**Jesus: The Divine Word**

**John 1:1-5**

Code: 43-2

We begin today a study of the gospel of John, and I’m so delighted to do this. This was really the first book that I taught. I did some series when I first came in 1969, preliminary to this, and we did a few book studies which were redone as the years went by. But this was the first book of certainly any length that I taught originally way back in 1970, and what a joy it was at that time and the Lord has used even the messages from that series through the years to be a blessing to other people. But I’m really thrilled to be back at the gospel of John.

I love the author, John himself, who never refers to himself in his gospel. In fact, none of the four gospels identify inside the gospel the author. Church history tells us who the author is. It’s universal history going way back to the apostolic era, so we know it’s Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. And while John is mentioned twenty times in the other gospels, he’s never mentioned in this gospel at all by name. However, he chooses to refer to himself in another way. He calls himself “the disciple whom Jesus loved.” And if you had the choice between calling yourself “John” and calling yourself “the disciple whom Jesus loved,” that’s not a tough call. He was always in wonder and awe over the fact that he was so loved by Christ. He is the one we find leaning on Him, as it were, at the end of life.

He starts out as the son of thunder. He has a brother, an older brother named James. They are called *boanerges*, “sons of thunder.” They want to call down fire from heaven on some people who are mistreating Jesus. They needed to be tempered. And obviously, over the years, John was wonderfully tempered—so much so that he is known in history as the apostle of love. And the reason he’s known as the apostle of love is because he makes reference to love eighty times in his writings, eighty times. So he is genuinely to be identified as the apostle of love. It’s also true about John that he was concerned concerning the truth. He mentions truth twenty-five times in his gospel and twenty times in his epistles. So forty-five times he talks about truth, eighty times he talks about love. But one hundred times in this gospel he uses the word *believe*, *believe*.

Putting that all together, he wants us to believe the truth so that we can enter in to a relationship of love with the Lord. That’s...that’s really tying John together with the use of his most familiar vocabulary. John has a father named a Zebedee. They run a fishing business in Galilee. His mother’s name is Salome, and according to John 19:25 she may have been a sister to Mary, the mother of our Lord, which would make him a relative of Jesus. Small group up there, folks, who knew each other well, and intermarriage over the years could have led to that kind of relationship. As I said, he starts out pretty radical and severe and self-serving, even as his mother asked Jesus if he and his brother can sit on the right hand and the left in the kingdom. Over the years the work of the Lord on his heart, the Holy Spirit further working on his heart, a few years with the beloved apostle Peter, and he becomes the apostle of love, the apostle of truth, and the apostle of faith. And that’s what we’re going to find as we meet him in this wonderful gospel.

Now the gospel of John is in itself identified by many through the centuries as the holy of holies of the New Testament. It’s the most sacred place you can go. In fact, if there’s a most sacred chapter in the entire Bible, it would be the seventeenth chapter of John where our Lord Jesus prays to the Father in that intimate inter-Trinitarian prayer, the likes of which appears nowhere else in Scripture. That might be considered to be the very mercy seat of the holy of holies. But John is often called the holy of holies, because in this gospel the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ is fully displayed. And what was not accessible to people in the Old Covenant, namely the Holy of Holies, has become accessible to us in the New Covenant because the veil is down, the way is open, we come boldly into the presence of God. And as we enter the gospel of John, we—like a priest of old on the Day of Atonement—have access to the Holy of Holies to see the glory of Christ.

In this gospel, we will fellowship in the deepest way with the Lord Jesus. We will hear His beating heart. We will touch His wound prints and hopefully with Thomas we will say, “My Lord and my God.” In some ways, John’s gospel is simple enough for a child. In other ways, it is sublime as an angel. It is both as gentle as a lamb and as bold as a lion, as deep as the sea and as high as the heavens. And yet its truths must be and can be contained in one human heart. It is an amazing account.

John’s message is simply this: the eternal God Himself has become human. That is John’s message. The Creator has become a part of His creation, fully God and fully man. And why? In order that He might save sinners from their sin, death, judgment, and eternal hell. That’s the message of the gospel of John, that the eternal God, infinite, transcendent, all-knowing, all-powerful, all-present, everlastingly unchanging, that one true and living God who is at the same time one God and yet three persons has become man. In verse 14 of John 1, the phrase establishes that when John writes, “The Word became flesh.” “The Word became flesh.”

“The Word” is a title given to Jesus. In Matthew 1, at the birth of Christ, the angel says, “Call Him Immanuel,” which is “God with us,” because that very baby is indeed God with us. In Luke 1:32 and 35 He is to be “called Son of the Most High,” Son of God because He is deity in human flesh. *This, the essential truth of the Christian faith, that Jesus is God in human flesh, God the eternal, infinite, transcendent, all-knowing, all-powerful, all-present, everlastingly unchanging God has come into His creation in human form. That massive reality is the foundation of the Christian faith.*

There are four gospels that tell the story. Three of them, Matthew, Mark and Luke, give us the earthly history. Three of them look at the birth and the life and the experiences and the travels and the calling of Jesus upon His followers, and the teaching and the parables and the events of His life, including His arrest and His trial and His execution and His resurrection—and many of the features with which we are so familiar in those so-called Synoptic Gospels, because they’re the synopsis of His earthly life.

John doesn’t give us the earthly story. John doesn’t give us the historical view of the life of Christ. John gives us the *heavenly* story. He gives us the supernatural view of Christ. And in that way, John is unique. Ninety-percent of what is in John is not in Matthew, Mark, or Luke. Ninety percent of this is John’s alone to declare under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. There is nothing in John’s gospel about the birth of Christ. There is nothing about the early life of Christ. There is nothing about the baptism of Christ. There is nothing about the temptation of Christ. There is nothing about the transfiguration of Christ. There is nothing about the travels of Christ. There is nothing about the garden of agony of Christ. There’s nothing about His ascension into heaven, because John is not focusing on the history of His life. There are no parables. Parables were earthly stories. There are no earthly stories. This is a heavenly book. This is a heavenly look at the Lord Jesus Christ. This is the most heavenly of all the gospels by far.

The purpose of John is to convince the sinner of the true person of Christ, the true person of Christ. “That you might believe,” John 20:31, “that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you might have salvation in His name.” This is a salvation book. This is an evangelistic book. And in order to have salvation, you must believe in the true Christ. Write it down somewhere, John 20:31, “These things are written that you may believe”...There’s that word that he uses a hundred times...“that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life”...eternal life...“in His name.” To have eternal life, you must believe in the true Christ. You must believe in the true Christ—not a false Christ, not a misrepresentation of Christ, not the Christ of human intuition, human philosophy and false religion, but the true Christ.

John, therefore, gives us this immense treasure, twenty-one chapters demonstrating in every paragraph that Jesus is God in human flesh, that He is true God and true man, fully God and fully man. That is the Christ who is the true Christ; that is the Christ that must be believed on in order for one to be saved. John supports that fact about the identity of Christ by showing His divine claims, supporting those claims by the record of divine works, miracles, divine words, divine titles, and divine worship.

John pulls all of that together to demonstrate that we are talking about a divine person, a divine person. And that’s the objective of John. John authored three epistles at the end of the New Testament and, of course, received the glories of the book of Revelation. But here in this book he gives us his great evangelistic tract, if you will. Only when you understand Christ to be who He is and understand His person first, and then His work, is there any possibility that you could be saved. You must believe. You must believe the truth. You must believe.

When we go through this together, we’re going to have reasons to affirm what we already believe as Christians. And it’s going to arm us and equip us to declare the truth concerning Jesus Christ. I told you last week that it seems as though this is under assault and always under attack. People wanting to talk about Jesus but they don’t want to define who He is. This week that came to light when Billy Graham met with Mitt Romney in a private meeting. And the next day the Billy Graham organization removed Mormonism as a cult from their website. Really unimaginable. You can see it on the website. It’s their proclamation, with a statement that they didn’t want to get into theological issues that have political overtones. So we give honor to the false Christ of Mormonism and dishonor to the true Christ? How can that be? People play fast and loose with the glory of Christ, don’t they? In the most amazing ways. How sad.

The message of the New Testament, the message of the Old Testament, as we saw from Isaiah 52, is that Jesus is God. He is nothing other than God, nothing less than God. He is not a created spirit-brother of Lucifer and Adam as the Mormons say. And there are many, many other aberrant views of so-called Jesus Christ.

The New Testament is full of evidence that He is God. I don’t need to parade all that before you; you know that. It’s everywhere in the New Testament. Philippians 2 would be a good place to start. “He thought it not something to hold onto to be equal with God, but humbled Himself, took on the form of a man.” You know that great passage. We just read from Hebrews chapter 1 that He is the exact representation of God, that God says to Him, “O God, Your throne is established in heaven,” as we read in Hebrews 1. The Scripture is loaded with evidences that He is God. If you just take titles given to Jesus and also given to God, you can see the equality there. God and Jesus are both called Shepherd, both called Judge, both called Holy One in Scripture, both called First and Last, both called the Light, both called the Lord of the Sabbath, both called Savior, both called the pierced one (in the same verse, Zechariah 12:10), both called Mighty God, both called Lord of Host, both called Alpha and Omega, both called Lord of glory, both called Redeemer, and I can go on. Titles are given to Jesus that belong only to God. Our Lord Jesus is described as eternal, omnipresent, omniscient, omnipotent, immutable, unchanging, sovereign, all glorious, and eternal. Jesus did works that only God can do—He created; He raised the dead; He overpowered the kingdom of darkness; He forgave sin; He received worship on many occasions through His life and ministry. He declared that He had a right to be worshiped after His resurrection. He says in John 14 that He is the one who is the qualifier for all prayer, that is to be accepted by God and answered by God: “If you ask anything in His name, He hears and does it.” He answers prayer as God alone can do.

He does works that only God can do. He receives worship that only God can receive. He answers prayer that only God can answer. And we’re going to see as we go through the gospel of John evidence upon evidence, upon evidence of His deity.

The summation of what John is going to show us in this gospel is found in verse 14, “And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us.” “And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us.” That’s the most concise statement in the Bible on the incarnation. “The Word became flesh, and dwelt among us.” “The Word” is none other than Christ, and I’ll explain why that is the term John uses. But the Word, who is Jesus Christ, is God who took on humanity. The infinite becomes finite. The eternal one enters time. The invisible one becomes visible. The Word—He is called “the Word” in verse 14 and three times in verse 1, three times in verse 1.

John doesn’t explain that. John does not explain that. You might ask, “Well, why doesn’t John explain it? Doesn’t it seem a little bit oblique? Why doesn’t he just say ‘Jesus,’ it might simplify things.” He says the Word because that was such a perfect term to use to identify Christ on the supernatural side, on the supernatural side. There was a philosophical understanding of the word, that’s the Greek term *logos*. The philosophers talked about *logos* as the reality that was visible in creation. They believed in a *logos* spirit, some non-personal power source, some non-personal energy entity. They believed in some abstract kind of principle of reason, they called it, or principle of order and structure—some non-personal force floating around in the universe, some non-personal entity of wisdom, because they understood that you couldn’t have the creation in which they lived without having some source for it. But they believed it was impersonal, or even better, non-personal.

And even the common people saw the *logos¸* the philosophical identification of this powerful, non-personal force in the universe as being responsible for the way things were. John comes along and says, “Let me introduce you to the fact that the *logos* is not an impersonal force; the *logos*is a person. The *logos* is a person, not an impersonal reality, but a personal God who came into the world in the man Jesus—not just a concept but a person.

And then even beyond that, for the Jewish people, they didn’t need an explanation because the phrase “the Word of the Lord” appeared so many times in the Old Testament, and the Word of the Lord was simply the revelation of God. You wouldn’t know anything about God if He didn’t speak, and that’s why Hebrews 1, I read earlier, begins this way, “God who in time past, by the fathers and through the prophets, spoke in many ways in many portions, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son.” As the Old Testament is the written Word and the revelation of God, the New Testament is the account of the incarnate Word in the person Jesus Christ. So He is the Word, in that in Him God speaks, and that concept was well established among the Jews—“The Word of the Lord came to So-and-so, the Word of the Lord came to So-and-so.” You read that through the Old Testament. The Word of the Lord came often to the prophets, and it often came to the fathers, and it was the will of God expressed and communicated through Revelation.

So the Word of the Lord is the expression of God to people. There’s no greater illustration of that, there’s no greater representation of that, manifestation of that, demonstration of that than Jesus Christ. He is God speaking to us. If you want to hear from God, you can read the Old Testament and you will hear what God spoke to the fathers and the prophets who wrote that. But if you want the fullest revelation of God, you go to the New Testament because God most fully spoke in Christ, in Christ.

So John is telling us that Jesus is the incarnation of God. As I read, He is the exact representation of the nature of God. God speaks in Christ most clearly, most fully and savingly. So “the Word became flesh”—“became,” *ginomai.* Though God is immutable, God is pure eternal being and is not becoming, that is he’s not changing, developing, growing. He is pure, eternal, constant, immutable, unchanging being, yet He becomes…He enters in to creation and takes on humanity which is in the process of becoming. And He starts out in a womb and He becomes a child, and He grows in wisdom and stature and favor with God and man. The One who is pure being becomes a man, becomes flesh—that’s what that means—and dwelt among us. He’s not a vision. His humanity is not an apparition. His humanity is not a phantom, as we pointed out last week. Some people have said—the Docetists, namely that group of heretics. He didn’t take on the appearance of humanity or some apparition of humanity, or some illusion of humanity. He actually took on flesh and dwelt among us. Philippians 2, He was made in the likeness of men. He partook of flesh and blood, Hebrews 2:14 says. For thirty-three years, the fullness of the Godhead, Colossians 2:9; the fullness of the Godhead dwelt in Him bodily, fully God and fully man. Not half God, half man, fully God and fully man—that’s John’s message through this book. You must be right about Christ, fully God, and fully man. Any assault on His deity is a heresy; any assault on His humanity is a heresy.

Now, in order to demonstrate that Jesus is fully God in human flesh, emphasizing the deity aspect, John takes us through three very important truths. If you remember back Christmas a year ago—I didn’t know I was going to go into the gospel of John—and we looked at this chapter and saw some of these things from a little different approach. There are three things that demonstrate the deity of Christ: His preexistence with God, His coexistence with God, and His self-existence with God. He is pre-existent, co-existent, and self-existent. I don’t want you to get tangled up in terms. Those are not complicated, and I’ll hope to be able to make them easy for you to understand.

Here’s John’s message: “In the beginning was the Word,” simple statement. “In the beginning”—What beginning; the beginning of what? In the beginning of Genesis 1:1—that’s the beginning. If you don’t qualify “the beginning,” then it’s “the beginning.” “In the beginning”—the same beginning that is Genesis 1:1, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” In *that* beginning, the Word was. What is the importance of that? The Word was already existing. That is to say the Word who is none other than the Son of God, Jesus Christ, was already in existence when God created everything that exists. Now, if you’re not a part of the creation, you’re not a part of time and space. If you’re not a part of time and space, then you’re eternal. That’s a very important statement. John affirms His preexistence. He existed before the beginning of everything that exists. He was already existing. It’s the imperfect tense of the “to be” verb, the verb *eimi*. The imperfect tense means continuously. He was continuously existing already when the beginning began. He didn’t begin with the beginning. He’s not a part of the creation. He’s not a created being. He’s an already existing being. Time began with creation. Time began on the first day when God created, and the second day, and the third, and on time has marched until time will one day end and we will live in eternity, without time. But since time began, with the starting of time was the starting of creation; this Being, the Word, existed before time and therefore is outside of time, and therefore is eternal.

At the point that everything began, He already was, describing continuous existence before creation—the eternal pre-existence of the One called the Word. So very important and unmistakably clear. That is why Jesus, and we’ll see this all the way through the gospel of John, borrows a title that God uses to describe His own eternality. When Moses wanted to know the name of God, God said, “My name is I AM that I AM. My name is the verb ‘to be.’ My name is Eternal Being.” And repeatedly in the gospel of John, Jesus will say, “I AM, I AM, I AM, I AM”—the verb “to be”—and He will even be so bold as to say to the Jews, “Before Abraham was, I AM” (John 8:58), I AM. He only speaks of Himself in the present, continuous tense because there never was a time He didn’t exist.

This then is also reinforced in verse 1, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God.” The Word was with God—that’s repeated in verse 2, “He was in the beginning with God.” It’s interesting that that’s said twice, “the Word was with God,” verse 1. Right back, “In the beginning with God.” Repeats twice: “In the beginning was the Word, the Word was with God.” He was in the beginning with God. This is an emphasis to make sure we don’t miss the point.

Now listen to this. When the beginning began, He already existed. He existed as God. He’s outside time; He exists as the eternal God. But listen to this: He not only exists as the eternal God, and it says it in verse 1, “The Word was God,” but He existed eternally with God. This is very, very important because what it tells us is that not only is He the eternal God, but He is distinct from the eternal God. And this is where we come to understand that there is one God and yet there are three persons. And here we find two of them, He is God, the Word was God, but the Word was also with God. How can you be God and with God? Only in a Trinitarian way can that be explained—to be God by nature and yet be a distinct person, being with God.

There’s a beautiful illustration of this relationship that could well be the intention of the writer of the Proverbs, if you listen to the eighth chapter of Proverbs where there’s a record of creation from a most wonderful perspective. This can be the testimony, perhaps, of the Son of God, who is God and yet is with God, verse 27, “When He established the heavens, I was there, when He inscribed a circle on the face of the deep, when He made firm the skies above, when the springs of the deep became fixed, when He set for the sea its boundaries so that the water wouldn’t transgress His command, when He marked out the foundations of the earth; then I was beside Him, as a master workman; and I was daily His delight, rejoicing always before Him, rejoicing in the world, His earth, and having my delight in the sons of men.” Could this be the testimony of the One who is the Word who was with God when God was doing the creation? We know from Genesis 1 that the Holy Spirit was there brooding over the face of the waters and bringing shape into the creation. The whole Trinity is involved in this creative work. Yes, God the Father is the Creator, of course. Yes, the Holy Spirit participates in creation, of course. The Holy Spirit is the One who moves over the inanimate creation and brings life to it.

But listen again to the explanation of how they work together, from Hebrews 1 that I read you. It simply says this, verse 2, God “has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world.” God is the Creator, but the agent of creation that He uses is the Son, the Word. So what we have here then is a very important distinction that answers the Sabellianists, the Modalists—the people who say God is only one—like the oneness pentecostals I told you last week. There are about 25 million of them who believe there’s no Trinity but there’s only one God, and sometimes He acts like the Father, sometimes He acts like the Son, and sometimes He acts like the Spirit. And they have no idea what’s going on at the baptism when you have the Son being baptized, the Father saying, “This is My Son in whom I am well-pleased,” and the Holy Spirit descending like a dove—What is that? Of course there are many other questions they can’t answer, but they didn’t come to their heresy by reason. They came there by demonic revelation. It is He who is the agent through whom the Father creates.

God in the Old Testament, for example, is the God...is the Judge of all the earth. And yet in the New Testament, the agent of judgment is clearly Christ, ’cause He’s committed all judgment to Him. Now you’re getting into the inner workings of the Trinity. Not important for me to sort all that out, only to the degree that we know Scripture, what it’s saying to us. Can we do that anyway? But the point I’m making is simply that while He was God, He was also with God as a distinct person, as a distinct person. So we have His pre-existence.

John starts with the fact that when you’re talking about Jesus, you are talking about a pre-existent, eternal God, not a part of creation, not a part of creation. By the way, in Mormonism they not only believe that Jesus is the created spirit/brother of Adam and Lucifer, but they believe the God of the Bible is created by another god.

Alongside the truth of pre-existence comes the second truth of co-existence. And we already established that just by making a comment on the last phrase of verse 1, “the Word was God,” “the Word was God.” If He preexisted time and space, if He preexisted creation, if He existed already before anything was created that was created, then He has to be uncreated. If He’s uncreated, He has to be God. All angels were created. All fallen angels fell from a creation in which God had made them holy, and they defected and rebelled and fell. Every person in the universe, every person in the universe is a created being except the Creator Himself. This is a powerful expression, by the way, a very powerful expression. “The Word was God”—four words: *theos an ho logos*; literally in the Greek, “God was the Word,” “God was the Word.” Powerful Greek expression. Jesus in John 17 talks in His prayer to the Father in verse 5 about the glory that He had before the world began when He was *pros ton theon*, “on equal level with God.” Something, as I said, in Philippians he says, He did not hold on to but gave up for the sake of incarnation. Colossians 2:9, “In Him the fullness of the Godhead dwells bodily.” He is full deity; God was the Word, God was the Word. Four words in Greek: the clearest, most direct declaration of the deity of the Lord Jesus Christ in all four gospels—God was the Word. So He is preexistent, outside time and space before anything that is made is made. And He is co-existent, He is fully God. These are essentials for salvation faith.

Thirdly, His self-existence; He’s self-existent. This is obvious. If you’re not created, then you’ve existed outside creation. *You must be self-existent. Pre-existent, co-existent, self-existent.*

How do we establish that? Verses 3 and 4, “All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being.” This is a reiteration essentially of what I read to you in Hebrews, that God made all things through Him. In Him was life, and we’ll stop at that point.

Here is the proof of His self-existence. Everything that exists came into being through Him. That’s a positive declaration, simple, clear, flawless evidence—not even arguable—that the Lord Jesus Christ is eternal deity. Everything that exists, He made. It all came from Him. He didn’t come from anyone, or anything. Everything came from Him.

Listen to 1 Corinthians 8:6, “There is but one God, the Father, from whom are all things...and one Lord, Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we exist *through* Him.” It’s the same thing—God is the Creator; the Holy Spirit is an agent in creation; but at the end, God does all His creating through the Word, the Lord Jesus Christ. This doesn’t deny God as Creator. It doesn’t deny a role that the Holy Spirit plays in bringing order to the creation. But it says that the Son of God is the agent by which the creating is done. We know the Old Testament says that God is Creator. You can read it all through the Psalms. Read, for example, Psalm 102, a wonderful testimony of God’s identity as Creator. Read Isaiah 40, Isaiah 42, Isaiah 45—lots of places in the Old Testament talk about God as Creator, to say nothing of Genesis 1 and 2. Mark 13:19 speaks of God creating. Romans 1:25 talks about God as the Creator, and all through the New Testament God is referred to as the Creator. And so, of course, is the Lord Jesus Christ by whom God made everything that He made, as we read here and in Hebrews chapter 1.

The positive confession is that “all things came into being through Him.” The negative confession is, same verse, “apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being.” That’s the negative declaration. You have the positive declaration and the negative. Not one thing—that’s the literal Greek—not one thing exists that He didn’t make. The Creator of everything that exists, listen, must necessarily then be uncreated. If He’s not a part of the creation, then He’s uncreated, right? This is necessary. Only the eternal God is uncreated. The Jews would agree with that. Only the eternal God is uncreated. If Jesus is the Creator of everything that is created, then He too is uncreated and therefore He is the eternal God. Jesus is God; you can’t escape His deity. And yet while He is God, He is with God. *He is God and yet is distinct from God. He is God and yet is the means through which God creates, which again emphasizes His distinction.* Again, the argument is simple. Since God the Son is the Creator of everything that exists, He has to be outside the creation and that would be to be uncreated. He has to be outside time and that would be to be eternal.

Now this also leads to another conclusion—very obvious conclusion—stated at the beginning of verse 4. “In Him was life,” “in Him was life.” He didn’t get life from someone; nobody gave Him life. In Him was life. Now this starts to get...this starts to get you in places that you can’t escape from. You start thinking about God being eternal and being eternally alive, never a moment when He did not exist. That’s more than your feeble mind can handle, or mine—the eternality of God. But as an essential part of His eternality as evidenced by His creation, was life. He was alive and the source of life. That is such a profound statement. “In Him was life.” And the word used is not *bios*, ’cause He’s not just talking about biological life, which is one form of life. But the word is *zoe,* which has to do with spiritual life, the life principle, the reality of life. When a little baby comes into the world, that baby has biological life and that’s the functioning of the human body.

But there’s another kind of life existing in that little baby that can’t be quantified; it can’t be found and can’t be located, and can’t be tied to DNA—it’s a spiritual life. It’s an essential life that is not observable, and that’s the life that comes from God. Of course, as in Himself, the components that create biological life at every level—all the way from the simplest one-celled animal to the most complex being, the human being, and even a more amazing and complex being, the supernatural realm of angelic beings. God has the power in Him for all of that kind of life, including and stretching to the reality of spiritual life. And spiritual life lasts forever. So in Him is biological life and spiritual life by which He can create the physical world, which will die and by which He creates eternal being so we’ll never die. In Him is life.

When you’re looking at the Lord Jesus Christ, you’re looking at the one who is Himself life. He said that, “I am the way, the truth and”...What?...“and the life.” He can’t look at Christ in any other way. It’s a massive, massive statement—massive statement. He is life. He is the fundamental reality of all that exists. It’s in Him we live and move and have our being, have our existence. All that exists, exists because they have life from Him. “In Him was life.”

People come along with some nonsense about Jesus being a created being. This is where you want to take them. He is not the Jesus of the cults; He is not the Jesus of the liberation theology realm; He is not the Jesus of liberalism. He is the Jesus who is fully God, fully Man, who is the means by which everything that exists. And not only is He the means that came into existence, but Hebrews 1 says, “By His power He upholds all things.” He not only gave life, but He sustains life. He not only created, but He sustains the creation because in Him was life. And then John makes a wonderful statement, “*The life was the Light of men*.” And while you might distinguish between life and light, you can’t do it here. What John is saying is the life is the same as the Light of men. It’s the same phrase—the life was the Light as the Word was God. It’s the same Greek construction. And John is connecting life and light. The one who was the life became the Light of men. That’s why He was incarnate, right? That’s why He came into the world, to shine light into the darkness, to reveal God. The life was the Light. That’s an equal statement; that’s a parallel statement. The life and the Light in this case are the same, the same. The Light is the revelation of the life. Jesus said in John 8:12, “I am the Light of the world,” right? Whoever “follows Me will not walk in darkness,” John 8:12. “*I’m the Light of the world*”—we’ll see that when we get to John 8. It’s an amazing statement.

He is the life manifest, and the life manifest is called Light, the metaphor of light against the darkness of fallenness. Jesus is the eternal life source, the eternal divine life, manifest in the world like light shining in the darkness. Amazing. And “the Light,” verse 5 says, “shines in the darkness.” Verse 9 says, “*The true Light comes into the world and enlightens every man.” “The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness didn’t comprehend it*.”

You probably have a marginal reading. I don’t know why they don’t replace this word “comprehend” because comprehend is an old English word. For us it means to understand, and that’s not what this is saying in the original language. What it is really saying is the darkness doesn’t *katalambano*. *Katalambano*, the most vivid way to explain that would be “to pounce on and overpower, pounce on and overtake, overcome.” And what it’s saying is the one who is life has come into the world and is the Light of the world and the darkness cannot overpower it, cannot overwhelm it. You know that, darkness cannot overcome light. Light always overcomes darkness.

You go into a pitch-dark, isolated place in a room and light is one candle, and the light will overpower the darkness. The life of God, the eternal one, the eternal life—Jesus—comes into the world as light and He lights the world and He’s continuing to light the world. And notice this, the darkness can’t overpower it. What is the darkness? What’s it referring to? Well, if you go to Luke 22:53, Jesus was coming to the cross and He said, “*This is the hour of the power of darkness.” “This is the hour of the power of darkness*.” This is when hell is going to throw everything they’ve got at Me. The darkness refers to Satan, demons, and the whole complex of darkness. All that the domain of darkness, Colossians 1:13, has to bring against the light. Satan’s world, Satan’s realm of which all men are a part of your father, the devil, he is the prince of darkness. This is the kingdom, or domain of darkness. That’s what it’s talking about. The demon-darkness cannot overpower the Light, cannot overpower the Light. Darkness has tried to do it. Satan tried to destroy the Messianic line many times. Satan tried to kill all the babies and catch the Messiah in the slaughter when Jesus was just a child. The demons came after Jesus again and again, and again, and again. They tried to get Him every way they could. Satan himself comes at Him at the temptation to get Him to bow down, to get Him to violate God’s Word. Satan does everything he can in the garden, as you know, to get Him to go the other direction from the will of the Father and the sacrifice of the cross. Jesus through His travels ran into demons everywhere He went, who came after Him, assaulting Him for all time, you could say. Since the promise of God to bring a Redeemer, Satan has done what he could to extinguish the Light, the light that has now come in Christ. But the darkness, all the demon darkness, all the forces of hell and all their accommodating human evil, cannot successfully shut out the Light. The Light still shines. The Light still shines.

This opening of the gospel of John is such a powerful statement of the person of Christ and His impact on the world. The demon darkness cannot extinguish the Light, and the Light is shining in the world, it is shining in the world—it has been shining in the world for a long, long time. It has been available to any who would listen, who would hear.

You know, in Romans chapter 10 we are reminded of the fact that God says to Israel, “*All the day long I have stretched out My hands to a disobedient and obstinate people.” “All day long I have stretched out My hands to an obstinate people.*” You should have heard and believed. Verse 18, “*Surely they have never heard, have they? Indeed they have; their voice has gone out into all the earth, and their words to the ends of the world*.” The message of the light has gone out to Israel, to the end of the earth. The darkness can’t extinguish the message. But you must believe it—“faith comes by hearing the truth concerning Christ and believing.”

A final verse, John 8:24; Jesus said this, “*I say to you, you’ll die in your sins unless you believe that I am He, you will die in your sins*.” You don’t want to die in your sins, dear one. You don’t want to die in your sins and go to everlasting hell, but you will die in your sins unless you believe that I am He, that I am the one described here in these opening five verses and proven in the rest of this amazing gospel. Do you believe that Jesus is God in human flesh? That’s the foundation of saving faith. If you don’t believe that, you will die in your sins, unforgiven, and bear the full punishment for those sins. Put your trust in Him and His sacrifice on your behalf, and your sins are forgiven. Verse 12 says, “As many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become the children of God, even to those who”...What?... “believe”...What?...“in His name”; His name meaning who He really is.

Father, we thank You again this morning that we’ve been able to come together to worship, worship You and to worship You, O Christ, and You, Father, and You, Holy Spirit. Lift up our songs of praise and hymns of praise and prayers of petition, adoration, gratitude. We’re thankful that we have been exposed to the wondrous, amazing, divine text of Holy Scripture which gives us the most profound and comprehensible truth in language that even a child could understand. The simplicity of this, the economy of it, the clear power of it is evidence that we’re dealing with a supernatural book and not the efforts of men. What it says is true. What it says about our Lord is true about Him. May we believe that with all our hearts, believing have life in His name.

Father, we thank You for the grace that has extended itself to us. We are unworthy. We don’t deserve to be a part of Your kingdom. We don’t deserve to be called Your children, to have the right to be the children of God. What an amazing gift, amazing gift, to live in your eternal heaven with all its glories and joys forever. If this is what you give to the one who believes in Your Son, I pray, Lord, that You will work a work of saving grace in the hearts of many today who would turn from their sin and turn to the only hope in the Lord Jesus Christ. Thank You for the clear Word that You’ve given to us. We express our love and gratitude in His name. Amen.

**Jesus: The Divine Light**

**John 1:6-13**

Code: 43-3

Open your Bible, if you will, to the first chapter of the gospel of John, and we are continuing our wonderful journey through this glorious presentation of our Lord Jesus Christ, who is introduced to us in this book in metaphoric language. He’s presented to us, as John opens, as the Word, as the Life, and as the Light. Each of those is a way to speak of His deity. He is the Word because He is the communication of God. He is the Life because He is the very eternal life itself who gives life to everything that lives. And He is the Light because He is the one true illuminator, who illuminates all spiritual reality.

I want to read the opening of this gospel again, from verse 1 to 14, so that you have it in mind. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being. In Him was life, and the life was the Light of men. The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overpower it. There came a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to testify about the Light, so that all might believe through him. He was not Light, but he came to testify about the Light. There was the true Light which, coming into the world, enlightens every man. He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him. But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.”

In our previous looks at the gospel of John, we have considered the fact that Jesus is the Word and the Life. And this morning I want us to notice that He is the Light. In verse 4, it is said of Him, “*The life was the Light of men*.” And then five subsequent times in the verses that I read, He is referred to as the Light, as the Light.

Let’s just borrow a little bit from science, to get an understanding of why this idea of light is attached to the Lord Jesus Christ. When we think of light, we have to consider it in its most simplest terms and sort of take it for granted because we’re so used to it. Life is full of darkness and light. We understand them without a scientific explanation. But whenever there is a term like this, borrowed from life, used to describe the Lord Jesus Christ, or God Himself, it behooves us to dig a little deeper into the concept to see if we can’t see that God is viewing far more than we might see on the surface.

We experience light in an ecstatic way. It is either dark, or light, or some degree in between. For us, light is on and off, it is present or it is absent. And we look at light as some kind of static condition. Nothing, frankly, could be further from the truth.

To give you a scientific definition of light might help expand your understanding a little bit, and then we can apply it to what we’re learning here about the Lord Jesus Christ. Light, in fact, is energy. Science defines light as luminous energy, as radiant energy, as electromagnetic energy, and light is moving at a speed of 186,282 miles per second. It is anything but static. It is anything but fixed. It is considered as a wave, as a corpuscular or quantum phenomenon. It is, in great measure, indescribable as to the power and the source of that power. And the quantum idea is a testimony to the idea that it cannot be comprehended as to the source from which it draws its velocity, and its very existence. Light is a wave, moving at 186,000 miles per second. This wave can hit the retina of the eye and when it does that, it makes things visible. It illuminates things, all colors depend on light. Where there is light, we see. Where there is no light, we do not see. It is high-speed energy that hits the eye and makes things visible.

When you think about light in that way, you are seeing it, or viewing it in a way that is directly applicable to the Son of God, the Lord Jesus Christ, who is divine power in the spiritual realm, making things visible. When the Light, the spiritual light of Christ, hits the living soul, which would be equal to the open and functioning eye, everything is illuminated in the spiritual realm. The Light, according to John, is none other than the life--that eternal life who is the Lord Jesus Christ--who is the Word that comes from God. He is the Word because in Him God speaks. He is the Life because through Him God gives life. He is the Light because by Him everything in the spiritual realm is illuminated. Apart from Him, there is no word from God. Apart from Him there is no life. And apart from Him, there is no true understanding--all is darkness.

John has captured some very basic things--simple on the surface and yet profound to express who this person is that we call the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the living wave of divine power, moving at infinite speed, shining brightly into the spiritual realm to illuminate all that is otherwise dark. The Word is the Life, who is the Light that overpowers the darkness. The darkness, verse 5 says, cannot overpower the Light.

Our Lord Jesus Christ makes everything spiritual truly discernible and visible. You see the way the spiritual realm truly is, only in the light of Christ. Apart from Him, everything is dark. Even in the world of religion, the realm of religion, everything is dark without Christ.

So John introduces us to the one who illuminates the spiritual realm. And while in reading that you might think, starting from verse 6 down, that it’s a bit eclectic. It talks a little bit about John, and then it talks about the world, and then about Him coming to His own, and about people who believe, and so forth. You might see this as a bit eclectic or maybe he’s just kind of pulling a few things together that are unrelated, but that is not the case. We want to give John more credit than that.

What he’s doing here is identifying the Light. And he refers to it six times, and he will refer to Christ as the Light again as we will see in subsequent sections, even this morning, of the gospel of John. But what John is going to do in this opening chapter is to turn that Light on some very essential, foundational, bottom-line, bedrock, spiritual truths. He’s going to shine the Light where the Light initially needs to be placed in order for us to understand the foundational realities. The light of Christ will shine and reveal in this section the nature of true ministry. The Light will shine and reveal the very nature of the Savior Himself. The Light will shine and reveal the nature of sinners. It will shine and reveal the nature of believers, and it will even illuminate the nature of God--all of that in this section. We will see the truth about Christian ministry, the truth about Christ Himself, the truth about sinners, the truth about believers, and the truth about God when the Light shines--and the Light is none other than Christ. The arrival of the divine Light drives the darkness away from these foundational realities.

Now remember, John has a gospel objective here. He says at the end of his letter that he has written all these things that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and believing have life in His name. So this is a saving effort; this is a gospel effort; this is an evangelistic book. He wants us to be saved, and He knows that can only come when we understand the gospel. And these are the foundations of the gospel that John shines the light on at the very, very beginning.

Now let’s begin where John begins and talk, first of all, about the light of Christ illuminating the true nature of ministry, the true nature of ministry--gospel ministry. And this is first in John’s order, so we accept that as having been inspired by the Holy Spirit: “there came a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness”...or for a witness...to testify about the Light, so that all might believe through him. He was not the Light, but he came to testify about the Light.”

The essence of gospel ministry, which is the responsibility of every preacher, every believer--we’re all to be giving a witness to Christ. The essence of the nature of gospel ministry is right there established for us at the very beginning of this gospel. Since the purpose of it is evangelistic, this is critical to John that we understand the nature of Christian ministry and why we are as believers in the world, and why some of us preach and what is to be the theme of our preaching.

But let’s back up and start at verse 6 and this morning we’ll run from verse 6 through 13. The change is very abrupt here. “*There came a man*.” Just mark that. There came a man. Up to this point, we’ve been in verses 1 through 5, and we’ve been talking about the uncreated One, the eternal One, who in the beginning existed already, who was with God, that is, was with God distinct from God and yet was God. He is the One who created everything that exists and nothing has come into existence that He didn’t create. He is life itself and gives that life, and He is Light.

So we’ve been talking about the eternal Son of God, the second member of the Trinity, verse 14 says, who “b*ecame flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.*” So we’ve been talking about God who became a man.

Now we have a shift in verse 6. “*There came a man.” “There came a man*.” We move from the uncreated One, the Creator, the eternal One, preexistent, coexistent with God, self-existent, that is life is in Him, to a mere man. Now John’s going to give us a lot of things in his gospel that give testimony to Christ. John will give us many things that give testimony to Christ. He will point us, for example, to the testimony of the Father. He will point us to the testimony of the words of Jesus, the works of Jesus. He will point us to the testimony of the Holy Spirit, to the testimony of eye-witnesses of His miracles, to the testimony of His disciples. John will give us at least seven different lines of evidence to show that verse 14 is true, that the eternal uncreated Word of God became flesh. But he begins by pointing us in the direction of this testimony that comes from a man named John. Another man named John; John means gift of God, and John the apostle is the writer, but here he’s referring to a different John: “There came a man sent from God, whose name was John.” He’s not talking about himself; he’s talking about John the Baptist, as we know him, because of his ministry of baptizing people in the Jordan River who had come to him to hear that Messiah was coming. And they needed to repent and get their hearts right, and to symbolize their desire to be washed and cleansed from sin, John put them through a baptism, which was really what they did to Gentiles who were outside the covenant when they wanted to become a part of worshiping the true God and become a part of the religion of Israel.

John had a massive amount of people coming from Jerusalem and Judea, to prepare for the Messiah, at least on a superficial level, when he was baptizing them and so he became known as John the Baptist. He is the last Old Testament prophet. There hasn’t been one for 400 years until he arrives. You can read about him in the early chapters of Matthew, the early chapters of Mark, and the early chapters of Luke, the details of his story. He is the last Old Testament prophet; he is the greatest man who ever lived, up until his time, Jesus said in Matthew 11:11. Why? More intellectual? No. More spiritual? No. More influential? No. He’s the greatest man who ever lived up until his time because no man ever had a greater responsibility or a more privileged duty. He introduced people to the Messiah. That made him greater in terms of responsibility and privilege than anyone who had ever lived. He was bold, forthright, and yet he was humble. He was resolute; he was so faithful to the preaching of the truth that it cost him his head, as Matthew 14 tells us--the story of his being beheaded.

But here we are introduced to John, not in a sense of all of his biography, which we find in Matthew, Mark and Luke, but here we are introduced to John only in the sense that we get a look at his ministry. And his ministry is defined in verse 7 in very simple terms. “*He came for a witness, to testify about the Light, so that all might believe through Him*.”

In that one verse, verse 7, you have the model for gospel ministry, a model for gospel ministry. John lays this down at the very outset. If his purpose, and it is, is to cause people to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and believing have life in His name, then that becomes the mission of every true believer and every true preacher. And here John sets the foundation for that kind of ministry.

Looking at verse 6, just for a brief moment, it is indicated to us that there came a man sent from God whose name was John. I cannot tell you all the times that I have been introduced by that verse. People referring it to me in a gracious gesture. But John...somebody might doubt whether I’ve actually come from God, in any sort of directly divine act. But you couldn’t doubt it with John because John, first of all, was prophesied to come in the Old Testament. In the fortieth chapter of Isaiah, he would be the voice crying in the wilderness, “*Make way for the Lord, straighten out the highway*.” He is the one spoken of at the end of Malachi who would come before the Lord’s arrival. So he comes from the Lord in a very direct sense, as he is prophesied, clearly by prophesy he is sent from the Lord.

Secondly, his parents were barren. They were in their eighties, at least. They had never been able to have children. He is miraculously conceived, which adds another component to the fact that he is definitely sent from the Lord. His conception is a miraculous conception.

To add another component to the fact that he’s sent from God, we would be reminded in Luke 1 that his arrival was announced to his father by an angel who came from heaven. I can promise you in my own case, as an example, there are no prophesies that I would be a preacher, there were no miracles that brought me about, and no angels showed up at my parents’ house. So this is a man sent from God in a completely different way. Even his timing in Luke 1:80 it says, “*There was a day for his public appearance, and God had ordained that very day*.” He is the true prophet. And, in fact, in Matthew 14 and Matthew 21, we read that everybody thought he was a prophet. Everybody believed he was a prophet because of the nature of his ministry and the nature of his preaching.

So this bold, powerful, humble, effective prophet comes along. But he is a man, and that’s the contrast here. The Lord Jesus was from all eternity. John came into being in time. The Lord Jesus is the eternal Creator. John is His creation. The Lord Jesus is God. John is sent by God. The Lord Jesus is the Light. John testifies about the Light. He comes, verse 7, “*as a witness*,” or for a witness. He comes for a witness. If you read it, he came as a witness, it makes the word “witness” seem like it’s referring to the man, but it isn’t. “He came for a witness” is a better way to translate it, because the Greek is not a person, but the message, *marturia*, “the message.” He came for a message. “He came for a message, to testify.” Both of those come from the same root. One is a noun form--he came for a message, to give a message; he came for a testimony, to give a testimony. The other, *martureo*, is the verb. Both terms fit the courtroom. He came to step into the courtroom of the world and give evidence of the Christ, being the Son of God. That’s why he came. He came as a man who had the true evidence from heaven regarding the Light. He had the facts by which to give the message, the testimony to the court of the world so that they would understand the truth about the light. Notice “*about the Light,” “about the Light.”*

I can’t emphasize that enough. Gospel ministry is about the Light. It is about Christ. It is giving the facts, the truth, the evidence concerning who He is, why He came, and what He has done. That’s gospel ministry, to give the facts concerning the One who is the Word, the Life, the Light, the Lord Jesus Christ, and to demonstrate that indeed the Word became flesh, dwelt among us for thirty-three years, put His glory on display, the very glory that belongs to One who proceeds from the Father, full of divine grace and truth. All true Christian ministry is established here as being Christ dominated, Christ centered. This is the true nature of Christian ministry, it is about Jesus Christ. John points people to the Savior.

Down in verse 15, John is giving his testimony. He’s crying out, shouting at the top of his voice, “*This was He of whom I said, He who comes after me has a higher rank than I, for He existed before me. He who comes after me, existed before me*.” So he is talking about the One who though man is also the eternal God. He gave constant testimony concerning Christ.

Verse 29, he points to Jesus and said, “*Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world*.” Verse 30, “*This is He on behalf of whom I said. After me comes a man who has a higher rank than I for He existed before me*.” Verse 34, “*This is the Son of God*.” Verse 36, “*Behold the Lamb of God*.” That’s His testimony. It’s a Christ-centered testimony. And it continued to be the subject of his preaching. This is a foundation which Paul builds on when he says, 1 Corinthians 2, “*I’m determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified.*” Paul describes in 2 Corinthians 4 gospel ministry as proclaiming Jesus as Lord, the one in whom the glory of God is shining, none other than Christ.

In Acts 1:8, Jesus says to the disciples and the believers that the Holy Spirit is going to come and you’re going to be witnesses unto Me. You’re going to give the same kind of testimony, same word, *martures--*you’re going to be giving testimony in the courtroom of the world of the evidences that point to Me, the Savior, the Son of God, so that people can believe in My name and be saved. Christ is our subject. Christ is our theme. There is no other subject. There is no other theme.

And just to deny any confusion, in verse 8 John the apostle says that John the Baptist was not the Light, but He came to testify about the Light. That’s what true preachers do. That’s what true ministers do. That’s what true believers do. We testify about the Light. John knew he wasn’t the Light. Over in chapter 3, verse 25, “There rose a discussion on the part of John’s disciples,” John the Baptist. By the way, the only...when you see in the book of John the word *John*, the name *John*, most of the time it’s John the Baptist. There’s only one other John in the whole gospel of John, and that appears four times--and that’s John, the father of Peter. John the apostle never uses his name; he chooses to call himself “The disciple whom Jesus loved.” So when you see John, most often it’s John the Baptist; and four times or so, most of them at the end, it’s the father of Peter. So here we have John the Baptist, according to verse 25, and his disciples are having a discussion with a Jew about purification. They came to John and they said to him, “*Rabbi, he who was [which means “teacher”], he who was with you beyond the Jordan, to whom you have testified [that means Christ], behold, He is baptizing and all are coming to Him*.”

You know, your career is over. Do you understand that? They’re not coming to you anymore; they’re coming to the One you were testifying about. “And John answered and said, ‘*A man can receive nothing unless it’s been given him from heaven*.’” Which is to say, “Look, I had my place. I received from God the commission and discharged it. You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, ‘I’m not the Christ,’ but, ‘I have been sent ahead of Him.’” He knew he was not the Light, not the Christ. And that’s why in verse 30 he says, “He must increase, I must decrease.” Let me fade away and let Him take the spotlight.

So verse 8 says John was not the Light. Now some people have brought up an issue and it’s an important issue to mention, so I want to point you to it. In John 5:35, in John 5:35 a comment is made about John, John the Baptist. And it says “*he was the lamp that was burning and was shining and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light*.”

Well, wait a minute. John at the beginning in chapter 1, John the apostle says, “[John the Baptist] was not the Light.” John himself says, “I’m not the Christ. He is and I give testimony to that.” But here it says “he was the lamp [or the light] that was burning and shining, and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light.” What’s the issue here?

The word “lamp” in 5:35 is *luchnos*; it means “a portable lamp”--small portable oil lamp with a little wick. John was that kind of light. He was a derived light. But in chapter 1, verse 8, when it says Jesus is the light it’s the word *phos,* which is essential light from which you get “photography,” “photosynthesis.” Any time you see the *pho* that’s from that Greek word “light.” Jesus is essential light; John is a lamp that reflects that light in the same sense that you and I are the light of the world, and we’re not to hide our light.

So at the very start of this wonderful gospel, John illuminates the nature of true gospel ministry, all true ministers, faithful witnesses, center on the evidences and the facts concerning the person and work of Christ, to make the case that He is who the Scripture says He is. That’s the theme of all preaching by all obedient, loyal, faithful ministers and Christian witnesses. Ministers are not priests; we are not priests; we are not mediators. We are not sacred agents who somehow draw down through ceremonies and rituals some kind of divine life and grace and dispense it to somebody else. We don’t do that. That’s a deception. We don’t bring divine grace through any sacramental means to people. We’re not spiritual advisors. We’re not coaches, which seems to be a popular term. We’re not helpers, psychologists, who through our good advice make people feel better about themselves. We’re not miracle working healers who have some kind of anointing from heaven that exalts us above everybody else. All of that is just lies. No preacher is anointed in any supernatural way above anybody else. There’s no such thing in Scripture.

All true ministers are sent from God to declare the true witness and testimony concerning the Light, concerning Christ, who alone dispels the darkness. And when we give the true and accurate and complete testimony to the Lord Jesus Christ, we are loyal and faithful. That’s why as long as you come to Grace Church, and as long as you’ve been coming, you will see Christ the theme of everything.

Why? Back to verse 7, “So that”...Here’s the purpose...“so that all might”...What?...“believe through him.” Who’s “him?” Not Christ. Through John, in this case. “He came for a witness, to testify about the Light, so that all might believe through him.”

You say, “Wait a minute, do people believe through a man?” Yes, yes. That seems like a stretch. Look at Romans 10. What’s the Great Commission? You know what the Great Commission is? “Go into all the world and”...Do what?...“preach the gospel to everybody.” Why, why do we need to do that? Why do we need to do that? Because if they don’t hear the gospel, they can’t be saved. In Romans 10, we could pick it up in verse 13, “Whoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved.” “Whoever will call on the name of the Lord”...Jew or Gentile, there’s no distinction he says back in verse 12...“whoever believes will not be disappointed,” verse 11.

Then verse 14, “How will they call on Him in whom they haven’t believed? How will they believe in Him whom they haven’t heard? How will they hear without a”...What? A what?...“preacher. How will they preach unless they’re sent?” No wonder they say, “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news of good things!” Verse 17, “Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word concerning Christ.”

So John is a model. John came for a witness to give testimony about the Lord Jesus Christ so that all might believe through his preaching, through his ministry.

People come to salvation by believing preachers, by believing the evidence they present, by believing other Christians who have taken the gospel to them and explained it and given the facts and supported it. And those who come to Christ, come to Christ through human means, and say from that Old Testament text, of course, “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news.” We love the people who brought us the gospel, right?

The goal of gospel ministry is believing through our preaching. That’s why Paul says, “Woe is unto me if I preach not the gospel.” “I’m not ashamed of the gospel of Christ; it’s the power of God to salvation to everyone who believes.” I’m a debtor to the Jew and the Greek to preach the gospel. All that in Romans 1:16 to 18. It may be foolishness, 1 Corinthians 1, may be a stumbling block, but to those who are being saved, it is the power of God unto salvation.

So the light is shining, first of all, in this foundational passage in John, on the nature of true ministry. Secondly, the light illuminates the nature of the Son of God, the true nature of the Son of God. We would know from the Old Testament, the second member of the Trinity. We would know the Trinity because we see all three persons of the Trinity engaged in the Old Testament. We would know that there is a relationship between the members of the Trinity. There are conversations between the members of the Trinity: “the Lord said unto My Lord,” for example, in the Psalms. We would know something about the nature of God because His attributes are disclosed in the Old Testament. We know a lot about Him. But there would be a measure of darkness until the light appears. And the light illuminates Himself. The light shines to reveal the very Light itself, the very essence of Christ. And what we learn in verse 9 is “*there was the true Light which coming into the world enlightens every man*.”

When Christ arrived, now the second member of the Trinity becomes clear to us. Now we see who He is. We know, from the New Testament, that He was working in the Old Testament. That He was a spiritual rock, for example; that brought water to the children of Israel in the wilderness. We know other things about Him that are referred to in the New Testament. We know that He was actually the One on the throne in Isaiah 6 of whom the angel said, “Holy, holy, holy.” We know that He is the Savior of Isaiah 52 and 53, the One who would be our substitute. But there’s still shadow around that until we come into the New Testament and the light arriving illuminates Himself. And we see the light of the glory of God like never before shining in the face of Jesus Christ. Which is more glorious, which is more instructive? To see a cloud of fire at night? A cloud of light in the day, leading the children of Israel, or to look into the face of Jesus Christ? He is the effulgence of the Father’s glory, the express image of His person, Hebrews 1. He is the One in whom the Godhead dwells bodily. He is the one in whom the glory of God is revealed, full of grace and truth.

The light shines then on the true nature of gospel ministry and it shines on the Light itself. He is the true Light. We see that. The *alethinos*; “genuine” it means; “real;” “legitimate, as opposed to false.” He is the true Light, as opposed to borrowed light, secondary light, derived light. He is the true Light, as opposed to shadows and symbols. He is the pre-eminent, all-glorious emanation from God. The glory of God shines in Him, more brilliantly than in any other revelation. And consequently enlightens every man who sees Him for who He is.

What does it mean “enlightens every man?” What it means is for every man who truly sees Christ, there is complete enlightenment about who He is--not available in the Old Testament, not available. No one really could see the full glory of Christ until He came into the world. He enlightens every man. He is the only Light for every man. Everyone who is enlightened is enlightened by Him. Everybody who understands salvation and His role as Savior; everyone who understands that understands it because they see Him for who He is. Everyone who is truly enlightened; everyone who sees spiritual reality, who sees the supernatural world the way it really is; everyone who is enlightened genuinely and savingly is enlightened because he has seen the light of Christ. You can’t be saved apart from Christ. He says in 8:12 of John, “*I am the Light of the world. No man who follows Me will ever walk in darkness*.” The only Light the world has is Christ. He is the only Light that can enlighten anyone and everyone. His light is the only sufficient light.

In John 3 verse 16, we all know, “*God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life*.” But it goes on. “*God didn’t send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him. He who believes in Him is not judged; he who doesn’t believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God*.” Again, John’s theme of believing in Him for salvation.

And then this: “*This is the judgment*,” verse 19, “*that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the Light, doesn’t come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But he who practices the truth comes to the Light, so that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God*.”

The light of salvation shines only in Jesus Christ. J.C. Ryle put it this way: “Christ is to the souls of men what the sun is to the world. He is the center and source of all spiritual light. Like the sun, He shines for the common benefit of all mankind, for high and for low, for rich and for poor, for Jew and for Greek. Like the sun, He is free to all, all may look at Him and drink health out of His light. If millions of mankind were mad enough to dwell in caves underground, or to bandage their eyes, their darkness would be their own fault and not the fault of the sun. So likewise, if millions of men and women love spiritual darkness rather than light, the blame must be laid on their blind hearts. But whether men will see or not, Christ is the true sun and the light of the world, there is no light for sinners except in the Lord Jesus,” end quote. What a great statement.

As the sun is the light that lights the world, so Christ is the Light that lights every man. There is no other light. And if you accept the Light, you’re saved. And if you reject the Light, you’re judged.

How did He manifest Himself? Verse 10, “*He was in the world.” “He was in the world.*” He was in the world that He made. “The world was made by Him.” He was in the world for thirty-three years. He was present in His creation. For thirty years in Nazareth, the people had Him in their neighborhood and the first time He came back to preach, they tried to kill Him, tried to kill Him. For three years He ministered in the land of Israel and banished illness, banished demons, demonstrated His power over nature. He was the mystery of godliness, God in human flesh. He was the invisible God made visible. He was in the world, the very world that He made. And He demonstrated His creative power, didn’t He? Gave people limbs, gave people organs, gave people eyes, new hearing mechanisms. Gave people life from the dead, controlled storms, walked on water. He showed His creative power. And He put Himself on display by being in the world. This is the greatest manifestation of the Savior, the second member of the Trinity who would be our sacrifice.

So the coming of Christ then enlightens us about the nature of spiritual ministry and it enlightens us about the nature of the Savior Himself. Thirdly--and I’ll hurry a little bit--Christ coming into the world as the Light, illuminated the true nature of sinners, illuminated the true nature of sinners. In order to get the gospel in your mind and understand its urgency and importance and understand the truth about how it operates, you have to see this third point. John makes this unmistakably clear and you will probably recall these verses by memory. Back to the middle of verse 10. “The world did not know Him. He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him.”

Look, we understand that men are sinners, that the heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked is not new. That’s Jeremiah 17:9, way back. We understand the Fall in Genesis 3. We understand that mankind is cursed. We understand that God has to drown the whole human race very early in the book of Genesis, because He sees only evil continually. We understand the depth of human depravity; it’s the history of the Old Testament and the account of the New, as well as all human history up to the very moment we live. We understand the wretchedness of the world. But never, never has that wretchedness and the profound nature of that darkness been more on display then when people reject the light. It’s one thing to reject the light of the Law. It’s another thing to reject the word of Old Testament prophets. It’s another thing to reject the revelation of God written in the Old Testament. But it is a far more indicative thing to reject Christ.

This is incomparable testimony to the depravity of man. Put the blazing Light of heaven, full of grace, full of truth, in the world of sinners, and when they reject Him, you will have the most dramatic evidence of the depth of their depravity. One thing to reject a man, a prophet; it’s another thing to reject a scroll that someone wrote. But it is quite a flagrant thing to reject the living God in human flesh. Never, never has the depravity of man been so clearly revealed as when the light came into the world and exposed all that was hidden in the darkness of the human soul. No disclosure of the sinfulness of sin is ever as revealed as this. How wretched are you when you resent Jesus Christ--when you will not believe in Christ; then; ever since then; or now? Again, rejecting written revelation, rejecting spoken revelation, rejecting a preacher, rejecting a prophet. Very revealing. But rejecting the Lord Jesus Christ Himself is the most devastating indication of the depth of human sin. Verse 10 says, “The world didn’t know Him.” Romans 1 says, “They don’t know God.” And John 1 says, “They don’t know Christ.” Engulfed in spiritual death and blindness, they love their sin. And John, as I just read in John 3:19 and 20, this is the judgment that comes on them that the Light shines but “men love”...What?...“*darkness rather than the Light*.” They plunge deeper and deeper into the darkness. To those that are perishing, the light is foolishness. They didn’t know God in Romans 1. They don’t know the Son of God in John 1. Still true today.

He gave ample evidence to the generation that were there when He arrived and has left ample evidence in the testimony of Holy Scripture. In John 5 He says, “*Can’t you believe My words, and if you can’t believe My words, can you believe My works? And if you can’t believe My works, can you believe My Father? If you can’t believe My Father, can you search the Scripture, for they are they that speak of Me*.”

There is plenty of evidence of human sin, plenty of evidence of the depth of human depravity. But never is it more stark then when people know about Christ, have the truth in their hands, and reject Him because the light is never shone in such glorious brilliance, and the people who plunge deeper into the penetrating darkness demonstrate the sinfulness of sin.

And it even goes beyond that. In verse 11, “*He came to His own*.” What do you mean “His own?” Well, it means His own place, His own people, His own country, His own nation, His own town, “and those who were His own did not receive Him.” It wasn’t just the world that didn’t know Him, the Gentile world, the outside world, continuing even to today. It was the very people who claimed to believe in the true God of Israel, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of the Old Testament. It was the most religious people on the planet. It was the people who had, according to Romans 9, the Law, the prophets, the covenants, the adoption, the fathers--all that God had poured into the people of Israel. You will find in the Law, the prophets, the historical writings, and the Psalms--all those categories in the Old Testament--used dozens of times this phrase by God: “*My people, My people*.” That’s what’s being referred to. He came to His own people, and those who were by their own statement His own people did not receive Him. How deep is depravity?

The greatest illustration of human depravity in history is the Jewish rejection of Christ when He was here. There is nothing parallel to that, nothing. “*He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him*.” John’s going to show us the history all through this gospel of Jewish rejection of Christ.

There’s a fourth illumination, the Light illuminated the truth regarding gospel ministry, regarding the Savior Himself, regarding sinners, and, fourthly, the Light illuminated the true nature of believers. Just briefly on this.

Verse 12 tells us the plan was not thwarted in spite of the world’s rejection and the rejection of Israel. “*But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name*.” What does it mean to receive Him? It means to believe. They’re parallels. “As many as received Him...to those who believe in His name.” To believe in His name is to receive Him, to receive Him is to believe in His name, to believe in His name is to believe in what His name means and it means all that He is. There will be some who will believe. The word “but” is a small, powerful fulcrum that makes a dramatic shift from the previous unbelief. But as many as received Him, or believed in Him, He gave the privilege to become children of God. And that’s the true nature of believers.

What are we? Are we just religious people? Are we just people who follow creeds? Are we just people who go through religious ceremonies? Are we just people who have a certain moral code that we live up to? No. The true nature of believers is we are children of God. And you don’t find that really clearly indicated in the Old Testament, because the people in the Old Testament would only call God Father in a creative sense, not in an intimate, personal sense. We cry “Abba, Father”; we speak to God as our personal Father because we are His everlasting children. Because we received Christ and believed in Him, believing in the three Latin words: “sense,” *notitia*, we know the truth; *ascensus*, we ascend to the truth; *fiducia,*we trust in the truth and we put our destiny in the hands of the One in whom we believe. We believe in His name. And therefore, we have the privilege “to become”--there’s that creative word again; “to be being” is eternal; “to become” is in time, to be created. So what happens is, we will be created again. We were created physically, and as believers in Him we have become children, we have been created as spiritual children. This is the second creation; that’s why it’s called “the new birth,” or being “born again, or being “born from above,” as we’ll see in John 3.

The One who created us materially, physically, will create us spiritually. And this One is Christ Himself. Nothing was made without Him in the physical creation, and no one is spiritually recreated without Him either. “As many as received Him [Christ]” believed in His name. “To them He gave the right to become [created] children of God.” He creates us. Christ creates us anew--second birth, regeneration.

So the true nature of a believer, not a follower of somebody in the sense of a student, not a person who is guided by a moral code, or an ethical system, but the true nature of a believer is that he is a new creation, a child of God everlastingly true.

So John, one by one, shines the light of Christ to illuminate the nature of ministry, to illuminate the Savior Himself, to illuminate the condition of sinners, to illuminate the nature of believers, and one more, this is a big subject, but I’m just going to make quick reference to it. The Light coming into the world also illuminated the true nature of God, the true nature of God.

If men are as sinful as they are, if they are as wretched as they are, if they love the darkness as they do, if they’re spiritually dead and spiritually blind, how can they possibly believe? How can they possibly receive Christ? How can they possibly become children of God? How can they possibly be born again? How can it happen?

Verse 13, here we look into the very nature of God. “Who were born”--to be a child you have to be born; this is that new birth, regeneration. “Who were born not of blood.” Know what that means? Heritage, descent; it doesn’t come down from your ancestors. That’s not how you become a child of God, not because of your parents or your grandparents, or your family. “Nor of the will of the flesh.” Not because of personal effort, personal moral effort, personal spiritual effort, personal religious activity. “*Nor of the will of man*.” What does that mean? The acts of others, some sacramental system, some system of religion plied by so-called priests on your behalf. You’re not going to become a child of God by family heritage. You’re not going to become a child of God by personal effort. You’re not going to become a child of God by some man-made system--all impossible.

How? You “*were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.*” Only God can do this miracle. And here we’re introduced to the true nature of God with regard to the gospel. God is by nature a Savior. He’s a Savior whose mighty power causes us to receive His Son and to believe in His name. He will have much more to say about this later on in the gospel, but at the very foundation we need to know that in this ministry of evangelism and gospel presentation and giving testimony and witness to Christ, God will work to give life to dead sinners. It is His heart to do that. God our Savior, God our Savior, says the apostle Paul again and again and again. God who is the Savior of all men, especially those who believe; He is a saving God. Who is a pardoning God like You? Read Ezekiel 36 and 37; God presents the New Covenant of salvation. Read Jeremiah 31; God is by nature a Savior. It’s in His heart to give life to dead sinners. This is what we need to know as the foundation, the bedrock essentials for Christians. We need to know that God by nature is a saving God who gives life to dead sinners. We need to know that believers are those who become by new creation eternal children of God. We need to know that sinners are deep in blindness and darkness and flee the light. We need to know that Christ is the only true light to enlighten every man, and we need to understand that the nature of ministry then is to present Christ and give testimony to Him and see what God will do for His own glory.

Let’s pray together.

Father, it’s been a marvelous, marvelous time with the apostle John as we’ve gone over the words that once, several thousand years ago, he penned on a piece of parchment as the Holy Spirit poured them through His mind; and to see that they are today alive and powerful, penetrating, gripping, truthful, and that nothing as the centuries have rolled by has diminished in any sense any word from You, because every bit of it is everlasting, everlastingly true. It would be our prayer today as we’ve read earlier in the service that no one would harden his heart in unbelief against the truth concerning Christ and plunge deeper into the darkness. But would You in Your kindness as a saving God give new life because people can only be born when they’re born of God; they can only be regenerated when You regenerate them. We know the new birth is Your divine work, and, Father, we ask that You would do that on behalf of sinners. Cause them to receive and to believe the truth concerning the Lord Jesus Christ, and use us to spread that truth as faithful evangels that others may hear and believe. How will they hear without a preacher? How will they preach unless they’re sent? So send us here and around the world with the truth concerning Christ. Be lifted up and exalted among us and, Lord, glorify Yourself by giving life to dead souls, giving new birth, spiritual life for Your glory, we pray. Amen.

**Jesus: Glory, Grace, and God**

**John 1:14-18**

Code: 43-4

All right, the gospel of John, what a wonderful place to be in the time of darkness to shine the light, right? We have been introduced to the Lord Jesus Christ in this gospel. He is the Word. He is the Life. He is the Light, as we learned in the first four verses; and the fifth verse began to expand on that concept of light, and we came all the way down into verse 13 last time. So pick it up at John 1:14; let me read it to you.

“*And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth. John testified about Him and cried out, saying, ‘This was He of whom I said, “He who comes after me has a higher rank than I, for He existed before me.”’ For of His fullness we have all received, and grace upon grace. For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ. No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, he has explained Him*.”

John opens his gospel with 18 verses that we would call a prologue, a prologue. This is John talking theologically. Starting in verse 19 he goes into the narrative part of it in which he starts to tell the story of Jesus’ life in the world. And he goes into the statements that Jesus makes and the works that He does and the miracles He performs, and gives us the wonderful story all the way to the cross and the resurrection. But in the opening prologue he makes his thesis statement. And the statement in the opening prologue is that Jesus is God in human flesh. That He is the Creator of the universe who has become a part of His creation. He is pure, eternal being who has become a man. That is John’s message, that Jesus is not a created man; He is God in human flesh. And that, dear friends, that is *the* most essential doctrine in the Christian faith. That is it. And that is why there have been and continue to be so many heresies concerning Jesus Christ, concerning the essence, or the nature, or the person of Jesus Christ. This is *the* important doctrine in the Christian faith. It must be known; it must be believed for someone to escape hell and enter heaven, that Jesus is God.

Summed up in four words at the beginning of verse 14, “The Word became flesh.” “The Word became flesh.” That is the central truth of Christianity. That is the theme of John’s gospel. And that is the required conviction for anyone who will escape hell, to understand that “the Word became flesh.”

Now we’ve already learned in the opening thirteen verses that what that is saying is that the one, true, eternal God became human. That the infinite One became finite; that the eternal One entered time; that the omnipresent One became confined in the space of a human body; that the invisible One became visible. The true church of Jesus Christ has always believed that. It has always proclaimed that. It has always demanded that. Any other view of Christ is unacceptable; it is a damning heresy. This is the only view of Christ by which someone can escape hell and enter heaven. This is the reason John makes such a case out of the deity of Jesus Christ.

He gives his purpose in chapter 20, verse 31 at the end of his gospel. “These have been written”—everything in the gospel up to this point—“so that you may believe that Jesus is the anointed One, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name.” The only way to have eternal life is by believing in Him—believing who He is, first of all, and what He has done.

So in His opening prologue, John talks about the nature of Jesus Christ. He introduces Him as the Word. This is a metaphor which speaks of Christ as coming from God, as God revealing Himself, disclosing Himself, speaking. And he says, “*The Word was in the beginning*.” In other words, He already existed when everything that began, began—which means He’s eternal. He was with God, which means though He was God, He was at the same time distinct from God. He was with God and was God. That is Trinitarian. There is one God and yet three persons. Jesus is God and yet He is with God. The theology here is profound. And in the beginning when everything came into existence that came into existence, He “was”—the verb “to be,” pure being; He eternally existed.

To prove that, everything that came into being came into being through Him, and without Him did not anything come into being that came into being—and that because He is life. He has life in Himself. He is the Creator. And the Creator whose eternal being, verse 5 says, came into the darkness of this world like a light. And that’s how he introduces this incredible book—the arrival of the Light, the very life of God, the very Word of God into the world.

Now I think it would be safe to say that John was legitimately obsessed with this great foundational doctrine. And again I urge you, whenever anybody talks about religion and gets to Jesus, you want to focus right down on what Jesus they are talking about. Are they talking about the One who is *the* eternal God? The One who is *the* Creator, who existed infinitely forever? Or are they talking about some other Jesus? John is obsessed with this.

In the last century, the last decade, rather, of the first century—in the nineties—he wrote his gospel and he also wrote three epistles. And just to show you what was so much on his heart, turn to 1 John for a moment, 1 John. And John launches his epistle, and he’s writing this epistle to believers to identify for them the marks of true salvation. And listen how he starts. He starts very much like he started his gospel. “What was from the beginning,” that’s Christ, who when the beginning began already existed because He’s eternal. “*What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, namely the Word of Life—and the life was manifested*.” There is very parallel language. The eternal Word, life itself, manifested itself in the world, John said, and we saw it with our own eyes. And we looked at it, and we heard, and we touched Him with our hands. “We’ve seen,” he says in verse 2, we testify, we proclaim to you the eternal life—you could capitalize that, The Eternal Life, meaning the Son of God—“which was with the Father and was manifested to us—and we’ve seen and we heard and we proclaim to you.” He can’t get over this. John is absolutely blown away by the fact that he has heard, he has seen, he has looked deeply into the face of, and he has touched the Creator of the universe in a human form. I think this would be something to obsess about. That’s where John is. And what we have seen and heard and touched, we declare to you “so,” verse 3, “you may have fellowship with us,” so that you may come into the kingdom, believing in Him, and “our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ. And these are things we write, so that your joy may be made complete,” because complete joy can only be found in knowing Him.

You know, John never got over it. You wonder why John refers to himself in his gospel, not by his name, but he calls himself “the disciple whom Jesus loved,” or “the disciple who leaned on Jesus”—because he never, ever could fathom the reality that this is the eternal Creator God, the One true God in human form; and He loves me; and He walks with me; and He talks with me; and I touch Him; and I fellowship with Him; and I can’t get over it. This is the obsession of all of his writing.

In chapter 2 of 1 John, down in verse 22, he says, “*Who is the liar...Who is the liar but the one who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, the one who denies the Father and the Son. Whoever denies the Son doesn’t have the Father; the one who confesses the Son has the Father also. As for you, let that abide in you which you heard from the beginning. If what you heard from the beginning [from the apostles, from us] abides in you, you will abide in the Son and in the Father*.” Again he goes back that if you tamper with who Christ is, you will alienate yourself from God—very, very serious to John.

Chapter 4, “Beloved, do not believe every spirit.” Don’t believe every claim, every teacher, every spirit behind every teacher. Test the spirits, see whether they’re from God because there’s so many false prophets in the world. How do you know when someone’s a false prophet? “*By this you know the Spirit of God [that is behind the true Spirit]: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God*.” Those who affirm the deity and humanity of Jesus Christ, they’re from God. “*Every spirit that doesn’t confess Jesus is not from God; this is the spirit of antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming, and now already in the world*.”

John is absolutely crystal clear that one’s view of Jesus Christ is determinative, determinative. Down in verse 12, same chapter: “*No one has seen God at any time; if we love one another, God abides in us, His love is perfected...and it’s by this we know that we abide in Him and He in us, because He’s given us His Spirit. We have seen and testified that the Father has sent the Son to be the Savior of the world. Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God*.”

If you tamper with the deity of Jesus Christ, you are not in the kingdom of God. Chapter 5, he’s not finished. Verse 1, “Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God.” That simple. “Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God.” Verse 4, “Whoever is born of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. Who is the one who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?” And finally, down in verse 20, “We know that the Son of God is come,” “we know that the Son of God is come.” We’ve seen Him, heard Him, touched Him, “and is given to us understanding so that we may know Him who is true. And we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life.”

