true rest and true satisfaction into our lives.

I Lay Down My Life

But Jesus doesn't only contrast himself with a thief. He also is better than a hired hand. A hired worker cares only for his pay, not the sheep. He will not risk his life to save the sheep, but will rather run away. The shepherd however will fight for his sheep, endangering his own life for their protection. Of course, Jesus the good shepherd would do more than merely risk his life - he would actually lay it down and die to save his sheep. At the cross we have the ultimate assurance of God's love for us. There was no price too great to pay to purchase our salvation.

I Know My Own

Jesus also speaks again of the way that he knows which sheep are his, and they know they are his. This reminds us of the solemn fact that not all are saved - only those who follow the Shepherd are. But also it speaks of the ongoing relationship the believer has with Jesus. We know that we belong to him, that he is our Shepherd, and so we respond to him as he guides us and leads us. Becoming a Christian is not a one-off transaction we can make and forget about, it is the beginning of a new life and a new identity as one who belongs to the Good Shepherd.

John 10:16-21

16 And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. 17 For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. 18 No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father.” 19 There was again a division among the Jews because of these words. 20 Many of them said, “He has a demon, and is insane; why listen to him?” 21 Others said, “These are not the words of one who is oppressed by a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?”

Other Sheep

Jesus continues using the imagery of himself as a good shepherd here, and what he says is quite surprising. He has already spoken of calling out sheep who are his from a larger flock. This most naturally seems to suggest that Jesus envisioned himself as calling out his disciples, his flock, from Judaism. But now he says there are other sheep. This points to the fact that Jesus would draw followers from other nations and religious backgrounds. They too will listen to his voice, and become part of his flock. Of course, Jesus never personally did large-scale preaching amongst the “Gentiles”. He would call these people through the witness of his disciples. Notice also that Jesus speaks of “one flock”. This refers to the church, those who follow Jesus as being one people of God, consisting of Jews and Gentiles.

I Lay Down My Life

Jesus again speaks of laying down his life, and draws out a number of important points that help us understand the meaning of his death. First, the Father loves Jesus for doing this. This sounds strange. Why would dying be a reason that the Father loves Jesus? The answer is that Jesus lays down his life in obedience to the Father, and more than that, he does it because he shares the Father’s love for those he was dying to save. Second, Jesus lays down his life to take it up again. The resurrection wasn’t an unexpected surprise for Jesus; he knew that it was part of the Father’s plan from the beginning. Though he would really have to go through the physical agony of death, it wasn’t hopeless for him - he knew that even at this darkest moment, a great victory was being won.

Third, Jesus’ life is not taken from him, he deliberately lays it down. Again, this surprises us, because on one level, we see him being killed by the Romans, having been betrayed and condemned by the Jews. They did indeed have a part to play in Jesus’ death, but ultimately, Jesus went willingly, knowing that even their hatred and cruelty would be the occasion for God’s amazing plan of salvation to come to pass. Finally, Jesus had authority both to lay down his life and take it up, because the Father had commanded him to. Anything God tells us to do we have authority to do as he is the highest authority. Jesus, even though he had authority in himself as the Son of God, here stands as a demonstration of how the human race should live, in total obedience to the Father’s command.

In these words we see Jesus’ astounding confidence in his Father. He knew that even though he was called to suffer unimaginably, he could trust his Father’s sovereign control, and resolutely set his face to do what he had been called to do. As the Good Shepherd, he lays down his life for the sheep, and as the good Son, he lays down his life for the Father.

Why Listen To Him?

Understandably, what Jesus had to say was hard for people to accept. Opinions were polarised. On the one hand, some decided he was demon possessed or insane. But others knew that the miracle of the opening of the blind man's eyes must point to something. Surely God was at work in Jesus.

C. S. Lewis famously boiled down responses to Jesus into three categories. You can decide he is demon possessed, insane, or divine; he is either bad, mad, or God. Of course, we don't like it when we are forced into a corner like this, forced to make our minds up; but faced with Jesus we must make a decision. We worship and follow, or we reject him. Even as Christians we must remind ourselves that we cannot claim to think he is the Son of God, unless we are willing to act as though he is, giving him our love and obedience.

John 10:22-30

22 At that time the Feast of Dedication took place at Jerusalem. It was winter, 23 and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the colonnade of Solomon. 24 So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly." 25 Jesus answered them, "I told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name bear witness about me, 26 but you do not believe because you are not part of my flock. 27 My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. 28 I give them eternal life, 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."

Are You The Christ?

Their question was fair enough. Jesus had spoken of himself as the "Bread of Life", the "Light of the World", the "Good Shepherd". But he had yet to say "I am the Christ". Why his reticence to answer a simple question? Perhaps the answer lies in the definition of terms. When they asked, "are you the Christ", what they were really asking was "are you the one who is going to do the things we think the Christ should do?" In other words "are you going to lead an army against the Romans and set the nation of Israel free and restore the kingdom?" The salvation that Jesus came to bring was deeper than merely from political oppression. He wanted to address a more fundamental problem. These Jewish leaders themselves needed to be saved from their own sin. Their blindness to this fact would cause them to miss what God was doing.

Are You My Sheep?

Jesus' response to their question is that he has already told them all he needs to, and has already done all that needs to be done to prove it to them. If they still refuse to believe, they never will. In fact, he has a question for them. Are they even his sheep? He was calling, yet his words seemed to be falling on deaf ears. This constitutes proof that they are not among those who are his sheep. They may be in the 'fold' of Judaism, but they are not in Jesus' flock.

My Sheep and My Father

Jesus doesn't remonstrate with them, pleading them to change their minds. He knows that his Father is in control. In a way that is a mystery to us, God already has chosen and foreknown those who will constitute his flock. Jesus therefore simply calls people to follow, knowing that not all will. Those that are his sheep will respond to his voice. What's more, he offers his sheep eternal life.

Not only does Jesus promise the gift of life, but he also speaks of the security of those who he gives it to. No one can snatch them out of his hand, and no one can snatch them out of the Father's hand. Both Jesus and the Father promise to hold on tightly to believers. This truth should be the source of peace and confidence for Christians. It also speaks of the unity of Jesus and the Father. They work together to bring salvation, with one accord and one purpose. Indeed, their unity is more than a mere alliance; Jesus here claims they *are* one. He has gone one better than claiming he is the Christ, here he has claimed to be equal with the Father, one with the God who is greater than all.

John 10:31-42

31 The Jews picked up stones again to stone him. 32 Jesus answered them, "I have shown you many good works from the Father; for which of them are you going to stone me?" 33 The Jews answered him, "It is not for a good work that we are going to stone you but for blasphemy, because you, being a man, make yourself God." 34 Jesus answered them, "Is it not written in your Law, 'I said, you are gods'? 35 If he called them gods to whom the word of God came—and Scripture cannot be broken— 36 do you say of him whom the Father consecrated and sent into the world, 'You are blaspheming,' because I said, 'I am the Son of God'? 37 If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me; 38 but if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father." 39 Again they sought to arrest him, but he escaped from their hands. 40 He went away again across the Jordan to the place where John had been baptizing at first, and there he remained. 41 And many came to him. And they said, "John did no sign, but everything that John said about this man was true." 42 And many believed in him there.

Blasphemy!

Jesus' claim to be one with the Father was more than these Jews could take. As far as they were concerned this was blasphemy. Indeed it would have been, if Jesus had been setting himself up as a *rival god* to the one true God. But that is not what Jesus had been claiming. So he presses them as to exactly what they object to. He has been going around doing good works that the Father has told him to. Should he be stoned for that?

Their response is that the works are irrelevant - it is what he said that causes them to stone him. Jesus' way of responding is surprising. He in essence says "don't be too quick to assume that someone is blaspheming." He backs this up with a quotation from Psalm 82. On face value, this should be considered blasphemy, yet it was written in the inspired Word of God. Jesus therefore is not backing down on his claims, rather, he is asking them to properly understand what claim is being made, before jumping to a conclusion.

Works of the Father

The way he asks them to judge is by looking at the "works" he is doing. Is he clearly doing the Father's work as he heals the sick and calls people to repentance and faith? Surely they must admit that the miracles he performed constituted "signs" pointing to who he was. Though it would be better if they believed on the basis of Jesus' words, he will accept faith that comes from seeing the works. If they understood either, they would see that Jesus was in the Father, and the Father was in him. This is essentially an elaboration of what he meant when he said "I and the Father are one." He didn't mean that he *was* the Father, nor did he mean that he simply was in agreement with the Father. No there was an essential unity between them.

Even this clarification simply served to incense the Jews further. They would have arrested and tried him there and then, but because of God's sovereign control, Jesus was preserved until the time was right. He retreated temporarily to the other side of the Jordan, away from those who rejected him. Yet many people came and sought him out. Thankfully, these were of a different mind to those Jews in Jerusalem. They saw where the signs pointed, and they also recognised that John the Baptist had prophesied correctly about Jesus. They had reached that point where they trusted Jesus enough to believe what he said about himself. That is in effect the beginning of becoming a Christian. There may be many things we are unsure of or don't know, but we have

at least got to the point where we are willing to trust Jesus enough to believe what he says about himself, and to obey what he tells us to do.

John 11:1-6

1 Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. 2 It was Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was ill. 3 So the sisters sent to him, saying, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." 4 But when Jesus heard it he said, "This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." 5 Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. 6 So, when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

Bad News

Jesus had "escaped" from the hostile environment of Jerusalem into relative tranquillity. But it wasn't long before there was trouble. This time it wasn't spiritual opposition, it was illness. Lazarus and his sisters were good friends of Jesus. Lazarus was clearly very ill, for the sisters sent an urgent message for Jesus to come. They firmly believed that Jesus could help. They had seen him heal others, but now they needed that healing themselves.

Jesus' response is surprising. We have no other examples of him refusing to heal someone immediately. Instead he appears to tell the messenger that Lazarus will recover naturally, so there should be no need for worry. How hard a test must this have been for their faith! When the messenger returned without Jesus, all he had was a message that it would not end in death. And yet by this point, Lazarus was even worse, and showing no signs of recovery. Maybe he had died already.

Waiting

There is no doubt in this passage that Lazarus, Mary and Martha were dear friends of Jesus. We are told that he loved them. We also see that they knew he loved him, and their own love for Jesus is evident. If ever there was a family that Jesus would want to drop everything and go to help it was this one. And yet he waits.

Jesus lived with a remarkable sense of purpose. He knew what the Father was calling him to do. But he also knew the Father's timing. He had left Jerusalem because he knew that his time to die had not come. And he waits here, because he knows that God has a different timing. "This illness does not lead to death" may at first glance appear to be a failed prophecy. But Jesus had a glimpse into God's future plan here. He knew that God would obtain more glory for himself through a miracle of resurrection than he would through simply another healing. This miracle would be the occasion to display yet another powerful sign concerning who Jesus was. This miracle would be the one that showed Jesus as the one in control even of death.

But all this is hidden to Lazarus and the sisters. For now, they must trust Jesus. The same is often true for us. We ask God to answer our prayers, and we seem to get no answer. Are we willing to trust him anyway, believing that even in our disappointments he is able to work things out for his glory? We should remind ourselves that with God, there is always hope, we have no need to despair, even in bleak circumstances. If we know the will of God, we will have purpose, and if we understand the timing of God, we will be able to persevere.

John 11:7-16

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 After saying these things, he said to them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him." 12 The disciples 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 meant taking rest in sleep. 14 Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus has died, 15 and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." 16 So Thomas, called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

Walking in the day

Jesus had been informed of the serious condition of Lazarus, yet he had refrained from heading straight there, and only now did he announce that they would in fact go to see him. The disciples are shocked. The last time Jesus had been in Jerusalem he had made people so angry that they wanted to kill him. The disciples knew that to head back into Judea was to head straight towards trouble.

Jesus' response is cryptic. He speaks of walking in the day rather than the night, because in the day there is light. When Jesus says things that are perplexing it is because he desires that people meditate on them, and think them through. Here he seems to be referring to the period of his life as "day", when he, the light of the world was there for all to see. A time of night was coming, when he would die, leaving those who killed him in darkness. Jesus knew that this night was soon to come, but there was yet a little more for him to do during the period of day.

Going to die

He then told his disciples that Lazarus had died, but the way he said it confused them. By saying that Lazarus had 'fallen asleep', he was not merely using a euphemism to avoid speaking directly of death. He deliberately chose this metaphor in order to hint at Lazarus' resurrection, which would be like a person awaking after a sleep. Lazarus was about to become a powerful demonstration of the fact that death does not mean the end, and that the resurrection power of God was at work in Jesus. The metaphor of "sleep" also fits well with what Jesus has just spoken concerning "day" and "night". The night of Jesus' own death would indeed be a dark one, and yet his death would be followed by the new dawn of resurrection.

Thomas' response is interesting. He views it as inevitable that Jesus will die if he returns to Judea, and therefore must choose whether he goes too. Thomas decides that he is willing to follow Jesus, even to death. How ironic that Thomas, having displayed this level of commitment and devotion, should be the one who struggled the most to understand that Jesus too had only "fallen asleep" to be awoken later by the resurrection power of God. Thomas is so similar to us in many respects - he expresses great faith one day and then reaches the depths of doubt another. And yet Jesus was glad to have him as a disciple.

John 11:17-27

17 Now when Jesus came, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. 18 Bethany 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 So when Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, but Mary remained seated in the house. 21 Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. 22 But even now I know that whatever you ask from 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. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, 26 and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?" 27 She said to him, "Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world."

Really Dead

Lazarus had been in the grave for four days. In other words he was *really* dead. His corpse would now be starting to rot. Not only that, but his family and friends were now well into the process of mourning and grieving. They were coming to terms with his death. But what would Mary and Martha think when they heard that Jesus had arrived? The messenger they had sent to call him when Lazarus was still alive had returned with the news that Jesus wasn't going to come because he didn't think the sickness would end in death. Had Jesus got it wrong this time? Had Jesus let them down?

Resurrection

It would appear that Mary was so overcome with grief that she couldn't immediately go to Jesus, but Martha went straight to him. On another occasion, Mary had been the one who went to Jesus, while Martha had other things on her mind (see Luke 10), but here the roles are reversed. We should let neither busyness nor grief and doubt hold us back from heading straight to Jesus.

Martha's words are a model of raw honest faith. She says honestly what she feels - Jesus could have averted this tragedy if only he had come. But this does not mean she has stopped believing in him. She still believes that Jesus has such a close relationship to God that whatever Jesus asks, the Father does. She probably is not hinting that Jesus should raise her brother from the dead - she has already begun to "let go". Rather, she is affirming that she still has implicit trust in Jesus. Her disappointment in this instant will not stop her from remaining a disciple.

Jesus then challenges her faith by telling her that Lazarus would rise again. Does she really believe that God has the power to raise the dead? Yes, she answers, she does believe in the last resurrection. She was of course right to believe in an end-time resurrection of the dead, but little did she know that her brother would be raised a lot sooner than that.

Do You Believe?

Martha has expressed here her faith that God can raise the dead. Jesus takes her faith in God and directs it towards himself. "I am the resurrection and the life". It is Jesus who offers and gives the eternal life and resurrection power of God to all who believe in him. He makes it clear that the life he gives does not exempt people from physical death, but that those who believe in him nevertheless have an indestructible life that can survive physical death, because of the resurrection power of God.

It was a lot for Martha to take in. Could she believe that it was only through faith in Jesus that she and Lazarus would participate in the final resurrection to eternal life? Jesus challenges her. "Do you believe this?" Martha's faith does not waver. She grasps that Jesus' claim to be able to raise the dead and give life must mean that Jesus is indeed the prophesied Messiah, the Son of God who would save the world.

It is important for all Christians to grasp the fact that Jesus is the resurrection and the life. In this life we are not promised comfort and ease. Indeed, Jesus warned that his followers would face opposition, persecution and even martyrdom. If he does not have the power to raise the dead then, following him is futile and foolish. But if we share Martha's faith that Jesus indeed is able to offer indestructible life to those who believe in him then we will follow him with joyful confidence, knowing that we are completely secure, no matter what may come.

John 11:28-37

28 When she had said this, she went and called her sister Mary, saying in private, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you." 29 And when she heard it, she rose quickly and went to him. 30 Now Jesus had not yet come into the village, but was still in the place where Martha had met him. 31 When the Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary rise quickly and go out, they followed her, supposing that she was going to the tomb to weep there. 32 Now when Mary came to where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet, saying to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." 33 When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled. 34 And he said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." 35 Jesus wept. 36 So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" 37 But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man also have kept this man from dying?"