In the second letter, after the first epistle, verse 7, he says: “Many deceivers are gone out into the world...who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh. This is a deceiver and antichrist.” Verse 9, “Anyone who goes beyond doesn’t abide in the teaching of Christ, doesn’t have God; the one who abides in this teaching...has the Father and the Son.” So “if anybody comes to you and doesn’t have that teaching, don’t let him in your house, don’t give him a greeting,” because you would be a partaker in his evil deed. It’s all about Christ and who Christ is.

Now with that in mind, you can go back to the first chapter of the gospel of John. It is therefore not surprising that of all of the Christian doctrines there has no single doctrine been more assaulted and attacked than the truth concerning the incarnation of Jesus Christ. There have been all kinds of Jesuses, all kinds of Christs offered to the world. And in the future, we are warned that as we get closer to the coming of Christ, false Christs will multiply, false Jesuses will multiply, and we have to be discerning about whether people are speaking of the true Christ.

To put it another way, it is as damning to believe in the wrong Jesus as to believe in no Jesus. To believe in the wrong Jesus is as damning as to believe you’re saved by a rock, some animistic religion. You can’t be saved by believing the wrong thing about Christ. You must believe in His deity and humanity. And that’s why John is so compelled at this point.

Now in verses 14 to 18 we come to the crescendo, “And the Word became flesh,” “the Word became flesh.” The Word, meaning the pre-incarnate Son of God whose eternal being became flesh (*sarx*). Sometimes the word “flesh” is used in a moral sense, deeds of the flesh—like Romans 8, Galatians 5. But sometimes it’s used in a physical sense, and that’s the way it’s used here. Romans 1:3 says that Jesus was the Son of David, “according to the flesh,” humanly speaking. So sometimes it has a moral component, and other times it’s just talking about a physical component—and that’s what it is here. The eternal Word became human, that’s what it means; the eternal Word became human. So you have the God/Man. The eternal God who is pure eternal being, and not becoming at all as His creatures are, becomes a part of His creation. God and man are joined in one person, never again to be separated. Listen to that. They are joined in one person, never again to be separated, yet never confounded and never mixed. His human nature, His human nature does not overpower His divine nature; His divine nature does not overpower His human nature. They are both perfect and distinct and indivisible and yet unmingled and unmixed.

The deity of Christ is not diminished by His humanity, nor is His humanity overpowered by His deity. And maybe I can illustrate that by saying this: when you see Christ in heaven, He will be exactly the same God/Man that He was when He walked on earth—in the post-resurrection form of the body that the disciples spent forty days with. He is the same Christ. He doesn’t become a floating fog in heaven, as some of these silly people say who take fake trips to heaven and then make up things. He is exactly who He is. He will be who He was on earth—fully man, fully God in the same way He walked on earth.

And let me take it a step further. His humanity is not the humanity of Adam before his fall. He does not have a pre-Fall humanity. Some people think that, yes, He’s fully man; but He’s fully man in the sense of Adam was before the Fall. That is not true. He is fully man in the sense that Adam was after the Fall. How do you know that? Because He lived and grew and died, and that is a factor of fallen condition. Furthermore, if He was not in the form of man after the Fall, He would have no ability to understand our weaknesses and our infirmities and be tempted in all points as we are tempted, and come out as a merciful, sympathetic High Priest. So He is truly human in the sense that we are human in the post-Fall realm. With one exception: no sin. He is without sin—holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, without sin forever. Second Corinthians 5, He knew no sin.

So this One, John says, this God/Man, “*the Word became flesh*.” And then He says, “*And dwelt among us,*” “dwelt among us” (*skenoo* means to pitch your tent). He brought His tent to us and He settled down in our world. For thirty-three years He lived in our world—took on the form of a man; came and became one of us, Hebrews 2, Philippians 2; grew in wisdom, stature, favor with God and man. You can’t deny that. That’s 1 John. I just read it to you (4:2 and 3). If you deny that Jesus came in the flesh, that the Son of God was an actual man, then that’s heresy and you don’t know God. God in human form dwelt with us.

How did we know He was God? John gives us three very important statements and they’re tied to three words—clear evidence that this is God. First word, glory; second word, grace; third word, God. And we’ll just look at this briefly. I know you’re familiar with it.

Back to verse 14, first point: the incarnate Christ displays divine glory. The incarnate Christ displays divine glory. John says in verse 14, “And we saw His glory.” “We saw His glory.” And it was glory that belongs to the *monogenes* of the Father, and it was full of grace and truth. We saw His glory.

What is glory? What does that mean? You have to go back to the Old Testament to pick up on that, really. God’s glory is intrinsic to His nature; it is who He is. It is the sum of His attributes. Take all the attributes of God and you can list them; all of the attributes of God in perfect complex are His glory, His intrinsic innate glory—all of His attributes. But then there is also His manifest glory. And He manifests His glory symbolically and in reality. Let me tell you what I mean.

Moses in Exodus 33 says, “Show me Your glory. I want to see Your glory.” And the Lord says, in effect, “*Okay, I’ll show you My glory, but I have to warn you, I can’t show it all to you because no man could see My face and live*” (Exodus 33:20). “*So the Lord said, ‘There’s a place by Me, and you can stand there on the rock; and it will come about, while My glory is passing by, I’ll put you in the cleft of the rock and I’ll cover you with My hand until I pass by*.” And what you’re going to see is the edges of My glory shining across the cover. You can see the fringes of My glory, because if you saw My full glory, you’d be incinerated in a millisecond.

What is this kind of glory? What is this? This is God’s nature, God’s essence that the eternal complex of all that He is—the all-glorious God manifest in blazing light, manifest in blazing light. I think that’s something of what Adam and Eve saw when they walked and talked with God in the garden, because God is invisible, called repeatedly the invisible God. So what did they see? They walked with the *Shekinah.* They walked with the presence of God manifest in light to some degree. And maybe they were able to absorb more of His glory since they were unfallen, and once they fell they had to be kicked out because they could no longer look at His glory or fellowship with Him. Moses says, “Show me Your glory,” and God says, “I’ll let you see the afterglow; I’ll let you see the back part; I’ll let you see the edges or you’d be incinerated in a millisecond. That’s the powerful majesty and glory of God that would destroy us because we’re sinners.

And then the glory is defined. Moses said, “Show me Your glory,” and He said, “Okay”—God did—verse 19, “I’ll make all My goodness pass before you. I’ll proclaim the name of the Lord, and the name of the Lord is all that He is. Before you I’ll proclaim My attributes; I’ll be gracious to you; I’ll show compassion on you. And then down in verse 6 of the next chapter, “The Lord descends,” in verse 5, “and then the Lord passes in front of him and His light passes in front of Him,” this glowing light, and the Lord begins to describe His glory.

Verse 6, “*The Lord, the Lord God, compassionate, gracious, slow to anger, abounding in lovingkindness and truth; who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, forgives iniquity, transgression, sin,”* etc. The glory of God is the complex of all of His attributes and sometimes it was manifested in blazing light.

Later on when the children of Israel were walking in the wilderness, you remember God led them by a fiery flame at night, and when the tabernacle was built in Exodus 40, the glory of God came down to the tabernacle. When the temple was built, 1 Kings 8:11, the glory of God came down to the temple. So God’s glory is His attributes, but manifestly seen frequently in the Old Testament as light.

In the future, Matthew 24, Matthew 25, Jesus returns and it says in both those chapters, chapter 24, verses 29 and 30, chapter 25, verse 31 that He will come in great glory and the *shekinah* will be back. Revelation says people will call on the rocks and the mountains to hide them from the face of the glory, the sky will go dark, the moon and sun will not give its light, and into the blackness will come this blazing *shekinah* presence of Jesus Christ.

Again, the manifestation of the attributes of God in light. So that had happened in the past and in the future will happen again in the meantime—the glory comes to earth in Jesus. Okay? And on one occasion Matthew—Luke also records it—they went up to the mount, Peter, James and John, remember? And the Lord pulled back His flesh and what did they see? They saw His glory, and it was so blinding they fell like dead men under the sheer shock and force of this blazing light, even though it was veiled to some degree so they didn’t burn up.

And Peter writes, “When we were in the holy mountain, we saw His glory”...“we saw His glory.” Let’s go back now. When John says, “We beheld His glory,” “we beheld His glory,” he can mean that they beheld the light, the *shekinah*, the blazing light, because John was up there on that mount. He certainly could mean that. And this is written long after that happened, so he would remember that experience as well as Peter did.

But it’s more than that. When John says, “*We beheld His glory*,” he’s not only talking about the representation of that glory in light, he’s talking about the reality of those attributes which were manifest throughout the ministry in the life of Christ. John could say it this way: “We saw His love; we saw His mercy; we saw His wisdom; we saw His knowledge; we saw His power; we saw His justice; we saw His holiness; we saw His compassion; we saw His omnipotence; we saw His omniscience; we saw His anger; we saw His wrath; we saw His kindness; we saw His patience; we saw it all. We saw all those things that the Lord listed back in Exodus 33 and 34, and we saw the light, and we saw the light. We saw His glory. We don’t question that this is God, right? We saw the manifest light that symbolizes His glory, and we saw the attributes that make up His glory—we saw it all, we saw it all. We saw a visible representation of His glory, and we saw the invisible representation of that glory in His life.

We’re going to find out in John 2 when we go to a wedding together that Jesus did a miracle there and verse 11 says of John 2, “This beginning of His signs Jesus did in Cana of Galilee, and manifested His glory.” “Manifested His glory.” He didn’t pull His flesh back like He did in the Transfiguration, but He manifested the glory of His power by creating wine out of nothing. So John says, “Look, we saw His glory; yes, on the holy mount, visible glory. But yes, we saw that invisible glory, the operation of His attributes.”

So when you ask John if Jesus is God, the God/Man, God in human flesh, John will tell you yes—yes He is because we saw His glory. Secondly, John will tell you that the incarnation of Christ dispenses His grace, dispenses His grace. At the end of verse 14, “*Full of grace and truth*.” “Full of grace and truth.” Not half measures, not fractions, not incomplete—“full of grace and truth.”

Grace and truth are together in this passage. They need to be together. They have to be together because the only way that you can experience grace is by believing...What?...the truth. They go together, they go together. And so John says, “We have experienced who He is intrinsically. He is the *monogenes* from the Father. That’s His essential being. We’ve also experienced His glory through His grace and truth—manifest in His works and words and life.”

And then John calls His friend, John the Baptist; we call him John A and John B. John the apostle calls on John the Baptist and says, “John testified about Him and cried out saying, ‘*This was He of whom I said, “He who comes after me has a higher rank than I, for He existed before me*.”’” How can somebody who comes after me exist before me? John says He came after me. He was born after me. Elizabeth was pregnant with John the Baptist before Mary was pregnant with Jesus. John was born first. And John says, “The one who was born after me was before Me. He existed before Me.” Again, that’s pure eternal being. So John the apostle borrows some testimony from John the Baptist. Why do you think he does that? Is that necessary? It’s necessary if you’re Jewish and you believe in Deuteronomy that everything has to be confirmed in the mouth of two or three witnesses. Why not? It was John the Baptist. This language here, the verbs here indicate that this was constantly John’s pattern. This was what he was always saying. “He who comes after me has a higher rank than I, because He existed before Me.” How could anybody who comes after me have existed before me unless He’s eternal?

So the testimony of John A, the apostle, John B, the Baptist, join together to declare that Jesus is the divine glory, that Jesus is the divine glory, divine God on display. Number two: the incarnate Christ dispenses grace “*for of His fullness we have all received, and grace upon grace. For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ*.” We’re so glad to be delivered from the law, right? And brought to grace, grace came through Christ. So He displays glory, He dispenses grace. This is the evidence of His deity.

He is “*full of grace and truth*.” He is full, in verse 16, and “of His fullness we have all received,” and then he illustrates it by saying in the Greek, “Grace after grace”; “grace in the place of grace.” That’s what that is. It’s just endless, non-diminishing supply of grace upon grace upon grace. I love that the preposition after grace, after grace, after grace—after this grace is moved, there’s more grace filling the vacuum. There’s never any diminishing of grace. We have received the fullness of the grace that He possesses, grace in the place of grace, in the place of grace, in the place of grace. Romans 5, Paul says, “*In this grace we stand*”—we live; this is where we exist. Grace comes constantly to us because we have believed the truth of the gospel, and we don’t receive some small amount of grace. You remember to the apostle Paul who was concerned about his thorn in the flesh. Our Lord said, “My grace is sufficient,” right? “My grace is sufficient.” It’s a never, ever ending supply. We read in Hebrews, “*Come to the throne of grace*”; there’s a never diminishing supply for every need that you will ever have. John says, How do we know He’s God? Because we are living in this realm of grace that just keeps being poured out and poured out and poured out on our lives.

And all we knew under the law was threats and warnings, and death and judgment, and along comes Christ, and it’s grace in the place of grace, in the place of grace. At the end of verse 17, “*grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ*.” Promised in the Old Testament? Yes. Promised in the Old Testament. Activated in the Old Testament? Sure; Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord. Grace all through the Old Testament. Everybody ever saved in the history of the world has been saved by God’s grace.

But grace was not fully realized until Christ came and paid His penalty on the cross. The word “realized” here is *egeneto*, *egeneto*. It’s from the verb *ginomai,* “to become,” and it means “came into being,” “came into existence.” We could read it that way. Grace and truth came into being through Jesus Christ.

Well, you say, “If they only came into being through Jesus Christ, then was there any grace before Jesus Christ?” Yes, God knowing that the Lamb was slain from the foundation of the world was applying the grace that had not yet been validated. And the grace that Christ exhibited and purchased at the cross extended back as much as it extends forward.

John says, “This is not an ordinary man.” Gospel truth tells us that this is the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God, the God/Man, fully God, fully man. We see it; we’ve experienced it; we’ve touched Him; we’ve heard Him. He displayed grace, and He dispensed glory.

One final point: the incarnate Christ defines God, He defines God. He displays glory, dispenses grace, and defines God. I love verse 18. “No one has seen God at any time.” Why? He’s invisible. There are times when God has appeared as smoke and fire and things like that, but He has no form. No one has seen God at any time. However, the *monogenes*, the Son of God, the incarnate One, the One “who is in the bosom of the Father.” “Bosom” is really an antiquated word; let me tell you what that word is. It’s actually used in the book of Acts for “bay,” or “inlet.” It’s a word for the fold in material. If you took a bunch of material and piled it up, and it had little folds, that would be the word used; or it’s for a very tight, small pocket.

And so, what he is saying is the *monogenes,* who is tucked in intimately to the very presence of God—beautiful picture—who is folded into God, he has explained Him. That last statement: “He has explained Him,” really powerful. Wouldn’t you like to have God explain to you? When somebody said to you, “How would you explain God?” where would you go? Well, you’d go to that verse and say, “Look at Jesus Christ, He explains God.” By the way, the word “explained” is an interesting word. It’s the word *exegeomai* from which we get *exegete*. We use that word a lot in seminary because we teach people how to do exegesis, how to exegete Scripture.

What does it mean? It means to explain, interpret, give the meaning. Jesus exegetes God. So you want to know about God? Jesus defines God. He displays glory; He dispenses grace; and He defines God. So don’t come to me with any patronizing nonsense about Jesus being a nice man, a good teacher, a noble, religious leader. That’s not an option. He’s God. He is God. And if you believe that and you receive Him, “to those who received Him,” right? Verse 12, “*He gave the right to become children of God...to those who believe on His name*.”

In order to be a child of God, you have to believe on His name. To believe on His name, you must believe that He is who He is.

Father, we are grateful again for how clear and yet profound Your Word is, and we thank You for the treasure that every verse, every phrase is to us. We feel like we’ve gone way too fast; we could spend a year on that passage alone. We’re going to have to trust Your Holy Spirit and gladly go to unfold its truths to us as we go back and meditate, and meditate, and meditate on its truth. More importantly, Lord, I pray for those who have not yet confessed Jesus as Savior and Lord, who have not yet come to know the God/Man who died on the cross to pay the penalty for their sins and rose again to provide eternal life. May those hearts be open today. May they believe, and not having heard this preached, walk away in rebellious disobedience and forfeit eternal rest. May they enter into the rest that is found only through faith in Christ. We pray in His name. Amen.

**The First Testimony Concerning Jesus, Part 1**

**John 1:19-37**

Code: 43-5

As we come to the nineteenth verse of the gospel of John, the nineteenth verse of the gospel of John—that’s chapter 1, verse 19—we come to the historical section of the book. Verses 1 to 18 is theological, presents the nature of Christ predominantly as God with God, that is to say, He is God and yet He is distinct from God the Father—He is the Creator; He is the Word, that is He is the expression of God; He is the Life; He is the source of all that lives; He is the Light, He is the shining of the nature of God into the darkness of this world. All of that has been laid out. Verse 14, the Word, the eternal Son of God became flesh, dwelt among us. So John has introduced us to the nature of Christ in theological terms, and that is an unparalled portion of Holy Scripture. So if you missed any of those messages, you do well to listen to them and find good source material on the opening 18 verses, because the reading of that would be of great benefit and blessing to you.

But John has a sole and singular purpose in His gospel and it’s crystal clear. I would say it’s clearer than, let’s say, the purpose of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. We know that they’re presenting Christ. But John is not just presenting Christ; his theme and his purpose he articulates in chapter 20, verse 31 at the end when he says, “These have been written”...these words contained in this gospel...“*so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ [the Messiah, the Anointed One], the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name*.” So his purpose is polemical, giving you evidence so that you might believe, and it is evangelistic so that believing you might be saved and receive eternal life.

So everything John says is geared at believing Jesus is the promised Christ, the Anointed One, the promised King, the Son of God. His deity and His humanity and His being the Lord and Savior are John’s focus. So John doesn’t spend a lot of time on historical background. He is not so much about the narrative as is Matthew, Mark, and Luke. They are called the Synoptic Gospels because they together tell the same story. And why three? Because, if for no other reason, Deuteronomy says that the truth must be confirmed in the mouth of two or three witnesses, and so we have these three inspired witnesses to tell us the full story of our Lord Jesus. And there’s much theology in it, of course, in the Synoptics; but John here tells us only what is germane to his proof that Jesus is the Christ and that believing in His name is the only way to eternal life.

John’s first line of testimony is from another John, John the Baptist. And that’s why verse 19 begins, “This is the testimony of John.” And that refers to John the Baptist, not John the apostle, who is the writer. So here you have the beginning of his polemical, historical record concerning Jesus being the Christ, the Son of God. So that you might believe that, he amasses evidence that is incontrovertible—“and that believing you may have eternal life in His name.”

The first testimony to Jesus, we might call this section, the first testimony to Jesus. Let me read you this record that comes from John the apostle about John the Baptist: “This is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent to him priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, ‘Who are you?’ And he confessed and didn’t deny, but confessed, ‘I am not the Christ.’ They asked him, ‘What then? Are you, Elijah?’ And He said, ‘I am not.’ ‘Are you the Prophet?’ And he answered, ‘No.’ Then they said to him, ‘Who are you, so that we may give an answer to those who sent us? What do you say about yourself?’ And he said, ‘I am a voice, a voice of one crying in the wilderness, “Make straight the way of the Lord,” as Isaiah the prophet said.’”

“Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. They asked him and said to him, ‘Why then are you baptizing if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?’ John answered them saying, ‘I baptize in water, but among you stands One whom you do not know. It is He who comes after me, the thong of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie.’ These things took place in Bethany beyond the Jordan, where John was baptizing.”

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

“*Again the next day John was standing with two of his disciples, and he looked at Jesus as he walked, and said, ‘Behold, the Lamb of God!’ The two disciples heard him speak, and they followed Jesus*.”

Now we’re going to cover that section from verse 19 to 37 today and next Sunday. This is the first testimony that John the apostle records concerning the deity of Jesus Christ, and it is from John the Baptist, the last Old Testament prophet and the first New Testament preacher. Now remember, Jesus said John the Baptist was the greatest man who ever lived up until his time (Matthew 11:11). The greatest man who ever lived up until his time. That is an amazing statement. When you think about all of the great people that lived, going all the way back to the patriarchal period, all the way back to Abraham, all the way back to Moses, all the way back to David and everybody else, that’s quite an amazing statement. It is amazing because John the Baptist was not a great leader. John the Baptist did not live in the halls of influence. John the Baptist did not have a social presence. John the Baptist didn’t fight any battles. He didn’t establish any institutions. As far as we know, he had no formal education. He left nothing, speaking of institutions or movements. He lived completely detached from society. He had no wealth. He lived like a poor rural person who was a nomad. And he lived the first thirty years of his life in the obscurity of the Judean desert.

His story, the history of it, is told in Luke 1. And you can read Luke 1; it virtually takes up the entire chapter all the way to verse 80. You can read that story, and it’s important to know that story, to know that his parents were barren, could never have children. He is a miracle child promised by God through an angel that came to his father and all the story of that, and how it was declared to his father that he would come in the spirit and power of Elijah, and he would turn the hearts of the people toward God and prepare them for the Messiah. The history is very important and very rich.

But it doesn’t interest John because John’s interest is not history. John’s interest is evidence. John’s interest is testimony. John’s interest is witness to the deity of the Lord Jesus Christ. So to John it doesn’t matter where he lived; it doesn’t matter what he wore; it doesn’t matter that he had a camel’s hair coat; it doesn’t matter that he ate locusts and wild honey. It really doesn’t matter the history of this man as remarkable and wonderful as it was. What matters is what he said. Now for thirty years of his life he didn’t say anything.

Now remember, John the Baptist was probably a cousin to Jesus since the mothers, Mary and Elizabeth, were related. And John the Baptist was born about six months before Jesus. And so in the same thirty years that John was waiting to begin his ministry, Jesus was waiting to begin His. Jesus waited in Nazareth, in the home of Joseph and Mary. Joseph probably died somewhere in that period of time; so He among the rest of the brothers and sisters took care of His mother, working in the carpenter shop. Thirty years of total obscurity with only one glimpse at the age of twelve. But during the same thirty years, John the Baptist is in the desert. After you close the chapter of Luke 1, about the Benedictus of Zacharias when he pronounces blessing and salvation on generations to come because of the ministry of his son introducing the coming Messiah, John completely disappears. You might say he disappeared after his circumcision, never to be seen for thirty years. He was a desert nomad.

However, after those years had passed, Luke chapter 3 gives us a point in time, “the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar,” that puts it around 26 or 27 A.D. Pontius Pilate is now governor. Herod is tetrarch. His brother Philip is a tetrarch. Herod’s in Galilee. Philip’s in Ituraea and Trachonitus. Lysanias is tetrarch of another area called Abilene. Annas and Caiaphas are the two high priests and they were related, as you know, by marriage. And they were the architects of the execution of Jesus eventually. So that’s just some historical notation.

So we’re all the way down deep into the life of John at 30 years and Jesus at 30 years, and we read this, “*The word of God came to John, the son of Zacharias, in the wilderness. And he came into all the district around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins; as it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, ‘The voice of one crying in the wilderness, “Make ready the way of the Lord, make His paths straight. Every ravine will be filled. Every mountain, hill will be brought low; every crooked place becomes straight, the rough roads smooth; and all flesh will see the salvation of God*.’”

John was launched into ministry by a word from God. Listen, John knew his history. He knew of the angelic visit to his father, although his father, you remember, couldn’t say anything because he was so doubtful. The Lord shut his mouth until John was finally born and then went through the normal purification. He couldn’t say anything up until that point, but after that, believe me, he spent his whole life telling the story about his son. And he must have spent his whole life waiting for God to say something to his son whom he knew was wandering out there in the “kitty litter” east of Jerusalem.

And finally it came and the word of the Lord came to him, God Himself spoke to him. God commissioned him. God called him. Mark 1:4 says of John he suddenly appeared in the district preaching. He just came out of nowhere, which is to say that he hadn’t been preaching prior to that.

In Matthew chapter 3, verse 5, Jerusalem and Judea and everywhere else came to hear John. He was so remarkable, so powerful, so unique, so effective as a preacher. And if you study the Synoptic Gospels accounts of John, you do find those things about him—courageous, bold, powerful, confrontive. He says to the leaders of Israel when they show up, “*You snakes, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come*?” Just a very bold man in the sort of the line of all the great prophets of the past.

The people had a lot of interest in John because of the greatness of his preaching. But he had something else in his favor and that was the fact that he was from a priestly family and priests were respected. They would be the most respected people in the culture. There were tens of thousands of priests all over Israel living in all areas who a couple of times a year would go to Jerusalem and do priestly function in the temple. But for the most of the year they would be in their communities, and they were respected as those who represented God and taught Scripture and were seen as pious.

So, in John 5:35 we read that of the people it was said, “*You were willing for a time, for a while, to rejoice in His light.”* He was popular. He was a popular preacher. Not only because of the power of his preaching, but because he was saying the Messiah’s coming, the Messiah’s coming, the Messiah’s coming—and that’s the message that people had wanted to hear. They were weary of the centuries that had gone by, full of reminiscences about biblical prophecies about Messiah that never came to pass. They were weary of the occupying forces that had come into their land and desecrated it because they were Gentiles. They were certainly weary of the presence of the Romans. And so John was very popular because the people wanted this message that he was giving about the coming of Messiah. And that’s what took the edge off his message of repentance, because the repentance was connected to the coming of Messiah. And so he was preaching repentance, and people were coming and saying, “Okay, we repent.” And he would say to them, “If you truly want to repent and be cleansed by God on the inside, then demonstrate that by a public act of baptism,” which was an external symbol of that desire for an internal cleansing. And John had an amazing impact.

So he is the first and he is a very formidable testifier to the deity of Christ. He is absolutely unique. You understand there hasn’t been a prophet in Israel for 400 years. They haven’t heard from God in 400 years. This is a prophet. This is a real, true prophet. And he’s saying what we’ve all wanted to hear, “Messiah is coming.” And he’s telling us to repent and get our lives ready for the arrival. And so they were rejoicing for a while in his life. Remember John 5:35 says, “He was a shining light, a burning lamp.”

Now as we look at this passage, it gives us the testimony of John. And I just want to...there’s going to be a lot of threes that we’ll be working with, just the way it’s laid out. But I want to give you kind of an overview. There are three things that you’re going to see here in this passage, just from the bird’s eye view, getting above it and looking over it. The first thing you see: the character of a faithful preacher; you see the character of a faithful preacher. Yes, John is that shining lamp; yes, he is that voice crying in the wilderness. That’s...that’s his function. But what about his character? Well, his character is revealed here, I think, in a very clear way. If you go back to verse 15 you have reference back in verses 6, 7, and 8 to John the Baptist, and you have a reference to John the Baptist in verse 15. So let’s go back to the one in verse 15, even before his testimony starts in verse 19.

“John testified about Him and John cried out, saying,” and this is John the Baptist testifying to Christ, “This was He of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me has a higher rank than I, for He existed before me.’” This is a very important statement. “He existed before me though He was born six months after me.” That’s an affirmation of the eternality of the Son of God. “He is born after me but He existed before me.” But more importantly, looking at his character, “He has a higher rank than I.” You know, in a sense, that’s hard to grasp because there was no preacher in 400 years, and even the final prophets in the Old Testament 400 years ago, weren’t this popular. I mean, there could be a case made that John had been elevated to a position above everybody. Certainly, from a popular standpoint, he had been elevated above the high priest, the father of the high priest, the former high priest, the Sadducees, the Pharisees, the leaders of the Pharisees, the chief priests, the scribes, and all the rest of the elite who ran the false, apostate, legalistic system of Judaism.

But John doesn’t see it that way. Even though he is *the* man, he is *the* popular preacher, he is *the* elevated preacher, he says, “The one who is coming after me has a higher rank than I.” And then in verse 27, he says this, “It is He who comes after me, the thong of whose sandal I’m not worthy to untie.” That was the job for the lowest slave. Take the master’s sandals off, wash his feet. John says, “I’m so low, I’m lower than the lowest slave, I’m not even up as high as a foot washing slave—that’s how low I am.”

And in verse 30 he says the same thing he said in verse 15, “After me comes a Man who has a higher rank than I, for He existed before me.” So what is the character of this faithful preacher? Humility; in a word, humility. He sought no honors. He sought no money, no pay, no accolades, no titles; he has no title, no flattering words. He didn’t seek disciples because in verse 35 it says, “He was standing with two of his disciples,” two of his learners, two of his students; and he looked at Jesus as he walked and he said, “Behold the Lamb of God!’” And what he was saying to them was, “Why are you standing here with me? Follow Him.” “The two disciples heard Him speak, and they followed Jesus.” He didn’t want anything—he didn’t want followers; he didn’t want disciples; he didn’t want honors; he didn’t want titles. Verse 23 says, “I’m a voice”...“I’m a voice”...that’s all I am is a voice...“crying in the wilderness”...“crying in the wilderness,” and it was the wilderness. It was the desert. But it was not only a physical, geographical wilderness, it was a spiritual wilderness, of barren hearts. I’m just a voice.

Therein...therein lies the proper view of the preacher. A faithful preacher is marked by humility, seeks no honors, no money, no disciples, no titles, no flattery—he’s a voice. And he directs everything to One greater than himself, everything.

The second thing you see here is not only the character of a faithful preacher, but you see the character of a faithless people. You’re going to meet in this opening section the people who rejected the Lord, the people who were disinterested in Christ. They’re a delegation that you first meet in verse 19, it says, “The Jews sent to Him priests and Levites from Jerusalem.” So Jerusalem is a sort of a religion central. The Sanhedrin runs the religious system. The Sanhedrin is the Jewish council of seventy elders plus the high priests, and they call the shots religiously in that apostate religion. The term “the Jews,” that is a term you will see seventy times in the gospel of John. It is never used ethnically. It is never used racially. It is always used in one sense: it is used to identify the enemies of Jesus. It’s John’s choice term. You don’t find it in the other gospels. You find it here in the gospel of John. It is the term that John uses for the religious establishment, the religious elite from the high priest all the way down to the Pharisees, the Sadducees, priests—everybody else who were the duly constituted leaders of apostate Judaism who resented, hated Christ and ultimately were responsible for handing Him over to the Romans to be executed. So you meet in this passage right away, right at the beginning in the first verse of the historical account of the gospel of John, the faithless people. And you’re going to see them all the way through. You’re going to see these people...I said...seventy times this term is used, and it always refers to the enemies of Jesus.

But there’s a third group that you’re going to see and that’s the faithful people, the faithful people. And you get a glimpse of them in verse 37 when those two disciples heard what John said about the Lamb of God and they followed Jesus. That’s how this gospel breaks down. All the way through this gospel you’re going to see the faithless people associated with the leaders of Israel, and the few faithful who followed Christ. That’s going to be the story.

So we see at least in a broad sense as we look at this passage, the character of a faithful preacher. He may be a bright and shining lamp, but he sees himself as nothing but a voice, disdaining all flattery, all followers, and calling everyone to follow One who is far greater than himself. We see the character of faithless people, who no matter what the signs are, no matter what the testimony is, John the Baptist gave testimony. You know John the Baptist told people after he had baptized Christ that Christ was the Messiah, because the Father had said, “This is My beloved Son in whom I am well pleased”—the same Father who had commissioned Him to ministry. The Spirit had come down like a dove; Jesus had just come from triumphant temptation over Satan. John was giving all this testimony. No matter what John said, the Jews did not believe it. And when Jesus came and began to give testimony, they didn’t believe Him. When He did miracles, they didn’t believe them. When His words were the words of God, they didn’t believe them. And that’s the faithless people that track all the way through and scream for His blood at the end and are destroyed in the destruction of Jerusalem. Sprinkled into the story as well are going to be those who put their trust in Christ.

Now just...I know I’m giving you a lot of detail, but I want you to get this picture here because it’s so really important for you. This section from 19 to 37 unfolds on three days. And that’s very rare, by the way, in the New Testament, to find something that’s so clearly identified in a period of sequential days. The only thing you have close to this would be the Passion Week where you can sort of put the things together that happened on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday. It’s particularly the cross on Friday, the resurrection on Sunday, and you can kind of piece it together with the chronologies that are given. But here is the only place really in the four gospels you have specifically one day, two days, third day. And it’s a three-day look at the apex of the testimony of John the Baptist. Now he’s been...he’s been preaching. We don’t know for how long. He will go on preaching; we’re not sure exactly how long. But here we’re going to catch him at the high point because on day two Jesus walks up and he says, “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” That’s day two. We’re going to join him on day one and we’re going to be there on day three because John has given us this record—three specific days giving us the sequential testimony of John the Baptist toward the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now let me back off a little bit and tell you how the scene works out. This would be the last of the year 26 A.D., or maybe the beginning of 27 when all this starts to happen. John takes off. He receives a word from the Lord out in the wilderness to begin to preach, as I read you in Matthew 3. And he launches his ministry in the wilderness. About the same time, generally speaking, the Lord Jesus leaves Nazareth. Been there 30 years, working in the carpenter shop, taking care of His family in the death...in the event of the death of His father. He hasn’t done any ministry at all, except whatever personal ministry He did, which would have been amazing, of course. But He now goes down the Jordan Valley, and He has to go all the way down to where John is because He’s going to be baptized by John, because that’s part of Him fulfilling all righteousness. In other words, doing everything that God required of everyone.

So He heads down the Jordan Valley. He is going to a place that’s identified for us in verse 28. “*These things took place in Bethany beyond the Jordan, where John was baptizing*.” Now just a couple of comments about that.

We don’t know exactly where that is. We know where Bethany by Jerusalem is; it’s still there. Two miles east of Jerusalem down the Mount of Olives, a little town called Bethany. Mary, Martha, and Lazarus lived there and Jesus stayed there. But as in many countries, there were towns and villages that had the same names. So this is not that one. This is not Bethany by Jerusalem. This is Bethany beyond Jordan. You’ve got to go all the way down the back of the Mount of Olives, all the way down to Jericho, all the way across the Jordan River, and somewhere out in the wilderness beyond that there’s another Bethany. And that’s where John is. It needed to have one thing for sure, water. Because John was not a Presbyterian, John put them down, held them down, and brought them up.

So Jesus leaves, goes about thirteen miles south of the Sea of Galilee, about twenty-six miles south and east from Nazareth, and He comes down to where John is baptizing. This is before this account, because in this account John is remembering the baptism. He remembers the baptism, verses 32 and 33, so it’s already happened. And this is where Jesus is launched into His ministry.

Now John’s preaching repentance. Get ready for Messiah. Jesus comes. John doesn’t really know who He is. Verse 31, “*I didn’t recognize Him*,” he says. “I didn’t recognize Him.” Again in verse 33, “I didn’t recognize Him.” That tells you he didn’t have a halo; file that. And there were thousands of people coming, all Jerusalem, Judea is coming, and here comes just another Jewish man dressed like everybody else, walking twenty-six miles from His home, or about that. And He shows up and introduces Himself, and John doesn’t want to baptize Him. He says, “You need to baptize me.” And He says, “No, you have to baptize Me so that all righteousness can be fulfilled.” Everything that God requires of His people, I’m going to do to show them the path of obedience. So John baptizes Him, and you know the story. The Spirit comes down like a dove, and it doesn’t mean that the Spirit came down as a dove—get over that, would you please? The Spirit is not a dove, never was a dove, so if you’ve got doves everywhere, that is not the point. He came down the way doves come down and land. I mean, He could have been a canary for that matter. He could have been a pigeon—anything that comes down and lands. The Holy Spirit came down and rested on Him, the way a dove comes down and rested on Him. For all we know He might have been manifest in light, or He might have been manifest in fire.

And then the Father speaks out of heaven, “This is My beloved Son in whom I am well pleased,” and John baptizes Him. Now we don’t know how many people heard that, knew what was going on; and now remember, there’s thousands of people, and he’s just dunking them all as they come. And then Jesus disappeared. He left.

Where did He go? He was led by the Holy Spirit, according to Luke 4...Matthew 4...into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And this is where He is going to demonstrate and prove His triumph over Satan. For forty days He’s tempted in the wilderness. In the meanwhile, forty days John keeps doing what he’s doing, preaching; people coming, going through this what is really a proselyte baptism. The Jews baptized Gentiles when they wanted to come into the Judaistic religion as a symbol of their desire to be cleansed on the inside. They went through this washing, which meant that the Jews who were doing it were saying, “I’m no better than a Gentile.” That’s quite a confession of sin for a very self-righteous and spiritually proud people.

But anyway, Jesus is gone now and He’s being tempted and John keeps ministering. The forty days are up; the angels come and minister to Jesus. He eats. He gets some strength. He’s up in the devastation to the west, up in the rugged, amazingly rugged, terrifyingly rugged, mountains above the city of Jericho or in that area somewhere, and He starts down, and He comes all the way down back to John. And on day two He arrives. The ministry of John the Baptist has been going on but this is going to be the apex. So that’s the scene. Got it? Okay. We’re going to go to 19.

“This is the testimony of John” that occurred during that three-day period. Day one, day one; and then day two; and then day three. All right, let’s look at day one. “This is the testimony of John when the Jews sent to Him priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him”...and so forth and so on. Day two comes in verse 29 because verse 29 begins, “The next day.” Day three begins in verse 35 because verse 35 begins, “The next day.”

Now let me tell you how John’s testimony went. Day one, John said, “He’s here; He’s here.” Day two he said, “Behold Him.” Day three he said, “Follow Him.” Three days, three sequential messages to three different groups. Day one, he’s talking to a delegation from the Sanhedrin. Day two, he’s talking to the people in general. Day three, he’s talking to his own disciples. This is just a wonderful glimpse of the very most important three days in the ministry of the greatest man who had ever lived up until his time—the last Old Testament prophet, the first New Testament preacher.

This is the testimony of John. Day one, “The Jews sent to him priests and Levites from Jerusalem.” The Jews, that is the hostile religious establishment or the enemies of the truth, they’re the enemies of righteousness. They are the enemies of godliness. They are the enemies of John. They are the enemies of repentance. Then they will be the enemies of Jesus. So they get a coalition, a delegation, if you will, of priests and Levites. These are common people. The priests were common people. There were, as I said, tens of thousands of them and they were religious but they were common. They’re not the elite. They’re not the scribes, you know, the religious theologians, the elevated theologians; not the Sadducees, the people with all the money and the power. And then the Levites came with them. What were the Levites? They did menial work to support the priests. I guess one way to say it would be the priests...the priests were the questioners. They were the religious delegation where the Levites were the protectors. One of the things the Levites did was work in the temple, and they worked under the temple captain and under the lieutenants of the temple captain in crowd control. The Levites worked to keep the peace; they were kind of a riot squad. They were officials.

And so, here come priests. And, you know, they sent priests and that was good because they knew John came from a priestly line. That must have been known because anybody in the priestly world would have known that. Zacharias, you remember, had actually been offering a sacrifice in the temple during the course of his work when the angel came to him to tell him that John would be born. So he got a little mileage out of being in the priestly line. That respect may have been why—one of the reasons why—they could rejoice for a little while in his light.

So here comes the representatives of the Jews who are the enemies of the truth and righteousness and John and repentance and Jesus, and they send this delegation of kind of the normal course of priests who wouldn’t know the Scripture and be the religious sort of neighborhood leaders and their attendance who could do some crowd control if necessary. But they are a delegation; verse 24, notice that, had come “from the Pharisees.”

Now the Pharisees gets us closer to the problem here because we don’t have illustrations of Pharisees being converted (one at the end). They were the avowed enemies of Jesus who drove this thing in the direction of animosity and hatred toward Him. The Sanhedrin is behind it. They are the ruling council of seventy elders plus the high priest. They send this delegation. The Pharisees are the...they are the gate keepers of Jewish apostate religion, and they send these common priests and Levites and they’re going to ask some questions of John. This is a...this is a mission from the Sanhedrin.

So they say in verse 19, “Who are you?” “Who are you?” The implication is, “Are you the Messiah?” Why do you say that? Because the answer indicates that that was the point of the question. “Who are you?” It’s thoughtful. It’s a respectful way to ask the question. I wouldn’t equivocate on that. They want to know if this man is the Messiah or thinks He’s the Messiah. According to Luke 3:15, “While the people were in a state of expectation...” Why were they in a state of expectation? Because John was saying the Messiah’s here and they were all wondering in their hearts about John as to whether he was the Messiah. So that’s naturally on everybody’s mind: “Are you the man? I know you keep talking about somebody else of higher rank who was born after you but existed before you, but are you the man?” They had to find out because the masses of humanity were pouring out of the city of Jerusalem and the surrounding area to go hear John. He was having far more religious clout than anybody else.

In verse 20 “he confessed and didn’t deny,” but confessed. And by the way, that’s an English way of trying to translate the Greek, which is very, very strong. He was outraged. He was livid at that question. “He confessed and didn’t deny, but confessed, ‘I am not the Messiah. I am not the Christ.’”

Now, by the way, they weren’t looking for a Savior, you have to understand that. They weren’t looking for a lamb; they weren’t looking for a sacrifice; they weren’t looking for someone to take the wrath of God. They were looking for a King because they thought they were okay. That was a modest commitment to repentance for the sake of John and for the sake of being ready for the Messiah. But there was no sense in which they were looking for a Savior.

If you go to John 3:25, there was a discussion on the part of John’s disciples with a Jew about purification. So they came to John, John the Baptist, and said to him, “Rabbi.” So there we indicate that they had identified him not only as a prophet and from the priestly line, but as a teacher. “Rabbi” means teacher. “*He who was with you beyond the Jordan, to whom you have testified, behold, He is baptizing and all are coming to Him*.” And these are disciples of John who go to John and say, “Our teacher, John, you’ve got to answer a question for us. The person you pointed to, He’s got all the crowds. They’re all going after Jesus. They’re all leaving you. They’re all going to Him and He’s now baptizing.”

“And John answered and said, ‘A man can receive nothing unless it’s been given him from heaven.’” There’s a verse to build your life on. “You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, ‘I am not the Christ,’ but ‘I have been sent ahead of Him.’” “I am not the Christ.” “I am not the Christ.” In the next verse he uses an analogy, “I’m not the bridegroom. I’m just the best man.” “He must increase,” verse 30, “I must decrease.” So John knew he wasn’t the Messiah and he emphatically says, “I’m not the Messiah.” And so they ask him, verse 21, they asked him, “What then? Are you Elijah?” Well, why would they ask a question like that? Elijah is long ago off the scene. Why do they ask that? They ask that because the final prophet, Malachi, said this of the coming of Christ, the coming of Messiah: “I’m going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord. He will restore the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers, so that I will not come and smite the land with a curse.” Prior to the return of the Lord Jesus Christ in judgment, the great and terrible day of the Lord, Elijah will come. That’s a promise. That’s an Old Testament promise. Earlier in Malachi 3:1 he’s called the “messenger”—the messenger who comes before the return of Messiah to set up His kingdom.

The rabbis all got it. The Jews got it. The priests got it. The Levites got it. They all understood it. Before the arrival of Messiah will come Elijah. But it is before Messiah’s coming to judge. So we can say this, just for our understanding, that Elijah will come before the Lord’s Second Coming in judgment. Some would equate him with one of the witnesses of Revelation 11, verse 3, the two witnesses that come at the end. Elijah never died. Is that not true? He went to heaven. What? Yeah, he went to heaven in a chariot. So Elijah will come before the return of the Lord in the great and terrible day. So they say, “Are you Elijah?” Does this mean this is the coming of the King? And, of course, they thought the judgment would be upon the ungodly nations and they would be given the kingdom. And he says to them, “No, I’m not. I’m not.”

You say, “Well wait a minute, wait a minute. Why would he say I’m not?” Because he wasn’t. He was John the Baptist. He didn’t exist before he was born. He’s not recycled Elijah. However—and here’s what you have to understand—the angel said he will come “in the spirit and power of Elijah”; with that kind of prophetic power and effect, turning people’s hearts back to God.

So understand it this way: two comings of Christ. The first coming he is preceded by one in the spirit and power of Elijah. Second Coming, he’s preceded by Elijah. So John is not the Elijah, but he is the one who comes in the spirit and power of Elijah. And it’s pretty clear throughout the testimony of Matthew and Luke that they understood that—that John was not Elijah but he was the one who would come in the spirit and power of Elijah. You remember the great prophet who spoke the Word of God.

So they weren’t having much success trying to identify this guy. So they said, “Are you the Prophet?” “The Prophet?” Well that’s pretty vague, isn’t it? No, not really. They were talking about a specific Old Testament prophecy in Deuteronomy 18; in Deuteronomy 18 there’s a specific prophecy, verse 15, “The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your countrymen, you shall listen to Him.” “I will raise up a prophet from among their countrymen like you. I’ll put my words in his mouth and He shall speak to them all that I command.” That’s Moses promising the coming of a prophet, a great prophet in the future, a prophet associated with salvation, restoration, the revelation of the Word of God.

The Jews throughout their history had seen that as a prophecy of the coming of Messiah, either the Messiah or someone coming at the time of Messiah would be that prophet. So these are questions that come out of their theology and their understanding of the Old Testament. They ask if he’s the Christ and then they ask, based on Malachi 4:5, “Are you Elijah?” And then based on Deuteronomy 18, “Are you that Prophet?”

And by the way, if you...if you want to know who that prophet refers to, it’s in Acts 3, because Peter in his second sermon on Christ talks about Christ suffering and he says in verse 19, “Repent and return, that your sins may be wiped away...and that He may send Christ, Christ appointed for you.” And then He goes on to talk about Christ and says this, “Moses said, ‘The Lord God will raise up for you a prophet like Me from your brethren; to Him you shall give heed to everything he says to you.’” That’s quoted right out of Deuteronomy 18. So Peter in his second sermon identifies that prophet as none other than Christ. And it will be that every soul that doesn’t heed that prophet will be destroyed.

Stephen gave the same message in the seventh chapter of the book of Acts. Stephen identifies that prophet, I think it’s in verse 37. “*Moses said to the sons of Israel, ‘God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brethren*.’”

So are you the Messiah? Are you Elijah? Are you the prophet? And to all three questions he says, “No!” emphatically. And in verse 22 they say to him, “Who are you so that we may give an answer to those who sent us?” Now there’s the commission issue. They had been mandated and sent as an official delegation from the Sanhedrin, “What do you say about yourself? We need an answer.”

I love this. He said, “*I’m a voice...a voice of one crying in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord.*’” It reminds me of Paul in Ephesians 3:8 who said he was least, less than all the saints. John’s a voice. This is the essence of real greatness—humility.

What do you say for yourself? What do you say? “I’m the son of Zacharias, the esteemed priest. I’m the greatest man who ever lived, by the way. I’m a man who was, just for your information, filled with the Holy Spirit when I was still in my mother’s womb. He doesn’t say any of that, he just says, “I’m a voice.” “I’m a voice.” Just a voice. It reminds me of Luke 17:10 where it says that when we’ve done everything we ought to have done, we ought to say we’re only an unprofitable servant, I’m a slave—just a voice, just a voice. But I am a voice that is unique. “I am a voice of one crying in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’ as Isaiah the prophet said.” I am a voice, but I am a voice fulfilling an Old Testament prophecy in Isaiah 40, verses 3 to 5. I am the fulfillment of Isaiah 40:3 through 5.

And what did Isaiah mean when he said “The voice of one crying in the wilderness?” Isaiah was talking about the coming of Messiah, and that before the Messiah would come He would be preceded by a voice crying in the wilderness: “Make the way of the Lord clear; make smooth in the desert a highway for our God. Let every valley be lifted up, every mountain and hill be made low; let the rough ground become a plain, and the rugged terrain a broad valley; then the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all flesh will see it together; for the mouth of the Lord has spoken it.” That’s a prophecy of John the Baptist. He says, “I’m that voice.”

Now listen, he was in a physical wilderness, he was in a geographical wilderness. But that’s not the point of the word “wilderness” in the prophecy of Isaiah, because when John came, he didn’t come with a bulldozer. He didn’t come and start moving dirt, filling holes and knocking down mountains. So in what way was he lowering mountains and elevating valleys and straightening out crooked roads and clearing obstacles off the path spiritually? Spiritually; the truth preacher of righteousness, a voice not attracting people to himself but to one of higher rank whose sandals He wasn’t worthy to untie. And He was saying, “Make straight,” He says in verse 23, “*Make straight the way of the Lord*.” Create a highway in your heart is what he’s after.

When we went through that as I read it to you earlier in another passage, I covered that in detail. The low places are the base things in life that need to be...that need to be brought up. The high things are the elevated self-righteous, prideful, hypocritical things that need to be brought low. The crooked things, the deviant things need to be straightened out. The clutter of life needs to be cleared off so that the road is clean. This is all a part of the message of repentance. Deal with the issues of the heart, which is both wretched in its self-elevation and it’s self-debasing.

And by the way, at the very moment that John was answering their question on day one, Jesus was walking toward John and would arrive the next day. I’m a voice. Not just a voice in the sense, I am the voice prophesied in Isaiah who has come to cry in the wilderness of sin and barrenness and crookedness and debasement and self-righteousness. Deal with your heart. Make the path straight. And they had been sent from the Pharisees.

“*So they said to him, ‘Why are you baptizing if you’re not the Christ, and you’re not Elijah, and you’re not the Prophet? What are you doing? Who are you?*’”

I’ll tell you the answer to that and it will be his answer next time. Pretty dramatic, isn’t it? We didn’t even get through day one, sorry. Let’s pray.

Father, we’re so blessed and so grateful for the richness that is placed in our minds and our hands, our hearts, in Your Word, every word, every verse, every text, every account, every testimony is just so obviously supernatural from heaven. And we have communed with heaven today. We’ve offered up our prayers to heaven, and we’ve heard heaven speak through this chapter. Thank you for the testimony of John to the deity of our Lord Jesus Christ. Thank You for sending Your Son into the world to seek and to save the lost. And may we all conclude that John did, that this is the Son of God. This One on whom the Spirit descended and of whom the Father said, “This is My beloved Son in whom I am well pleased.” And may we follow Him as did those disciples of John faithfully to the end, denying ourselves, taking up our cross, following Him. I pray for those who are in the wilderness of sin, whose hearts are barren and empty and filled with the pits of wickedness in the heights of pride and the turns of perversion and the stumbling stones of sinful clutter, that You would by Your Holy Spirit clear the way, and clear the path for the Lord. Do that today.

Father, we thank You that You have planted this in our hearts and minds. Use it, Lord, use it. May it not end here, may it not just be a bucket that receives something and holds it, but may we be like a funnel that what we hear we find ignites our hearts and fills our conversation both with those who know You and those who do not. Use this truth, Lord, and spread it in ways that we can’t even now perhaps imagine for Your glory, we pray, and bless this congregation in every case, every life. May Christ be honored in us all, we pray in His name.

**The First Testimony Concerning Jesus, Part 2**

**John 1:19-37**

Code: 43-6

The gospel of John—we’re in chapter 1, working our way through this wonderful presentation of Christ, remembering that John’s purpose is very simple. His purpose, which is articulated at the end of the book, is to present the evidences, the testimony, the proof that that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, so that you might believe and believing have eternal life in His name. His goal, as I said before, first of all polemic, to prove that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God; and then evangelistic, so that you in believing that may have the eternal life that comes with that faith. That’s the whole point of the gospel of John. It is evidences of the deity of Jesus Christ, evidences of the messiahship of Christ, evidence that He is the Savior, the only Savior, and that those who believe in Him have forgiveness and eternal life.

So the gospel of John is in the opening eighteen verses a declaration of the deity of Christ. And then starting in verse 19, the evidences proving that declaration to be true. John opens the gospel, as you remember, speaking of the Lord Jesus as the Word and identifying Him as with God and God Himself. He is both God and with God, which is a Trinitarian understanding. He is fully God, and yet He is with God. The members of the Trinity are fully God and yet separate persons. He introduces Him not only as the Word, that is the truth that emanates from deity, but as the life, the very life source of all that lives, and then as light, and that is to say He is God penetrating the darkness of a fallen world.

In verse 14 he sums up his declaration, the Word, the eternal Word who was God, who was with God, became flesh and dwelt among us, and put on display His glory which is the glory of the *prototokos*, the premier one from the Father, full of grace and truth.

And then in verse 15 he said, “John,” meaning John the Baptist, “testified about Him.” John the Baptist testified about Him. And with the introduction of John the Baptist in verse 15, John the apostle, who is the writer, draws his first witness to the deity of Christ. His first witness to the deity of Christ is none other than John the Baptist, who was introduced in verse 15 by name. He is mentioned earlier because in verse 6 it says, “There came a man sent from God, whose name was John”—there’s the first use of his name—“he came as a witness, to testify about the Light, so that all might believe through him.” So you have, first of all, the introduction of John as the first witness in verse 6. You have again a second reference to John as a witness in verse 15. And then, coming down to verse 19, this is the testimony that John gave, “this is the testimony of John.”

Now why is this so important that John the apostle draws from John the Baptist this initial testimony? And the answer to that question is multiple. Number one: because John was a prophet. In fact, he was the only prophet in Israel. In fact, there hadn’t been a prophet in 400 years. “And everyone understood John to be a prophet.” That is what it says in Matthew 14, and that is what is repeated in Matthew 21:26. Everyone knew him to be a prophet. In John 5:35 it says that for a while everyone was willing to rejoice in his light, and he was a burning and shining lamp.

So, first of all, it is to be understood that if you’re going to have a human testimony given to the Messiah, it needs to come from the most credible source. And the most believable, credible preacher and witness to the person of Christ would be the one who was most reliable, who was called by God to be a prophet and therefore spoke the word of God, and that’s John the Baptist.

Furthermore, John the Baptist was not just an ordinary man. He didn’t have an ordinary origin. He came from a priestly family, which gave him extra credibility because the priests were revered and honored and respected throughout the land of Israel. His lineage was of the highest kind, religiously speaking. And that gave him a hearing. So here is a true prophet, the first one in 400 years, everybody knows that. He speaks for God, he speaks from God, and he is also priestly in his heritage. You can add this other component to John’s credibility—his birth was extraordinary. One might say miraculous because his parents were barren, and they were in their senior years—had never been able to have children—and his mother Elizabeth gives birth in her old age to this son. That is miraculous.

Beyond that, his birth was not only a miraculous event, but it was a prophesied event by an angel who showed up to Zacharias when he was doing his sacrificial work in Jerusalem. An angel from heaven came and declared to him that they would have a child and that this child would be the forerunner of the Messiah, that he would actually come into their lives through the normal birth channels—even though they were barren—that he would be filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother’s womb, that he would come in the spirit and power of Elijah to turn many of the hearts of the people back to God and prepare them for the arrival of Messiah.

So he was a prophet and recognized to be a prophet. He had a miraculous birth, humanly speaking. He was prophesied by an angel, and the prophecy of the angel came to pass. Another component that makes John so unique is he lived completely apart from the religious system of Israel. He, from the time that he disappears in chapter 1 of Luke, he goes into the wilderness and for thirty years or the greater portion of that thirty years, he lives like a hermit out in the middle of the desert and eats whatever he can find with his hand and wears whatever he can put on his back (camel’s hair). He is a nomad who is completely alien to the religious system. In fact, he’s so alien to the religious system that the first glimpse we have of the leaders of Israel coming to him, he says to them, “You brood of snakes, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” He is not only alien to the apostate system of Judaism, he is anti-apostate Judaism. He’s not only separate from them, he speaks prophetically against them and warns of their judgment to come.

This is the man that John draws on for the initial testimony. He’s not a product of the system religiously. He’s not, in a sense, simply a product of a human life. He is a divinely prepared child. He is not a man who found a career because he sort of had a bent that way. He was ordained by God and so prophesied to do what he did. And he was before all a true prophet, a burning, shining lamp.

The point being this, that if you’re going to identify someone to start the testimony, pick the most credible person. And that’s exactly what John the apostle does in drawing out John the Baptist. As I told you last time, John isn’t concerned about where he lives, what he wears, what he eats. He’s only concerned about his testimony. The nation acknowledges John the Baptist as a spokesman for God and so John draws on his testimony and rightly so. This is the most credible, believable, trustworthy voice in Israel. And the people have come to know it and they’re flooding his wilderness location, coming by the tens of thousands from all Jerusalem, Judea, and the surrounding places to hear him.

Now to get this testimony, in verses 19 to 37 John the apostle hones in on three days, three days of the enduring ministry of John the Baptist. He ministered for months and months but out of that period there’s a three-day sort of apex, and it’s an important three days because on day two Jesus actually shows up. And so John the apostle gives us a picture and gives us within that picture of the ministry of John the Baptist, the specific testimony of John. There are three points here and John has three messages to give. He gives one on day one, another on day two, and another on day three; and they’re sequential, and they are testimonies that really are permanent in their validity.

On day one he says, “He is here.” On day two he says, “Look at Him.” And on day three he says, “Follow Him.” And that would be the message that any preacher would give regarding Christ. He is here, look at Him, see the revelation of who He is and follow Him. And that’s the nature of John’s ministry. So that gives you the overview—three days, three messages.

And interestingly enough, the three messages are given to three groups. On day one it is a hostile delegation from the Sanhedrin, the Jewish leading religious council. On day two it is the mass of people that are there. And on day three it is some of John’s own disciples. So three days, three messages to three different groups.

Now let’s look at day one and we’ve already started into this last time; we’ll pick it up. Day one, given to the Jewish delegation that had come from Jerusalem, to confront John and ask him the questions that the religious leaders wanted answered. Verse 19, “This is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent to him priests and Levites from Jerusalem.”

Jerusalem is the obvious headquarters of Jewish religion. The people in power in the Jewish council, which is called the Sanhedrin, that’s a council of seventy plus the high priest who ran Judaism. That council is made up predominantly of Sadducees. Sadducees were religious liberals who were not fundamentalists in the sense that the Pharisees were—didn’t believe in miracles, didn’t believe in physical resurrection. They were the sort of critics of the Old Testament, didn’t necessarily believe in the minutia of the Word of God the way the Pharisees did. But they had the bulk of power. And the predominance of the Sanhedrin members came from the Sadducees, the high priest, former high priest, the chief priest which made up mostly of Sadducees. They controlled the temple operation and the money and the power and the connections with Rome.

But with them were the Pharisees. They were much more devoted to the law. They were less political. They were the ones who studied the law, who applied the law, who taught the law to the people. And they were the lawyers, we would say, that is they were the experts on the law of God.

But apparently this delegation from the Sanhedrin is mixed with both. The idea in verse 19 that the Jews sent them would mean that they came from the Sanhedrin. John uses the expression “the Jews” seventy times in his gospel. As I told you last time, he’s not using it ethnically, or racially, he’s using it to identify those hostile to Jesus. Those who are hostile to Jesus, he calls “the Jews.” And that would represent the Sanhedrin. But it also encompasses, verse 24 says, the Pharisees. They had been sent from the Pharisees. The best we can say is this is probably a coalition coming from the Sanhedrin, and the Pharisees become the leading questioners in this group. As I said, the Sadducees predominated in the Sanhedrin, but it also included Pharisees.

So here comes this delegation and they select priests; the Sanhedrin selects priests and Levites from Jerusalem. And they are accompanied by Pharisees. They come to pose questions to John the Baptist. The questions sound like questions that reflect the Pharisaic understanding because they’re connected to the interpretation of the Old Testament, which was their primary realm of operation.

So they come to John and they ask him a series of questions about who he is. Verse 19, “Who are you?” What is implied in that question is, “Are you the Messiah?” How do you know that’s implied? Because of his answer in verse 20, “He confessed and didn’t deny, but confessed, ‘I am not the Christ.’” So we understood that what they were asking is, “Are you the Messiah?” And he says, “No, I am not the Messiah.” And the Greek language is very strong, a very, very strong denial. Later in chapter 3 we have another incident with John the Baptist when he says exactly the same thing, chapter 3, “I am not the Messiah. I am not the Christ.”

So they then say to him, “Well, what then?”—verse 21—“Are you Elijah?” Why did they ask that? Because Malachi 4:5—our Old Testament ends with that—promises that before the coming of Messiah in judgment at the great and terrible day of the Lord, Elijah will come, Elijah will come. And his answer is the same. “I am not,” a very strong denial, “I am not the...I am not Elijah.” This is not a recycled prophet. This is not a reincarnation. This is not Elijah taking on another name. This is a man who has never previously lived, born to Zacharias and Elizabeth, named John, and called the Baptist because of his baptizing ministry. “I am not Elijah.”

Now that poses an important question, because in Matthew 17 the statement is made by our Lord that John is Elijah, John is Elijah. And people say, “Well, wait a minute, John says he’s not, and Jesus says he is. How do we harmonize those two?”

It’s very simple. You understand it this way. In Luke 1:17 the angel said to Zacharias he will come “*in the spirit and power of Elijah*,” He will come “in the spirit and power of Elijah”—with the same boldness and the same power in preaching, and the same call to repentance that Elijah had.

So there will be two, in a sense, comings of Elijah. At the first coming of Christ there will be one in the spirit and power of Elijah. At the Second Coming of Christ there will be the actual Elijah. Prior to the coming of Christ in judgment will come Elijah, but prior to the coming of Christ to offer Himself as a sacrifice for sin there is John who comes in the spirit and power of Elijah. That’s made clear, I think, if you read Matthew 16:13 to 16 and compare that with the seventh chapter, verses 9 to 13 of Matthew as well. So John says I’m not the return of Elijah prior to the coming of Christ. And remember, Elijah didn’t die; he went to heaven, taken to heaven by God in the chariot. And so he didn’t die. He will return in the future, before the Second Coming of Christ.

So they ask him another question. “Are you the Prophet?” “Are you the Prophet?” What is that? Deuteronomy 18, Moses talked about a prophet who would come, a prophet who would come and speak the word of the Lord. And the Jews knew he was talking about Messiah; they assumed he was talking about Messiah. And if you read the sermon of Peter in Acts 3:22 and 23, he says that that passage in Deuteronomy 18 is referring to Messiah. If you read the sermon of Stephen in chapter 7, verse 37, he says Deuteronomy 18 is referring to Messiah. So that was common Jewish understanding. So they’re asking questions about these eschatological figures. Are you the Messiah? Are you the one who is to come before the Messiah? And then they ask him again, Are you the Prophet who they believe to be the Messiah? Who are you?

And the question that’s behind the questions is this: “*Why in the world do you think you have the authority to be baptizing these masses of people*?” Again, their issues were always about power and authority. They were completely hostile to Jesus because He assumed authority in what He said and what He did. He hadn’t come through any rabbinical system, any rabbinical institution, any rabbinical training—none of the normal channels. He didn’t have any authorization from anybody in religious power, and Jesus acted on His own authority again and again and again, and He said, “*Look, I have all authority given to Me*,” as you know, “*in heaven and in earth*.” He took authority over the Sabbath. He took authority over death. He took authority over demons. He took authority over creation, nature. He took authority over diseases. And this issue of authority especially irritated them when He took authority to interpret the Word of God and declare for God what God would say. It was always about authority because Jesus was a massive threat to their religious authority.

Well, John was the same. The people were going to John by the tens of thousands. Typically speaking, if we can go back and look at their history a little bit, they did have a baptism that they enacted for proselytes, meaning Gentiles who wanted to become Jews and become a part of their religion. They could go through a proselyte baptism, go into water symbolizing externally what was going on internally. In other words, I want to be cleansed of my paganism and I want to enter into the religion of the true God of Israel.

From what I can tell in reading, this was actually done by individuals. In other words, they would do it themselves. I suppose a friend could do it but from what I can tell, if you wanted to become a Jew, you would literally do a baptism of yourself, put yourself in water as a symbol on the outside of what you wanted to happen on the inside. At least we cannot find any authorized group in the history of Israel that did this. So it seems to be something people did as a sort of public confession. And so, here comes John and he takes the authority to be the one doing this, and he actually goes so far as to say, “I am doing this by divine authority.” Down in verse 33, “He who sent me to baptize in water.” So he comes with this commission and must have made it known that he was doing this with authority from God. So they’re saying to him, “Who do you think you are? You’re not the Messiah. We might allow for the Messiah to do this. You’re not Elijah. We might assume that Elijah would do this. Where do you get the power or the authority to do this?” That’s what’s behind the question.

Verse 22, “They said to him, ‘Who are you then, so that we may give an answer to those who sent us?’” We have to give a report back to the Sanhedrin. What do you say about yourself? And after saying, “I am not, I am not, I am not,” he finally says, “I am.” Verse 23, “I’m a voice.” And we went over that last time. “I’m a voice; that’s all I am.” He’s very humble; verse 15, you know, he said about Christ, “He comes after me but He is a higher rank than I, for He existed before me.” Verse 27, the same attitude, “He comes after me, and the thong of His sandal I’m not worthy to untie.” In verse 30 again he says, “He comes after me, but He has a higher rank than I, for He existed before me.” Amazing statements that show the humility of John. He’s humble; he’s selfless; he wants no titles, no honors, no money, no comforts, no followers, no disciples. He wants to point to Christ, and that’s exactly what he does. He just continues to point to Christ.

So he says, “I am a voice of one crying in the wilderness,” and he draws it right out of Isaiah 40, verse 3; that’s a quote from Isaiah 40, verse 3. I am the fulfillment of that prophecy. The prophecy that there would come before the Messiah a voice crying in the wilderness, not particularly the wilderness of Judea, but the wilderness of Israel in the spiritual sense—the barrenness, the bankruptcy, the desert of hearts that Israel had become with no life. I’m coming into that wilderness. I am a voice, nothing more. And I say make straight the way of the Lord as Isaiah the prophet says in Isaiah 40, verses 3 through 5.

So he says my job is to be a voice to cry out to you to make your heart a ready path for the King. The King is on the way; I’m telling you to get ready. He is a true preacher, John is, he’s a true teacher. He’s a true believer. But he’s only a voice, and he’s pointing to Jesus Christ. And he’s telling the people, “Make your path straight.” Get the obstacles, the bends, the dips, the high places, and I went into that a little bit from Isaiah 40 last time. The low places, the base places in your life need to be lifted up. The high places, the proud places need to be brought down—the crooked part of your life, the perverted places need to be straightened out. The cluttered places need to be cleaned off to get ready for the one who is coming. I’m only the voice. I’m only the voice.

But what an unspeakable honor for John. How amazing it must have been to realize that every day that you are those beautiful feet mentioned by Isaiah and also by Paul in Romans 10. How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel. How amazing to know that you are the herald of heaven’s King, of heaven’s Lamb, of the Messiah. And he knows that, and he understands that. And he deflects the question when asked him, “Who do you say you are? How do we explain you?” He says, “I’m a voice, that’s all. I’m a voice. I’m a voice.”

So verse 25, they get to what motivated the whole thing, they asked him and said to him, “Why then are you baptizing?” Why are you doing this? You’re not the Christ. You’re not Elijah. You’re not the prophet of Deuteronomy 18. Where do you come off doing this? Where did you get this right? Where did you get this authority? They would have expected the Messiah to do it, perhaps. They would have expected Elijah to do it. But what about John, how can he put himself in this position? And John’s response, essentially, is to say, “You’re making too much out of this.” “You’re making too much out of this.” Verse 26, “John answered them saying, ‘I baptize in water, but among you stands One whom you do not know. It is He who comes after me, the thong of whose sandal I’m not worthy to untie.’” In other words, why are you focused on me? Why are you so caught up with me? I baptize in water. He just deflects this thing completely away. I baptize in water. What’s the big deal? This is water. This is just putting people in water—just an external symbol.

He did have authority, verse 33. “He who sent me to baptize said to me”—and that would be God—“He upon whom you see the Spirit descending and remaining upon Him, this is the One who baptizes in the Holy Spirit”—namely the Son. And that’s the recollection of his being at the baptism of our Lord. He did have divine authority. He did what he did because God told him to do it. But he doesn’t tell them that at that moment. He says, “Look, you’re making too much of this. I’m just doing water baptism here. There’s one that you need to look at who is already among you, and He will baptize with the Holy Spirit. You need to be far more concerned about the one who deals with hearts than you are about me and what I do.” Real baptism, real purification, regeneration, the washing of regeneration, is going to be the work of the Messiah. He will baptize with the Holy Spirit. That’s at the end of verse 33.

So John does what he always did, turns everybody’s attention toward Christ. And there you have his first message in verse 26, “*Among you stands One whom you do not know; He is here*.” That’s his first message. He’s here. Why are you caught up with me? You see me, you know me, but One stands already here that you don’t know. He’s the One you need to know. He’s the One you need to know. He’s the One, he later says, who baptizes in the Holy Spirit. In other words, He’s the One who deals with the heart, with the heart. The Messiah is present. He’s here. He doesn’t mean He’s standing there by the water that day. He means He’s in the land; He has arrived. At the very moment he says this, Jesus is walking toward where John is and will arrive the next day. It was forty-plus days ago that John baptized Jesus. And then Jesus went, carried by the Holy Spirit, up into the wilderness for forty days of temptation. The forty days of temptation is ended. Jesus is on His way back, back to John. And what John is saying is not that He’s here on the spot, but that He’s here—He has been identified and He’s present. That’s the first great message that John gives. That’s where all gospel preaching starts, doesn’t it? He’s here; He’s come; He’s come; He’s come.

In their eagerness to expose all the false Messiahs, elevate themselves, they didn’t know the true Messiah. John says, “I’m not even worthy to untie the thong of His sandals.” That would be the lowest level of a slave who would take care of people’s dirty feet. “I’m not even worthy to do that. I’m nothing. I’m the lowest of the lowest unprofitable servant. You don’t need to be looking at me. You don’t need to be concerned about me. I’m a voice. I’m a slave. You need to be looking at Him. You can see me and know me, but you don’t know Him, and that’s the issue. Get past the preacher,” he’s saying. Get past the preacher to the One of whom the preacher speaks.

So on the first day you have John’s first testimony to that group from the Sanhedrin and he says, “He’s here.” “He is here.” By the way, that message would have gone immediately back to Jerusalem and would have made the Jews in the Sanhedrin, and the wide influence of that information would have spread to all the elite leaders in Israel—the Messiah is here. And what that does is leave the Jews without any excuse such as, “Oh, we’re surprised that Jesus has shown up and claimed to be the Messiah.” They are on notice before Jesus begins His ministry officially that the Messiah has arrived. And from that very outset of that report going back, their hostility goes all the way to the cross where they finally execute Him. The message is the same: He’s here; He’s come.

Let’s look at day two. Day two picks up the story in verse 29. All of this, of course, verse 28 says, was happening in a place called Bethany beyond the Jordan. Not the Bethany on the eastside of Jerusalem there, but another Bethany. We don’t know where exactly it was; out beyond the Jordan River into the wilderness. It all happened there. But verse 29 then takes us to day two, the next day. He saw Jesus coming to him and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” This is day two; this is group two. Group two, all the people that are gathered, all the crowd, and the message: “Look at Him.” “Look at Him.” “Look at Him.”

Message one: He’s here. Message two: *Look at Him, He is the Lamb of God*. He is the Lamb of God. Day one was kind of a private delegation. Day two is the public proclamation. And it’s a shock because he sees Jesus coming to him and he knows Him, obviously. And he declares Him to be the Lamb of God, and that’s an exclamation, “Behold!” Look at Him. Take Him in. Take in the reality of who He is. He is here and this is who He is. He is the Lamb of God. That’s not what they expected to hear. Why would the Messiah be a Lamb? Why would...at best, a lamb is impotent, weak, helpless, stupid, dependent, even dirty.

What do you mean the Messiah’s a Lamb? This is shocking, shocking. They would have expected him to say, “Behold your King. Behold the triumphant One. Behold the majestic One. Behold the exalted One. Behold the Ruler. Behold the Anointed One.” But he says, “Behold the lamb of God.” At best, as I said, a lamb is impotent and weak. At worst, a lamb is dead. And lambs were sacrificed all the time. All through the centuries Israel knew about a sacrificial lamb—going all the way back to Abraham and Isaac and God providing a sacrifice for Abraham so he didn’t have to kill his own son. And then back to the Exodus and the Passover Lamb and every Passover after that, and every morning and every evening, there was a morning sacrifice, an evening sacrifice, and lambs were slain as sin offerings over and over and over and over, day after day after day, century after century after century. And they also knew, Isaiah 53, that He was led as a lamb to slaughter. The One who was wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities, and the One upon whom the chastening for our peace fell. They knew all of that. They knew about sacrifice. But they didn’t know how it fit because they never saw themselves as a people needing a sacrifice.

In other words, they assumed that the combination of their righteousness and their obedience in offering an animal was enough. But those animals couldn’t take away sin; they could only point to the one sacrifice that would take away sin, that had not yet come until Christ. And because they didn’t recognize their sinfulness, they didn’t recognize they were under judgment, under wrath, needed a sacrifice, and that their Messiah was to be that sacrifice that Isaiah 53 was talking about—their Messiah—they had no concept they needed or that the Messiah would be a lamb. And so Johns says, “Behold the Lamb of God”—the lamb that God has chosen to be the sacrifice.

Every family chose its lamb. Every father chose a lamb. This is the lamb that God has chosen. He’s come to deal with sin at last, to be wounded for our transgressions. He became sin for us who knew no sin. He offered Himself as a sacrifice on the cross. He bore our sins in His own body. God made Him who knew no sin, sin for us. All those New Testament explanations. The Jews wanted a prophet. The Jews wanted a king. They got a lamb. They wanted a leader; they wanted a monarch. They got a substitute. They wanted an exalted messiah. They received rather a humiliated sacrifice. They wanted one who could kill all their enemies, and they got One whom their enemies killed. But then again, they could never have a king until they had a lamb. And that’s the two comings. There could never be a coming in glory to reign until there’s a coming in humiliation to die.

“Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” What that means is that for the whole world there is only one who can take away sin. For the whole world, there’s only one who can take away sin, and that’s this One who will die as the sacrificial lamb God accepts. And John then adds what he said back in verses 15 and 27, “This is He on behalf of whom I said, after me comes a man who’s higher rank than I, for He existed before me.” And again he says, “Get your attention off me. He came after me in terms of beginning His ministry, but He existed before me. He was born after I was born, and yet He existed before me. Get your eyes on this eternal One. Get your eyes on this exalted One who is of higher rank than I am, the One you don’t know.”

And then John is again deflecting, and yet at the same time understanding, the difficulty of this because he says in verse 31, “I didn’t recognize Him at first.” You say, “Well weren’t Elizabeth and Mary related?” They were. Elizabeth and Mary were related. “Didn’t Elizabeth and Mary talk?” Sure. Mary knew that she had conceived Jesus as the Son of God without a father, humanly speaking. Elizabeth knew of the miracle of her birth. They were together when both of them were pregnant. They knew; didn’t they talk about that through the years? Wouldn’t have those women told their sons that they were who they were? And wouldn’t John know that Jesus was the Son of God?

Well, the answer is, “Yeah, he would know that because his mother would have told him, and Mary may have told him. And it certainly was known in the family.” But you have Jesus, thirty years of complete obscurity, thirty years in a carpenter shop, which would raise some pretty serious questions, wouldn’t it? I mean, John’s trying to say, “He’s the Son of God; He’s God in human flesh; He’s the Messiah.” Nothing’s happening. Nothing’s happening. It would be easy for doubt to come in.

You know, even later in the ministry of John, after it became clear who Jesus was, John began to doubt. You remember that? John began to doubt whether Jesus was actually the Messiah, because even after He started His ministry, He didn’t do anything; He didn’t conquer anything; He didn’t take over anything. So John sent some of his disciples to Jesus and they said, “John wants to know if You’re really the Messiah? Are You really the Messiah?” And Jesus said, “Tell them about the things I’ve done. Tell them about the works.”

So John had questions. They aren’t questions because nobody had given him information. He had information from his family knowledge. He had information from the ministry of Christ. But because Jesus wasn’t acting the way he thought a Messiah should act, either obscure in the first part, or increasingly hated in His public ministry, questions arose.

So here John is just admitting that I didn’t recognize Him in the full sense; *oida* is the Greek verb. I didn’t recognize Him in the full, deep sense. But so that He might be manifested to Israel, I came baptizing in water. And John testified then in verse 32 saying, “I’ve seen the Spirit descending as a dove out of heaven, and He remained on Him. I didn’t recognize Him.” Up to that point he’s saying, “I knew Him, but there was no way for me to be certain that this is the Messiah, which by the way, is a footnote, is a clear declaration that Jesus’ humanity was real humanity. There was nothing about seeing the man Jesus that would tell you He was a heavenly person. I didn’t recognize Him. “But He who sent me to baptize in water,” that’s God, “said to me, ‘He upon whom you see the Spirit descending and remaining upon Him, this is the One who baptizes in the Holy Spirit.’”

You remember at His baptism, Matthew 3, Luke 3, the Spirit came down, the Father said, “This is My beloved Son in whom I am well-pleased.” John at that moment knows. But as I said, even later after that, doubts arise because he doesn’t see the evidences that he would have anticipated. But at this point John gives us this testimony, verse 31, “I didn’t recognize Him, then I was called to baptize.” Verse 33, “I didn’t recognize Him until the Father told me He’s the one the Spirit descends on.” At that point, verse 34, “*I myself have seen, and testified this is the Son of God*.”

So on day two we could say this: John says to the crowd, “*Look at Him, the Lamb of God who is the Son of God.*” That’s John’s ministry. The Lamb of God who is the Son of God. He knows it. He’s heard the voice from heaven of the Father. He’s seen the Spirit coming down and again, as I said, later on he had some doubts, but they were affirmed with the testimony coming back from his disciples when they asked. “Now I know John’s testimony, this is the Son of God.” So you have the finest, the most believable, credible, trustworthy voice in Israel affirming that this is the Lamb of God who is the Son of God.

Verse 35 takes us to day three, just briefly. “Again the next day John was standing with two of his disciples, and he looked at Jesus as He walked, and said, ‘Again, behold the Lamb of God.’” I think he’s in awe. I think he’s just struck with the One in whose presence he walks. The two disciples heard him say that, and they followed Jesus. All right, this is day three, group three. Who are they? Two disciples of John. John was a teacher and John had followers. So here are a couple of them. By the way, we know who these two are. According to verse 40, one of them is Andrew; one of the two who heard John and followed Jesus was Andrew. Who’s the other one? Well, the writer of the gospel of John is always reluctant to name one of them. Who is it? Himself.

So Andrew and John started out as followers of John the Baptist, getting ready for Messiah. And John, who wanted no disciples, the next day is standing with them and he looked at Jesus as He walked, and he says to these two disciples, “Behold, the Lamb of God!” Look, what are you doing hanging around me?

“The two disciples heard him speak, and they followed Jesus.” And verse 38, I love this, “Jesus turned and saw them following Him, and said to them, ‘*What do you seek*?’” What do you guys want?

They said, “Rabbi, where are You staying?” In other words, this isn’t a short-term interest. Wherever you’re going and wherever you’re going to stay, that’s where we’re going to stay. John had done his job, hadn’t he? He’s here. He’s the Lamb of God and the Son of God. Follow Him and stay with Him. That is a pure and blessed gospel ministry, modeled for us by this selfless, humble, meek man who, by the way if you didn’t know, is one of my favorites in all of Scripture—John the Baptist. Yes, He’s here. Look at Him. He’s the Lamb of God and the Son of God. Follow Him permanently. That’s the essence, by the way, of saving faith.

You understand that He came. You understand who He is. And you commit your life to follow. That’s what it means to be a Christian. Bow with me in prayer.

Father, we acknowledge there is a beautiful simplicity in Scripture and an evident consistency in Scripture, that there is one message preached numerous ways, and that one message is about Christ Jesus, the One who is the Son of God, the only Savior. And it is to know that He came to believe the truth about Him and to follow Him. Father, we thank You for the testimony of John. We thank You that that testimony continues to go on from John, even as it did this morning through an understanding of this chapter, and that it’s extended through the rest of the New Testament and through all of history through faithful preachers who proclaim the coming of Christ to be the Lamb and who call people to put their trust and faith in Him and follow Him permanently. I pray that the Holy Spirit today, O God, would touch the hearts of some who are here who may be in danger, as those in Hebrews 6 were in danger, of knowing the truth, understanding the truth, even believing the truth, to a degree, but never committing themselves to Christ—be in danger of falling away, never to be renewed to repentance. I pray, Lord, that Your Holy Spirit will draw them away to Christ. We have no desire as preachers that people be our disciples or be attached to us, but that they follow Christ. We speak of Him, His coming, His life, His identity, and as John, we call sinners to follow Him and to go where He goes and stay where He stays. I pray, Lord, that You would grant that marvelous gift of salvation to some even today, even here.

And now, Lord, work in our hearts, all of us, to bring about, first of all, a new understanding of the glory of Christ and the sweet truth of the gospel; and make us ever thankful for the knowledge that has saved us, granted by Your Spirit and by Your will and Your power. Pray for those that don’t know Christ—may this be the day of their salvation. I pray that You’ll encourage us with the truth, fill our hearts with joy, and make us faithful witnesses that others may know our Christ. We pray in His name. Amen.

**The Disciples’ Testimony Concerning Jesus**

**John 1:38-51**

Code: 43-7

We come now to the Word of God, John chapter 1 and verses 38 to 51. This is on the surface a narrative portion of Scripture. And we’ll see many of these as we engage ourselves with the gospel of John, as John tells the story of Jesus from His own perspective. But there’s some wonderfully foundational things in this section, as we would expect at the beginning of the gospel of John. Let me begin reading and we might as well start reading at verse 35.

“Again the next day John was standing with two of his disciples”--that’s John the Baptist--“and he looked at Jesus as He walked, and said, ‘Behold, the Lamb of God!’ The two disciples heard him speak, and they followed Jesus. And Jesus turned and saw them following, and said to them, ‘What do you seek?’ They said to Him, ‘Rabbi (which translated means Teacher), where are you staying?’ 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. One of the two who heard John speak and followed Him was Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother. He found first his own brother Simon and said to him, ‘We have found the Messiah’ (which translated means Christ). He brought him to Jesus. Jesus looked at him and said, ‘You are Simon the son of John; you shall be called Cephas’ (which is translated Peter.

“The next day He purposed to go into Galilee, and He found Philip. And Jesus said to him, ‘Follow Me.’ Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. 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.’ Nathanael said to him, ‘Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?’ Philip said to him, ‘Come and see.’ Jesus saw Nathanael coming to Him, and said of him, ‘Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!’ Nathanael said to Him, ‘How do You know me?’ Jesus answered and said to him, ‘Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you.’ Nathanael answered Him, ‘Rabbi, You are the Son of God; You are the King of Israel.’ Jesus answered and said to him, ‘Because I said to you that I saw you under the fig tree...you believe? You will see greater things than these.’ And He said to him, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see the heavens opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.’”

This is a very, very simple account of Jesus collecting His first followers. But it has great importance for the apostle John because John has a purpose in writing this gospel of 21 chapters, and he articulates that purpose in chapter 20, verse 31, “These are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name.” So as I said before, his purpose is both apologetic, that is to prove that Jesus is the Son of God, and the Messiah, the Savior, the Redeemer, and it is an evangelistic purpose so that you may believe that and by believing that have eternal life in His name.”

So what John does in these 21 chapters is amass evidence that Jesus is the Son of God, the promised Messiah and the Savior. And he amasses all that evidence from every possible source that he can draw it. By the time we’re at the end of the gospel of John, he has exhausted all the necessary sources of the proof that Jesus is the Son of God. Whenever a person comes to me and has questions about the identity of Jesus, through the years I have told them, “Read the gospel of John; read the gospel of John and draw your own conclusion, because it is written that you might know that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, that you might believe that, and in believing that have eternal life in His name.” So John accumulates evidence concerning Jesus as the incarnate Son of God, the One who was God, was with God, and was made flesh--as he says early in the chapter.

Now he starts out with the testimony of the greatest man who had ever lived up until his time, John the Baptist, the last and greatest of all Old Testament prophets. The testimony of the last and greatest of all Old Testament prophets matters, and John was revered by the population of Israel as a prophet. And it is John then who points to Jesus and says, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” And we have the record of that declaration here in chapter 1 of John’s gospel, verse 29. He repeats it again in verse 36, “Behold, the Lamb of God!”

True Israelites, true Jews, believing Jews knew they were sinners. John’s ministry was a ministry of repentance. His baptism was a baptism of repentance. Now remember, he is confronting a nation of self-righteous people who don’t think they need to repent and don’t think they need a Savior. That would be the dominant view. That was the view of the religious establishment. They were not looking for a lamb, or a sacrifice, or a savior, they were looking for a king. They felt they had already achieved status and acceptance with God by their religiosity and their morality. But John’s message was, you are no better than Gentiles. You are outside a relationship with God, you need to repent and you need to be baptized as an outward expression of the desire for an inward cleansing, like a Gentile who is becoming associated with Jewish religion. In other words, you’re outsiders, you need to repent or the wrath of God is going to fall on you. John preached wrath and he preached repentance, and then he pointed to Christ and said, “This is the Lamb and the sacrifice for your sins.” True Jews understood that. They knew they were sinners. They knew they needed to repent and they knew they needed a sacrifice for their sin. And perhaps these men, this small group of fishermen, even understood the full impact of Isaiah 53. There was coming one who would be wounded for their transgressions, crushed for their iniquities. They would have understood the sacrificial system pointing toward a full and final sacrifice. And when John said, “Behold the Lamb of God,” that may not have registered with the populace, but it registered with those who had a true understanding of the Old Testament and a true admission of their own spiritual and sinful condition.

So here in this section, verses 38 to 51, we meet a little group of Jews who were believers in the Old Testament and had a true interpretation of the Old Testament that had truly changed their lives, represented by the words of our Lord, “Behold”--that’s a shocking realization--“a true Israelite in whom there is no deceit”--a real believer. So here is a little group of believers that we just read about--Andrew, Peter, Philip, Nathanael--and John is also originally with Andrew in this. You can add James. You can throw in Thomas. And you have seven Galilean fishermen, seven Galilean fishermen who give testimony ultimately, although Thomas took him a long time till he finally said, “My Lord and my God.” They start out to be the core of the...of the disciples of Jesus, who then become the apostles of Christ, the first great preachers and missionaries of the gospel that start what is still being finished and will be until Jesus comes. It’s an amazing reality how the Lord chooses these insignificant people and He doesn’t have to scour the whole country, He doesn’t have to try to find the best guy in every city or every county. He can take four, five guys who know each other, that live in the same area, make their living the same way--catching fish--and He can turn them into world changers. He can take anybody and do that, and that’s what you see here.

You know, the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 1 said, “Consider your calling, not many noble, not many mighty,” remember that? The Lord has called the base and the lowly and the nothings and the nobodies and the insignificant. And that’s how the gospel gets launched. The seed that’s planted is John the Baptist; he’s like the first testifier to Jesus. And then the next group is this group that’s completely alien to the religious establishment. There’s not a rabbi; there’s not a priest; there’s not a Sadducee; there’s not a Pharisee; there’s not a scribe--no one who is a part of the religious establishment which was apostate. No one is selected, but rather humble, rural fishermen become the first followers of Jesus--the first missionaries, the first preachers, the first witnesses--and they give an amazing testimony. In verse 41, one of them says we found the Messiah. In verse 45, another one says, “We have found Him of whom Moses in the Law and also the Prophets wrote.” And in verse 49, another one says, “Rabbi, You are the Son of God; You are the King of Israel.” And the reason for the story here is to declare those statements. We have found the Messiah who is the fulfillment of the Old Testament, who is the Son of God and is the King of Israel. This is not their calling to be apostles; that doesn’t happen until a year and a half later. Half way through the ministry of Jesus, these men are identified as part of the twelve apostles. But at the start here, they’re just common, insignificant, uninfluential Galilean fishermen who know each other, who along with James and John all live in the same place and make their living the same way. They may well have worshiped God together in the same synagogue. Amazing. But what they launch will go, and is still going, to the ends of the earth, the ends of the earth.

The truth of the gospel spreads in every generation since the first through humble people, through the unknown, the uninfluential, the powerless, the weak and the meek. That’s how it’s always spread--person to person to person; the kingdom advances one soul at a time, one soul at a time. Sure there are preachers who preach to groups, but the primary way the kingdom moves is from one person to another, to another, to another, and that’s how it all started.

Now the challenge for them was immense, really immense. They were nobodies, absolutely nobodies, as given testimony to the fact that they were declaring Jesus to be the Messiah who Himself appeared to be a nobody, the son of Joseph from Nazareth. And everybody in Judea looked down on Galilee and the people in Galilee looked down on Nazareth. Talk about humble beginnings.

So as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1, the advance of the gospel cannot be attributed to the power of the people. It can only be attributed to the power of God. And so, if you’re going to boast, boast in the Lord because it’s by His doing that you’re in Christ. The Lord has turned His back on the religious establishment. People might have thought if He’s the true Messiah, the rabbis will tell us, the scribes will tell us, the Pharisees will tell us, the priests will tell us. But all of them resented Jesus, resisted Jesus, rebelled against His message, and led to His execution. No, the message is going to come from some Galilean fishermen in the purpose of God. And it continues that way even today.

Right here in verse 38 we are at the beginning of the ministry of Jesus. Up to this time He’s been in obscurity, living in Galilee; but these men don’t even know Him, they don’t know Him. Later on one of them says, “How do You know me?” Which is to say, “I don’t know You.” And in that little, small area of Galilee, thirty years Jesus has lived there and they don’t even know who He is, which speaks to the fact that He had done nothing to draw attention to Himself. And He begins now to gather His followers, and John the Baptist fades out of the picture now and makes one small appearance in chapter 3. But now the story turns to Christ and He takes center stage.

Now as we look at verses 38 to 51, we’ll split this into the natural way that John does it--it’s two groups. The first really focuses on Andrew and Peter; the second focuses on Philip and Nathanael. Keep in mind that John is John the apostle, not John the Baptist--is embedded here as well but never likes to refer to himself. So let’s look at group one.

We’re still at this time in the location of verse 28 at a place called Bethany, beyond the Jordan, not the Bethany near Jerusalem, but another one across the Jordan out in the wilderness where there was water, where John had been preaching and baptizing. We’re still there. This is day three. You remember on day one, John had told the people that were there. This is a three-day snapshot of John’s ministry. Day one he said, “The Messiah is present. He’s come.” On day two he said, “There He is, behold the Lamb of God!” On day three he says, “Follow Him,” and he turns his disciples from him to follow Christ. He doesn’t want disciples following him, not John the Baptist. He wants them following the One he came to declare. So verse 37, the two disciples heard him speak--and that would be Andrew and John--they heard him speak and they followed Jesus. And that’s where we pick up the story.

So this is the third day in John’s chronology and that’s another indication that John is present because he’s so precise on the days, even down into verse 43, the next day. And he also makes the declaration in the end of verse 39 that it was the tenth hour. So he even remembers the time, which is good indication that John was the unnamed one there. So they follow Jesus as John the Baptist has instructed them at the end of verse 37.

Verse 38, we pick it up. This is group one. “Jesus turned and saw them following, and said to them, ‘What do you seek?’”--“‘What do you seek?’” Now keep in mind that there are two of them here, down later we find one of them identified in verse 41, one of the two who heard John speak and followed Him was Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother. The other one is unnamed, but again that’s a good indication that it’s John because he will not name himself. Starting in chapter 13, verse 23 he calls himself the disciple who leaned on Jesus, “whom Jesus loved.” And then he keeps referring to himself in ways like that, chapter 19, chapter 20, chapter 21. But he kind of fades out of the picture. He’s the writer and his humility shows up, and he sort of fades out and tells the story of Andrew and his brother Simon Peter, as you know him.

So in verse 38 they’re following Jesus. Jesus turns and says, “What do you seek?” What’s your motivation? What do you want from Me? What are you looking for? They knew John the Baptist had identified Jesus as the Messiah. He had identified Jesus in the true biblical way as the Lamb of God rather than the reigning King. He was a king and they declared that at the end of this testimony. But initially He comes as a lamb; He comes as a sacrifice for sin. They have been listening to John’s message of sin and repentance, and mark it please, they are disciples of John, verse 35, “John was standing with both of them and they were his disciples.” And then verse 37, “The two disciples”--not disciples of Jesus, but of John the Baptist. So they had bought fully into John’s message of judgment and sin and repentance and you need salvation, and the Lamb of God has come.

Now keep in mind, John’s preaching for months. He’s preaching day after day after day. He didn’t just say “Behold the Lamb of God” over and over again. He no doubt gave a full explanation of the identity of Jesus Christ as the Lamb, connected with the Old Testament sacrificial system--maybe Isaiah 53 so that they knew exactly what His coming as a Lamb meant. These are men who heard that message and believed that message and had come to repent and to receive the One who would be the sacrifice. They have a lot of questions, so they are asked, “What do you seek?” And they give an answer that is really very, very wonderful. They said to Him, “Rabbi.” Rabbi was a common expression that students used to give honor and respect to their teacher. In fact, it became another word for teacher, as the note says, “(which translated means Teacher), where are You staying?” They’re saying, “Look, we can’t cover everything that’s on our minds here. “What do you seek?” We need to go where you are and we need to sit down with you, we want to have a conversation with you. They show great respect and great honor, and you will find this...this address “Rabbi” repeatedly given to Jesus through the gospel of John, and one time even in chapter 3 the disciples of John the Baptist call him “Rabbi.” So it was a title of honor from students to their teacher. And so now they have transitioned from John as their teacher to Jesus as their teacher, and they now say, “You are our new rabbi; You are our teacher; where are You staying?” And they know there is more than just a casual sound bite that they need to hear. They want time. They want conversation. They have questions. They have inquiries. They want to discover everything they can discover about Him.

Now remember, they’re not made permanent disciples on this day. They’re just beginning to examine Jesus. Later on they will become permanent followers and later after that they will become apostles and be sent to preach the gospel. The Lord’s invitation is immediate. This is just a beautiful picture of condescension and invitation. Verse 39, He said to them, “Come, and you will see.” Come with Me and you will see. This is like Matthew 11 where Jesus said, “Learn of Me,” “learn of Me”; “come, and you will see.” Come with Me. This is the accessibility, the availability, the condescension of our Lord Jesus.

So they came and saw where He was staying. We don’t know where that was, out in the desert somewhere, no doubt a humble place where Jesus was staying with some persons who had provided for Him a room or a bed. We know nothing more than that. “And they stayed with Him that day, for it was about the tenth hour.” By Jewish reckoning, which begins at 6:00 a.m., that would be four o’clock in the afternoon when they finally go to where Jesus is. So they’re going to stay with Him, stay the day, stay the night. I can imagine if I started a conversation with the Son of God, sleep would be the last thing on my agenda. This must have gone through the night. They stayed with Him the remainder of that day because it was already about four o’clock evening. And this would have been in January, so the days are fairly short and the darkness had come.

I can only imagine what this must have been like. It’s kind of an interesting parallel to the last meeting that Jesus had with the disciples on the road to Emmaus when they went in and sat down around the table and they asked questions and He essentially proved to them then the same thing He proved to these men here--that He was the One the Law and the Prophets spoke about. Remember in Luke 24 when He meets them on the way to Emmaus and they go in the house and sit down, He takes the Law and the Prophets and the Holy Writings and explains all the things concerning Himself. So He’s giving the same lesson at the end that He was giving at the beginning. Again, that’s a conversation that I would have loved to have been a part of. They spend the rest of the day and no doubt the night. Verse 40 simply notes that the two of them who had heard John the Baptist speak and followed him, one of them was Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother. Andrew will become known as “Simon Peter’s brother” because Simon Peter is casting a big shadow. And by the time John writes his gospel, which would have been in the nineties, at the end of the first century, Peter would have been well-known and there wasn’t a lot about Andrew. So Andrew would have had to spend his whole life being Simon Peter’s brother. That would be the way he would be introduced.

However, if priority matters, Andrew is the first disciple called. He’s the first disciple called and you have the account of it here. Well, Andrew is called over that night to conviction that Jesus is indeed the Messiah. So he finds, first of all, his own brother Simon, which meant that he must have been around, which meant that he may have been a follower of John the Baptist as well, because, remember, they’re not in Galilee where they live, they’re down in the south, across the Jordan River, east of Jerusalem. He finds Simon and he says to him, “We have found the Messiah.” Now that [Messiah] matters a lot to John, which translated into the Greek is “Christ.” “Messiah” is a Hebrew word; “Christ” is a Greek word. It means “the Anointed One.” And we’ll see more about that tonight. But this is...John’s point here; here is a first-person, eyewitness account by objective evidence that Jesus is the Messiah. Here is a reliable first-person testimony. “We have found the Messiah.” No equivocation, no hesitation, no doubt, absolute certainty--“We have found the Messiah.” The objective test of scrutiny, examining Jesus, asking Him questions, talking with Him the rest of the day through the night, and this is a joyful proclamation, joy beyond joy--“We have found the Messiah.” And he brought him to Jesus, Simon Peter. He brought him to Jesus.

That’s how the kingdom advances, isn’t it? One bringing another. And so here comes Andrew dragging Peter to Jesus. Jesus looked at Peter and said, “You are Simon son of John,” or Jonah, or Jonas--a lot of ways to transliterate that--“you’re Simon, son of John.” That must have caused Peter a little bit of shock. There’s no indication that He was told that, but then He knows everything. He knows who he is. More than that, He knows who he will become. He says, “you shall be called Cephas” (which is translated Peter).” “Cephas” is the Aramaic word, which was the common language they spoke. “Peter” is the Greek form of the word *stone*, or *rock*. And our Lord is predicting what Peter will become. It’s going to be a tough journey getting him there, but he will become a rock. He will become a rock. Matthew 16, Jesus looks at him and says, “You are Peter,” you are the stone. But on an even greater rock, the rock of your confession, I’ll build My church. Peter’s confession, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God--“on that rock bed [that *petra*] I will build My kingdom.” But you’re a *petros*, you’re a stone. In fact, you’re one of the foundation stones Ephesians 2:20 talks about, of the church. The Lord says, “I not only know you, but prophetically I know what you’re going to become. You’re going to be a rock. You’re going to be solid. And he was from the day that the Spirit of God came upon him, and he stood up on the dais, if you will, on the Day of Pentecost and preached Jesus Christ and preached again. And preached through the first twelve chapters of the book of Acts in the foundation years of the church. He was the rock who proclaimed the truth on which the church was built. So Jesus must have startled Peter by knowing who he was and being able to prophesy what he would become.

I’m sure Peter was shocked and willing to accept the testimony of his brother Andrew, “We have found the Messiah.” Men can’t know what He knows. That’s group one, Andrew and Peter.

Let’s look at group two. Verses 43 to 51 is the second group--“the next day.” This will be day four, “the next day He purposes to go into Galilee.” And when He goes to Galilee, which you could walk in a good portion of the day--probably less than twenty miles--it would be a rigorous walk, but if you started early you’d get there. And he found Philip and He said, “Follow Me.” It’s very likely that Peter and Andrew were with Jesus and more instruction and more interrogation went on all day as they traversed the countryside back to Galilee. So they go back to find friends. Verse 44, “Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter.” That’s a small...that’s not a city. Bethsaida is a small place, “house of fishing.” It’s a fishing village on the northeast tip of the Sea of Galilee. They were all from the same village. Later on, of course, we know Peter’s house was in Capernaum because that’s what we’re instructed in Mark chapter 1, verses 21 to 29. So he was born and raised with these other two guys, Philip and Nathanael, in the little village of Bethsaida and later moved to Capernaum where he had his house.

That would be similar to Jesus of Nazareth who lived in Nazareth but originated in Bethlehem. So we meet then two men who know Peter and Andrew very well because they were from the same village. And it was a very small place. So Jesus comes to Philip and says, “Follow Me.” “Follow Me.” That’s a statement that Jesus makes again, and again, and again--twenty times He’s going to say that to somebody. And He also says at other times, Luke 9, Matthew 8, Matthew 9, more times. You remember, “If any man will come after Me, let him take up his cross, deny himself, follow Me.” This is the initial following. But His call is not to a momentary decision, but a life commitment--present tense, continuous action: “Follow Me.” “Come after Me.” Sure there’s a moment in time in which that’s a physical act, “Follow Me, follow Me, come with Me.” And we don’t know what happened in the conversation, but Philip follows. And whatever happened between the time Philip followed and verse 45 must have been an amazing experience because in verse 45 Philip found Nathanael and said to him, “We...found Him of whom Moses and the Law and also the Prophets wrote--Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.” It doesn’t even tell us the conversation, but the conclusion is enough, right? We have...first Andrew says we found the Messiah. Now Philip says, “We have found the one of whom Moses in the Law and also the Prophets”--the whole Old Testament—“wrote.” We have found Him. We found Him.

What was Jesus doing in these times? He was explaining to them how He was the Messiah. How He was the fulfillment of everything the Old Testament said. So here you have a second testimony. You have the testimony of Andrew, “We have found the Messiah,” based on a first-person eyewitness time with the Lord Jesus. You have the second first-person, objective eyewitness account of the testimony of Philip, who has spent time with Jesus and compared Him with the Law and the Prophets and declared that “we have found Him.” We have found Him. And amazingly, it is “Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.”

Back to the beginning of verse 45, “Philip found Nathanael.” Nathanael becomes an important part of the followers of the Lord and ends up being an apostle. He is referred to most often as Bartholomew. Only John calls him Nathanael. Bartholomew would be kind of his family name, Bar--son of Tholomew, Tolmai--so he is Nathanael, son of Tolmai; that’s who he is. And by the way, he lived in another little village up there called Cana, Cana; another small village at the north end of the Sea of Galilee. And something very special is going to happen in Cana, in chapter 2, right? That’s where there’s a wedding and Jesus does His first miracle. The first sign, miraculous sign, is performed in the little village where Nathanael lived. The identification of Nathanael with Cana is made in John 21, verse 2.

So Philip says to Nathanael, “We have found the prophesied Messiah, and He is none other than Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.” And again, I just want to put in your mind that what must have happened in that time that they were together that day, is that Jesus did for Philip what He later did for the ones on the road to Emmaus. He went back to the Old Testament and showed how it was all fulfilled in Him--wonderful, wonderful reality.

Now, “Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.” Nazareth was a disdained town, and Joseph was absolutely nobody. He is the son of Joseph by family identity, although He is the Son of God by birth, right? Virgin born, Matthew 1; the Son of the Most High, Luke 1. He, Joseph, you remember, wanted to divorce his wife or stone her to death because she was pregnant and he had never known her. But the Lord declared to him through the angelic visitor that the Holy Spirit has placed the Son of God in her womb. So Joseph is only the father by virtue of family identity. And this is, this is obscure; this is a nothing guy; this is nobody; this is a common man. This is a lot to swallow. We have found the Messiah; we have found the One prophesied in the Prophets and the Law of the Old Testament. And oh, by the way, He comes from Nazareth. That doesn’t seem to work. Maybe if they had given the city in which He was born, Bethlehem, because at least that’s a city of David; or maybe Jerusalem would be acceptable because that’s a place where everything that’s religious ceremonially happens. But Nazareth? And the son of a common man, Joseph? We’re not surprised then when Nathanael says in verse 46, “Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?” That’s a little sort of civic rivalry there. We don’t know whether at the time Nathanael had much of a perspective, but he had inherited a disdain for Nazareth, and he didn’t have a lot to brag about--he came from Cana. Cana was a dinky little place, short walk from Nazareth. But I guess the people in Cana didn’t think much of Nazareth. So he says, “Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?”

Philip said to him, “Come and see.” “Come and see.” Same as verse 39, “Come and you’ll see.” John is giving us the testimony of eyewitnesses--objective, first-person, firsthand, who met with Jesus, asked all their questions based on the Old Testament promises, and came to the conclusion that He is the Messiah, He is the Son of God, He is the King of Israel, He is the One prophesied. And Nathanael is told by Philip, “You come, you ask your questions.” So they head for Jesus, verse 47. Jesus saw Nathanael coming to Him to have his questions answered in the same way that Andrew and John and Peter and Philip had earlier, and here comes Nathanael. And Jesus says to him, verse 47, “Behold”--shocking, startling, stunning--“an Israelite indeed” [*alethos*, a true Israelite, a true Jew]. Paul says in Romans 2, a true Jew is one who is a Jew inwardly, a true believer in the true God, a saved man in Old Testament terms, a penitent believer in the true God in whom there is no deceit--no guile, no hypocrisy, no duplicity, no phoniness. Wow! This is rare in a nation of apostates, in a nation of hypocrites, in a nation of supposedly self-righteous people who exalt themselves. Here is an honest, true-hearted man, a genuine believer, a true believer, no hypocrisy--integrity, rare in Israel. I love the fact that the perfect Son of God, the sinless Son of God, the holy One could say of any man, “Here’s a true Israelite in whom there’s no deceit.”

Does that mean he was perfect? No, but he had been made acceptable to God by his faith. And he was the real thing. He was the real thing--*alethos* (“genuine,” “true”). What is happening here is Jesus is reading his spiritual condition supernaturally, supernaturally. And Nathanael’s response is obvious, “How do You know me?” “How do You know me?” How do You know anything about me? How do You know that about me?

Jesus answered and said to him, “Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you.” Well, you say, maybe He could see the fig tree. No, He couldn’t see the fig tree. Before Philip had gone to have that conversation, and maybe that conversation happened under the fig tree, but before Philip ever went to find Nathanael, which verse 45 says, Philip found Nathanael: “I saw you under the fig tree.” I not only know you on the inside, I know you on the outside. I not only know who you are, I know where you are. I saw you when My eyes couldn’t see you. I can see your heart and I can see your body. Wow! It doesn’t really matter where the fig tree was, it just matters that Jesus saw him there without seeing him physically. Omniscience.

There’s an old tradition that John Gill writes about (the Puritan writer), and he says that there’s a Syriac tradition that stated that when Jesus said “I saw you under the fig tree,” He was referring to the fact that this is the old Syriac tradition that Nathanael happened to be born at the time when Herod was massacring the babies and in order to save Nathanael from Herod’s massacre, Herod’s mother hid him under a fig tree and that Jesus is really saying, “I’ve known you since you were born.” It’s kind of interesting, but I don’t know if that works since Herod was killing people in the south, and he was living in Galilee. Nice idea. I think the simplest understanding of it is: I see you wherever you are and I saw you before Philip ever found you.

This is pretty overwhelming, pretty overwhelming. When Philip found Nathanael, he gave him this message, “We have found the One of who Moses and the Prophets have written.” And he must have explained that. And in the time that they head toward Jesus, further explanation comes, which is confirmed by the omniscience of Christ who knows who he is and knows where he is. Verse 49, he’s convinced. Nathanael answered Him, “Rabbi, great one, You’re my teacher. You are the Son of God. You are the King of Israel.”

Testimony is mounting. Andrew, Peter, Philip, Nathanael--first-person, eyewitness accounts; we can tuck John in there even though he doesn’t refer to himself--“You are the Son of God.” That’s a Hebraism referring to being of the same nature; son of Belial is of the same nature as Satan. Son of God bears the same nature as God. That’s a Hebraism. John and James were called sons of thunder because they bore the same nature as thunder--they were thunderous, outrageous kinds of people. So that was a Hebraism. What he’s saying is You have the same nature as God. In John 3, that wonderful, familiar 16 to 18 repeats the idea that Jesus is the Son of God--again and again and again and again. God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son of God. Then it refers to the Son of God, the Son of God, the Son of God--and all the way through John’s gospel. That is to say that He bears the same nature as God; He is God the Son. “Rabbi, You are the Son of God.” You are deity, and “You are the King of Israel.” You are the Messiah, the Anointed One, the One who’s come to reign. Now the testimony is complete. We have found the Messiah, the One promised in Moses and the Prophets who is the Son of God, who is the King that was promised.

John has then taken from this little group of guys that knew each other and caught fish on the shore of the Sea of Galilee--this collective, first-person testimony from the commonest of people, the most unexpected sources to carry this truth. Jesus answered and said to Nathanael, “Because I said to you that I saw you under the fig tree, you believe.” Jesus is affirming that the reason you believe is because I’ve demonstrated My omniscience to you.

That’s good. That’s good. But that might be fragile. So you will see greater things than these. The fact that I knew you on the inside to be a genuine believer, a true Israelite in whom there’s no hypocrisy; the fact that I saw you when you were invisible to My physical eyes--that brought you to believe. But I will show you far greater things than these. That’s not going to be enough.

So what did the Lord mean by that? The rest of the time that you follow Me over the period of three years, I will show you miracle upon miracle upon miracle upon miracle upon miracle upon miracle. And that’s then what He means in verse 51. He said to him, “Truly, truly,” that is very familiar, 25 times in the gospel of John we’re going to read that. “Truly, truly,” and always from the lips of Jesus, to refer to something not only truthful but solemn and amazing and compelling. “Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see the heavens opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.” What is that? Now remember, they knew Moses, the writings of Moses, the Pentateuch. They knew the Law. They knew the writings of the Old Testament. They knew the Messianic prophecies. They now know Jesus squares up with all of that. They know He’s the Son of God because He’s evidenced His deity. They’ve got the full picture. And they would have a wonderful familiarity with Genesis and the twenty-eighth chapter of Genesis. And in the twenty-eighth chapter of Genesis we read what is one of the most interesting of all the accounts in the lives of the patriarchs, and it had to do with Jacob. And you remember it.

Let me read a few verses of Genesis 28. Maybe we’ll start at verse 10, “Jacob departed from Beersheba and went toward Haran. Came to a certain place, spent the night there, because the sun had set...took one of the stones of the place, put it under his head, lay down in that place”...a stone for a pillow...“had a dream. Behold, a ladder was set on the earth.” Actually a staircase would be better than a ladder, the Hebrew term. There was a staircase. The staircase started on the earth and the top reached to heaven “and behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending.” He saw this staircase, the angels of God going up and down, “And behold, the Lord stood above it and said, ‘I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie, I will give it to you and your descendants. Your descendants will also be like the dust of the earth, you will spread out to the west, the east, the north, the south; in you and your descendants all the families of the earth will be blessed. Behold, I am with you, I will keep you wherever you go; I will bring you back to this land; I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.’”

What an amazing dream. And what’s the dream about? God is saying, I am going to take you, you weary traveler, you weary pilgrim, I am going to take care of you, I am going to fulfill My promises to you and your people, your family. I am going to fulfill the Abrahamic promise. I’m going to develop your nation. I’m going to bless your nation. I’m going to bring salvation to your nation. I’m going to open up heaven and make sure the angels go back and forth to protect you and care for you and your people until that covenant is fulfilled. That’s what Genesis 28 is talking about. And Jesus borrows that here in the last verse of chapter 1 and says, “You’re going to see heaven opened and the angels ascending and descending on the Son of Man.” You’re going to see heaven’s power unleashed in My ministry, that’s what He’s saying. Son of Man is a Messianic title from Daniel 7:13-14, Jesus used it about eighty times to refer to Himself. This is a graphic dream given to Jacob to assure him that heaven was paying attention to him and that God was going to make sure the angels fulfilled their role in being the means by which God keeps His protection on His people. And He says to Nathanael, “You’re going to see in a metaphoric sense, you’re going to see heaven open up and angels come and go in My ministry. I will do supernatural works, no doubt mediated in some ways by angels.”

How did Jesus live His life? According to the will of the Father by the Holy Spirit, mediated by angels. It was angels that announced to Zacharias that the forerunner would be born. It was angels that spoke to Mary. It was an angel that spoke to Joseph. It was a chorus of angels that announced the birth of Christ to the shepherds. It was angels who came in Matthew 4:11 and ministered to Jesus at the end of His temptation. It is angels that are at the tomb. It is angels that surround Him in His ascension. He even said, “Look, if I wanted to, I could call a legion of angels.” So that we don’t have them described throughout His ministry, this is a wonderful insight. Jesus does what He does by the will of the Father through the power of the Spirit by the means of the angels.

So He says, “Nathanael, I’m glad you believe because of My omniscience. You’re going to see greater things than that, you’re going to see greater things than that. You’re going to see heaven open up and things happen that are supernatural and divine.” And they start in chapter 2 and go to the end of the ministry of Jesus.

Now that’s the introduction. Now let me give you the message. (laughter) I have a three-point outline (laughter) Here you have a microcosm of how salvation works. I’m just going to let you think about it. I could say a lot more. Here’s a microcosm of how salvation works. There must be a seeking soul. There must be a seeking soul, verse 38. Jesus turns and sees Andrew and John and says, “What do you seek?” “What do you seek?” Verse 39, “They came and saw where He was staying...they stayed”--that’s more of that evidence of their seeking. Verse 45, Philip, “We have found Him,” again indicating that he was a seeker. “We have found Him.” “We have found Him.” Verse 47, Nathanael is coming to Him. Salvation requires a seeking sinner, a seeking soul. “If you seek Me with all your heart, you’ll find Me,” right? “Seek and you shall find. Knock and it shall be opened.” You know all of that.

Prompted by a sense of sinfulness, prompted by a heart of repentance, prompted by faith in the Scripture, the seeking soul comes. But salvation also requires a seeking Savior, and that’s illustrated here. It is Jesus who initiates things. Verse 38, “What do you seek?” Verse 39, “Come, and you will see.” Verse 43, “Jesus says to Philip, ‘Follow Me.’” Verse 47, “Jesus sees Nathanael coming to Him, and says, ‘Behold, an Israelite indeed in whom there’s no deceit!’”

There’s no possibility for the sinner to be seeking unless the Savior is seeking. Jesus said, “You have not chosen Me, but”...What?...“I’ve chosen you and ordained you that you should go and bear forth fruit.”

But there’s another element, too. Salvation requires a seeking soul, a seeking Savior, and a seeking saint. What does that fit in? “How will they hear without a preacher?” “Faith comes by hearing the Word.”

So you have John the Baptist telling his disciples, verse 37, “Follow Jesus.” You have verse 40, Andrew; verse 41, finding his own brother and telling him we found the Messiah. And then in verse 42, bringing Peter to Jesus. And then you have Philip, verse 45, finding Nathanael to bring Nathanael to Jesus.

Here at the very start, as the Holy Spirit moves John, to lay out testimony to the identity of the Lord Jesus Christ, we see the elements of salvation. It requires a seeking sinner, a seeking Savior, and a seeking saint to bear the message. So much more, but we’ll see it all unfold as we go through the gospel of John. Let’s pray.

Again we are overwhelmed, our Father, with the rich treasure of Holy Scripture. We...we’re in awe of it. It is so obviously supernatural and divine, and at the same time so accessible, believable, precious to us. Thank You for this revelation again of the identity of our Lord Jesus. We have come together because we can make that confession. We have found the Messiah, the One of whom the Old Testament speaks, the One who is the Son of God, the King of Israel. We have found the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. All that He is, the Lamb, the Messiah, the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy, the Son of God, the King of Israel, the King of kings, all laid into this testimony of these humble men who had no religious motivation other than their own heart love for the true God and the Scripture and a desire to be obedient, penitent believers. And it was to them that you revealed the truth, and it’s their testimony that we cherish. Thank You for it. Thank You for making it a living testimony that has the power to quicken our own hearts from death to life. Do that, we pray, in some hearts even today.

Now, Father, we go from this place with a new responsibility, a new level of accountability because You have given us this glorious truth, not as an end, but as a means to proclaiming it to others. May we be like Andrew who found Peter, and Philip who found Nathanael. May we spend our lives finding others and declaring the truth of Christ to them. Use us in that way, and we’ll thank You and praise You in Your Son’s name. Amen.

**The Beginning of Miracles**

**John 2:1-11**

Code: 43-8

I do want to mention to you that tonight we’re going to continue a brief series on the idea of the Messiah. We all know that Jesus is the Messiah, but do we know what that means? Last week we looked at the office of Messiah, tonight we’re going to look at the person and the ministry of Messiah in what I think is one of the most fascinating and sort of overview perspectives that help us to understand the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. So be with us at six o’clock tonight as we continue to learn about the Messiah.

For now, it’s John chapter 2, John chapter 2. And I have reminded you and will remind you again that John has written his gospel for one purpose, really. These have been written, he says--the words of this gospel--that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. John writes to give evidence for the fact that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah and is the Son of God, that you may believe that, and that believing you may have life, eternal life, in His name. So we’ve been saying he has an apologetic purpose to give evidence that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and he has an evangelistic purpose that you might believe that, and then believing have eternal life in His name. John’s gospel is a collection of evidences, of evidences concerning the Lord Jesus Christ, to prove His deity and His humanity. The whole purpose of this gospel is just to line up supporting proofs for the deity of Jesus Christ.

We already know that from our experience in chapter 1. There is the first eighteen verses, which is the testimony of John the apostle himself. In the opening eighteen verses that some call the prologue, John gives his own testimony that the Word, who is Jesus Christ, is God, with God, created everything, is the Light, is the life, all of those things are part of that. “The Word,” verse 14, “became flesh and dwelt among us and we beheld His glory. The glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.”

So in the opening eighteen verses, it is the testimony, the inspired testimony of the apostle John concerning the fact that Jesus is the Creator God Himself and yet distinct from God, being God and yet being with God. Then starting in verse 19, we have the testimony of the greatest of all Old Testament prophets, the greatest man who had ever lived up until this time--John the Baptist, the great and last Old Testament prophet and the first preacher of Jesus Christ. And he affirms that Jesus is the Messiah, the Lamb of God.

And then starting in verse 38 you have the third group of those giving verbal testimony--Andrew, Peter, John, Philip and Andrew--who are Old Testament believers who were true worshipers of the true God, who give us first-hand testimony that Jesus is in fact the Messiah, that He is the One spoken of by the Law and the Prophets, that He is the Son of God, He is the King of Israel.

So the first chapter is verbal testimony from John the apostle, John the Baptist, and five followers of John the Baptist who then follow Jesus and later will become apostles. All of that is verbal testimony. Jesus is God, with God, is the Light, is the life, is God in human flesh, is the Lamb of God, is the Messiah, is the One spoken of in the Old Testament, is the Son of God and is the King of Israel. All of those confessions are made in that first chapter.

Now we come to chapter 2, we move from verbal testimony to testimony by the works of Jesus. And John is going to alternate now as we go through His gospel, between the words of Christ, and the works of Christ. He’s going to have us look at the statements Jesus made that indicate His deity and the works He did that demonstrate and prove His deity. He will do what no one but God can do. And we see that in the very first miracle in chapter 2.

Now in John’s book, he gives us eight signs, eight miracles that Jesus did that are signs pointing to His deity. He turns water into wine in chapter 2. He heals a dying man in chapter 4. He cures a paralyzed man in chapter 5. He creates food for thousands of people in chapter 6. He walks on water at the end of chapter 6. He gives sight to the blind in chapter 9. He raises a man dead for days in chapter 11. He creates a meal in chapter 21, breakfast for His disciples. And then the culminating miracle beyond the eight, He is raised from the dead. So those are the miracle signs that John records. And I would just remind you that in chapter 20, verse 30, it says this: “Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples which are not written in this book.” So I don’t want you to think that these are the only miracles Jesus did, far from it. There are many others. They were a daily experience of those who followed Jesus.

And then in chapter 21, verse 25, the last verse in the gospel of John, John writes “there were also many other things which Jesus did which if they were written in detail, I suppose that even the world itself would not contain the books that would be written.” Jesus did so many signs and so many miracles that the books of the world wouldn’t be able to contain the details of all of them. Many other things; John is merely giving us samples of these miraculous evidences that Jesus is in fact God because He does what only God can do. In chapter 1, verse 14, the Word, the divine Word, the eternal Word became flesh and manifested His divine glory. That’s John’s point. He shows His glory as God through these signs.

Now as we come to chapter 2, it is also in chapter 2 that we have the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry. His ministry to the crowds, His ministry to the people of Israel, and His public ministry goes from chapter 2, verse 1 to the end of chapter 12. When you come to the end of chapter 12, that’s the end of His public ministry. Chapter 13 through 17 is His private ministry in the Upper Room to the apostles. And that is right before His death and resurrection, which then become the subject of chapters 18 to 21. So the book is divided then into those sections: chapter 1, verbal testimony; chapter 2 to 12, public ministry; 13 to 17, private ministry; 18 to the end, His death, resurrection, and post-resurrection appearances. That helps locate you in the big scheme of things in the gospel of John.

So, we’re going to start His public ministry, and we’re going to be following that till we get to the end of chapter 12. And it all begins with a supernatural miracle. Let me read it to you starting in verse 1, chapter 2. “On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee and the mother of Jesus was there and both Jesus and His disciples were invited to the wedding. When the wine ran out, the mother of Jesus said to Him, ‘They have no wine.’ And Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, what does that have to do with us? My hour has not yet come.’ His mother said to the servants, ‘Whatever He says to you, do it.’

“Now there were six stone water pots set there for the Jewish custom of purification, containing twenty or thirty gallons each. Jesus said to them, ‘Fill the water pots with water.’ So they filled them up to the brim. And He said to them, ‘Draw some out now and take it to the head waiter.’ So they took it to him. When the head waiter tasted the water which had become wine and did not know where it came from, but the servants who had drawn the water knew. The head waiter called the bridegroom and said to him, ‘Every man serves the good wine first and when the people have drunk freely, then he serves the poorer wine. But you have kept the good wine until now.’ This beginning of His signs Jesus did in Cana of Galilee and manifested His glory and His disciples believed in Him.”

There is no human way to explain Jesus. He has to be God. If this was all we had, we would know that, because He creates wine out of nothing. We already know He is the Creator: John 1:3, “Nothing was made that He didn’t make. Nothing was made without Him making it and He made everything that exists from nothing.” Here you have a miracle in which the God/Man creates wine out of nothing. This is evidence that He is divine. And Scripture leaves us no other explanation, and that is John’s mission, and it will mount as we move through this book.

Now let me just break down this account into four simple features. The party, let’s start with the party, okay? It’s a party. It’s a party that exceeds all other parties because it’s the most important event in the ancient world in the life of people in a town and a village. It is a wedding. It is a wedding.

Verse 1 says, “On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee.” Now that identifies this as the most significant and important and carefully planned event that happened in ancient family life. We are told it is the third day. The third day? What does that mean? The third day after the previous meeting with Philip and Nathanael, which was concluded when Philip brought Nathanael, and Nathanael said in verse 49 concerning Jesus, “After we’ve examined You, we see You are the Son of God, You are the King of Israel.” That’s what John the apostle said in the opening, that’s what John the Baptist says, that’s what these men all say, and now it is going to be proven to us in the miracle that happens in the wedding at Cana. It’s the third day after that meeting. What that tells us is that from the time that John the Baptist said “Behold the Lamb of God” and turned his disciples away from him to follow Jesus--those five men to follow Jesus--from that day to this day everything happens in a week. They have gone from being across the Jordan and Judah, all the way back to Galilee to the village of Cana, which is about nine miles, the ruins of it are about nine miles north of Nazareth. All of this happens in a very power-packed week. Jesus being declared, these men being called to follow Him, and they do so and end up in the town of Cana. As you remember now, we’re talking about Andrew and Peter and Philip and Nathanael and John and just incidentally Nathanael’s hometown, according to John 21:2, was Cana. This is a very small place. Nazareth, for example, the highest number we read about in terms of the population of Nazareth at the time of Jesus would be 500. That would be the max. Small place.

Cana is a village nine miles away, even smaller; maybe a few dozen people, a sort of a gathering place for the agricultural folks in that region; very, very small place. That would make this wedding a huge event. And obviously people from Nazareth would know those people because they lived nearby, they farmed together, the people in the outlying areas would come to Nazareth when they needed things that could only be gained in Nazareth.

It would also be true that if a town of Nazareth has five hundred or less people, they know each other. They’ve been there for generations; they aren’t mobile. They’re not only friends, many are family, and that would be extended into Cana. So we’re not surprised that Nathanael would be there because that’s his village. We’re not surprised that Mary would be there, she had lived in Nazareth for a long time. And we’re not also surprised that the rest of these folks from Galilee, the other men who came with Jesus, would also be there. Surely they would know people in that wedding as well.

So on the third day, there’s a wedding in Cana of Galilee. And this is a very significant experience, not because of the wedding, although the wedding is important, but because of what Jesus does at this wedding, and I’ll explain some of its importance to you even beyond the miracle itself.

I want to give you a footnote to think about though. The fact that our Lord did His first miracle at a wedding emphasizes the sanctity of that covenant. Weddings matter. Public covenant matters. The ceremony matters; it always has, it always has. People are not married who just live together. People are married who make public covenant before God and before people.

Marriage is a condition of life designed by God, ordained by God, and authenticated in an open, public covenant. It is the highest and noblest and best of all human relationships. No other human relationship is as wonderful as marriage. It is called in the Bible “the grace of life.” It is *the* most wonderful and most blessed of all common graces. And we talk about common grace. What we mean by that is a grace gift from God to all people without regard to whether they believe in Him. That’s a common grace. And of all the common graces--the beauty of the world, a sunset, sleep, health, a good meal, falling in love--of all the common graces, the epitome of common graces is marriage. It is the best gift that God can give to humanity in general without regard to whether they know Him at all. Any society that honors marriage, any society that elevates marriage--a life-long commitment openly; a covenant made and kept between a man and a woman who rear children in the bond of that love--any society that honors marriage will be blessed temporally. It will prosper. It will be safe. It will be secure. It will know peace. It will have a minimum of crime.

On the other hand, any society that fails to honor marriage as a covenant, open covenant between a man and a woman for life, in which children are reared and cared for; any society that diminishes marriage, that fails to honor marriage, is corrupt, is doomed to chaos, turmoil, evil and judgment. Where marriage for life is not honored, where the covenant vows between a man and a woman are not kept, immorality abounds. Immorality overruns the culture, delinquency overruns the culture. The fabric of society is shredded and even escalates. Our Lord honored marriage by attending and doing His first miracle at a wedding.

I also can’t resist saying at this point that the Roman Catholic Church has decided that because Jesus was at this wedding, marriage is a sacrament. The Roman Catholic doctrine of the sacrament and the sacrament of marriage is based on John 2, that Jesus was at a wedding. Verse 2, both Jesus and His disciples were invited to the wedding, as well as the mother of Jesus being there from verse 1. Based upon that, the Roman Catholic Church has developed the notion that marriage is a sacrament simply because Jesus was at a wedding.

Now what do you mean a sacrament? Well, those of you who come from Roman Catholic backgrounds, you know what that is saying. The sacraments are baptism, confirmation, communion, extreme unction, holy orders, penance, and marriage. Now what is a sacrament in the Roman Catholic system? A sacrament is a sacred rite in which God grants efficacious grace.

What do we mean? It is a sacred rite in which God grants inward spiritual grace through Jesus Christ. Let me take it further. Roman Catholicism says this, “Marriage as a sacrament, like the other sacraments, is a means by which God dispenses through Christ efficacious grace for justification and the promise of eternal life in marriage.”

Now I’m happy that the Roman Catholic Church puts a priority on marriage. I’m glad that they want people to be married. But to get there by telling people that this is the path of justification and eternal life is a lie. That’s not true. There is no efficacious, justifying grace in marriage. It’s a common grace. It’s not a saving grace. Somehow marriage becomes a means by which Christ causes grace to enter the soul with mysterious effects, causing justification which has to be aided by works and becomes a pledge of eternal life. That’s right out of Roman Catholic theology. That’s all utterly absurd, of course. But marriage is ordained by God. And it is the universal, relational, common grace that’s at the top of all common graces in the benefits that it provides.

So Jesus went to a wedding. And the mother of Jesus was there. Not surprising. Again, how many generations of her family had lived in the little town of Nazareth? A few hundred people. And how well would they have known the folks just up the road? Not surprising, likely related--cousins, extended family, close friends. Maybe Mary was there because she, of course, would have been who served, just her character as a godly woman demonstrated in her Magnificat at the time of our Lord’s birth. She would have been a wonderful woman, a loved woman, a beloved woman. She probably had some role to play in the wedding to serve as indicated by the fact that she sees the problem and brings it to Jesus. Again this is a major event going on, it lasted for days. Some writers say they usually would start in the middle of the week and go on for many days. Sometimes they would start early in the week and go all week long, as long as seven days. When people came to this celebration, they came because there had been a betrothal, an engagement period. About a year earlier, the couple had been engaged. That’s a legal, binding, covenantal contract that could only be broken by divorce. But the marriage wasn’t consummated; it wasn’t consummated till the end of this party.

What was going on all that year? The husband was preparing a place for his bride. That’s what he did. He built a house for his bride. He may be extended on the father’s house, the family house. The bridegroom had full responsibility for all the cost of the wedding. And his job was to get everything ready, and then when everything was ready and the house was built and the house was furnished and all preparations were made and he had demonstrated that he had what it took to care for this girl and to provide for this girl, the party began. It was a great celebration because he had been working hard for a year. She had been waiting and preparing for this, and finally the time comes, and it’s just an immense celebration. Jesus is there, as well, with the five; and they’re in the celebration.

I just want to stop here to say this. There’s something really beautiful about this because He’s had thirty years in Nazareth in this little town, a few hundred people, and He’s about to step out into the world, if you will. Thirty years of absolute obscurity in private life, and now He’s going to begin public ministry, and the bridge from His private life to His public ministry is a miracle for His family and friends. Do you see that? This didn’t happen in Judea. This happened for His family and His friends, they were the first ones who were to recognize what He had never demonstrated before, that He is the Creator God. It’s a family and friends miracle, which makes even more bizarre of the fact that when He came back to Nazareth, a few months later, Luke 4, and went back to the synagogue where they all went, where they all knew Him, where He had gone since His birth. And He preached a sermon and told them that He was the Messiah, which He had already proven at this event. And believe me, what He did would have spread through that little community. He came back a few months later. He tells them this day these prophecies are fulfilled in your ears and the people in the synagogue He grew up in, the friends and family for whom He had done the miracle, took up stones and tried to murder Him. Tried to murder Him.

How strange, what hard-heartedness. So He starts His miracle ministry with a friends and family miracle, transitioning Him from the obscurity of Nazareth to public ministry. By the way, Joseph isn’t mentioned and I would assume that Joseph was dead. He must have died during those silent years. There were people who knew Joseph and Mary. John 6:42 says there were people who knew His parents, they knew Joseph and Mary, but Joseph was very likely dead. We know he was gone by the time Jesus went to the cross because in John 19, when He’s hanging on the cross, He commits His mother, Mary, into the care of John the apostle because she’s a widow. Which means then that He had been the father once His earthly father Joseph had died, Jesus as the oldest son would have taken the responsibility to care for the widow and the family.

Well, a wedding, as I said, is the greatest occasion. No occasion like it. And the celebration is in full swing. Everybody’s having a wonderful time. That’s the party. And then comes the predicament, verse 3, when the wine ran out, that’s a problem. When the wine ran out, this is a major catastrophe. This is a colossal social embarrassment because if there was anything that the bridegroom had spent a year trying to prove is that he could take care of his bride. He had to build her a house; he had to acquire everything that was necessary. He had to demonstrate his ability to take care of her for the rest of her life. Her father was handing her over to him. This is a problem. Maybe he can’t plan. This is what all of you fathers who marry off your daughters fear. Is this guy going to be able to make a living? Is this guy going to be able to take care of you? Is this guy smoke ’n mirrors here? Is there substance there? This is the same issue. They ran out of wine at the greatest celebration that they would have had. Remember, life was tough, life was hard, labor was extreme. It was a difficult world to just survive and a celebration like this meant so much as a relief and then to run out of wine.

“When the wine ran out,” what about the wine? Well, it was a staple drink in the ancient world, and they made it from all kinds of fruit, mostly grapes, but other fruit as well. And let me just remind you of the fact that wine and the juice of any of those fruits was subject to fermentation because there was no refrigeration. So everything fermented and developed alcohol. To quench your thirst with water was dangerous because water was not purified. But to quench your thirst with fermented wine was dangerous because you could get drunk and that was a sin. You didn’t want to be sick and you didn’t want to sin. So the way they dealt with that is that they diluted the water, or they diluted the wine with water, one to three to one to ten--ten parts water, one part wine, down to three parts water, one part wine. And they did that so they could drink the water because it had been purified, and they could drink the wine and it wouldn’t make them drunk because it was diluted. So this would have been prepared in the normal fashion and it ran out. This is a problem--big problem, big embarrassment.

The mother of Jesus, verse 3, said to Him, “They have no wine.” Why her? Well, I don’t know; maybe she was in charge of things. I don’t know. We don’t know that. But she certainly knew what was going on. When the wine ran out, everybody knew the wine ran out; there’s nothing to drink. And this is a several day event. Some have suggested she wanted Him to do a miracle. He had never done a miracle. Why would she all of a sudden want Him to do a miracle? He had never done a miracle. Well, but He had been baptized by John. She knew He was about to embark on His public ministry. He was gathering followers. This was all new--He had left home; He had gone south; He had gone through His temptation. You know, John had identified Him as the Lamb of God and certainly that had been circulating in the little meeting at the wedding if it hadn’t before. And maybe she was thinking, “Wow, now, maybe this is it. Maybe the miracles begin here.” That’s a possibility, that’s a possibility.

But I think there’s something more obvious than that. Think of it this way: whenever Mary had a problem, who do you think she went to for a solution at home? He never had a bad idea in His life. He never had a wrong solution in His entire life. He never led her one step in the wrong direction. He had the perfect solution to every dilemma. He had the perfect answer for every predicament. Everything that ever went wrong in a house, He knew why it went wrong and how to make it right. He was the most wise, intelligent, resourceful person that had ever lived or ever will live on this earth. And He was in the house with her.

You know, some of us are severely challenged domestically. Things I can’t do; I can’t solve all problems, not by a long shot. But He would know the way to solve every problem. And not only that, He cared about people. He was compassionate, He was kind, He was loving, He could see the issues. Who else would she go to? Who else? Who else had one that they would go to the equal of Him? None. He had the perfect solution to every dilemma, the perfect answer to every question, perfect solution to every problem. And she also knew He cared and He cared deeply about people because He loved as only God can love. I don’t think she’s necessarily asking for a miracle. She just goes to the One she would always go to when there was a very difficult predicament. So she simply says to Him, “They have no wine,” “they have no wine.” She’s learned as a widow to trust in His leadership and His wisdom.

Oh, by the way, the Roman Catholic Church teaches that you don’t want to go to Jesus if you need something, you want to go to Mary to ask Jesus. The whole idea that you go Mary to plead with Jesus because Jesus can’t resist Mary comes from this passage. Can you believe that? Oh by the way, never mind that she was rebuked by Him for asking. This is the only time in the New Testament that Mary ever made any request to Jesus. And He responded by saying, “None of your business.” But this is where the Catholic Church finds the fountain of its Mariolatry, going to Mary to get things from Jesus.

Verse 4, after Mary says to Him, “they have no wine,” Jesus said to her, “Woman.” Woman, not mother? It’s not harsh to say “Woman.” Some say it’s kind of the southern expression, “ma’am.” It’s not harsh, but it’s not intimate. It’s not mother. It’s courteous. By the way, it’s the same word that He used on the cross in John 19 when He said to her, “Woman, behold your son,” and handed her over to John. He called her “woman” there as well. Why? Because He is telling her we don’t any longer have the relationship we’ve had up till now. It’s over. She is no longer in a position to act as an authority in His life. She is no longer in a position to tell Him what to do, to make suggestions to Him. This would be a big change because I’m pretty confident that everything she ever asked of Him, everything she ever desired of Him, He gave out of His love. But she could no longer demand anything from Him. She played no role in His ministry.

Listen to this carefully. When He was twelve years old, He gave her a preview of this moment, and He was in the temple talking to the officials, and He said, “I must be about My Father’s business.” And this day His Father’s business started and His mother’s business ended. From here on He was saying, “I don’t do your business; I do My Father’s business. I’m done with My mother’s business, fully engaged in My Father’s business.”

Can I even extend that? He never asked for suggestions from anybody…from anybody. In fact, when people gave Him suggestions, He normally rebuked them such as “Get behind Me, Satan.” Here His rebuke is a little milder. He says, “What does that have to do with us?” “What does that have to do with us?” This is so critically important. The years of compliance, the years of submission, the years of obedience are over. He is finished with His mother’s business and He is now doing His Father’s business. He says from here on, as we’ll see in John, “I only do what the Father tells Me to do. I only do what the Father wills that I do. I only do what I see the Father do. It is the Father who gives Me His Word, and it is what the Father speaks that I do.”

He is distancing Himself from that mother/son relation which had existed for thirty years. To call her mother would have kept that relationship kind of intact. “Woman” shows that she is now dealing not with her son, but with the Son of God. What does that have to do with us? What an amazing statement. By the way, that statement is made a couple of times in the Old Testament. It’s made in Matthew 8 and Mark 1 and Mark 5; it’s a very familiar expression; it’s a Semitic kind of expression, literally it is as “What to Me and to you?” What is it that concerns you and Me together? Nothing. What do we have in common? Nothing. It is a separating statement. I am completely free from you as to your desires, your wishes, your advice. He sealed this in Matthew 12; you remember the story, no doubt, in verse 46. He was speaking to the crowds and His mother and brothers were standing outside and they wanted to talk to Him--Mary and His half-brothers. “Someone said to Him, ‘Behold, Your mother and Your brothers are outside standing out there seeking to speak to You.’ Jesus answered the one who was telling Him and said, ‘Who is My mother? Who are My brothers?’ Stretching out His hand toward His disciples He said, ‘Behold, My mother and My brothers. Whoever does the will of My father who is in heaven, he is My brother and My sister and My mother.’” The only relationship I have is with people who do My Father’s will. Other human relationships cease. That’s what He’s saying. What do we have in common? You have no role to play in My life; all family connections are over. All family relationships are over.

This is the opposite of what the Roman Catholic Church has said, that Mary has any function, any role at all in His life. He clearly dismisses that idea. Luke 11:27, Jesus was speaking and one of the women in the crowd raised her voice and said to Him, “Blessed is the womb that bore You and the breasts at which You nursed.” He said, “On the contrary, blessed are those who hear the Word of God and obey it.” He completely distances Himself from Mary. He has assumed a higher position, and she has no role to play. He is done doing His mother’s business. He is doing His Father’s business.

And then He says this, “My hour...My hour has not yet come.” This is the first time we see this statement, but we’re going to see it again. We’re going to see it in chapter 7. We’re going to see it in chapter 8. We’re going to see it in chapter 12. We’re going to see it 13, 17, “My hour has not come.” “My hour has not come,” or “My hour has come.” This is a phrase that in its fullness looks at the cross, the hour of His death and resurrection. And what Jesus is saying is, “Look, we don’t have anything in common because I’m now on a divine schedule that culminates in My death and everything leads to that. Every event, every issue, every circumstance is leading to that final hour.”

So He’s saying that phrase, “My hour has not yet come,” by simply saying, “that final hour of My death and resurrection is set by God and all events that lead up to that are determined by God. You’re outside the divine timetable.” And Mary bows out. “His mother said to the servants, ‘Whatever He says to you, do it!.’” She just bows out. Okay.

And then He does what she asked. He made the point, and it just so happens that this is on the divine timetable. I don’t know that she knew that. Certainly she didn’t assume some great miracle. She probably assumed just some kind of a natural solution. But it was on God’s list to be done there and then. So we go from the predicament to the provision.

This goes pretty quick. “There were six stone water pots set there for the Jewish custom of purification, containing twenty or thirty gallons each.” So what have you got? A hundred and twenty to a hundred and eighty gallons in these water pots. This is not for drinking. I told you they didn’t drink water unless it was mingled with a purifier. This is for purification. If you go to Mark 7, verses 3 and 4, you read that the Jews always purify everything. They wash their hands, they wash the utensils, they wash the plates, they wash...wash the pans; they wash the copper pots; they washed everything. This is not about cleanliness, this is about ritual--a purification rites and rituals and ceremonies that they had developed. And the water was used for that because people were going to be there, and it was a custom, and they would go through ceremonial washings before every meal, and there’s lots of meals in a multi-day experience. So there was plenty of water there for everybody to wash ceremonially. So Jesus said, “Fill the water pots with water.”

So they filled them to the brim, which is what He wanted. If they weren’t filled to the brim, somebody would just say He added wine to the water. But if the water goes all the way to the brim, there’s nothing left to...no room left. That was the point. And by the way, you have people who are completely disinterested parties now who are going to give testimony to this miracle. They don’t have any stake in this issue. They’re not trying to prove anything about Jesus. These are servants, whoever they were, the people who were serving there. They might not have been full-time servants. They might just have been friends and folks who were willing to do this. But they don’t have any issue. They are disinterested parties who are going to witness and give testimony to this miracle. So they filled the water pots with water. And they filled them up to the brim. “And He said to them, ‘Draw some out now and take it to the head waiter”--the *architriklinos*, the maitre d’, the chief waiter, take it to him--“so they took it to him. When the head waiter tasted the water which had become wine.” Whoa-whoa-whoa; when did that happen? Well, that happened between verses 8 and 9. What? No, it actually happened in the white space between verses 7 and 8. They filled it to the brim and all of a sudden they drew some out, took it to the head waiter, they took it to him and the head waiter tasted water which had become wine. This is so understated. This is like in the backdoor. Where’s the miracle? I mean, this is massive. How do you get wine? Grapes. How do you get grapes? Vines. How do you get vines? Seeds. How do you get seeds? Other vines. How do you make the vine grow? Sunlight, water, earth. How do you get the wine? Crush, strain.

There are no grapes, no vines, no seeds, no other seeds, no sunlight, no water, no earth. Nothing. He’s created wine out of nothing. I mean, at least He could have said, “Wine!” Right? I mean this is a pretty dramatic deal here.

The head waiter tasted the water which had become wine, and didn’t know where it came from. But the servants who had drawn the water knew they knew what happened. So you’ve got these completely disinterested eyewitnesses giving testimony that He had literally created wine to replace water. Where did the water go? And by the way, this would have been unfermented wine that just sort of bypassed the curse. It bypassed the earth, the vine, the grapes, everything. This was the best wine ever. This was Eden kind of wine.

And it becomes apparent right away because the headwaiter calls the bridegroom and the bridegroom is the guy who wants the news ’cause he’s responsible for this. Said to him, “Every man serves the good wine first, and the people have drunk freely, then he serves the poorer wine, but you’ve kept the good wine until now.” That’s just axiomatic. Everybody does that. You do that. You have company over. If they keep eating long enough, they’re going to get the leftovers that are still in the refrigerator. You know, I mean, that’s the way it goes. You prepare something; you give them what you’ve got. If they’re still hungry, you start digging down into yesterday and the day before and last week. I mean, that’s...so he says, “Nobody does this. Nobody keeps this quality of wine until the end, nobody does that.” Which is the unexpected, again an indifferent witness to the fact that this was wine. And it was not only wine, it was the best wine that had ever been consumed, pure, sweet, unfermented, delicious, like nothing else the man had ever tasted.