Mary Wept

Martha has shown tremendous faith in her response to Jesus, but Mary has still not come. Jesus won't let her wallow alone in her sadness and sends Martha to get her. Though she hadn't come of her own accord, Mary's love for Jesus was such that she couldn't resist his call and she went straight out to find him, leaving those around her wondering what was going on. Her words are the same as Martha's - if only Jesus had been there, he could have prevented the tragedy. Unlike Martha she doesn't follow this up with an expression of faith, but simply falls down at his feet and cries. Both sisters' responses are appropriate. When faced with a tragedy we must respond like Martha in faith rather than despair, but this does not mean we are to be stoic or emotionless. Mary made no pretence of her grief before Jesus - she knew that he would accept her and not tell her to stop being pathetic.

Jesus Wept

But what of Jesus' response to this situation? The Greek word that describes his response can be translated in two different ways. It may simply mean that he was moved with *compassion*. Or it may mean that he was moved with *anger*, or perhaps frustration. Perhaps there is truth in both. He had great compassion as he saw the grief of his two dear friends. But also he saw a despairing hopelessness in many of the mourners. Did they not really believe in a future resurrection? If they did, should there not be some expression of hope, even in the midst of grief?

As Jesus was taken to the tomb, people started to whisper about him. They saw that Jesus had truly lost a dear friend in Lazarus. And yet this posed theological questions for them. How could it be that a man with such a clear gift of healing, who had healed a beggar he didn't even know, now not be able to heal such a close friend? Similar questions are asked by many today, as we hear testimony of God's miraculous healing power alongside seeing many others who suffer terrible illness and tragedy. How can we make sense of such things? Perhaps we will not make sense of it all this side of the final resurrection, but we can respond rightly.

Martha demonstrated a faith in Jesus that is not easily shaken. The crowds of mourners seem to have somewhat more fickle faith. They are already doubting. Perhaps this was the cause of Jesus' frustration. If they could only have faith in a God who would always do things exactly how they expected and wanted, then what would they do when Jesus died on the cross? How would they make sense of that? Through the eyes of faith, the cross is seen as the ultimate triumph of

Jesus, the place where his glory is displayed. But to those with a shallow faith, it would only serve to confirm their suspicion that he wasn't the Messiah after all.

John 11:38-44

38 Then Jesus, deeply moved again, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone lay against it. 39 Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, by this time there will be an odour, for he has been dead four days." 40 Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?" 41 So they took away the stone. And Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. 42 I knew that you always hear me, but I said this on account of the people standing around, that they may believe that you sent me." 43 When he had said these things, he cried out with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out." 44 The man who had died came out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

See the Glory of God

Jesus had claimed to be "the resurrection and the life" - that is to say, the one who is the source of resurrection and life for all who put their trust in him. Now he demonstrates that this is not mere talk. Again we are reminded that Lazarus is *really* dead. Four days in the tomb is as dead as it gets. His corpse would already be starting to rot. Martha, despite her evident faith in Jesus, now begins to reason with him - surely he cannot be serious. We should not be too hard on Martha - she did not have the benefit of hindsight to know what was about to happen. In some ways, we are like her. When Jesus asks something of us that seems strange or difficult, our immediate response is not to obey but to question.

But Jesus does not rebuke her. Instead, he offers her a second chance to obey. He reminds her of a promise he had made that she would see the glory of God if she believed. Seeing the glory of God in this instance was not about seeing some kind of bright light, but seeing a display of the awesome resurrection power of God that would bring glory to him. Martha responds wisely and with faith, she is willing to obey based on the promise of Jesus and orders the stone to be removed.

Lazarus, Come Out

At this point of course, Lazarus was still dead. Martha had taken her step of faith, but it was Jesus who would perform the miracle. It is interesting how he went about performing it. He first prayed. He was supremely confident that the Father had heard his request. In fact, the way he prays shows that he was praying more for their benefit than his own. Jesus wanted the onlookers to understand that he was working in cooperation and dependence on the Father, so that it would serve as an authenticating sign of his message, and would lead people to follow him.

But then he spoke. "Lazarus come out". This was not a request but a command. Lazarus had no choice but to obey, even if he would rather not have come back to the world of sin and suffering! For Lazarus' sisters, they had got what they wanted - their beloved brother returned to them. But it was now obvious that this was more than merely an act of compassion. This was a highly symbolic act - a sign from God. When Jesus says "I am the resurrection and the life", he is not joking or exaggerating. He is not even merely speaking 'metaphorically'. He means what he says. His voice can speak life to the dead.

For the Christian, Jesus will speak life to us twice. First, when we are born again, he commands spiritual life to awaken us. This life will never die, even though we remain, physically speaking, mortal. Second, when our decaying bodies finally die, he promises to resurrect them again, by

his powerful re-creative word. It will not matter even if our bodies have started to decompose, or completely disintegrated.

John 11:45-57

45 Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what he did, believed in him, 46 but some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. 47 So the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered the Council and said, "What are we to do? For this man performs many signs. 48 If we let him go on like this, everyone 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 understand that it is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish." 51 He did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, 52 and not for the nation only, but also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad. 53 So from that day on they made plans to put him to death.

54 Jesus therefore no longer walked openly among the Jews, but went from there to the region near the wilderness, to a town called Ephraim, and there he stayed with the disciples.

55 Now the Passover of the Jews was at hand, and many went up from the country to Jerusalem before the Passover to purify themselves. 56 They were looking for Jesus and 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 should let them know, so that they might arrest him.

Polarised Response

The raising of Lazarus from the dead was without doubt an outstanding miracle. One would expect that no one could object to the miracle, or would criticise Jesus, and yet the reaction of the people tells otherwise. There were some, who according to this passage, did believe in Jesus as a result of seeing this miracle. They saw the sign for what it was - a divine authentication of Jesus' claim to be the "resurrection and the life".

But there were others whose focus is elsewhere. They rush off to tell the Pharisees what had happened. Sadly, this does not appear to be a joyful reporting of what a wonderful thing Jesus has done. Rather, we get the impression that they are passing on the report so that the Jewish leaders can decide what ought to be done about this renegade miracle worker. As they gather to discuss the 'problem', their words betray the root cause of their opposition to Jesus - self-preservation. They knew that under Roman occupation, they were in a precarious situation. If the people decided that Jesus was the Messiah, it might cause them to rise up against the Romans which would doubtless result in a bloodbath, and their privileged position would be lost. It barely crossed their minds to ask whether Jesus was indeed the promised Messiah - they were too busy considering him as a threat.

The Prophecy

It is at this point that Caiaphas speaks up. As the high priest, he is expected to provide spiritual leadership. His idea is chillingly ruthless - Jesus should be sacrificed, to secure their place as religious leaders and Israel's freedom to worship. They feared more than anything that the Roman authorities would put an end to their temple worship. If Jesus had to die, to ensure they continued to benefit from the Pax Romana, then so be it.

The irony is obvious, and John points it out. Caiaphas' prophecy would come to pass, but in a way he could never have understood. Jesus would indeed die for the people. In fact, he would die not simply for the Jewish nation, but to save the "children of God who are scattered abroad".

As so many times in this gospel, we see that the good news of Jesus' salvation, though being offered first to the Jews, is intended to reach out to the whole world. As it happened, Jesus' death did not save the Jewish nation in the way Caiaphas hoped. Less than a generation later, the temple was destroyed in a brutal attack by the Romans. But Jesus' death came not to bring peace with the Romans, but peace with God.

The Passover

So the wheels were finally in motion. The Jewish leaders were unanimous that Jesus needed to die, and began to make preparations. Jesus had to withdraw into the wilderness for a final period with the disciples, no doubt preparing both himself and them for the ordeal that was to follow. But the Jews knew that it was only a matter of time before their opportunity came - the Passover was coming, and Jesus was known to be a faithful attendee. The religious leaders callously gave orders that anyone who knew where Jesus was should report him. This would have given a real test of faith to those who had recently become believers in Jesus. Where would their loyalties lie? At different times in church history, Christians have been put in similar dilemmas - do they act in faith and remain loyal to Jesus, or do they act in self-preservation and betray their fellow believers and Lord by capitulating to the hostile authorities. It is only those who realise that they can only truly save their lives by clinging to Jesus who will be able to stand firm. He is the resurrection and the life.

John 12:1-8

1 Six days before the Passover, Jesus therefore came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. 2 So they gave a dinner for him there. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those reclining with him at table. 3 Mary therefore took a pound of expensive ointment made from pure nard, and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. 4 But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (he who was about to betray him), said, "Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?" 6 He said this, not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief, and having charge of the moneybag he used to help himself to what was put into it. 7 Jesus said, "Leave her alone, so that she may keep it for the day of my burial. 8 For the poor you always have with you, but you do not always have me."

The Thankyou Meal

The time of Jesus' final journey to Jerusalem was fast approaching, but here we see him in more relaxed circumstances. It would seem that Lazarus and his sisters had invited Jesus round to honour him with a special meal, as a way of thanking him for bringing Lazarus back. It is interesting to see the way the two sisters express their gratitude. Martha prepares and serves a great meal, while Mary pours expensive ointment on Jesus' feet and wipes them with her hair in a way that would probably have been embarrassingly intimate at such an event. On a previous occasion, Mary and Martha had conflicted over who should be doing what, and Jesus had rebuked Martha for putting duty above devotion. Yet here there is no rebuke for Martha. Both sisters show their love for Jesus in a way appropriate to their different personalities.

Yet it was Mary whose act of devotion again caused controversy. The ointment she poured out was so valuable that it would be considered wasteful to be poured out in this way. And perhaps in one sense it was. But Jesus refuses to criticise her, and in fact sees what she has done as a profoundly symbolic act. Maybe Mary had been planning to use this perfume on Lazarus' body, and her pouring it out on Jesus was a way of thanking him for giving her brother back. What she didn't realise was that while Lazarus had been restored to life, Jesus would soon be dead himself. And she again would head to a tomb with perfume in hand only to find that yet again she didn't need to use it.

Jesus and the Poor

At first sight, Judas' objection seems valid. He appears to be concerned about the poor, and openly criticises Mary. It is right that we call Christians and churches to account for whether they use their money wisely and generously, but we should beware a hypocritical and judgmental attitude. Jesus saw right through Judas. In effect he says "So you're concerned about the poor are you? Good. You are going to have plenty of opportunities to help them - they will always be around." He was challenging Judas to live a life characterised by generosity to the poor, not to simply kick up a fuss when money wasn't spent in the way he deemed best.

In fact, Judas' motives were even more sinister. He helped himself to money from the disciples' moneybag - money that had been directly allocated to helping the poor! Though Mary was not one of the chosen twelve disciples, we see here a true disciple contrasted with a false one. The false one appears respectable, wise and prudent, the true one appears to behave impolitely and indulgently. Yet the Lord sees the heart. We should remember this when tempted to make judgements on one another.

John 12:9-16

9 When the large crowd of the Jews learned that Jesus was there, they came, not only on account of him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. 10 So the chief priests made plans to put Lazarus to death as well, 11 because on account of him many of the Jews were going away and believing in Jesus. 12 The next day the large crowd that had come to the feast heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. 13 So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, crying out, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!" 14 And Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it, just as it is written, 15 "Fear not, daughter of Zion; behold, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt!" 16 His disciples did not understand these things at first, but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written about him and had been done to him.

Fame and Notoriety

Jesus of course couldn't do anything now without attracting attention. He was a wanted man, and Lazarus had also become a minor celebrity. News of a miraculous return from the dead would have spread fast, and doubtless all sorts of people would want to find out for themselves what exactly had happened. As for the chief priests, they now had a double problem. Would killing Jesus be enough to quell the messianic fervour that was building? Would they have to get rid of Lazarus too?

Poor old Lazarus - you can't help wondering whether being raised from the dead wasn't the great blessing for him that it had been for his sisters! Jesus warned his disciples that they would face opposition and persecution, and we see here that already coming true. Lazarus wasn't looking for trouble - he was simply willing to testify to what Jesus had done for him, and yet trouble was coming to him. Still, at least Lazarus knew that death would not be the end for him the second time either. The chief priests may indeed be able to have him killed, but his trust was firmly in Jesus - the one who was the resurrection and the life.

Homecoming King

At last the time had come for Jesus' final journey into Jerusalem. As so often in this gospel, we see tremendous symbolism in both what Jesus did (no doubt intentionally), and what the people did (probably less intentionally). Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey - making a powerful prophetic statement that he was a king, coming in peace. The crowds welcomed him with great enthusiasm, shouting "Hosanna", which indicated their belief that Jesus was the one through whom God would bring salvation to his people. Of course, the salvation they had in mind was altogether a different kind to the one Jesus was bringing. They thought they were welcoming the Messiah who would defeat the Romans and become King of a re-established nation state of Israel. What they were witnessing was indeed the Messiah but his battle was against evil and his kingdom was going to be far greater than the boundaries of a single nation. The crowds therefore fulfilled Zechariah's prophecy¹⁴ in one sense, but also were prophetically acting out another homecoming of the King that is as yet still future - when Jesus returns again, and will be acknowledged by all as the Saviour and King of the world.

¹⁴ See Zechariah 9:9-10

John 12:17-26

17 The crowd that had been with him when he called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to bear witness. 18 The reason why the crowd went to meet him was that they heard he had done this sign. 19 So the Pharisees said to one another, "You see that you are gaining nothing. Look, the world has gone after him." 20 Now among those who went up to worship at the feast were some Greeks. 21 So these came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and asked him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." 22 Philip went and told Andrew; Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. 23 And Jesus answered them, "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 Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. 26 If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there will my servant be also. If anyone serves me, the Father will honour him."

Mr Popular

After Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, even more people wanted to meet him. At the time of the Passover, hundreds of thousands of people would be in Jerusalem, and would be very keen to get to hear Jesus for themselves, or at least to hear eye-witness reports of the raising of Lazarus. This irritated the Pharisees greatly. Their plans to discredit Jesus were going badly wrong, and in their own words "the whole world" was going after Jesus.

It is here that we get a glimpse of quite how far Jesus' reputation had spread. Some visiting Greeks had heard of him, and wanted a private audience with Jesus. They found Philip and Philip then went with Andrew to see if Jesus would come and speak to these Greeks. Now the normal picture we have of Jesus from the gospels is that he always made time for the people who wanted to see him, but in this instance he doesn't appear to be willing. Perhaps it was because time was short, or maybe he simply had no interest in being a celebrity. Whatever the reason, he takes this opportunity to give some solemn teaching about his impending death and what it means to be a disciple. In fact, it is not until his death, that these Greeks will truly be able to "see" him anyway.

Lose Your Life

First, he indicates that "the hour has come" in which he will be glorified. He knew that his death was imminent, but also believed that it would be the moment in which he would be "glorified" - that is to say, that he would reveal God's glory to an extent never before seen on the earth. In Jesus' mind, the cross was not going to be a defeat, but a glorious victory.

Second, he uses an illustration of a grain of wheat, that must die and fall into the ground before new life comes and much fruit is produced. This would serve as an image of what his death would do. It was only after he died and was buried that much new life would result through his resurrection and the salvation he brought.

Third, he warns those who "love their life" that they will end up losing it, while those who "hate their life" will keep it. It would seem that he knew that to identify with Jesus would be to risk your own life. Maybe the family and friends of Jesus' disciples would say "Do you hate your life? Why do you admit to being a disciple of Jesus? Don't you know you will end up getting executed?" While most followers of Jesus today don't suffer the same mortal danger, the same love of this temporal life can be a huge stumbling block to those who would follow Jesus. We need to put to death a self-centred mindset and live to follow Jesus.

Fourth, he says that those who *serve* him, that is to say, his disciples, will *follow* him, which is to say that they will follow the same path as he did. They too must die like a seed in the ground, and be raised to new life. Just as the Father honoured Jesus and raised him to life, so Jesus promises that those who serve him, will be honoured by the Father. The Christian life is presented here by Jesus as a hard road to follow, but one worth following because it ends in glory and honour.

John 12:27-36

27 "Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? But for this purpose I have come to this hour. 28 Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven: "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." 29 The crowd that stood there and heard it said that it had thundered. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him." 30 Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not mine. 31 Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out. 32 And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." 33 He said this to show by what kind of death he was going to die. 34 So the crowd answered him, "We have heard from the Law that the Christ remains forever. How can you say that the Son of Man must be lifted up? Who is this Son of Man?" 35 So Jesus said to them, "The light is among you for a little while longer. Walk while you have the light, lest darkness overtake you. The one who walks in the darkness does not know where he is going. 36 While you have the light, believe in the light, that you may become sons of light." When Jesus had said these things, he departed and hid himself from them.

Hour of Glory

Just because Jesus knew that his impending death would reveal his glory didn't mean that he was able to laugh off the pain he would face. He knew full well that he was about to suffer terrible agony. He freely admits that he would love to avoid dying in this way, and yet he knows that this "hour" was the very purpose for which he had come. He knew that praying for God to save him would be praying against his Father's will. Rather he prays that through his obedience, the Father would be glorified.