So you have this testimony of a creative miracle in the mouth of people who have no stake in trying to prove anything about Jesus. It’s amazing. Well, the party was back in full bloom. And verse 11 gives us the final word on this. And the final word is the purpose. We saw the party, the problem, the predicament, and then we saw the provision and the purpose in verse 11. “This beginning of His signs Jesus did in Cana of Galilee and manifested His glory and His disciples”...What, did what?...“believed in Him.”

So now we’re seeing the purpose of the gospel of John. “These things are written that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and believing have eternal life in His name.” That’s the purpose. That’s the purpose.

He manifested His glory, John 1:14, “We beheld His glory, the glory of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.” John wrote that and John first began to behold that glory right there at the wedding of Cana because he was there, he was there.

Let me just separate all of you into three groups. Can I do that? And you will be in one of these groups. His disciples believed in Him. That’s group one. Turn to John 12, we’ll close here. John 12:37, John 12:37, “Though He had performed so many signs”--so many miracles before them”--“yet they were not believing in Him.” That’s group two. There were people who believed in Him; there were people who did not believe in Him. And both groups saw the same signs like you today. You have been exposed to this sign, this miracle sign, confirmed by eyewitnesses who were objective. You believe, or you don’t believe. And you’ve been exposed to far more than this.

But there’s a third group. Go down to verse 42, “Nevertheless, many even of the rulers believed in Him.” Of course, the evidence is just massive and overwhelming and clear that He is God. “Many even of the rulers believed in Him, but because of the Pharisees they were not confessing Him for fear they would be put out of the synagogue.” They didn’t want to pay the social price. Verse 43, bottom line, “They loved the approval of men rather than the approval of God.”

All of you are in one of these groups. You believe, you don’t believe, or you believe and you’re not willing to pay the price to come to Christ. That’s tragic. To love the approval of men who can give you nothing eternal over the approval of God who gives you eternal life in His Son, that is a fool’s bargain.

Father, we thank You again for the privilege we’ve had this morning to worship You and to spend a little time with our Lord at a wedding, which seems to be such a minor event in a tiny little vision outside of a very small town in an obscure part of the world two thousand years ago. And yet what happened there was the first great miracle proving Jesus to be the Messiah, the one promised in the Old Testament, the Son of God, the Lamb of God, the King of Israel. And we thank You that we have been able to see and to hear the record of the testimony of those who were there, that He had the power to create, power that only God possesses. We believe, we believe, and in believing have eternal life. I pray for those here this morning who don’t believe who are fighting against the evidence. And I also pray for those who see the truth and acknowledge it as the truth but will not come to Christ because they love the approval of men more than Your divine approval.

Lord, would You help us all to see where we are because that’s where we have to begin. For those who don’t believe, grant them faith. For those who believe but are unwilling to make the commitment ’cause they love men, they love the world rather than loving You, and they want what the world can give them rather than what You have prepared for them. Lord, grant them grace to see what a horrible, horrible decision they’ve made, especially when the greater judgment belongs to those who know and believe and will not come. Do work in all our hearts. For those who believe, fill us with joy in believing. For those who don’t believe, grant them faith. For those who believe but will not make commitment, Lord, press them to embrace You to seek Your approval, which is bound up in loving Your Son that they may receive eternal life.

Now, Father, we ask that You would be gracious, pour out Your grace even today on many hearts who have resisted, who have fought the battle against what they know to be the truth, who have had to muster up all their sinful strength to fight against the gospel, and may they give up and embrace the truth and receive the salvation that You promise. We ask in Your Son’s name. Amen.

**Zeal for My Father’s House**

**John 2:12-17**

Code: 43-9

In John chapter 2, verses 12 to 17, we read this: “After this He went down to Capernaum, He and His mother and His brothers and His disciples, and they stayed there a few days. The Passover of the Jews was near and Jesus went up to Jerusalem and He found in the temple those who were selling oxen and sheep and doves and the money changers seated at their tables. And He made a scourge of cords and drove them all out of the temple with the sheep and the oxen and He poured out the coins of the moneychangers and overturned their tables. And to those who were selling the doves, He said, ‘Take these things away, stop making My Father’s house a place of business.’ His disciples remembered that it was written*, zeal for your house will consume Me*.”

Now remember, the overarching purpose of John’s entire gospel is stated in chapter 20 and verse 31, and I remind you of it every time because it’s the reason for everything that John writes. You’re going to be able to quote this from memory, “These have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.” So he has a...an apologetic purpose, a polemic purpose to prove that Jesus is the Son of God, the Messiah. And then he has an evangelistic purpose, so that you will believe that and in believing that have eternal life. Everything in this gospel then is driven in the direction of proving the deity of Jesus Christ, proving that He is divine, that He is the Word made flesh, that He is God who was with God by whom everything that exists was created. All the way through by the action of Jesus, by the miracles of Jesus, by the works of Jesus, by the words of Jesus there is evidence of His deity.

Now when we come to the miracle that we just read, on the surface it may not appear as a miracle because nothing really obviously supernatural takes place as it does in a resurrection or a healing, or the casting out of demons, or the creation of wine as we saw in the first miracle in the prior passage. But this is nonetheless a miracle. It is a miracle of mammoth proportions, and I will try to help you to understand that. It is a miracle driven not by compassion, but driven by anger. The first miracle that John records and the beginning of miracles that Jesus did was a private miracle. It happened among family and friends; it happened in the little town of Cana nine miles out of Nazareth with people they knew and grew up with. Mary was there and the family of Jesus and the extended family, and this was a...this was the first miracle and it was sort of His embarkation point as He left thirty years of obscurity and did a miracle for family and friends.

The second miracle is not a private miracle; it’s not a family and friends miracle—this is a miracle in which tens of thousands of people participate, and they’re not watching and they’re not innocent bystanders. They’re in the middle of the drama and the power and the divine energy of this miracle. It is a miracle, as I said, not driven by compassion which is why Jesus made wine and why He casts out demons and why He heals sick people and why He raises dead people. Those are miracles of kindness and compassion. But at the beginning of His ministry and the end of His ministry, He did two miracles, essentially the same thing—He threw the entire mass of humanity at Passover out of the temple. He did it at the beginning and did it at the end. Those were not miracles of compassion, those were miracles of holy anger and they were previews of future judgment, a judgment that would come in the destruction of Jerusalem temporarily and a judgment that will become a reality forever before the throne of God at the Great White Throne.

And what causes Jesus to do what He does here is an age-old problem and one that we must address as well. If you go back to Isaiah chapter 1, all the way back before the Babylonian captivity, way back into the era of Isaiah, you read this, coming from the mouth of the Lord, Isaiah 1:11, “What are your multiplied sacrifices to Me?” Josephus says there would have been as many as a quarter of a million animal sacrifices offered at a Passover. Isaiah asks hundreds of years before, “‘What are your multiplied sacrifices to Me,’ says the Lord, ‘I’ve had enough of burnt offering of rams and the fat of fed cattle. I take no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats. When you come to appear before Me, who requires of you this trampling of My courts? Bring your worthless offerings no longer. Incense is an abomination to me. New moon and Sabbath, the calling of assemblies, I cannot endure iniquity and the solemn assembly. I hate your new moon festivals and your appointed feasts. They have become a burden to Me. I’m weary of bearing them. So when you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide My eyes from you. Yes, even though you multiply prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are covered with blood. Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean, remove the evil of your deeds from My sight. Cease to do evil, learn to do good, seek justice, reprove the ruthless, defend the orphan, plead for the widow. Come now and let us reason together,’ says the Lord, ‘though your sins are as scarlet they will be as white as snow. Though they are red like crimson, they will be like wool. If you consent and obey, you will eat the best of the lamb. But if you refuse and rebel, you will be devoured by the sword. Truly the mouth of the Lord has spoken.’”

That message could have been given by Jesus on the day He cleaned out the temple. It’s the exact same issue. It is an age-old problem of hypocrisy in Israel, false religion, superficial worship. And it infuriates Jesus because it is irreverent and it is blasphemous. In Amos the Lord says, “Stop your songs; I don’t want to hear your songs.” It’s a very appropriate passage for us as we come to the Lord’s Table because the Lord feels today and here and now exactly the way He did in Isaiah’s day and in our Lord Jesus’ day about false worship, about superficial worship, about hypocrisy.

So let’s look at this story and how it applies to us. Verse 12 says, “He went down to Capernaum”; that’s 16 miles from Nazareth. He went and His mother went and His brothers, John tells us later in chapter 7. They were not believers in Him. The family goes, and then His disciples—Andrew, Peter, Philip, Nathanael, James and John—so far are following Jesus. They all head down to Capernaum, that little village on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee. That little village, by the way, was a place where Jesus did so many miracles that their unbelief is worse than Sodom and Gomorrah. Jesus said in Matthew 11 that if it had been done in Sodom and Gomorrah what was done in Capernaum, they would have repented. Jesus spent a few days there this time and later in His ministry—many many months there doing miracles.

On this occasion they stay only a few days because they’re headed to Jerusalem for the Passover. They go toward Capernaum and then, verse 13, they arrive at the Passover because it’s near and Jesus then comes with the entourage and everybody else to Jerusalem. The Passover of the Jews, that’s an annual feast followed by another feast of seven days of unleavened bread that God mandated. You remember when Israel was delivered from Egypt—Exodus chapter 12—they were told the last plague is going to be the death of the firstborn. The angel of death is going to come and kill all the firstborn. And if you want the angel of death to pass over your house, then sacrifice a lamb, sprinkle its blood on the doorposts and the crosspiece, eat a meal together and have unleavened bread, get ready to go. The angel of death will pass over you and deliver you from judgment if the blood is on the door. That was a symbol of the work that Messiah would do when He put His blood on a cross and provided deliverance from divine judgment. So the Passover is instituted in Exodus 12. In Exodus 23 God mandates that they keep that Passover every year along with a couple of other feasts as well.

Jesus, always obedient to the Word of God, always obedient through everything in the Old Testament, fulfilled all righteousness, Scripture says. He obeyed everything that was moral in the Law of God, everything that was religious in the Law of God, and everything that was ceremonial in the Law of God, everything that was practical, whatever it was that was written by God and prescribed for the people of Israel, Jesus did it. And so, as He always did, He comes to the Passover. In fact, His ministry begins at a Passover, and it ends at a Passover. And at both of those Passovers, the first and the last, He does the same action against the Temple. At the first Passover, He cleanses the Temple to publicly begin His ministry. At the last, He cleanses the Temple to publicly end His ministry; then becomes the Passover Lamb. And in between during His ministry, there will be two other Passovers. John tells us about one in chapter 6, and another in chapter 11. He always kept the Passover, always.

This time as He enters into the Temple to begin His ministry, and by the way, He had been there every year of His life. But this time He had engaged in His ministry, and so He comes with a different mindset. We have a glimpse of Him coming there, don’t we, when He was twelve. And at that point He’s only asking questions, trying to get answers out of the leaders in the Temple. But this time He’s entered upon His messianic ministry and He’s going to do His Father’s business. This is the first act of His Father’s business. They have turned His Father’s house into a place of business, but He’s going to do His Father’s business.

He goes in. He found, verse 14, in the Temple those who were selling oxen and sheep and doves, and the moneychangers seated at their tables. And you have to understand a little bit about this. I don’t know if I can paint the whole picture in the brief time that I have. The number as to the population of Jerusalem at the time of Jesus, a little bit hard to identify. But if you look hard enough and sort of put everything together, it appears as if the city of Jerusalem could have had a hundred to three hundred thousand inhabitants normally, we don’t know exactly. Several hundred thousand seems to be a safe number. However, at Passover that number would be expanded to read a million. Josephus goes so far as to say 2.7 million, but that’s because he multiplies the number of sacrifices by ten. I don’t know how legitimate that would be, but let’s say for the sake of being conservative there are a million people—and I think that’s pretty safe—that have literally descended upon the city of Jerusalem for the Passover and the subsequent feast. That means that every room in every inn and every room that wasn’t a room for occupancy was turned into a room for occupancy. Every...every extra room in every single home was filled and people were packed into rooms in multiples to get this mass of people in. The population fourfold what it normally would be, let’s say.

And a focal point of all the activity of these million people is the Temple, and the Temple courtyard, the outside courtyard, the Court of the Gentiles as it was called, would be only acres, only some number of acres at that time, and it would have to absorb this mass of humanity coming there. How many animals did they slaughter? Was Josephus right in saying 250 thousand? The slaughter of the animals officially took place at three o’clock, between three o’clock and six o’clock on the afternoon of the Passover. But if there were that many animals, they might have started slaughtering them even earlier, and there would be people coming and going for the purpose of bringing their sacrifice to be offered.

But there was more than that going on. Apparently by this time and there’s some historical indications of this, the people who used to buy and sell outside the Temple have now moved inside the Courtyard. This may well be because the High Priest has now taken over this business for his own aggrandizement. In fact, they were called the Bazars of Annas. So when you get inside, you not only have this crush of humanity of people coming and going and some people coming ostensibly to talk to God, to praise God, to worship God, to see the Temple as pilgrims from other places. We can’t even estimate how many people were there. It would be well into the tens or twenties of thousands of people at any given point in time.

In the middle of this there are people selling oxen, sheep and doves which means there are oxen, sheep and doves there. And there are moneychangers seated at their tables. The reason they were selling sacrifices is because people coming from long distances would find it inconvenient and cumbersome to take animals with them, and so they would purchase an animal when they arrived there. And experience told them that if they brought an animal, it would probably be rejected by the folks that checked out the suitability of the animal and if the animal was refused, they would have to buy one of the temple animals anyway. That’s kind of how they did their business. They rejected the ones that were brought so they could make money on exorbitant prices on the ones they sold.

Also, by the way, everybody had to pay for the animal and the temple tax in the currency that was accepted in Israel. And these people would be from other countries, have different currency, would have to be changed. Some historians say the exchange rate went over ten percent, twelve percent of the coin exchange. So there was business going on there in the temple. Extortion, really, Matthew 21, when Jesus does this again, He says, “You’ve turned My Father’s house into a den of thieves, robbers.”

So into this crushing place with tens of thousands of people and animals, buyers and sellers, under the control of about three hundred Temple police, if you add all the folks who were responsible to keep the peace in there and to manage the crowd control and to make sure that they took care of any incidents and disruptions, you’d get about three hundred, maybe a little less, maybe two hundred and seventy. Fort Antonia was next to the Temple and the Romans had built it high so they could sit on the top and watch what was going on. If needed, they could dispatch a Roman garrison to go down there and put down any kind of action that was threatening. So it was a well secured place and, after all, it was a temple and people were supposed to be worshiping there. So they were supposed to maintain a proper attitude.

Jesus sees all of this, selling sacrificial animals, money changing, and He sees that they have totally polluted His Father’s house. Their hearts are the same as the hearts of the people to whom Isaiah wrote, to whom Amos wrote. Their hearts are like Psalm 51:16 to 19, you can read that at your own leisure. They’re irreverent. Should have been a place of repentance, a place of reverence, a place of humility, a place of worship, a place of praise; it’s a chaotic marketplace—abusive commerce and corruption marked that place. Nothing...say that advisedly...nothing enraged Jesus with holy anger and fury like irreverence. And He did His most severe action in these two incidents in His life. All the rest of the time it was compassion and mercy. Here it was divine fury, divine fury. These are the most severe things Jesus did in His entire life and they were done against hypocritical worship.

The Jews expected the Messiah to come and attack the Gentiles. Instead, the Messiah came and attacked them. And He attacked them at their best. He attacked them in the middle of their worship, at their high point, the Passover, in the Temple. They expected a conquering warrior for sure, but who would come after the nations that had abused them, mistreated them and were currently occupying them. But instead He sends an unmistakable message that judgment is coming on them, not their enemies. In fact, at the end of His ministry after doing the same thing again, He sat and looked at the Temple and told His disciples that this thing is coming down and not one stone will be left on another, 70 A.D. It happened and it is no more to this day.

Well, Jesus saw all of this and in holy fury He acted. Verse 15, “He made a scourge of cords.” Cords would be lying all over the place because there were animals everywhere and the animals were always tied to ropes and they would be also tied to crates, to keep the crates closed or to carry the crates that the birds were in. And He was picking up some of these cords and braiding them into a scourge. It doesn’t seem much of a weapon against tens of thousands of people who were all going to have plenty of reason to resist what you’re doing. Now remember, this is an unknown man, this is the beginning of His ministry…this is the beginning. They don’t have any history of Jesus to expect anything. They don’t know who He is. He is just a man; He’s just a man at the Passover, perhaps recognizable as a Galilean by the way He dressed. Put some little ropes together, makes a little whip. And then He unleashes miracle power. There is no human explanation for what happened. The miracle is in these words, “And drove them all out of the Temple.”

Again I remind you how understated the miracles of Scripture are. There’s no lightning, there’s no thunder, there’s no angelic fanfare, no trumpets blow. He just drove them all out. Just an unimaginable act of power.

How did He do it? Well it’s sort of the reverse of what happened in Galilee when they tried to kill Him and He disappeared. You remember that? He was in the middle of a crowd; they wanted to stone Him and He left. This time He’s in the middle and they leave. All the animals leave, all the people with the doves grab their crates and leave. He flips over all the tables of the moneychangers. They scramble to get whatever they can and they evacuate the place to such...in such an orderly fashion that we don’t even have any word that the Romans turned a garrison loose on the crowd. We have no instruction in Scripture to indicate that anybody was injured, anybody was hurt. I’m sure some people bumped into counters and tripped over tables and bumped into animals and bruised their knees and all of that kind of thing. This was not an act of cruelty on people. This was an act of judgment on a system of religion.

I know the Roman Catholic Church uses this as a justification in the Middle Ages for the Inquisition and torture and imprisonment and execution. But Jesus did no harm to people. He attacked the system. The merchants would want to stop Him. The Temple police would feel completely responsible to stop Him. The crowd would want to stop. All it would take was one big burly guy to wrap his arms around Him and say, “Whoa, whoa, what are you trying to do, buddy?” And a few other people would grab Him and they’d take the same cords that He had made His little whip from and they’d tie His hands up and say, “We’ve got to deal with this guy. That doesn’t happen. This is miraculous power. This is crowd control, the likes of which has no human explanation. He goes from this very private family miracle to this massive public miracle in which tens of thousands of people participate and no one can do anything. Unparalled display of divine force creates an evacuation as the merchants frantically chase their beasts, as the money changers scramble to grab what they can and everybody’s completely obedient. This is a preview of the power that Jesus has to judge—the inescapable power of His judgment. “You have polluted,” He says, “My Father’s house.” You have corrupted My Father’s house. This is the loyal Son of God and He is, first of all, loyal to His Father, loyal to His Father. He will do this on a massive scale at His Second Coming. At a massive scale He will do this, only there at His Second Coming there will be death, there will be death. Revelation says a sword will come out of His mouth and there will be a slaughter, the likes of which the world has never seen.

“My Father is being dishonored by what you are doing.” “My Father”—what a statement. The Jews didn’t say that about God. That would be presumptuous. John 5:18, “For this reason the Jews were seeking to kill Him because He not only was breaking the Sabbath but was calling God His own Father. And they said, “If You call God Your Father, You make Yourself equal with God.” That’s My authority for doing this, He says. “I’m one with God, and You’re desecrating God.”

Did things like this ever happen in the Temple? Yes they did. There’s a book called *The Jews at the Time of Jesus*. It’s written by a man named Wylen, W-y-l-e-n, and he says in there, and this is a quote, “Such incidents were not unusual as trouble in the Temple.” And he gives one very interesting one. The high priest was in the Temple at one of these events and the Jews were very unhappy with the high priest. And so they started throwing lemons at Him, blasting the high priest with lemons. He unleashed His private mercenaries, His mercenary army, and according to the record, slaughtered the people in the courtyard in the multiple thousands for throwing lemons at the high priest. That’s a far cry from what our Lord does. He doesn’t kill anybody, but He does more than throw lemons at the high priest because He doesn’t like the high priest. He pronounces judgment on the entire religious system, priests and people.

Verse 17 then says, “His disciples remembered that it was written.” Now you’ve got to remember, these six men were really true Old Testament believers. They were followers of John the Baptist, preparing for the Messiah. And John it was, you remember, who said, “Follow Christ,” and they had followed Him. They have been with Him now for a while, a week at least between when they first started following Him and had the wedding at Cana and now a few days more. They know their Old Testament. And when they see Jesus do this, they remember a verse; it’s Psalm 69:9. This is the verse they remembered: “Zeal for Your house will consume me.” They know that passage. Psalm 69 was written by David. And David was calling the people to true worship, that’s the scene. David was calling the people to true worship and what He was getting back was resistance and hatred and hostility. The people were in the same condition then that they are in Jesus’ time. But David is doing his best to call them back to faithfulness. And David says they’re mistreating me, they’re hating me; and then he says in verse 9 of Psalm 69, “But zeal for Your house has consumed me and the reproaches of those who reproach You are fallen on me.”

I have to do what I do because I feel the pain when You’re dishonored. That’s what that means: my passion for Your house consumes me. The reproaches that fall on You, fall on me. When somebody criticizes You, when somebody dishonors You, I feel the pain. And by the way, that’s when you know you’re spiritually mature; when God is dishonored and you feel the pain. When God is dishonored and you feel the pain. And they think of David. Wow! When he saw God dishonored, he felt the pain. And they see Jesus doing the same thing. That psalm is messianic in that sense. Here is Jesus acting like David, the same devotion to the glory of God and the honor of His house and reverence. And Jesus felt the pain far more than David. And David couldn’t seem to do anything about it, not like this. Jesus is consumed with this same truth—God is to be glorified. God is to be glorified. And He was not being glorified there and Jesus basically declares the whole thing irreverent, blasphemous.

So what does that have to do with us? There’s no Temple anymore. Oh, at least there’s no building that is the Temple, but there is a temple. We are the Temple, aren’t we? Turn to 1 Peter 4 and we’ll wrap up there, and then we’ll share in the Lord’s Table together. First Peter 4, verse 17, “For it is time for judgment to begin with the household of God and it begins with us first.” Time for judgment to begin with the household of God. Who...who is that; what is that? Listen to Ephesians 2:19, “You are fellow citizens with the saints and you are God’s household.” The judgment begins with the house of God. We are the Temple of the living God, He indwells His church. And it is time for judgment to begin here and this is where we come to grips with that, right at this table. And I’ll show you that. Turn to 1 Corinthians 11. This is where Paul institutes the Lord’s Table, repeating what our Lord did in the night of the Passover. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 11:27, “Whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup in an unworthy manner shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord.” That’s a frightening thing if you come to this table in an unworthy manner, that is celebrating the death of Christ for sin while holding on to sin, if you come in a hypocritical manner, you’re guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. “So let a man examine himself and in so doing eat the bread and drink the cup, do some heart examination, for he who eats and drinks eat and drinks judgment to himself.”

And then verse 31, “If we judge ourselves rightly, we will not be judged.” So judgment begins in the church, in the household of God, and here is where it starts. If we judge ourselves, we won’t be judged. That’s what it’s saying. The Lord’s Table then becomes the point of our initial self-judgment. When we are judged, Paul says, we are disciplined by the Lord, not condemned with the world. There’s no condemnation to those who are in Christ. But judgment begins here so that we don’t become disciplined by the Lord. And this is where the judgment starts. If we examine ourselves and come in a worthy manner, then there’s no further judgment—that judgment stands as the final judgment. If we don’t judge ourselves rightly and discern our condition and come in a pure way, then we are exposed to the judgment of God in forms of discipline. And that’s why we come to the Lord’s Table. We come to be judged if we do not judge ourselves. So when you come to this table you are saying to the Lord, “I’m exposed at this point, to Your judgment if I don’t examine my own heart and honestly confess my own sin.”

What would happen if the Lord showed up here? Would He do something like He did then? I think there might be many churches where He would. He is here and He will judge those who will not examine themselves and repent. So we invite you to do that. Let’s pray.

Father, again we come before You fearing that our familiarity with these things keeps us from a genuine examination of heart. Show us anything that’s wrong in our lives and help us to confess and yield to everything that displeases You. Forgive us, cleanse us, wash us. May we be honest in that self-examination, honest as we repent so that we might not be in a position to be disciplined. We want Your favor and we want the joy of obedience. And You’ve put this table in the life of the church as the point at which that judgment takes place—that self-judgment, that honesty of heart that protects us from Your divine discipline. Open our hearts, show us what we need to give to You, let go of, confess that we might honor You even as we partake. Amen.

**Deity on Display**

**John 2:18-22**

Code: 43-10

As you know, we are looking at the gospel of John, and I want you to turn in that gospel to chapter 2, John chapter 2; we’ll finish up that second chapter this morning. And I do confess to you that there’s so much more that can be said and should be said about these sections that we’re not able to get to, and I commend you to read diligently and meditate on these texts and let the Lord direct you as well in the things that we don’t even have time to cover.

But I remind you, for those who are visiting with us, that John’s gospel is a record of the life and ministry of Christ that focuses on one aspect, and that is His deity, that He is fully God. And John gives his purpose in chapter 20, verse 31, “These have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God and that believing you may have life in His name.”

So he has an apologetic purpose, to prove that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and an evangelistic purpose so that you will believe that and in believing that have eternal life. So his goal is salvation, salvation. His means is evidence concerning Jesus Christ.

Now the New Testament is clear, as well as the Old Testament, but particularly the New Testament is clear on the deity of Jesus Christ. In fact, His deity--He is God--is declared throughout the entire New Testament. John begins His gospel, “In the beginning was the Word, the Word was with God, the Word was God.” He is both God and with God, and there you have a statement regarding the Trinity. The three members of the Trinity are God and yet they are separate. He is with God, as distinct from God, and yet He is God. And this is the wondrous mystery of the Trinity. But the New Testament affirms the deity of Christ repeatedly. In Matthew 16 He is called the Son of the living God. In John 1, John 20, Hebrews chapter 1, He is called God Himself. In Titus and Peter He is called “Our God and Savior.” He is in Revelation, “The first and the last, the beginning and the end, the One who was and is and is to come.” He is the Alpha and the Omega, the Lord of lords, the King of kings throughout the New Testament, in the gospels, in the epistles, particularly in the book of Hebrews, chapter 1 verse 3--He is the Creator and Sustainer of the entire universe. He is the One who forgives sin and only God can do that. He is the One who raises the dead and only God can do that for, in Him is life. He is the One alone who receives worship. There is worship for no other than the one who is God, and Christ Himself commanded that He be worshiped as well as God commanded, and as well as the Spirit enables us to worship Him. Summing it up in Colossians 2:9, the apostle Paul says. “In Him all the fullness of deity dwells in bodily form.”

So that is the Christian doctrine of Christ. He is God and man. He is the Word, the eternal God made flesh. He is 100 percent God and man. Throughout the gospel of John, John wants to demonstrate that, and he does it paragraph after paragraph after paragraph, incident after incident after incident, claim after claim, word after word, work after work, all the way to the culminating reality of His resurrection, which is the final validation of His claim to deity.

Now we’re looking at chapter 2 and verses 12 to 25--chapter 2, verses 12 to 25. In this little passage here there are three incidents that happen. They’re not serendipitous; they’re not unplanned; they’re divinely orchestrated incidents. They really are confrontations, three distinct confrontations. The first one is in verses 12 to 17 and that’s with the Temple forces, the masses, tens of thousands, upon thousands gathered in the Temple at the Passover time and we have already looked at that, how that Jesus confronted what He saw, the desecration of His Father’s house, turning it into a place of business. And He made a whip and He threw everyone, including all the animals, out of the Temple. This...this is a very, very powerful expression of the deity of Jesus Christ, His super-human powers. There would have been resistance from the crowd in the tens of thousands, multiples of tens of thousands of people there. There would have been resistance from the Temple police. The minimum number would be three hundred and there would probably be more for the Passover. There would have been, in the event there was any reaction by the crowd, and a conflict generated, immediate invasion by the forces of the Romans who were sitting next door watching all of this and ready to quell any disturbance. And yet, with all of those forces set against one man, not with a repeating rifle, but with a little cord, there was no resistance. And He evacuated that Temple in a matter of brief time. This demonstrates His divine power. No man could have pulled that off. That is the first indicator of the deity of Jesus in this little set of three.

The second one comes in verses 18 to 22 when He is then confronted by the Jewish leaders. First He faces the masses in the Temple. Then He faces the Jewish leaders and their queries about why He had the right, or thought He had the right to do that.

And finally a third confrontation with those who believed in Him.

So three different groups: the masses in the Temple, the leaders among the Jews, and then those who said they believed in Him. In each confrontation, collectively looking at it for a moment, in each of them there are elements of His deity on display. We see His divine knowledge. He knows the mind of God. He knows the future of His own life. He knows the future actions and behaviors of people who don’t even know they’re going to do what they’re going to do and at this point aren’t even thinking about it or motivated to do it. He knows the mind of men. He knows every thought in every person’s mind. He knows the thoughts that those who think don’t even understand. His divine knowledge then is on display. His divine holiness is on display. He is angry over religious corruption. He is zealous for the appropriate worship of God. He is passionate for reverence. He rejects superficial faith.

His divine sovereignty is on display. He is Lord over the Temple. He has authority over the Temple, authority over religion, authority over worship. He has authority over death. He has authority over human lives and destiny. All of that is here in this brief section.

Now we already looked at the first confrontation, we’re not going to do that again. But it precipitates a question. Jesus goes in, just sends everybody out of this Temple at the most diligent, concerned period of Jewish worship history as they came to offer the Passover lambs. They were focused on doing what they had been prescribed to do and traditionally done every year at this time and they are bent on accomplishing this and it’s against all of the force of that and the human power of the accumulated masses and all the rest that I mentioned, Jesus sends everybody out, including all the animals, and grinds everything to an immediate halt. Deity is on display at that point because He demonstrates the ability to do something that a man could not do.

But as we come to the second two, it’s not so much His power that’s on display, as His omniscience. So as we look at incident number two and incident number three, omniscience is the focus. And when I use the word *omniscience*, I mean that He knows everything, He knows everything. *Science* is for knowledge, *omni* means “everything.” He has all-inclusive knowledge. That’s what that word means. He knew what people can know and He knew what they can’t know. He knew what people discover, and He knew it without discovering it. He knows everything there is to know. He knows the future, He knows the present. He knows what is happening. He knows what is invisible. He knows the visible and the invisible. He knows the past. He knows the present. He knows the future. This we see on display in Jesus here. This is testimony to His deity. God alone knows everything. God alone knows the past, the present and the future. God alone knows every thought, every word, every action, and the collective effect of all thoughts, all words, all actions. Only God knows, according to 2 Corinthians 4, the intent of the heart...1 Corinthians 4, rather...the intent of the heart. God will judge every man when the motives and intentions of the heart are made manifest, because God knows them. He knows history and He knows all that is behind history. He knows everything that has happened perfectly, everything that is happening perfectly, everything that will happen before it happens perfectly. And, in fact, He not only knows all of this but He controls it all, He controls it all. That’s His sovereignty. God doesn’t learn anything, nobody teaches God anything. He knows everything that can be known. He knows all the incalculable motives, all the effects. He has known them forever. He knows them perfectly. He knows them eternally. He has to gain no knowledge and He loses no knowledge. His presence and power control absolutely everything exactly the way they need to be controlled to bring about His purpose and His glory, because that’s the goal of everything.

In his wonderful book *The Knowledge of the Holy*, A.W. Tozer writes this about God’s knowledge. He says, “God knows all that can be known and this He knows instantly and with the fullness of perfection that includes every possible item of knowledge concerning everything that exists or could have existed anywhere in the universe at any time in the past, or that may exist in the centuries or ages yet unborn. God knows all causes, all thoughts, all mysteries, all enigmas, all feelings, all desires, every unuttered secret, all thrones and dominions, all personalities, all things visible and invisible in heaven and in earth. Because God knows all things perfectly, He knows no thing better than any other thing, but knows all things equally well. He never discovers anything. He’s never surprised, never amazed. He never wonders about anything, nor does He seek information or ask questions. God is self-existent and self-existent knowledge. He is self-contained and self-contained knowledge and knows what no creature can ever know. He knows Himself perfectly, and only the infinite can have infinite knowledge of Himself. This is God.

God knows details like the numbers of the hairs of your head, Jesus said. He knows details like every time a sparrow hops. All of that, you remember, our Lord spoke about in His sermon, Sermon on the Mount. You find those references there in Matthew and also Luke 12. He knows everything.

If you go back to the Old Testament, you find this is often indicated. I’ll just give you a couple of suggestions from the Old Testament. But in the sixteenth chapter of Jeremiah and the seventeenth verse, God is in this context telling the Jewish people they’re going to go into captivity, they’re going to go into judgment. It’s going to be a terrible, terrible judgment. There’s going to be severe punishment. In fact, earlier in the chapter he says in verse 13, “I’m going to hurl you out of this land. I’m going to throw you out of this land and finally in the end, in the future, you’ll be regathered.” And verse 17, God when He regathers Israel will have full knowledge: “My eyes are on all your ways,” speaking of His people, “All their ways, they are not hidden from My face, nor is there iniquity concealed from My eyes. I will first doubly repay their iniquity and their sin because they have polluted the land.” After that, the Lord will then--it says in verse 19--regather the people. And verse 21, “Make them know Him and to know that My name is the Lord and I have no problem bringing judgment on you because I know every one of your iniquities, they are not concealed from My eyes. I know every detail there is to know about you and one day in the future you will also know Me.”

Jeremiah 23 is another one. In fact, the Bible says that those of us who go to glory will know as we are known. So we’ll have knowledge that is also supernatural. In Jeremiah 23, verse 23, God compares Himself a lot in Jeremiah and Isaiah to false gods--idols, non-existent gods--made out of wood and stone. So He says, “‘Am I a God who is near?’” declares the Lord, ‘and not a God far off.’” In other words, He’s talking about His omnipresence. He is both near and far. “Can a man hide himself in hiding places so I do not see him?” declares the Lord. “Do I not fill the heavens and the earth?” declares the Lord. God is saying, “I’m not like your gods stuck in some Temple somewhere. I’m everywhere in the universe and I see everything and I know everything and no one can escape My knowledge.”

Psalm 139 is a marvelous insight into the omniscience of God. Psalm 139, verse 1, “O Lord, You have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up. You understand my thought from afar. You scrutinize my path and my lying down, are intimately acquainted with all My ways, even before there is a word on My tongue. Behold, O Lord, You know it all. You know the words I haven’t even spoken. You’ve enclosed Me behind and before. Laid Your hand on me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me. It’s too high, I cannot attain it.”

What He is saying is it’s not some kind of knowledge from afar, you know Me and you know Me in the sense that you actually have Your hand on me. You monitor me in that very intimate way. Verse 7, “Where can I go from Your Spirit? Where can I flee from Your presence? If I ascend You are there. If I make my bed in Sheol, behold You’re there. If I take the wings of the dawn, and dwell in the remotest part of the sea, even there Your hand will lead me and Your right hand will lay hold of me. If I say, ‘Surely the darkness will overwhelm me, and the light around me will be night, even the darkness isn’t dark to You and the night is as bright as the day, darkness and light are alike to You.’” There’s no escaping God. He is everywhere, omnipresent, and consequently He knows everything, fully aware of everything in His universe and in the vastness of His eternal presence.

In Isaiah 40 to 46, Isaiah again does something like Jeremiah and compares in a little more detailed way, God with the false idols and the foolishness of making an idol and then worshiping it. In Isaiah 40, for example, God introduces Himself as the one who measured the waters, verse 12, and marked off the heavens, and calculated the dust of the earth by the measure. That’s the science of isostasy, the weight of the earth is all perfect so that the mountains balance like in a pair of scales.

Then in verse 13, “Who has directed the Spirit of the Lord or as His counselor has informed Him?” Who told God anything? Who gave God any information about all of this? No one did. He knows everything about creation, everything about water, everything about the heavens, everything about the Earth, everything about the balance of the Earth, the rotation of the Earth--everything. Nobody taught God anything about science. Nobody taught Him anything at all. Who gave Him understanding? Verse 14. The rhetorical question expects a “no one” for an answer. Who taught Him about morality, justice? Who taught Him knowledge? Who informed Him in the way of understanding or wisdom? No one. No one. You certainly, verse 18, wouldn’t liken God to something you crafted out of gold or silver, an idol. “Do you not know,” verse 21, “have you not heard, has it not been declared to you from the beginning, have you not understood from the foundation of the world? It is He who sits on the circle of the earth.” The earth is a sphere. This is long before they were still thinking it was flat, and so forth.

Verse 25, “To whom will you liken Me? What God am I like? Like none.” Nobody gives Me information. Nobody gives Me knowledge. I’m not limited. I’m not isolated. I’m not located in one place. Chapter 41, verse 21, “The Lord says, ‘Bring your argument forward. Bring forward your gods.’” Let’s have a test. “Let them bring forth and declare to us what’s going to take place. Tell the future.”

If you’re a true God, tell the future that we may consider them and know their outcome. “Announce to us,” verse 22, “what is coming. Declare the things that are going to come afterward that we may know you are gods.” If you can’t tell the future, you’re not God and only God can tell the future--the true God.

Isaiah 45:19, “I haven’t spoken in secret in some dark land. I not only know the future, I declare things that are right.” “I declare things that are right.” Down in verse 21 He goes back to the future, “Declare and set forth your case.” If your gods are true gods, let them consult together. “Who has announced this from of old, who has long since declared it? Is it not I, the Lord? There is no other God beside Me, a righteous God and a Savior. There is none except Me. Turn to Me and be saved all the ends of the earth, for I am God and there is no other.” Why? Because I know the future. I know all things. Chapter 46, verse 9, “I am God, there is no other, I am God, there is no one like Me declaring the end from the beginning. And from ancient times, things which have not been done saying My purpose will be established and I will accomplish all My good pleasure.”

So God says I can tell the future. And anyone who claims to be God then has to be able to tell the future. Let’s look at verse 18 to 22, that’s exactly what Jesus does. It’s exactly what He does.

This is the evidence for the deity of Jesus Christ, taken from His ability to tell the future. And not just His own future, but the future of those who don’t even know their future. Verse 18, “The Jews then said to Him,” after He had done what He had done to the Temple; they were infuriated, to put it mildly. “What sign do you show us as Your authority for doing these things.” They’re outraged. “Who do you think you are?” That’s the question. The “Who do You think You are” question which they frequently will ask Jesus because He takes power and authority over things that they think belong to them. So in response to His assault on the corruption of the Temple, which, by the way, is a preview of an even greater assault that’s going to come at His crucifixion when the veil of the Temple is ripped from top to bottom and the Holy of Holies is exposed and therefore the whole sacrificial system comes to an end and then 40 years later the Romans come, dismantle the Temple so there’s not one stone left on another, destroy the entire city of Jerusalem and bring an end to that great city and that great temple--a final end and never yet to be rebuilt. This is where that starts. This is His first attack on the Temple. At the end of His ministry He does it again. Then the Temple is attacked while He’s dying by God, as He rips the veil. And then it’s attacked 40 years later by the Romans as they come and totally destroy it. So they say, “Who do You think You are? You’ve got to prove to us that You have authority.”

Now they know He’s claiming to be from God because He says, “You’ve turned My Father’s house into a business.” Or as He said in the latter time that He did this at the end of His ministry, “into a den of robbers.” He’s claiming to be the agent of God. This is My Father’s house and you’ve desecrated the place. And, of course, it was John the Baptist who said already to the whole populace of Judea that He was the Lamb of God. The word is circulating about Him. So they want a sign. If you’re acting for God, if you’re protecting God, and God is Your Father and You’re the Son of God, well give us a sign, some sign to indicate that You have a valid authority for doing this.

By the way, “the Jews,” when you see that in the gospel of John--“the Jews”--you’ll see that repeatedly over and over and over again; it is a term that John uses to speak of the enemies of Jesus, the enemies of Jesus. Not necessarily the whole populace of Israel, but the collected group of enemies who are always attacking Jesus. And so they--and it constitutes here, of course--the religious leaders who make up the Sanhedrin and the scribes and the important elites in religion. Jesus is not a priest. He’s not a Levite. He has no rights inside the Temple. That belonged to the priesthood; that belonged to the Sanhedrin. That was their purview. That belonged to those who were in the Levitical order, or in the priestly line. Jesus has no role in religion in Israel. He’s not an official anything. He had no right to do anything there, granted to Him by any powers in Israel. It is an outrage. He, Jesus, believes they have desecrated His Father’s Temple rightly. They believe that Jesus, a man with no authority, has desecrated their Temple.

By the way, there’s no repentance on their part. There’s no sorrow. There’s no bowing down and saying you’re right, we desecrated the place, this is absolutely true. We need to repent. We need to seek forgiveness. We need to be reconciled to God. They don’t have any interest in that because they don’t love God, they don’t love God at all. In fact, the truth is, they hate God; they hate the true God and the true way of salvation by faith and grace which had already been ordained throughout all of Old Testament history. They loved themselves. They love money, Jesus said. They hate souls. They make people into sons of hell.

They demand, then, one thing--that is that Jesus give them some sign so that they can validate His right to do this. That’s what they want.

“Well,” you say, “well, hadn’t He done a lot of miracles?” Well, He’s about to do more because down in verse 23 it says, during the feast, “They were observing His signs which He was doing.” He was doing signs. During the time of the Passover and the subsequent feast that came immediately after the Passover, so that’s a week and another week, and the day surrounding it, Jesus is doing sign miracles. You say, “Well what do they mean ‘Show us a sign? What sign do You show us?’”

They were never convinced by the miracles that Jesus did that didn’t fit into their category. When He healed people on earth, when He cast out demons of people on earth, they saw those as insufficient miracles to convince them. What were they looking for? Well, if you go back a little bit and remember your study of the gospels, you will remember that they wanted a sign not on earth but a sign from heaven. They wanted a sign from heaven. They wanted some astronomical sign. They wanted something to happen in the sky. They wanted a divine fireworks display or something…something that was so clearly heavenly. They were looking at Jesus; He was a man. He looked like a man in every sense. He didn’t have a halo, He didn’t have a short of a heavenly expression on His face all the time. He just looked like a man. And the things that He was doing were earthly things and they were dealing with people’s illnesses and possessions, and they were even providing of food, and the miracles that He was doing there weren’t astronomical. They, they were able to sort of keep those down at a low level and leave them in an unconvincing category.

In fact, it’s much like Matthew 12. You remember that in Matthew 12 Jesus made a claim that also outraged them. In Matthew 12 and verse 8, Jesus said that He was Lord of the Sabbath. The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath. He had been healing on the Sabbath and they said that’s illegal. “What You’re doing is not right, You can’t do this on the Sabbath, You’re violating Sabbath law.” He said, “I’m Lord of the Sabbath.” So this is the same thing, “I’m Lord over the Temple, I’ll do what I want with it; I’m Lord over the Sabbath, I’ll do what I want with the Sabbath.” And He went right on healing the man with the withered hand on the Sabbath. He was Lord of the Sabbath.

Well, they were outraged at this and so in that same twelfth chapter of Matthew, in verse 38, the scribes and Pharisees, again the religious leaders, said to Him, “Teacher, we want to see a sign from You. You need to give us a sign. You can’t just do these kinds of things without having some authority and we don’t know where Your authority is coming from; You’ve got to show us a sign.” So it’s exactly the same thing; they’re looking for a sign. And we’ll go back to that passage if we have time a little later. Unbelief rejects signs that it chooses to reject, as the crucifixion proves after Jesus had done miracles for three years; they still put Him on the cross and rejected Him. And they sort of held out their trump card, “Well, He didn’t do anything heavenly. It was all sort of earthly.”

He says, “Okay, I’ll give you a sign.” Verse 19, “He answered and said, ‘Destroy this Temple and in three days I’ll raise it up.’” Destroy this Temple and in three days I’ll raise it up. This is best understood as a statement of future fact, a statement of future fact. Some call it a sort of permissive reality in terms of the original language. It’s not a command. He’s not commanding them to destroy Him. He’s making a statement about future fact. Since you destroy this, if you destroy this, and you will destroy this, and I will raise it up. He’s not commanding them to destroy Him; He’s simply making a statement of future fact.

There is the first indication from John in the record that He knows the future. They don’t even know they’re going to kill Him, yet this is the beginning of His ministry. All that stuff hasn’t really taken shape in their minds and hearts, formed itself into motives, and then become a passion that finally ends in Him being executed at the hands of the Romans. They don’t even know that all of that is working, but He knows: “Destroy this Temple and I will raise it up.” He knows the future, they will destroy Him. He knows that He will rise from the dead on the third day. He knows all of that. That’s the knowledge of the future that He has.

His resurrection then will be the sign from heaven that ultimately validates His claim to be the Son of God. And why would you consider it a sign from heaven? Because He will die and He will be dead, as verified by the Romans withholding the breaking of His legs because He was already dead, jamming a sphere into His side, all of which the leaders of Israel knew--blood and water coming out, He is dead. He is buried in the grave. He is a dead man. The sign from heaven is that He comes back. And the sign from heaven further is that at His resurrection there are angels sitting in the tomb who had been sent from heaven by God. There’s ample testimony to that angelic precedence. You want a sign? I’ll give you a deferred sign, I’ll give you a deferred sign. I will raise it up.

By the way, this is a good place to make a little note. When He says, “I will raise it up,” He’s saying, “I will...I will raise Myself from the dead.” In other places in the New Testament, for example in Romans 1, it says that God through the Holy Spirit raised Jesus from the dead. In 1 Corinthians 15 it says, “God raises the dead.” So in Romans 1 the Spirit raises Christ. In 1 Corinthians 15, God raises Christ. And here, Christ raises Himself. Is that a problem?

Well, it’s not a problem here anymore than it’s a problem with creation. God creates; the Holy Spirit moves to make the creation take shape. And Christ creates everything that is created, and nothing is created that He didn’t create. This is the Trinity’s work. They are one in nature. They are one in operation. One in nature, one in operation.

So they want a sign. Jesus says, “I’ll give you a sign deferred. A sign from heaven that will involve someone who dies and goes out of this world and comes back from heaven, attested by angelic angels.”

Now go back to Matthew 12 for just a moment because when they said to Him in Matthew 12, “Where do You get the authority to claim to be Lord of the Sabbath?” They asked the same thing. “We don’t know where You get this authority; show us a sign.” He gives them the same answer. “He answered and said to them, verse 39 of Matthew 12, “‘An evil and adulterous generation prays for a sign.’” Mark it, folks, an evil and adulterous generation prays for a sign. What is that saying?

Listen, you remember the words of our Lord in Luke 16 when He was telling the story about the rich man and Lazarus. The rich man said, “Send back Lazarus to my brothers.” Send him back from the dead so he can tell my brothers not to come here. And Jesus said, “If they don’t believe Moses and the prophets, they won’t believe though someone is raised from the dead.”

The point is this, an evil and adulterous generation is not satisfied with Scripture; they want a sign. That’s why all these so-called phony sign ministries provide no real truth, no real ministry, no real message that brings salvation. Salvation comes by hearing the Word. Faith comes through hearing the Word concerning Christ. If you will not accept that, signs won’t do it. They didn’t do it in that generation. Why did the Lord do those signs? To strengthen the faith of those who believed, and we’ll see that in a moment.

So He says, “An evil adulterous generation prays for a sign. No sign will be given but the sign of Jonah the prophet as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a sea monster, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.” This is going to be the sign, the sign of the resurrection which is analogous to Jonah.

They wanted astronomical signs when He exercised authority as Lord over the Sabbath. They wanted astronomical signs when He exercised authority over the Temple here in John 2. By the way, I don’t know if you thought about this, but when they said this to Him, “Show us a sign,” and He said, “Destroy this body, this Temple, and in three days I’ll raise it up,” that...that literally went across Jerusalem. That became a part of popular conversation. That...if it were today it would have been tweeted universally. That statement alone would have showed up on every social media format immediately. It would have gone viral because it did go viral.

How do you know it went viral? Because three years later when Jesus goes to His trial, they’re trying to find an indictment, they’re trying to find a way to convict Him. Mark 14 records this, so they bring some phony witnesses in and these witnesses say this, they say, I’ll read you exactly their words because it’s important what they said and it’s in Mark 14, starting in verse 56. False witnesses come and they stood up and they began to give false testimony, and this is what they said. This is three years later: “We heard Him say I will destroy this Temple made with hands and in three days I’ll build another made without hands.” Did He say that? No. That is a garbled gossipy misrepresentation of what Jesus said. But it’s in the minds of people who can be used as false witnesses because they remember this in a garbled way.

And Matthew 26:60, by the way, says that that was the spin of the false witnesses; that was their version of it. In Matthew 27 and verse 40, this is even more interesting to me, Jesus is hanging between two robbers, two robbers, and they’re hurling abuse at Him, Matthew 27:39, and what do they say? “You who are going to destroy the Temple and rebuild it in three days, save Yourself.” What did I tell you? Those words that Jesus said had gone viral, they were everywhere. They were known by the riff-raff; the criminal element heard this. This got passed around. This man is crazy. This man is going to destroy the Temple and build it back in three days.

Well, of course, they didn’t understand what He meant by what He said, but they also misrepresented what He said. He never said “I will destroy it.” What He said was, “You will.” Verse 20, this is mockery, just sheer mockery: “The Jews then said, ‘It took 46 years to build this Temple and will You raise it up in three days?’” This is a joke. It’s also a demonstration of their spiritual blindness. I’m sure Jesus made a gesture like this, “Destroy this Temple and three days I’ll raise it up.” Let’s get off this Temple that you’re concerned about and let’s get on this one. And He predicts what they’re going to do in the future accurately.

They couldn’t understand that. I mean, this is typical of them. This is typical of them, and you will see that as we go through the gospel of John. You see it in chapter 3. Jesus tells Nicodemus he has to be born again. Nicodemus has no idea what He’s talking about. How can a man be born again? How can he enter a second time in his mother’s womb? I mean, how does that happen? That’s not possible. You can go over to chapter 6 and verse 51, and there are a lot more, I’m just giving you some samples. And Jesus says, “I’m the living bread, I came down out of heaven. If anyone eats of this bread he’ll live forever and the bread which I give for the life of the world is My flesh. And the Jews began to argue with one another saying, How did He give us His flesh to eat?” He was speaking metaphorically. They never did understand it. This is the pattern.

Maybe just another one or two. Chapter 7, just so you have this in mind. Jesus says in verse 33 of 7, “A little while longer I’m with you and I’m going to go to Him who sent Me. You will seek Me and will not find Me and where I go or where I am you can’t come.” The Jews said to one another. “Where’s He going? Where’s He going to go where we can’t find Him?” I mean, they were so ignorant. This was their constant pattern. He was talking about spiritual things and they were dead spiritually.

He says to them, “If anyone keeps My Word,” John 8:51, “He will never see death.” The Jews said, “Now we know You have a demon. Abraham died, everybody dies. And the prophets die. And You say, If anyone keeps My words, he’ll never taste of death? Surely You’re not greater than our father Abraham who died. The prophets died too. Whom do You make Yourself out to be?”

They were so blind to everything He was saying that it all went right on by without ever attaching to their understanding. So here’s the first illustration of it, verse 20, 46 years according to Josephus, it had been exactly 46 years at this time that the Temple had been under construction.

Just a little bit of background--it’s not the Solomonic Temple; it’s not the Temple of Solomon, that was basically destroyed in 586 B.C. by the Babylonians, that great edifice that Solomon had built. And then when they came back after 70 years of captivity, Haggai and Zechariah the prophets told the people who had come back to Jerusalem to rebuild the Temple, they completed it in 519. So it had been around a long time. It was pretty much in disarray. There was not much when Herod shows up 500 years later. And so Herod wants to make something out of it. So Herod decides to start a massive reconstruction, and it starts with the same location and builds this reconstruction, and he’s been doing it for 46 years by this time. Very expensive; took ten years to do the main part of it and one record is that they used 18,000 workers on this. It’s still going on for 46 years at this time and, by the way, 43 years after this when the Temple and Jerusalem is destroyed, it will still not be completed. That’s what kind of a construction project it was.

So they’re looking at Jesus and this is a joke. This thing is 46 years in the building and you’re going to destroy it and put it back up in three days. Verse 21, “But He was speaking of the Temple of His body.” “He was speaking of the Temple of His body.” Isn’t it interesting that He didn’t explain that to them? Why? Because of Matthew 13, “He’s hidden these things from the wise and the prudent and revealed them to babes.” He wanted the disciples to understand that; He wanted you and I to understand that, because this is evidence of His deity as He predicts the details of the future. But He never said anything to them about it.

But verse 22, “When He was raised from the dead, His disciples remembered that He had said this and they believed the Scripture.” What Scripture? All the Scripture from the Old Testament about the Messiah, including His death and resurrection and exaltation. They believed the Scripture and the Word which Jesus had spoken.

They had trouble believing along the way, didn’t they? That’s why Jesus said to them, all the time, “O you of little faith!” O you of little faith!” They were the little faith association. Always faltering in their faith until finally after the resurrection when Jesus appeared to them, they got it. And then, like on the road to Emmaus, He spoke to them all the things concerning Himself from the Law and the Prophets and the holy writings, the Old Testament, and their eyes were opened, their eyes were opened.

So Jesus gave a sign but it’s a not a sign to an evil and adulterous generation. It wouldn’t have mattered what He did; it didn’t matter. He did rise from the dead, but they wouldn’t believe. If they won’t believe the Scripture, they won’t believe even a cosmic heavenly sign, a resurrection attested to by angels from the very throne of God.

So our Lord’s divine nature is revealed here in this passage in marvelous ways. He knows the future. He knows the future. In fact, the details of His death He lays out. Read Matthew 16, Matthew 17, Matthew 19, and through that section where our Lord is instructing His disciples, He gives them details: “I will be arrested by the chief priests and the leaders of Israel. I will be scourged, I will be spit on. I will be beaten. I will be crucified. I will be buried. I will rise again.” He gives every single detail. He knows the future. That’s omniscience.

Listen, God knows all future events. Just take, for example, the realm of predictive prophecy. Because God knows the future, Isaiah was able to announce the coming of Cyrus to deliver the Jews from Babylon 150 years before the event. Because God knows the future, Daniel was able to predict the rise and fall the great powers of the world that would dominate Israel, the great four-nation powers. Because God knows the future, Zachariah could predict that Jesus would ride into Jerusalem on a donkey and be pierced. Because God knows the future, Micah could predict that Jesus would be born in Bethlehem. Because God knows the future, Isaiah could say that He would be born of a virgin. Prophecy is non-existent if God doesn’t know the future. But He does know the future and that’s why we believe that when we hear in the Bible that there is coming a rapture of the church, and a time of tribulation, and a millennial kingdom, and a new heaven and a new earth--the same God declaring that in the future is the one who declared the future from the past, which we now know came to pass. Omniscience has perfect knowledge of the future.

Now just a closing comment on verses 23-25 because it’s really obvious. Omniscience also knows the secrets of men’s hearts. He knows the big events that will happen visibly. He also knows the invisible world of human thought. “Now when He was in Jerusalem at the Passover during the feast, many believed in His name, observing His signs, the miracles which He was doing.” He stays on, the Feast of Unleavened Bread follows the Passover, and He’s performing miracles. You remember John 21 says He performed so many of these things that all the books of the world couldn’t contain all that He did and all that He said. So He’s doing these kinds of miracles, which for the Jews were not adequate enough because they weren’t cosmic. But it does say, “Many of the people believed in His name.” That sounds really good. This is why he came. Is this not wonderful? Was this the moment? Was this the desired outcome, a true spiritual awakening of repentance and salvation? Was this it? Was this...was this kind of a Jonah thing where the whole of Jerusalem begins to repent as Nineveh did? Many modern evangelists would start here counting hands and heads fast and racking up the numbers.

But there’s a very interesting play on words here. “Many believed in His name, observing His signs, but Jesus on His part was not entrusting Himself to them.” That is very interesting. I want you to look more deeply. “Many believed,” that’s the Greek verb *pistuo,*the verb that means “to believe.” “Many believed in His name, in His name as Messiah, who He claimed to be. But” verse 24, “Jesus was not entrusting” [in the NAS, it’s the same word *pistuo,* “believing”]. They were believing in Jesus but Jesus was not believing in them. He had no faith in their faith. He had no trust in their trust. He didn’t believe in their believing.

Right here at the very outset of the gospel of John, we’re introduced to a very important issue throughout all redemptive history, the presence of false, superficial, artificial faith that doesn’t save, that doesn’t save. It’s a reality. It has to be recognized. As those of you who have been around here for any time know, that has been a major emphasis of our ministry in writing and preaching for decades and decades from the very beginning. The demons believe, the devils believe and tremble. “Many will say, ‘Lord, Lord, didn’t we do this and do that in Your name?’ ‘Depart from Me,’ He says, ‘I never knew you.’” False faith is a significant reality. Many will say, many will say, many will say; few will go through the narrow door. Most people who claim to believe in Jesus have a non-saving faith. That’s a frightening reality, frightening reality.

All belief in Him is not true belief. It is superficial, artificial. It lacks repentance. It lacks the singularity of faith alone by grace alone and it’s muddied up by works. Or it’s superficial, like the soils, right? There were three kinds of soils that seed landed on and they produced no fruit. There was a little emotional response, a little positive reaction, but no fruit. And then there was good soil, and the evidence of true faith is not in the proclamation of that faith, but in the demonstration of that faith in righteous behavior, John 8. “If you...if you obey My Word,” John 8:31-32, “if you obey My Word, then you’re My real disciple.”

True salvation shows up in a transformed life pursuing righteousness. “Faith without works is”...What?...“dead,” James 2. How did He know this? Why didn’t He believe in their believing? I can’t know that. When somebody comes to me and says “I believe in Jesus Christ,” I don’t have any way to say, “Well, I’ve got to talk to you because I don’t think your faith is real.” Over time I might be able to look at that life and say I question that because I don’t see the passion for righteousness. But it immediately, instantaneously, verse 24 says, “He was not believing in their believing because He knew all men and because He didn’t need anyone to testify concerning man for He Himself knew what was in man.” Nobody needed to tell Him anything about anybody.

If somebody comes to me and says, “I don’t know if my husband’s saved,” well I might say, “Well, tell me about him. Give me some information, maybe I can help you decide whether he’s saved. What are his strong desires? What are his longings? What is his life like? Does he love worship? Does he love the people of God? Does he love the things that God loves? You could ask questions and getting enough information you might be able to say, “Well, based upon what you’ve told me, I think maybe he’s saved.” Or “Maybe he’s not saved,” or whatever. But that’s not the case with Jesus. He doesn’t need people to come and tell Him about people. He doesn’t need that because He knows what is in man. That can only be said of God, right? Now we’re back where we started to omniscience. This is what John is doing here, he’s connecting us to the deity of Christ through the evidence of His knowledge.

First John 3:20, “God is greater than our heart and knows all things.” “God is greater than our heart and knows all things.” What he means is that...there is...He knows what our own hearts don’t even know, what we don’t even know about ourselves, He knows perfectly. He reads your heart and my heart like a billboard, like a billboard.

So false faith is the end of 2. He sets the stage for 3, which is Nicodemus and true faith, true saving faith. But let me close by having you turn again to the end of John, John 21. He knows the future perfectly. And He knows the secrets of the heart perfectly. Let’s pick the story of Peter up, we all love this story, this is Peter when he’s confronted by Jesus because he’s disobedient, didn’t do what the Lord told him to do. He went back to fishing. The Lord told him just go to Galilee and wait for Me, and he went back to his boat and his nets and went back to his old profession. And, of course, the principle was if you love Me, you do what I say. If you love Me, you keep My commandments. So after breakfast, Jesus confronts Peter in verse 15 and he says, “Do you love Me? Do you love Me more than these?” Do you love Me more than these things that you’ve now gone back to? Do you love Me more?

And what does Peter say? “Yes, Lord, You know that I love you.” What is he basing the testimony on? The omniscience of Christ. You know I love you. It’s not evident. I get it. It’s not evident. I can’t say, “Well, look at my works. Look at My faithfulness. Look at My obedience.” He can’t say that. So I have to call on your omniscience. You know that I love you. He says to Him again. Okay, do you love Me? He said, “Yes, Lord, You know that I love You.” He says to Him again, “Do you love Me?” Verse 17. And then He says, “You know all things, You know that I love You.” “Yes I do, yes I do.” Jesus would have said, “So go tend My lambs, shepherd My sheep, attend My sheep, I do know you love Me.”

Boy, that’s comforting, isn’t it? ’Cause Peter was disobedient. But a moment’s disobedience doesn’t cancel out the true love for the Lord. Just evidence of our fallenness. So here we have an illustration of where Jesus knew the secrets of the heart of Peter, and He knew he loved Him. Jesus also knew his future, verse 18. “When you were young, you used to gird yourself, walked where you wished.” He knew his past. He’s talking about his past, before he met Jesus, telling him that he was a free-wheeler. You put on your clothes and did whatever you wanted. But when you grow old, looking at your future, you’re going to stretch out your hands. That’s a euphemism for crucifixion. I know your future, you’re going to get crucified, and Peter was crucified. I know your future. Someone else is going to gird you, take you where you don’t want to go. You’re going to die. He was signifying the kind of death by which he would glorify God.

So here in a little microcosm in the case of Peter you have this same omniscience directed at Peter. He knows Peter’s heart. And He knows Peter’s future. That’s omniscience.

I hope your prayer is the frustrated confession of Peter--you know I love you, you know I love you, you know all things, you know I love you. And I hope your future is the one promised to Peter, a future in which though suffering may come, you will glorify God. Let’s bow together in prayer.

It’s always a thrill and blessing, God, to spend time with our Lord Jesus. It’s such a privilege to be a part of these scenarios, these divinely authored occasions, incidents, confrontations, and times of instruction with our Lord. I can’t imagine a richer experience than these. But it isn’t just literature; it isn’t just art to be admired, sort of spiritual beauty. It is to be convicting to our own hearts and to call us to examine our own hearts and ask whether you have faith in our faith, or whether ours is of that artificial and superficial kind and You know it, we’re not fooling You.

On the other hand, for those of us who do love you, who do long to honor you, who have strong desires to please you, to glorify you, to worship you, we thank You that You’ve called us to tend Your lambs and shepherd Your sheep, because you know that in spite of our failures, we love you and you now that. And you know our future, and it’s a future that’s going to glorify You. We rest in that. We rest in the affirmation of that through the confidence and assurance that comes by means of the Holy Spirit. But I pray for those who You know don’t believe savingly; they believe superficially. There’s no repentance there. There’s no hunger and thirst after righteousness. Lord, may that superficial faith be replaced with a genuine saving faith. And may they relish the joy of knowing they love You and knowing that You know they love You and that their future is one in which they will glorify You. We pray that for every soul here.

Lord, we ask that Your Spirit will tie this all together, press it deep into all our hearts. Fill us with joy in believing in thankful hearts for all that has been done for us in Christ. May we boldly proclaim His glorious truth until that day when we see Him face to face. We pray in His name. Amen.

**Jesus Teaches the Teacher**

**John 3:1-3**

Code: 43-11

I want to remind you that preaching is not a spectator sport. It is not a matter of sitting and watching. It’s not a form of spiritual entertainment. Preaching is really a form of engagement, it’s a conversation. And I’ve always believed that you get from it what you bring to it. And one of the things that expository preaching does is engage you beyond the preacher with the Scripture. And that’s the intention, that you bring your Bible, and even if you sit back in the corners far away from me where I can’t really command your attention, the Word of God can command your attention because it’s right there before your eyes in your hands. And that’s very, very important because you’re engaging when you come here not with me, I’m merely a tool, I’m really a light, a reflected light to point you toward the true light which is the Word of God.

Your benefit from preaching is going to be in direct proportion to your engagement thoughtfully in the text. Sometimes that’s a little easier if you’re closer to the front, but as long as you have the Word of God in your hand, you need to engage your heart and your mind with the text. And I’m saying that here because the text with which you are about to engage is one of the most important sections in all the 66 books of the Bible. In fact, one could argue that this might be one of the three or four most important scriptures in the Bible, and that’s not simply because it is in fact the words of our Lord, although that is essential in itself. Every part of Scripture is the Word of the Lord even though it doesn’t come directly from the lips of Jesus, but rather it is important because of the nature of the content here, having to do with the issue of regeneration or new birth, which is the first great miracle that takes place in the salvation of a sinner.

We understand the doctrine of salvation to be made up of many elements. There is, of course, the matter of sovereign election and predestination. There is the reality of regeneration. There is the truth of conversion. There is the great truth which we love of justification. There’s the element of sanctification. There’s the truth of redemption. There are the elements of faith and repentance and all of these are aspects and components of the one great miracle of salvation.

And in coming to John chapter 3, we come to the great truth of regeneration. In the work of God to save His people, this is the second work. The first being election--we are chosen in Him before the foundation of the world, predestined to be saved. When then in time election is activated into salvation, the first great work of God is the work of regeneration, which is the subject of this chapter of this conversation that Jesus has. This then becomes very foundational in our understanding of the work of God in saving His people.

Let me read these ten verses to you and we’ll then begin to work our way through. Don’t be under any illusion that we’re going to get very far today because it would be a travesty on truth for us to hurry through this chapter.

“There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews; this man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, ‘Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher, for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.’ Jesus answered and said to him, ‘Truly, truly I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.’ Nicodemus said to Him, ‘How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born, can he?’ Jesus answered, ‘Truly, truly I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be amazed that I said to you, “You must be born again.” The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it but do not know where it comes from and where it is going. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit.’ Nicodemus said to Him, ‘How can these things be?’ Jesus answered and said to him, ‘Are you the teacher of Israel and do not understand these things?’”

Five times in those ten verses our Lord speaks of being born again, being born. Now that idea of being born again is a very familiar concept to believers. At least the terminology is a very, very familiar part of evangelical lingo. It has been popular for a long time, to speak of oneself as being a born-again Christian, to disassociate oneself from being some kind of traditional Christian. This is a kind of a Christian pop-culture; it’s been turned into an adjectival phrase, a “born-again Christian.” Evangelists for decades have called for people to be born again, told people they need to be born again, and then told them how to be born again, the steps to take, the path to follow, the prayer to pray in order to be born again.

Books have been written on how to be born again. Articles on how to be born again. Pamphlets on how to be born again. In fact, there is no notion that is perhaps so common and so familiar in evangelical lingo as this one to describe what it means to be saved. It is so familiar, this born-again idea, that it is uncritically assumed without really being understood. People have for decades been told, “Here’s how to be born again.”

But the very idea of being born again is completely alien to anything that a sinner could do. And that’s why Jesus chose this analogy. The whole point of the analogy of being born again is to demonstrate that Jesus is saying something has to happen to you that you can’t do, that you can’t contribute to in any way. The analogy describes a spiritual reality to which the one born makes no contribution. Think of physical birth. What contribution did any of us make to our physical birth? None. We were non-existent. We made no contribution to our physical birth and that is why the Lord chooses this analogy because we also make no contribution to our spiritual birth…none.

Our Lord could have used other analogies if He had intended to communicate that we do make a contribution, but He chose this one to make it crystal-clear that new birth happens to us not by us. We receive this birth from someone else in the same way that we receive our physical way from someone else. Birth happens to us, not by us. And that is exactly the point of this analogy. No one gives himself or herself physical life, and no one by any means gives himself or herself spiritual life. That’s the whole point. Spiritual birth or regeneration, or new creation, whatever term you want to use, is the second work of God in salvation. And it is wholly a work of God. The first work, election. Wholly a sovereign work of God. The second work, regeneration, wholly a work of God.

Now this text is so important and so foundational and so basic that a person cannot truly be saved at all without understanding this reality. There are a lot of things you don’t have to understand. You don’t have to understand or even believe the doctrine of divine election. But you must understand the doctrine of divine regeneration and new birth in order to be saved. It is also essential not only for salvation, but it is essential for evangelism and the fulfillment of the great commission. This is crucial truth and consequently we’re going to work our way through it and I want you to make a total commitment to engage yourself with this amazing conversation which leads to the understanding of this amazing revelation.

Now it’s a very familiar story. Everybody knows Nicodemus. We know his name. His name, by the way, is a Greek name, transliterated really into Aramaic. In Greek it means “victor over the people.” The first part of it, “Nic” comes from *nike, nike*, which is the word for triumphant or victory. So his parents gave him a very elevated name, took a Greek name, transliterated into Aramaic and he was fully Jewish but has this unique, common, very common, Greek name. And we know about him. We know his story. But we really don’t understand the full theology that is coming to us in this amazing account.

I’m going to break these ten verses that I read into three sections. We’re going to start with the sinner’s worry, verses 1 and 2. Then we’re going to go to the Savior’s way. And then we’re going to go to the Spirit’s work. Okay? So you can remember it with that simple little outline. The sinner’s worry, the Savior’s way, and the Spirit’s work.

Now this account is more than a story. Many times this is told as a story and we don’t get very deep into it. But we’re going to go where maybe you’ve never gone before in the story. So much are we going to go into the depth of the story that it could take us a month to get through these ten verses. But I promise you, what it yields to you will be a treasure that you will highly prize.

Now I’ve been telling you that the whole purpose of the gospel of John can be understood by two concepts. One, it is polemical. That is, it is a defense of the deity of Christ. It is a proof and evidence of the deity of Christ. Every paragraph, every section, every incident is to indicate to us that He is the Son of God. So it has a polemical aspect.

Secondly, it has an evangelistic aspect. Our understanding that He is the Son of God is so that we can believe in Him and have eternal life. That’s the evangelistic side. This account is no different. It is first polemical. It proves that Jesus is God. How does it do that? Because Jesus knows what Nicodemus is thinking. That’s omniscience. And it is also evangelistic because it gives us the necessary truth for salvation. So John, consistent with his twofold emphasis on polemics and on evangelism, covers both.

Now what this story makes clear for us, and I’m going to tell you this at the beginning and then I’m going to tell you at the end, and I’m going to show you in the middle. What it makes clear to us is that salvation is not for those who become more religious. It is not for those who try harder to be good. It is not for those who live morally improved lives. It is not for those who turn away from certain vices. It is not for those who diminish evil behavior and escalate noble and good behavior. Salvation is not for those people. The kingdom of salvation, the kingdom of God, opens its door only to people who abandon all of that. Did you get that? The doors of the kingdom open only to those who abandon all self-effort to earn their way. And, on the other hand, receive from God a new birth. In other words, they can’t improve on who they are, they have to be someone else other than they are. The doors of the kingdom only open to those who cease trying to earn a place in the kingdom and are given new life. In other words, you have to delete your entire life, hit the reset button and begin all over again.

Now as we approach this text, I want to take you back to chapter 2, verse 23 because this is where we get the starting point. Jesus was in Jerusalem, this was the first Passover in His ministry, and you remember the last Passover of His ministry life He was Himself the sacrificial Lamb. But here is the first Passover in His ministry life: goes to Jerusalem; He’s there with all the pilgrims for a couple of weeks because the Passover is followed by the Feast of Unleavened Bread. So several weeks encompass these great religious celebrations.

Now during the feast, verse 23 says, while He was in Jerusalem at the Passover, many believed in His name, observing His signs, His miracles which He was doing. The whole time He was there He was doing miracles. He was demonstrating divine power. Miracles, we know, came in a number of categories--power over demons, power over disease, power over death, power over nature. We don’t know specifically here what they were; John doesn’t tell us this, but there were many divine miracles.