At that moment, a remarkable thing happened. The audible voice of God spoke, saying "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." God indicates here that he is pleased with the obedience of his Son, and will indeed get the glory from what is about to happen. The incident was so strange that people struggled to explain it - perhaps it had thundered. Others imagined that they were hearing the voice of an angel. Yet Jesus told his hearers that the voice from heaven was for their benefit. It would powerfully underline the fact that Jesus' death was no accident - it was God's ordained means of saving his world, and bringing glory to his name.

Hour of Judgment

Jesus also indicated that this was a time of judgment of the world, when the ruler would be cast out. Clearly he is referring to Satan as the "ruler" of this world. At the cross, Satan would be dethroned, and Jesus exalted as the rightful king. But the judgment that would fall at the cross did not in fact fall directly on the world. Rather, it fell on Jesus, the one who was bearing the sin of the world. The cross was the place where God's judgement against sin fell not on the sinners but on the one who knew no sin who was made to be sin for us. And yet at the same time the cross is also the place where those who will not accept Jesus as their Saviour store up judgement for themselves.

Jesus was not unaware that he would be crucified. He knew that this most horrible of modes of execution was to be his fate. Yet he speaks of it as being "lifted up" - though the Romans would lift him up to die in shame, at the same time God would lift him up in honour. Those who had eyes to see his glory would be drawn to him. When he speaks of "all men" being drawn to him, here perhaps is his response to the Greeks whose desire to see Jesus had prompted this discourse. They would indeed get to "see Jesus", because God was about to lift him up for all to

see, Jews and Gentiles. As a result of the cross and resurrection, the good news of Jesus would go out to the ends of the earth, drawing people from every nation.

Hour of Darkness

The crowd manage to understand that Jesus is referring to his death, and this poses a dilemma for them. If Jesus is going to die, then clearly he is not the Messiah, because they believed that the Messiah would never die. Perhaps then Jesus is not the “Messiah”, but a different end times figure, the “Son of Man”. Or maybe Jesus is calling someone else “the Son of Man” and it is that person who will die.

Jesus didn’t answer them directly on the subject of being the Messiah, as had been his policy all along. There was far too much misunderstanding of what the Messiah should do for him to identify fully with that role. Rather, he will demonstrate what it means to be the Messiah. He warns them that they will have “the light” only a little while longer. A time of “darkness” is coming. He is challenging them to put their faith in him now. Jesus is referring to himself as the light. If they hesitate to believe now while they can see him, how will they come to faith in him after he is gone? The same urgency to believe while there is still time should be present as the church takes the good news of Jesus to a world still in darkness.

John 12:37-43

37 Though he had done so many signs before them, they still did not believe in him, 38 so that the word spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: "Lord, who has believed what he heard from us, and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?" 39 Therefore they could not believe. For again Isaiah said, 40 "He has blinded their eyes and hardened their heart, lest they see with their eyes, and understand with their heart, and turn, and I would heal them." 41 Isaiah said these things because he saw his glory and spoke of him. 42 Nevertheless, many even of the authorities believed in him, but for fear of the Pharisees they did not confess it, so that they would not be put out of the synagogue; 43 for they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God.

Blind Eyes

Why was it that the Pharisees and religious leaders persisted to oppose Jesus, even after he had performed so many miracles? How could they not see where all these signs were pointing? John attempts to answer this for us, and the answer is not quite what may expect. He first shows that Jesus was not the first man sent from God to be rejected. Isaiah, and indeed most of the prophets before him, found that their message was rejected. It wasn't that people had not heard the message, or that they hadn't seen God reveal his power. The issue was their stubborn unbelief.

Isaiah speaks of the people's unbelief in a way that is uncomfortable for many to accept. He claims that God himself has blinded peoples' eyes and hardened their hearts. This ties in with many other places in John's gospel where the sovereignty of God in salvation is emphasised. This should cause us to be grateful for God's grace in softening our hearts, as well as to pray that he might open the eyes of many more to see the truth.

Glory From Man

Isaiah spoke as one who had seen God's glory, and having seen it, could live for nothing else. Even though he was not accepted by people in the way he would have liked, what he wanted more than anything was to please God. Sadly, the people of Jesus' day were not quite so sure whose glory they were living for. Some had seen enough to begin to believe that Jesus was the Messiah, but they were afraid to publicly acknowledge it. The opinions of the Pharisees and their own reputation mattered more to them than doing the right thing.

We don't want to be too harsh on these Jews. To be put out of the synagogue would mean social ostracism for them. But John is telling us that if they really had seen Jesus revealing the glory of God, just as Isaiah had, then they would be ready to fully commit. As it is they display half-hearted faith. A similar temptation exists for modern Christians, even if the stakes are not as high - will we publicly identify ourselves as believers in Jesus, or will we prefer the praise of men and keep our light hidden? And if we remain silent, what does this say about our "faith"?

John 12:44-50

44 And Jesus cried out and said, "Whoever believes in me, believes not in me but in him who sent me. 45 And whoever sees me sees him who sent me. 46 I have come into the world as light, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness. 47 If anyone hears my words 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 The one who rejects me and does not receive my words has a judge; the word that I have spoken will judge him on the last day. 49 For I have not spoken on my own authority, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment--what to say and what to speak. 50 And I know that his commandment is eternal life. What I say, therefore, I say as the Father has told me."

The One Who Sent Me

Jesus now gives one final appeal for people to believe in him. He emphasises that in accepting him they are accepting God the Father, and by implication, to reject him is to reject the Father. Therefore to "believe" in Jesus is an act of faith or "believing" in God himself. Even more strikingly, Jesus presents himself as the one who reveals the Father. Those who wish to "see" God can do so by "seeing" Jesus. This of course is more than a literal physical seeing of Jesus in the flesh. Jesus again calls himself a "light" - he is bringing revelation and illumination - those who accept him and his message are those who "see", while those who reject him are in spiritual "darkness".

Judgment and Salvation

But if rejecting Jesus meant rejecting God, then wouldn't it have been better if he never came? Absolutely not. Jesus explains that his purpose in coming was not judgment but salvation. His coming is good news for those who do receive him - because they are in need of a saviour. For those who reject him, his coming simply confirms the condemnation that is already headed their way. This is what Jesus refers to as "the last day" - a coming final judgment, where salvation will rest upon whether we trusted in God - which is determined by how we responded to Jesus.

On what authority does Jesus claim that he is able to offer eternal life? He answers by pointing us back to his Father. Jesus was very clear that he had come to do only what his Father told him to do, and to say only what his Father had told him to say. The desire that people should be saved was not Jesus' initiative against the better judgement of his Father - no it was in the heart of God the Father himself to send a saviour that people would be rescued and redeemed and be able to stand on "the last day".

John 13:1-11

1 Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to 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, when the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray him, 3 Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going back to God, 4 rose from supper. He laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist. 5 Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around him. 6 He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, do you wash my feet?" 7 Jesus answered him, "What I am doing you do not understand now, but afterward you will understand." 8 Peter said to him, "You shall never wash my feet." Jesus answered him, "If I do not wash you, you have no share with me." 9 Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" 10 Jesus said to him, "The one who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but is completely clean. And you are clean, but not every one of you." 11 For he knew who was to betray him; that was why he said, "Not all of you are clean."

His Hour Had Come

At this point we transition into the final section of the gospel of John. John has deliberately chosen to devote a large portion of his available space to discussing the events of the final days of Jesus' life. Here, we are told that Jesus' "hour" had come and he knew it. This underlines for us the fact that God was in total control of what was happening, and that it was all according to plan. Jesus would eventually return to his Father, but not before sacrificing his life on the cross. This powerfully demonstrates his love for the people in the world. His love for them was not in doubt, but here we see the full extent of it - his love kept going right to the end, even at the point where he might have been tempted to give up and walk away.

Even though the cross was in the eternal plan of God, we see another side to the story in verse 2. The devil was planning something as well. It would seem that he was ignorant of the great victory that would be won by Jesus going to the cross, and saw it simply as an opportunity to kill the Son of God. The devil is depicted as sowing the seeds of betrayal into Judas' heart. Yet Judas remained a human being with moral responsibility. The tragedy is that he didn't resist the devil and was complicit in his evil plan.

Washing the Feet

We might have expected Jesus to be preoccupied with his own troubles, but his selflessness shines through in all he does and says on this evening. He starts off by taking a towel and a basin of water and washing the feet of his disciples. By taking a job that the lowest of servants would take, he powerfully enacted a parable of the way in which he was about to humble himself yet further, in loving service of his followers.

Of course, at the time, the symbolism was lost on the disciples, and as usual it was Simon Peter who spoke his mind. It didn't seem right to him that Jesus, their esteemed teacher, should do such a menial task. It offended Peter's pride and, doubtless thinking this was a noble statement, said that Jesus would never wash his feet.

Jesus response was to warn Peter "If I do not wash your feet, you have no share in me". Obviously something deeper and more symbolic was being intended. The washing of the feet

represents the forgiveness and cleansing that Jesus' sacrificial death would provide. If we are too proud to receive forgiveness from Jesus, then we cannot share in the new life he offers.

Peter typically responds by going to the opposite extreme, requesting that Jesus wash him completely. Jesus takes the opportunity to make another, more subtle point. Once you have had a bath, you still need to wash, but only the parts that have accumulated dust. It would seem that Jesus uses the idea of having a bath as an analogy for what happens when we are saved - we are washed clean of all our sin. This is powerfully symbolised in baptism. But that is not to say that there is no need for an ongoing cleansing and washing - for we all continue to sin and are sinned against. Salvation is not a one-off request for forgiveness and then we head off and do our own thing. No, becoming a Christian is the beginning of a lifetime spent with Jesus, following him, and allowing him to wash our feet when necessary.

The tragedy of this section of the story is Judas. He had his feet washed by Jesus, but he had never had that "bath". There is a decisive moment that everyone must pass through if they are to receive the salvation that Jesus offers, but Judas had bypassed that. He stands as a stark reminder that going through the motions of religious ceremony is futile.

John 13:12-20

12 When he had washed their feet and put on his outer garments and resumed his place, he said to them, "Do you understand 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, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. 15 For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you. 16 Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. 17 If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them. 18 I am not speaking of all of you; I know whom I have chosen. But the Scripture will be fulfilled, 'He who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me.' 19 I am telling you this now, before it takes place, that when it does take place you may believe that I am he. 20 Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever receives the one I send receives me, and whoever receives me receives the one who sent me."

I have given you an example

It is interesting to see the two different ways that Jesus applies his symbolic action of washing the disciples' feet. It has already been used as an illustration of the cleansing from sin that his death will bring. Viewed in that way, this is something that Jesus does (and only Jesus can do). But Jesus now tells his disciples that in his action of washing feet, he was also setting an example to be followed.

He challenges them about the names that they call him by - specifically "Lord" and "Teacher". If he is truly their Lord, then they will obey him, and serve him. And if he is truly their teacher, they will learn from him and follow his example. So if Jesus was willing to humble himself and serve his disciples in this way, then we too should be those willing to humbly serve others.

But exactly how were they to obey this command to wash one another's feet? Perhaps next time they met for a meal, one of them might take the initiative to wash the feet of the others. This would certainly be a provocative act of witness in their culture - how strange for a community of people who are willing to wash one another's feet. But surely Jesus intended for a wider application of this principle. We follow the example of Jesus whenever we see a need and humbly offer ourselves to meet that need, even though it is "not our job". If this type of loving service were to characterise the Christian community, it also would serve as a powerful witness to our different values as we follow the Servant King.

Jesus' logic is compelling. If our Lord and Master was willing to wash people's feet, then no task is too menial for us, if it is done in loving service. It is not enough merely to acknowledge that this is how we ought to behave. The blessing comes as we actually do this. It seems counter-intuitive, but the promise is that the path to blessing is not through having others serve us, but by humble service of others.

I know whom I have chosen

There is a shadow over this whole scene though, and it is the imminent betrayal of Jesus by Judas. Jesus' words may shock some. He not only knew that he would be betrayed and the identity of his betrayer, but he reminds them that he is the one who had "chosen" each of the disciples and he knew exactly what he was doing. Once again we see the mystery of divine sovereignty alongside the reality of human responsibility. Judas may have made his choice to betray Jesus, but Jesus had chosen Judas as a disciple, knowing even back then what his true nature was.

More than that, the betrayal by Judas had been spoken of long ago in the Scriptures. In fact, this was the explanation for why Jesus would have ever chosen someone such as Judas in the first place. The fact that Judas was there at this last meal, having his feet washed by Jesus, and sharing from the same loaf and meal as him makes his treachery all the more shocking. But Jesus knew all that was happening, and was deliberately indicating that knowledge, not in the hope that somehow Judas would change his mind, but rather that his disciples could look back and understand that it was all according to the plan and foreknowledge of God.

Jesus closes this section with a saying that seems at first to be a little out of place. He talks about “receiving” those he sends and the one he has been sent by. It is an explanation of how we receive the gospel message. As Jesus’ disciples “received” him by believing his message and entrusting their lives to him, they were actually receiving God himself, who had sent Jesus. And in turn, when they took the gospel out to those who had never met Jesus in the flesh, people accepted Jesus by accepting the message of those he sent. Thus the world is to be filled with disciples of Jesus as we take on the task of faithfully spreading the good news of the gospel.

John 13:21-30

21 After saying these things, Jesus was troubled in his spirit, and testified, "Truly, truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me." 22 The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he spoke. 23 One of his disciples, whom Jesus loved, was reclining at table close to Jesus, 24 so Simon Peter motioned to him to ask Jesus of whom he was speaking. 25 So that disciple, leaning back against Jesus, said to him, "Lord, who is it?" 26 Jesus answered, "It is he to whom I will give this morsel of bread when I have dipped it." So when he had dipped the morsel, he gave it to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot. 27 Then after he had taken the morsel, Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, "What you are going to do, do quickly." 28 Now no one at the table knew why he said this to him. 29 Some thought that, because Judas had the moneybag, Jesus was telling him, "Buy what we need for the feast," or that he should give something to the poor. 30 So, after receiving the morsel of bread, he immediately went out. And it was night.

One of you will betray me

Jesus now becomes explicit about what he knows will happen. He will be betrayed, and by one of his own disciples. We are told that he became "troubled in his spirit". His foreknowledge did not in any way mean that he could become emotionally detached. Just as the physical pain of the cross was intense, so the betrayal by a trusted friend caused him emotional anguish.

The disciples didn't have a clue who Jesus' betrayer could be. Judas wasn't some kind of monster. He appeared to be just as committed a follower of Jesus as any of the others. Sure he had his failings, but which of the disciples didn't?

Who is it?

Most commentators think that the "disciple Jesus loved" refers to the apostle John, author of this letter. He chooses not to identify himself directly, and this description of himself shows his close relationship to Jesus. Was he saying that he was Jesus' favourite disciple? Probably not. What it does indicate is that John was especially aware of how much Jesus loved him. Judas, by contrast, appears to be unaware or unmoved by Jesus' love for him.

Jesus' statement in verse 26 followed by his action in verse 27 at first glance may appear that Jesus is very bluntly pointing out Judas as the betrayer. With hindsight, this seems obvious to us. But on the night, the disciples still had no idea of the magnitude of the events that were just about to unfold. They probably took Jesus' words to mean, "Someone here, who I am eating with tonight, is the one who will betray me".

The Moneybag

So when Jesus handed the bread to Judas, the disciples may not have grasped the full significance of the action. In fact, their misreading of the situation is admitted by John. They assumed that Judas got his bread first because he needed to go and do some kind of administrative duty for Jesus. After all, Judas had the moneybag. Treasurer is the job you give to the person you trust most, right?

The misunderstanding also reveals something interesting about Jesus' spending habits. The two most likely things were food for the feast, or giving to the poor. Clearly spending money on enjoying a good meal with friends was not something Jesus had any objection to. And equally clearly, giving to the poor was such a habitual action of Jesus that his disciples could assume he was doing it even at this late hour in the evening.

These two forms of spending show a balance, not in terms of money spent on 'me' versus money spent on others, but between showing love to those we are close to and showing love to strangers. Jesus' eating was not for his own self-indulgence, but always with a view to teach and bless those with which he shared his meals.

Do It Quickly

Jesus' words to Judas are shocking - do it *quickly*. He makes no attempt to plead with Judas. Indeed, maybe the offer of the bread was the final offer of friendship. With Judas determined to do what he was going to, Jesus seems at peace with the fact that this will be his final day. He is not desperately trying to buy himself extra time. He has accomplished what he needed to already, and the final climatic moment of his ministry was coming into view. He knew that only hours remained before his arrest, and he was going to use much of that time to give some final teaching to his disciples, words that they would treasure for the rest of their lives.