As a result of this, many believed in His name. That sounds good and it’s a starting point. Let’s say it’s a place where you have to begin. You have to believe, to start with, in Jesus to some degree. You have to believe in His name, meaning His identity, who He claimed to be; and there were many who did, many who did based on the miracles. But Jesus, verse 24, on His part was not entrusting Himself to them. It’s the same word as believing. They believed in Him, but He didn’t believe in their believing. He didn’t have faith in their faith. He didn’t entrust Himself to them as a Savior because they hadn’t yet believed sufficiently to be saved. They believed but they didn’t believe enough to be saved.

And why did He not entrust Himself to them and how did He know the nature of their faith? End of verse 24, “Because He knew all men and because He didn’t need anyone to testify concerning man for He Himself knew what was in man.”

Whatever it was they were saying, and how would He know that they believed in His name? They would tell Him. This isn’t one moment in time, when a mob came and said, “We all believe.” This is a period of days, a couple of weeks, He’s teaching, He’s doing miracles, people are coming on and off and saying, “We believe in You, we believe You’re from God. We believe You’re a teacher from God. You can’t do these things unless the power of God is with You.” But Jesus is not affirming that as saving faith and establishing a relationship with them. Why? Because He knows that it’s not sufficient faith to save. How does He know? Because He knows what’s inside them. That’s omniscience. And we talked about that, didn’t we, that that’s evidence that He’s God.

Well one of these people, one of these many impressed by the signs, believing in Jesus is the man Nicodemus. He’s one of them. He’s the only one we know because he’s the only one about which a story is included in the text of Scripture. The story of Nicodemus then is the illustration of chapter 2, verse 23. He’s one of the many who believed but didn’t believe sufficiently to be saved. How did Jesus know that? He knows it because He knows his heart, and here’s an illustration of it in these opening verses. This is a very, very powerful, powerful account on many levels and from many perspectives.

But let’s start just with Nicodemus. And we’ll begin with what we call the sinner’s worry, the sinner’s worry. Now as you can see from verse 1, this man, Nicodemus, “there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews.” This is a formidable man in the religious system of Israel, a very formidable man. In fact, maybe even stood out head and shoulders above the rest since in verse 10 Jesus says, “Are you *the* teacher of Israel?” This man has reached the absolute pinnacle of Judaism, of religion because he is *the* teacher, definite article, *the* teacher of Israel. He’s a very religious man, but he is worried, fearful, guilty, anxious, doubtful, lacking in assurance. Why? Because he is an apostate. He’s part of a defective religious system, an apostate Judaism. He’s a hypocrite. He doesn’t know God. He doesn’t truly love God. His heart hasn’t been changed. He is just another Pharisaical hypocrite. And He knows his heart. And the heart of a hypocrite is full of fear and doubt and dread. And what does he fear? That he’s not headed for heaven. That’s the sinner’s worry. He fears that he’s not headed for the resurrection and eternal life in heaven.

Now when you have reached the pinnacle of your religion and it doesn’t deliver the confidence that you’re going to heaven, you’re a worried man. An irreligious, atheistic, openly immoral man has fear--fear of judgment, but not nearly the level of fear that an elevated hypocrite has because he’s done everything he knows to do and when the fear and the dread and the reality that he doesn’t know God hits him, he has nowhere to go because he’s reached the peak. That’s Nicodemus.

The Pharisees--there were six thousand of them, according to Josephus, in the land of Israel at that time--were the most devout, the most conscientious keepers of the Law. Not only the Law of Scripture, but all the other laws that they made up, prescriptions to produce holiness they thought. The word “Pharisee” comes from the word meaning “separated.” They were the separated people, separated from the rest of the people by their devotion to the Law, separated from sin, separated from evil, etc., etc. They were at the very heart of apostate, corrupt Judaism. They were the people Jesus was assaulting when he went into the Temple in chapter 2, verses 13 to 18, made a whip and started throwing people out. It was their system that He was assaulting.

Now they were so devout that on many, many levels they had achieved external virtue. Listen to the testimony of Paul who was one of them, a Pharisee in Philippians 3. “If anybody has a mind to have confidence in the flesh, I do. I was circumcised the eighth day of the nation Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews.” That means he followed all the traditions. “As to the Law, a Pharisee, as to zeal, a persecutor of the church. As to righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless.”

Here’s Paul; that’s the testimony of a Pharisee. I dotted every i; I crossed every t religiously. I observed the laws, I was kosher, I carried out the traditions, I did it all. And it really came down to some bizarre minutia. There are records that tell us, for example, that a Pharisee could not look in a mirror on the Sabbath. A mirror would be a piece of flattened metal, not glass. But a Pharisee couldn’t look in a mirror on the Sabbath because he might see a gray hair and be tempted to pull it out, and that would be a violation of the no-work on the Sabbath. A Pharisee who had a sore throat would normally gargle with vinegar; that’s what they used, this kind of an antiseptic. But Pharisees couldn’t gargle on the Sabbath because that was work; they had to swallow it immediately when they drank the vinegar. A Pharisee could eat an egg that was laid on the Sabbath if he intended to kill the chicken that laid it on the Sabbath.

I mean, that’s how it developed into these ridiculous formulas for virtue. Well, this is one of them. The best description given in the New Testament of Pharisees was given by our Lord in Matthew 23, in the last week of His life and ministry before His death. Turn to Matthew 23 and this will be the best glimpse of the Pharisees. They are described along with the scribes for the most part who were part of them. It says in verses 1 and 2 of Matthew 23 that they put themselves in the chair of Moses. In other words, they became the interpreters of the Law of Moses, the Law that God had given to Moses back in Exodus. By the way, they tell you to do all those things but they don’t do them themselves. They’re hypocrites. They tie heavy burdens on you; they don’t help you with those burdens at all. Verse 4, they do what they do to be noticed by men. Verse 6, they love the place of honor at banquets, chief seats in the synagogues. They love to be greeted in the marketplace and called rabbi. It’s a term of respect, meaning teacher, a Chaldean term that came out of the captivity when they were there. They loved to be called rabbi, they loved to be called teacher, they want to be called father as if they’re the source of truth. They want to be called leader.

However, verse 13, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, you shut off the kingdom of heaven from people and you don’t enter in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in. You stop people from the kingdom. You’re not in the kingdom and you can’t help anybody get in the kingdom. You’re not in it and you prevent others from being in it.”

And that’s exactly where Nicodemus was. He wasn’t in the kingdom. In his heart he knew he wasn’t in the kingdom. Verse 15, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, you travel over sea and land to make one proselyte and when he becomes one you make him twice as much as son of hell as yourselves.” Verse 16, “Woe to you blind guides.” And it goes on like this. Verse 23, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, you tithe little tiny herbs and neglect the weightier provisions of the Law, justice, mercy and faithfulness.” Verse 25, “You are hypocrites who clean the outside of the cup and inside are full of robbery and self-indulgence.” Verse 27, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, you’re like whitewashed tombs.” Verse 29, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, you built the tombs of the prophets, adorn the monuments, etc., and through history you kill the prophets.”

He sums it up in verse 33, “You serpents, you brood of vipers, how will you escape the sentence of hell?” Pharisees, include Nicodemus. He’s at the top of the pile. He...in fact, go back to verse 1...is a ruler of the Jews. A ruler of the Jews? That is right. He has reached the pinnacle. He has reached the highest level that anyone can reach. He is a member of the Sanhedrin. He is one of them, we learn in John 7. Seventy men chosen from all the leaders, the religious leaders of Israel, many of them Pharisees, some Sadducees, the most elite, in some cases the richest, in some cases the finest scholars, in his case, the best teacher, ex-high priests made up this ruling body called the Sanhedrin, the Seventy. He’s a part of that group. This man is at the apex of religion. Very rare, by the way for a Pharisee to come to Jesus. There’s only one in all four gospels, and it’s him. The only other Pharisee we know about, Jesus went after him on the Damascus Road, Paul. This is very rare. He’s the only story in the gospels of a Pharisee coming to Jesus.

He is full of fear, anxiety as hypocrites are. He fears judgment. He fears hell, punishment, exclusion from heaven. Pharisees believed in all of those things. Pharisees believed in divine sovereignty. Pharisees believed in human responsibility. The Pharisees believed in angels, they believed in the resurrection, they believed in heaven, they believed in hell, and he’s got that much in his theology and that’s enough to frighten him.

By the way, this is necessary angst for anybody to be saved, because until that fear rises in your heart, you don’t pursue salvation. Well this man, verse 2 says, came to Jesus by night. Much has been written on the fact that he came by night, pages and pages and pages and pages. Let me tell you what it means. It means this: he did not come during the daylight. That is what it means. That is the depth and height and length and breadth of what it means. If you asked me why did he come at night? I don’t know. More, I don’t care. You tell me, when is the best time to come to Jesus? Any time. Maybe his wife told him to clean the back porch and it got dark and then he came. I don’t know. I don’t know. I don’t care. That’s not the point.

It’s not a metaphor of the darkness of his soul. He came. He was curious, he was concerned. He came with the sinner’s angst, the sinner’s worry.

Now you know, in Matthew 23, Jesus blistered the Pharisees. I just read it to you. “Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, hypocrites, hypocrites, hypocrites. Your house is left to you desolate,” He says. “Judgment is going to fall on you. You kill the prophets, you stone those that are sent to you, you snakes.”

But here at the beginning of His ministry comes this one Pharisee, and Jesus opens His arms to him, opens His heart to him. In a sense, Jesus treats him in the way that Matthew 12:20 says the Messiah would treat people. Matthew 12:20 quotes a passage from Isaiah 42, this is the passage. “A battered reed He will not break off, a smoldering wick He will not put out.” When the Messiah comes, He will not turn down the broken people. This is a man who is a broken reed. This is a man whose fire is low. The Messiah will receive the broken and the smoldering who come to Him, and that’s demonstrated here.

The conversation is initiated by Nicodemus. He says to Jesus, “Rabbi, we know that You come from God as a Teacher.” Now back in verse 23 of chapter 2, many believed. What did they believe? Well here’s an illustration. They believed that He came from God. You say, “Well, maybe just Nicodemus believed that.” No. Listen to what he said. “Rabbi, we know you’ve come from God as a Teacher.” We...he expands beyond himself and he’s saying, “You know what? The many people who believe in You, this is what we believe. We believe You come from God as a teacher.” Why do we believe that? “For no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him. We know You are a God-sent teacher.”

Wow, that’s a great, great confession. “We know, Rabbi”; by the way, He received that word every day of His life, He was called Rabbi, Rabbi; that’s a term of great respect, honorable term. And now he turns and gives it to Jesus, which means he sees Jesus at least as his equal and He is the teacher in Israel. But You’re one up on me because You’re doing miracles that men can’t do. Remember, miracles were not a part of life. That whole generation of people--never seen a miracle, never, never. There hadn’t even been a prophet for 400 years, nobody they knew had ever seen a miracle; no ancestor had ever seen a miracle. Here were miracles all over the place in just a few weeks. “No one can do what You do unless the power of God is with him. We believe that You have come from God as a teacher.”

Well that’s a good start, isn’t it? That’s a really good start. Maybe like Moses, whom God attested with miracles around the life and ministry of Moses. Maybe like Elijah, Elisha whom God affirmed by miracles, a prophet like Isaiah, a prophet like Jeremiah, a prophet like Jonah, a prophet like Ezekiel. And just maybe in the back of his mind, maybe You are the Messiah. Maybe You are the Messiah. But he’s like the five disciples in the first chapter who needed more information, remember their stories? They were followers of John the Baptist. John said, “Go follow Jesus.” They followed Jesus and then at night they sat down with Him and asked all kinds of questions to fill out their faith and then believed and followed. He needs more information.

But this is a tremendous declaration from a man who was part...listen...of the enemies of Jesus who drove Him to the cross. Why is it important? I’ll tell you why it’s important. Here is a man who is a member of the most hostile, the most aggressive, the most angry, the most hateful enemies that Jesus had on earth, the Pharisees. And he is saying, “You are a teacher sent from God doing miracles.” That is objective, first-person, plural because he says, “We know that You have come from God.” This is objective, first-person, plural, eye-witness testimony to the authenticity of Jesus’ miracles. And that’s why John includes this. That’s the polemical part of this. This isn’t coming from John and Peter and Philip and Nathanael. This isn’t the testimony of His followers. This is the testimony of one of His enemies, that He is on a divine mission empowered by God, speaking the truth of God as a prophet. This is not just polite. This is not just curious. This is not just cordial. This is not just hopeful. This is an amazing first-hand profession and affirmation of the miracle power of Jesus that affirmed Him as a Teacher sent from God, from a man who is at best indifferent, at worst hostile.

So Jesus didn’t commit Himself to Nicodemus here as He didn’t commit Himself to them back in chapter 2, verse 23, because this is not a sufficient faith to save. But it is a sufficient declaration to affirm that Jesus authenticated Himself as a teacher from God by His miracles. That’s a starting point, that’s a starting point.

You know, I commend Nicodemus. He took the road less traveled. Pharisee, who would want to be one of them? Who would want to worry about pulling a gray hair? He lived a most restricted life and, believe me, once you joined the association, everybody held you to those restrictions. The accountability was massive. In fact, perhaps one of the reasons he came by night was because that would be the only way he could isolate himself from the rest of the group to talk to Jesus.

He took religion to its apex. He took religion to its highest level, its noblest level. He reached the very pinnacle of it. He was as fastidious as fastidious could be. He was the guy who tithed the tiny little herbs, but his heart was full of fear and he wanted more information about Jesus. So he comes, a worried sinner.

Now come to verse 3, the Savior’s way. How is the Savior going to respond to him? “Jesus answered and said to him.” I always loved that in English, “Jesus answered and said to him.” I don’t know why they put “answered” there because he didn’t ask a question, he didn’t ask a question. He made a declaration, he made a confession. “We know You’ve come from God as a teacher, for no one can do these signs [these miracles] that You do unless God is with him.” That’s a confession, that’s not a question. “But Jesus answered and said to him, ‘Truly, truly I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.’”

Does that seem like an irrelevant comment? I don’t know, I think if it would have been me I’d have said, “Well thanks a lot, Nicodemus. I appreciate that. I’m so happy to know that you believe that I have come from God, that I’m a teacher from God, I appreciate that.” But Jesus ignores what he says, totally ignores what he says. Now this is a cryptic representation of the conversation. Let me promise you; I read that in three minutes earlier, that ten verses. This conversation with Nicodemus didn’t last three minutes. It may have lasted hours; this is simply a cryptic summary of that conversation’s most salient elements. So I’m sure Jesus was kind enough to ingratiate Himself to Nicodemus and respond His commendation.

But the point that needs to be made is that what Nicodemus said wasn’t important to Jesus. It was what Nicodemus was thinking that was important. And if you go back again to chapter 2:23 to 25, Jesus knew all men and He knew what was in man. His omniscience. He knew what Nicodemus was thinking and he knew the sinner’s worry, he knew his angst, and he knew what it was about was that he was afraid he was going to die and miss the kingdom. He knew he didn’t have a relationship with God. He knew he wasn’t in the kingdom. He knew he wasn’t headed for resurrection life and heaven. That’s what he knew. And so Jesus ignores what’s on his lips and goes to right what’s in his heart and reads him like a billboard. “Jesus answered and said to him, ‘Truly, truly I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.’” That was the issue. He was afraid he would miss the kingdom. He feared that all his religion, all his ritual, all his ceremony, all his external righteous acts, all his silly conformities to the prescriptions that the rabbis had amassed over the centuries, all of that had not gotten him into the kingdom.

Now what is he talking about? The kingdom of God can be understood four ways: the universal kingdom, Psalm 93, “The Lord reigns, the Lord reigns, He reigns over the entire universe, He reigns over eternity.” That’s one aspect of the kingdom of God, the eternal universal kingdom.

The second aspect of the kingdom is the mediatorial kingdom. That is the kingdom of salvation and redemption that He mediates on earth as He uses human means to bring people to salvation. The third element of the kingdom is the millennial kingdom, the thousand-year reign of Christ at the end of human history. The fourth element of His kingdom is the new heaven and the new earth and the eternal kingdom. So there is the universal kingdom, God rules over all. There is the kingdom of salvation, working its way out in human history to be followed by the millennial kingdom of the reign of Christ on earth. And then the eternal kingdom. What he’s talking about here is not the universal reign of God which is over everyone, not the future millennial kingdom, not the future eternal kingdom in particular, but the realm of salvation, the special realm of the redeemed, those who are saved from judgment, reconciled to God in relation to Him forever, headed for resurrection and life in heaven. Jesus says you’re not going to be in that kingdom; you’re not going to be in that kingdom unless you are born again.

Our Lord didn’t connect, at least in the text, with Nicodemus’ comment. He went straight to his heart. And Nicodemus knew he had a place in Judaism; he had a very elevated place in Judaism because he was a son of Abraham, and because he was a dutiful Pharisee. But he had no place in the kingdom of God. Abraham was his physical father; God was not his spiritual Father. He was no better off than an immoral pagan. And he was trusting in his religion to get him there and he knew in his heart it wasn’t doing it. The Savior then gave him the way and he starts by saying, “Truly, truly,” you’re going to see that 25 times in the gospel of John, Jesus says that. He says it again in verse 5 right here. “Truly, truly.” And when He says that, He is correcting a falsehood. And the falsehood is the religion of Judaism.

I’m telling you the truth now--“Truly, truly”--emphatic, strong, the current Jewish idea that all Jews are going to be in the resurrection and in heaven because they’re a part of the kingdom, unless they are willfully apostate or blasphemous, and that’s what the Jews taught--all Jews are okay. Let me tell you something. I want you to let that falsehood go. Here’s the truth. “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see or participate in the kingdom of God.”

Now what is the bottom line here? Here it is. Religion in any form to any degree is completely useless in getting anybody to heaven. Did you hear it? Religion in any form to any degree at any level is totally and completely useless. It is ineffective even at its highest levels of devotion. The words of Jesus here that you must be born again are simply saying there’s nothing to add because nothing you’ve done matters. You have to go back and start all over again. You have to slay, as it were, or have slain who you are and be replaced by a new creature. His words shatter once and for all every supposed excellence of man’s religious devotion and behavior. All religious behavior, all moral behavior, all religious achievement, all ceremony, all ritual, all devotion adds up to absolute zero, all accumulated morality adds up to zero. All the merits of human goodness add up to zero. It’s all zero. In fact, it’s worse than zero. Paul says I counted all these things gain and then I saw Christ and I realized it was all excrement, manure, Philippians 3.

So that’s Jesus’ view of religion. All religion is useless, absolutely useless. You may be the Pope and all that religion is useless. You’re no better off than a pagan atheist; it counts for nothing, it counts for nothing. The Savior’s way, you must be born again. Five times He says that in this text. You’ve got to go back to the beginning, cancel, delete all religiosity, all religious achievement, all moral achievement, all human goodness, all noble behavior--it adds up to zero.

Now, you’re familiar with being born again, but let me tell you something about the word “again.” It’s the Greek *anothen, anothen*. It actually means “from above,” “from above.” It can be translated “born again,” but it could also be translated “born from above,” and both are correct. You need to have another birth from above, from above. You have to be created all over again to enter the kingdom from above, which is to say you make no contribution to it; that’s why the analogy of birth is used. And again I say what I said at the beginning. You made no contribution to your birth; physically you make no contribution to your birth spiritually. That birth is not achieved by man. So it could be translated “you must be born from above.” And by the way, *anothen* is used at the end of this chapter, near the end in verse 31, and there it’s translated “from above.” He who comes from above, it’s the same word. In chapter 19, *anothen* is translated “from above.” So it means “from above.” You have to be born and you have to be born not by something done here but by something done above, above.

I don’t...it doesn’t matter whether you’re a priest. It doesn’t matter whether you’re a religious leader. It doesn’t matter whether you’re an atheist who hates and rejects religion. You’re all in the same boat. I know we get upset in America with the rise of atheism. You should be no more upset about the rise of atheism than you should be upset about the rise of false religion in any form ’cause they’re all in the same boat. This has to happen from above.

Go back to John 1. At the very beginning John made this clear. In verse 12 he talks about children of God, children of God. And with that implies birth, doesn’t it? In order to be a child, you have to be born. In order to become a child of God, you have to be born from above; that’s what he says. He talks about having the right to become children of God by believing in His name. Then verse 13 makes it clear, “Who were born not of blood”...that is, this spiritual birth isn’t something you inherit...“nor of the will of the flesh”...it isn’t something you get because you want it hard enough...“nor of the will of man”--that is by some human devised religious scheme. But this is a birth of God who were born of God from above.

Regeneration is a divine miracle that happens from heaven. Nicodemus has physical life. He didn’t contribute to it. He has no spiritual life. He needs it. But he can’t contribute to that either because that’s a work of God that comes only to those who cease trusting in themselves. In divine majesty with one glorious stroke, Jesus obliterates all the sinner’s refuge, all the sinner’s safety in traditionalism, formalism, ceremonialism, legalism, ritualism, ecclesiasticism, and points the barbed arrow of spiritual truth at the vital point. You have to discount all of that. It’s manure. You need to be born again.

Jesus had respect for the Law. Great respect for the Law. He was the author of the Law. He fulfilled the Law. But He knew the Law couldn’t save, the Law could not save. This man had one great need and it’s the same great need that every sinner has. He needs to be regenerated, reborn from above. This great truth of Christ splintered by destructive lightning coming out of the sky all the forms, all the formulas, all the dogmas, all the legalistic requirements, all the ecclesiastical rituals placed between a man and God. He went to the root of the issue, regeneration. Nicodemus didn’t need more laws, more rules, more services, more sacrifices, more prayers, more candles; he needed to become a new creation; only God can do that. And that is every sinner’s need.

Next time we’ll talk about his response.

We thank You again, Lord, for the wonderful time that we’ve enjoyed this morning in fellowship and worship. We thank You for Your Word. It just illuminates everything. We understand the world. We understand things that people can’t understand. Thank You that it elucidates everything. And we pray for sinners here who are worried sinners, who are hypocritical sinners, who know in their hearts that they’re outside the Kingdom, that they’re not headed for resurrection and eternal life, who are living in fear and doubt and dread, and anxiety, and angst over their condition. And some for sure have tried religion, some have tried it in an extreme way, and it has delivered nothing for the soul. I pray for those people, Lord, that they would cease trying and they would cry out to You to give them life as they put their trust in Christ to as many as received Him, God gives the right to become the children of God, born of God. May You give that life today, to Your everlasting glory we pray. Amen.

**The Blueprint for Being Born Again**

**John 3:3**

Code: 43-12

For now, I want to encourage you to open the Word of God to the third chapter of John as we continue to look at this very important portion of Scripture on the new birth, being born again. We are returning to what is the definitive text in the gospels on the new birth. Our teacher here is none other than the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God. This, of course, is for most of us who have been in the church any length of time, a very familiar portion of Scripture. The terminology “being born again” is part of evangelical lingo and has been for a long, long time.

But in spite of the fact that it’s familiar terminology and it’s thrown around a lot and has been certainly all through my lifetime, there seems to be a failure on the part of most Christian people to understand what new birth means. It’s not obscure, not difficult to figure out; it’s all bound up in the analogy itself, being born.

Let me read the passage for you, verses 1 through 10, and then we’ll take another look at it. I told you last time, and I’ll tell you again, we have to go slowly through this because it is so important, it is so critical. So we’re not going to finish these ten verses this morning, but we’ll dig down deep enough so that you’ll be greatly enriched and encouraged by what you learn.

“Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, ‘Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher, for no one can do these things that You do unless God is with him.’ Jesus answered and said to him, ‘Truly, truly I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.’ Nicodemus said to Him, ‘How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born, can he?’ Jesus answered, ‘Truly, truly I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be amazed that I said to you, you must be born again. The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it’s going. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit.’ Nicodemus said to Him, ‘How can these things be?’ Jesus answered and said to him, ‘Are you *the* teacher of Israel and do not understand these things?’”

Now our Lord’s message is very simple. The kingdom of God is entered only through being born again. The kingdom of God is the sphere of salvation, it’s the people ruled by God who have eternal life and are on their way to heaven. The only way to enter the kingdom of God is by being born again. That’s the only way. Apart from that, no one enters the kingdom of God.

Now as I said, this is a common idea. We even talk about born-again Christians; that is very familiar to all of us. But we don’t seem to get a grip on the essence of this analogy. The point of our Lord’s analogy is simply this: being born is not something that you have anything to do with. You didn’t have anything to do with your physical birth, nor do you have anything to do with your spiritual birth. Being born physically is something that happened to you, completely out of your control. And being spiritually born is something that happened to you completely out of your control. In both cases, God created you by the means of your parents, but nonetheless God created you. Your parents could give you physicality, but only God could create your spirit. And in the spiritual sense, being born again is an act of God by which He recreates you. It’s a new birth. And that’s the point of the simple analogy. This we call the doctrine of regeneration. What does it mean? It is simply a term that describes the necessity that a person receive a new birth, a new life, a new nature, a new disposition, a new character, a new mind from God and that person makes no contribution to that.

As I told you last time, spiritual birth is the second work of God in salvation, if you want to sort of split them out. The first work of God was election when He wrote our names down in the Lamb’s Book of Life, chose us before the foundation of the world and predestined us to become His children. That was the first act of God. The second is to regenerate us. The work of election took place in eternity past; the work of regeneration takes place in time present.

Now to understand the doctrine of regeneration is to understand the essence of salvation as a work of God. And that’s the point here. This analogy is very instructive, very simple, very basic; really should not be misunderstood at all. To enter the kingdom of God, whatever it is you may have accomplished morally, religiously, ritually, ceremonially in terms of human goodness is immaterial because you can’t contribute anything to your birth spiritually, any more than you contributed to your birth physically.

Now all of this comes out in this discussion between Jesus and Nicodemus. And I would remind you that this is a cryptic account, that is to say it’s a summarized account. Nicodemus came to Jesus, you remember, “at night” it tells us in verse 2, and no doubt the conversation lasted for hours if not all night. And what you have here is a summation and a representation of the dialogue that was there, but there was so much more that must have been said than just this. So I’m going to take the liberty to fill in what might have been discussed. How can I do that since I wasn’t there? I can borrow all of that from the writers of the rest of the New Testament to whom the Holy Spirit brought to mind in the great work of inspiration and revelation, the truths that they needed to know. What Jesus says here only introduces the subject of being born again, of regeneration, and the rest of the New Testament enriches and expands and elucidates on that subject.

Now as we approach this particular portion of Scripture, let me give you a little bit of a running start. I always like to do that. So go back to chapter 2, verse 23. Jesus is in Jerusalem; you know what’s been going on there. He attacked the Temple and threw everybody out of the Temple because they turned it into a business and corrupted it and dishonored God. He is still in Jerusalem at the Passover in verse 23. And following the Passover was the Feast of Unleavened Bread, which lasted another week. So He’s there for a couple of weeks, at least. And according to verse 23 He’s doing miracles called signs, and they’re so convincing that many believed in His name. So the first thing that I want you to note is that Jesus in Jerusalem is doing miracles, visible miracles to this massive crowd that have assembled there for these very important annual festivals among the Jews. And they’re so powerful, these miracles, and we would know what they would be, miracles of healing, miracles of casting out demons, things like that, because that’s what marked His entire three-year ministry. And they’re believing in His name. People are believing in His name.

However, this faith is not saving faith, and that becomes clear in the next two verses because Jesus on His part was not entrusting Himself to them. And the verb is the same. It says in 23, “Many believed in His name.” The same verb is used in 24, “But Jesus was not believing in their believing.” He had no faith in their faith. In other words, He knew that it wasn’t saving faith; it wasn’t full faith; it didn’t have enough content.

How did He know that? “Because He knew all men. He didn’t need anyone to testify concerning man, for He Himself knew what was in man.” So you have two things working here. You have superficial faith at work, or initial faith, or beginning faith. And then you have the omniscience of Christ. So you have a description of the people who are there who have this kind of an initial, basic, non-saving kind of faith. And then you have the Lord Jesus who is obviously God because only God knows how people think and what their thoughts are. So the omniscience of Christ demonstrating His deity and the condition of the soul of man of superficial faith. Those two things are indicated there in verses 23 to 25.

Now when you come to chapter 3, those two things come together. Here in this illustration you have one of the many who believed. They are mentioned in verse 23; here’s one of them. And he speaks not only for himself, but he speaks for the rest of the group who believed that he knows about because he says in verse 2, “Rabbi, we know.” And so he’s speaking not only for himself but those others who believe that had, you know, met each other and recognized that they had this common response. “We know that You have come from God as a teacher for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.” So that tells us what they believe. What did they believe? That He was a teacher, that He had come from God. He was at least a prophet. They knew not in their lifetime because there hadn’t even been a prophet for 400 years, there hadn’t been miracles for a long time. You have to go way back into the Old Testament to find miracles happening, way back past the post-exilic prophets. So they weren’t used to miracles, but they did know Old Testament history that God did mark out His prophets like Moses and Elijah by miracles. And so they know at least this is a prophet, a teacher from God, which is short of saying He’s the Son of God and the Messiah, and the Savior, and the Lord and so forth. That’s why it’s not a saving faith. So he gives us what they believe, that this is a teacher from God and we know that because nobody can do the miracles you’re doing. They’re clearly miracles; they’re clearly designed to demonstrate His deity and the power of God. So they recognize that.

Then when you come to verse 3 Jesus ignores what Nicodemus says and reads his mind and says, “Truly, truly I say to you, unless one is born again he can’t see the kingdom of God.” What was in Nicodemus’ mouth was an affirmation that’s recorded in verse 2. “We think You’re a teacher come from God because of the miracles You do.” What was in his mind was, “I don’t know how to get into the kingdom of God.” And so Jesus bypasses His initial, I guess, polite introduction “rabbi” and confession of what he believed—goes right to the issue of his heart. So here you have an illustration then of the supernatural omniscience of the Son of God who reads a man’s mind accurately, and you have an illustration of superficial faith, just as was indicated at the end of chapter 2.

Now as we dig into this chapter, I want to split it down to three simple parts. Number one is the sinner’s worry, and that looks at the anxieties in the heart of Nicodemus, and we dug into that last week. And then the Savior’s Word to Nicodemus that brings an answer to that worry. And then finally the Spirit’s work, which will show up particularly in verse 8. But again, let’s go back to the analogy here of new birth.

Salvation is not gained by those who try harder. Salvation is not gained by those who live better. Salvation is not gained by those who become more moral, more religious, take religion to its highest level, forsake certain vices. No, the kingdom of God is not gained by anything a person does. The kingdom of God only opens to those who are born again; or the term again is *anothen* in the Greek and it means “from above,” “down from above.” You have to be given life from above, and that’s not something that you can do spiritually any more than you can do it physically. The kingdom of salvation, we said last time, opens its doors only to those who abandon all human effort as a means of salvation, who cease trying to earn their way in and literally are born from above by the power and will of God.

Now let’s go back to the text with that sort of in mind. Looking again at the sinner’s worry. Nicodemus is introduced in verse 1 as a Pharisee. Pharisees were...were literally archetypal hypocrites. They were models of what hypocrisy was. In fact, they are condemned by Jesus in the most blistering malediction on the pages of the New Testament, Matthew 23, where He calls them sons of hell who produce more sons of hell, where He repeatedly calls them hypocrites and pronounces damnations and curses on them, one after another, after another, after another, after another, Matthew 23. They tell people to do things that they don’t do. They put burdens on people of legalism that they don’t help them carry. They essentially are liars. They are phonies; they are frauds described as whitewashed tombs on the outside, inside full of corrupt dead men’s bones. He was one of those. He was a man who was like the apostle Paul—zealous for the law, traditional, kosher, blameless before the law, externally fastidious about keeping every law, every ritual, every little minute kind of tradition that had developed and he lived as a hypocrite. And hypocrites know that there’s a difference between the outside and the inside because the spirit of a man, 1 Corinthians 2 says, knows what is in the heart of a man. So he knows what’s going on. He’s a hypocrite.

Now he’s climbed the hypocrite...the hypocritical pile to the very top because he is a ruler of the Jews, a member of the Sanhedrin, the ruling body of seventy people, and to be in that group you had to be one of the most elite of all hypocrites. He was also labeled in verse 10 as *the* teacher of Israel, which means that he had climbed the pile of academia and biblical knowledge and was regarded as *the* teacher. So here is a man extremely religious, extremely fastidious. He is…he is at the pinnacle of what would be called a Pharisaical, Judaistic nobility. He is elite when it comes to that, devotedly moral, externally following every detail of the law and on the inside he knows he is not in the kingdom of God. He has no assurance that his eternal soul belongs to God. He has no assurance of forgiveness of His transgressions and his sins which are many, the least of which is certainly the most common of sins, and that is his hypocrisy. The greatest of which is his rejection of the way of salvation, which was always by faith and grace and penitence. He is a hypocrite. He has no relation to God, no place in the kingdom, no assurance of forgiveness, no hope of heaven, and he knows all that because the spirit of a man knows what’s in a man.

So he comes to Jesus. And what is he doing? He comes by night; he needs some help. And the help that he wants is how do I get in the kingdom. And you know what his approach is going to be. His approach is going to be, I’m not in the kingdom. I know I’m not in the kingdom. What do I need to do? I’ve done everything I know to do. I’ve kept every law I know to keep. I’ve kept every biblical law I know to keep. I’ve kept every rabbinic traditional law I know to keep, I’ve dotted every i, crossed every t, my whole life, that’s why I’ve achieved what I’ve achieved religiously. In a sense you could say he may well be the pope of Jerusalem. I mean, he’s hit the top of the pile.

What do I do? Where do I go? What more do I need to do? What other thing do I need to do? Or what thing do I need to delete out of my life? What am I doing that I need to stop doing? What am I not doing I need to do? And Jesus says to him this: “If you want to enter the kingdom, you’ve got to be born again.” Which is to say, “Nothing you’ve ever done makes any contribution. Everything you are needs to be dead. Everything you have achieved needs to die, is dead—dead works as we read in Hebrews 9.” Because the kingdom of God, verse 3, the kingdom of God, the realm of salvation is only for those who are born again, or you can’t see it, meaning you can’t participate in it, you can’t be a part of it, both in your life here and forever in the glories of heaven. He ignores the greeting. He doesn’t comment on the greeting, at least John doesn’t record his comment on it if he did. He reads Nicodemus’ mind. He goes right to his mind because He knew everyone’s mind. He knew what everybody was thinking ’cause He’s God. And He shatters in that one statement to bits all the stained glass ideas of religion. All religious works, all moral works are useless, impotent to provide anything by which a man can enter the kingdom. This is the truth of regeneration. And is predicated on the fact that the best that a man can do is wretched, that all our moral works, and all our religion is useless to satisfy or please God.

Ephesians 2 says, “You’re dead in trespasses and sins.” Ephesians 4, “You’re cut off from the life of God.” This is a dead man, a blind man, an ignorant man, a hopeless man and on top of that, a hypocrite. From there you can’t get to God’s kingdom. You can’t. Unless you’re born from above, born again, have another birth that comes like your first birth from above. You need to be created by God again spiritually. This introduces to us the truth of regeneration.

Now I want you to get this, going to give you a little theology this morning. When you look at salvation, you could say when I say I’m born again, you mean by that the full orbs of salvation. You could say I’m regenerate and you could mean by that fully the reality of salvation. If you said I was converted, you could mean the same thing. If you said I’m redeemed, you could mean I’m speaking in general terms of my salvation. You could say I’ve been justified. You could say I’ve been sanctified, and all of those could be general terms to describe your salvation.

But at the same time, they can all be broken down as individual components in the panoply of realities that make up salvation. Regeneration is different from justification. Justification is different from sanctification. Sanctification is different from conversion. Conversion is different from faith. And faith is different from repentance. Those are all a way to describe the whole, but they can also be broken out as component parts. So let’s talk about regeneration not in its general sense, the way we would throw it around when we say I’m born again. Let’s talk about it in its specific sense and see what it is in terms of its biblical, narrow definition.

Now let me help you with this. Some of you who have studied theology. When you come together to this term “regeneration,” when you bring yourself to visit this declaration, this great doctrine of regeneration, you’re touching the truth of irresistible grace. Now you will remember that phrase if you know Calvinism, total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, perseverance, the little tulip acrostic. So irresistible grace is where you are when you come to the doctrine of regeneration. Okay? Some would call it the supernatural subpoena. Some would call it the unyielding summons, the saving call. But this is where God draws you to Himself, out of your deadness. This is where God drags you out of the grave. This is regeneration. This is what enables the dead sinner to believe, to repent, to call out to Christ. This is what enables us to come to Christ in faith.

Now the New Testament is crystal clear on this and it’s everywhere and not I’m not going to take you everywhere, but am going to take you somewhere. Second Corinthians 5:17, “If any man be in Christ he is”...What?...“new creature,” “new creation,” “new creation,” okay? If any man’s in Christ, he’s a new creation. You’ve been born again; it’s a new creation. Now remember, I told you what Jesus said to Nicodemus when He said to him, “You must be born again,” was that everything you’ve done in the past is useless. It’s all dead works. It doesn’t matter, it’s useless. It wouldn’t make any difference if you were a prostitute or if you were *the* teacher in Israel, you’re in the same condition. Because none of that counts; none of that matters. You have to be born again. Born from above. This is a powerful truth. We’ll come back to this at a later time, but in 1 Peter 1:3, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again.” Blessed be God. We give Him all the glory, all the credit. He caused us to be born again. He birthed us. He birthed us. And the New Testament says this repeatedly, one wonderful comment is made in the sixth chapter of Romans by Paul where it says, “Present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead.” “Present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead.” Ephesians 2:4, “God being rich in mercy because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead, in our transgressions, made us alive.” It’s always God who makes us alive, who creates us, who gives us life.

Now I want to leave Nicodemus and Jesus for the moment, and I want you to go to James chapter 1, because this is where I’m going to fill in some of the gaps that may well have been in that conversation. And I say that because they’re all over the New Testament and the Spirit of God revealed them to the other writers, but I want you to go to James chapter 1. There might be a number of places to go, but this one is especially condensed.

There’s a lot of conversation about sin and temptation here, starting in verse 13. Temptation, evil, God doesn’t tempt, verse 14, “Each one is tempted when he’s carried away, enticed by his own lusts, and lust”...follow this...“lust when it conceives does”...What?...“gives birth to sin. Sin when it’s accomplished gives birth”...same terminology...“gives birth to death.”

So here you have the fallen condition of man, it’s just the reproduction of temptation—he goes from temptation to lust, to sin, to death. In contrast to that you come to verse 17. In contrast to all those bad things, temptation, lust, sin, death, “every good thing given, genuinely good, truly good, every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights.”

So there’s a tremendous shift between verse 16 and 17. Every good thing given, every spiritually good thing, this is inclusive, comprehensive, all that is holy, all that is righteous, every good thing given, every perfect gift is from above, *anothen*, the same term that’s used in John 3 for born again. And it all comes down, *katabaino,* “it comes down from the Father of lights.” “The Father of lights” is an ancient Jewish title for God because when God began His creation, God said, “Let there be light.” He’s the Father of light—the Father of light and the Father of lights. He attached that light once He created light. He attached it to the moon, the sun, the stars, either in the way it’s in the sun, as germane to its own entity, or the way it’s in the moon as it’s reflected. So God is the Father of lights. He’s the Creator and that’s the very important point. Every spiritual thing, every holy thing, every righteous thing given, every gift that can be deemed perfect because it is holy and righteous is from above. It’s *anothen* and it comes down from the Father of lights. Everyone—that’s comprehensive and inclusive—God who sovereignly created the light that comes down from above, has given every good perfect gift in the category of what is holy, what is good, what is righteous. And then this interesting comment. And with whom in that area, there’s no variation or shifting shadows.

God did create light but light creates shadows, doesn’t it? It creates variations. God created light but we don’t have...we don’t have perfect light all the time; we have light and darkness. We have everything from a blazing, blinding sun at mid-day to pitch black, crowded skies—darkness at night. And we have everything in between. We have the shadowy times as the sun rises, as the sun sets. There are all these variations in the physical light that God has created. But there are no variations in the spiritual gifts that He gives. That’s James’ point. Really a magnificent point because he ends verse 17 by saying, “With whom there is no variation, or shifting shadow.” Literally from turning, there’s a Greek verb here, it’s a very interesting verb. Literally when it says a shifting shadow, it means turning. The rotating earth, the turning earth is what creates the shadows. The sun’s not going anywhere but the earth is turning and creating shadows. But when he says there’s no variation, he uses a verb *paralego* from which we get the word *parallax*. Studied that in a science class? A parallax means the apparent displacement, or the apparent difference in something by virtue of the perspective you have on it. For example, you look at something from this angle like columns in a building and it has a certain appearance, and you move somewhere else and look at it and it has a different appearance. That’s a parallax. From different perspectives, you get a different view.

So, in the world that God has created, in the light that He has created, you have all kinds of shadows because the thing is turning and you have all kinds of parallax because perspectives change all the time. But when it comes to God in the realm of spiritual gifts, of holiness and righteousness, they never change from any perspective; they never vary. There are never any shadows, and no matter the vantage point you take, they’re always the same, always the same.

And what is His best gift and in what...and to whom...do these gifts come? Well, they come in the kingdom to those who belong to it. And He describes that in verse 18. Here’s His best gift, and here’s the entrance to all His gifts which never change. “In the exercise of His will.” Do I need to stop there and emphasize that? “In the exercise of His will He birthed us.” “He birthed us.” Well you can stop right there. He brought us forth. It’s exactly the same verb as back in verse 15, “sin gives birth to death.” In His kingdom He gives birth to us.

The glory of this divine gift is really stunning and it is the starting point for all His other gifts, for every good gift, every perfect gift follows. Having given us this, Romans 8 says, “How will He not freely give us all things in Christ?” Or Ephesians 2, where He saved us that He might dispense to us “the riches of His mercy forever and ever and ever and ever.”

So we want to look at the starting point here in verse 18 and understand how it is that we are birthed by God into His family and hence into His kingdom. So let me ask the simple questions, what, who, how, why? What is regeneration?

Well, go back to verse 18, He brought us forth, He gave us birth. He birthed us. He gave us life. He made us live, brought us out of death. Regeneration is simply that. “The wages of sin is death,” Romans 6:23, “but the gift of God is”...What?...“eternal life.” The New Testament is just packed with revelation about God giving us life. That’s what regeneration means. Ephesians 2:1, “And you being dead in trespasses and sins”...that’s the condition of every human being; we need life, spiritual life.

Let’s see how John deals with it. We can’t deal with everybody, but look at John, 1 John 1, 1 John chapter 1, verse 1, John identifies Jesus as “the Word of Life and the Life was manifested.” And then he says, “The eternal life, and it was manifested to us.” So John has had this wondrous experience of receiving life from God through Christ who is that life.

Now go down to chapter 2 and let’s follow up what John has to say. Chapter 2, verse 28, he identifies believers as little children. He does it numbers of times through this one chapter alone. It starts that way in verse 1, talks about it again in verses 12 and 13, talks about it again in verse 18 that we are children because we’ve been born into the family of God. And then he says, in verse 29, “If you know that He is righteous, you know that everyone also who practices righteousness is born of Him.” That’s how He describes what it is to be a believer. What is it to be a believer? It is to be born of God, to be born from above, to be spiritually given life, to be dragged, as it were, out of the grave, to be awakened from the dead.

Chapter 3, and by the way, when you’re born of God it shows up because you practice righteousness. Why? ’Cause you’re a new creation. “Old things have passed away, new things have become”—common, standard, normal. You’re a new creation. Chapter 3, verse 9, “No one who is born of God”—again, that’s how John refers to what it means to be a Christian—“no one who is born of God practices [goes on habitually practicing] sin.” Why? “He has a new seed of life abiding in Him. He can’t sin because He’s born of God.” Again you can understand that John, who wrote the account of Nicodemus, got the point about new birth, and it becomes the theme term by which he describes salvation in his epistle.

If you drop down to verse 14, “We know that we have passed out of death into life because we love the brethren.” Again this is how he describes what it means to be saved. You pass out of death into life and your life...you’re new, you’re a new creation. You follow righteousness. You don’t choose a practice of sin. You love your brother. Whoever doesn’t love his brother is still dead.

Chapter 4, verse 7, “Beloved, let us love one another. Love is from God and everyone who loves is born of God.” And again, the same terminology. He doesn’t say saved; he doesn’t say justified; he says, “Born of God.” Because these are the characteristics that are inevitable in the person who has been recreated. Ephesians 2:10 says, “We were literally recreated unto good works.” Chapter 5, verse 4, “Whatever is born of God overcomes the world,” “overcomes the world.” We overcome the world, that is to say we “no longer love the world, the things that are in the world, the lust of the eyes, the pride of life.” We don’t love those things. We’ve overcome the world. Verse 12, “He who has the Son has the life. He who doesn’t have the Son doesn’t have the life, because the life,” verse 11, “is in His Son.”

So you can see just from looking at the wonderful little epistle of 1 John, which a lot of folks think is sort of a basic thing on the Christian life. Well, if it is, you start with the doctrine of regeneration, and you can declare yourself born of God as evidenced by the fact that you’re a completely new creation and the things that used to be part of your life are no longer the dominant forces of your life. You’re not perfect but the direction of your life is dramatically changed. You move toward righteousness, away from sin. You walk as Christ walked, or you desire to walk as Christ walked. You follow in that path. You love your brothers. You have no interest in the passing world ’cause you have been given life.

Peter says it this way in 2 Peter 1:4, “You became a partaker of the divine nature.” “You became a partaker of the divine nature.” What a great statement. The very life of God, you have the life that comes from God. You’re not like the rest of the human race. “The glorious manifestation of the children of God is not yet...has not yet appeared.” They don’t know what we are. They don’t know that walking around in this world, though we look like everybody else, we have the life of God in our souls, divine life.

So that’s what regeneration is. Who regenerates us? Go back to James 1. Who regenerates us? Who does this? Is there something we can do to pull it off? No. “In the exercise,” verse 18, “of His will, He birthed us.” John the Baptist, Jesus, the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the New Testament writers never tell anybody to do something to be born again, to say something to be born again, to pray something to be born again. They preached people to repent and believe. But they never told people to be born again because there are no steps to recreating yourself. Of His own will, monergistic not synergistic. You know, you’re not a believer because you took all the things that you wanted, all the desires that you had, all the bad feelings about the way you were living, threw them in a blender, God dumped in some of His own power and you drank the elixir of salvation. It’s not how it works. “Of His own will,” “of His own will”—monergistic; He chose you; He determined; He gave you life. This is a unilateral work of the Creator God. Only He could do, as John says in John 1:12 and 13, “It’s not by blood, genetics, it’s not by flesh, not by sexual relationships, or anything like that, it’s not by the will of man, not because you want it, not because you desire it; but it’s by God that you are born.”

Go back to the light analogy and look at 2 Corinthians 4. If I signed any of your books or anything along the way, you might see that I use this passage ’cause it’s so important. Second Corinthians 4:5, “We do not preach ourselves but Christ Jesus as Lord and ourselves as your bondservants [or slaves] for Jesus’ sake.” And then notice verse 6. Now we’ve heard what John had to say; we heard what Peter had to say. Now let’s hear what Paul has to say about this new birth. “God, for God who said, Light shall shine out of darkness.” That’s a reference to Genesis 1. God who said, “Let there be light is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.” The reason that you have come to salvation is because God sovereignly turned on the light in you, dispelled your darkness, gave you life for death, light for darkness, sight for blindness, truth for ignorance. Paul says this also in Colossians 1, a wonderful verse, chapter 1 and verse 13, “He rescued us...He rescued us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son.” He grabbed us from the domain of darkness and death and pulled us into the kingdom of His dear Son.” This is a work of God. Colossians 2, verse 13, “When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive. He made you alive, having forgiven you all your transgressions.”

Again, the testimony of Scripture is that this is a work of God. Regeneration is re-creation, new life, being born again. It comes from above; only God can do it. He has already decided to whom He will give life and in His own time He gives that life sovereignly. In fact, in John 6:44 it says this, “No man comes unto Me unless the Father draws Him.” It’s the verb *helkuo* and that verb means “to compel.” It’s a compelling force, unless God drags him out of the grave, drags him out of the darkness, drags him out of the kingdom of Satan. That verb *helkuo*, the Father draws, is used in John 21 of dragging a net. In John 18 of drawing out a sword. In Acts 16 and Acts 21, of dragging a reluctant person into court. It means to compel, to force, to pull, to overwhelm. This is power grace, and that’s why theologians call this irresistible grace. This is a work of grace not based on merit. This is grace and omnipotence, power grace, a work of God.

Once again, to hear from Paul, Titus chapter 3, and we’re touching only some of the passages in the New Testament that address this. I don’t know how it could be more clearer than this, in chapter 3, verse 5; let’s go back to verse 3, “We were once foolish ourselves, disobedient, deceived, enslaved to various lusts and pleasures, spending our life in *kakia* [that’s general evil], envy, hateful, hating one another. That was us. But when the kindness of God our Savior and His love for mankind appeared, He saved us.” He saved us. Follow, “Not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy by the washing of”...What?...“regeneration.” Regeneration is a birth that wipes out, that washes away all our transgressions and renews us in the Holy Spirit. He saved us.

You know, you contributed no more to your regeneration than Lazarus did to his resurrection. Lazarus was dead, several days dead, stinking dead, wrapped up corpse and Jesus came and said, “Lazarus, come forth.” He made no contribution and neither did I and neither can you. Jesus says to Nicodemus, “Nicodemus, your problem is not that there are a few things you still need to do. Your problem is not that there are a few things you need to stop doing. Your problem is nothing you have ever done or not done has any bearing on this. You need all of it to stay in the grave and you need to be recreated from heaven.”

So you say, “Well how do I…what do I do? I want that. How does that happen?”

Well let’s answer the question then, how? What? New birth, new life. Who? God in the exercise of His own will. Go back to James now, we keep bouncing back to James, that’s our...that’s our base; follow this, “In the exercise of His will, He birthed us”...here it comes...“by the Word of truth,” “by the Word of truth.” What’s that? The gospel, the gospel: “Faith comes by...hearing.” Repentance and faith come by hearing the message concerning Christ, Romans 10. “How will they hear without a preacher?” “Whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” Whoever calls will be saved. How can they call on one they’ve not heard? How can they hear without a preacher? How can they have a preacher unless somebody is sent?

So we go and we preach because regeneration takes place by means of the Word of truth. It doesn’t happen in a vacuum. Theologians through the centuries have said, “Regeneration can happen days, months, years before salvation.” I don’t think so. I mean, somebody...somebody can actually believe that you’re regenerate but not saved? No. You have to understand this: regeneration is an element of salvation. Justification is an element of salvation. Redemption is an element of salvation. Sanctification is an element of salvation, and they all happen in one instantaneous miracle. And two other things are always there: repentance and faith. We’re only sorting them out in terms of what’s called the *ordo salutis*. Sorting them out from the perspective that one leads to the other. There can be no repentance. There can be no faith. There can be no embracing of Christ until the heart has been recreated.

So, how long does that happen before? I don’t know. A sort of divine, heavenly millisecond? Let’s put it this way. You can’t be regenerated apart from hearing the Word of truth. It doesn’t happen weeks before, months before. In the mighty power of God, He works to regenerate upon the hearing of the Word. He gives the gift of repentance. He gives the gift of faith. He justifies, He redeems, He sanctifies, and it’s all one-moment miracle.

But understand this, faith doesn’t produce regeneration. Repentance doesn’t produce regeneration. That regeneration comes first and only when you’re made alive can you repent and believe. And it comes only with the Word of God. Listen to 1 Peter 1:23, “You’ve been born again,” Peter writes, “you’ve been born again not of seed which is perishable, but imperishable, so you’ve been born again unto eternal life, you won’t perish, through the living and enduring Word of God. The Word which was preached to you,” Peter says. Regeneration then is this mighty work of God giving life to the dead, but it doesn’t happen in a vacuum, it doesn’t happen in isolation, it happens only upon the hearing of the Word.

Now go back to James 1, one final point to make in James 1 and that’s why...why? The what of regeneration—new life. The who of regeneration—God, the exercise of His own will. The how of regeneration—through hearing and believing the Word which is part of the regenerating work of God to enable us to do that. And why—why does God regenerate? End of verse 18, “So that we would be”; “so that” is *eis* with *einai,* which is a purpose clause in the Greek. “So that the purpose is this, we would be a kind of firstfruits among His creatures.” Remember in the Old Testament—Deuteronomy, Leviticus—you read about the firstfruits? Exodus even. The firstfruits, the best of the crop, the cream of the crop, the off-the-top which the farmer gathered into himself. And that’s exactly what you have here. Why did God do this? The answer is, He wanted a gospel harvest. He wanted from all of humanity to pick off a gospel harvest, to bring to heaven for His own joy and His own glory. This is John 6, “This is all that the Father gives to Me will come to Me.” These are the gifts, the redeemed sinners that God gives to His Son as a love gift, that the Son gives back to the Father in eternity. This is a gospel harvest. Out of all humanity, why is God doing this? Why is He giving life to the dead? In order that He might gather together a gospel harvest to become His own possession, to love Him and to adore Him and serve Him and worship Him forever and ever and ever in fellowship with Him in heaven.

Well, that’s the doctrine that Jesus was talking about to Nicodemus. You must be born again or you’re not going to be in the kingdom.

What would my question be at this point? Well, how do I do that? I mean, how does it happen? You can’t make it happen. And Nicodemus says that. How can a man be born when he’s old? He gets the analogy. How can I...how does this happen?

Let me tell you what you can do. You can do what any sinner can do, you can ask...you can ask God in His mercy and in His grace to give you life. And mystery of mysteries, Jesus said, “Him that comes to Me, I will never turn away.” “Seek and you shall find. Ask and it shall be given. Knock, the door will be opened.” That’s the mystery of it all.

So what was Nicodemus’ response? Amazing response? Be here next Sunday.

Father, we thank You for this amazing account. Thank You for this glorious, overwhelming truth of regeneration, the gift You’ve given us so that we can repent, believe, follow You, manifest righteousness, holiness, flee from sin, love each other. And most of all love and worship You forever and ever and be blessed beyond comprehension. There are no words. This is the unspeakable gift for which all the words of eternity piled together in a cacophony and a chorus coming from the lips of the glorified and the redeemed could never, ever fully praise you for such a gift. Thank You for this salvation. We pray, Lord, for those who have not asked, who haven’t come like Nicodemus in their heart, knowing they’re alienated, isolated, separated, dead, blind, darkened, and said, “How do I get in the kingdom? Please tell me,” and cried out, “Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner, and save me.” May there be some today here in this place who come before You, pleading that You would give them life. May the Spirit convict their hearts to that end.

Lord, be honored and be glorified today as we celebrate and worship You for this gift of life. And may we be willing and eager to share it with others, proclaiming Your glory. We pray in the name of Your Son.

**God's Role in Regeneration**

**John 3:1-10**

Code: 43-13

For this morning, I want you to open the Word of God to the third chapter of John, back to the third chapter of John and the opening ten verses. Now, you who have been with us the last couple of weeks know how important and critical this portion of Scripture is. You know something about it now that we’ve sort of penetrated it at least as far as verse 3. The good news, we’ll finish all the way down to verse 10 this morning. I can’t exactly tell you when but we will finish verse 10.

Now I’m going to read it to you and then I’m going to say what’s obvious, and then we’ll dig down to what may not be quite as apparent. John chapter 3 verse 1. John writes, “Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, ‘Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher, for no one can do these things that You do unless God is with him.’ Jesus answered and said to him, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.’ Nicodemus said to Him, ‘How can a man be born when he’s old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born, can he?’ Jesus answered, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be amazed that I said to you, “you must be born again.” The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit.’ Nicodemus said to Him, ‘How can these things be?’ Jesus answered and said to him, ‘Are you the teacher of Israel and do not understand these things?’”

Five times in this passage we have a reference to being born again, or born from above. The word *anothen* can be translated “again” or “from above,” and both are applicable. Jesus is saying that for anyone to enter the kingdom of God, the realm of salvation, eternal life, forgiveness of sins, that person must be born from above, born again. This is the doctrine of regeneration, at the very heart of understanding salvation.

It was twenty-five years ago or so that the most publicized and recognized evangelist, Billy Graham, published a book and that book has been a staple in the evangelical world for all these twenty-five years and it’s spun off a lot of other resources. The title of that book is *How To Be Born Again*; it’s a how-to book, *How To Be Born Again*. That book gives steps to being born again. The approach is well-intentioned, of course, and it does call for repentance and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, but that book and its title fail to understand the principle that Jesus is teaching here. The whole point of this text is that something must happen to you that you don’t participate in. There is no how to be born again. There are no steps to being born again. Nowhere does Jesus tell Nicodemus, do this, say this, pray this.

Nowhere does He tell him how to be born from above, how to be born again. Yes, it says a man must be born again. And in verse 8 He says to Nicodemus, “You must be born again,” but that is not a command, that is a statement of fact. God’s kingdom is only for people who have been given God’s life. You can’t live in His kingdom unless you are a partaker of the divine nature, unless you are a new creation. And the analogy is so simple and so basic that it can hardly be misunderstood. The analogy is birth. And everybody gets that. You did not participate in your own birth. There are no books out there that say how to be born physically. You don’t have anything to do with that and that’s the reason our Lord used this analogy. As you play no role in your physical birth, you play no role in your spiritual birth. That’s the point of the analogy. Jesus is saying the kingdom only opens to people who know it’s one hundred percent a divine miracle and who forfeit all efforts to participate.

The kingdom is open? What do we mean by the kingdom? The realm of salvation, the way to God, forgiveness of sin, eternal life, heaven, blessing in time and eternity—all that is part of the kingdom of salvation; all of that is available only to people who are born from above by a creative act done by God in which they don’t participate. I told you last time, theologians say this is monergistic rather than synergistic. This is a work of God apart from man. The sinner then must be the recipient of a divine miracle that comes down from God, and there are no steps, there is no how-to. That is the simple, clear, unmistakable point of using the analogy of birth rather than some other analogy. Again I say, you don’t do anything to contribute to your physical birth, and you don’t do anything to contribute to your spiritual birth.

Now we need to understand this. As we said, this conversation about regeneration, the new birth, flows through three features; there’s kind of three segments here. There is the sinner’s worry, we see that in Nicodemus. There is the Savior’s Word. And then finally, the Spirit’s work, and we’re going through the conversation looking at those features. The message again, so you don’t miss it, the kingdom of salvation, forgiveness of sin, eternal life, heaven, is open only for those who abandon all self-effort. It’s a work of God.

Now let’s go back to the conversation. First, the sinner’s worry. “There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, ‘Rabbi, we know You have come from God as a teacher, for no one can do these things that You do unless God is with him.’”

Let me just give you a brief review. Nicodemus is a Pharisee. Pharisees were an elite group of students of the Old Testament Law who obeyed that Law as well as all the rabbinic traditions that grew up around that Law fastidiously. They were the most devoted of all Jews to the Old Testament and every bit of their Jewish tradition. They were isolationists. They wanted nothing to do with the hoi-polloi, the populace, the people. In fact, later in the gospel of John you will find that they deemed the entire population apart from themselves to be cursed. They were the ignorant and the cursed. They didn’t see themselves as in some kind of a role of ministering to people; they simply isolated themselves. They were the arch-hypocrites; they were the archetypal hypocrites of all hypocrites. They were whitewashed on the outside and full of dead men’s bones on the inside. They pretended to be religious and lead people to heaven. And actually they created sons of hell. They multiplied sons of hell everywhere they went because they themselves were sons of hell.

Nicodemus is described in Matthew 23 as one of those whom Jesus pronounced a series of damnations upon and curses on. Nicodemus would be like the apostle Paul who when giving his own testimony about what it was to be a Pharisee says that he was zealous for the Law, that he was blameless before the Law, that he kept every tradition and he marched to the steps that the Pharisees required in every tiny detail, tithing even tiny little herbs. They were fastidious about their religion, but they were hypocrites.

One of them, like Nicodemus, we see in Luke 18. He is described by our Lord. The Lord creates this imaginary Pharisee and this Pharisee goes into the Temple to pray and he says to God, “I thank You that I’m not like other men. I thank You that I’m not like this crummy tax collector. I fast. I tithe everything that I possess. I do all these good things.” That’s a Pharisee, that’s Nicodemus. He’s not just one; he’s at the top of the pile. Verse 10 says he’s *the* teacher in Israel. Pharisees were teachers. He’s *the* teacher in Israel. He’s the most illustrious, the most noble of teachers, the master teacher. He’s a member of the Sanhedrin, according to chapter 50. He’s a part of the Jewish council of seventy. That was a very elite group of people that were the Supreme Court of Israel. He’s an Old Testament expert. He’s intelligent. He’s bright. He’s immensely successful. Traditions tell us that he was one of the three richest people in the city of Jerusalem. His wisdom, his ability to think and reason and do his business had made him extremely, extremely successful and wealthy. He had it all. And, of course, from the Pharisees viewpoint, they loved money. Jesus said they loved money.

Well, Nicodemus had a way of loving it into his own purse successfully. He became very, very rich. And, of course, the equated riches with God’s blessing, so he was deemed to be blessed of God mightily because he had been so rich. In his heart he knew he was a fake and he knew he was a phony, and he knew he was a hypocrite. Religion on the outside. Empty in his fear, doubt; anxiety tearing up his soul. Here’s his problem. Who does he go to? He’s *the* teacher.

Then he comes across Jesus and guess what? Jesus is a teacher at a higher level than he is because he’s never done a miracle, he’s never seen a miracle, he’s never seen anybody who did a miracle, or met anybody who saw a miracle. So he comes to Jesus and he says, “Look, we know You have come from God.” In his own heart he knew he did not. But he knew Jesus was from God because of the signs that He had done, the miracles He had done. Finally here was a teacher above himself. And his heart cries out for reality.

And so he comes with that introduction. That was the statement on his lips. But Jesus knew what was in his heart, verse 3, Jesus ignored what he said, verse 3, “Jesus answered and said to him…in the third person, so we’re going to have a discussion here, we’re going to talk theology, going to talk about the kingdom. It’s not personal right now; it’s in the third person: “Truly, truly,” which means this is new, brand new and He says it again in verse 5, “Truly, truly...truly, truly I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” You’re not going to get one foot in the door unless you’re born again.

Why does He say that? That has nothing to do with what Nicodemus said in his introduction. The reason Jesus said that was because He knew the sinner’s worry. He knew what was worrying Nicodemus. How did He know that? Go back to verse 24, “He knew all men.” Verse 25, chapter 2, “He didn’t need anyone to testify concerning man, He Himself knew what was in man.” And here’s the illustration of it. He had omniscience. He knew what men thought. He knew their thoughts. He knew the longings and desires of their hearts explicitly. Here’s a loyal religionist. This is a Pharisee. This is a legalist of legalists. He’s reached the apex of Judaism and he’s not in the kingdom and he knows it and his heart is full of fear. He has no peace. He has no joy. He has no sense of assurance or forgiveness. And in his heart he’s crying out, “What do I do? What do I do? Or what do I stop doing?” ’Cause all he knows is “do”; it’s a works system. And our Lord says to him, “Nobody enters the kingdom who’s not born again,” which is to say you’ve got to go all the way back and start all over. And I told you in the last couple of weeks, that comment simply says this: all accumulated religion, all accumulated morality, all accumulated human goodness adds up to zero...absolutely zero with God, meaningless.

So there he is in zero condition and he knows it. That’s the sinner’s worry. Now we came to the Savior’s Word in verse 3. And He says, “Unless one is born again, or born from above, he cannot see or enter, or participate in the kingdom of God.” That’s regeneration. You have to be born. You have to have a new nature, new life, recreation. And we looked at that in detail, not by the will of man, chapter 1 verse 13, not by the will of the flesh, not by human blood, but by God. We looked at James 1 that it is God who gave us life. We looked at Ephesians 2, made alive together with Christ. We looked at Titus 3, the washing of regeneration. We looked at 1 Peter 1, begotten again. We looked at all those passages in the rest of the New Testament, and there are many, many more that point to the fact that salvation is a work of God. It is a divine miracle that comes down from heaven in which we do not participate. We didn’t participate in our election before the foundation of the world and we do not participate in our regeneration in time. That’s a work of God.

So now we go back to the story. So let’s go back to verse 4. How did Nicodemus respond to the statement of Jesus in verse 3, “Unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God?” And He was talking in the third person; they’re having a theological discussion; it hasn’t gotten personal yet. Preachers have said, “Well, Nicodemus doesn’t get it. He doesn’t have any idea what Jesus is talking about. He’s very confused.” So in verse 4 Nicodemus said to Him, “How can a man be born when he’s old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born, can he?” Some people think he’s being sarcastic. Some people think he thinks this is ridiculous, this is a joke. You can’t be born again. That this shows his ignorance and he’s sort of scoffing and laughing at it.

That’s not correct. That’s not at all what we have here. He knows Jesus just read his mind. He doesn’t say to Jesus, “Why did You bring that up? Why are You talking to me about the kingdom? Why are You talking to me about this?” He doesn’t ask that. He knows Jesus just read his mind. And he knows Jesus just said, “You can’t get in the kingdom by anything you do any more than you could bring about your own birth.” This man lives in a world of analogies. The rabbis—that was their world, the world of analogies, illustrations parables, word pictures, parallels. He’s brilliant. He’s *the* teacher in Israel. He’s a logician. He’s spent his entire life in theological discussion and dialogue. He completely understands what Jesus said. He gets it 100 percent. And he jumps right into the third person discussion and he says, “How can a man be born when he is old?” I’ll use your analogy. “He cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born, can he?” That proves that he totally understood what Jesus was saying. Jesus was saying you come into the kingdom but you can’t do anything about it. He gets it. He understands the figurative language. The rabbis and teachers used it all the time. So he takes up the analogy and he says, “Hey, You’re telling me it’s humanly impossible—impossible. You’re speaking of something that’s impossible to me.” No, he doesn’t miss this at all. He does not miss it at all.

Jesus doesn’t tell him how to be born again. He knows better than that. Jesus is telling something that there are no how-to’s for. He understood it better than most evangelicals, I’m afraid. If an unsaved Pharisaical hypocrite, part of a false religion, can in one conversation grasp the simple truth of the doctrine of regeneration, why is the church so confused about this? Where have we been? And why do so many preachers tell people the steps they can take to be born again? He was reacting as any legalist would react. “Are you kidding me? I’ve spent my entire life doing things to get into the kingdom, now you’re telling me the only way into the kingdom is by means of something that I have nothing to do with.”

Here’s the heart of the gospel of grace, isn’t it? All he had ever known was, you earn it, you achieve it by religion, ceremony, ritual, morality, human goodness. That’s why Jesus says, “Truly, truly,” because He’s saying essentially, you’ve been caught up in the damning lie of Satan that you can earn your salvation. And I’m telling you the truth, the truth. He is hearing for the first time in his entire life, and he’s had lots of theological discussions. For the first time in his entire life that God has to do something in his soul that is a work of creation, that comes down from above, that he does not at all participate in. He is stunned by this, absolutely stunned.

Jesus could have said to him, “Oh yeah, I know it’s a big change for you. I know. I’m sorry. I’m going to have to reprogram you.” But He doesn’t. Down in verse 10 Jesus says to him, “Are you the teacher in Israel and do not understand these things? How did you get to that position if you don’t understand these things?” He does not let Nicodemus off the hook. It is inexcusable that Nicodemus doesn’t understand the new birth. It is inexcusable that he doesn’t understand regeneration. It is absolutely inexcusable. Wow. But He’s going to help him, so He’s going to give him two hints, two hints. Hint number one comes in verse 5; hint number two comes in verse 6. And this is good teaching. This is how teachers work, effective teachers. They lead the student. They don’t give them the answer; they lead the student. So here’s the first hint. “This is new to you, Nicodemus, and you’re *the* teacher in Israel? This is new?” Let me put it another way, verse 5, “Jesus answered, ‘Truly, truly I say to you”...still in the third person; we’re still talking theology here...“truly, truly I say to you”...Does this help?...“unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.”

You know, any time you’re having a conversation and somebody gives you a riddle, what’s the first thing you ask for when you can’t figure it out? “Can you give me a clue; give me a hint?” Nicodemus has hit the wall. He just heard something he’s never heard in his life. “Can You give me a clue to this?” Jesus said, “I’ll give you a clue. Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. Does that jog your mind, Nicodemus? Water—Spirit, water-Spirit; have you heard that?”

Traditional sermons on this have said, “Well, water and the Spirit means this: the water is human birth because we say prior to the birth of a child the water breaks. And so you have to have a human birth, a physical birth, and then a spiritual birth. So you must be born of water—that is physically born, and then born spiritually.”

Really! You mean Jesus is saying to Nicodemus, “First of all, Nicodemus, you have to exist. You have to be a person because non-persons can’t be saved.” That’s ridiculous. Furthermore, we in this modern world speak about the water breaking. The Hebrews never used that expression. He wouldn’t know anything about that. This is not clinical. He’s not talking about that.

Others say, “The water is baptism.” That’s very popular. Commentators go on for pages because you have to since it’s not here, trying to invent it. And they come up with Christian baptism, which didn’t show up until the second chapter of Acts. Nicodemus doesn’t know anything about Christian baptism. He’s giving him a hint.

Where was Nicodemus’ bailiwick? Where did he live and move and have his being—in what? The Old Testament. “Does that ring a bell to you, Nicodemus? Does that ring a bell to you?” Listen, he knew the Old Testament. He probably had massive sections of the Old Testament memorized. He was very familiar with the prophets. He knew it. Water and Spirit; where would his mind go?

Go back to Ezekiel 36, Ezekiel 36. Here is a principle bound up in one of the most marvelous passages in the entire Old Testament which describes God’s saving work in application to Israel, of course. But it’s the same saving work in application to Gentiles as well throughout history, as well as Jews who come to faith in Christ. Here’s how salvation works. Ezekiel 36:25, notice the “I wills.” Why? Because this is a work of God. This is that monergestic work of God from heaven, and you will notice five times, “I will.” God speaking: “Then I will sprinkle clean water on you and you will be clean. I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new Spirit within you.” There, dear friends, is the water and the Spirit. The water and the Spirit is simply a reference to the creation, the new creation, the regenerating work of God that He does by His own in the heart of a sinner, and here He’s promising one day to do it not only in individual Jews and Gentiles, but one day for the whole of the nation Israel. I will put a new heart in you, a new Spirit in you, remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I’ll put My Spirit within you. I will cause you to walk in My statutes. I will, I will, I will, I will, I will, and then “you will be careful to observe My ordinances and you will,” verse 28, “be My people and I will be your God.” That’s the water and the Spirit.

This great, epoch New Covenant passage of Ezekiel 36 would have been so very familiar to Nicodemus. He would have known it well. And then he would have known chapter 37 well where God looks at the future salvation of Israel and in verse 3 He says to Ezekiel, calling him Son of Man, “Can these bones live?” There’s a picture of a valley of dry bones illustrating Israel’s spiritual deadness. “Can these bones live?” “And I answered, ‘O Lord, God, You know,’ and He said, ‘Prophesy over the bones and say to them, “O dry bones, hear the Word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones, behold, I will cause *ruach*, Spirit, breath to enter you that you may live.”’” In other words, God will give life in the future to Israel. He will save them not only as individuals but as a nation. Verse 12 of that same chapter: “Thus says the Lord God, ‘I will open your graves and cause you to come out of your graves, my people, and I will bring you into the land of Israel. Then you will know that I am the Lord, when I have opened your graves and caused you to come up out of your graves, My people. I will put My Spirit within you and you will come to life, and I’ll place you on your own land and then you will know that I, the Lord, have spoken and done it, declares the Lord.” That is sovereign work of God, giving life in the future to the nation of Israel. That’s His promise to the nation, and that’s His plan and means for salvation for every individual as well. It is a work of God.

You can go back. Nicodemus knew that passage, he knew those Ezekiel texts. He would also have been very familiar with the eleventh chapter of the beloved prophet Ezekiel. He would have read this many times, probably had it in memory because of the promise. Ezekiel 11:19, “I’ll give them one heart, put a new Spirit within them, take the heart of stone out of their flesh, give them a heart of flesh that they may walk in My statutes, keep My ordinances and do them. They will be My people and I will be their God.” This is a divine work laid out clearly in the Old Testament.

I want you to notice Jeremiah, just two passages in Jeremiah. Jeremiah 24:7, “I will give them a heart to know Me for I am the Lord and they will be My people and I will be their God. They’ll return to Me with their whole heart.” That’s re-creation. New heart, new spirit—washed, cleansed. And then that most familiar Isaiah...rather Jeremiah 31...Jeremiah 31:31, same verse, same chapter: “Behold, days are coming, declares the Lord. I’ll make a new covenant with the house of Israel, house of Judah. Not like the covenant I made with their fathers in the day I took them out of the land of Egypt. That covenant was the Mosaic Covenant which they broke, even though I was a husband to them. But this is the covenant, verse 33, which I’ll make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord, I will put My Law within them and on their heart I will write it and I will be their God and they shall be My people.” I’m creating a new people, giving them a new Spirit, a new heart, washing them, cleansing them, purifying them. That is all New Covenant language.

Now I want to give you an illustration of it. Turn to Psalm 51. When David wrote Psalm 51, he was a believer, he was a man after God’s own heart. He had written many psalms before Psalm 51. But in Psalm 51 we have a very unique situation with David because he has perpetrated a massive, prolonged premeditated, well-planned and orchestrated set of sins—started out when he was wandering around on his balcony and he saw Bathsheba and he lusted after her and then he engaged himself after that to make sure that he connected with her, that he brought her to the palace, that he had her husband who was out fighting in defense of Israel in David’s army, left in the middle of the battle so he would die. So he had his soldiers complicit in the murder of her husband. He takes her. He commits adultery; a terrible tragic situation happens; a child is born; the child dies. You know the whole horror story. But it was protracted, prolonged, premeditated sin and this man is so overwrought and destitute over the reality of his own condition that it’s as if he’s not even saved; it’s as if he has no relationship to God. And in Psalm 51 he cries out to God, “Be gracious to me, O God, according to the greatness of Your compassion blot out my transgression.” He’s praying like an unconverted man. “Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity. Cleanse me from my sin.” That’s New Covenant language.

He’s talking like an unregenerate sinner because that’s how he feels. “I’ve sinned against You, and You only and done this evil in Your sight. And I’ve been a sinner since the beginning, verse 5, “I was brought forth in iniquity.” In other words, I was born a sinner. He doesn’t mean his mother had him illegitimately. He means from conception I was in sin. “But You desire truth in the inward part.” In other words, I need to be a different person on the inside. And so he says, “Purify me with hyssop and I shall be clean. Wash me and I shall be whiter than snow.” And then in verse 10, “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not take away Your presence, do not take Your Holy Spirit from me.” That’s...that’s New Covenant language. David is so profoundly exercised in repentance over his sin that he prays as if he was an unregenerate man. He knew what it meant to be regenerate. It meant to be washed clean, given a new heart, a new spirit, a new disposition, be a new creation.

So David knew and recorded this in his fifty-first psalm and Nicodemus knew that psalm, recited that psalm, knew it by memory—one of the most popular and familiar of all psalms. How could it be then that if he knew that salvation based in the Old Testament was a matter of God acting sovereignly because He wills, He wills, He wills, He wills to give a new heart, a new disposition and to wash and cleanse the sinner from above? How is it that he got caught up in the damning lie of Satan that somehow he could earn his salvation by something he did? Jesus doesn’t let him off the hook. He says, “How can you be *the* teacher of Israel and not know this? Apostate Judaism had ignored the truth of New Covenant salvation and believed the lie of Satan that you could earn yourself into the kingdom. That was hint number one. Go back to John 3 for hint number two, verse 6.

Now we’re going to reason a little bit. “That which is born of the flesh is flesh.” Stop there. “That which is born of the flesh is flesh.” That’s His second hint. “Nicodemus, there is a foundational principle here that you and your entire system have overlooked. All that the flesh can produce is”...What?...“more flesh.” You can’t get from flesh to Spirit. You can’t do that. What He’s basically indicting Nicodemus for is a failure to understand the Old Testament doctrine of sin, the Old Testament doctrine of total depravity, the utter inability and unwillingness of the sinner to do right. Nicodemus, how can you be *the* teacher of Israel and not know about New Covenant salvation by the washing of regeneration, the washing of the Word and the giving of a new heart and a new spirit and planting the Holy Spirit in the heart. How can you not know that that’s a work of God and that’s laid out all over the Old Testament, and how could you not know that the flesh can only produce flesh? That’s a hint.

What would Nicodemus have thought about? Well, let’s go back and find out. One area of Scripture that he would have been very, very familiar with would be Genesis 6, when God gives His reasons that He’s going to drown the entire world. When I say the entire world, I mean the entire world. All the millions of people who had been born since Adam to Noah are all going to be drowned in a flood, with the exception of Noah and his wife and his three sons and their wives, eight people who were justified by God through faith by grace. But the rest of the world was drowned.

Why? This is where the whole human race ended up. Verse 3, “My Spirit shall not strive with man forever because he also is flesh.” This is the problem. There’s the very word Jesus used, “flesh.” That is the word for fallen, corrupted, sinful humanness. And then down in verse 5 He shows what flesh produces. “Then the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth and every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.” That’s as clear a statement about human depravity as you find in the Bible. Every intent of every thought of every heart was only evil continually. Flesh produces that because that’s all it can produce.

If you’re going to be in the kingdom of God, you need a new heart. Chapter 8, the Flood begins to fade away, the whole human race has been drowned. We come into chapter 8, we hope for a better world. Noah builds an altar in verse 20, takes animals and offers God sacrifices, which means Noah recognizes that he is a...What?...a sinner ’cause that’s why you offered sacrifices. And the Lord smelled the soothing aroma and the Lord said to Himself, “I’ll never again curse the ground on account of man. But oh, by the way, the intent of man’s heart is still evil from his youth. Nothing changed except that God wouldn’t drown us anymore. Did you know that, Nicodemus? Of course you knew that. You knew that nothing in man pleases God, nothing. You must remember the book of Job, Nicodemus. You must remember the testimony of Job. Chapter 14, verse 4, “Who can make the clean out of the unclean? No one,” He says. “No one.”

You must remember the testimony of Eliphaz in chapter 15. “What is man that he should be pure, or he who is born of a woman that he should be righteous?” Ha, impossible, one who is detestable and corrupt cannot be made righteous. He must have remembered Bildad in Job 25, “How then can a man be just with God? Or how can he be clean who is born of woman? Even if the moon loses its brightness and the stars are not pure in His sight, much less man, that maggot, that worm.”

Job’s friends and Job all knew the theology of total depravity. They all knew it. And Job was written in the patriarchal period around Genesis. This isn’t new information. And then there was Psalm 51:5 that I read to you where David says, “In sin did my mother conceive me, I was iniquitous from my conception.” Do you think Nicodemus knew this verse? Isaiah 64:6, “All our righteous deeds are like filthy rags. All of us wither like a leaf and our iniquity is like the wind, takes us away. There is no one who calls on Your name, no one. You have delivered us into the power of our iniquities.” That’s Old Testament teaching on depravity. And our good friend, Jeremiah, is not to be left out. Jeremiah 17:9, “The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick.” That’s the heart.

Now there was a time when the apostle Paul thought he was holy, thought he was righteous. He really did. And then when he came to the truth, he counted all his righteousness as manure, he says in Philippians 3. Paul understood Old Testament doctrine.

Turn to Romans 3. In Romans 3 Paul is indicting the entire human race, Jew and Gentile, for their sin. He is saying that the Gentiles are sinful and the Jews are equally sinful. And to prove his point, starting in chapter 3 of Romans, verse 10, Paul quotes a whole series of verses from the Old Testament; starting at verse 10, going all the way to 18. All those are direct quotes right out of the Old Testament; right, most of them from the Psalms and Isaiah. Paul says, “Let me define sin. There is none righteous, not even one. There is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God. All have turned aside. Together they’ve become useless. There’s none who does good, there’s not even one. Their throat is an open grave, their tongues are used to keep deceiving, the poison of asps is under their lips, whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood. Destruction and misery are in their paths and the path of peace they have not known. There is no fear of God before their eyes.”

Every one of those is an Old Testament statement on the sinfulness of sin. What’s wrong with you, Nicodemus? Paul the former Pharisee knew all of those passages and finally saw the light. Verse 20, “By the works of the Law, no flesh will be justified in His sight.” Flesh produces flesh and nothing more, and this, verse 21 says, is witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, meaning the Old Testament. The Old Testament then teaches all of this concerning the sinfulness of sin.

So what does the Old Testament teach? Salvation is a sovereign act of God by grace that He does independent of any action on the part of man. Man needs a complete spiritual birth. He needs to be washed. He needs to be transformed. He needs to have his heart replaced with a new heart. His Spirit replaced with a new spirit, or disposition. And he needs the Holy Spirit planted within him if he’s going to enter the kingdom of God. And that is not something he can do because he is flesh and flesh produces only flesh. “So, Nicodemus, how can you be *the* teacher in Israel and you don’t know this?” He doesn’t let him off the hook. So He says in verse 7, “Don’t be amazed.” Why would you be amazed that I said to you; now He gets into the second person: “You must be born again. You’re not going into the kingdom until this happens to you and you can’t make a contribution because you’re flesh, and flesh can’t do this.”

This is the denunciation of all religion apart from the sovereign grace of God and the gospel of Christ. Don’t be amazed. Why would you be amazed? You know the Old Testament. You’ve been blinded by believing the lie of Satan. Don’t be amazed.

This leads to the final point, the sinner’s worry and the Savior’s Word—the final point is the Spirit’s work. End of verse 6, “That which is born of the Spirit is spirit.” This is a work that only the Holy Spirit can do. Well how does that work? Verse 8, “The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it but do not know where it comes from and where it’s going. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

Huh, this is another analogy. This is another analogy—listen to me—that takes spiritual birth completely out of the hands of the sinner. What do you do to control the wind? Nothing. It comes from above; you can’t summon the wind; you can’t send it away. You can’t write a book on how to increase the wind in your community. You can’t do that. How to increase the wind in your yard. You can’t do that. You can’t do that. It is completely and totally the sovereign work of God. The wind is invisible, it is uncontrollable, it is irresistible, it is unpredictable, it cannot be summoned, it doesn’t show up because you want it, it doesn’t go away because you’d like to get rid of it. This is the second analogy that our Lord uses with this smart, sharp, clear thinking, logical rabbi—to tell him that this is a work in which he doesn’t participate. This is irresistible grace, like John 5:21. “The Son gives life to whomever He will.” The same verse says, “And God who raised the dead gives life.” It is the will of God and the will of the Son and the power of the Spirit. It’s a certain work of God. It is so new to Nicodemus, just so contrary to everything he’s ever known. Verse 9, “How can these things be?” I mean, you just destroyed my entire life, like Paul on the Damascus Road. Paul said it’s all manure, every bit of it. Nicodemus isn’t there yet. What can he do? Well, he can’t do anything, can’t do anything.

You say, “Well, what happened to him?” He disappears in verse 10 for the moment, he disappears. He disappears with a question, a question he’s never had in his entire life in his mind. What do I do? I was just told I can’t do anything. I don’t understand that. What do I do?

So what happened to Nicodemus? What happened to him? Well, for now he disappears. But he showed up again. Go to chapter 7 of John. Chapter 7, Jesus is in Galilee and the Jews want to kill Him. And the feast of the Jews, the Feast of Booths, is near; so they migrate down and He is confronted again by the Sanhedrin. They want Him dead. He’s preaching and teaching in the Temple, according to verse 28, and people are listening and, wow, they’re saying all kinds of things. Some think He’s the Messiah. Some think He’s the prophet, down in verse 40. “This is the prophet; this is the Messiah.” And there’s a division, according to verse 43. Well, the rulers want Him dead, so they get some Temple guards to go seize Him and arrest Him so they can kill Him. But they wanted to seize Him, but no one laid hands on Him. When they got there, they couldn’t...they couldn’t lay their hands on Him. So the officers come back to the chief priests and the Pharisees of whom Nicodemus was one, and they said to them, “Why didn’t you bring Him? We sent you to arrest Him, why didn’t you bring Him?”

The officers answered, “Never has a man spoken the way this man speaks.” We couldn’t get past what He said. He paralyzed us with His words. The Pharisees then answered them, “You’ve not also been led astray, have you? No one of the rulers or Pharisees has believed in Him, has he?” So now we know that Nicodemus hasn’t become a believer; this is a year later. And he was in the Sanhedrin. But verse 50, Nicodemus steps up. Nicodemus, he who came to Him before being one of them, one of the Pharisees and chief priests on the Sanhedrin, said to them, “Our law does not judge a man unless it first hears from him and knows what he’s doing, does it?” Point of order, the lynch mob isn’t right. You can’t do this. Even the Romans gave due process. Hmm, that’s a bold step to take. When the whole group wants Jesus dead, and you step up in defense of the law because you want to protect Jesus, not a believer yet.

The people in leadership looked at Nicodemus, *the* teacher in Israel, “Oh, You’re not also from Galilee, are You?” Mockery, sarcasm. “Search and see that no prophet arises out of Galilee.” They rebuke with sarcasm and mockery this their most illustrious teacher. He served notice that he’s leaning toward Jesus. And they mock him. They mock the one they had revered and elevated. This is, by the way, actually two years after the meeting at night; two years have passed. So there is only one year left until the death of Christ. Let’s go to chapter 19.

So two years later, Nicodemus is still a Pharisee, still on the Sanhedrin. But he steps up in a point of order in favor of Jesus. Come to chapter 19; Jesus is dead, verse 38, “After these things, Joseph of Arimathea being a disciple of Jesus, but a secret one for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus. Pilate granted permission, so he came and took away His body.” Oh my, look. “Nicodemus who had first come to Him by night also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes.” That’s a resin, powdered resin that they used to spread out on the body to diminish the smell of decaying flesh. And aloes has a kind of a sandalwood fragrance. He brought 75 pounds. That’s a massive amount because that’s one way they showed honor to an illustrious person. This is an honorable act on the part of Nicodemus; it’s also a bold act. Nicodemus joins his companion, Joseph of Arimathea, who had been a believer but hadn’t been willing to confess it openly. And now Nicodemus is bold and he comes and we know now that he has identified himself with the Lord Jesus and he is there, and he took the body of Jesus. You can imagine this. Nicodemus handling that body that he had spent that night talking to in his own arms, binding the body of Jesus with linen wrappings and putting in the spices in between all the wrappings as the burial custom was, and along with his friend, Joseph, they laid Jesus in the garden in a new tomb which no one had ever been laid in. There he is with the body of Jesus in his arms.

What happened to Nicodemus? I’ll tell you what happened. God came down, gave Him life, gave him a new heart, a new soul, washed him, regenerated him. What about the rest of the story? Well, the rest of the rest of the story, you mean? Tradition says that he was the only person who stood up at Jesus’ trial before Pilate and defended Jesus. Tradition says he was baptized by Peter and John. Tradition says that his confession of the Lord Jesus was so bold that it led him to being deprived of his office, deprived of his position as a teacher and deprived of all of his entire fortune, all his property, all his possessions, and he was banished from Jerusalem by the Sanhedrin he had served. He was reduced, living outside the city, and his family left inside the city to abject poverty. There’s a wonderful little traditional story that his daughter was so poor that she reached the shame of digging in the dung piles for pieces of grain to eat and survive. And a rabbi came by and saw her and felt compassion for her and said, “Who are you?” And she said, “I’m the daughter of Nicodemus.” And the rabbi said, “Whatever happened to your father?” And she said, “He came to be a follower of Jesus and was banished.” And the rabbi refused to help her.

Some centuries later a man named Photius refers to an ancient document that records that Nicodemus was martyred in the first century for his devotion to Christ. How he was beaten to death by a mob. And that’s the full story. He lost everything in this world, gained everything in the world to come. What can you do? I give you John 6:37, “Him that comes to Me I will not cast away.” You can plead with God to give you life; it’s His prerogative. But you can pray and He doesn’t reject that honest prayer. You can say with the publican in Luke 18, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner.”

Father, we thank You again for the wonderful story of Nicodemus, this amazing account of Scripture. For all the richness of it, for all the magnificence of divine truth, there is no parallel, nothing even comes close, nothing ascends to this level, nothing. This is the greatest treasure in the world, the most important thing in the world, divine truth; sweeter than honey from the honeycomb, more precious than gold, much fine gold. We thank You for the sweetness, the value, incomparable joys that come to us in the understanding of divine truth. We understand it. We get it. The truth, hidden from the wise, revealed to babes, for Your glory, Your glory alone. I pray for those who are here who are like Nicodemus, maybe religious, moral, but worried, fearful, doubtful, knowing the hypocrisy of their own hearts, knowing they’re not in the kingdom. Would You be merciful for Your own glory? Would You save them by Your will, wash them with the water of Your Word and give them a new Spirit and plant Your Holy Spirit within them, give them new life, regenerate them? Open the grave, let them out, transfer them from the kingdom of death and darkness to the kingdom of Your dear Son and produce in them repentance and faith and obedience. All of this for Your praise and Your glory.

Father, thank You for this wonderful time of worship. Use us, Lord, to proclaim this truth boldly and then to wait on Your power and give You all the praise, we pray. Amen.

**The Divine Summons**

**John 3:1-10**

Code: 43-14

Now open your Bible, if you will, to the third chapter of the gospel of John. This, of course, is a critical chapter in all of holy Scripture. It sets the tone for our understanding of salvation, and the truth of this chapter, of course, is built upon throughout the rest of the New Testament. Let me read these ten verses. I want them to be in your mind, and then what I’m going to say this morning will be a kind of an appendix or an addendum to what we’ve already covered in these verses.

“Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews; this man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, ‘Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.’ Jesus answered and said to him, ‘Truly, truly I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.’ Nicodemus said to Him, ‘How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born, can he?’ Jesus answered, ‘Truly, truly I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be amazed that I said to you, “You must be born again.” The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit.’ Nicodemus said to Him, ‘How can these things be?’ Jesus answered and said to him, ‘Are you the teacher of Israel and do not understand these things?’”

As we’ve been saying, five times in those brief verses there’s a reference to being born again, or born from above. Either is fine, and both are accurate translations. We need to be born again. That is, having been born physically, we need now to be born spiritually. That birth comes from above. In a sense, our first birth, of course, was a direct creation of God as well, even in the physical sense. And so it is with our second birth that comes down from above. There is, however, no human aid to that birth, as there is in physical birth. It is a divine work of God. That is why it is referred to as being born of the Spirit, born of the Spirit.

It is the work of the Holy Spirit to give us life. That’s what “born again” means. And the reason the Lord uses this analogy is because it expresses to us the fact that we have no participation in this birth. You had nothing to do with your first birth, your physical birth. And you will have nothing to do with your spiritual birth. It is a divine work of God. Theologians call it monergistic rather than synergistic. You don’t participate in it. I didn’t participate in it. No person who is born again makes a contribution to that. There isn’t a way to make that happen. That is a divine work of God.

To look at it in perhaps an unforgettable illustration, remember what I said about Lazarus. Lazarus is dead. He’s in the grave. He’s been dead four days. His body is in a state of decay. The Lord comes to his tomb and raises him from the dead. He does it by a call. He says, “Lazarus, come out!” And Lazarus comes to life, comes out of the grave a new creation. The grave clothes are taken off of him; he is fully alive.

We are a race of Lazaruses, spiritually dead. God gives us life and He does it through a call, through a call. Jesus gave life to Lazarus, and He declared that life through calling him out of the grave. And so it is with those who are given life by the Holy Spirit. It is by a divine call. God speaks and life comes to us.

I want you to think about it that way because that’s a very important way in which the New Testament refers to God making us alive, giving us life. It is by a divine call. When we talk about being called of God, we are first and foremost talking about the call to come to life, to come out of the grave. It is a call to reconciliation, yes. It is a call to justification, yes. It is a call to redemption. It is a call to enter into the eternal kingdom of God. It is a call to sonship with all its rights and privileges. It is a call to love and service and obedience to the Lord. It is a call from bondage into freedom. It is a call to joy and peace. It is a call to holiness. The gospel call is referred to by the writers of the epistles as a high call, a holy call, a heavenly call. It is clearly a rare call. It is an undeniable call. It is an irreversible call.

The language of the New Testament makes much of the fact that our regeneration came in response to the call of God, the call of God. And I am saying that word repeatedly because I want you to see this word as it unfolds in the rest of the New Testament, so that whenever you read the New Testament this word in particular will come off the page with new and fresh meaning. This is a call that is a divine summons; it is a divine subpoena to come to life, to come into the family of God, into the kingdom of God, into the court of God to stand before God and to be declared forgiven and righteous and free forever from any judgment or any condemnation. Theologians have talked about this call and they have attached many adjectives to it. It has been called an effective call, an efficacious call, an irresistible call, a powerful call, a determinative call, a decisive call, a conclusive call, an operative call—and all of those are certainly suitable and fitting. It is a call to salvation. It is a call to life.

I want you to turn to Romans 8 as we add a bit of an appendix to our study of John 3. And I want us to begin to unfold what the New Testament says about this call so you understand the full wonder of it.

Romans 8 is very familiar to us—in verse 28 particularly, a verse that we love and apply many times in our Christian experience. “We know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.” God works everything to our good because we are called by Him.

If you go down into verse 29, you read, “For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified.” There you have a very clear definition of the absolute efficacious nature of being called. We are predestined, called, justified, and glorified. Whoever God predestined, He called. Whoever He called, He justified. Whoever He justified, He will glorify. It all began with predestination, and it ends with being conformed to the image of His Son. This is the divine purpose. And as that purpose unfolds throughout redemptive history, God causes everything to work together for good, to bring about the end result from His original predestination. Within the plan of God, from predestination to eternal glory, is calling and justification. All who have been chosen will be called; all who are called will be justified; all who are justified will be glorified.

And in the eleventh chapter of Romans, a wonderful promise for us who have been called, verse 29, Romans 11, “The gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.” “The gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.”

We’re talking about a call that is an absolute effective call. Whom He called, He justified and glorified. Now let’s talk about the word “call.” Simple word in the English language. *Kaleo*; it even sounds like the English word, *kaleo.* It means “to summon someone” to oneself, to one’s presence, “to call someone” to come to you. The word is descriptive, so descriptive that believers are identified as the called. We are literally “the called”; so that you take the verb and turn it into a noun. All of us have been called and we are, according to Romans 8:28, “the called.” In fact, that’s what a church is. The true church is the gathering together of the called. The word for “church”—we love the word “church”—it doesn’t tell us anything about who we are, the English word “church.” But the English word “church” is a translation of the Greek word *ekklesia. Ekklesia* is from *ekkaleo*, it means “the called.” *Kaleo* with a preposition at the front—*ek,* meaning “out of”; we are “the called out.” We have been called out of the grave. We’ve been called out of death, called out of ignorance, called out of blindness. We are the called. The church is *ekklesia*. It is “the called out,” “the called out.”

It would be wonderful if there were an English word that better explained that work of God than the rather static word that is the word church, ’cause it’s also used to describe organizations and buildings. So let’s refer to ourselves as often as we can think to do it as the called, the called. And to help you familiarize yourself with that, let me take you on a little run through the epistles of the New Testament. We can start in Romans where the epistles begin. Romans chapter 1; Paul, verse 1, identifies himself as “a slave of Jesus Christ, called”—called individually, of course. And then he goes down to talk about the redeemed. He talks about those who, in verse 5, have received grace and the obedience of faith among all the nations for His name’s sake. And then verse 6, “Among whom you also are the called...the called of Jesus Christ.” Verse 7, “You are the beloved of God in Rome, called saints.

In 1 Corinthians chapter 1, Paul again demonstrates how familiar this language is. First Corinthians 1, “Paul, called as an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, Sosthenes our brother, to the [*ekklesia*, to the called out ones] of God which is at Corinth, to those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by calling,” “saints by calling.” Go down to verse 9, “God is faithful, through whom you were called into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.” And when I’m reading this word “called,” I want you to be thinking about Lazarus. It was the call, “Lazarus, come out,” that brought him from the grave. And it is this same call that has given us life.

If you drop down into verse 23, “we preach Christ crucified, [admittedly] to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.” He can preach the gospel and it will be foolishness, and it will be a stumbling block until it hits the purpose of God, and they will come to life. Verse 26 then, “Consider your calling, brother,” “consider your calling.”

How did it happen? Verse 27, “God has chosen.” Verse 28, “God has chosen.” That’s why you were called. Called by the sovereign choice of God. In Galatians chapter 1, Galatians chapter 1, Paul again introducing himself at the beginning of his epistle, and this is very often at the opening of epistles because it identifies the believers to whom he writes. He is concerned about the churches in Galatia because there is some serious compromise going on in their lives. They have fallen into confusion and so in verse 6 he says, “I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ.” That’s, that’s a saving call; again, “Him who called you by the grace of Christ.” Again, God has called you; don’t defect from obedience to all that call implies.

In the wonderful letter to the Ephesians, chapter 4, verse 1, Paul again identifying himself as the prisoner of the Lord says, “I...implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called,” “the calling with which you have been called.” Verse 4, he identifies it again, “There’s one body, one Spirit, and you were called in one hope of your calling.”

In Colossians chapter 3, again the language doesn’t deviate from this one verb. Colossians 3 talking about what it is to be raised in Christ and seated at the right hand of God, and to have died and our life being hidden with Christ in God, Christ is now our life. We’ve been regenerated. That’s the language of regeneration. But down in verse 15, “Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body; and be thankful.”

First Thessalonians chapter 2, you can see that this language is in every one of these epistles. I’m not giving you every incident of it, just some samples. It’s all talking now to the Thessalonians in chapter 2, and verse 12 says, “Walk in a manner worthy of the God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory.” There’s absolutely no equivocation on this language. There’s no attempt to backtrack. There’s no attempt to sort of waylay any confusion or offense that this kind of language might stir up. It is straightforward; it is glorious language. It is celebrated, and it is to produce obedience and worship.

Second Thessalonians chapter 2, this is one of the great little duet verses in the New Testament, 2 Thessalonians 2:13 and 14, “We should always give thanks to God for you,” “thanks to God for you.” Because the reason you are who you are is because of what God has done—“Brethren, beloved by the Lord.” That’s where it starts, the Lord decided to set His love on you, “because God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation.” “He has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth. It was for this He called you through our gospel, that you may gain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.” You have all of the work of redemption summed up in two verses. It starts with love and then choice, and then calling, and then salvation, and then glorification. And at salvation comes the work of the Spirit to produce faith in the truth. This is the reason He called you, to bring you to eternal glory. That’s back to Romans 8. Predestined, called, justified, glorified, irrevocable, and no one is lost.

Let’s hear a word from the writer of Hebrews. The writer of Hebrews, chapter 3, verse 1; this is a beautiful statement. Hebrews 3:1, “Therefore, holy brethren, partakers of a heavenly calling,” “holy brethren, partakers of a heavenly calling.” How did we get to be holy? How did we get rid of our corruption, our wretchedness, our fallenness, our depravity? How did we become holy brethren? We received a heavenly calling. Heaven called us out of death, out of darkness, out of ignorance, out of blindness into life and light and truth.

Peter, 1 Peter 2, again all the writers of the New Testament celebrate our calling. This is really one of the richest of all of the texts on this subject. First Peter 2:9, “You are a chosen race”—talking to the *ekklesia*, the called out ones—“You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.” That is unmistakably clear. How did we get to be a special people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession who could proclaim His excellencies? How did that ever happen?

He called us “out of darkness into His marvelous light; for you were once not a people. Now you are the people of God. You once had not received mercy, but now have received mercy.” This is the call of God. Verse 21, “You have been called for this purpose.” And he just talked about suffering—called to suffer for Christ to be glorified with Christ.

When you think about who you are as a Christian, maybe Christian is certainly one way to define yourself, and maybe it’s fine to think of yourself as a part of the church of Jesus Christ. But I think to narrow that down to know that you have been called by God to life from the dead, because He set His love upon you before the world began, gives a fresh understanding to that. Again in 1 Peter chapter 3, Peter encourages us to give blessing to people, not returning evil for evil, insult for insult, but to give a blessing. Why? “For you were called for the very purpose that you might inherit a blessing.” That looks at eternal glory. You were called to eternal glory; you were called to receive a blessing from God. While you’re here, give blessing; don’t give evil for evil; don’t retaliate insult for insult. Blessed, God called you to give you eternal blessing.

And then in the last chapter of 1 Peter, chapter 5 and verse 10, Peter says, “After you have suffered for a little while”—that’s the way it is in this life—“the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish you. To Him be dominion forever and ever. Amen.” That’s a doxology. And boy, is every reason for a doxology because you have just read that your calling from God is forever secure, forever secure. He chose you because He set His love on you. He called you, justified you, and promises to glorify. Yes, you’ll suffer in this world. But “the God of all grace,” just to remind you that this isn’t about you, this is about Him. This isn’t about you deserving to receive salvation, or to keep salvation. This is about all grace from the one who called you, and He called you not to a temporary salvation, but He called you to His eternal glory in Christ. And that’s where you’re going to be. That’s where you’re going to be. He called you to that.

Second Peter—can’t resist this—Peter introduces himself as a slave, an apostle of Jesus Christ. And then he says in verse 1, quite interesting, “To those who have received a faith of the same kind as ours by the righteousness of our God and Savior, Jesus Christ.”

Where did you get your faith? Where did you get your faith? You received it. It was in the package when He called you forth. You received your faith. You received faith by the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ. It is a gift of God’s grace. “Grace and peace then be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord.” Then look at verse 3, “Seeing that His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness.”

Now listen to that. By His divine power He granted us everything pertaining to life and godliness. What does that mean? Election, calling, regeneration, justification, sanctification, glorification, everything—He granted us everything through the true knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence.

Again there’s that unilateral, monergistic work of God by which He calls us and gives us everything pertaining to life and godliness. Now do you understand that this is not some obscure designation of the people of God? This is how the writers of the New Testament epistles refer to us. Now this is not a general call. This is not an external call. This is not a call that a preacher or an evangelist makes. This is an internal, inward call of God that cannot be resisted.

There is an external call. When I preach the gospel, when an evangelist preaches the gospel, when you give the gospel to a friend, when you witness to somebody and call them to come to Christ and to respond to Him and embrace Him and His gospel, that’s an external call that humans make. And in that sense, you can take the language of Matthew 22:14 and the parable that Jesus gave where He said, “Many are called, few are chosen.” You remember that the ones initially called to the banquet didn’t come. That’s an external call. The call of the gospel externally goes out and people reject that call. Many are called, few are chosen. That refers to the general call, the outward call, the external call.

But when you come into the New Testament and you start with Romans, and you go through the rest of the New Testament, every time the word “call” appears in the category of the gospel, it is an internal, efficacious call from God that brings the dead sinner to life. That’s how the New Testament writers refer to it. It is an unyielding subpoena from God to come into His court, to be made alive, to be brought into His court, not to be condemned, not to be judged, but to be declared forgiven and righteous and set free. And to be then adopted as a son and reconciled fully. It is God’s sovereign, saving call as He exercises His own will and through His own magnificent grace takes the elect sinner into His presence to declare His forgiveness of that sinner and grant that sinner the very righteousness of Christ. Make Him a Son and promise him eternal riches in glory.

As wonderful as this is, it bothers some people. It does. They say, “Come on, God’s not going to bring sinners to Himself kicking and screaming. He’s not going to overpower them against their will and violate their choice.” Some say God can’t do that. He can’t do it because He’s given us freedom and we have freedom and free will and God can’t violate that. “Oh,” they say, “God can crack the lid of the casket so the dead person can get a little bit of glimpse of enough light and truth to believe. God can kind of open the mind just a little bit. But He can’t force them. They have to have the opportunity, that’s all, just the opportunity.”

There’s a book written, popular book written in recent times by a well-known theologian called *Chosen But Free*. And it presents the reality of the calling of God as really an unacceptable doctrine. He says it makes God into a dictator with power that crushes our freedom and drags us into His kingdom. Is that how you felt when you were saved? I don’t think so. I think you couldn’t get there quick enough. I don’t think you now feel like the worst thing that ever happened to you was your salvation. Why in the world did God drag you kicking and screaming into this? That’s completely an alien idea. You’re so grateful every day of your life for the salvation that God gave you.

That kind of thinking is not biblical, not true, and not a fair representation of what the Bible teaches. No one is ever saved against their will, no one. You weren’t saved against your will. I wasn’t saved against my will. No one has ever been saved against his will. Anyone who has been saved has willed to be saved. Anyone who has repented and believed the gospel has willed to repent and believe the gospel. In fact, anyone who’s been saved has had such a compelling, powerful desire to be saved that they literally push their way into the kingdom, Jesus said. They’re compelled to this. They come with tears. They come pounding on the chest, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner.” They’re willing.

Why are they willing? Because God makes them willing. Psalm 110:3, “Your people will volunteer freely in the day of Your power.” “Your people will volunteer freely in the day of Your power.” When the Lord lets out the call, “Come forth,” and life surges into your dead soul, that life activates your will. That life produces repentance. That life produces faith. And you come not kicking and screaming, but you come weeping with joy.

So the question is, How does the sinner become willing? No sinner has what it takes to be willing. When I teach on the doctrine of human depravity, the nature of fallen man, I talk about man’s problem in two ways. He is unable to be saved on his own and unwilling to be saved. Okay? Unable/unwilling—that’s the essence of depravity. Not only can’t he, he doesn’t want to. That’s Romans 3. “No man seeks after God, there’s none righteous, no, not one.” Ephesians 2, “Dead in trespasses and sins, walking according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that works in the children of disobedience.” Romans 5:6, “Helpless” is the word used. Helpless, hopeless, can’t understand the things of God; they’re foolishness to him as we saw in 1 Corinthians 1 and 2. Second Corinthians 4, “Blinded by Satan, the god of this world who has blinded their minds.”

“No sinner left to himself is either willing or able to come to God.” Corruption is too profound, too far reaching, too comprehensive. God must come then in His sovereign power and summon us to believe. He must on the day of His power make us willing. It’s not a kicking and screaming work which we resist; it’s a gracious, powerful, supernatural, heavenly regeneration of our whole inner being that makes us willing in the day of that power.

Well, what about the freedom of the will? What about that? Aren’t we free? Sure. You have a free will. Everybody in the world has a free will. You know, you make choices all the time. You made a choice to be here. You make choices all through the day. I don’t think you live under some kind of horrible sense of overpowering compulsion, unless you’re addicted to something. But just in general in life, you have freedom. But here’s the problem. If you’re not born again, if you are not regenerated, here’s the extent of your freedom. You can pick whatever behavior, attitude you want that dishonors God. Take your pick. But you can’t please Him. You can’t. You can pick your sin. And people do it all the time. You can pick your sin, you’re free. People talk about, “I want my freedom,” you’ve got it; you can choose your sin. Well, you might be restrained a little bit because you don’t want to go to prison for the rest of your life. Or you might be restrained a little bit because you don’t want to crash your car, so you limit how much you drink. You might be restrained a little bit ’cause you don’t want to lose your wife and your children, so you hide your immorality. But you can choose your sin. You just can’t choose anything else. You can’t choose not to sin. You can’t choose what pleases God.

Jonathan Edwards dug a little deeper on that and Jonathan Edwards, certainly in my mind, the greatest theologian America’s ever known and maybe the most brilliant thinker. He wrote this, “What we choose is not really determined by the will. What we choose is not really determined by the will. It is determined by the mind. What the mind thinks is what makes the choice and the mind is not neutral. The mind is not neutral. The mind,” and I’m paraphrasing Edwards at this point, “the mind is corrupt, the mind, to borrow Jeremiah’s word, the mind of man is deceitful above all things and exceedingly wicked.” So the mind isn’t neutral. It thinks some things are best and it’s free to choose. “When confronted with God,” Edwards goes on, “the mind of the sinner never thinks that following or obeying God is a good choice.” Never thinks that. His will is free to choose God. Nothing stops him from choosing God but his mind will not allow him to submit to God because that’s not desirable to him. “Therefore,” says Edwards, “unless God changes the way we think, our minds will always tell us to turn from God, which is precisely what we do.”

The sinner is in a position where he can’t do anything else. So if he is to will to repent and will to believe, God has to change his mind. Change how he thinks. Change what he desires, what he loves, what he hates, what he longs for. This is often called irresistible grace, and that’s okay. It works with a little tulip acrostic, irresistible grace. But I don’t know that I like that because irresistible is negative, and I don’t think of this as a negative experience, do you? I mean, if you call this His irresistible grace—I was saved by God’s irresistible—it sort of sets up the idea that I got something I necessarily didn’t want. Also, to say irresistible grace is redundant, because frankly, sovereign grace is irresistible since it’s sovereign. And so to say irresistible grace sort of over-qualifies grace and sort of under-defines grace. Grace is more than something to resist. And it is by nature a gift from God that is irresistible.

We could do better than that. We could call it saving grace, life-giving grace; a sinner can’t change his will because his mind is corrupt. He can’t move his will toward God, not by logic, not by a persuasion, not by clever preaching, and not by emotional music. God has to go to the grave and say, “Come out,” and give him a sovereign, supernatural call that summons the sinner up from the dead, at which point all his faculties are given new life, a new mind, a new will as mighty God works a work of regeneration.

Back in 1996 there was a meeting of some of my friends and some of the noblest and best of those who serve the Lord and think about biblical things, called “The Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals.” They met in Boston and they produced what’s called “The Cambridge Declaration.” One of the paragraphs in that Cambridge Declaration says this: “God’s grace in Christ is not merely necessary, but is the sole efficient cause of salvation. We confess that human beings are born spiritually dead and are incapable even of cooperating with regenerating grace.” Great statement.

They’re incapable even of cooperating with regenerating grace. I say that because I don’t want you to think I invented this. I know you don’t because I showed it to you in Scripture, and they’re just seeing exactly what you saw today.

Salvation is not in any sense a human work. Human methods, human techniques, human strategies can’t accomplish regeneration. Faith is not produced in our unregenerated human nature. We receive faith, we receive a new mind. We receive a new will.

One of my favorite little bits of church history is to go back to Charles Wesley. Charles Wesley denied this doctrine essentially. He was an Arminian in theology. That is, to follow an early theologian named Arminius who denied that salvation is all a work of God. He saw it as a synergistic work between God and man. Not only did, of course, does that view have problems with John 3 and everywhere else in the New Testament, and the whole idea of calling, but nonetheless it developed into a full-blown theology which still exists.

Charles Wesley had some issues with the theology, even though he espoused it and affirmed it along with his brother, John. But, you know, when you got to the heart of Charles Wesley, I think he found something different. Listen to what Charles Wesley wrote, and you know these words, listen to this: “Long my imprisoned spirit lay, fast bound in sin and nature’s night, Thine eye defused a quickening ray, I woke the dungeon flamed with light. My chains fell off, my heart was free, I rose, went forth to follow Thee.” The guy is a closet Calvinist! (Laughter) Are you kidding me!? You can’t say it any better than that.

Jim Boice, a good friend, now with the Lord, wrote a little story about John Newton. I’ll close with this. Newton was raised in a Christian home in which he was taught verses of the Bible, but his mother died when he was only six years old, and he was sent to live with a relative who hated the Bible and mocked Christianity. So John Newton ran away to sea. He was wild in those years and was known for being able to swear for two hours without repeating himself. He was forced to enlist in the British navy, but he deserted, was captured, and beaten publicly as a punishment. Eventually Newton got into the merchant marine and went to Africa. In his memoirs wrote that he went to Africa for one reason only, quote: “That I might sin my fill.”

Newton fell in with a Portuguese slave trader in whose home he was cruelly treated. This man often went away on slaving expeditions, and when he was gone his power passed to his African wife, the chief woman of the harem. She hated all white men and vented her hatred on Newton. He says that for months he was forced to grovel in the dirt, eating his food from the ground like a dog. He was beaten mercilessly if he touched it. In time, thin and emaciated, Newton made his way to the sea where he was picked up by a British ship making its way up the coast to England. When the captain of the ship learned that the young man knew something about navigation as a result of being in the British navy, he made him a ship’s mate. But even then Newton fell into trouble. One day when the captain was ashore, Newton broke out the ship’s supply of rum and got the crew drunk. He was so drunk himself that when the captain returned and struck him on the head, Newton fell overboard and would have drowned if one of the sailors hadn’t quickly hauled him back on board.

Near the end of one voyage, as they were approaching Scotland, the ship ran into bad weather and was blown off course. Water poured in and the ship began to sink. The young profligate was sent down to the hole to pump water. The storm lasted for days. Newton was terrified. He was sure the ship would sink, he would drown. In the hold of the ship as he desperately pumped water, the God of all grace whom he tried to forget but who had never forgotten him, brought to his mind Bible verses he had learned in his home as a child. The way of salvation opened up to him. He was born again, totally transformed.

Later, when he was again in England, he began to study theology, eventually became a preacher in a little town called Olney and later in London. His story is contained in these words: “Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me.”

Father, we thank You for the truth, thank You for the work of salvation, the mighty work of salvation that You have done in us. We are unworthy. When we have done all that we ought to have done, we have to say, “I’m an unworthy servant; all glory goes to You, all praise to You. To the praise of Your glory You have chosen us, You have redeemed us, You have justified us, regenerated us, adopted us, sanctified us. You have placed us into the communion of the saints and promised us eternal glory. And this is all Your mighty work for which we praise You. How could we not worship, how could we not love You? How could we not obey You? How could we not find endless joys in what You’ve provided for us? May that never grow stale in our minds and hearts. We give You thanks; we give You praise.

Father, thank You for the time that we’ve been able to set aside from the world around us, come into this wonderful place, gather with Your saints, worship You and have You speak to us so powerfully through Your truth. Seal all these things to our hearts and fill us with gratitude, we pray. Do Your work in every life, and we’ll give you all the praise and all the glory. Amen.

**Twin Truths: God’s Sovereignty and Man’s Responsibility**

**John 3:11-21**

Code: 43-15

This morning we’re going back to John chapter 3, so open your Bible, if you will, and come with me to the third chapter of John. We’re going to take a look, an initial look at this section, verses 11 to 21. And then I’m going to kind of digress a little bit because there’s something I have to tell you to set this entire passage in a proper context and to put it in your mind in a way that will be most helpful.

But let me read, we left off our discussion of the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus in the opening ten verses where Jesus talks to him about being born again, born from above. And we talked about the new birth. We talked about being born from above. It’s a work of God; it’s a divine work, a work of sovereign grace and sovereign power. It’s a monergistic, unilateral work of God that’s not a synthetic work where you have God participating with man. It’s not some kind of coalescing of the will and power of man, with the will and power of God. It’s a singular work of God by which He comes down from heaven, irresistibly brings a call—we call it an effectual call on the heart of a sinner—draws that sinner to himself, regenerates that sinner, and then justifies that sinner, sanctifies that sinner and then glorifies that sinner. It’s a work of God. The new birth being born from above, in the very illustration of birth, makes the point because no one participates in his own birth. You didn’t participate in your physical birth; you didn’t participate in your spiritual birth. It is a work of God, a divine, creative miracle.

So we went through that discussion, verses 1 to 10, with Nicodemus. Our Lord continues to speak to Nicodemus but beyond Nicodemus because as you begin in verse 11, the pronouns are plural as He says, “I say to you.” In verse 11, the pronoun is plural, so it broadens beyond Nicodemus to anyone else who happened to be there listening and to everyone else, for that matter, who will ever read this.

We pick up the monologue, the conversation ends in verse 10. Nicodemus has nothing else to say. But Jesus then speaks from verses 11 to 21. I want you to notice the emphasis here. “Truly, truly I say to you, we speak of what we know and testify of what we have seen and you do not accept our testimony.” That is an indication that Nicodemus did not accept what Jesus said about the new birth. That’s the post-mortem on that part of the conversation. You didn’t accept it. That explains the ignorance of verses 9 and 10. Nicodemus doesn’t understand; how can these things be? And Jesus says, “Are you the teacher of Israel and you don’t understand these things?” The reason he can’t understand—ignorance is the product of unbelief. And so he is not a believer. You do not accept our testimony.

Then our Lord goes on to say, “If I told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven but He who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up. And so whoever believes will in Him have eternal life, for God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.” Martin Luther called that verse the gospel in miniature, the most familiar verse in the Bible.

Verse 17 then, “For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world but that the world might be saved through Him. He who believes in Him is not judged, he who does not believe has been judged already because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. This is the judgment, that the light [meaning Christ] has come into the world and men love the darkness rather than the light, for their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil, hates the light and does not come to the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But he who practices the truth comes to the light so that his deeds may be manifested, **in having been,** as having been wrought in God.”

Now if there’s any one word that jumped off the page as I was reading that, it had to be the word “believe” because it appears seven times. In the first ten verses, we notice that the term “born again” appeared five times—“born again, born from above,” speaking of that divine, supernatural, sovereign, miraculous, gracious work of regeneration done by God. That was the theme of 1 to 10, the new birth, regeneration. The theme here is faith, believing. And so we have identified this message this morning as *“Sola Fide,”*Latin for “faith alone.”

Now why do I choose to use Latin to title a message? Because that is a classic term used to describe the doctrine that is taught in verses 11 to 21, going all the way back to the Reformation. If you go back to the sixteenth, seventeenth century when there was a clarification of the gospel, when the Reformation happened, there were five *solas* that the Reformers identified. Those five *solas*became the identifying benchmarks of the Reformation, and they are really the *solas* on which Protestantism is founded and a true understanding of the gospel.

The Reformers came up with, first of all, *sola Scriptura* as over against the Roman Catholic Church. They affirmed that there’s only one divine revelation, Scripture alone, *sola scriptura.*Not what is stated *ex cathedra* by the pope, not the product of church councils, not the collective magisterium of the Roman Catholic tradition—those are not divine, inspired, and authoritative revelations. *Sola Scriptura*, and then they came to *sola Christus*. Mary is not a co-redemptrix, only Christ. Christ alone, the only savior.

Salvation is not by grace and works, it is by grace alone—*sola gratia, sola gratia*. And it is appropriated not by works or any effort of man, but *sola fide*, “by faith alone” and the final *sola, soli Deo gloria*, “the glory of God alone.” So those *solas* define the Reformation and when you read any Reformation literature, you’re going to be running into the *solas.*In fact, through the years, many times I have spoken on these subjects at conferences designed really to give the *solas,* and a number of speakers would come in and address *sola Scriptura, sola Christus, sola gratia, sola fide,*or*soli Deo gloria.* Great, great themes.

So we’re looking at *sola fide*, the aspect of salvation that declares that one is saved by faith alone, not by faith and works, for by grace are you saved through faith, it is not of works. That’s Ephesians 2:8 and 9. It is not of works. It is by faith alone. Or Romans 3, “No one is justified by behavior, by the deeds of the Law.” Or Romans 4, “Abraham is justified by faith and not by works.” Or Romans 10, “One is saved by believing in the resurrection of Christ and acknowledging His Lordship.” The Word of God is crystal clear on that. I read earlier from Hebrews 10 an Old Testament statement, “The just shall live by faith.” That is to say, justification comes by faith and faith alone. And we all know something of the history of that. That was the great discovery that Martin Luther made that launched the Reformation. And he was kind of the triggerpoint to get it rolling, and it roared against the Roman Catholic Church and Protestantism, named as a protest against Catholicism, was born and the true gospel was recovered. Salvation comes by faith alone, not by faith plus works—by faith alone.

That is what John is saying in verses 11 to 21. He is telling Nicodemus and beyond Nicodemus using those plural pronouns, “I say to all of you,” that is to anybody else who was standing there with Nicodemus, including His own disciples, “And I say to all who will ever read this that you will be saved only by faith.” Verse 15, “Whoever believes will have eternal life.” Verse 16, “Whoever believes will not perish but have eternal life.” Verse 18, “He who believes is not judged.” It is about believing. It is about faith and faith alone.

This is consistent with John’s purpose. If you remember, John gave his purpose at the end of his letter, John 20:31, “These have been written,” meaning the entire letter, the entire gospel, “These have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.” John consistently says eternal life, that is, the forgiveness of sins, reconciliation to God. The hope of heaven comes to those who believe. It is by faith alone.

Now what is so fascinating about this is the fact that it comes on the heels of verses 1 to 10. Just think about this. Jesus is talking to a non-believer. He’s talking to a man who is in a defective, heretical, apostate religion. He is desiring to bring that man to a knowledge of the truth and consequently He says to him three times in this conversation, down through verse 11, “Truly, truly,” which is a way of saying, “In contrast to all the error that fills your mind, error which you have learned and then taught as *the* teacher in Israel, “I want to tell you the truth. And the first truth I want you to understand is that salvation is a divine work that God does from heaven down, that doesn’t depend on you.” We saw that. It’s absolutely crystal clear in verses 1 to 10.

And then without any explanation, without any transition, our Lord takes the next part of the conversation, turns it into a monologue and says this, “Anyone can be saved who believes,” and explains that in these verses. Anyone can be saved who believes. So on the one hand you have the doctrine of divine sovereignty. On the other hand you have the doctrine of human faith, human belief, or human responsibility. There are warnings that I just read you. If you don’t believe, you’ll be condemned. If you don’t believe, you’ll be judged, which means that if you don’t believe, you’re responsible for your unbelief, you will be held guilty, and you will be punished. This is human responsibility. Consequently you need to believe. You need to believe and in believing in the Lord Jesus Christ the Son of God, you will not perish; you will have eternal life. So here is human responsibility, both negatively and positively. You will bear the full weight of judgment if you refuse to believe. On the other hand, if you will believe, eternal life waits for you no matter who you are.

So you have then as clear a presentation of sovereign salvation in verses 1 to 10 as anywhere in Scripture, and right against it you have a clear presentation of human responsibility. And the question that if I don’t answer today, you will be asking in every verse, is how do those two things fit together? I’ve done questions and answers through the years in every place I’ve ever gone in the world, and every time there is an open question and answer session, I am asked this question: “How can salvation be solely a work of God and me be held responsible for believing or not believing? How can those two go together?”

Now I want to say this to you, first of all. Most people in doing evangelism would avoid that question all together, assuming that Christians who have been Christians for a long time don’t even like to face that question. They would do everything they could to keep a non-believer in the dark about it, and they would be doing exactly the opposite of what Jesus did. Jesus is talking to a non-believer and He presents to him the twin parallel truths of divine sovereignty in salvation and human responsibility, and He does it at the very beginning of the conversation. This is a work of God, solely a work of God, but you will be held responsible if you do not believe, and you are called to believe and eternal life awaits you if you will believe. Those are twin truths that run parallel.

May I tell you? They will always run parallel. They will always run parallel. They will never come together. They will never intersect. They will never be diminished; legitimately, they are what they are. The fact that you don’t understand how they go together only proves that you’re less than you should be. It doesn’t say anything about God. Your inability to harmonize those things is a reflection of your fallenness, my fallenness. People ask me all the time, “How do you harmonize those?” And my answer is, “I don’t. I can’t.” They can’t be harmonized in the human mind. But realize this, you are a puny mind and so am I, and collectively we are puny compared to the infinite, vast, limitless mind of God. All I can tell you is that in the Word of God, these truths run parallel. And the answer is to believe them both with all your heart. And the one, divine sovereignty, will inform your worship and the other, human responsibility, will motivate your evangelism.

So how are we to understand these things? Well, we’re going to get into the text and I’m going to show you the condition of unbelief, the commendation of belief, and the condemnation of unbelief, but we’ll leave that for next time. I want to talk about this particular issue ’cause, as I said, if I don’t, in every verse you’re going to have this dilemma in your mind about how does this work? How could we be saying these things about you must believe, if you believe you can be saved, and make that square with what we already know about divine sovereignty in salvation. How do those things come together? They don’t. I say it again, they are parallel truths, they are both true. I’ve been around a long time and I have seen every imaginable, every conceivable effort to harmonize those things done by people, well-intentioned people, very gifted people, well-known preachers, theologians, writers, commentators who tried to harmonize it. Anybody whoever tries to harmonize those two things destroys one or the other of them, or both of them. You can’t change them, you can’t tamper with them. You must be content to believe them both.

Now how can I help you to deal with that? I can’t harmonize it. I can’t bring it all together. I can’t solve your dilemma. I can’t answer the apparent paradox. So what am I left with? I want to make you comfortable with your inability not to get it. Okay? That’s my objective, okay? I just want you to be completely happy that you don’t get it. Okay? Just put you to rest, stop fighting that. That’s where we’re going today. I want you to be comfortable with the fact that, wow, you just might not understand something. I know that’s a big pill to swallow because of human pride, but get over it and be content not to get it.

Now I want you to understand that when the Bible deals with these things, it doesn’t explain itself. It isn’t self-conscious. You don’t read—I know this is really tough to get—you don’t have caveats like that. You don’t have underlying statements. You don’t have efforts to make explanations. These things are stated in Scripture as parallel realities and never really explained or harmonized because they both exist. And the fact that we can’t understand them leaves us with one option, and that is to believe them both and be content with that.

Let me give you a couple of illustrations to help you with your comfort. Turn to Isaiah 10, and this might seem a bit of a different angle on this but I want you to show, to be able to see how God shows us these things in maybe surprising ways.

God has a will. We know that. God will do His will, or whatever the Lord wills, He does; whatever He purposes, He brings to pass. The will of the Lord cannot be thwarted. He is absolutely sovereign. He does what He wills in every life. He does what He wills among men. He does what He wills in the world. He brings His own purposes to pass. That aspect of the sovereignty of God is clearly revealed all over Scripture.

But here’s a very interesting illustration of how that goes together with responsibility. In the tenth chapter of Isaiah, God introduces Assyria, the nation of Assyria, the people of Assyria. And he introduces that pagan, idolatrous nation in a very interesting way. Verse 5, Isaiah 10, “Woe to Assyria.” Okay, a judgment is coming on Assyria, a judgment from God: “Woe.” “Woe” is an onomatopoetic Hebrew term. We say, “Woe” in English. It actually in Hebrew, *oyeeyaa*,; it’s that kind of groan. That’s why I mean onomatopoetic; that’s a word that sounds like its meaning. So it’s a word of terrible distress that signifies destruction and judgment. God is going to destroy Assyria. God is going to bring divine judgment on Assyria.

Then from there we read, “The rod of My anger and the staff in whose hands is My indignation.” God says I’m going to judge Assyria, and then He identifies Assyria as the rod of His anger and the staff of His indignation. In other words, Assyria is a weapon in the hands of God. Assyria...God is picking up Assyria like a weapon to use Assyria to unleash His wrath.

On whom? Verse 6, “I send it against a godless nation and commission it against the people of My fury.” That’s a sad designation because He’s talking about Israel. God, and it happened in history, picked up Assyria and sent Assyria as a destroyer against an apostate idolatrous Israel. God says, “I am going to pick up Assyria, the rod of My anger, the staff of My wrath, My indignation, and I’m going to send it against a godless nation, against Israel.” And that’s what He did. Assyria was God’s tool. You know the story of the Assyrian invasion of the northern kingdom in 722—took them captive, massacred them, and they never returned from captivity; the northern part of the divided kingdom. Assyria was the weapon. And He says in verse 6, “To capture booty, to seize plunder, to trample them down like mud in the streets,” and that is exactly what happened.

Then you come to verse 7, most interesting. “Yet, it does not so intend, nor does it plan so in its heart.” I’m going to use Assyria to do this and this is not Assyria’s plan. This is not what Assyria is choosing, this is what I am choosing for Assyria to do. This is not Assyria’s intent. This is not its plan. Rather, it has its purpose—to destroy and cut off many nations.

Assyria is targeting all kinds of nations and their names in the next verse, verse 9, that identify some of those. Assyria has its plan, but I have My plan, and I without their planning it, or intending to do it, I’m going to pick them up and use them as My weapon.

Well, this is amazing. Assyria has no intention of doing this. God literally, sovereignly picks them up, drives them at Israel to accomplish His will, and then He says in verse 5, “Woe to Assyria.” Woe to Assyria, a nation to be destroyed for doing something they didn’t choose to do, doing something they didn’t plan to do, doing something that was not their intention to do.

Assyria had its own plans. God had different plans. But Assyria will be destroyed. Verse 12, “It will be when the Lord has completed all His work on Mount Zion, representing Israel and Jerusalem, He will say, ‘I will punish the fruit of the arrogant heart of the king of Assyria and the pomp of his haughtiness.’” And then He goes on to quote what the king of Assyria said when he became proud and launched against Israel. God says, “I’m going to destroy him.”

Verse 16, “I’m going to send wasting disease. Under His glory a fire of kindle like a burning flame. The light of Israel will become a fire, his Holy One a flame and burn and devour his thorns and briars in a single day. He will destroy the glory of his forest and fruitful garden, soul, and body as when a sick man wastes away,” etc. This is an amazing juxtaposing. God punishes a nation for doing what God picked them up and made them do. There’s no explanation. There’s no way to harmonize those things. Full responsibility for pride fell on the king of Assyria. Full responsibility for evil intention and massacre fell on Assyria. Even though they were acting by divine decree, they bore full responsibility for what they did. This again is an illustration of those parallel realities: human responsibility and divine sovereignty. And they will always run parallel, and they will always have to be understood that way. Sinners bear the full weight of responsibility for their acts of defiance against God, even when God is using them to accomplish His purposes. And yet all things are decreed and determined by God as to their final end.

Let me take you into the New Testament, for a moment. Turn to Matthew chapter 11, Matthew chapter 11, and this may be a little more on point. Matthew chapter 11, verse 27, this is a verse on divine sovereignty. “All things have been handed over to Me by My Father.” Now listen, “And no one knows the Son except the Father, nor does anyone know the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal Him.” Did you see that? The only one who knows the Son is the one to whom the Son wills to reveal Him. You can’t know Christ if He doesn’t will for you to believe in Him. If He doesn’t will you to know Him. Well, that’s verse 27, strong on divine, sovereign, determined purpose. You can’t know the Son unless the Son wills you to know Him.

And then verse 28, what does it say? “Come to Me all who are weary and heavy laden and I’ll give you rest.”

How can that be? He just said that no one can come unless the Son reveals Him Himself. How can you say that? But that’s all over the Bible. They’re those two parallel realities, those twin truths again. On the one hand, the sovereign purpose of God; on the other hand, an open offer: “Come to Me” all who are weary, heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, learn from Me. I’m gentle and humble in heart. You’ll rest for your souls for My yoke is easy, My burden is light.”

You have this firm statement about no one being able to know Christ unless it is revealed to him from above. And then you have an immediate plea from the heart of Christ for anyone and everyone to come.

Turn to John 6, and we’ll get to John 6, one of the really great chapters in Scripture. But in John 6 we can pick it up at verse 35, Jesus says, fed the multitude; then He’s taught about the bread of life, about Himself being the bread of life. In verse 35 He said, “I am the bread of life, he who comes to Me will not hunger. He who believes in Me will never thirst.” So if you have spiritual hunger and spiritual thirst, that can be remedied and answered by coming to Christ. What does that mean? It means believing. Verse 35 is one of those “whoever”—“He who believes in Me, whoever believes in Me will never thirst.” I said to you, “You have seen Me and yet do not believe.” You don’t believe. Your problem is, you’ve seen Me, you’ve heard Me. I just created food to feed 20 to 25 thousand of you. I’ve been teaching you. I’ve said all this. Your problem—you don’t believe; you don’t believe.

And then He says in verse 37, look at this: “All that the Father gives Me will come to Me.” And He goes from the failure to believe to divine sovereignty. You won’t believe, you won’t come. And then He immediately says, “All that the Father gives Me will come to Me.” And, by the way, in verse 40 He says, “This is the will of God, My Father, that everyone who beholds the Son and believes in Him will have eternal life.” It goes back and forth from divine sovereignty to human responsibility. It goes from new birth, regeneration as a work of God, the Father chooses, the Father draws, the Father gives to the Son, the Son receives, the Son keeps and loses none. That’s the divine side. And it just moves easily without an explanation to the reality that anyone, whoever believes, may have eternal life.

Down in verse 44, “No man can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws Him.” Well, you can’t come unless the Father draws you, and yet verse 45, “Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to Me.” That seems to support the idea that this is a divine work of God. In fact, verse 46, “Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from the Father, He has seen the Father.” And this is talking about the divine side. “You can’t know the Son, you can’t know the Father, you can’t know eternal life in them unless God draws you, unless God calls you, and yet, verse 47, “Truly, truly I say to you, he who believes has eternal life.” It’s a matter of believing.

Verse 57, “As the living Father sent Me and I live because of the Father, so he who eats Me, he also will live because of Me.” All you have to do is receive Christ, take Christ in and you’ll have eternal life. Down in verse 63, it is the Spirit who gives life. That’s regeneration. That’s John 3:1 to 10; it’s the new birth, the regeneration born from above. It’s the Spirit who gives life. It’s the Spirit who gives life. And yet verse 64, “There are some of you who do not believe. There are some of you who do not believe, that’s your problem. And as a result of that, verse 66, “Many of His disciples withdrew and weren’t walking with Him anymore, so Jesus said to the Twelve, ‘You do not want to go away also, do you? Simon Peter answered Him, ‘Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, we have believed and have come to know that You’re the Holy One of God.’”

Back and forth from the sovereign choice of God, the sovereign revelation of the Father and the Son, the sovereign work of the Spirit who gives life to believing and not believing. Those things are side-by-side in Scripture everywhere. Two parallel truths to be affirmed if not fully comprehended.

In the second chapter of the book of Acts, there is another one of these illustrations where Peter is preaching on the Day of Pentecost, and he indicts the Jews for rejecting Christ and crucifying Christ. He says, “Men of Israel, listen to these words,” Acts 2:22, “Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst, just as you yourselves know, this man delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross and put Him to death.”

The predetermined plan of God and yet you nailed Him to a cross. And we know from the teaching of our Lord that they were to be held accountable for that, that their house was left to them desolate. They were guilty of not only stoning the prophets, but killing the Son of God Himself, and they would bear full weight for the responsibility of their unbelief and their action against Christ. Yes, by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, and yet full responsibility on the part of those who rejected Him and took His life.

In the fourth chapter of the book of Acts: “Truly in this city they were gathered together against Your holy servant, Jesus, whom You anointed,” speaking to God, “Herod, Pontius Pilate, the Gentiles, the people of Israel to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose predestined to occur.”

So there, the Jews, the Romans, Pilate, Herod, everybody involved in the execution of Jesus, they were doing what they wanted to do in unbelief and an unbounded iniquity and yet they were executing the purpose predestined by the hand of God. Those parallel truths. The Old Testament prophesied the betrayal of Jesus. It prophesied Judas. The New Testament records the fact that Judas was the fulfillment of the one who was prophesied to lift up his hand, His own familiar friend who would lift up his hand against Him. It was ordained by God that Judas would be a betrayer in John 18, that Jesus says, “I have lost none of them except the son of perdition that Scripture may be fulfilled.” And yet in Acts 1:25 it says, “When Judas hanged himself, and fell and burst his bowels open, he went to...he turned and went to his own place.” These are samples of how consistently Scripture puts these things parallel without mingling them and therefore diminishing one or the other, or both.

One final illustration in Romans 9, 10 and 11, we’ll wrap it up here in just a few moments. Obviously these are great passages. I remember when the first time I ever went through Romans 9, 10 and 11, those three chapters, I think, took a year. I admit, people were screaming for mercy within six months; we plowed through it in a year. But so I’ll give you just the overview.

Chapters 1 through 8, the gospel. Chapters 1 through 8, the gospel. The gospel is introduced in 1, and then it becomes the subject in all its beauty and all its nuances, aspects, and the gospel is through 1 through 8.

Now you come to 9 and in 9 to 11 the gospel, having been explained, the apostle then bears his heart over the application of that gospel truth to sinners. And he chooses one group of sinners, the one that is the most familiar to him, and those about whom he cares the most, the Jews. So let’s take the gospel from the opening eight chapters and let’s apply it to the Jews. How does he feel about his nation?

Well, chapter 9 verse 1, “I’m telling you the truth in Christ, I’m not lying. My conscience testifies with Me in the Holy Spirit that I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart. I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh who are Israelites.” So here’s his problem. He understands the gospel. He’s unfolded the glories of the gospel and he’s looking at his people, his nation Israel, and his heart is broken to the degree he would almost give up his own salvation if Israel could be saved. The same thing is in chapter 10, verse 1. “My heart’s desire, my prayer to God is for their salvation.” Same attitude. Chapter 11, verse 1, “Has God rejected His people? No He has not. May it never be.”

So what you have here is Paul’s passion that this glorious gospel which he’s unfolded be applied to Israel. Now that brings into play these two parallel realities. And you have the first one, divine sovereignty in chapter 9, and you have the second one, human volition in chapter 10. Let’s see how chapter 9 begins. Chapter 9 begins with affirming the privileges that the Israelites had. Verses 4 and 5, the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the Law, the temple, the promises of the Father’s. Even Christ came through the line of Israel, all of that. The Word of God didn’t fail. What happened? “Not all Israel is Israel.”

What? “Not all Israel is Israel.” God makes choices. And you go down to verse 13, you see an illustration. “Jacob have I loved, Esau have I hated.” What? “Jacob have I loved, Esau I hated. I even determined that the older would serve the younger.” Verse 14, the response then, “What are we going to say? There’s no injustice with God, is there?” That doesn’t sound fair. How can you make that determination before they’re born? How can you choose Jacob and not Esau? How can you do that? That’s not fair.

Verse 15, Here’s God’s answer from Exodus 33, “I’ll have mercy on whom I will have mercy. And I’ll have compassion on whom I will have compassion.” I make that decision. I decide to whom I will give mercy and compassion. “It doesn’t depend on the man who wills. It doesn’t depend on the man who runs.” It depends on God who has mercy. Verse 18, “He has mercy on whom He desires. He hardens whom He desires.”

So the question is then in verse 19, “How can He then find fault with me?” I’m not even a factor. If He’s making all the choices, how can He hold me responsible for rejecting? Because who could resist that sovereign will? That’s your complaint. That’s not fair. What’s God’s answer? Simply, “Shut up, you have no right to ask that.” That’s what he says in so many words.

Verse 20, “Who are you, O man, who answers back to God?” “Who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, ‘Why did You make Me like this, will it? Does not the potter have a right over the clay? To make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for common use? So what if God desired to demonstrate His wrath and make His power known through vessels prepared for destruction?’” God has a right to put His glory on display, the glory that He gets through His wrath. And so what if God wanted to make known the riches of His glory on vessels of mercy. God is glorified in His wrath and He’s glorified in His grace.

From Hosea, verse 25, “I’ll call those who were not My people My people.” I’ll make that call. I’ll make that decision. That’s a sovereign decision made by God. That is the most strong section of the New Testament on the sovereignty of God in choosing people for salvation.

Now you come to chapter 10, the next chapter. Here’s the other side, human responsibility. What’s the problem? “My prayer to God is for their salvation. I pray that they’ll be saved.” Why are they not saved? Well, “they have a zeal for God,” verse 2, “but not in accordance with knowledge.” They don’t have enough knowledge. He’s not saying, “Well I...there’s no way they will be saved because I guess God didn’t choose them.” He doesn’t say that. He says, “The problem is they don’t have knowledge.” And what is it that they don’t understand? Well, they don’t understand the things you need to understand. I mean, you totally need to understand. For example, they don’t understand God’s righteousness. Wow, that’s really important. They don’t understand that God is as righteous as He is. They think God is less righteous than He is. And they seek to establish their own righteousness. So they have a bad theology proper. They think God is less righteous than He is. They have a bad anthropology. They think they are more righteous than they are, and so they can satisfy God on their own.

So they have an inadequate view of God as holy, perfectly righteous. They have an utterly inadequate view of themselves as totally and utterly sinful. And therefore they don’t subject themselves to the righteousness of God. In other words, they don’t fall under the burden of realizing they can never attain to the righteousness of God, and therefore cry out to Christ to end the reign of the Law and bring them righteousness and how would that happen? It would come to everyone who believes. How amazing is that? Verse 4, they don’t understand that righteousness which brings an end to the tyranny of the Law is available to everyone who believes. And so, Paul says, “That’s what we preach,” verse 8. We preach the Word about faith. We preach about faith. We preach that if you confess with your mouth “Jesus is Lord, believe in your heart God raised Him from the dead, you’ll be saved, for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness.”

And then He says in verse 11, “Whoever believes in Him will not be ashamed.” Whoever believes, it doesn’t matter, Jew, Greek, same Lord, Lord of all, abounding in riches for all who call upon Him. For whoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

Wow! After that, chapter 9, resolute, absolute on the sovereignty of God in salvation, here it’s about knowing the truth, believing the truth, believing in Christ.

How do we respond to these two things? Well, we have a mandate. Verse 14, and this is how you resolve this. “How will they call on Him in whom they haven’t believed? How will they believe in Him whom they haven’t heard? How will they hear without a preacher? How will they preach unless they’re sent?”

You see, faith, verse 17, comes from hearing the Word concerning Christ. So what’s our responsibility? Climb into an ivory tower and try to find a solution to these two parallel truths? To try to find a way to resolve the apparent paradox? To try to catapult ourselves to the level of the mind of infinite God? No. Our responsibility is to recognize this. We have been given a command and a commission to go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature because anyone who believes can be saved. Anyone who believes will be saved. “Anyone who comes to Me,” Jesus said in John 6, “I will never turn away.” The only way people can come to Him and believe is if they hear. The only way they can hear is as if we go and tell them.

If this issue of sovereignty and human responsibility is nothing more for you than some kind of a mental exercise, then you’ve missed the entire point. We are held responsible for the proclamation of the message of salvation to the ends of the earth, to the ends of the earth. And if we do that, they will say what is recorded in verse 15, borrowed from Isaiah 52, “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news, good tidings, the gospel.”

In the end, the final word, and it’s a magnificent one, comes at the close of chapter 11, at the close of chapter 11. Verse 33, now we know what our mission is, to go to the world and preach the gospel, to be the preachers who are sent, to tell the truth so people can hear, believe and be saved. But this is where the final resolution comes, verse 33, Romans 11. This is Paul, and Paul understood these two parallel truths, certainly as well as any human being could understand them. And he says this, “O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God.” The first thing to acknowledge is this, what God knows and what God understands is vastly beyond us. It is at a depth we cannot fathom. In fact, he says, how unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways.

Can you take the instruction from that? You cannot understand these two things and how they harmonize in the mind of God. You never will understand them in this life. They are unsearchable and unfathomable. There are plenty of people who would like to give God a little advice and their idea of harmonizing these. But the problem is in verse 34, “Who knows the mind of the Lord and who became His counselor.” Do you think God’s waiting for you to give Him some hints on how He can simplify? Who do you think you are? You don’t know the mind of the Lord. You can’t even come close. You’re not going to counsel Him.