"It was night." Most commentators agree that this is not merely a casual observation. John sees the night as symbolic. We are at the darkest moment of the history of the world. The moment where evil appears to triumph and hope appears to be lost. But morning light will eventually come.

John 13:31-38

31 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 glorify him at once. 33 Little children, yet a little while I am with you. You will seek me, and just as I said to the Jews, so 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: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. 35 By this all people 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 him, "Where I am going you cannot follow me now, but you will follow afterward." 37 Peter said to him, "Lord, why can I not follow you 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, the rooster will not crow till you have denied me three times."

Glory

After Judas leaves, Jesus begins by announcing, in a slightly cryptic manner, that a moment has come in which both Jesus (the Son of Man) and God the Father will be glorified. In particular, God would be glorified because of what the Son does, and will respond in kind by giving glory to the Son. Jesus also indicates that this vindication will happen "at once".

What is meant by this talk of glory? Isn't the cross the exact opposite of glory - the humiliation of Jesus that preceded his exaltation? The answer lies in the fact that the cross represents the high point of Jesus' obedience to his Father, the culmination of God's plan of salvation and the ultimate demonstration of the love of God for the world. The glory is there to see for those who have eyes to see it. It is also possible that Jesus refers to his resurrection and ascension in this saying, where he will be more clearly seen to be glorified in full view of his disciples.

You Cannot Come

There is another enigma in this next saying of Jesus. He tells the disciples he will soon leave. Obviously he knows his death is imminent, but is he referring to just the next three days, or is he referring to his departure from earth after his resurrection? Most likely there is a dual purpose in his discussion on this evening, first to prepare them as best as possible for the coming three days, but with a long-term goal of telling them things they need to know for the period after his ascension into heaven.

Later, Jesus indicates to Peter that he will eventually follow. This makes it a little clearer that Jesus is referring to his death, and that Peter too will lose his life in a similar way. But Peter's time to die had not yet come. These words, which he misunderstood initially, would no doubt comfort him in the future, as he realised that the time of his death was under the sovereign control of God.

A New Commandment

Given that a climactic moment was coming which would result in Jesus' glorification and departure, Jesus proceeds to give them a "new" commandment. Again, it takes us by surprise, because there is nothing especially "new" about the command to love one another. So in what sense was it new?

The most likely explanation comes from the fact that Jesus gives himself as an example of the type of love his disciples are to show to one another. Though they do not know it yet, he is about

to demonstrate the full extent of his love by laying down his life for their salvation. This model of sacrificial love forms the basis for the command to his disciples.

Jesus indicates that the love between his disciples would have an evangelistic impact. This type of love would be recognized by a watching world. In fact, this kind of love serves as an authenticating mark of a true Christian. A disciple is someone who learns from and emulates their teacher. Someone who does not love others sacrificially cannot claim to be a disciple of Christ.

It is interesting that Peter claims that he will lay down his life for Jesus. A noble intention, but Jesus warns Peter that he will fail to come good on that promise. It will be Jesus who lays down his life for Peter, and Peter will later need to receive forgiveness for his denial of Christ. It is a reminder of our human weakness, that despite what we would like to think, we often fall well short of the example of sacrificial love set by Jesus. He offers us forgiveness for our failure and his Spirit to help us overcome our weakness.

John 14:1-6

1 "Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. 2 In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? 3 And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. 4 And you know the way to where I am going." 5 Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can 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 except through me.

Let not your hearts be troubled

It hasn't really sunk in yet. Jesus has told the disciples more than they can appreciate, and they have clearly been shaken by his startling predictions. But he doesn't want them to give way to anxiety or fear. They can be confident, because both Jesus and his Father can be trusted. In saying this, Jesus draws a parallel between himself and God. He is to be trusted and believed in the same way that God is.

I go to prepare a place

What does it mean that there are many rooms in his Father's house? Perhaps the most common understanding is that Jesus is talking about heaven here. He will soon be going to his Father, and his disciples will eventually join him. When they arrive, they will find not just a warm welcome, but a room in their Father's house - they will be treated as one of the family, and no painful separation need ever occur again. The point is not that in heaven there is literally a giant house with millions of rooms, but rather that Jesus intends to live with his followers forever, and is expecting many guests.

Whatever exactly the living arrangements are going to be in heaven, Jesus promises his disciples that he will come again for them to take them there. This appears to be a promise of the second coming. Jesus himself will be the one to take and introduce his disciples to their new heavenly dwelling.

You Know the Way

Thomas' question "how can we know the way" is understandable. If you don't know where someone is going, you logically cannot know the way to that place. But Jesus answers with another of his famous "I AM" statements. Jesus himself is *the way*. They do not need to know the details of the final destination, so long as they continue to follow him. "The way" is not a set of instructions or a map; it is a person. Without knowing Jesus, we are lost.

Jesus also goes further and claims to be *the truth*. Truth is not a set of abstract factual statements that must be believed, truth is a person. To know the truth is to know Jesus and to believe the truth is to believe Jesus. If we do not know Jesus, we are in the dark concerning the most central reality of the universe.

He also claims to be "*the life*". Life is not just a biological construct, whereby those who are still breathing are considered to be 'alive'. To be truly alive is to know Jesus, and for his Spirit to live within you. If we do not know Jesus, we have not begun to live yet.

Except Through Me

Jesus' next statement is a striking one. He claims not just to be one way to the Father amongst many, one speaker of truth amongst many, or one route to life amongst many. Rather he claims to be the only way. This is of course a message that will offend some, but it is at the heart of

what it means to become a Christian. In doing so we renounce all other attempts at finding God, finding truth or finding life without reference to Jesus, and instead look to him as the one we can trust our lives and eternal destinies to.

John 14:7-11

7 If you had known me, you would have known my Father also. From now on you do 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 with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? 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 authority, but the Father who dwells in me does his works. 11 Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, or else believe on account of the works themselves.

Seeing the Father

Jesus has told his disciples that they know the way to where he is going. And the reason that they know the way is because they know him. But what is the destination? Jesus is going to be with his Father, and he therefore is the way for his disciples to know and see the Father.

As usual, the disciples are slow to understand. Philip expresses a sentiment felt by many – wouldn’t it be wonderful to be able to see the Father? Yet the Father has revealed himself for the disciples to see - and it is not in the form of a brilliant shining light, but in the form of his son in human flesh. God has chosen to reveal himself to the world that he may be both seen and known, and the way he has done that is by sending his son. By seeing and knowing Jesus, the disciples were able to see and know the Father. Similarly for us, it is by coming to know Jesus that we have access to the Father.

I am in the Father

So what is the relationship between Jesus and his Father? Jesus explains it in terms of mutual indwelling and mutual purpose. Jesus is in the Father, and the Father is in Jesus. Jesus will only say and do those things that the Father says and does. In other words he is not presenting himself merely as someone who has formed an alliance with the Father, but that he is in a very real sense one with his Father.

He calls on his disciples to believe him for two reasons. The first is simply because he says so. Have they not learned to trust him yet? Secondly, he points to the works he does. Do not the signs and wonders point to the fact that the power of God is operating through him? Does not his amazing teaching back up his claim to be speaking the very words of God? The evidence is there for those who have eyes to see it.

John 14:19-21

19 Yet a little while and the world will see me no more, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. 20 In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.

21 Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me. And he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him."

See Me and Live

When Jesus speaks of "the world", he is referring to the world that has rejected God and cannot receive his revelation through his son. Though the people can physically "see" Jesus, they do not have the eyes of faith to see him for who he truly is. Soon he will be gone and they will no longer be able to see him in either sense of the word.

But for the disciples, they will still be able to see Jesus, not because he is in hiding, and not even through special dreams or visions, but by the Spirit, the Helper that Jesus would send. He may also be promising here, that they would see him one last time between his resurrection and ascension. Jesus goes further, they will not only still "see" him, but they will share in his life. Knowing Jesus is to truly be alive, and to share in a life that cannot be defeated by death itself.

Though the disciples cannot really appreciate what they are hearing, Jesus promises them that one day they will know and understand not only the oneness that Jesus enjoys with his Father, but that they themselves will be joined to Christ by the Spirit.

Loved by the Father

We return to the theme linking obedience and love. Jesus has asked his disciples to demonstrate their love for him by their obedience to him. In fact, their obedience will be the evidence of their love. Jesus promises that both himself and his Father will reciprocate that love, and express it by revealing himself to them. Surely Jesus is referring again to the ministry of the Spirit by which we can experience the presence and love of Jesus.

John 14:22-24

22 Judas (not Iscariot) said to him, "Lord, how is it that you will manifest yourself to us, and not to the world?" 23 Jesus answered 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 home with him. 24 Whoever does not love me does not keep my words. And the word that you hear is not mine but the Father's who sent me.

Our Responsibility of Love and Obedience

Jesus has been speaking about the disciples seeing him again, but the world not seeing him. This begs the question of how exactly Jesus will do this. But Jesus' answer was not perhaps what they were hoping for, as he simply goes back and reiterates what he has already been telling them about the link between love and obedience. Clearly, this was something very important that he wanted his disciples to fully grasp hold of.

Jesus says three things about the person who loves him. First, that person's love will result in obedience to Jesus' word (which, as he points out, is actually the Father's message). In other words, those who love Jesus will pay attention to what he says and put it into practice. For us, this means reading the Bible and allowing the Spirit to speak to us through it.

By contrast, the one who does not love Jesus does not have the Spirit living within him and does not live a life of obedience. It does not matter if they are a very religious and moral person. The first and greatest commandment is to love God. If we do not truly love God, then we cannot obey him or please him.

God's Response to Our Love and Obedience

Second, those who love Jesus will be loved by the Father. Our obedience to Jesus and our love for Jesus brings the Father great pleasure. But we should not make the mistake of thinking that Jesus is telling us that we have to earn the Father's love through obedience. As John says in another of his books, God's love for us is shown that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. His love is freely given.

Third, those who love and obey Jesus are promised that both Jesus and the Father will "make their home" with them. This seems to be best interpreted as another reference to the Holy Spirit who Jesus has just promised. The gift of the Spirit means that we really can know the presence of Jesus with us. And it is only through the power of the Spirit that a life of love and obedience is possible at all.

John 14:25-27

25 "These things I have spoken to you while I am still 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 have 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. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.

The Helper

Doubtless Jesus had much he wanted to teach to his disciples on this occasion, but their questions revealed how little they understood. But they will not remain in the dark indefinitely, because the Holy Spirit would be sent to them.

The Holy Spirit is said to perform two functions in this passage. First, he will teach them all things. This presumably means that the things they have heard will not just be words in their heads, but will be understood and obeyed, which Jesus has already emphasised as the appropriate response of love for Jesus. Second, the Spirit will remind them of what Jesus had said. After the cross, resurrection and ascension of Jesus, his teaching would take on whole new depths of meaning for the disciples. The Spirit would both bring these teachings to mind and aid them to apply them correctly¹⁵.

Although this ministry of the Spirit had particular applicability to the original disciples, who did not have the benefit of hindsight when they first heard Jesus' teachings, we too need the Spirit's help as we seek to follow Jesus' teaching, to understand it and obey it.

Legacy of Peace

Jesus promises to leave another gift with his disciples - the gift of peace. It may seem an odd time to promise peace, when the most terrifying ordeal is just ahead of him. They are not to give in to fear or anxiety, not because they deny the reality of the circumstances, but because they trust Jesus. The way Jesus gives peace is different from the way the world gives peace, which is perhaps through hollow sentiments like "good luck" or through drinking for "Dutch courage". He gives a peace which is fully rational because it is based on trust in a sovereign God who has a plan to work all things for good for those who love him.

¹⁵ This promise would be of particular importance to those disciples who were to be involved in the writing of the New Testament. It was the Holy Spirit who enabled them to accurately remember and faithfully record the teachings of Jesus.

John 14:28-31

28 You heard me say to you, 'I am going away, and I will come to you.' If you loved me, you would have rejoiced, because I am going to the Father, for the Father is greater than I. 29 And now I have told you before it takes place, so that when it does take place you may believe. 30 I will no longer talk much with you, for the ruler of this world is coming. He has no claim on me, 31 but I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father. Rise, let us go from here.

Going to the Father

The news that Jesus will be leaving soon has come as a shock to his disciples, and even though he has promised to send the Spirit, they are clearly dismayed. Jesus tells them though that if they truly loved him, then they would rejoice. Their sorrow that Jesus is leaving exposes a certain self-centredness to their grief. Rather than contemplating what this meant for Jesus, they only saw things from their own perspective. True love rejoices with those who rejoice and weeps with those who weep.

The reason for rejoicing is that Jesus will be reunited with his Father, and exalted to his rightful place. By saying that “the Father is greater than I”, Jesus is not denying his own deity, but honouring his Father, and contrasting the exalted position in heaven with his own humble standing on earth. The reason for telling his disciples this is not because they can understand this immediately, but because the Holy Spirit will help them to see with hindsight that all that has happened to Jesus was part of the plan of God.

The Ruler of this World

We might expect Jesus to be talking about his Father when he says “the Ruler of this World”, but in fact it appears that this is a title for the devil. The devil is not the rightful ruler of the world, but is the effective ruler, having put people in bondage to sin and deception.

Jesus has lived a life demonstrating that he is not in any sense under the rule of the devil. Instead his life was characterised by complete obedience to his Father, an obedience predicated on love, just as he has asked his disciples to demonstrate their love for him with obedience.

John 15:1-3

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 does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. 3 Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you.

The True Vine

In John's gospel there are at least seven places where Jesus describes himself with an "I am" saying. Here he describes himself as the true vine, which is an interesting choice because in the Old Testament Israel is likened to a vine¹⁶. In this illustration, the Father is the gardener, looking after and caring for the vine. The final part of the picture is that the branches appear to be people. The job of each branch is to grow some grapes.

A good vinedresser knows that to maximise the fruitfulness of the vine, branches that are unproductive must be removed. But even branches that are fruitful need to be pruned. Because he is speaking in picture language, the meaning of this pruning is not completely clear. Does it mean that people who are unfruitful will become disconnected from Jesus? Perhaps it also means that in some way God can "prune" us as individuals, painfully cutting things away from us in order that it may result in fruitfulness? Either way, the image stresses the vital importance of fruitfulness, similar to the emphasis on obedience in the previous chapter.

You Are Clean

Verse three seems to break with the imagery of a vine for a moment, to tell the disciples that Jesus' words have made them "clean". While again it might be hard to pin down exactly what this means, it shows that Jesus is not teaching a salvation by works - our acceptance by God is not based on fruitfulness, but on being made clean by the words of Jesus.

¹⁶ See Isaiah 5

John 15:4-8

4 Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. 5 I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. 6 If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and 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 By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.

Abide in Me

Jesus asks his disciples to “abide” in him. To abide simply means to live somewhere and remain or stay in that place. The image is still of the vine. A branch will not bear any more fruit if it has been disconnected from the vine; instead it will wither and die. The abiding goes both ways: the vine “abides” in the branch too in the sense that it supplies what the branch needs to bear fruit. Jesus says that his words can abide in the disciples, meaning that they have taken them to heart and are living in accordance with them.

This mutual abiding is essential to a fruitful Christian life. Jesus says that we can’t bear any fruit apart from him. In saying this he reveals that all the “good works” or religious activity that do not flow out of Christ’s indwelling presence are of no real value. This leads to a solemn word of warning: a branch that doesn’t bear fruit is only fit for the fire, which is a picture of God’s judgement.

Glorifying the Father

There are many benefits for those who abide in Jesus. First is that our prayers will be answered. This is an audacious promise - we can ask whatever we wish and it will be done for us. But we cannot ignore the importance of abiding in Christ for this to happen. When we truly abide in him, the things we wish for are the same things God wishes to do in and through us.

A second benefit of abiding in Jesus is that we will be very fruitful, but the purpose of this is not to make us look good, but that God may be glorified. It authenticates us as true disciples of Jesus, that we live to glorify God in just the same way that Jesus did. In fact, a desire to glorify God is probably the key to the answered prayer promised in verse 7. Prayers for God to be glorified will never go unanswered.

John 15:9-12

9 As the Father has loved me, so have I 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, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full. 12 "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.

Abide in my Love

Jesus' love for the disciples can hardly be in question; he is, after all, about to lay down his life for them. This kind of love is a reflection of the strength of love the Father himself has for his Son. And with the same powerful and sacrificial love with which Jesus has been loved, so he loves his disciples. Our job is to "abide" in his love. But how exactly do we stay in the love of Jesus?

The answer comes in the next verse. We abide in his love by obeying his commandments, which Jesus has modelled for us - he abides in his Father's love by obeying his commandments. But is this verse teaching that God will only love us based on our obedience? This is a concept that is flatly contradicted by other parts of Scripture. But it is not what Jesus is saying here. We can choose to receive God's love, to accept his embrace, or we can reject it and push him away. To live in disobedience to God is to effectively run away from him, refusing to receive the love he offers.