Furthermore, in verse 35, He’s not obligated to you to give you any more information than you have. “Who has first given to Him that it might be paid back to Him again.” Do you think God owes you something? You think He owes you an explanation? No, in the end, “from Him, through Him, to Him are all things, we put them there and we leave them there. To Him be the glory forever, Amen.”

Now, I did all that, said all that, took you through all that so that when we start to look at the role that faith plays, you’re going to be at peace and at rest as you think about that in comparison to the wonderful section on regeneration, the work, the divine work of God.

Do you feel a little more comfortable with those two things? I hope you do. That’s the whole point. In Psalm 77 (applause)...thank you...in Psalm 77 and verse 19 it says, “Your way was in the sea and your paths in the mighty waters”...I love this...“and your footprints can’t be known.” Beautiful imagery, right? You walk through the sea and you don’t leave any footprints. I’m content with that. I rejoice in that. And I live my life believing both of those things, but the one that puts the responsibility on me is *sola fide*; divine sovereignty puts no responsibility on me. Faith and believing puts all the responsibility on me, to believe, to not be left in unbelief, and to proclaim a message so that others can hear and also believe. So next time we’re going to look into the wonderful section on whosoever believes will not perish but have everlasting life.

Father, thank You for our time this morning, as we have grappled in our minds with these things—some of us for a long time—and perhaps not understood how marvelous and how wondrous these realities are. And how the very reality that they’re beyond us speaks of their divine character. We honor You, we adore You, we love You, we exalt You, we lift You up and even in all our efforts to do that, we can’t comprehend You as you really are. We long for the day in heaven to come when our knowledge will be made perfect and our understanding will be made clear and we’ll be able to glorify You perfectly. Until then, we give You the honor that the apostle did, and we say with Him that from You and to You and for You are all things, to You be the glory forever. Amen.

**Simply Believe**

**John 3:11-14**

Code: 43-16

All right, let’s open the Word of God to the third chapter of the gospel of John, and we begin now to look at verses 11 to 21, really one of the most important portions of Scripture in all the Bible. I’m not going to be in any hurry to get through it, so we’ll spend a few weeks on this passage, and that works out well because it will be around the Shepherds’ Conference and it will be wonderful, at least for the folks who are for sure here next week to hear a little bit of our Lord’s teaching in this vital chapter.

Now you will remember that this section of John’s gospel, starting in verse 1 and running to verse 21, is the Lord teaching about salvation, teaching about salvation. And it all happens in a conversation with a Pharisee by the name of Nicodemus. Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night; he’s a very formidable man. The fact that he was a Pharisee meant that he had achieved a very elevated status in his devotion to the Old Testament and to rabbinic law and tradition. He was an expert. Jesus even calls him *the* teacher in Israel. There are some historical indications that he was one of the three wealthiest people in Jerusalem, which means that he has reached high levels of influence--a member of the Sanhedrin, the Supreme Court--a very, very elevated Jew.

Here we find the Lord Jesus Himself as the evangelist and Nicodemus as the subject of his evangelism. This is Jesus talking to a lost sinner, a hypocrite--very religious, very well versed in his religion, but lost, unconverted, outside the kingdom of God, not possessing eternal life; really an archetypal hypocrite. And we’re not saying anything about Nicodemus that he didn’t know. He is a deeply troubled man. He is a hypocrite who understands his hypocrisy. He is a secret sinner. He is a deeply worried man. He does not know that he is reconciled to God. He has no confidence that he possesses eternal life. He does not believe he is not sure that he is in the kingdom of which he continually speaks and which he ostensibly represents.

He has been watching Jesus, if only for a brief period of time, as Jesus has been in Jerusalem around the Passover. And Jesus has been doing mighty miracles and the evidence is that He is from God because, as Nicodemus said to Jesus, “nobody can do what You do unless God is with him.” The only explanation for the powerful miracles was that Jesus was connected to God. Nicodemus is not saying he is God, but he knows he comes from God. So Nicodemus hopes that maybe this man from God can give him an answer to the deep anxiety of his own heart. Maybe this man can tell him what else he needs to do or what he needs to stop doing to get into the kingdom, to have some peace and some joy and some assurance and some confidence, and some real hope.

So he comes to Jesus at night and his heart is open to Jesus who knows everything in everybody’s mind and heart, as chapter 2 says at the very end. He knew what was in man so nobody needed to tell Him anything about it because He knew the heart of man. Jesus knows the angst and the worry and the fear and the anxiety and the trepidation of this arch-hypocrite in Judaism at the highest level. He knows his aching heart.

And so He speaks to Him about entering the kingdom. And the first thing He says to him is, “It isn’t something you can do.” It isn’t something that you can do. You can’t make a contribution to entering into the kingdom. In verse 3 He says, “You have to be born again [*anothen,* “born from above”].” Later in that section, verses 3 to 10, you have to be born by the Holy Spirit. You have to be born of the Spirit and cleansed by power from above. And He uses the analogy of birth. Birth is an earthly analogy. We all understand that you make no contribution to your birth, none. And the same would be true in the spiritual realm. You make no contribution to your spiritual birth. That’s why the analogy of birth is so appropriate. You need to be born from above. You need God to give you spiritual life, the same way God gave you physical life--and you made no contribution to your physical life, and you can make none to your spiritual life.

This is devastating. This is turning his religious paradigm and all his theological thinking upside down and inside out because his religion like all false religions in the world are all about people achieving a relationship to God, human achievement, works, religion, ritual, ceremony, morality, whatever the categories of accumulation. All religions systems in the world, bar none, are all about human achievement. This was apostate Judaism. That was his entire perspective. All of his convictions about theology, about God, about relationships to God, about life, kingdom, heaven were around the idea that he had to do something. He had to be moral. He had to be virtuous. He had to be righteous. He had to follow the rituals and the routines and the ceremonies to achieve this standing with God that would grant him entrance into God’s presence eternally.

Jesus says to him, “What is required is something you can’t do. You have no part in what needs to happen. Now what is striking about that is that would seem to me to be the last thing that most Christians today would want to say to someone who came to find out about eternal life, who came to find out about entering the kingdom, who came to ask about how to have a relationship with God, how to have your sins forgiven, how to be saved (to use our language). It would seem to me that the last thing people would say is, “Well, you’re asking the impossible. There is no way that you can do this. There is no way that you can make a contribution to it.” Whatever you are, whatever you have done, have not done, whatever good you’ve done, whatever evil you’ve done has no bearing on this. Your connection to religion has no relationship to this. Your connection to morality has no relationship to this. You’re asking for something to happen to you that comes from God by sovereign power. But that’s what Jesus told him. And I’m convinced that we far too often hide that great truth.

There are people who are afraid to say that to Christians, that the salvation they already received was a work of God from heaven. Somehow they think that intrudes on people’s independence and freedom. Why would we say that to a non-believer? Answer: to stop the non-believer dead in his tracks, with nowhere to go and nothing to appeal to. “By the deeds of the Law,” in the words of Paul, “shall no flesh be justified.” You’re asking something that is impossible. You would be better off trying to stuff a camel through the eye of a needle than to think you can earn your salvation. This is a complete, massive shift in the thinking of Nicodemus. That is why twice in that opening section, verses 3 to 10, Jesus says, “Truly, truly,” “truly, truly,” because I’m telling you for the first time what is true as over against the lies that you have longed believed.

Now Jesus holds him responsible for not knowing that. “How can you,” He says in the end of that opening section, verse 10, “how can you be *the* teacher in Israel and not know this?” He should have known this because the message of divine, sovereign salvation is given clearly in the Old Testament, in the New Covenant passages in which Nicodemus would have been very familiar (Jeremiah 31, Ezekiel 36, Ezekiel 37). How is it you don’t know that a relationship with God is something God does miraculously from heaven, it comes down?

So here is this self-condemned hypocrite with a guilty conscience, full of angst because he knows he’s alienated from God, he knows he’s a phony, he knows he’s a secret sinner. And now he hears that he can’t do anything about it and all he’s ever known all his life is that he can do something about anything, even a relationship with God is in his hands.

So our Lord stops the sinner in his tracks. And I commend to you this approach. If somebody would come to you and say, “What do I do to be saved?” The answer is...What?...nothing. There’s a sense in which you say this is a divine miracle, this is a work of God according to His will; as verse 8 says, the Holy Spirit does it when and where He will. And as we’ve been saying all the way through those opening verses, all you can do is ask, all you can do is ask.

Now last week we made a transition into the section verses 11 to 21. New birth was mentioned five times in the opening verses; belief is mentioned seven times in verses 11 to 21. So now we came to that second parallel track, you remember that? If you weren’t here last week, you might want to get that message. The second parallel track, human responsibility. You can’t do anything about it on the one hand, but on the other hand, you are responsible for your belief or unbelief. So the message to a sinner is, You can’t do anything to gain your salvation. You can’t make a contribution to it, but you are required to believe what God has done to provide it, to believe what God has done in Christ to provide salvation as a gift of grace.

Now with that in mind, let me read verses 11, and we’ll read least down through verse 18. “Truly, truly I say to you, we speak of what we know and testify of what we have seen and you do not accept our testimony. If I told you earthly things and you did not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven but He who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life, for God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him. He who believes in Him is not judged.” And we’ll stop there.

Now as we work our way through this passage, this most remarkable, remarkable passage, we’re going to follow three simple lines. We’ll cross into three little categories. Number one, the confrontation of unbelief. That’s the opening couple of verses. Our Lord confronts unbelief. Then 13 to 18, He commends belief. And then 19 to 20, He condemns unbelief. So the whole thing is about believing and not believing--confrontation of unbelief, commendation of belief, condemnation of continued unbelief.

Now let’s pick it up at verse 11 and you’ll see how it connects. “Truly, truly,” for the third time He says that because He’s saying things that are so alien and at the same time absolutely true and speaking into the error and ignorance of Nicodemus. “Truly, truly I say to you, we speak of what we know and testify of what we have seen.” And by the way, that’s an editorial “we.” You find other illustrations of our Lord doing that, where He uses a plural to speak of Himself. Some think He’s embracing all others who would preach this message, but it’s such a unique statement that I think it’s best to see it as simply an editorial “we,” which is something very common in all the language of the world. Sometimes when you refer to yourself, you defer from saying “I” and you say, “Well, we believe,” and you understand that that’s you, but there’s truth beyond you represented by that that’s also believed by others. So our Lord uses the editorial “we.” We speak of what we know and testify of what we have seen.

That is a really stunning statement because what Jesus is saying is, I am telling you what I know and what I have personally experienced. I’m not giving you second-hand information. You’re not getting second-hand information from Me. It’s not like a prophet came to you; it’s not like a preacher came to you; it’s not like an apostle came to you to give you what he had received from God, I am speaking to you what I eternally know and what I have eternally experienced firsthand. Really a very dramatic statement.

But notice how verse 11 ends. “And you do not accept our testimony.” Shocking, shocking. “You” is plural, “you do not accept our testimony.” “You” is plural. Why is it plural? You, your friends the Pharisees, the leaders of Israel, your nation and the world: “He came into His own, His own received Him not, He was in the world, the world was made by Him and the world knew Him not” (John 1:10-11). I have come to you with the truth, eternal truth that I have always known, truth that proceeds from Me as the eternal Son of God. I have given you that truth.

By the way, remember now, you have a representation of a conversation that could be read in a few minutes, but probably lasted for hours in the night as Nicodemus and Jesus talked. So, Nicodemus, *the* teacher in Israel, as imminent as any teacher, as gifted as any teacher, as skilled as any teacher, had just more than met his match. He had just had a conversation with the perfect teacher, the most powerful, the most competent, the most convincing, the most brilliant, the most wise, the most clear, the most persuasive voice that ever uttered a human word had been talking to Nicodemus--the very Son of God, the Lord Jesus Christ, the Messiah. And He had told him the truth about salvation, that salvation is not a matter of works. It is a matter of a divine miracle that God does independent of the sinner. He had told him that. Powerful statements. It’s as if He said, “Look, with all divine authority, firsthand information from Me as God, eternal God, I have told you the truth about salvation. It’s not works; it’s a divine miracle. I have told you what I have always known and I am eternal. I have told you what I have understood from all eternity in union with the Father and the Spirit. I have not learned this, I have not heard this, I have not read this, I have not received it, I have not been taught this. I have eternally known everything I have said to you.

In John 8:38, Jesus said, “I speak the things which I have seen with My Father...with My Father...and you do not accept My testimony.”

You know, in a sense that’s discouraging. But in another sense, it’s encouraging. If this man who knew the Scripture wouldn’t receive truth from the greatest, most skilled, powerful, effective teacher who ever spoke on earth, don’t be surprised when they don’t believe you. I’m not surprised when they don’t believe Me. You don’t believe. That’s the post-mortem on the conversation with Nicodemus, you don’t believe. So where is Nicodemus after what he just heard? He doesn’t believe; he’s a non-believer; he doesn’t buy it. It’s way too dramatic a paradigm shift. It literally has turned his theology on its head. All he’s ever known like everybody else in religion is works--works, legalism, righteousness by effort--that’s all he’s ever known because every religion in the world is that, every single one, including apostate Judaism. And our Lord has told him something that is just shattering; it’s just not possible to process this, that entering the kingdom is something that happens to me to which I make no contribution.

Having said that, our Lord then turns and deepens this confrontation by pointing out the ignorance of Nicodemus. Everybody, all Nicodemus’ career had: “O, Nicodemus, you’re such a great teacher, you’re such a great teacher. You’re *the* teacher in Israel.” He was an elevated man. Everybody sat at his feet in wonder and awe, and that’s why he kept getting pushed up until he ended up on the Supreme Court, the Sanhedrin.

But Jesus doesn’t treat him that way. Verse 12, He says, “If I told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things?” It’s pointless for Me to go any further with you. It’s pointless for Me to dig deeper into the profound realities of theology and the mind of God and the purposes of God in salvation, I can’t go there because I gave you a simply earthly analogy and you can’t even believe that.

What’s He mean when He says, “If I told you earthly things?” Earthly things simply refers to the concept of birth. That’s an earthly thing; that’s an earthly thing. Birth happens on earth; it doesn’t happen in heaven. It happens here. It’s a simple analogy, a simple earthly illustration and you don’t get it, and you don’t buy it, and you don’t believe it. And it’s so simple. And it’s so clear. How in the world will you believe if I now drop the earthly analogy and start talking to you about the Trinity? About eternal predestination? About the relationship of the Father to the Son and the Son’s role in atonement to propitiate and satisfy God? How can I possibly tell you about all the panoply of glories that are attached to the work of God in salvation? How can I possibly explain all that heavenly theology when you can’t even believe the simple earthly illustration?

Let me tell you something about unbelief. Unbelief produces ignorance. If you want to hear ignorant representation of the Bible, listen to unbelievers. They will misrepresent the Scripture constantly. I never expect to hear any unbeliever rightly represent the Bible. A lot of the time I don’t even expect believers to rightly represent the Bible, but I certainly don’t expect non-believers to rightly represent the Bible. Why? Because unbelief locks them in ignorance, because that’s 1 Corinthians 2:14, “The natural man understands not the things of God.” What are they to him? Foolishness; to those who are perishing, they are foolishness.

I was doing a little research, thinking about Shepherds’ Conference next week, and maybe talk to the men about an interesting character in the last century, a very prominent preacher by the name of Charles Templeton. Some of you may remember that name. He was one of the founders of Youth for Christ, along with Billy Graham. And he was believed at that time to be the greatest of the preachers. Billy was kind of the second preacher. He was the great mind, he was the great presence, he had all the drama. He had it all--brilliant mind, all of that, and he became a great preacher and a great evangelist and preached to stadiums full of people and he was carrying the weight of that kind of Graham/Templeton duo in the early years. And people fell at his feet. People loved to listen to him. He was...he was basically targeted for massive success.

Little by little it began to surface that he misrepresented Scripture. And he began to a little more, a little more out about what he thought about Scripture. It all came to a culmination when he wrote a book. The title of the book is a biography of his spiritual journey, and the title is *Farewell to God* by Charles Templeton. He ended up a journalist in Canada, a novelist, writer, television personality; *Farewell to God.*

What he does in that book *Farewell to God* is attack the Bible. And it’s amazing for someone who was trained and who prepared and who preached. He gets everything in the Bible wrong, everything. His view of everything is warped and skewed, and that is the legacy of unbelief. The legacy of unbelief is ignorance. That is why if you go to a university and you listen to unbelievers talk about the Bible, they’ll get it wrong. If you go to a seminary and you have unbelieving professors talk about the Bible, they’ll get it wrong. And here was Nicodemus, he was one of those. Unbelief produces ignorance. And so we see the passage open with this really startling confrontation of the condition of the heart of Nicodemus and the universal condition of every unbelieving heart, that it is locked in and it is prisoner to spiritual darkness, spiritual ignorance.

So Jesus is saying to him, “Look, there’s really not a lot of point in Me launching on deeper theological explanations because I’m talking to a brick. You have no capacity to absorb this. Your mind is darkened. You’re double-blinded by Satan, we might say, if we borrowed Paul’s insights.

So, what’s the remedy? The confrontation of unbelief then leads to a commendation of belief, and starting in verse 13 the Lord says the only thing you can do is believe. That’s all you can do. “No one has ascended into heaven but He who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life.”

What can Nicodemus do? He’s locked in unbelief, and he’s double-locked in darkness and ignorance. What can he do? Whether he was moral or immoral makes no contribution to his entrance into the kingdom. Whether he was religious or irreligious, makes no contribution. What can the sinner do? All the sinner can do, according to verse 15, is believe, but that is enough. That’s enough. So we have in verses 13 and following this commendation. Really it’s a command to believe; that’s the only hope. So here’s the truth of *sola fide*, faith alone. And it’s not from a Reformer, by the way, but it’s from the author of truth, because truth is eternal, because He is eternal and truth is simply an extension of who He is. And I love how our Lord says this. Verse 13, let’s see how He makes this point about commending belief: “No one has ascended into heaven.”

Now I can’t resist stopping at that time. Look, that’s obvious, that’s obvious. We’re locked in a space/time realm, right? We’re material, we live in bodies. We’re locked into space and time. We don’t transcend that. We don’t get out of our space/time box. Nothing can get us out of that. I know people want to get out of that, that’s why there’s so much stupid fantasy in the world--movies, books, television. I wouldn’t watch fantasy for two minutes. I don’t need fantasy, just give me reality. And I don’t ever want to start living in the world of fantasy. It’s all full of lies and misrepresentations. The only fantasy I’m interested in is watching cartoons with my grandkids. But it’s not very deceiving because I know Mickey is not really a mouse. But a whole culture of people consumed, whether Harry Potter or whatever it is; “Twilight” or whatever it is, living in some kind of fantasy world. Look, you’re locked in space and time--deal with that; deal with that. Don’t fool yourself into believing that you can live in a fantasy world.

There were some exceptions. There are some people who have come back from heaven. Really? Yes. Lazarus, John 11; he was dead for a few days and he was somewhere and he came back. And then when the Lord died on the cross, do you remember the graves were opened and the saints came forth, so they came back. And Paul, 2 Corinthians 12, had a short trip to heaven and came back. But here’s the important part. That exception proves the rule. Those are very rare, very, very rare. Elijah went to heaven, but really only came back in the moment of the Transfiguration. Very rare. We don’t go to heaven and come back. People don’t do that. By the way, you wouldn’t know that if you went to your Christian bookstore and saw the shelf on the people who have been to heaven and back. Really; it’s crazy. And they come back and they say, “Well, Jesus has a rainbow horse, and I saw God, and the Holy Spirit’s a blue fog,” and on and on and on they go. There are several books like this that are very, very popular. Heaven is for real, and ninety minutes in heaven, and one other book. There’s one book where a boy had an accident and his father wrote a book about him going to heaven, coming back. It’s very interesting.

We’re just completing it, it will be out soon--a new edition to the book on heaven in which the opening whole section opens a book--it’s a new seventy-fifth anniversary for Crossway Publisher--and the whole opening is debunking all these phony trips to heaven and then talking about the real heaven as revealed in Scripture.

But anyway, people don’t go to heaven and come back. When you go to heaven, you stay there and you’ll be glad you did, really. Can you think of any reason in the world you’d want to come back? No, you can’t.

Well, there’s more to that than just that. There’s some very important truth here that I want you to understand. No one has ascended into heaven but He who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. Listen to this, the only...the only person who ever came down from heaven with the truth about salvation is Jesus. Every other religion comes either from this earth or below. Every religious system is earthly, demonic. There’s only one heavenly gospel, only one heavenly message that came down, and that’s from Jesus. Not even the most religious saint, not people who think they’re into transcendental meditation and they ascend to some higher levels of consciousness. That’s ridiculous. That’s just mindless meandering. No person has gone to heaven and brought down the truth. Not L. Ron Hubbard, not Mary Baker Eddy Patterson Glover Frye, not Joseph Smith, not anybody--not any angel, not any human. Jesus said, “I’m the only one whose come down from heaven. And the message that I bring is that salvation is a work of God in which you do not participate. It is a gift that God gives according to His will and all you can do is receive it by believing. That’s the truth. And I’m the only one whoever came down from heaven with the truth, with a message.

Jesus refers to Himself a number of times in that same phrase, “He who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.” For example, in John 6:33 He calls Himself the bread of God which comes down out of heaven. John 6:38, “I have come down from heaven.” Again in verse 51 of that same chapter, chapter 6, “I’m the living bread that came down out of heaven.” Chapter 8, verse 42, “I came down from heaven.” Chapter 13, verse 3; 16:28; 17:5--many times He says I came down from heaven. He is the only heavenly source of heavenly truth. And the message is salvation is by faith alone. So He comes down; He brings these two parallel truths: salvation is a divine miracle, new birth, being born from above, and salvation is received by the sinner believing. He is the Son of Man, that’s a messianic title taken from Daniel 7. He is the promised Messiah. He is God’s sent prophet. So Nicodemus is speaking with God in human flesh. Nicodemus is talking to a heavenly being. He is talking to the eternal Son of God and the eternal Son of God is saying, “Don’t believe anything other than this, because no one has ever gone up to heaven and brought down the truth. I have come from heaven with the truth.” That’s why Paul says, “Believe any other gospel,” Galatians 1, “you’re cursed.” Believe any other gospel, you’re cursed because no one’s been to heaven and brought it down. It’s earthy or it’s demonic, a combination. False religious systems are the work of Satan who is disguised as an angel of light; they’re a combination of human ideas and demonic seduction.

The gospel in all its richness, with all of its elements is the only message that has come down from heaven. And then in verse 14, our Lord says, “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up.” You’ve got to lift Him up. First of all that means elevate Him above all others. Elevate Him above all others. He’s the only one that has come down. He is the eternal Son of God. He is the Lord of Lords. He is the second member of the Trinity. He is the source of truth. He is the truth as well as the life, and the light. Elevate Him; lift Him up. Lift Him up. John 14:6, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No man comes to the Father but by Me.” Acts 4:12, “Neither is there salvation in any other.” There’s no other name under heaven whereby men may be saved, only in the name of Christ. Believing in Christ alone, Christ alone, Christ alone; *sola Christus*, *sola fide:*faith alone, in Christ alone.

I am the one that has to be lifted up. And in saying that, there is a reference to His crucifixion. “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up.” What is that about? Back in Numbers 21 the children of Israel in their disobedience were punished by God. God sent snakes, remember, to bite them. And they were bitten with this toxic and deadly poison and they were in a panic. They cried out to God and what did God do? God in His compassion and His mercy said to get a pole, put a bronze serpent on the pole, and for anyone who looks up at the pole, I’ll provide immediate healing. That’s just a story from Israel’s past, and it’s an analogy. It’s not an allegory; it’s just an illustration. In the same way that the children of Israel, carrying about the deadly poison of the bite of this snake, could be delivered from death by looking up at a brazen serpent, so it is that sinners carrying the poison of the arch serpent and the sin that he perpetrated on the human race can be delivered from death by looking up at the crucified Savior.

What a beautiful analogy. That’s the first time we know that there’s a certain lifting up of Christ. We haven’t heard how He’s going to die. But we do know from Psalm 22, some of the features of His body--we know about His thirst, and we know about His wounds. And from Zechariah we know He’ll be pierced. And from Isaiah 53, we know that He will be beaten and again that He will be pierced for our transgressions. We know that He’s going to die. Already chapter 2, verses 19 to 22, Jesus said, “Destroy this body and I’ll raise it up.” But now all of a sudden, we’re getting another perspective here and the perspective is that His death will be a death in which He’s lifted up.

But there’s more to this than just being lifted up in His death. It means that you give Him all your attention. You elevate Him above all others, over all others, as the preeminent one and you look to Him in faith and Him alone for salvation.

The bitten Jews were healed from the poison by a look of faith. They had to believe I’m going to go where that thing is. I’m going to go there, I’m going to look, and if they would do that, they would be healed. And so it is that all God asks of us is to look at His Son, lift Him up. The Jews who were bitten didn’t have to do anything. There were no works. Nothing for which to atone. No restitution, nothing; just look and you have life. What a beautiful analogy. And I know when it happened it was in the plan of God that it would be the analogy of the simplicity of salvation by faith--Christ lifted up; we look at Him and that’s enough, we have life.

And here’s the heart of the heavenly message that Jesus brought down. Verse 15, “So that whoever believes in Him will have eternal life. Whoever believes will have eternal life. That’s all the sinner can do. Belief, belief--that’s the heart of the gospel.

The real shocker here is the word “whoever.” If you want to know why that’s such a shock to Nicodemus, be right where you are next week and we’ll see.

Bow with me in prayer. Lord, we are so overwhelmed by the majesty of Scripture, the wonder of it, so grateful for the grace of it that all that needs to be done You do. You provided the sacrifice. You provide the power, the will. You do the work. You give us life from heaven, from above by the Spirit. You regenerate us. It’s all Your work, and You receive all the glory. And the only thing that we can do, the one thing is to lift our eyes to see Jesus above all others--the only Savior, dying on a cross, hanging there for us, bearing in His body our sins and believing in Him we have eternal life. What an amazing gift.

That eternal life frees us from ignorance and the truth becomes clear to us, and what was foolishness once is joyous, clear truth. Father, would You awaken hearts even today? And call sinners to believe, take their eyes off Moses or Abraham, or any other religion or religious leader and lift their eyes only to Christ, and look to Him in faith as Savior and Lord and receive eternal life.

Father, now we ask that You would commit to us the truth and that we might find expression for it this week, to communicate what we’ve learned so that we can know it even more deeply because we’ve shared it, and so that it can be useful in the lives of others. Give us that opportunity, we pray, and bless every soul here. May each look to Christ and find in Him eternal life. Amen.

**elief, Judgment, and Eternal Life**

**John 3:15-21**

Code: 43-17

Now for this morning we come to John chapter 3. Apologies to those of you who have come to visit us this morning. You’re getting in, as people often do, on part 3 of a discussion of John chapter 3, verses 11 to 21. You’re getting in on part 3, which means you’ve missed the first two parts, and although I’m greatly tempted to go back over all of that because I hate for anybody to miss anything, I’m going to restrain myself at this point and encourage you if you want to listen to those, they are available, gty.org, and you can download them there. But I do want to draw back to John chapter 3 and just remind you that this is really a remarkable moment in the life and ministry of Jesus.

His great enemies through His entire life were the religious leaders of Israel. Here He was, the Son of God, the Messiah, the One they had all been waiting for and His greatest enemies were the religious teachers of Israel—the scribes, the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the rabbis—everybody who was in spiritual influence and spiritual power turned against Him. And it is then remarkable that there is one Pharisee who seeks Him out, a man by the name of Nicodemus. He wants to talk to Jesus and he comes to Him, as chapter 3 begins, at night. And he comes with a very, very profound ache in his heart. He has “sinner’s worry.” He is full of anxiety, fear, dread.

Why? Because he’s a hypocrite. All Pharisees were hypocrites. In Matthew 23 Jesus called them hypocrites repeatedly, time after time after time after time. Said they were like whitewashed tombs; they looked good on the outside and on the inside were full of dead men’s bones. They were hypocrites. Hypocrites know they’re hypocrites because they know their own hearts. They know that what they’re doing on the outside has no correlation to who they are on the inside. Jesus said that they were sons of hell themselves who made more sons of hell by the influence they had through their teaching of others.

One of those sons of hell, a man named Nicodemus, is profoundly burdened and he’s an important man. According to history, he’s one of the three wealthiest men in Jerusalem. He is *the* teacher in Israel. He is the elevated and most noble, and maybe the most respected, of all the teachers of Judaism in its apostate form at that time. He’s a member of the Supreme Court of Israel. He’s ascended to that level. He is a very important figure with a huge, huge fear in his heart. He doesn’t know God. He has no assurance of heaven. He does not believe that he is reconciled to God. He’s full of angst and fear, and he comes to Jesus in the hope that maybe Jesus can tell him what’s missing because he’s convinced that Jesus is a teacher sent from God. That’s what he says in chapter 3, the first verse or two: “I know, we know You’re a teacher from God because no one can do what You do unless God is with him.” So here is a better teacher than he is. If he’s *the*teacher in Israel, he’s supposed to have all the information. There’s nobody lower than him that might have information that he doesn’t have, but here he’s met somebody who has to be a more elevated teacher than he is because he’s never known anybody to do the miracles that Jesus has done.

So here is his opportunity to get an answer to the hypocrisy that has marked his entire life. So he comes to Jesus and here we find Jesus evangelizing a Pharisee. Here we find Jesus evangelizing a very elevated religious leader. Therefore what Jesus says to this man is highly instructive for us.

Now backing away from that which is the setting for chapter 3, the message of Christianity has always been this, that everybody in the world is headed for eternal hell to be punished forever for their sins—everyone. However, there is heaven. There is eternal heaven of joy and bliss and peace and satisfaction and fulfillment forever. How does one escape hell and get to heaven? That’s the message of Christianity. And the answer is by faith, not by works, but by faith, not by religion but by believing. That’s the message of Christianity, “For by grace are you saved through faith, not of works.” It’s not about your morality, it’s not about your virtue, it’s not about your philanthropy, not about your ceremonies, rituals, religious activities. The only way to escape hell and enter heaven is by believing, believing by faith. And faith has always been God’s way. If you question that, think back about twenty minutes ago to when I was reading Hebrews 11, “by faith...by faith...by faith...by faith,” one after another, after another; they all lived in faith, believing the promises of God. It’s always been by faith. Go back to Genesis 15:6, go back to the very father of the Jews, a man named Abraham, and you read this, “Abraham believed in the Lord, he believed in the Lord and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.” All the Lord wanted out of Abraham to declare him righteous was belief, faith in Him. Abraham believed God and for that, God gave Abraham His own righteousness as a covering, forgiving him all sin, making him His eternal child, granting him everlasting life simply on the basis of faith.

Paul makes that the whole point, doesn’t he, in Romans 4 and Romans 5, how that Abraham was justified by faith, declared righteous by God because he believed. That’s always been the biblical message.

In Hosea, the prophet sums it up, “The just shall live by faith.” The righteousness comes by faith, not by works. In Isaiah 55, the prophet offers an invitation, “Ho! Every one that thirsts, everyone that is hungry, come eat, come drink, come buy wine and bread without money and without cost.” The free gift of divine satisfaction from God to the heart of the sinner without a price. This has always been God’s way to bring sinners to Himself by faith.

Now Nicodemus, according to verse 10 of chapter 3, was *the* teacher in Israel, *the* teacher in Israel. He should have known that truth. He knew all those stories that we read in Hebrews chapter 11. He should have known that God wanted faith. He knew the story of Abraham. He knew Genesis 15:6 that Abraham was justified, declared righteous by God, purely on the basis of his faith. He knew that. He also knew that God was the One who gave, who granted life to the sinner and forgiveness. He knew that God as a pardoning God. He knew the prophet had said that. He knew what Isaiah said that if you come to God, He’ll wash you and make you clean. He knew God was a Savior. But he was the leader of an apostate form of Judaism. He was a Pharisee. He was devoted to the counterfeit religion. He was devoted to a satanic system that called itself Judaism, attached itself to the Old Testament but taught salvation by morality and salvation by religious works, very much a parallel to Roman Catholicism. The apostle Paul was in the same system and himself a Pharisee when he saw it for what it was—called it manure. He was living in fear because he knew his heart and he knew he was a hypocrite.

So he came to Jesus. And what’s on his heart? He wants peace, he wants satisfaction, he wants hope, he wants joy, he wants forgiveness, he wants to be a different man, he wants spiritual reality. So he comes to Jesus hoping that Jesus can take him the next step, probably thinking there’s something I’m missing, maybe another thing I need to do or something I need to quit doing and He’ll just move me on a step or two to what I don’t know.

And so, Jesus addresses the issue of his heart. Now he never says what he’s thinking, but he doesn’t need to. How does chapter 2 end? “Many believed in Him but He was not committing Himself to them because He knew what was in them.” No one needed to tell Jesus what was in the heart or mind of a man because He knew what was in man. So He reads his mind. Yes, Nicodemus believed. He and a lot of others believed, but what did they believe? Verse 2, “They believed that Jesus was a teacher from God”; that’s as far as their faith went. That’s not enough to save. But what’s in His heart is this anxiety over his spiritual condition, and Jesus reads his heart and reads his mind and in chapter 3 makes an astonishing statement to him. “Truly, truly,” and the reason He says “truly, truly”—and He says it three times in this conversation—is because this is all brand new information to Nicodemus, and for the first time in his religious education he’s hearing the truth. He’s hearing the truth. The whole system belonged to Satan, and it was all lies about salvation by works and religious ritual. Now he’s hearing the truth and here’s the truth, “Unless one is born again, he can’t see the kingdom of God.” I know you want the kingdom. I know you want to know God, to be reconciled to God, to be in the kingdom of God. To live a kingdom life, you have to be born again. Why does He say that to him? Because Jesus initiates His conversation with this religious legalist by saying, “You need what you can’t contribute to.”

Now we’ve been two weeks working on this; I won’t take a lot of time. But Jesus chooses His analogy very carefully. I said a few weeks ago, there’s a book called *How To Be Born Again.* That book is in complete defiance to this text because the whole point of being born again is that something has to happen to you to which you make no contribution. Simply stated, What contribution did you make to your physical birth? What? None. You didn’t make a contribution and that’s why the Lord chose this. And nor will you make a contribution to your spiritual birth. So the first thing Jesus says to Nicodemus is—and this stops him dead in his legalistic tracks—something has to happen to you from above and you have no part in it. Try that on the next time you evangelize somebody. You need something you can’t do. You need something you can’t participate in. You need something you can’t contribute to. You need heaven to come down. And oh, by the way, unless you’re born from above, born again, unless you’re born of the Spirit, you’ll never enter the kingdom of God. And by the way, the Spirit comes and goes when He wills, and you can’t call Him and you can’t dismiss Him. And this is the doctrine of divine calling, the effectual call, the efficient call. This is what some call irresistible grace. This is the calling that identifies the church as the called. It’s divine.

So He says to Nicodemus, “Sorry, Nicodemus, you need what you can’t participate in.” And so we went through verse 10 in that amazing doctorate of divine, sovereign grace. God has to give you life. And what did I say? What can the sinner do? Ask, that’s all. And Nicodemus doesn’t know what to do with this. And Jesus ends the first part of the conversation in verses 9 and 10 by saying, “How is it that you don’t know this? You study the Old Testament. How is it you don’t know this? Do you remember Jeremiah 31, Ezekiel 36? Do you remember all the times God said, ‘I will take out your heart of stone. I will give you a new heart. I will give you My Spirit. I will cause you to walk in My statutes and My ways.’” Those two New Covenant passages are all about God’s sovereign power regenerating the dead sinner. How is it you’re the teacher of Israel and you don’t know this? How is it?

Well, Nicodemus didn’t buy it. How do you know that? Verse 11 and 12. End of verse 11, “You don’t accept our testimony.” Middle of verse 12, “You don’t believe.” Nicodemus didn’t buy it. He didn’t believe it. This is literally turning his world over because he’s a legalist. Something has to happen to you that you don’t participate in.

Wow! This is the great doctrine of divine, sovereign salvation. But running parallel to that doctrine is another doctrine. It’s the doctrine of human responsibility. And we talked about that, right? And how those two run parallel but never intersect. And we believe them both. And the fact that we can’t harmonize them only means we’re human. And in case you have any questions about that, talk to the nearest person and they’ll solve the problem of your dilemma. We are human. The fact that we can’t understand everything is testament to our humanity. And alongside divine sovereignty comes human responsibility. And that’s where we pick up the story.

We can go down to pick up the story in verses 11 to 21. At this point Nicodemus doesn’t believe, he doesn’t buy it, he doesn’t accept this. So Jesus reminds him in verse 13 that no one has ascended into heaven but He who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. That He has been a part of a system of religion like all systems of religion that are earthly or demonic, and now he’s hearing from heaven. No one has been to heaven and brought a message back. Only the Son of Man has come from heaven. So you better listen to this message. This isn’t just another human and demonic message. This is coming to you by way of the Son of Man. Nicodemus isn’t speaking anymore but he’s there. The pronoun “you” stops being singular and broadens out, and now He’s talking to Nicodemus, and He’s talking through Nicodemus to all the Pharisees who are part of Nicodemus’ group, and all the nation of Israel who are following the Pharisees, and the rest of the world that are caught up in religion and He is simply saying, “You had better listen to the One who came from heaven because only One has come from heaven with the truth, only One.”

“I tried to tell you earthly things, I used an earthly illustration of regeneration and birth, and you couldn’t even get an earthly thing. I know you’re not going to believe now when I tell you heavenly things, but I’m going to reveal those heavenly things anyway.” And He starts to talk about heavenly things, first of all, by saying, “I came down from heaven and I’m the one with the truth and the only one with the truth.”

And I will say this to you, people, and it’s obvious, but it’s so seminal in this passage: the only truth from God about salvation came from Jesus Christ. All other sources are lies and deception, either earthly or demonic, or a combination. And I’m telling you, as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up. I came down, I will be lifted up. This is an allusion to His death. We went over all that last time.

Now He comes to verse 15 and we’ll pick up the account for today. “So that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life.” Now you have to understand that Nicodemus is in a state of turmoil when he arrives. He’s wondering what more legalistic thing, or what more religious thing, he can do to take the last, final step to get into the kingdom and get some peace in his troubled soul. And Jesus says absolutely nothing; you can’t do anything. In fact, you’ve got to cancel out everything you’ve ever done. Like Paul, you’ve got it designated as *skubalon,*and you’ve got to go back and be born all over again, and that’s something that can only happen from heaven. You need a divine miracle from heaven over which you have no control and in which you do not participate. That’s shaken his entire perception of religion.

And now there’s a second shock. Jesus says, “Whoever believes in the Son of Man whose come from heaven and is lifted up”—an allusion to His cross—“whoever believes will in Him have eternal life.” Whoever believes.

What’s the shock there? Well, believe could be a shock because this is salvation by faith. But the real shock is “whoever”; that’s the shocker. Eternal life, they knew what that was. By the way, John uses the reference to eternal life fifteen times in his gospel. The Jews knew what eternal life was. It was the life of God, not so much a duration of time as a quality of life. The life of God, the very life of God, divine life, everlasting life, transcendent life, supernatural life, union with the Trinity, possessing the life of God now and forever, this is available to whoever believes. The shock is in the “whoever.” Why? Because the Jews believed that when the Messiah came He would save Israel and punish all the nations. He would punish them for their blasphemy. He would punish them for their idolatry. He would punish them for their mistreatment of Israel. And now Jesus says, “Whoever believes.” And He says nothing about Moses, nothing about Abraham, nothing about the Temple, nothing about the tabernacle, nothing about the Law. He simply says it’s about believing in the Son of Man who is lifted up and whoever believes will have eternal life.

Now you have to understand that this lifelong, legalistic Pharisee is having a very difficult time letting this even enter into his mind, let alone processing it. But Jesus is saying anybody who believes, anybody who believes in Him, the Son of Man lifted up, will escape judgment, escape hell, be given forgiveness, blessing, everlasting life in heaven. Salvation is by faith. That’s our message, that’s our message—it’s by believing. We call this little series *sola fide,* borrowing from the Reformers who use Latin to express faith alone, *sola fide; sola gratia*, grace alone, *sola Christus*, Christ alone; *sola Scriptura*, Scripture alone. Those were the phrases that they used.

They also use some other Latin phrases to describe saving faith. Now remember, chapter 2, verse 23 to 25, says, “Many believed; Nicodemus believed.” But what did they believe? They believed Jesus was a teacher, came from God, and did miracles. But that’s not enough to save. Nicodemus rejects the message of faith for salvation. He believes something, but he doesn’t believe what he has to believe.

So the Reformers came up with some terms. They said saving faith has three components: *notitia, fiducia, and assensus;* that’s your Latin lesson for today. N*otitia* is knowledge, you have to know. Faith comes by hearing the message concerning Christ, Romans 10. So you have to know. Then you have to have *fiducia,* you have to believe. That means to trust in or to believe. But the third one which is so important was *assensus* or assent, meaning to commit to, to commit, to take up your cross, to follow, to be obedient, to invest your entire life in that thing which you know and believe.

Nicodemus then is given the shocking thing from the lips of our Lord, that salvation is by faith alone. A faith that commits itself to the Son of Man, and the Son of Man lifted up and crucified, makes that full commitment, and anybody, whoever he is, who makes that commitment will have eternal life—Jew or Gentile.

This is just devastating. Nicodemus was a racist, very much so, as the Jews were. Their hatred of the idolatrous blasphemous nations was settled long before he came long. And now the shock is “whoever.” And it’s while Nicodemus is trying to process that that Jesus gives us the most familiar verse in the Bible, John 3:16. And this is an explanation of verse 15, ’cause Nicodemus is going to be saying to himself, “Why in the world would God do this? Why would God give eternal life to anybody who just believed in Him? Why would God not reserve eternal life for the people who kept the rules, right? For the people who followed the Law, for the people who kept the Sabbath, for the people who were traditionalists, for the people who were zealous for holy things, did the ceremonies, offered the sacrifices?”

Wait a minute. Why does eternal life get to be given to whoever believes, and not just Jews that believe but whoever believes? How can this possibly be?

And the answer is this, here’s why, verse 16, “For God so”...What?...“loved the world.” What’s behind this whole thing? What’s behind it all? God’s...What?...God’s love, God’s love. Now this is a heavenly thing; this is a heavenly thing. Whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life, because God who so loves the world gave His only begotten Son to make that possible. I think our very familiarity with this verse sometimes locks its truths in and we don’t understand. I mean, we all say that, we knew it from, you know, elementary school or Sunday school. Do you know Reformed theologians have just worked this verse to death through the centuries? Here would be a classic Reformed theological explanation of John 3:16.

First of all we have the remote efficient cause. Then we have the approximate efficient cause. Then we have the instrumental cause. And then we would add the material cause. Does that move your heart? Is that gripping you? That’s the theological way to explain John 3:16. The remote efficient cause—God’s love. The approximate efficient cause—God’s grace. The instrumental cause—belief. And then they would add the material cause—the cross. And the result, eternal life.

But let’s not get technical. So let me give you a simpler outline. How about the motive for salvation? The motive? God so loved; God so loved. This is way beyond their confined racism. This is way beyond their hatred of Gentiles and the nations around them and the Romans living among them. God loves the world; God loves the world. How long had they justified their hatred for the world and defended it on the basis that this is how God felt? Right? They were the people of God. They were the representatives of God. This is the teacher. He hated the world ’cause God hated the world.

Not true. The reason that God makes salvation available to anyone who believes and the reason that anybody can believe is because God actually loves the world. Shocking, absolutely shocking. That’s the motive.

The object is the world and anybody in the world whoever, whoever. The world here is a term simply for humanity, humanity, that’s all—just God loves humanity. Titus 3:4 uses a similar expression, mankind. God loves mankind. It doesn’t mean that He’s going to save everyone who ever lives. That’s pretty clear because verse 18 talks about the ones that are going to be judged ’cause of their unbelief.

There’s only one world, one realm of humanity, and God has determined to set His love on that world. He didn’t do that with angels. The angels that sinned were cast into hell and have never known God’s love since their rebellion. But God chose to love the world. So the motive for salvation is love, and the object of salvation is the world. God’s love shows up across the world in common grace and gospel invitation. That’s the broadest sweep of God’s love. The rain falls on the just and the unjust. The sun rises on the just and the unjust. People fall in love, have children, enjoy the beauties of life and the world, the satisfactions, the successes, the wonderful things that God has placed in man’s care in this world are all evidences that God has a general love for humanity. He gives them gospel opportunity. The gospel reaches to them. He demonstrates Himself and who He is inside of them. He writes His Law in their hearts and He makes Himself accessible to human reason so that you can look at the world that is and determine there’s a God behind it and know something of His power and eternal Godhead, Romans 1.

But there’s a special love that He has for His own in the world and they’re all over the world. In fact, when you get a scene in heaven in Revelation 4 and 5 and 6 and 7, all the way through there, you see all the saints gather around the throne, eventually you find out they’re from every tongue and tribe and people and nation, not just Israel.

So this confined racism that was true of Nicodemus and others, not a reflection of the heart of God. Nicodemus is messed up in his theology very severely. He can’t earn His salvation. It has to come from heaven and it’s a sovereign work of God, not a work of man. And God loves a world that he hates, and God makes salvation accessible by faith when he always thought it would be by works. And so the action for salvation comes next.

The motive is love. The object is the world. The action is He gave His only begotten Son. That’s a little misleading, “only begotten Son.” It’s *monogenes, monogenes*. *Genes* is a Greek word from which you get *genetics*. *Mono* is one. And what the word actually means, when you put *monogenes*together, it means unique, it means one of a kind, the only one. That’s easier for you to understand. God gave His unique Son, His one of a kind Son, His beloved Son. “This is My beloved Son,” He says, the Son of His love; His own Son Romans 8:3 puts it.

And there’s something to be said here, very important. See the word “so”; “God so loved the world.” What does “so” mean? “To the degree that,” “to the end that,” “in this way.” That is God so loved the world. To what degree did He love the world? To the degree that He gave His only Son. In other words, the extent of His love is measured by the extent of His gift. The most magnanimous thing that God could possibly do would be to give the thing He loved the most, the One He loved the most, the Son of His love. He gives the person that He loves the most, the Son of His love, and that shows you the extent of His love. He loves the world so that He gives His one of a kind, unique, beloved Son.

The means for salvation? Whoever believes—believe, believe, believe; that’s the means. Believe, believe what? Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. Believe that God raised Him from the dead. Believe in the significance of the cross and the resurrection. Believe the gospel. Whoever, whoever.

Listen carefully. The free offer of the gospel is broad enough to include *the* worst sinner who believes. Did you get that? The free offer of the gospel is broad enough to include the worst sinner who believes. Even the chief of sinners; Paul said he was. Listen, the gospel is narrow enough to exclude the most moral religious unbeliever. I thought about that this week. Who is the most moral, religious man on the planet? The pope. But he hopes in his works, in his merit to get to heaven, and the gospel excludes him. The most profligate, wretched, corrupt person on the planet who trusts only in Christ—the gospel is wide enough to embrace him or her. It’s by faith alone.

And what is the result? “Shall not perish but have eternal life.” Negative—“shall not perish.” “Perish” is the Greek word *apollumi,*which is much used in the New Testament for eternal ruin; it refers to hell. Positive—eternal life, eternal life.

So maybe there’s a fresh look at John 3:16. Now follow very carefully in these last few moments. So the message of our Lord is this, you need to be born from above and that’s a work of God. And you don’t participate in it. But anybody can be saved who believes and no other way. Anyone who believes. Why would God do that? Because then He gets all the glory, as Paul said in Ephesians; we don’t boast, but because He loves the world.

You know, it would be easy to think of holy God as viewing humanity in the condition it’s in—in sin, rebellion, disobedience, hating God. It would be easy, you know, if Scripture said, “God looked at the world and He said, ‘I’ll break them, I’ll punish them. I’ll put the pressure on them of divine judgment until they come to me.’” But it wasn’t His anger that sent Christ. Christ didn’t come to judge the world. He came into the world to save the world because what motivated the Father was not His anger, but His...What?...His love and so you come then to verse 17, “God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him,” “through Him.” God wanted to save the world. God sent Jesus to save the world. Jesus came to save the world. That is sinners from all over the world. He sent His Son because of His infinite love of sinners. He sent His Son to display His grace and mercy, to save them from His wrath. His love motivated Him to save them from His wrath. That’s another heavenly thing.

The purpose of the Messiah’s coming is not condemnation; it’s not judgment. The Jews expected the Messiah will come and judge all these nations. Messiah comes and they rejected Him. He wound up judging them, but opened the gospel to the ends of the earth.

Next time He comes, He will come in judgment. The Second Coming He will come in judgment. But this time the Son of Man is come, Luke 19:10, “to seek and to save that which was lost.” He didn’t come to judge the world; He came to save, to save. However, very important, verse 18, “He who doesn’t believe has been judged already because He has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. I can’t tell you how important this is. And I said, this is a very seminal chapter, we could be here forever in this chapter, nuancing all these truths but let me help you with this. Listen carefully. “He who does not believe has been judged already.” The word “already” is the key. I want you to follow this; the word “already” is the key. Christ came in love to save because God in love sent Him to save, which means you don’t need to run to Mary to find somebody sympathetic. God is by nature a Savior. Christ is by nature a Savior. Believe and you will be saved. Believe, that’s all it takes;and all the charges against you are wiped away. The Bible says you come into a status that can be defined this way, “No condemnation, full pardon, rescued from the curse of the Law, cleared from all guilt, declared righteous, granted eternal life, never to be removed.” What grace, what mercy, what immense love.

But on the other hand, if you don’t believe, you have been judged already because you have not believed in the Son of God, the unique Son of God. Now let me tell you what the “already” means. Typical of people in the world to say, “I’m living my life, I think I do more good than bad, right? I think you know if God’s keeping records, I’m going to be okay. I’m going to be....” I’ve had people say that to me, important people in media places say, “I’m going to be okay; I’m going to be okay. You know, my good outweighs my bad.”

Can I tell you something? That’s irrelevant. That is irrelevant for this reason. You’ve been judged already. Do you know when the verdict was made on your life? Do you know when the gavel fell? When you arrived in the planet. You arrived in the planet as an unbeliever, not believing in Christ. The gavel fell and the verdict was rendered and sentence was passed. Nothing is now being determined, nothing. There is no one counting your record to see if your good outweighs your bad. You have been judged already. You were judged when you were born. You were judged because you were an unbeliever. Oh yeah, God knows everything, so He’s well aware of the record of your crimes against Him. But that has nothing to do with the verdict because the verdict has already been passed. The divine Judge has already ruled, the gavel has come down and you have been condemned and sentenced to hell.

Now again, most people think they’re in the process of accumulating a record, and if the good outweighs the bad, then the Judge will make the ruling in his favor in the end. And I want to tell all of you who think that, the judgment was passed when you arrived. The sword of Damocles is over your head. The sack is on your head. Your neck is in the guillotine, and the guy’s about to let go of the rope. Final judgment was passed long ago. No future verdict will be made.

What caused this? “Because you have not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.” You’re going to be sent to hell not for something you did but for what you didn’t do, and that’s believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.

So that makes that pretty important, critically important. Every sinner is already condemned. The only way that verdict can be reversed and the slate cleaned and the sinner forgiven is by believing in the unique Son of God, the only way. So it’s important to remember this: what damns people to hell in the end is not because of some divine decree made by God. It doesn’t make that. What damns people to hell is not because of some deficient provision in the sacrifice of Christ. What damns people to hell is not because they sin and because they break God’s Law. What damns people to hell is because they do not believe in Jesus Christ. That’s the issue.

So when you talk to people, I think it’s sometimes okay to say, “You know, you’re a lawbreaker, you’ve broken this law, broken that law, broken the Ten Commandments, fine. That’s all forgivable.” Sooner or later in the conversation, and may I suggest sooner rather than later, you need to address people about what they think concerning Jesus Christ and cut to the chase and say, “If you do not believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as Redeemer, and Savior, and Lord, you will die in your sins and go to hell. That is the one unforgivable sin.”

Now when sinners come before God at the Great White Throne judgment depicted in the book of Revelation, and then brought before the tribunal of God—they face God—you might assume they’re going to complain. They’re going to say, “Look, I mean, what do I have to do with anything, God; it’s Your fault, Your fault.” And they’ll complain against You, like Adam did; the woman You gave me, it’s Your fault.

Or somebody might complain of Adam, “What did I have to do? I wasn’t in the Garden, if I had been in the Garden instead of Adam, I wouldn’t have done that. Look at me, I’m the victim of what Adam did.” Or somebody might want to say, “Well, it’s my nature; what am I going to do? Has the Adamic nature got passed down to me? I came from corrupt parents, what do you expect?” Or somebody might say, “It was my circumstances. I mean, look at the circumstances I had to live in.”

Do you know none of that matters? What you’re going to say when you stand before God is this, “I refuse to believe in Jesus Christ,” and that’s the issue. And that will be the issue. You have been judged already—you’re condemned and sentenced. And if you continue in unbelief, you will perish.

Now with the seriousness of that and the opportunity to come to Christ, you’d say, “Wow, why do sinners reject? Why do they not believe?” Listen to this, verse 19, “This is the judgment that the light has come into the world,” that’s Christ, the light, identified in chapter 1; He is the light. “The light has come into the world and men love the darkness rather than the light for their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the light and doesn’t come to the light for fear that His deeds will be exposed.”

There’s one reason people don’t believe in Christ, one reason. They love their sin. They don’t want to come near Christ ’cause He shines a light on their sin, exposes their sin. Sinners love sin. It’s not ignorance. It’s not lacking the basic faculties of reason. It’s not misunderstanding. Sinners prefer moral darkness. They’re like bugs that run for the dark when you pick the rock up. They love their corruption. They delight in their evil and love darkness, hate light, don’t want to come to the light because if they come to the light they’ll be exposed for what they are. So they resent the truth, they resent the Scripture, they resent the church, they resent Christians, they run from us. It’s strong—it’s a strong, dominating compulsion in a fallen heart. If you look at John 7:7 it says, “The world cannot hate you,” Jesus talking, “but it hates Me because I testify of it that its deeds are evil.” They hate Christ because He exposes their sin. That eventually gets passed down to us.

Now may I say something practical, and I’ll finish up in the next couple of minutes? Stop appealing to sinners psychologically. Stop saying, “Do you want purpose in your life? Jesus will give you purpose.” Stop that. Stop saying Jesus will make you happy, give you a better life, solve your problems, make you better, make you richer—stop. That produces false converts because that sheds no light on the sinner’s wretchedness. That uncovers nothing. That exposes nothing. That’s a lie. What you want to do is shine the light of the pure righteousness of Jesus Christ as brightly as you can on the sinner and see if the sinner runs. That has no value to people, that kind of stuff—produces nothing but false converts. The issue is to confront sin in all its horror and all its ugliness and they will seal their sentence by rejecting Christ because they love their iniquity. Or by the grace of God they will run to the truth, verse 21, “He who practices the truth comes to the light so that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God.”

You know what the difference between the sinner and the believer is? Why are you here today? You come to Grace Church. I know why people come to Grace Church. I know why you come, because we turn the light on so bright. Right? We’re not messing around. We turn the light on bright. This is the light. This is the light that reveals the light and it’s bright here, and if you’ve got something to hide, you better go down the street to the next church. But the people who practice the truth are here because the light shines and reveals that what’s going on in their life is being done by God. So what do they get out of that? Assurance, comfort, encouragement, security. I don’t know about you, but I can’t get enough light shed on my life. That’s why you’re here. People say to me sometimes, “I don’t go to that church anymore.” I don’t ask why; I know why. I need a little more shade.

But the benefit is, if you’re one of those who practices the truth, the light comes on and you take a look at your life in the light and you say, “What’s going on in me is wrought by God.” And there’s confidence and assurance and joy in that. We come to the light, we love the light, we welcome the communion with Christ. And there’s no fear; there’s complete acceptance and security and joy and protection and love. Boy, what a...what a...what a message Nicodemus got that day and he never even asked a question. He just got his heart read.

Oh by the way, he eventually became a believer. The seventh chapter, he speaks a word in defense of Jesus and he’s in process; chapter 19, he shows up with Joseph to bury His Savior. It took a while but you’ll meet him in heaven.

Father, we thank You for Your Word, we thank You for its power, its clarity, its encouragement, profoundly blesses us. Thank You for this precious congregation of people. We thank You that You have by Your grace and power made us a people who have been given life, and we now have the joy of practicing the truth and we come to the light and we embrace the light and we love the light, we can’t get enough of the light. Because even though it does expose the remnants of our fallenness, it also shows us that You’re at work in us. We measure ourselves by the Word of God and we say, yes, this is the work You’re doing in me. What a joy, what a blessing. I pray for those who hear this message who have not yet believed in the Lord Jesus Christ. May they understand that nothing is in question then at this moment; nothing is yet to be determined in the future; they have been judged already. And may they run to Christ, to the One lifted up on a cross to bear their sins and rose for their justification, and may they believe in Him as Lord and Savior. Deny themselves, take up their cross and follow Him. May heaven come down and give life. May sinners believe to Your glory.

Father we are so rich because we have the truth. When our Lord says “truly, truly,” we say “Amen,” we affirm. But You’ve already brought to us, and what You’ve already taught us we are taught of You, taught by the Spirit. Thank You for Your living and abiding Word. Seal it to our hearts and use us to pass on this glorious message of Christ. May we warn sinners, in love. May we remind them that God does love them and whoever of them is willing to believe in His Son will be completely forgiven, the sentence will be reversed. No condemnation will ever fall, and instead they will be given Your very righteousness as a covering and eternal life in Your presence—what a gift. And may You diminish the attraction of sin that holds sinners prisoner; do it by Your power. We are reminded of the hymn we sung earlier. “Long my imprisoned spirit lay/ Fast bound in sin and nature’s night;/ Thine eye defused to quickening ray,/ I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;/ My chains fell off, my heart was free,/ I rose, went forth to follow Thee.” That would be our desire for every heart. Bring us back again tonight with great expectation. In Christ’s name, amen.

**Humility Is the First Law of Ministry**

**John 3:22-30**

Code: 43-18

Now turn in your Bible to John chapter 3, John chapter 3, John chapter 3. We admit that we have been much assaulted by all of the media attention in Rome, and this text in John 3 speaks to the very things we have been seeing. We have been watching these incredible parades of wealth and wardrobe—garbed in outlandish clothing are these cardinals and priests and popes—and elevation beyond anything else in the world.

How do we react to that? How do we respond to that? In the text before us, it so happens that John the Baptist speaks to that very issue. In verse 30 of the text, and we’re looking at John 3:22 to 35, we’ll spend a couple of weeks on it. But in the section 22 to 36, I want you to go down to verse 30 and there you read these words uttered by John the Baptist: “He”...meaning Christ...“must increase, but I must decrease.” “He must increase, but I must decrease.” That is an axiom. That is an aphorism—that’s a great old word. That’s an aphorism, meaning an adage, an axiom, a canon, a dictum, an epithet, a proverb, a truism. And, in fact, that is the first law of ministry; that is *the* first law of ministry: He must increase; I must decrease. Humility is the first law of ministry—humility, humility.

In 1 Corinthians Paul says “Who is Apollos? Who is Paul? No one. Christ is everything.” In 2 Corinthians he says, “We are earthen vessels, clay pots, while Jesus Christ is the glory of God shining.” In writing to the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians chapter 2, Paul says, “When I came to you, brethren, I didn’t come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God, for I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling and my message, and my preaching, were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in the demonstration of the spirit and of power so that your faith would not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God.” Paul preached Christ, made much of Christ, and made nothing of himself.

And in that wonderful passage in 2 Corinthians 4, Paul says in verse 5, “We do not preach ourselves, but Christ Jesus as Lord and ourselves as slaves for Jesus’ sake.” The first law of ministry is humility. This axiom expresses that. He must increase, but I must decrease.

In 1 Thessalonians 5:12, the apostle Paul says, “Appreciate those that are over you in the Lord.” It says, “Love them, appreciate them.” Yes, love them; yes. Give them glory—no. Exalt them—no. First Peter, Peter writes in chapter 5 instruction to pastors. He says this: “Clothe yourselves with humility, for God is opposed to the proud but gives grace to the humble. Therefore, humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God that He may exalt you at the proper time.” Again, humility is the first law of ministry. All faithful, all honorable ministers make much of Christ and nothing of themselves.

This is precisely what we see in this passage. Let me read you verses 22 to 30. “After these things, Jesus and His disciples came into the land of Judea and there He was spending time with them and baptizing. John also was baptizing in Aenon near Salim because there was much water there and people were coming and were being baptized, for John had not yet been thrown into prison. Therefore there arose a discussion on the part of John’s disciples with a Jew about purification. And they came to John and said to him, ‘Rabbi, He who was with you beyond the Jordan to whom you have testified, behold, he is baptizing and all are coming to him.’”

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

Any so-called minister, any so-called minister who exalts his own office and his own position into that of a priest, a mediator, is perverted in his claims. There is only one High Priest and one Mediator between man and God, the man Christ Jesus. Any so-called minister who declares himself an authority over the church is a deceiver and a liar. Any so-called minister who says he exercises power over the church is a deceiver and an antichrist. Any minister who views himself as anything more than a simple Christian equal to every other Christian has corrupted himself. Any so-called minister who claims to be the head of the church, dishonors the Son of God to whom that title belongs exclusively. Any so-called minister who claims the name Holy Father dishonors the true Father/God to whom that title belongs exclusively, and thus did Jesus say, “Call no man Father.” Any so-called minister who takes the title vicar, or replacement for Christ, dishonors the Holy Spirit who is in the world today, and who possesses truly that title exclusively. Any professing Christians who treat a so-called pastor or minister or a priest as if he were anything more than any other believer, dishonors the Lord Jesus Christ to whom all honor belongs totally and exclusively.

All human ministers are like night stars, stars who appear in the darkness—their flickering light, not enough to light the world. They fade out as the sun rises. Ministers are like those night stars who fade out of sight as the sun arises. As churches defect, as churches fall into apostasy, they think less of Christ and they make more of their ministers. So they keep elevating and elevating and elevating and elevating, until it becomes bizarre. The resplendent decorations, foolish costumes, hats, accoutrements, are inverse to the diminishing of the glory of Christ. As the sun goes out, the stars appear in the darkness. Not enough to dispel the darkness. To the decaying, corrupt church the sun has gone out and the stars have ascended into the blackness of the sky. In a truly holy church, true church, the church makes little of the ministers and much of Christ. And the Son Himself shines so fully and so brightly in a starless sky that His glory fills everything.

J.C. Ryle said, quote: “Every faithful minister must be content to be less thought of by his believing hearers, in proportion as they grow in knowledge and faith and seek Christ Himself more clearly.” The more you see of Christ, the less you see of the minister. “He must increase, I must decrease.” How horrible if someone were to say, “I came looking for Jesus, but John MacArthur got in the way.”

John the Baptist was the greatest man who had ever lived. Therefore, he was the greatest servant of God who had ever lived, the greatest prophet who had ever lived. Did you get that? The greatest man who had ever lived. What was his clothing like? Camel’s hair and a leather belt. What was his diet like? Locusts and wild honey, anything he could find. He saw himself at best as the last night star in a sky that had only one. He was the last prophet. There hadn’t been a prophet in 400 years; there were no other stars in the sky. Israel was in darkness. One star and he faded out as the Son of righteousness arose. He sought to be hidden. His joy was in being hidden. It was to bring Christ in view that he lived and served.

Think of it, the greatest man who had ever lived in the history of the world, the most privileged prophet, the most popular preacher in centuries, drawing massive crowds, the most powerful messenger bringing the greatest message the world had ever heard—the Messiah is here and here He stands. The ultimate preacher ever. And the lesson he teaches us is how important it is that he fade away and Christ become everything. He had national popularity. All Jerusalem and Judea went out to see him. The Son of God was living in obscurity up in Nazareth, 30 years. He finally appeared; He was baptized by John. John sent a few of his followers to follow Jesus, and Jesus began to gather a few. Went to Galilee; gathered a few more. Had this little band of men, but He stilled remained in obscurity.

And then, as recorded in John 2, He came to Jerusalem on that Passover and He went into the Temple, still in obscurity. And then He broke that obscurity and ended that anonymity when He took a whip and assaulted the Temple and threw everybody out, creating a massive, unparalleled sensation. But He still had only a few disciples.

And then He began to do miracles. Then He began to cast demons out and He began to heal people of all sicknesses. And the crowds began to come to Him ’cause John didn’t do any miracles. John the Baptist never did a miracle. And there were people who were demon-possessed, and there were people who were ill, obviously. And they knew that Jesus could deal with that, and so based on His miracle power, He began to draw and no one had ever taught like He had. No one had ever spoken like He had, and His teaching attracted people. And then, of course, John was telling the people, “There He is,” chapter 1, verse 29; chapter 1, verse 36, “Behold the Lamb of God,” “behold the Lamb of God.” And He pointed to Christ and He is saying, “Go follow Him, go follow Him.” Who are you, John? Who are you? “I’m just a voice crying in the wilderness. I’m just getting the road ready for the Messiah. The Messiah’s here. Follow Him.”

So you have John telling people to go after the Messiah. The Messiah attracting them with His teaching and His miracles. And John’s beginning to fade. But their ministries overlap. Their ministries overlap for a while, of necessity, because there’s a transition going on here. And it’s in this context, in this time of transition, that what John the apostle records here takes place. And it’s a wonderfully urgent text for anyone in ministry, because here you have the minister being diminished, fading away, and Christ being exalted.

This is a lesson for all of us. This is *the* most basic law of ministry. So John’s ministry overlaps with Jesus, probably overlapped for as much as six months or so, maybe a little less. It had to be that way because he was the one introducing Jesus. So he was still ministering and preaching repentance, and preaching that the Messiah had come and telling them who He was and baptizing those who repented. And Jesus began to do that as well. Preach repentance, preach the kingdom, declare Himself the Messiah, and baptize people. The ministries were overlapping.

This fomented a problem. It was a problem very human. John’s disciples began to feel jealous. John didn’t; there’s no rivalry with John. But his disciples did.

I remember reading an article many, many years ago in a magazine. Somebody was...a non-believer was writing about the offense of so many Christians and he made the comment, one line, “I’m certain Jesus had more class than most of His agents, most of His representatives.” Well, that would be true. But it can happen even in a human sense that sometimes those who represent a man don’t rightly represent Him. And that was the case with John’s disciples. As the sun rises and the star begins to fade, we see an amazing example of humility, of the greatest minister who had ever lived. His humility is magnificent.

Let’s look at the setting, verse 22, pick up the story. “After these things,” meaning after the things described in chapter 2, verse 13 through 3:21. Of course you know what that is. He came to Jerusalem, went to the Temple, attacked the Temple. And after that the Pharisee Nicodemus came to Him, we went through the whole discourse with Nicodemus from chapter 3, verse 1 to 21. So after the occasion in the Temple when He assaulted the Temple, talked with Nicodemus, did some miracles, convinced some people that He was sent from God, as chapter 2 says at the very end, after those things...Jesus and His disciples came into the land of Judea, into the land, operative word “land.” They went out of town, that’s what it means. They went into the countryside. And they went into the countryside, leaving Jerusalem for two reasons. There He was spending time with them. Based upon what it says in chapter 4, verse 35, we think this is up to six months. This is very important because we don’t have any information about what was going on in that six months, but we do know that He was spending time with His disciples. This is the preliminary, very early training of His followers, a prolonged period of time. At the same time, it’s as He was baptizing, which means that He was doing the baptism of repentance, the same kind of baptism that John was doing, which was a kind of an Old Testament, symbolic washing of the outside to demonstrate a desire to be washed on the inside to get ready for Messiah’s arrival and kingdom. So Jesus is beginning to do essentially what John is doing. John came preaching the kingdom, preaching Christ, preaching repentance, baptizing people who repented, and Jesus came doing exactly the same thing. So you have this overlap, and it’s going on for a number of months.

We see that in verse 23 with one important note. John also was baptizing in Aenon near Salim, because there was much water there. You need much water to baptize people the right way. You need enough to put them under. That was an accommodating place for John, which means there were still a lot of people coming to John. And it was in...the location is called Aenon, near Salim. We don’t exactly know where that is. There are two possibilities. It could be near Shechem, or it could be near Bethshean—both fascinating biblical places, Old Testament places. You can even see them today. Especially Bethshean is an amazing place where Saul was executed. But both of them are in Samaria. That’s the interesting thing, both are in Samaria. So what it tells us is, John went north. As soon as Jesus went into the regions around Jerusalem and Judea and began to do His ministry, John went somewhere else. There was no competition in him. He went north into Samaria. He left Judea for Jesus. This is the first act of a humble man who leaves the very location of his success and goes somewhere else to make room for someone else. So he’s doing his ministry of preaching, repentance, baptizing and paralleling the ministry of Jesus. Neither of them is doing Christian baptism, as such. That doesn’t come into place until Acts 2, verse 41, after the death and resurrection of Christ, which Christian baptism depicts—buried with Him in baptism and raised in new life. So the two are overlapping ministries. They’re going on simultaneously.

I just would make one note. In verse 22, He was spending time with them and baptizing. Go over to chapter 4, verse 1. “Therefore when the Lord knew that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John.” So now we get a footnote. More people are going to Jesus now, than have been going to John. Oh, by the way, verse 2, “Although Jesus Himself was not baptizing, but His disciples were.” He was baptizing in the sense that He was providing the baptism. He was calling people to baptism, but He was having His disciples do it—obvious reason, right? Who were you baptized by? Oh, personally I was baptized by Jesus, who were you baptized by? That would just feed human pride. That’s 1 Corinthians 1 where Paul says, “I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius” because that just creates problems. So Jesus could pass off the baptizing, not the preaching; the disciples were too new. Not the teaching; they were too untrained, even after some months. But he could let them do the baptizing and that’s what happened. But the note I want you to see is in verse 1, that Jesus’ popularity was increasing and John was fading. And apparently John’s disciples began to worry about the implications of this on the one they loved. But let’s pick up verse 24 where we see that. It says, “For John had not yet been thrown into prison.” “For John had not yet been thrown into prison.” Why is that in there? That’s really an important statement. You say, “But it’s obvious. It just said he was baptizing.” So we get it. He wasn’t in prison; he was out baptizing.

Why is that statement there? Here is the answer: because in Matthew and Mark, John’s imprisonment is recorded right after Jesus’ baptism by John. If you read Matthew and Mark, you read John baptizes Jesus and, boom, John’s in prison. And by the way, people have been reading those gospels for thirty-plus years by the time John writes. So John wants to make the record of history correct, and so he just pushes apart the baptism of Jesus and the imprisonment of John the Baptist and drops this section in. This is in the chronological flow where it belongs.

And by the way, that’s the benefit of reading that new book *One Perfect Life,* all that’s done for you through the entire story of Jesus. So you read it as it unfolded chronologically.