Joy

The night before his execution, you would not expect Jesus to be speaking about how joyful he was and how he wanted to share that joy with his disciples. Jesus was a seriously joyful person. His joy did not consist of making a joke of everything to stop himself feeling down about bad situations. Rather, he found joy in knowing his Father, participating in his Father's plan, and most of all in knowing he was loved by his Father. This joyful way of life could be experienced by the disciples too, and it started with obeying the central command - to love.

Just as Jesus' love for his disciples reflected his Father's love for him, so our love for one another is to reflect Jesus' love. The distinguishing marks of this love are that it is *sacrificial*- laying itself down on behalf of the other, and *joyful*- finding pleasure in pleasing and being with others. To obey this command to love one another sacrificially and joyfully is to abide in Jesus' love.

John 15:13-17

13 Greater love has no one than this, that someone 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 servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all 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 should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. 17 These things I command you, so that you will love one another.

Friends not Servants

Unquestionably, to give your life on behalf of someone else is the greatest possible display of love. And that was exactly what Jesus was going to do. He makes it clear that he views his disciples not as servants but as friends. He does not have simply a “working relationship” with them; he loves them dearly. But his reason for calling them friends may surprise us. “You are my friends if you do what I command you” would make more sense if it was “You are my *servants* if you do what I command you.” But Jesus is simply reiterating the point he has been making all along - the appropriate response of love from his disciples is to obey him, just as he demonstrates his own love for his Father through obedience.

The second reason for calling his disciples “friends” is that he wants to reveal to them what is about to happen. He doesn’t want them to be in the dark about God’s sovereign plan of salvation.

That Jesus would view us as his friends is humbling. There is nothing wrong with viewing ourselves as servants of the Lord – Jesus’ own mother Mary spoke of herself in this way. But we should not be content to remain at a professional distance like a servant might. Rather, God has welcomed us into a close relationship where we can be his friend - serving him not out of duty but out of love.

Chosen to Bear Fruit

The next thing that Jesus tells his disciples may have come as a surprise to them. They may think they “chose” to become disciples of Jesus, but he tells them that it was him that did the choosing. Not only that but they were chosen with a purpose in mind - to bear lasting fruit, and to receive answered prayer just as though the request came from Jesus himself.

The idea of God choosing us for a purpose is a common biblical theme. God has not merely chosen to forgive us, or to grant us an eternity in heaven, but he has chosen us for a life of fruitful service and intimate relationship with him. And the greatest evidence of fruitfulness in our lives is that we obey Jesus’ command to love one another.

John 15:18-22

18 "If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. 19 If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. 20 Remember the word that I said to you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours. 21 But all these things they will do to you on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me. 22 If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have been guilty of sin, but now they have no excuse for their sin.

The World's Hatred

It is time for the disciples to be warned that the hatred about to be directed at Jesus will also be directed at them. Why is it that they will be hated? It is because they no longer belong. The world has rejected Jesus, and so anyone who claims that Jesus is Lord inevitably sets up conflict. It is the name of Jesus that sets up the conflict - and his disciples cannot help but proclaim him.

It is not all doom and gloom though. Just as not everyone rejected and hated Jesus, so not everyone will reject and hate his followers. There will be those who accept the message. Christians should never be disheartened by animosity towards them; in fact it is to be expected. Not that we should deliberately antagonise anyone, but if people hate us for proclaiming Jesus as Lord, we cannot take that as an excuse to keep quiet.

What of those who respond with hatred to Jesus? The reason they do so, is that they do not know the Father. They cannot acknowledge Jesus for who he is, for they do not recognise the image of God when they see it. The fact that Jesus had come and spoken to them compounds their guilt, for now they have no excuse. This is not a reason to refrain from evangelism, as though it were better not to know anything about Jesus. All people are already lost and in need of a saviour. Those who meet the saviour and reject him have simply made their predicament worse.

John 15:23-27

23 Whoever hates me hates my Father also. 24 If I had not done among them the works that no one else did, they would not be guilty of sin, but now they have seen and hated both me and my Father. 25 But the word that is written in their Law must be fulfilled: 'They hated me without a cause.' 26 "But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me. 27 And you also will bear witness, because you have been with me from the beginning.

Hated Without a Cause

Many of those who hated Jesus claimed to love God, but Jesus says that this is impossible to do. You can't love one without loving the other. This is because Jesus has been sent by the Father speaking the words of the Father and doing the works of the Father. They could perhaps be forgiven for rejecting him had he not done these authenticating works, but having seen him, they stand guilty. They have unwittingly become the fulfilment of the prophecy that the Messiah would be hated without a cause.

The Spirit of Truth

The works Jesus did are not the only witness to who he is. They are the first of three witnesses mentioned here. The second is the "Spirit of truth". This refers to the Holy Spirit who is not only truthful, but points to the one who is the Truth. His role is in convicting people, not just of their sin, but of the Messianic identity of Jesus. The third witness is that of the disciples themselves. They are to testify to who Jesus is, drawing on all they have seen of him during his ministry.

The same three witnesses are at work today. As followers of Jesus, we are to speak of what we have experienced of him, pointing to his word and works which authenticate his claims, while the Holy Spirit works in people's hearts convincing them of the truth concerning Jesus.

John 16:1-4

1 "I have said all these things to you to keep you from falling away. 2 They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God. 3 And they will do these things because they have not known the Father, nor me. 4 But I have said these things to you, that when their hour comes you may remember that I told them to you. "I did not say these things to you from the beginning, because I was with you.

Suffering and Martyrdom

The hatred that Jesus warns his disciples they will experience from a hostile world will go further than simple dislike. The time would come when they would be ostracised from the Jewish community, considered heretics and put to death by those who think they are doing a service to God. This prediction of Jesus came true not only for his twelve disciples but countless thousands of his followers since.

Jesus' concern in telling them this is not to help them avoid the persecution, but rather to stand firm through it, and not "fall away". Several truths will help us to stand firm in the face of opposition.

First, we have the knowledge that God is in control. This is why Jesus told his disciples in advance, so that they would have confidence that something had not gone terribly wrong with God's plan.

Second, we know that Jesus himself faced suffering and can sympathise and intercede for us. We are called to walk in the example he set.

Third, we believe that Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. Since he is the only way to the Father, giving up in the face of opposition would be to lose everything worth living for.

Fourth, we recognise that those persecuting us are ultimately doing it because they do not know Jesus or the Father, not because of anything in us.

Finally, we have the comfort of experiencing the Holy Spirit, God's helping presence with us. Jesus had not told his disciples about their coming persecution until this point because they had his personal presence with them, but now they would need to learn to rely on experiencing his presence by the Spirit to sustain them.

John 16:5-11

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 Nevertheless, 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 when he comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment: 9 concerning sin, because they do not believe in me; 10 concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father, and you will see me no longer; 11 concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged.

It is to your advantage

A few times in this passage Jesus has indicated that his disciples are being a little self-centred in their attitudes. They are concerned for themselves that they are being left alone without Jesus, but do not seem nearly so interested in what this means for him. They should be pleased that he will be returning to the place he rightfully deserves, with his Father who he loves.

But even if their sorrow is self-centred, there is actually no need for it, because Jesus' departure would work for their advantage. Though we might think that having Jesus personally present is better than the Holy Spirit's invisible presence, Jesus says the opposite is true. Most likely this is because of the spatial limitations of being in human flesh - Jesus was only in one place at a time, whereas the Holy Spirit will go throughout the world, wherever he takes the disciples of Jesus.

The Helper

Bit by bit Jesus has been revealing what the Helper, the Holy Spirit will do when he comes. In this saying, the focus is on the conviction the Spirit will bring to the world. In saying "the world", John most likely means that this ministry of the Spirit is directed particularly toward unbelievers, even though the Spirit is given to believers. So it is likely the witness of the disciples that is in view here, and what effect the Spirit would have on the listeners through their message.

The Spirit will convict people of three things. First, *conviction of sin*. While most people will readily admit that they are "not perfect", recognizing our own sinfulness as God sees it requires a work of the Spirit. And the primary sin that people will be convicted of is the sin of rejecting Jesus.

Second, *conviction of "righteousness"*. This one is a little harder to understand. The reason given is that Jesus will go to the Father. It may mean that the Spirit will help people become convinced that Jesus was indeed the Son of God, righteous in every way¹⁷. Don Carson suggests that the Spirit convicts people of their empty legalistic 'righteousness' which is serving to keep them far from God. The Spirit thus continues this important aspect of the convicting work of Jesus now he goes to the Father.

Third, *conviction of "judgment"*. If Don Carson is right, this means that the Spirit will convict people of the fact that they have made a wrong judgment about Christ. Jesus' resurrection and ascension have proven the devil wrong and pronounced condemnation upon him, therefore

¹⁷ Others have suggested that Jesus refers to the Spirit convincing believers that they are righteous in Christ. This is surely something that the Spirit does, but doesn't seem to fit well with the context here, where "convict" is used in a negative sense.

those who stood on his side need to change their judgment of Jesus if they are not to face the same fate.

It is important to remember the need for the Spirit in evangelism. We do not need to emotionally manipulate people, nor do we need to rely on creating some kind of irrefutable logical argument. Instead, we proclaim the truth about Jesus and look to the Spirit to do his work of conviction in people's hearts.

John 16:12-15

12 "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. 13 When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. 14 He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. 15 All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

The Spirit of Truth

Jesus had so much more he wanted to say to his disciples, but knew that they were not ready for it yet. But his confidence in the Holy Spirit prevents him from becoming frustrated with them. The Holy Spirit will be able to guide them into the truth they need to know. We see here how closely the Spirit's ministry is tied to Jesus. It is the message of Jesus, the one who is the Truth, that the Spirit will speak. The desire of the Spirit is to glorify Jesus. He will not point away from Jesus or contradict Jesus in any way. In the same way that Jesus was a faithful messenger bringing the words of the Father, so the Spirit is a faithful messenger bringing the words of Jesus.

One implication of this was that the disciples needed to rely on the Spirit's guidance in the period after Jesus' ascension. They did not have everything already mapped out for them. Rather, they had something even better - someone who knew the way for them to follow. And this is the way God continues to deal with us, wanting us to be led by the Spirit, trusting him, rather than having the full details of our future available in advance.

Another implication is that the Spirit would inspire the apostles to write further Scripture. As wonderful as the gospels are, they do not contain the full revelation that Jesus wanted to bequeath to his church. Many of the things that the Spirit taught the apostles after Jesus' resurrection and ascension are recorded in the New Testament epistles. Those who claim to want to live simply by the words of Jesus and ignore other parts of the Bible, are not being faithful to Jesus' own desire that disciples would hear the rest of what he wanted to say through the Holy Spirit.

John 16:16-22

16 "A little while, and you will see me no longer; and again a little while, and you will see me." 17 So some of his disciples said to one another, "What is this that he says to us, 'A little while, and you will not see me, and again a little while, and you will see me'; and, 'because I am going to the Father'?" 18 So they were saying, "What does he mean by 'a little while'? We do not know what he is talking about." 19 Jesus knew that they wanted to ask him, so he said to them, "Is this what you are asking yourselves, what I meant by saying, '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, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice. You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy. 21 When a woman is giving birth, she has sorrow because her hour has come, but when she has delivered the baby, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a human being has been born into the world. 22 So also you have sorrow now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.

Sorrow will turn to joy

Here, Jesus is telling his disciples that though his death is imminent, he will soon return to them. These events would come upon them sooner than they imagined. Yet, the disciples still can't grasp what Jesus is saying. They felt awkward about asking more questions that would reveal their ignorance, but Jesus graciously offers to address their question.

There would be coming a time of mourning for his disciples. They would grieve not just Jesus' departure, but his death. And at the same time, the 'world' would be rejoicing. Those who are opposed to Jesus would be glad to see the back of him, and his uncompromising message of the kingdom of God.

But Jesus wants his disciples to know that the pain they feel is not a hopeless one. It is like the pain of labour - a precursor to a wonderful event, which will make even the most severe suffering seem worthwhile. Jesus clearly desired that his disciples would hang on to the promise of joy to come during the three days he was in the grave, but as events transpired it seems unlikely that they did in fact do so.

The joy that the resurrection of Jesus brought the disciples would be one that no one could take away. Jesus has risen never again to die. He leaves his Spirit with his followers, never to withdraw his presence from them again. For those of us living this side of the resurrection, we can experience the joy of knowing that his presence is always with us, while we look forward to seeing him face to face ourselves, at his return.

John 16:23-28

23 In that day you will ask nothing of me. Truly, truly, I say to you, whatever you ask of the Father in my name, he will give it to you. 24 Until now you have asked nothing in my name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full. 25 "I have said these things to you in figures of speech. The hour is coming when I will no longer speak to you in figures of speech but will tell you plainly about the Father. 26 In that day you will ask in my name, and I do not say to you that I will ask the Father on your behalf; 27 for the Father himself loves you, because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God. 28 I came from the Father and have come into the world, and now I am leaving the world and going to the Father."

Whatever You Ask

Verse 23 continues a series of audacious promises concerning prayer that Jesus makes in this discourse. The disciples can ask for whatever they wish and the Father will grant it. There is however, as with earlier promises, one important clarifying comment. They must ask in Jesus' name. So we should not interpret this as a "blank cheque" as though we have some kind of right to demand that God meet every whim and fancy we have. However, this verse does encourage us to have the same kind of confidence that Jesus had in making his requests to God. When we pray in Jesus' name, in line with his will, we can pray with great boldness.

The result of these answers to prayer is that our "joy" will be full. Answered prayer is indeed one of the great joys of the Christian life, and we can also be sure that whether God grants every request we make or not, he is always acting in a way that will ultimately bring us true and lasting joy.

It is also worth remembering how closely prayer is tied to bearing fruit in this discourse. Our desire should be to bring God glory by our fruitfulness, so this would naturally be central to our prayer requests, and is fully in line with the will of God both for our lives and more ultimately for his cosmic purposes to bring glory to himself.

The Father Loves You

Jesus goes on to clarify the reason that the Father will accept these prayers. It is not because Jesus will make the request on the disciples' behalf. No, what Jesus is about to do opens the way for the disciples to go directly to the Father. The Father loves them just as he loves Jesus. And all this has become possible because they loved and believed in Jesus. This is the incredible news of the gospel - the world was at enmity with God, but he sent Jesus to reconcile people to him. Now not only has the hostility been removed, but we can become sons of God, enjoying access to the Father in prayer in the same way Jesus does, and all on the basis of what Jesus has done. Jesus is now in heaven seated with his Father, and thus as we come into God's presence, we can have confidence that we will not be turned away.

Verse 27 clarifies the essence of being a Christian. It is not simply summed up in "belief" in an intellectual sense, or even in the more personal concept of "trust" that is in view often when the Bible speaks of belief. Fundamental to our relationship to Jesus is that we believe in him, trust him, and love him. It is from this love for him that our desire to please him through obedience springs. It is entering into a new relationship, not just into a new belief system, or a new code of ethics.

John 16:29-33

29 His disciples said, "Ah, now you are speaking plainly and not using figurative speech! 30 Now we know that you know all things and do not need anyone to question you; this is why we believe that you came from God." 31 Jesus answered them, "Do you now believe? 32 Behold, the hour is coming, indeed it has come, when you will be scattered, each to his own home, and will leave me alone. Yet I am not alone, for the Father is with me. 33 I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world."

We Believe

This long discourse ends on a slightly comical note as the disciples express relief that finally Jesus said something that they fully understood (or at least they thought they understood it)! They have also come to realise that Jesus does understand their questions, almost to the point that they don't need to ask him anything. Just like his Father, Jesus knows what they need before they ask, which lends credibility to his claim to have come from God.

You Will Be Scattered

Jesus has told his disciples that the time has come for him to leave them. But even more shocking is that they will first leave him. They will be scattered and he will be left alone. Jesus doesn't say this to evoke sympathy. Jesus will be with his Father which is all the comfort he needs.

Jesus has not hidden from his disciples the difficult truth that they will be hated because of him. He reiterates this again - they will certainly have tribulation. However, they should still have peace despite this tribulation. And what is the source of that peace? The fact that Jesus has overcome the world. Jesus has won a decisive victory over the world. Any trouble we face from the world is only temporal, and can be faced with the knowledge that Jesus is present with us by his Spirit.

This passage gives us two reasons to have hope, joy and peace whatever our circumstances. First, Jesus knows what we need before we ask it. He is not unaware of the situation we are in or even of the questions we are asking. Second, Jesus' victory over sin and death means that our two greatest enemies are rendered powerless to harm us. Our sin has been forgiven, and our eternal life guaranteed.

John 17:1-5

1 When Jesus had spoken these words, he lifted up his eyes to heaven, and said, "Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you, 2 since you have given him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. 3 And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. 4 I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do. 5 And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed.

Glorifying the Father and Son

After spending a considerable time speaking with his disciples, Jesus now turns to spend his remaining time before the soldiers' arrival speaking with his Father. He knows that the "hour" - the time of his trial and death - has come. Jesus makes two requests of his Father. First he asks that the Father would glorify him, and second that he would glorify the Father.

In what way would Jesus' death bring glory to both the Son and the Father? There are numerous ways. It brings glory to the Father by showing his gracious love for sinners. Jesus honours his Father by obeying him to the point of death, just as he has obeyed throughout his life. In fact, this is one of the primary ways that we as believers can glorify God, by uncompromisingly obeying him in all things.

Though the cross will seem like the opposite of glory for Jesus, after his resurrection it will be seen in a whole new light - the greatest demonstration of love, the greatest victory over evil, the climatic point of God's grace and righteousness being displayed. In this sense, Jesus can be seen to be glorified even in his death. Jesus enjoyed glory seated with his Father both before his incarnation and now after his ascension. That glory was veiled during his time on earth, but here he anticipates soon being restored to his rightful place.

Jesus is also glorified by his Father, in that God has given him authority to grant eternal life. Jesus exercises this divine right on behalf of his Father, and by doing so he brings glory to his Father who has chosen those who will receive this gift. This is the mystery of divine election. Knowing that all of us would turn away if left to our own devices, God graciously changes our hearts to enable us to respond to him in faith.

Eternal Life

For us, the gift offered to us by Jesus is "eternal life". This is more than just "everlasting life" in heaven; it refers to something we can begin to experience now. Eternal life is defined by Jesus as knowing both the Son and the Father. This is the best life possible. Thus bringing glory to God, which should be the chief goal of our lives, is not accomplished merely by serving a master, but by entering into a relationship of love with our heavenly Father and his Son our Saviour.

John 17:6-10

6 "I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world. Yours they were, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. 7 Now they know that everything that you have given me is from you. 8 For I have given them the words that you gave me, and they have received them and have come to know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. 9 I am praying for them. I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours. 10 All mine are yours, and yours are mine, and I am glorified in them.

The People You Gave Me

Jesus now turns to pray for the people that his Father has given to him. While we could say that this now includes all believers, at the moment Jesus is praying, it must specifically relate to his disciples. Jesus recognizes that they have been entrusted to him by God, and he has fulfilled his responsibility to pass on the words that God had given him to speak to them. In a sense, this is the task of every leader in the church, to faithfully pass on the message to those under their care. Jesus himself was not merely the messenger, but the message- and the disciples had now come to appreciate that he was indeed God's gift.

It is interesting that Jesus says that his disciples have kept God's word. This may surprise us, because up to this point, the disciples are still very immature in their faith, with much to learn. The reference is probably therefore to the simple fact that they have put their trust in Jesus, which is the essence of keeping God's word. Verse eight elaborates on this idea. To receive the words of Jesus, then you must receive Jesus himself, and recognise that he is the one sent by the Father.

I Am Praying for Them

That Jesus would pray for his disciples on a night like this shows how much he cares for them. Again, leaders in the church would do well to emulate this selfless and loving attitude. Jesus makes a distinction between those that are his and the world, again referring to the mystery of divine election. Not all have believed in him, but his prayer is for those who have believed, those whom the Father has given him.

The disciples, then, and by extension all believers, belong both to the Father and to Jesus. We belong to the Father as he has chosen us to be adopted into his family, and we belong to Jesus as the Father has given us into his care, for him to be our saviour. Our task is to bring glory to the one we belong to, which we do by believing him, trusting him and following him.

John 17:11-14

11 And I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one. 12 While I was with them, I kept them in your name, which you have given me. I have guarded them, and not one of them has been lost except the son of destruction, that the Scripture might be fulfilled. 13 But now I am coming to you, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have my joy fulfilled in themselves. 14 I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world.

In Your Name

As he continues to pray for his disciples, Jesus asks that they would be protected. They remain in a world hostile to God. What does it mean that the Father should keep the disciples in his “name?” Jesus himself has been “given” this name, indicating that it is a mark of ownership and association. Jesus belongs to his Father, and the disciples too belong to God. Jesus has protected his disciples and kept them in the Father’s name, and he asks that the Father would continue to protect them now that he is leaving the world.

We might think that Judas was an exception to Jesus’ claim not to have lost any, but he makes the point that Judas had never truly belonged to the Father. In fact, his betrayal was even predicted in the Scripture, showing that not even in this case had God’s sovereign plan been thwarted.

They May be One

As well as praying for protection for the disciples, Jesus prays for their unity and joy. He wants them to be “one” in the same way that the Father and Son are one. This means that we are to live together in loving community. God’s intention for his people is that they reflect the glory of the Triune God. We cannot do that if we live in isolation from other believers.

How can the disciples have joy in a world that hates them, and with a master who has left them? Jesus expects that their source of joy will be in the words that he has left with them. As the promise of the Spirit is fulfilled, and as the Spirit reminds them of the other words Jesus has spoken to them, they will be able to find joy.

It should be a source of great encouragement to us that Jesus cares so much for his disciples that he prays for our protection. Not only that, he prays for our joy, that even when we feel the hostility of a world in rebellion against its maker, we can have confidence in the God who is in control.

John 17:15-19

15 I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. 16 They are not of the world, just 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, so I have sent them into the world. 19 And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth.

Not of the World

Jesus continues his prayer for his disciples. In particular, he asks that they will be protected from the evil one. Though the devil is real and has power to do us harm, God is greater and is able to protect his people. However, the prayer will not be answered by removing them from the world. The disciples are to stay there because they have a job to do, to continue the mission of God.

Like Jesus, the disciples do not truly belong to the world. Again, here the “world” should be thought of as the rebel planet, the world of people in rebellion against their creator. In that sense, disciples of Jesus really do not belong, since they are the ones loyal to the world’s rightful ruler.

Sanctified and Sent

So what is the purpose for disciples of Jesus while we are on the earth? Two things: we are to be sanctified and sent.

First, we are to be *sanctified*. This will take place through the word of God, which is truth. Obviously, this does not eliminate the need for the work of the Spirit, as though simply reading the Bible will make us holy. Rather, it is through the word of God, recorded for us in Scripture, that the Spirit identifies to us the ways in which we must grow in holiness.

Second, we are *sent*, just as Jesus himself was sent by the Father on a mission. This is why we cannot be taken out of the world. The word of truth must not be kept to ourselves, but proclaimed to others. This will bring us into head-on collision in a society that has rejected God, but Jesus’ prayer is that just as he fulfilled the calling of his Father, so his disciples will do so too.

John 17:20-26

20 "I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, 21 that they may all be one, just 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 have sent me. 22 The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, 23 I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me. 24 Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. 25 O righteous Father, even though the world does not know you, I know you, and these know that you have sent me. 26 I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them."

Jesus Prays For Us

It is remarkable enough that on the very night Jesus knew he faced impending torture and death, he prays so unselfishly for his disciples. What is even more astonishing is that he was looking into the future to see other disciples, who would come to believe through his disciples fulfilling their commission to be those who are sent on a mission with the word of God. It is a wonderful thought that Jesus was thinking of us even as he went to the cross.

Perfect Unity

The main request of Jesus' prayer is a sobering one. He prays for our unity, something that the church has not had a good track record in over the years. The pattern for the unity of the church is found in the relationships within the Triune God. As people of the God who is three persons in loving community, we are to display the character of God to the world by living as a loving community ourselves. As he has stated before on this evening, the love between disciples is a crucial part of the witness of the church. This is the "glory" we have been given - to corporately be image bearers of God.

Jesus in Us

What Jesus asks in verse 24 is exciting. He is looking forward to the day when he will personally meet us, just as much as we are! Until then, he promises that the Father's love will be with us, and that he will dwell within us. Again, this most obviously refers to the Spirit, who is the main connecting point with God for those of us not living in the time of Jesus' earthly ministry. During this time, we get to know and love him more through his Word and Spirit, until we finally will meet him face to face.

John 18:1-9

1 When Jesus had spoken these words, he went out with his disciples across the Kidron Valley, where there was a garden, which he and his disciples entered. 2 Now Judas, who betrayed him, also knew the place, for Jesus often met there with his disciples. 3 So Judas, having procured a band of soldiers and some officers from the chief priests and the Pharisees, went there with lanterns and torches and weapons. 4 Then Jesus, knowing all that would happen to him, came forward and said to them, "Whom do you seek?" 5 They answered him, "Jesus of Nazareth." Jesus said to them, "I am he." Judas, who betrayed him, was standing with them. 6 When Jesus said to them, "I am he," they drew back and fell to the ground. 7 So he asked them again, "Whom do you seek?" And they said, "Jesus of Nazareth." 8 Jesus answered, "I told you that I am he. So, if you seek me, let these men go." 9 This was to fulfil the word that he had spoken: "Of those whom you gave me I have lost not one."

Betrayed

Now Jesus has finished giving his disciples some final words of comfort and instruction, and has spent some time in prayer, it is time for him to move on to the garden in which he will be betrayed. The fact that he goes there at all is telling. He already knows that Judas intends to betray him. For most people, this would be enough for them to attempt to hide. Yet, Jesus knows that even Judas' treachery is ultimately part of God's plan.

This lends great irony to the heavy-handed manner in which Judas and the chief priests go about attempting to arrest Jesus. He goes willingly to lay down his life; no one takes it from him. Indeed, he steps forward at this point, ensuring that it is only he who is arrested, rather than his whole group of disciples again. His concern for their well-being at this time speaks volumes of his selfless love for them.

When Jesus offered himself willingly to be arrested, the soldiers and chief priests were literally taken aback. Whether they feared some kind of ambush and stepped backwards tripping over one another, or whether simply the power and authority of the voice of Jesus momentarily rendered them incapable of standing is hard to say. But the incident serves further to demonstrate God's complete sovereignty over the whole situation. Jesus' opponents are unable even to stand in his presence unless God decrees that they may.

John 18:10-14

10 Then Simon Peter, having a sword, drew it and struck the high priest's servant and cut off his right ear. (The servant's name was Malchus.) 11 So Jesus said to Peter, "Put your sword into its sheath; shall I not drink the cup that the Father has given me?" 12 So the band of soldiers and their captain and the officers of the Jews arrested Jesus and bound him. 13 First they led him to Annas, for he was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, who was high priest that year. 14 It was Caiaphas who had advised the Jews that it would be expedient that one man should die for the people.

Drink the Cup

Despite the fact that Jesus offered himself willingly, Peter impulsively acts to try to save him. It was a very foolish risk to take in the first place since there were a large number of Roman soldiers, but Peter's actions at the very least displayed his resolute loyalty to Jesus (that was to be tested to the limit later that night). We know more about what happened next from the other Gospel accounts - Jesus warned Peter of the folly of trying to live by the sword, and healed the servant's ear. What John tells us in addition, is that Jesus explains to Peter why trying to defend him with force is pointless - it is the Father's will that Jesus suffer and die in this way. And Jesus is determined to submit completely to his Father's will. He will drink "the cup" no matter how bitter its taste.

One Man Should Die

There is further irony here that Jesus, the willing victim, who freely offered himself up is bound by the soldiers. Had he wanted to escape, nothing they could have done would have stopped him. John then tells us about a remarkable, though unintentional, prophecy from Caiaphas, the high priest. Caiaphas felt that a choice needed to be made between the death of one man - Jesus, and the Romans coming down hard on the whole nation. He thus attempted to justify the unlawful killing of Jesus by declaring it to be the lesser of two evils. Of course, he spoke better than he knew. Jesus was indeed dying for the people, but not in the way Caiaphas thought. His death wasn't to save people from Roman wrath, but his death made rescue from God's wrath possible.

John 18:15-27

15 Simon Peter followed Jesus, and so did another disciple. Since that disciple was known to the high priest, he entered with Jesus into the court of the high priest, 16 but Peter stood outside at the door. So the other disciple, who was known to the high priest, went out and spoke to the servant girl who kept watch at the door, and brought Peter in. 17 The servant girl at the door said to Peter, "You also are not one of this man's disciples, are you?" He said, "I am not." 18 Now the servants and officers had made a charcoal fire, because it was cold, and they were standing and warming themselves. Peter also was with them, standing and warming himself.

19 The high priest then questioned Jesus about his disciples and his teaching. 20 Jesus answered him, "I have spoken openly to the world. I have always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all Jews come together. I have said nothing in secret. 21 Why do you ask me? Ask those who have heard me what I said to them; they know what I said." 22 When he had said these things, one of the officers standing by struck Jesus with his hand, saying, "Is that how you answer the high priest?" 23 Jesus answered him, "If what I said is wrong, bear witness about the wrong; but if what I said is right, why do you strike me?" 24 Annas then sent him bound to Caiaphas the high priest.

25 Now Simon Peter was standing and warming himself. So they said to him, "You also are not one of his disciples, are you?" He denied it and said, "I am not." 26 One of the servants of the high priest, a relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off, asked, "Did I not see you in the garden with him?" 27 Peter again denied it, and at once a rooster crowed.

Denial

Following hard on the heels of Peter's show of bravado in the garden of Gethsemane, we might be surprised to see Peter acting in such a cowardly way. But things had changed. Jesus was no longer with him, and events seemed to have spiralled out of control. If he wasn't careful he too could end up being crucified.

Peter had gone with John to get a closer look at the trial proceedings, and John had some inside contacts allowing him to sneak into court so he attempted to come back and get Peter let in too. But when Peter was suddenly accused of being a disciple, he lost his nerve and denied it. He stood in the courtyard hoping that the suspicion would go, but those standing with him would not let it drop. There was even a relative of Malchus, the servant whose ear Peter had cut, present. So when he was accused again, Peter repeated his denial. As is the usual case with lies, once they have been told, they lock us into a cycle that is increasingly hard to break out from.

Peter's denial shows how much he needed the gift of the Spirit. Despite his best intentions before the event, when the moment of testing came, he was found wanting. The story would be different after Pentecost though. Then, filled with the Spirit, Peter would stand up and unashamedly proclaim his faith in Jesus, despite any mocking or hostility that he encountered.

Trial

While all this was going on, Jesus found himself in what appears to have been an informal preliminary trial. Perhaps they were still planning what the best strategy for convicting Jesus would be, and to see if he would try to wriggle out of any of his teaching.

But Jesus has nothing to hide. The message he has been proclaiming is no secret, and he has no intention of changing it. This answer infuriated them, leading to one of the temple officers unjustly (and probably unlawfully) striking Jesus in the face. Satan had not just entered into

Judas, but had led the Jewish religious leaders astray as their rejection of Jesus caused their hearts to become hardened, and they started justifying any action that would lead to his death.

John 18:28-32

28 Then they led Jesus from the house of Caiaphas to the governor's headquarters. It was early morning. They themselves did not enter the governor's headquarters, so that they would not be defiled, but could eat the Passover. 29 So Pilate went outside to them and said, "What accusation do you bring against this man?" 30 They answered him, "If this man were not doing evil, we would not have delivered him over to you." 31 Pilate said to them, "Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law." The Jews said to him, "It is not lawful for us to put anyone to death." 32 This was to fulfil the word that Jesus had spoken to show by what kind of death he was going to die.

What Accusation?

It appears that the Jewish leaders wanted to get this trial over and done with as quickly as possible, and were even prepared to bend a few rules and work through the night to avoid having to break for the Sabbath. How tragically ironic that they are so observant about the Sabbath while at the same time complicit in the greatest moral outrage of history - the murder of the only truly innocent man ever to live.

Even more ironic is their desire to be able to celebrate the Passover. If only they had recognised that the one who was the fulfilment of everything the Passover stood for was standing in front of them. They are in a hurry to slaughter the true Passover Lamb, so they can get home to enjoy the symbolic one.

Pilate is fairly cooperative, but clearly views this as a problem he needn't have been bothered with. He recognises that the charges against Jesus are not all they seem. But they insist that Pilate get involved, for they have already decided that Jesus deserves the death penalty, and they are unable to carry it out themselves. Probably they had in mind that Jesus was a false prophet, leading people away from the true God. Since Pilate wouldn't have considered that to be a major crime, they would also later need to introduce an element of rebellion against the state, to ensure the Romans too had an interest in putting Jesus to death.

And yet, despite this shocking disregard for justice, from both the Jews and Romans, John wants us to see God's sovereign hand still in control. Even this was known in advance - and was part of the amazing plan of salvation.

John 18:33-40

33 So Pilate entered his headquarters again and called Jesus and said to him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" 34 Jesus answered, "Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?" 35 Pilate answered, "Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have delivered you over to me. What have you done?" 36 Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world." 37 Then Pilate said to him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world--to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice." 38 Pilate said to him, "What is truth?" After he had said this, he went back outside to the Jews and told them, "I find no guilt in him. 39 But you have a custom that I should release one man for you at the Passover. So do you want me to release to you the King of the Jews?" 40 They cried out again, "Not this man, but Barabbas!" Now Barabbas was a robber.

King of the Jews

So Pilate begins his interrogation with what should have been a simple question. Is Jesus claiming to be the King of the Jews? This is the charge that both the Jews and the Romans would find fault with Jesus for claiming. But Jesus did not give him a straight answer. While he was not going to deny it, he knew that both the Roman and Jewish understanding of what a "king of the Jews" would do (i.e. overthrow the Roman occupation) was not quite in line with what he was here to do.

But Pilate is in no mood for playing games. In effect he acknowledges that Jesus has a right to describe himself in his own words, so he allows Jesus to phrase it his way. Jesus responds by describing the difference between his kingdom (and, by implication, his kingship), and the kingdoms of this world. The kingdom that Jesus rules over is not a geo-political entity. If it was, he would indeed need an army to defend its borders, and who would fight to the death to protect him. But since he has organized no such fighting force, this is proof that the type of king he is, is something quite different.

Pilate picks up on the implication that if Jesus claims to have a kingdom, then he must, in some sense, consider himself to be a king. This gives Jesus the chance to explain his main purpose in coming to the world. It is not to overthrow the Romans, or to establish any sort of earthly kingdom. Instead, he comes with the truth, looking for those who will believe his message. Obviously, "the truth", functions here as shorthand for everything Jesus has been teaching about himself, the kingdom of God, and what people need to do in response to the gospel.

Whilst we know Pilate would not have scruples about putting anyone to death if he felt it necessary, here we see him hesitating to allow the execution of Jesus. Here is someone clearly not a threat to the Roman governance of Israel, and so he decides to manipulate the Jews into letting Jesus free. They can choose between sparing the life of Jesus, or Barabbas. But his plan backfired badly. So set in their desire to see Jesus crucified were the Jewish leaders, that they were prepared to let a murderous criminal go free instead of him.

Many have noticed the almost poetic symbolism of Barabbas' name, which literally means "Son of the Father". Barabbas is freed, while the true Son of the Father goes to his death. So in a literal sense, his death saves Barabbas' life. But in an even more profound way, his death meant life for countless more who would put their trust in this King.

John 19:1-6

1 Then Pilate took Jesus and flogged him. 2 And the soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on his head and arrayed him in a purple robe. 3 They came up to him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" and struck him with their hands. 4 Pilate went out again and said to them, "See, I am bringing him out to you that you may know that I find no guilt in him." 5 So Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said to them, "Behold the man!" 6 When the chief priests and the officers saw him, they cried out, "Crucify him, crucify him!" Pilate said to them, "Take him yourselves and crucify him, for I find no guilt in him."

King of the Jews

We see here Pilate's lack of concern for justice as he flogs a man he knows to be innocent. Perhaps he is hoping that he will placate the Jews and avoid having to crucify an innocent man. Clearly he doesn't want to be involved, but he shows cowardice in refusing to stand up to the pressure from the Jewish leaders and do what he knows to be right.

The soldiers too, while attempting to heap shame on Jesus, end up shaming themselves. Their role in executing criminals seems to bring out the worst in them. They have no good reason to hate and mock Jesus, and yet they treat him with contempt. Little did they know that one day they would again be bowing before him and hailing him as king, but this time, they would be on the receiving end of punishment.

Crucify Him

The chief priests and officers too had a chance to back down from their evil scheme. They see a man who has been beaten to within an inch of his life, and mercilessly mocked. Had they had an ounce of compassion or mercy, they would have left it there. But they were determined to go through with their diabolical scheme.

This passage shows the worst in human depravity, the depths we can sink to. And yet this is not just a problem for a particularly bad subset of people. All of us have the same tendency to evil. It is why we needed a saviour. And even in the midst of this disgusting display of evil, that saviour chose, out of love, to continue with his mission, to offer forgiveness even to those who put him to death.

John 19:7-11

7 The Jews answered him, "We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die because he has made himself the Son of God." 8 When Pilate heard this statement, he was even more afraid. 9 He entered his headquarters again and said to Jesus, "Where are you from?" But Jesus gave him no answer. 10 So Pilate said to him, "You will not speak to me? Do you not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you?" 11 Jesus answered him, "You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above. Therefore he who delivered me over to you has the greater sin."

Son of God

So Pilate's plan to release Jesus with a flogging has backfired. The Jews play their final trump card. Jesus has committed a capital offense according to their law. He has called himself the "Son of God". For the Jews, this constituted blasphemy, since they denied that Jesus was the Messiah. But perhaps too, this title was intended to portray Jesus as threat to Caesar, who would claim that title for himself. It certainly struck fear into Pilate - he was beginning to realise that his hand was being forced.

Authority

So Jesus has a final chance to acquit himself. Pilate perhaps is hoping that Jesus will deny being the son of God. Interestingly, Jesus chooses not to answer Pilate's question about his origins. Maybe it is because to say Nazareth would be for him to duck out of the issue (and avoid fulfilling his Father's plan to go to the cross), but for him to say heaven would be to legitimise this unjust trial.

Pilate is astonished that Jesus doesn't immediately grasp his opportunity to escape. Perhaps Jesus has not realised that Pilate holds in his hands the power to kill or free Jesus. But Jesus had an entirely different perspective on things. He was confident in the overall sovereign control and authority of his Father. Pilate's authority had been given to him only by a higher authority. And God himself is the highest authority of all.

John 19:12-16a

12 From then on Pilate sought to release him, but the Jews cried out, "If you release this man, you are not Caesar's friend. Everyone who makes himself a king opposes Caesar." 13 So when Pilate heard these words, he brought Jesus out and sat down on the judgment seat at a place called The Stone Pavement, and in Aramaic Gabbatha. 14 Now it was the day of Preparation of the Passover. It was about the sixth hour. He said to the Jews, "Behold your King!" 15 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." 16a So he delivered him over to them to be crucified.

Behold Your King

We have seen that Pilate resented being manipulated by the Jews, and didn't really want to crucify Jesus, but they had one trump card left to play. They demanded Pilate execute Jesus as a display of loyalty to Caesar. Of course, the last thing Pilate could afford to be accused of was disloyalty to Caesar. Though the Jewish leaders had no loyalty of their own to Caesar, they realised this charge gave them a lot of leverage.

John chooses this moment to tell us what day it was: the day of Preparation for the Passover. In God's plan, this was no coincidence. For the Passover did not just commemorate the rescue of the Israelites from Egypt, but prophetically pointed forward to an even greater deliverance. This is just another small detail to remind us that, though Jesus appears to be at the mercy of Pilate and the Jewish leaders, actually what is happening is according to a plan that existed before any of them were born.

So finally Pilate's resistance crumbled. He still insists on irritating the Jews by referring to Jesus as their King. This serves simply to provoke their anger further. They are even reduced to saying "we have no king but Caesar" - shocking words from those who would not acknowledge a non-Jew as their rightful king. Their determination to do away with Jesus has seen them throw away their integrity.

John 19:16b-22

16b So they took Jesus, 17 and he went out, bearing his own cross, to the place called The Place of a Skull, which in Aramaic is called Golgotha. 18 There they crucified him, and with him two others, one on either side, and Jesus between them. 19 Pilate also wrote an inscription and put it on the cross. It read, "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews." 20 Many of the Jews read this inscription, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city, and it was written in Aramaic, in Latin, and in Greek. 21 So the chief priests of the Jews said to Pilate, "Do not write, 'The King of the Jews,' but rather, 'This man said, I am King of the Jews.'" 22 Pilate answered, "What I have written I have written."

Crucified

The chief priests have won, or so it seems. Their wish to see Jesus executed in the most cruel and humiliating manner possible had been granted. In their minds, this would be the ultimate demonstration to the world that Jesus was not the Messiah he claimed to be. How completely wrong they were. Though no one realised as it was happening, afterwards, millions of followers of Jesus would look back to this moment and see that God's plan of salvation reached its climax here. This was not the defeat of Jesus; it was the defeat of sin and death. We know that Jesus could have escaped this horrific torturous death at any point had he desired. But the strength of his love, and his resolute determination to do his Father's will meant that he endured right to the end.

King of the Jews

Pilate, no doubt to get his own back at the Jews who had forced his hand, wrote on the cross that Jesus was "King of the Jews". He intended it to mock them - to present a pathetic dying man as their king. And yet, had he known what was truly going on behind the scenes, he would have discovered that this was not just the king of the Jews, but the king of the universe. Today, it still requires the eyes of faith to recognise who Jesus is. Many are still blinded to his true identity. Many still mock. But those who have seen can do nothing but bow in worship before the king who willingly gave himself to save his ungrateful and rebellious subjects.

John 19:23-27

23 When the soldiers had crucified Jesus, they took his garments and divided them into four parts, one part for each soldier; also his tunic. But the tunic was seamless, woven in one piece from top to bottom, 24 so they said to one another, "Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it to see whose it shall be." This was to fulfil the Scripture which says, "They divided my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots."

So the soldiers did these things, 25 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 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!" And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home.

Dividing the Clothing

What happened to Jesus' clothes when he was crucified? At first glance, the question seems to be an unimportant piece of trivia, but John lets us know that the soldiers cast lots over them. This reminds us that those crucified were not even afforded the dignity of wearing an undergarment - they were stripped naked. It also shows how unconcerned the soldiers were at the horrific suffering that was taking place next to them - they had become so hardened to it that they can happily indulge in a bit of gambling. It serves as a stark reminder of how callous we can become if we allow ourselves to become indifferent to suffering. But most of all, this story is here to show, that even in the most apparently insignificant details God's plan was being fulfilled. This moment had been predicted centuries before in Psalm 22:18.

Behold your Mother

In stark contrast to the heartlessness of the soldiers, we see Jesus' utter selflessness in the way he arranged for John (who we presume the beloved disciple to be) to care for his mother. It is notable that while the majority of the disciples had fled, these three women were willing to stand by him in his moment of need. John was asked to treat Mary with the love and respect he would his own mother. This is a practise that is important for the church to maintain on behalf of those who find themselves bereaved and alone. In the church of God they should find a family that accepts them and welcomes them in.

John 19:28-30

28 After this, Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said (to fulfil the Scripture), "I thirst." 29 A jar full of sour wine stood there, so they put a sponge full of the sour wine on a hyssop branch and held it to his mouth. 30 When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, "It is finished," and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

I Thirst

John has already shown that the casting of lots for the clothing was a fulfilment of Scripture. Now he shows how the words of Jesus also functioned as a fulfilment. It may be that Jesus deliberately takes words from the Psalms, to show that even in this darkest hour, he knows that God is in control. And lest we imagine that Jesus' divine nature meant that he was able to endure pain without it really affecting him, here we see how as fully human he really did enter into the agony of crucifixion, gasping out for anything to drink.

Earlier in John's gospel, we saw Jesus offering living water that will quench people's eternal thirst¹⁸. We also saw him calling everyone who was thirsty to come to him and drink¹⁹. Though this drink of living, soul-satisfying water is offered freely to us, it came at a great cost to Jesus. He thirsted on the cross, that we might drink the water of life.

It is Finished

Having received the drink, Jesus then announced "it is finished". He didn't say "I am finished", though he clearly knew he was on the point of death. Rather, he recognised that his mission has been completed. He had humbled himself to the point of death, to bear the sins of the world, and had resisted any temptation to give in at any point. What was being accomplished in this moment may have looked like a victory for the devil, but in reality it was his moment of defeat. John even says that Jesus "gave up" his spirit. In other words, even at the very last, no one was taking Jesus' life from him; rather, he was laying it down for others.

¹⁸ John 4:14

¹⁹ John 7:37

John 19:31-37

31 Since it was the day of Preparation, and so that the bodies would not remain on the cross on the Sabbath (for that Sabbath was a high day), the Jews 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, and of the other who had been crucified with him. 33 But when they came to Jesus and 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 at once there came out blood and water. 35 He who saw it has borne witness--his testimony is true, and he knows that he is telling the truth--that you also may believe. 36 For these things took place that the Scripture might be fulfilled: "Not one of his bones will be broken." 37 And again another Scripture says, "They will look on him whom they have pierced."

A Broken Heart

Though the Jewish religious leaders had been willing to find loopholes in the moral and ethical requirements of the Scriptures in order to have Jesus executed, they remained as legalistic as ever when it came to the Sabbath. In many ways, it functioned for them as the ultimate test of faithfulness. No exceptions could be made. Therefore, the work of crucifying needed to be over and done with the day before. Normally this would mean breaking the death of crucified criminals who were dying a long and lingering death, but in Jesus' case this wasn't necessary, perhaps due to the severity of the beatings he received. But as we have seen, he had given up his life, rather than having it taken from him.

Instead, they ensured he really was dead by piercing him with a spear. Many say that the outflow of "blood and water" indicates he died literally of a broken heart. Whether or not this is the case, it is undeniable that the cause of Jesus' death was his great love for us. The cross speaks of a broken-hearted God, who, seeing the wicked rebellion of his world, chose not to simply destroy it in judgment, but at awful personal cost, the death of his Son, reached down to save us.

No Broken Bones

Yet again, John wants to remind us that at every point Scripture is being fulfilled. Even in what seem like random occurrences and insignificant details, God's divine superintendence ensures that everything goes exactly according to plan. I wonder how many apparently insignificant or even unpleasant moments in our lives will be revealed in hindsight to fit perfectly into a master plan that God intends for our good and his glory.

John 19:38-42

38 After these things Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus, and Pilate gave him permission. So he came and took away his body. 39 Nicodemus also, who earlier had come to Jesus by night, came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds in weight. 40 So they took the body of Jesus and bound it in linen cloths 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 So because of the Jewish day of Preparation, since the tomb was close at hand, they laid Jesus there.

Secret Disciples

Those executed by the Romans were typically discarded as human refuse. They would not be given the dignity of a proper burial unless their friends or family were willing to bury them. However, this required first that they had the money for a burial place, and second that they were willing to go to Pilate and ask for the body. And if someone has just been executed for being a rebel against the government, it's generally not a good idea to go and let the authorities know that you sympathise with them.

This makes it all the more surprising that Joseph of Arimathea, who had been keeping his discipleship secret, chooses this moment to come out into the open. Maybe the evil and injustice of this day's events have finally persuaded him that he no longer cares about the opinions of the Jewish religious leaders.

In fact, he is joined by another secret disciple, Nicodemus, who also decides that now is the time to show his allegiance to Jesus by bringing a generous gift of burial perfumes. We are not told that either Joseph or Nicodemus were expecting Jesus' resurrection. But we do see that these two men somehow realised on this evening that fear had been leading them to compromise and fail to stand up for what was right. They now, courageously, perhaps in contrast to fearfully earlier when Jesus was being tried, were ready to stand up and be counted as Jesus' disciples.

It has often been seen in the history of the church that the martyrdom of a courageous witness has led, not to other believers going into hiding, but to be even bolder in their stance. Obviously the death of Jesus was so much more than merely martyrdom, but his fortitude in enduring the cross stands as a challenge and encouragement to us all to be more courageous in our witness to the truth, and to stop fearing those who oppose us.

John 20:1-9

1 Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. 2 So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." 3 So Peter went out with the other disciple, and they were going toward the tomb. 4 Both of them were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. 5 And stooping to look in, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he did not go in. 6 Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen cloths lying there, 7 and the face cloth, which had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen cloths but folded up in a place by itself. 8 Then the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; 9 for as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that he must rise from the dead.

They have taken the Lord

Throughout the story of Jesus' death, John has been at pains to point out how every detail was under the sovereign control of God, and part of his plan. All the predictions and prophecies were coming to pass. So we might imagine that the disciples of Jesus would be expecting him to rise from the dead. But the reality was quite different. They had never really understood what he was saying when he made those predictions, or what the Scriptures were pointing to, and in any case, the shocking events of Jesus' crucifixion had left them bewildered.

So when Mary Magdalene came to the tomb, it was not because she was expecting to find it empty. She was coming to grieve. In fact, when she saw it empty, she ran to tell the other disciples that Jesus must have been taken from the tomb. Peter and John ran together to the tomb. John got there first, and simply stood in amazement. Peter, clearly not quite the athlete John was, arrived second, but true to form, barged straight in to investigate for himself. If there had been any doubt this was the right tomb, it was dispelled as Peter discovered Jesus' burial clothes still there, folded up.

Seeing and believing

John had not yet seen the risen Jesus, but this was enough for him. This was his moment of belief. There comes a point we reach where we must accept where all the evidence is pointing. To continually insist on yet another piece of evidence eventually moves from genuine enquiry into wilful unbelief. Everything John had heard and seen of Jesus up until this point added up to one thing - Jesus really was the Son of God, and really had risen from the dead.

I think John tells us about his belief at this point to reassure us that though we may not be, like he was, eye-witnesses of the resurrected Jesus, the historical fact of the empty tomb provides compelling reason to have faith in Jesus. Though people have continually tried to come up with alternative explanations for the empty tomb, the fact that it happened to this man, cannot be put down to mere coincidence.

John 20:10-18

10 Then the disciples went back to their homes. 11 But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb. 12 And she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet. 13 They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." 14 Having said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing, but she 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 Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher). 17 Jesus said to her, "Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" 18 Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"--and that he had said these things to her.

Why are you weeping?

The different reactions to the shocking discovery of the empty tomb are interesting. John is already contemplating the possibility of Jesus' resurrection, Peter doesn't know what to think. Mary just stays behind and weeps. Probably she didn't dare to imagine that Jesus might be alive again, for fear of having her hopes dashed. She simply wants someone who will tell her where the body is so she can mourn there.

Mary's tears were flowing so fast that it appears she didn't really notice who she was talking to at any point. The two angels she talks to as though they were just ordinary people, and neither does she immediately recognize Jesus. But she could never mistake his voice when he spoke her name. With just a single word he turned her mourning into dancing, her hopelessness into joy.

Commissioned

Mary's response tells us the name by which she knew Jesus. She called him "Teacher". Though she was not one of the twelve, she was in every way a disciple of Jesus. She had committed herself to learning from him and following him. She grabbed hold of him as if to say "don't you ever leave us again."

But her wish was not to be granted. Jesus is not staying on earth; he must ascend to his Father. This was always the plan, and, as he had explained before his death, this was best for his disciples too, since it meant the sending of the Holy Spirit.

Instead, Mary is given a commission. She is to take the message of the ascended Lord Jesus to the other disciples (and ultimately, to join them in the wider mission to take the message of the risen and ascended Lord Jesus to the world).

Notice that Jesus doesn't simply say he is going to his Father and God. He reminds Mary that this is her God and her Father too. It is, in a way, the first post-resurrection announcement of the gospel. Because of the saving work of Jesus, Mary can relate to God in just the same way as Jesus does, as a beloved child.

John 20:19-23

19 On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." 20 When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. 21 Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending 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, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld."

Fear and Peace

It is little wonder that the disciples met together on the Sunday evening. They had much to talk about - the empty tomb, the angels, Mary's message from Jesus about his ascension. But we are also told that they were particularly fearful of the Jews. Why would that be? Perhaps were they still nervous that having killed their leader, the Jews might now be looking to firmly crush the Jesus-following movement by executing some of the key disciples too. The fact of the empty tomb too may well have raised the possibility that they would be faced with accusations of grave robbery.

Whatever the reason for their fear, Jesus' appearance brings them joy and peace. He sets them free from the fear of what the Jews might do to them. Knowing that Jesus was alive and with them again gave them a new perspective. More than that, they are not just free from the fear of being attacked, but the fear of death has been dealt a severe blow, as they are looking at the one who has just conquered death - evidenced by the scars and wound in his side that he showed them. And best of all, Jesus brings the most important kind of peace - peace with God. This is freedom from the fear that God's wrath will be poured out on our sin in judgment. We need never fear that, since Jesus has borne our sin at the cross.

Sent with the Spirit

Jesus is not content to simply calm their fears. He has a commission for them, one that will make them leave the confines of their locked room and face up to those hostile towards them. Just as Jesus had a mission to go into a world that did not welcome him, so the disciples are now given a mission of their own to head out with the good news of the resurrected Saviour.

But they were not to go alone. Jesus offered them more than simply words of encouragement. He made two promises to them. The first is the promise of the Spirit. In some ways what Jesus does now is a little surprising, breathing on them and saying "Receive the Holy Spirit", since we know that the Spirit came on the disciples at Pentecost, 40 days later. But even if we are not sure in what exact measure they received the Spirit at that moment, the purpose of the Spirit is clear. He is the one who will give them the peace and the power they need to go on mission in a hostile world.

What Jesus says next is even harder to understand. But I think we can say that he promises them success. They will proclaim the message of forgiveness as they go on a mission sent by the Spirit, and some people will accept and receive the forgiveness. But who are the people from whom forgiveness is withheld? We might think of the fact that if the disciples opt to stay hidden away in their room, they are effectively robbing people of the chance to receive forgiveness. But although that is true, more likely this refers to those who reject the gospel message of

forgiveness through belief in Jesus. To those people, the disciples must announce with great regret that, having rejected the Saviour, they cannot be saved.

These verses then remind us of our call to mission. We have no excuse to hide away in fear, because God himself goes with us by the Spirit. We go, following the example of our Lord who fearlessly obeyed his Father's will, even to the point of death, but we know that the resurrection power of God means that death is not the end. And we go with the message that offers forgiveness to all, calling people to believe the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

John 20:24-28

24 Now Thomas, one of the Twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. 25 So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe." 26 Eight days later, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." 27 Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe." 28 Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!"

I Will Never Believe

Poor old Thomas missed the glorious moment of Jesus' first appearance to his disciples. We don't know why he wasn't there. Possibly, given his attitude, he was feeling disillusioned. Clearly he was not a gullible sort of a person. But he was verging on the territory of unbelief. After all, here he is faced with several witnesses, and they are people he knows and trusts. What's more, this is Jesus we are talking about, the one that Thomas had seen heal the sick and raise the dead. Why would he not believe? Thomas petulantly lays down the evidence he demands if he is to believe.

Do Not Disbelieve

That could well have been the end for Thomas. Jesus was under no obligation to appear especially to him, and come to him on his own terms. But maybe we see a softening on Thomas' part. He does join with the disciples again. Despite his doubts, he is not quite willing to walk away yet. He is open to persuasion.

And it is then, that Jesus, graciously and mercifully allows Thomas an opportunity to come to faith. Like the last time, Jesus comes bringing the disciples a welcome of "peace" - or "shalom". They had locked the doors again, indicating that their fear had still not subsided. They needed to come to grips with the fact that they need not fear even when Jesus is not physically present with them. The promised Holy Spirit would be the key to their eventual overcoming of this fear.

Jesus singles Thomas out, showing that he has supernatural knowledge of both what Thomas had said, and even thought. He knows the evidence that Thomas claimed he needed, but more than that, he knows that Thomas' problem is unbelief. Thankfully, Thomas realised that the criteria he had laid out for belief were unnecessary. He didn't need to perform a physical examination of Jesus to believe in the resurrection.

What Thomas says next demonstrates that he grasps just how significant the resurrection is. It is not just yet another miracle. He has called Jesus "Lord" before, but never referred to him as "God". But the pieces are falling into place in his mind - the resurrection has demonstrated that Jesus is indeed Immanuel - God with us.

John 20:29-31

29 Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." 30 Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; 31 but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

Believing without seeing

The sight of the risen Jesus alone was enough to overcome Thomas' scepticism. But this leaves a difficult question for those of us reading the gospel of John. How can we overcome our doubts, if we are not able to see Jesus in the flesh? Fortunately, Jesus has not forgotten us. Just as he indicated in his prayer before he went to the cross, he knew that there would be those who would believe on the basis of the witness of his disciples. Our faith is not based on seeing Jesus with our physical eyes, but receiving the message of the gospel. As we do so, the Holy Spirit breathes new life into us, enabling us to respond in faith.

Life through believing

This brings us to the reason this gospel was written in the first place. It was written that we might get to know who Jesus is, what he said, and what he did, and as a result come to have the same faith that the disciples did. John acknowledges that there are many other things that Jesus said and did that he has not recorded. But he has picked out what he believes are sufficient signs to bring us to faith.

In particular, John lists two things that every Christian comes to believe about Jesus. First, that he is the Christ. He is the promised Messiah, sent by God, the one who would save people from their sins. And second, he is the Son of God, worthy not just of our admiration but our worship and obedience. And this does not simply mean that we now have new opinions about Jesus. It is much more wonderful than that. As we believe, we receive the gift of new life, eternal life, life to the full, resurrection life, the life that is found only in Jesus.

John 21:1-7

1 After this Jesus revealed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias, and he revealed himself in this way. 2 Simon Peter, Thomas (called the Twin), Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, 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 go with you." They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing. 4 Just as day was breaking, Jesus stood on the shore; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. 5 Jesus said to them, "Children, do you have any fish?" They answered him, "No." 6 He said to them, "Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some." So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in, because of the quantity of fish. 7 That disciple whom Jesus loved therefore said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on his outer garment, for he was stripped for work, and threw himself into the sea.

Going Fishing

So Jesus had risen from the dead, and the disciples had all seen him. He had told them that they were being *sent*, just as Jesus was, and that the Holy Spirit would be with them. But at this time, they didn't really know what they were supposed to be doing, so they got on and did the thing that they knew best - fishing. They had spent the last three years following Jesus daily, but now he was no longer with them, they didn't know where to go. It seemed the most logical thing to do.

But they caught nothing. Perhaps we see a symbolism here that once we have come to know Jesus, attempting to go back to the old way of life will now be empty. They threw all their efforts in all night, and had nothing to show for it.

Stranger on the Shore

But then a stranger on the shore strikes up a conversation with them. When they admit to having completely failed to catch anything, he offers them a suggestion. Now I don't imagine that if I had been in their position I would have wanted to comply with this idea. How could this stranger possibly know there would be fish there? Did he think he could succeed where they failed?

But for some reason the disciples obeyed. They didn't yet know they were speaking to Jesus, but maybe their years of training with him had taught them that sometimes it is simply best to obey. Jesus had asked them to do all kinds of strange things, including looking for money in the mouth of a fish, and following the first person they saw with a water jar on their head. If they had learned anything, it was to be humble enough to take advice. And even though they didn't recognise Jesus, perhaps we see an example of what Jesus had said earlier in the gospel – "my sheep hear my voice ... and they follow me".

When the nets immediately bulged with fish, it all started adding up very quickly for John, in much the same way as it had done for him when he saw the grave clothes at the empty tomb. He knew immediately that it was Jesus.

But just like at the empty tomb, when John stood and marvelled while Peter rushed in, so John stands on the ship in amazement, while Peter (acting before thinking as usual), puts his clothes *on* before jumping into the sea. Maybe he thought he would be able to walk on water for a second time!

The story of the catch of fish probably has some symbolic meaning. Jesus had told his disciples that he would make them “fishers of men”. Their old occupation was catching fish, but their new occupation was catching people. And just like fishing, evangelism can sometimes feel like, hard, fruitless work. But we should not be disheartened. Jesus knows where the fish are, and he will direct us to them, so long as we are humble enough to follow his advice, and determined enough to keep going.

John 21:8-14

8 The other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, but about a hundred yards off. 9 When they got out on land, they saw a charcoal fire in place, with fish laid out on it, and bread. 10 Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught." 11 So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, 153 of them. And although there were so many, the net was not torn. 12 Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." Now none of the disciples dared ask him, "Who are you?" They knew it was the Lord. 13 Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and so with the fish. 14 This was now the third time that Jesus was revealed to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

The Catch

The miraculous catch of fish was so huge that the disciples opted to drag the nets behind the boat rather than risk sinking their ship by pulling them all on board. As is typical of fishermen whether in the first century or modern day, the disciples remembered the exact details of their amazing catch - 153 large fish. That the nets were not torn maybe has symbolic meaning that Jesus is able to prevent any of the "fish" that the disciples will catch in their evangelistic mission from getting away. The whole episode speaks of God's sovereignty over and empowering for the task of mission.

Cooked Breakfast

Jesus then invites the disciples to have a cooked breakfast, which no doubt was a very welcome sight after a hard night's work. The other disciples, whilst not as impulsive as Peter, nor as perceptive as John, nevertheless were convinced that the stranger on the shore was indeed Jesus, by the time they reached him.

As was his habit at meal-times, Jesus handed out the food. It was reminiscent of the way he blessed and handed out the bread and fish at the feeding of the 5000. It was probably also powerfully evocative of their final Passover meal they had eaten with Jesus about a week previously. Though he is now risen from the dead, he remains a humble servant king. This story demonstrates Jesus' ability and willingness to give us each day our daily bread, and not just physically, but to feed on the one who himself is "the bread of life".

John 21:15-19

15 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, "Feed my lambs." 16 He said to him 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, "Tend 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 everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep. 18 Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go." 19 (This he said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God.) And after saying this he said to him, "Follow me."

Love Me

Up until this point, there had been nothing said about Peter's denial. Perhaps Peter was hoping that nothing would be said, but Jesus knew that this was not an issue that could be left unresolved. The way he approaches it is full of grace. He doesn't rebuke Peter or heap shame upon him. Rather he asks a question that gets to the heart of the matter – "do you love me"?

This is the question that each of us must answer, but it was especially relevant given Peter's denial. Was there something that he loved more than Jesus? Peter affirms that he does indeed love Jesus, and as a result he is given a commission – "feed my lambs". Peter had of course heard Jesus say "I am the good shepherd", but now Peter himself was being given the task of being a good "shepherd". The lambs will not belong to Peter, but he is to feed and care them. This speaks of the pastoral care that would be part of Peter's future ministry - he would not just be an evangelist, catching fish, but a pastor, feeding lambs.

Why does Jesus repeat the question twice more to Peter? Perhaps in part, this three-time questioning corresponds to Peter's triple denial of Jesus. It also underscores the seriousness of the question. It is easy for us to sing "I love you Jesus" in a worship song, but it must be more than mere words to us. In the Greek language that John's gospel was written in, Jesus uses more than one different word for love. He wants to know if Peter loves him deeply, from the heart.

As each time Peter responds positively to Jesus' question, Jesus each time reiterates Peter's commission to feed and tend for his sheep. Jesus had emphasised that our service flows from our love for him. The only type of pastor that Jesus wants in his church is one who loves him first and foremost. Any other type of pastor is like the hired hand who doesn't truly care for the welfare of the sheep.

Follow Me

So Peter is given a second chance: a second chance as a disciple; a second chance as a leader. But he also gets a second chance that he doesn't want: a second chance to suffer as a follower of Jesus. Jesus prophesies over Peter's life that he will face a death that he does not want to go to. Doubtless there will be a chance for him to escape that death by denying Jesus again. But this time things will be different. This time, full of the Spirit, and standing firm in his love for his Saviour, Peter would glorify God in his death.

It may strike us as strange that dying could be a way to glorify God. But that was exactly what Jesus' death did, and what Peter's would too. They glorified God by staying faithful right to the

end, showing that there was absolutely nothing in the world that was worth more to them than their love for God. We glorify God by showing that he is our supreme treasure in life.

So with the words “follow me”, Peter is, without any shadow of a doubt, forgiven and restored as a disciple. He will not be physically walking around behind Jesus, but he will be following him by the Spirit, and following his example, of boldly going on mission in obedience to the Father. Jesus has the same question for us – “do you love me”, and the same call for us – “will you follow me?”

John 21:20-25

20 Peter turned and saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them, the one who had been reclining at table close to him and had said, "Lord, who is it that is going to betray you?" 21 When Peter saw him, he said to Jesus, "Lord, what about this man?" 22 Jesus said to him, "If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow me!" 23 So the saying spread abroad among the brothers that this disciple was not to die; yet Jesus did not say to him that he was not to die, but, "If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?" 24 This is the disciple who is bearing witness about these things, and who has written these things, and we know that his testimony is true. 25 Now there are also many other things that Jesus did. Were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.

The Disciple Whom Jesus Loved

If we were hoping that "the disciple whom Jesus loved" would finally reveal his identity at the end, we are going to be disappointed. But, as we have noted already, the most likely candidate is John, the disciple and writer of the fourth gospel. Peter has just learned that he will likely die by crucifixion (although not immediately, but as an older man). He now wonders whether John will meet the same fate.

But that is information Jesus is not prepared to give Peter. He simply does not need to know. What matters is that Peter follows Jesus. The brief glimpse into his own future he has been given was for his benefit, that he might stand firm when the final hour comes.

As for John, he was not told what his future would hold. He didn't know if he would be martyred. He didn't even know whether he would live to see the second coming or not. The same was true for him as was true for Peter - he needed to get on and follow Jesus.

Most of us are in John's shoes. We don't know what our future holds, but we do know the one who holds our future. We don't know the final destination, but we do know the Way.

True Story

John closes by assuring us that what he has told us is a *true* story. It may be a fine story in its own right, but its truth matters because it is a story that calls us to believe. It calls us to follow.

Jesus did many things, and you could fill a world with books about him. But our primary need is not just to know about him, but to believe in him, and in believing, have life in his name.