It is in those months between the baptism of Jesus and the imprisonment of John that the overlap of their ministry goes on. People are shifting from John to Jesus because John is sending them and because Jesus does miracles. So it’s in this context, verse 25, that we come to the issue—“arose a discussion on the part of John’s disciples with a Jew about purification.” Purification refers to the baptism. Baptism was symbolic of repentance and purification. So they started having a discussion with a Jew. We can assume this. This is a Jew, a fellow Jew who somehow is questioning the distinction between what Jesus was doing and what John is doing. That’s what precipitates the issue. I think maybe this man is a disciple of Christ, and he comes across the disciples of John. And this discussion begins about who is supreme, who is preeminent, whose baptism is most important, who is greater. Did John the Baptist’s disciples not get the message? He pointed to Christ in chapter 1, he says over and over, “I am not the Christ,” “I am not the Christ.” In fact, he says that all the time—“I’m not the Christ.” John the apostle says he’s not the Light; he came to give testimony to the Light. John is happy to say, “I’m not the Christ” when the leaders come and say, “Who are you? Are you Elijah? Are you that prophet?” “No, I’m not; I’m just the voice crying in the wilderness.”

They should have known, but they had a hard time with this. When John is finally imprisoned—you can read about it in Matthew 11—his disciples still are having a hard time shifting to Christ. So John sends them to go to Christ and ask Him if He is not the Messiah. And they do. Chapter 11, they go to Jesus and He says, “Well, look, people are healed, the blind see, the deaf hear, the gospel is preached to the poor. What else you need by way of proof?

So they’re holding on to John, so they get in this discussion. And they’re fighting for the superiority of John over Jesus. So they came to John. They said to Him, “Rabbi, He”...Notice the absence of the name Jesus?...“He who was with you beyond the Jordan.” You have to say all that because they don’t want to say Jesus; that’s how jealous he talks. “To whom you testified, behold, He is baptizing and all are coming to Him.” And that is what’s called a jealous exaggeration. This is just envy. They don’t even want to say His name. They’re zealous and jealous for John the Baptist, filled with dissatisfaction. So they come complaining to John.

Strange attitude, contrary to everything John had told them. What’s his answer? How does he feel about the masses shifting to Christ? How does he feel about the Son rising and His glory filling everything so that the one star in the sky fades away? How does He feel about that?

Well, this is what He says in verse 27, “John answered and said, ‘A man can receive nothing unless it has been given him from heaven.’” Wow, that sort of settles it, doesn’t it, with regard to ministry. It’s like John 15:5, “Without Me, you can do nothing.” Gifts, positions, ministries in God’s kingdom rest completely on God’s free grace, God’s sovereign call, privilege, opportunity.

I love what the apostle Paul says about this. He understands this so well. Second Corinthians 4, “Since we have this ministry as we received mercy.” Ministry is a mercy. I’ve said that through the years so many times. Ministry is a mercy. What is a mercy? Something you don’t earn, something you don’t deserve, something you are given even though you’re unworthy. Paul says to Timothy, reminding Timothy: “I was a blasphemer, I was injurious, I was a murderer, but the Lord counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry and He showed me mercy.” You don’t earn it. You don’t rise to the top because you’re holier than everybody else. It’s a mercy.

In the writing to the Colossians, that wonderful first chapter of Colossians, Paul talks a lot about ministry, but this is one of my favorite verses. Verse 25, Colossians 1, “I was made a minister according to the stewardship of God.” “I was made a minister according to the stewardship of God,” stewardship meaning a responsibility, a deposit, an accountability. The principle is very clear. A man receives nothing when it comes to a call, when it comes to the privilege of ministry, when it comes to the power for ministry, when it comes to the fruit of ministry, except it’s given to him from heaven. That would be true even of Christ. Look at verse 35, “The Father loves the Son and has given all things into His hand.” Even what Christ had was given to Him by the Father.

In 1 Corinthians 4 and verse 7, “For who regards you as superior,” Paul asks, “what do you have that you did not receive? And if you didn’t receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?” That is so foundational.

So the principle is very clear. Ministry is a mercy that flows to an unworthy Christian based upon God’s sovereign grace. You can’t earn it. You can’t gain it. You can’t achieve it. But oh, by the way, you can forfeit it. You can be disqualified. That’s John’s attitude. What humility.

What is John saying? If we can borrow the contemporary vernacular, it’s not about me, it’s not about me. This is about heaven and what heaven has deposited in my hands as a mercy. That’s the only way you can look at ministry.

And then, starting with that reality, he illustrates it in the next two verses. Verse 28, “You yourselves are my witnesses.” You’ve been my followers, my loyal followers, my jealous followers, “But you know that I said I am not the Christ.” You know that. “But rather, I have been sent ahead of Him.” He said that in chapter 1, verse 15; chapter 1, verse 23; chapter 1, verse 27; all the time, “I’m not the Christ, I’m not the Christ, I’m not the Christ.”

You know, every minister needs to say that over and over—“I’m not the Christ, I’m not the Christ.” It’s not about me; it’s not about me; it’s about Him. I’m a star, the faster I fade, the better. The faster I’m lost in the glory of Christ, the better, the better.

And then he gives a beautiful illustration of that in verse 29. “He who has the bride is the bridegroom. But the friend of the bridegroom who stands and hears Him rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom’s voice, so this joy of mine has been made full.” What made them jealous, made him joyful. That’s the right attitude.

If somebody came down the street here and started a church and had twice, three, four, five times as many people as we have here coming to Christ, believing the gospel and being saved, what would be our attitude? Would it be jealous. It’s not about us. It’s not about me. It’s about Him. It’s about Him.

In Philippians chapter 1, Paul is in prison when he writes Philippians 1 and there are some other preachers who are saying, “Ah, this is our chance to shine. You know, the old man’s in prison, now we can capture the day. He’s not able to circulate.” And so they start throwing, really, arrows at him. They’re wounding him. He uses the language. It’s not enough that I’m in chains. They’re adding pain on top of my chains by saying I’m in prison because of sin and because the Lord has punished me and they’re...verse 15, Philippians 1...they’re preaching Christ from envy. They’re preaching Christ from envy. Wow! Envy? How awful.

What’s your attitude, Paul? Verse 18, “So what. So what. Christ is proclaimed and in this I rejoice, yes, and I will rejoice.” That’s...that’s...that’s the humility of the minister—Christ is preached; Christ is exalted. Some preach out of good will toward me. Some preach out of envy toward me. In any case, “Christ is preached, in that I rejoice.” John doesn’t have any competitive attitudes toward Christ or toward any other person who preaches Christ. He’s like a best man at a wedding, and that’s the illustration of verse 29. What is the best man’s job?

Well, in ancient times, the best man, called *shoshbin*, he had a very important role to play, a very important role. Weddings were big deals. They lasted as long as a week. They were planned months in advance, and the bridegroom was getting his house ready because the wedding took place when the house was ready and everything was prepared. And so he had a best man, his closest friend, who would do all the work, take care of all the duties and all the responsibilities, and all the while communicate with the bride and communicate with the bride and let the bride know when and where and how to meet and get everything ready. And then when the day was done and it was supposed to happen, he would take the bride and present the bride to the bridegroom.

John says, “That’s my job. I’m not the bridegroom. I just want to connect the bride to the bridegroom. I just want to take sinners to Jesus. That’s all I want to do. And when I’ve done that, I rejoice, I rejoice. This joy of mine has been made full. You guys are jealous. You’re upset because Jesus has more people than I do. I’m telling you, this is why I live. This is what I’m called to. This is my joy. My task is done.”

And when the bridegroom takes his bride, the best man isn’t even a footnote; disappears. And thus, he says, “He must increase, but I must decrease.” This is the first law of ministry. Humility, a great ministry never produces disciples of the ministry; it always produces disciples of the Savior. You understand that; foundational. Whenever the people worship the man, something is corrupt, something is corrupt. When Christ is diminished and the ministers are elevated, you have Satan’s church. Where you have Christ’s church, the ministers never see themselves as anything other than equal to every other Christian—a sinner saved by grace, given gifts and a merciful stewardship from heaven that elevates them above no one, no one. Hierarchy in the church is a corruption. The maxim then is this. He must—“must” is the operative word—must be on the increase; I must be the retreating shadow. But the prophet is slipping into fullness of joy. He holds nothing for himself. And oh, by the way, at the end of this time of overlap he is arrested. He’s still fighting with his disciples about the issues regarding Jesus, and that’s why he sends them to get information. And then he’s languishing in the prison, and one day they call for him. They bring him out of his cell, they cut his head off, and they bring his head on a plate into an orgy. And that’s the last scene of John.

But, you know, his decapitation just ushered him into eternal joy. And I’m sure he heard, “Well done, good faithful servant.” So that’s “I must decrease.” Next week “He must increase.”

Lord, we come to You this morning with grateful hearts. We have so much to be thankful for, so much to praise You for. You have given us the truth. Thank You for rescuing us from false Christianity. Thank You for rescuing all these people from Roman Catholic churches and Mormon churches and other cults, and even from Islam and atheism—thank You. And may we together exalt Christ. May we fade away as He and His glory fills all in all. May it always be about Christ, always about Christ. We thank You for bringing us to the knowledge of Him and we pray for those who are in our midst today who have not come to know Christ, who are languishing in darkness, maybe in the darkness of Roman Catholicism, or some other false religion. Would You be gracious and allow the light of the gospel to shine unto them that they may see Christ for who He is and fall at His feet, understanding that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Him alone and not by any works they could do or any ritual. And it’s not offered by any institution. It’s a gift to a penitent sinner who comes by faith alone, not depending at all in his own works, and cries out for the mercy of new birth. And we thank You Lord, again, for the deposit that comes into our minds every time we gather around Your Word. We’re given another treasure, another investment of divine gold deposited into our minds, into our lives. Make us spiritually richer, more useful to You. May we spend that treasure as it’s needed to declare the truth to others. And may the light of the gospel shine in the darkness of this world and may it become clear where the truth is so the people can avoid the deception. Elevate the true gospel, faithful preachers, and humble them so that people become followers of the Christ they preach and not of them. We’ll thank You in the Savior’s name. Amen.

**Jesus Is Superior to John**

**John 3:31-36**

Code: 43-19

Now, we’re going back to John 3 and we’re going to be looking at verses 22 to 36 which we began last week…which we began last week. We keyed this passage with verse 30 where John the Baptist, who is the speaker, I believe, through this whole section says, “He must increase, but I must decrease,” and that’s kind of been the title we’ve used for these two messages, last week and this week. This is about Christ increasing and the minister decreasing. This is about fading recognition of the preacher and the increasing glory of Jesus Christ. It’s a very important axiom, a very important maxim for ministry, He must increase, but I must decrease.

And I told you last time, that those words basically established the first law of ministry…the first law of ministry is humility. I must decrease, Christ must increase. He is to be exalted, I am to be diminished. In fact, if you kind of go a little deeper into the original language, what it says is that one, literally, that one being referred to Christ in this passage, is of necessity to be enlarged. Me, on the other hand, I must be diminished. And that is exactly what John the Baptist is saying and that is the first law for all who serve in ministry. The decreasing of the minister and the increasing of Christ. This is consistent with what Peter says in 1 Peter, “Humble yourselves, be clothed with humility,” as he’s writing to shepherds and ministers.

And the greatest model of this, of course, is the Lord Jesus Christ in Philippians 2 who though eternally equal with God, thought it not something to hold on to but humbled Himself, took on the form of a slave and became obedient. In a sense, obviously, He hid His own glory for the glory of the Father. He was the ultimate model of a humble minister. We mentioned last time that as the church apostatized, as the church defects, as it falls into false doctrine as becomes more heretical, Christ is diminished and the ministers are elevated. And you can see a perfect illustration of the Roman Catholic Church. We talked about that last week in particular because everybody in the world was paying attention to the Pope and the cardinals and where Christ is diminished, the ministers are elevated. Where Christ is exalted, the ministers are diminished and they’re lost. They’re like stars, we said, who shine in the darkness only until the sun rises and then they fade completely out of view. But Roman Catholics aren’t the only ones who elevate ministers and diminish Christ. There are many evangelical churches where the focus is inordinately on the minister, on the preacher and the pastor and there are many cases where that’s the way the pastors want it. They see themselves as the ones to draw attention to. But where there is true ministry, in the Spirit, Christ will be all in all, Christ will fill all, Christ will be the blazing sun and the ministers will be diminished.

People who elevate themselves in ministry are graceless. And who wants to be a graceless minister? Why do I say that? Because James 4 records that God gives grace to the humble, but resists the proud. God gives grace to the humble, but rejects the proud. I don’t have any desire in my life to be a graceless minister. The path of humility, the path of exalting Christ is the only path that any faithful minister would desire to pursue.

Now all of this comes into clear focus in this passage of Scripture that focuses on John the Baptist. Remember now, John the Baptist was the forerunner to Jesus Christ, the last Old Testament prophet. There hadn’t been one in 400 years before Him, the last and the greatest. In Matthew 11:11 Jesus said he was the greatest man who ever lived. He had the greatest calling, be a prophet, he actually had the greatest responsibility to not prophesy about a future Messiah, but to point to the Messiah who had arrived, namely the Lord Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God who came to take away the sins of the world. The greatest man, the most privileged man with the greatest ministry of anyone who had ever lived in human history, and that covers a lot of folks, he was empowered, he was popular, he was influential, and yet it is from this man who reached even in the redemptive sense the absolute pinnacle of human elevation, it is from this man that we learn this great lesson of humility…He must increase and I must decrease…which that phrase, that axiom, that maxim coming out of the mouth of John the Baptist speaks of his true spiritual humility. He had every reason to think more highly of himself than he ought to think because of his privileged calling and responsibility, and yet He makes the statement…He, meaning Christ, must increase, He must be exalted, and I must be diminished.

Now we come back to that passage, let me read it to you and set it in your mind, verse 22. We get the setting in the opening few verses and then everything begins to focus on the humility of the minister and the exaltation of Christ. “After these things, Jesus and His disciples came into the land of Judea…meaning into the countryside…from the city of Jerusalem and there He was spending time with them and baptizing. John also was baptizing in Aenon near Salim,” And by the way, that would be in the region of Samaria. So now we have the overlapping of the ministry of Jesus in John the Baptist. For a period of months, Jesus is doing the very same thing that John is doing, preaching repentance, preaching the arrival of Messiah, preaching the Kingdom, and baptizing people with a baptism of purification to symbolize their desire to be purified for the arrival of Messiah. So John and Jesus have overlapping ministries. John has deferred to Jesus, has left Judea where he was ministering east of Jordan in the Judea area, he is gone into Samaria, he has yielded the Judean territory up to the Lord Jesus but the two of them are carrying on this ministry simultaneously in two different places.

Now we know this is going on, obviously verse 24 says, because John has not yet been thrown into prison. There were a few months there where their ministry overlapped before John was arrested and thrown in prison for what he said about Herod and his illicit marriage. We’re in that time, that overlapping of the two.

There is an arising issue at this point in verse 25, “Therefore there arose a discussion, or a debate, on the part of John’s disciples with a Jew about purification, or about baptism. Now this would be a Jew who had connections with the baptizing work of the Lord Jesus. And this Jew who comes from the baptism of Jesus is connected to those who are John’s followers and they begin to discuss whose baptism is most important? Whose ministry is the most important ministry? That’s the nature of the discussion. John the Baptist’s followers are holding out for John’s priority and this Jew is, no doubt, communicating to them the work of Jesus, the preaching, the baptizing ministry of Jesus and this sends them back to John and we pick up the story in verse 26.

“John’s followers came back to John and said to Him, ‘Rabbi, He who was with you beyond the Jordan to whom you have testified, behold, He is baptizing and all are coming to Him.’ John answered and said, ‘A man can receive nothing unless it has been given him from heaven. You yourselves are my witnesses, that I said I am not the Christ, but I have been sent ahead of Him. He who has the bride is the bridegroom, but the friend of the bridegroom who stands and hears Him, or listens to Him rejoices greatly became of the bridegroom’s voice. So this joy of mine has been made full, He must increase, but I must decrease.’”

Now that’s the text that we looked at last week and I just want to kind of reaffirm it in your mind. These are very loyal followers of John the Baptist. They have repented under his preaching. They have reaffirmed their commitment to be obedient to God. They want to live holy lives. They want to be ready for the arrival of Messiah and the establishment of the Kingdom. They owe a lot to John the Baptist, this great preacher. And they are bothered by this competing work and ministry that they’ve heard about that Jesus is doing. Jesus has taken over their territory in Judea. He’s doing His ministry where John was doing his ministry and they exaggerate out of the jealousy of their own hearts and they say at the end of their statement, verse 26, “All are coming to Him…all are coming to Him.” Well that’s the exaggeration of jealousy. And also, you notice, they make reference to Jesus without ever using His name which is another indication that they have some jealousy toward the one they recognize John was pointing to because they say the One whom you testified about.

So these are very loyal followers of John who are bothered by the fact that John is now up in Samaria, isolated in this unacceptable place, and Jesus has taken over their area in Judea. They’re jealous for John the Baptist. They want to provoke him to recognize that this isn’t right and to defend his stature and his place. And by the way, this is reminiscent of an occasion of another humble man, as humble a man as there was in the Old Testament. His name may be surprising to you is Moses. But back in Numbers chapter 11, a very similar situation happened. Two men in the camp of Israel when they were being led by Moses through the wilderness, two men in the camp, the name of one was Eldad, and the name of the other Medad, and the Spirit rested upon them. Which is to say they have God’s blessing on what they do. These two prophesied in the camp. All of a sudden in the camp, two preachers show up and they have the Holy Spirit resting on them which means they’re speaking for God. They’re truly representatives of God. So a young man ran and told Moses and said, “Eldad and Medad are preaching in the camp.” Not predicting the future, prophesying means preaching. There are two competing preachers, Moses. This young man is trying to excite Moses to jealousy. Perhaps he’s so loyal to Moses, he thinks these men are in competition. “Then Joshua, the son of Nun, the attendant of Moses from his youth says to Moses, ‘Moses, my lord, restrain them.’” So Moses buys the jealousy of the messenger and the young lad and says, “You need to stop these other preachers. You’re the preacher, you’re the man.”

Then Moses responds in verse 29, “Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord’s people were preachers, that the Lord would put His Spirit upon them.” You just can’t make a humble man jealous. They couldn’t make Moses jealous, not a stranger, a young lad, and not even his assistant who had been with him for years, Joshua. This is the principle of humility that is the first law of ministry. Moses says, “I wish everybody was a preacher. There couldn’t be enough preachers. Competiveness in ministry is a very ugly thing. Competiveness among preachers is especially ugly. There’s no place for it with humble people. Joshua tried to bait Moses into jealousy and couldn’t do it. And the followers of John tried to bait him into jealousy and they couldn’t do it either. And so back in John chapter 3, John the Baptist responds to their concern.

In verse 27 John answered and said, “A man can receive nothing unless it’s been given him from heaven.” I told you last week, John recognizes that ministry isn’t something you deserve, it isn’t something you earn, it isn’t something you are somehow worthy of, it isn’t something you achieve, it’s a gift from heaven. It’s a mercy. I keep saying that, it’s a mercy, it’s a grace, it’s something that God gives you when you don’t deserve it. It’s a gift of grace like every other good thing that God gives unworthy sinners. And John understood that, that he was not ever worthy of this mercy that he had been given.

And then he says to them again in verse 28, “You yourselves are my witnesses that I said I am not the Christ but I have been sent ahead of Him.” You’ve known since you started following me that it was never going to be about me, it’s not about me, and by the way, that has to be the attitude of every minister, it’s not about me, it’s never been about me. I didn’t earn this. I didn’t achieve this. I didn’t gain this. This is a gift of mercy given to me and it’s not about me, it’s about Christ. It’s about the one that I have given testimony concerning. The one I pointed to and said, “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” And believe me, these followers of John would have known about the baptism of Jesus when He came to the Jordan. They would have been told by John that John heard the voice of the Father, “This is My beloved Son in whom I am well-pleased.” That John saw the Holy Spirit descend on him like a dove. He would have rehearsed that again and again. And so John is perfectly content to fulfill his function and to point to Christ. And that’s why he says, “I must decrease,” this is not about me. And then he uses an illustration, verse 29, “He who has the bride is the bridegroom. Christ is here pictured as the bridegroom and the people as His bride. John says, “The friend of the bridegroom, he stands and listens to the bridegroom.”

What does that mean? He does whatever the bridegroom needs him to do. If you’re a best man, you do whatever the groom needs you to do. And in those days, it was a long drawn-out event, maybe six months or a year of preparation, and you put yourself alongside the bridegroom and you did His bidding for that duration of time to make all the necessary preparations for the wedding. And that’s his job. And he rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom’s voice. Everything the bridegroom tells him to do, he is eager to do. And finally, when the bridegroom shows up and the bride arrives and everything is ready to happen, his joy is made complete. And so John says, “So this joy of mine has been full.” And then he says, “He must increase, but I must decrease.” I’m the best man, it’s not about me. The greatest prophet here is slipping into anonymity as the bridegroom, Christ, comes into full view.

All right, that was point one, I must decrease, from last week. All right, let’s go to point two, “He must increase.” He must increase. Now we’re going to look at verses 31 to 36, this is a very important set of verses because of its focus on the preeminence of Christ and why He is preeminent. This is more than just…here’s why I’m focusing on Christ…it’s more than just that simple statement “He must increase.” Embedded in verses 31 to 36 is a full, rich Christology. The doctrine of Christ is here revealed in very profound terms. And by the way, John gives five reasons why Christ must be the focus of ministry and not the minister…five reasons.

I was talking to Patricia, who can be very funny some of the time…and I said to her, I said to her, “So what did you think about the sermon?” She was in the first service. She said, “Well, the outline was in your Study Bible.” Now look, I’m the only person who can preach directly out of the Study Bible because I put it there to start with. But of course it’s in the Study Bible, we’re trying to help you. So, you can’t change this outline, okay? That’s why it’s there. So, you can cheat by following the Study Bible if you have one.

But John gives five…five priorities, five identifying features that established the supremacy of Christ and it is a rich Christology. I wish we had time to fully develop it, but we’ll do that as we go through.

Now I want to add one other footnote here. I am fully convinced that the power to proclaim Christ comes from Scripture. It’s not about the cleverness of the preacher. It’s not about good illustrations. It’s not about evoking emotion out of people. The power to convince people concerning the identity of Christ comes from Scripture. So what we’re going to do this morning is start here and then use some comparative Scriptures to get a full sense of this presentation of Christ.

Now remember this, the whole gospel of John is written that you might know and believe that Jesus is the Christ, and by believing have life in His name. Okay? So we want you to believe that Christ is who He claimed to be because believing that brings eternal life and salvation. So that’s going to be the focus all the way through and it’s no different here, only here the testimony is not from John the Apostle, but it’s from John the Baptist recorded by John the Apostle. So in a sense, John the Apostle calls on testimony from John the Baptist that is consistent. And it’s wonderful to think that John the Baptist so early at the very beginning and even before the ministry of Jesus, has a full understanding of who Jesus Christ is and why He is to increase.

John the Baptist then continues his testimony to these disciples of his who have come back and he affirms the preeminence of Christ. He’s dispensed with himself in the previous verses and now he lifts up Christ. Number one reason for exalting Christ is He has a heavenly origin…He has a heavenly origin.

The New Testament establishes this, by the way, at the very beginning. You start in the book of Matthew and you can’t even get out of the first chapter before you have word coming from heaven. You have a dream and an angel, Joseph, son of David, don’t be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child who has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, you’ll call His name Jesus. He will save His people from their sins. Behold, the virgin shall be with child and shall bear a son, they shall call His name Immanuel which translated means God with us.

So the divine origin of the Son of God, Son of Man is clearly indicated in Matthew 1 in the account of Luke 1 the same thing takes place…an angel appears and identifies the child. You will conceive, Mary, in your womb, bear a son, call His name Jesus. He will be great, will be called the Son of the Most High, the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father, David. The angel says to her, the Holy Spirit will come upon you, the power of the Most High will overshadow you, for that reason the holy child shall be called the Son of God.

Jesus has a heavenly origin. Now with that in mind, look at verse 31. “He who comes from above is above all.” He who is of the earth…the earth, *ge*, g-e would be a transliteration. It simply means the planet, or earthly life. It doesn’t have any moral connotation. If the word *kosmos*was used, world, that has moral connotations in the Bible, but the earth doesn’t. So he’s saying simply, any earthly human being is of the earth, from the earth, speaks of the earth, but He who comes from heaven is above all. And that’s only one person, everybody else is of the earth. There’s only one person who is from heaven. This is John the Baptist, the greatest human being who ever lived saying, “All of us fall into this category, we’re all of the earth, from the earth, speaking from a human viewpoint. And therein lies our limitation. Therein lies the very purpose and reason for our humility. On the other hand, he says, “He who comes from above is above all.” He says it at the beginning and the end of that verse. John was very human. He was very human. As strong as his testimony was to Christ, as strong as his testimony is in this passage to his followers who were trying to bait him into jealousy, he affirms that I am not the Messiah. He knows who the Messiah is. Yet when he was imprisoned and was languishing in prison, knowing he was very likely going to lose his life, Matthew records in Matthew chapter 11 that he sends his disciples to Jesus and he says, “Go to Jesus and ask him this question, ‘Are You the expected one or do we look for someone else?’” This from John the Baptist? The man who affirmed Christ again and again and again, who was there at His baptism, who saw the Holy Spirit descend, heard the voice of heaven, makes this firm testimony, the very man who gives us this Christology here, he has questions about Christ?

Well he’s languishing in prison. What he anticipated to happen wasn’t happening. Where’s the Kingdom? Where’s the power display, overthrowing the Romans, establishing the promises of David? Not happening. That is, I think, testimony to John’s earthiness. Even the best of man, even the greatest of prophets live with elements of their fallenness that show up in doubts. But Jesus is of a completely different nature because He’s of a completely different origin. He had no human father, He was conceived by the Holy Spirit and that’s how a divine person passed into a human body. He has a heavenly origin. He is from above. And by the way, that is the same language of John 3, you must be born from above in the spiritual sense, regenerated by God to be a part of His Kingdom. Heavenly origin then becomes a very important part of Jesus’ testimony, and I want to show this to you.

John 6:33, Jesus had just fed the massive crowd the loaves and the fish and was teaching the great sermon on Himself as the bread of life. But notice a few of the things that he says. In verse 33, John 6, “For the bread of God…meaning Himself…is that which comes down out of heaven and gives life to the world.” Verse 38, “For I have come down from heaven.” Verse 50, “This is the bread which comes down out of heaven.” Verse 51, “I am the living bread that came down out of heaven.” Verse 58, “This is the bread which came down out of heaven.” That doesn’t leave any room for doubt about the origin of the Lord Jesus Christ. He came down from heaven. Clearly distinguishing Him from earth-born people, which constitutes the entire human race.

John then understands the divine origin of Jesus Christ. He is the uncreated Son of God who entered into human form in a human body in His incarnation. So that is the first point in John’s Christology establishing the superiority of Christ, He has a heavenly origin. And by the way, chapter 8, you’re going to find this as we go all through John’s gospel, but chapter 8 verse 42, Jesus said, “If God were your father…He’s talking to the Jewish leaders…if God were your father, you would love Me, for I proceeded forth and have come from God.” I proceeded forth and have come from God. In chapter 17 He prays a prayer and says, “Restore to Me the glory I had with You before the world began.” And speaks there of His preincarnate existence. In 17:8, “The words You gave Me I have given to them and they received them and truly understood that I came forth from You.” This is foundational to understanding Jesus Christ is not merely human. This establishes the deity of Christ…the deity of Christ.

John’s got a second point in his Christology, reasons for exalting Christ, reasons that Christ must increase and the minister must decrease, and that is found, and it’s a subsequent point, obviously as you will see in verse 32, what he has seen and heard, of that he testifies.

If He came from heaven, He has seen and He has heard things that we have not. This is to say the second point about Christ, what He knows, He knows from first-hand divine experience. What He knows He knows from first-hand divine experience.

Now we know He knows everything because in chapter 2 verses 23 to 25 it said He knows everything. He even knows the thoughts of every human being, this is omniscience. Jesus is the only man who never needed to take any information from anyone else. He didn’t need to be educated by other people. There was no need for that. Yes, He grew in wisdom, stature, favor with God, favor with man…there was an awakening to His divine knowledge as He grew legitimately as a baby and a child. He wasn’t a one-year-old able to spout profound eternal theology. He was conformed to the development of a human being. By the time He’s twelve, obviously it’s crystal-clear that He…He has reached the point with a full adult sense of His mission which means that His knowledge was then complete. Did He choose to use all that knowledge? No, He restricted the independent use of His own omniscience in His humiliation. That’s why He could say things like “I don’t know the day or the hour when I return to establish the Kingdom.” He put self-imposed limits on His omniscience. But He could limit His omniscience, no one could add to His knowledge. He could limit His development and that in the plan of God, but no information as outside that full omniscience.

This sets Him apart from us. Everything we know, somebody has to teach us. We need information from heaven given to us from someone from heaven. So Jesus comes, God spoke in time past by the Holy Spirit through the prophets and then He spoke, Hebrews 1, by His Son. Either God speaks to us through the prophets and through the writers of Scripture or He speaks to us through His Son, but He has to speak to us because we have no knowledge of heavenly things.

Back in chapter 3 verse 11, “Truly, truly…Jesus says…I say to You, we speak of what we know and testify of what we have seen.” This is firsthand knowledge. And he calls these things in verse 12 heavenly things. So in referring to Jesus Christ, everything begins with an understanding of His heavenly origin and then moves to an understanding that He has knowledge of all things, He has complete omniscience, He knows everything that can be known and He knows it by first-hand experience, not because He acquired that knowledge or was taught that knowledge. There is a reference in the gospel of John to being taught of God, Jesus speaking of being taught of God meaning only in the sense that He was with God in eternity past, they shared a common understanding of truth.

For example, Jesus reiterates this a number of times. Maybe it would be good to look at chapter 5 verse 30, “I can do nothing on my own initiative, as I hear I judge, My judgment is just. I don’t seek My own will but the will of Him who sent Me. If I alone testify about Myself, My testimony is not deemed true. There is another who testifies of Me and I know that the testimony which He gives about Me is true. You have sent to John and he has testified to the truth, but the testimony which I receive is not from man but I say these things so that you may be saved.” John is a lamp but I’m the light. In other words, Jesus says John gave you a testimony that he had received from God. I give you a testimony that comes from heaven itself. There’s a sense in which it all originates with God. The difference is John had to be taught this, Jesus knew it eternally. He is the omniscient one.

In the eighth chapter of John’s gospel, just a couple of other verses, verse 26, “I have many things to speak and judge concerning you, but He who sent Me is true and the things which I heard from Him, these I speak to the world.” Jesus says My knowledge is the knowledge that belongs to God, it is knowledge which we share. Verse 38, “I speak the things which I’ve seen with My Father.” In other words, the common identification of these two members of the Trinity, eternally, which encompasses their omniscience.

Because He is of heavenly origin then, He has all heavenly knowledge. There is no preacher who can claim that by any means. We struggle at best to grasp the heavenly things, to understand the heavenly things, to articulate the heavenly things, and we’re only scratching the edge of the surface.

By the way, at the end of that verse, a statement is made, “No one receives his testimony.” Back in verse 11 he said the same things, Jesus said it there. “You do not accept our testimony.” He said that to Israel and now John says no one receives his testimony. John the Baptist is affirming that what Jesus is saying, people are rejecting. It’s not consistent with what they’re used to. It’s not earthly. It’s not consistent with the system that they’ve developed. It’s too heavenly. And Jesus said that, how are you going to understand heavenly things when you don’t even grasp earthly things?

So, first of all then, John affirms the superiority of Christ because He is of divine origination. And secondly, because He is omniscient and knows what God knows and has known it for all eternity. Thirdly, and this is a very important aspect of His Christology. Anyone who affirms Christ, affirms that God is true. The truthfulness of God is bound up in the affirmation of Christ. Look at verse 33. “He who has received His testimony,” there are some, “no one received His testimony,” is a general statement, not an exclusive one, but there are some. “He who has received His testimony, that is the testimony concerning Christ, has set His seal to this, that God is true.” That is such an economy of words to say something so profound. Does God speak truth? Is God true? You heard Kory sing what essentially says that, you are truthful. God is true, a God who cannot lie. He is truth personified. God is true. If that is so, then you must believe in Christ. Why? Because God sent an angel and said this child is Immanuel. This is Jesus who will save His people from their sins. Because God sent an angel, this is the Son of God, because God spoke at His baptism, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased.” Because God spoke at the Transfiguration, “This is My beloved Son, listen to Him.”

If you don’t believe that Jesus is the Son of God, then God lied. Understand? So don’t come with some kind of patronizing statement about, “Well I believe in God, I believe in the true God, I just reject Christ.” No, if you reject Christ, then you affirm that God is a liar. Contrary to that, He who receives the testimony concerning Christ, sets His seal to this, that God is true. You can’t say God is true but reject Christ. You can’t do that. The Jewish people think they affirm the God of the Old Testament. They talk about the God of Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, the God of the Old Testament Scripture, they affirm that that’s their God and that’s the true God. But their God is a liar…their God is a liar because it is the God of the Old Testament who revealed every single prophecy directed and fulfilled in Jesus Christ’s first coming. It is the God of the Old Testament who talk about the seed of a woman in Genesis 3, it’s the God of the Old Testament who talked about one who would be crucified, pierced, wounded for the transgressions of His people, Isaiah 53. Every single prophecy in the Old Testament fulfilled in Jesus Christ is a point at which you either validate God as speaking the truth, or lying. You cannot reject Christ and say God speaks the truth. It was God who said this is My beloved Son. If that’s not His Son, God’s a liar.

In 1 John chapter 5, John affirms this very important declaration with this statement, 1 John 5:10. This time he’s writing in his epistle. “The one who believes in the Son of God,” John is constantly going back to this theme, this is who He is and you must believe to have eternal life. “The one who believes in the Son of God has the testimony in Himself. The one who does not believe God has made Him a liar.” Whoa-whoa, I would never make God a liar. You just made Him a liar if you reject what He said about Christ because you have not believed in the testimony that God has given concerning His Son. It’s inescapable. You don’t have the right to say I believe in God and that I believe God is true, and then reject Christ. If Christ is not who God said He is, we are really in serious trouble because the biggest promise that God ever made, the clearest identification that He ever spoke of was a lie. And if God is by nature a liar, throw your Bible away, throw your Old Testament away, run from it. You cannot reject Christ and affirm that God is true. If God is true, then everything He said about Christ is true and Christ is who He said He is and provides the eternal life that He declared He would give.

This becomes another of John’s themes. Chapter 7, verse 16, “So Jesus answered them and said, very basic statement, My teaching is not Mine, but His who sent Me.” Reject Me, you’re rejecting God. Call Me a liar, you’re calling God a liar. We are connected. If I’m a liar, God’s a liar because what I’m telling you comes from God.

Back in chapter 5 is maybe the most potent statement, chapter 5, you could pick it up say maybe at verse 19. Jesus is talking about His relationship to the Father, His Son can do nothing of Himself unless the something He sees the Father doing, common knowledge, common life, common action, common works, common words, whatever the Father does, these are the things the Son does. And He goes on to speak about this. And then He sums it up in verse 23, “So that all will honor the Son even as they honor the Father.” And then this, “He who doesn’t honor the Son, doesn’t honor the Father who sent Him.” Reject the Son, and you’ve rejected the Father. That is why the writers of the epistles of the New Testament refer to God as the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, meaning that the God that we believe is the God who is one with the Lord Jesus Christ. You can’t separate the two, and end up with anything other than blasphemy. It’s blasphemy to call God a liar. And if Jesus is not who God said He is, then God is a liar and there is nothing more horrendous or horrific than that kind of blasphemy.

In the fourteenth chapter of John, the tenth verse, “Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in Me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on My own initiative, but the Father abiding in Me does His works. My works, My words all come from the Father. Believe Me, I am in the Father, the Father’s in Me.” This is essential to any grasp of the identity of Jesus Christ.

All right, now there’s a fourth principle in the Christology of the Baptist and it is this, and it speaks again to His Trinitarian relationships. This comes in verse 34. In verse 34, and it is this, “He possessed full Holy Spirit presence…full Holy Spirit presence.” Why do we exalt Christ? He has a heavenly origin. We have an earthly one. He knows what He knows from eternal omniscience. We have to be taught and are limited in our comprehension. Why do we exalt Him? Because He is the one whom the Father promised and whom the Father affirmed and to agree with God the Father we must embrace Christ. And then this, “He possesses the Holy Spirit in full presence.” Great statement in verse 34. “For He whom God has sent speaks the words of God…that’s the same point He was making in verse 33, probably should be added to verse 33, and then verse 34 should say…”For He gives the Spirit without measure.”

One of the ministries of the Spirit, of course, was to bring the words of the Father through the Son. Everything Jesus did in His ministry was the work of the Holy Spirit, that’s why in Matthew 12 when they called Him satanic, they said You do what You do by the power of Satan, He didn’t say you blasphemed Me, He said you blaspheme the Holy Spirit.

Why? Because part of His incarnation was to become human, part of His incarnation was to restrict the independent use of His attributes. Part of His incarnation was to yield over His will to the operation of the Holy Spirit in His humiliation.

Now John the Baptist was filled with the Holy Spirit from His mother’s womb, remember that? From the very time that He was conceived, the Holy Spirit took special care in the life of John, His ministry was empowered by the Holy Spirit. But not to this degree because He was given, that is Christ, the Spirit, without measure. What does that mean? Immeasurably. What does that mean? Infinitely to the level of His infinite deity. So what you have in Jesus Christ is God the Son who is equal to God the Father in His fullness and equal to God the Holy Spirit in His fullness. Astonishing terms. Without measure. Without limit. Without border. Without boundary.

Back in chapter 1 verse 32, John testified saying, “I’ve seen the Spirit descending as a dove out of heaven and He remained on Him and I didn’t recognize Him, but He who sent Me to baptize in water said to Me, ‘He upon whom you see the Spirit descending and remaining upon Him is the one who baptizes in the Holy Spirit.’” So there symbolically is this coming of the Holy Spirit resting on Him. That’s only an external demonstration of what was an internal, eternal permanent union in the Trinity. In fact, in Colossians 2:9, it’s stated this way, “That in Him dwells the fullness of the Godhead bodily. He is Son and Father and Holy Spirit all in one.”

Why would you exalt the minister? John has a measure of the Holy Spirit. John has information given to him but John is an earthly man, not to be compared at all with the one who comes from heaven who knows everything from eternal omniscience, who gives perfect testimony establishing the truthfulness of God, and who has the spirit in infinite fullness.

And there’s one final point that John makes that establishes the superiority of Christ and that is He has received all authority from the Father…He has received all authority from the Father. Verse 35, “The Father loves the Son and has given all things into His hand.”

**This is…**John understands that the whole of redemption and the whole of creation, the creation of the material world, the immaterial world, the plan of redemption, all of it is about the Father loving the Son and creating a universe in which He can redeem humanity and give a bride to His Son, a love gift to His Son. John has a full understanding of the plan of God to create and then regenerate, to regenerate the heavens and regenerate the earth and regenerate fallen sinners and gather all that together and give it as an expression of His love to His Son. That’s staggering truth to grasp.

In Ephesians, the Apostle Paul tries to capture some of this with amazing language. Ephesians chapter 1, one of my favorite passages anywhere in Scripture, starting in verse 20, talks about Christ whom He raised from the dead. And then says about Him, “He is far above all rule and authority, and power, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. He’s put all things in subjection under His feet, given Him as head over all things, He’s head over all things, He’s given the One who is head over all things to the church which is His body. He is the fullness of Him who fills…the church is the fullness of Him who fills all in all. The language is full, full, full, full, full.

God’s eternal love relationship with His Son results in God giving to His Son all of His creation in its final form, the new heavens, the new earth, the redeemed humanity, love gifts to the Son. John understands this. Full Christology and so he closes with an invitation in verse 36, “He who believes in the Son has eternal life. He who doesn’t obey the Son will not see life.” By the way, why does it go from believing to obeying? Because to believe on the Son is a command. The gospel is a command, not a suggestion. It’s a command. He who believes in the Son has obeyed the command. He who does not believe in the Son has disobeyed the command. And he who doesn’t obey the Son will not see life but the wrath of God abides on him.

You have a choice. Eternal life, eternal wrath. Eternal heaven, eternal hell. John ends up a gospel preacher. Those are the last words to fall from the lips of John the Baptist recorded in Scripture and he’s a gospel preacher. Believe and have eternal life, it sounds like the words of John 3:16, believe and have eternal life. Fail to believe in disobedience, you will not see life but you will see eternal wrath, a preacher of the gospel, the last message and the voice of one crying in the wilderness goes silent…goes silent.

Not long after this John’s sad ending came. Let me read it to you. Matthew 14. Herod had arrested John. Herod arrested him because John publicly preached against Herod’s immorality and illicit marriage. So Herod arrested John, bound him, put him in prison because of Herodias, the wife of his brother Philip. That was the immorality. He had literally seduced his brother’s wife and married her. And John had been saying to him, “It is not lawful for you to have her.” Although Herod wanted to put him to death, he feared the crowd because they regarded John as a prophet. But when Herod’s birthday came which was a good excuse for debauchery, drunken orgy, the daughter of Herodias danced before them and pleased Herod in a very seductive way. Pleased him so much that he promised with an oath to give her whatever she asked. Having been prompted by her mother, she said, “Give me here on a platter the head of John the Baptist.”

“Although he was grieved, the king commanded it to be given because of his oaths and because of his dinner guests. He sent and had John beheaded in the prison and his head was brought on a platter and given to the girl and she brought it to her mother. His disciples came and took away the body and buried it and they went and reported to Jesus. And the shining star was out and the voice went silent.”

It’s really sad, isn’t it? Pathetic, ugly, horrible way for the greatest man who ever lived to end. His disciples buried his body and went and told Jesus. But this is how it is for the preacher. John died a satisfied man. His joy was made full, why? Because he had decreased and Christ had increased. And John’s followers had no one else to turn to, so they went to Christ. He was a faithful preacher of Christ, faithful preacher of the gospel and a model of the first law of ministry, the law of humility.

Lord, we are again so grateful this morning for the joys that have been ours just in this hour or so together to contemplate Your truth and our Savior, sing songs and hymns and fellowship together even to give and to pray together and now to enjoy one another as we leave and to come back again tonight to be blessed by Your truth. We’re so rich. We have the best the world can’t offer, the best that heaven can offer. We’re so grateful. Do Your work in hearts, Lord, give life to sinners, bring conviction of sin. Make Christ attractive, may He fill all our vision. May He be all glorious. May we never be able to get enough of Him. May we love Him more, serve Him more faithfully, seek to be more like Him. And we ask for His glory. Amen.

**Messiah: The Living Water, Part 1**

**John 4:1-15**

Code: 43-20

Well, turn again in your Bible to the fourth chapter of John. As we return, I want to say thanks to Austin Duncan and Phil Johnson, Nathan Busenitz for stepping into the pulpit and doing such a wonderful job here.  Always a joy for us to hear the Word from them.  But it’s good to be back and to go back to the gospel of John.

Much, of course, in the story of the woman at the well is familiar to you.  If you grew up in the church, you heard the story probably at many, many different intervals through your life and Sunday school.  You have no doubt read it many times and thought what a wonderful story it is. I’m not here to tell you things that you don’t know, or to bring out some kind of hidden realities in the story. The story is well-known.  It is a simple story, it is a straight-forward story, it is the story of Jesus evangelizing an outcast woman, of her coming to salvation and then being used by God to bring many in her village to salvation.  In fact, we read that sort of the culminating comment on the whole story comes in verse 39, “From that city, many of the Samaritans believed in Him because of the word of the woman.”

Here you have as clear a model of our Lord evangelizing a sinner as anywhere on the pages of the gospels.  And then that makes it a very instructive portion of Scripture, one that we should be very familiar with for the lessons that it teaches us.  We’re going to go over those lessons, lessons about how we approach the unbelieving world around us and how we bring them to hear the gospel and understand what it offers and what it demands.

But having said that—and we will look at the story and we will emphasize its wonderful, helpful modeling for us of evangelizing—having said that, I want to remind you that the purpose of John is not set aside here, and the purpose of John is stated again in chapter 20, verse 31 of his gospel: “These things are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you might have life in His name.”  So while it is about the woman and her conversion, that is the secondary purpose of this section as we would know, being consistent with John’s mission.  The primary purpose is to unveil Christ.  The primary purpose is to declare Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God. The primary purpose is to put Him on display.  And in this account, His humanity is on display as He is weary and thirsty sitting by a well. That’s His humanity, and we’ll look a little bit more closely at that.

But His deity is also on display because He meets a woman whom He has never met in His life and He knows her entire history.  So we see His humanity and His weariness.  We see His deity and His omniscience.  It is then, more than it is anything else, a presentation of Christ.  And what makes it unique is that up to now in the gospel of John, John the writer, John the apostle has presented Christ as the Son of God.  John the Baptist has presented Christ as the Messiah.  The disciples of Jesus have given testimony to the fact that He is the Messiah. So we have the witness of John the apostle.  We have the witness of John the Baptist.  We have the witness of the disciples.  But this is the first time that the proclamation of the messiahship of Jesus comes from His own lips and that we find in verses 25 and 26 where the woman speaks of the Christ, the Messiah who will come, and Jesus said to her in verse 26, “I who speak to you am He.”

So as I say, up to now it’s John the apostle, John the Baptist, and the followers of Jesus.  But here is the identity of the Messiah from His own lips.  Now what makes this so very unique is that this declaration from the lips of Jesus as to His identity is not given to any significant religious leaders in Israel.  It is not given in Jerusalem.  It is not given to the religious establishment there.  It is given to a woman who is, in every sense, an outcast. This is a woman who is a Samaritan.  Samaritans were essentially a corrupted form of the Jewish race. The Jews who remained in the northern kingdom of Israel when the Assyrians came and took them captive in 722—the Jews that remained after the population was removed the land—intermarried with all kinds of pagan, idolatrous nations and so they were a hybrid people who had forsaken their Judaism and committed the most heinous crime that a Jew could commit, and that was to mingle with idolatrous Gentiles. They had done that. They were outcasts.

So this is an outcast woman.  More than that, this is an immoral woman.  This is a woman who has been married multiple times and is living in an adulterous relationship at this very time. This is an ignorant woman.  She doesn’t know anything about the true religion.  Jesus even says to her, “You don’t know what you worship.  At least the Jews have the full Old Testament.”  She is an ignorant woman.  She is uneducated.  She is also an indifferent woman.  She is not like Nicodemus, she is not seeking Jesus.  Nicodemus came to Jesus by night because he knew He was a man who was sent from God, He was a prophet from God because nobody could do what He did. And Nicodemus had seen His miracles. This woman had seen nothing, knew nothing about Jesus, heard nothing from Him or about Him. She is religiously indifferent.  She is neutral. She has no idea of who Jesus is. She has no idea of who this Jewish stranger sitting on the well is.  She is from the dregs of corrupted culture and society. She is a pariah in her own realm. She is an unclean woman. She’s the very opposite of Nicodemus.  Nicodemus is moral, he’s religious, he’s an upstanding Jew, he is learned, he is a theologian, he is from the socially elite, he is a prominent leader, he is devout, he is respected by everyone, and it was he who sought out Jesus that he might know the way of salvation, the way into the kingdom.

This woman is the opposite and yet it is to this woman that Jesus first in the gospel of John declares His own identity.  It’s an amazing thing.  And it is a testimony, on the one hand, to the apostasy of Israel.  It is a stinging rebuke to Israel that this revelation is not made to some prominent religious leader there, but rather to this woman.  But it is more than just a stinging rebuke of Israel, it is a declaration on the part of Jesus that He has come to save people from every tongue and tribe and nation.  It is a testimony that salvation is for all who believe.  And that has already been declared in John 3:16 that God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.  This is the testimony of Scripture. Romans 10, “Whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved,” whether Jew or Gentile.  Galatians 3 says the same thing. Colossians 3 says the same thing.  From the very outset, from the very beginning, the gospel was intended not just for the Jews, but the world. Acts 10:34, “Opening his mouth, Peter said, ‘I most certainly understand that God is not one to show partiality but in every nation the man who fears Him and does what is right is welcome to Him,’ from every nation.”

That’s why the Great Commission says, “Take the gospel to every nation. Go to the ends of the earth to every creature.”  So here is a demonstration that God has forsaken Israel in a great measure, and that plays out, doesn’t it, as destruction comes in 70 A.D.  But it’s also a demonstration that the gospel is intended for anyone and everyone who believes, no matter what their ethnic identity, no matter what their place in life. And this is for us to understand as we proclaim the gospel in fulfillment of the Great Commission.

Now when you go into a story like this, there are so many deviations that you could take, so many side trips that you could take, so many tangents you can go off on, both in terms of historical background which always makes things rich and as well in terms of sort of expanding spiritual truth.  Well, I want to resist doing too much of that. I want to do only as much of that as I feel is necessary for you to relive the story.  And as I often say, it isn’t about bringing the story into modern times, it’s about taking all of you back into this event itself, and letting you live the event. And I need to tell you enough about what’s going on so you feel like you are really there.  And as we go, we’re going to see the glory of Christ on display but we’re going to learn from Him how we are to approach people in the world who are indifferent to the gospel.  Once in a while in my life, somebody will come up to me and say, “Do you know how I can be saved?”  Or, “I’m trying to figure out how to get into the kingdom.”  Or, “Do you know how I can receive eternal life?”  That happens, and I’m always glad when that happens; it’s a lot easier if you can start with that question.

But for the most part, through life, you’re going to be in the position of the initiation of a conversation with an indifferent person about a gospel they need to hear.  And that’s what we’re going to learn from Jesus.  We learn some things from Nicodemus, how to respond to someone who comes and says, “I want to enter the kingdom,” and Jesus says, “Well wait a minute, that’s not in your power, you need to be born from above.” And we understand that.  And so you need to pray and ask God for that new birth if you want to be in His kingdom.  That’s a very rare experience for most of us.  It may be most common in our families as our children come to us and ask us those questions and we start with the point that they want to know how to be born again.  But for the most part, if we’re going to take the gospel to the world, we’re going to have to initiate the conversation with ignorant, indifferent people who are in some way or another victims of the concoction that they call their own faith or their own religion—and we have to take the initiative.

Unlike Nicodemus, who sought out Jesus, here’s a woman who wasn’t looking for Him at all, didn’t know He existed, had no idea who He was.  He is an unknown, unsought stranger that she meets sitting on a well who is as far as she is concerned really bizarre, strange.  He is saying very strange things, things she can’t sort out—at least that’s how it starts.

Jesus dismisses her indifference.  It’s not a barrier.  He dismisses her ignorance. It’s not a barrier.  And He dismisses, this is important, her immorality.  I know we tend to get very, very self-righteous when we look at our immoral world.  And it’s very easy for us to have resentment toward people, very easy for us to resent homosexuals, advocating for gay marriage, corrupting our culture, corrupting our young people.  Very easy for us to resent those who are sexually immoral, very easy for us to resent Islamic terrorists because of the damage they do, the destruction they do.  But that’s the mission field.  That’s not the enemy, that’s the mission field.  And all sinners are in the same situation headed for the same hell, even if they’re not homosexuals or they’re not Islamic terrorists. They’re alienated from God and it’s our responsibility in this world to go to them.  They are the sick who need the physician.  They are the unrighteous, the sinners.

So having said that, as we go through this story, keeping in mind that Christ is magnificently on display, we’re going to learn some principles for approaching people with the gospel that we see our Lord using here and they’re very, very helpful.  But before we do that, let’s begin with the setting in verse 1.

“Therefore,” and that’s an important connection with the previous passage as you’ll see in a minute. ”Therefore, when the Lord knew that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John, although Jesus Himself was not baptizing but His disciples were, “He left Judea and went away again into Galilee.”  Simply stated, Jesus leaves Judea.  What’s He been doing in Judea?  He’s been preaching.  Preaching what?  Preaching repentance, preaching the kingdom. He has been doing what John the Baptist did.  You remember their ministries had an overlapping period of time.  Jesus launches Himself by showing up at the Jordan where John is baptizing. John baptizes Him and says, “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world”; points to Christ.  John tells His disciples, “Follow Christ, He’s the Messiah, Go after Him, I must decrease, He must increase.” And the transition is taking place.

But John then moves north, as we learned at the end of chapter 3, he goes up north and he begins to preach there in a new area and baptize people, declaring Jesus to be the Messiah, and also preparing people for His arrival, for confronting Him. So he’s doing the same thing in the north. Why did he go north?  Because he wanted to give room for Jesus to come in where he had been in the most populous area.  So Jesus is now in Judea and He’s getting big crowds, bigger crowds, we might assume, than even John. It seems to be what it’s saying.  Jesus is making and baptizing more disciples than John. They’re coming, being baptized. Jesus has an added feature that John didn’t have.  Jesus does miracles.  John did no miracles.  Jesus has already begun to do His miracles and the attraction is profound and He is baptizing.

What baptizing is it?  It’s that proselyte baptism in which Jews came and said, “I’m no better than a Gentile, and I want my heart cleansed,” and they symbolize the desire for heart cleansing to prepare for the arrival of Messiah by going through an external immersion into water. That’s what Jesus is doing.  It says there in verse 1 that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples.  And then verse 2 appears to be a sort of an edit by John the apostle, the writer, by saying, “Jesus Himself was not actually baptizing, but His disciples were.” And that would be for obvious reasons.

If Jesus baptized you, that might go to your head.  If others were baptized by the apostles and you happened to be baptized by Jesus, so Jesus defers and delegates that responsibility. But it comes out in the same way, in the general sense, as being a baptism by Jesus because it was done by His delegated representatives.  Also important to remind you that baptism does not depend on the baptizer.  The baptizer adds nothing to the baptism.  Paul said, “I’m glad that I baptized none of you but Crispus and Gaius.”  It is the baptism itself. It is the heart of the one being baptized that is the issue, not the baptizer.  Judas even baptized people, we must assume, when he became a part of the discipled group.

So Jesus’ ministry is flourishing but this creates problems.  The Pharisees already hate John the Baptist.  Why do they hate John the Baptist?  Because when the religious leaders came down to the Jordan where John was baptizing, and he saw them—you can read about it in Matthew chapter 3—John welcomed this with this: “You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?”  And then He pronounced damnation on their heads.

John was not popular with them.   Jesus was even less popular because Jesus had the same message about their apostate religion, but Jesus had come into the Temple and wreaked havoc. And these men, these Pharisees, were essentially the watchdogs for all things religious. And they were watching over their religious turf and hatred was mounting and building against Jesus. And so Jesus wanted to avoid a premature confrontation.  There wasn’t time for that.  There was much ministry yet to do before this thing escalated.  And so He left Judea, verse 3, and went away again—again because He had come from Galilee and from Nazareth. He went back home and back to Galilee where He would minister for well over a year, far from Jerusalem, far from Jerusalem.

It was never necessary for Jesus to sort of test His enemies.  In chapter 7, verse 30, they were seeking to seize Him and no man laid his hand on Him because His hour had not yet come.  In chapter 8, verse 20, He spoke these words in the treasury as He taught in the Temple, and no one seized Him because His hour had not yet come.  He was on a divine schedule and He took steps to avoid that both naturally and apparently occasionally even supernaturally. They tried to kill Him in Nazareth, and He just disappeared, we don’t know how, right out of their midst.

So He goes to Galilee, and He’s going there for the great Galilean ministry, which you know about if you’ve been with us in our gospel studies.  Now in order to get there, He had to pass through Samaria. Well, technically speaking, you don’t have to pass through Samaria, you can take the coastal route.  You’re going to Galilee in the north, you’re in Jerusalem Judea in the south.  You could go to the west and go up the coastal plain and go that way and avoid Samaria. Samaria is a strip of land in the middle.  Or you could go the eastern route by crossing the Jordan River going up through an area called Perea, and then cross back over the Jordan River and you will have gone literally around Samaria, or you can go through Samaria.  If you are a severely fastidious and sort of orthodox Jew, worried about defilement, you either take the coastal route, or you take the eastern route across the Jordan River because you don’t want to go through Samaria.  But here He had to pass through Samaria.

Literally in the Greek, it was necessary, it was required for Him to go through Samaria.  We could argue that it was the shortest route and so that laid the necessity on Him.  He wanted to get out of there.  And He didn’t want to prolong His trip. He wanted to get to Galilee as quickly as possible so He took the shortest route.  But I think we would have to go beyond that and say He had to go through Samaria because there was a sovereign appointment, that it was established for Him with a woman by a well and that had been ordained before the foundation of the world. And it was going to lead to her salvation and the salvation of an entire group of people from a local Samaritan village.  He had to go that way.

It was the shortest route, but there was more than a geographic compulsion—there was a divine appointment, a spiritual necessity foreordained. The machinery, you might say, of divine sovereignty, of supernatural purpose, was in motion and headed toward one surprised, sinful woman.

So He came by going through Samaria to a city of Samaria.  Now Samaria originally was the name of the capital city of the northern kingdom.  When the kingdoms split after Solomon—Solomon was the last king of the unified kingdom (Saul, David, Solomon, and from Solomon’s sons)—the kingdom split, ten tribes went north, two stayed south. The south became known as Judah.  The north as Israel. That’s historic.

When the kingdom was established independently in the north, Omri, who was one of the kings of the north...and by the way, all of them were evil, all of them were wicked, all of them were unrighteous, there was never a good king in the north. But Omri, according to 1 Kings 16, identified Samaria as the capital city.  Well, it didn’t take long for the word *Samaria* to extend from the capital city to the whole region, so it all became known as Samaria.

In Samaria, somewhere along the way, is a village called Sychar. So we read there that He came to this place, a city in Samaria called Sychar.  Probably modern Askar, still around, and located on the slope of Mount Ebal, opposite Mount Gerizim.  Do you remember Ebal and Gerizim from Deuteronomy 28?  The mountains of cursing and blessing where God warned the people, “If they obeyed they’d be blessed, if they didn’t, they’d be cursed?”  That area.  Now not just near this village, and by the way, the best estimate would be that if you started in Bethany, maybe He was staying with the family of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, we don’t know. But let’s assume Bethany, which is right by Jerusalem, somewhere in that area.  It’s about a twenty-mile hike and when I say hike, I don’t mean it’s a flat walk, I mean it’s an exerting kind of hike, up and down and up and down and a rigorous walk, 20 miles would take it to where the modern town of Askar is, if that’s close to where Sychar is—a twenty-mile walk that day.

He came to this place, which is also further identified by letting us know that this is a place where Jacob purchased land and dug a well and then bequeathed that land and well to his son Joseph. And Joseph, of course, was even later buried there after the land was conquered by Joshua post-captivity. So this is just identifying our historical, geographic location, which the Bible loves to do because it is a real book about real people doing real things in real places.  So Jesus goes the twenty miles and He arrives near Sychar, and some suggest that Jacob’s well—they know where that is today. It was probably between a half a mile and a mile away from the village of Sychar.  Askar is about a half a mile or so away.

He arrives at that place and we read this: “Jesus being wearied from His journey was sitting thus.” What does “thus” mean?  Wearied, in a wearied condition; He sat in a slumped, wearied condition by the well. It was about the sixth hour.  The day began at dawn, which means it began say around 6 A.M. and sixth hour puts it at noon.  It is high noon; it is the middle of the day. The sun is at its peak and He has walked 20 miles, a rigorous, rigorous walk that morning.  And He’s exhausted.  The word “wearied,” *kopiao*, means to be to the point of sweat and exhaustion.  It’s an extreme condition.  He is worn out.  He is spent.  And at noon, under the blazing sun, He sits down on the edge of the well.

The stage is set for this amazing encounter that is about to happen.  And again there you see the humanity of Jesus, don’t you?  You see His humanity.  He understands all that we suffer as men and women because He was one of us. He knew what it was to be weary, to be thirsty, to be worn out, to be exhausted, which contributes to Him being a sympathetic high priest who learned from His own experiences how to sympathize with us.  That kind of thing brings shame on those who say that only the Virgin Mary or the saints can sympathize with us.  Jesus walked in our flesh.  He understands even our physical weariness. And there He is by the well.

Now we come to the encounter and I want to give you some points as we go through. We’ll take maybe the first half of this little list today, and then next week the latter half.  The first thing that I want you to focus on as we look for a model for personal evangelism—the first thing is unexpected condescension, unexpected condescension.  And what I mean by that is Jesus takes the initiative and comes into her world.

Verse 7, “There came a woman of Samaria to draw water.”  Now I have to stop there for a minute.  Drawing water was women’s work.  Men worked in the field and did the hard work; women drew the water. That’s supported by all kinds of historical data.  They did it every day.  They did it every day because they needed water every day.  Water was scarce in that part of the world, as you know.  Wells were visited every day. That was a common meeting place; it was a common meeting place for the women who came to draw water.

What is fascinating is that they came at dusk, typically. They came when the day had cooled down in the evening.  Why is she coming at noon?  Why is she there at twelve?  Well, we can’t be certain about it, but it would be a reasonable thing to assume that this woman was a woman in town who had a very bad reputation—five husbands and living in adultery.  And oh, by the way, the Samaritan religion was based upon an understanding of the Pentateuch which contains the Ten Commandments and a whole lot of other things that have to do with marriage and divorce and adultery, the five books of Moses.  This is a scarlet woman, to borrow a little from Nathaniel Hawthorne.  She would normally come at dusk if she was like other women, but if she was a woman of shame, maybe she came at noon because she knows nobody else is going to be there. And maybe she’s avoiding the confrontation and the stigma that she bears.  And why this well?  Because there’s some information historically that there were wells closer to Sychar. Why go this far?  Why pass other wells?  And the answer might be the same, that she avoided the very convenient places in the normal time of day to avoid the scorn of other women that she would have to face.  She is not a respectable person.

Consequently by all expectations, she is not a woman worthy of attention from the Son of God.  She is not a woman who is elevated. This is condescension.  And how does He begin?  He takes the initiative.  He says to her, “Give Me a drink.  Give Me a drink.”  J.C. Ryle says, “This is a gracious act of spiritual aggression on the sinner, a gracious act of spiritual aggression on the sinner.”  We don’t think about aggression in terms of evangelism, but we should, we should.  It’s a shocking thing, really, very shocking.  Not so much in our culture, obviously, but in that culture it’s a shocking thing for Him to do because men don’t speak with women in public. That’s a breach of religious etiquette.  And especially rabbis don’t speak to women in public.  In fact, I remember reading years ago, a group of Pharisees and rabbis who were called the bruised and bleeding Pharisees and the reason they were bruised and bleeding was because every time they saw a woman they closed their eyes and they kept running into buildings.  Jewish men didn’t talk to women.  Do you know that Jewish rabbis were not supposed to talk to the women of their own family in public.

So here Jesus, a rabbi, a Jewish man, not only talks to a woman, but He talks to a woman who is an outcast, despised woman, who is a half-breed pagan and worse than that, she is by every measure a well-known adulteress who probably has been an adulteress for a long, long time, hence so many divorces.  ’Cause if you look into the Law of Moses in the Old Testament, you will find that Moses did grant a divorce, but a divorce, as we know—because Jesus reiterated it—for immorality.  This is an immoral woman.  It’s a shocking breach of everything Jewish for Him to say to this woman, “Give Me a drink.”  And somebody might say, “Well, why doesn’t He have the disciples get Him a drink?”  Well, can’t because verse 8 says they had gone away into the city to buy food; so He’s there alone.  Why is He there alone?  Well, because they needed food.  How many disciples does it take to get food?  All of them?  No, but dismissing them was beneficial to the conversation, let’s put it that way.  He wanted to be alone with the woman.

Without them there to get Him a drink, and without any instrument to get a drink, He says to the woman, “Give Me a drink.”  It’s just absolutely shocking.  And by the way, just a footnote, Jesus never did a miracle to quench His own thirst, satisfy His own hunger, or provide anything for Himself, never.  There’s no record in all four gospels that Jesus ever did any miracle to feed Himself, provide for Himself, and thus He honored work, and He honored effort, and He honored care, and He honored sacrifice, and He honored giving and all the things that we do in life to sustain ourselves.  This was also part of His commitment to humanity.  We get what we need through either our own work, and our own effort, or somebody else’s work and somebody else’s effort.  He didn’t do those kinds of miracles that would supply His own wants.

The woman then responds in verse 9.  “Therefore the Samaritan woman said to Him, ‘How is it that You being a Jew ask me for a drink since I am a Samaritan woman?’”  And then John adds, parenthetically, “For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.”  And by the way, just to take that out of English and put it in Greek, “For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.”  Literally the verb there is, “They don’t use the same utensils.”  Literally, “Use not anything together with Samaritans.”  They don’t use the same things.  They don’t drink out of the same cup.  Very specific.  She’s saying, “I know Your culture, I know what You think about us.”  And by the way, Jesus has shattered that because that was non-biblical tradition.  That kind of hatred toward the Samaritans that came from the Jews was wrong, it was illegitimate.

Again, that should have been the mission field, but now we’ve got a nation of Jonahs, don’t we?  We’ve got a nation of Jonahs who don’t want to take the message to anybody else any more than Jonah did.  There are the Samaritans and instead of telling them the truth, instead of trying to draw them to the true knowledge of the true God through the true Scriptures, they treat them with scorn and disdain.  And so, the woman knows that and she knows that they don’t share anything.  And she says, “How is it that You being a Jew?” How did she know He was a Jew?  Probably from His clothing; probably from His clothing.  Jews had distinctive clothing and they had tassels, you know, on the edges of their garments, according to Numbers 15.  And certainly a rabbi most likely would have those. There was nothing in His appearance that made Him look like some, you know, medieval painting of Jesus with a halo over His head.  He was just a man like any other man who was a Jew. Again His humanity is on display.  He has violated all expectations by talking to her. And listen to this, listen to how indifferent Jesus was toward all the non-biblical traditions.  He sent the disciples into a Samaritan town to buy...What?...food. They were going to eat Samaritan food bought out of the hands of Samaritans.  Jesus didn’t care at all for tradition, only revealed truth. And when they created these kinds of traditions, and therefore shut the Samaritans off, they were in violation of God’s will and God’s heart.  God had to send His Messiah to do what the people would never do, what the religious leaders would never do. The religious leaders of Israel weren’t even interested in converting their own people, let alone Samaritans.

John adds, “The Jews have no dealings with the Samaritans.”  They don’t use the same utensils.  In fact, the Jews in John 8:48 said, “Do we not say rightly that You are a Samaritan and have a demon?”  That’s what they said to Jesus.  You’re nothing; that was one of their epithets.  “You’re a demon-possessed Samaritan.”  Terrible scorn for the Samaritans.

Now again, you go back to 720, 722 B.C., Assyria captures the northern kingdom. Transports everybody out.  You can read the story yourself in 2 Kings 17.  Takes everybody into captivity, leaves a few people there, a few of the Jews from the ten tribes, and into the district come Babylonians, people from Cuthah, Avva, Hamath, Sepharvaim. They’re even listed in that chapter of 2 Kings.  They come in, they intermingle, they bring their gods, they get married, they lose their racial purity. This is a gross time in the eyes of the Jews.  They concoct some bizarre form of their own religion, they build a temple on Mount Gerizim and they carry on their own kind of worship.  We’ll see more about that later.

The bitterness is profound after the Jews in the southern kingdom, Judah came back from captivity. Remember they came back from their captivity.  After they came back and rebuilt, you remember, it was Samaritans who tried to help them. Do you remember at the story of Nehemiah? The Samaritans wanted to help them and they refused to let them help. And so the Samaritans then tried to stop what they were doing and the bitterness got deeper and deeper and it lasted, and it lasted, and it lasted.

A renegade Jew, actually, it was a renegade Jew named Manasseh, who married a daughter of the Samaritan Sanballat. You remember he was the enemy of Nehemiah.  This renegade Jew named Manasseh, who married the daughter of Sanballat, he’s the one that went up into Samaria and built the temple to sort of be their temple because they couldn’t be a part of the new temple being built in Jerusalem.  So this rivalry had gone on.  Here we are four or five hundred years later and the attitudes are bitter and deep.

And so, Jesus starts the conversation with an utterly indifferent, immoral woman. That’s the first point again, unexpected condescension.  That’s where this begins.  Second point: unsolicited mercy, unsolicited mercy is offered.  Verse 10, “Jesus answered and said to her,” and He doesn’t say anything about this conflict between Jews and Samaritans. He ignores that.  “But He answered and said to her, ‘If you knew the gift of God and who it is who says to you, “Give Me a drink,” you would have asked Him and He would have given you living water.’”

This is unsolicited mercy, using physical thirst and water as the contact point, He reverses the situation.  He starts out thirsty, asks her to give Him a drink. Turns the table.  Identifies her as the thirsty one and He the source of water.  She doesn’t know where He’s going with this.  But here is mercy. It is pure mercy because He says, “If you knew the gift of God,” the *dorean*, the free gift of God. And this is where evangelism starts.  You inaugurate the conversation, you find your way in at a common point of interest, and then comes the reality that you are offering the sinner without regard to morality, okay?  It is mercy with no regard for morality.  It is mercy with no regard for religion.  It is just mercy.  It is just grace.

It is the gift of God. This is the unique glory of the gospel.  In opposition to all religion, all religion says, “Do this, do this, do this, do this, and God will give you this.”  The gospel says, “In whatever state you’re in religiously, and whatever state you’re in morally, here’s a gift.”  It is the gift of God.  It is a gift of grace.  It is a gift of mercy.  *Dorean*, the word here, is “free gift.”  Paul loves that word.  Paul uses that word in Romans.  He uses it in chapter 5, the free gift, the free gift.  And that’s where our Lord starts with this unsolicited mercy being offered.

“If you knew the free gift, and if you knew who it is that said to you, ‘Give Me a drink,’ you would have”...What?...“you would have”...What?...“asked Him.”  What did we say when we were going through regeneration in John 3?  Regeneration is a work of God. You can’t participate in your own birth. All you can do is ask. All you can do is ask.  There’s a gift from God. I’m here to give it if you only ask, and if you would ask Him—speaking in the third person concerning Himself—He would have given you living water. And with that statement about living water, He takes the conversation in a strongly spiritual direction, a strongly spiritual direction.

We’re not exactly talking about the water that we started talking about, living water?  She might have assumed living water was what was in the well.  Why?  Because that well was spring-fed, a hundred feet deep, spring-fed, constant water from Jacob until then.  But if you only knew what God is offering you of living water, you would have asked.  And if you knew that I was the only one who could give it, and here I stood, you would have asked Me, and I would have given it to you.

What is the gift of God?  What is the living water?  Well, it’s salvation, clearly.  Everything that’s in salvation—mercy, grace, pardon, forgiveness, justification, flowing and flowing and flowing and flowing and flowing—and endlessly flowing, flowing, flowing.

Now I make an obvious point here and it’s this.  When sinners come before the judgment of God, the Great White Throne—and they’re all brought to that judgment in the end—when they’re all brought before the tribunal of God, based on what our Lord says here and elsewhere, they will be sent to hell not because of all the lists of sins. But they will be sent to hell because they failed to ask for the gift.  James says, “You have not because you ask not.”  Jesus says, “You will not come to Me that you might have life.”  Jesus says, “Because you don’t believe in Me, you’ll die in your sins and where I go you’ll never come.”  This is a gift.  This is a gift.  If you knew the gift, if you could grasp the gift, and who it is who is standing before you, you would have asked and I would have given it to you.  This is mercy. This is the uniqueness of the Christian gospel.  It is the free gift to the one who asks.  “Whoever calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved.”  “Whoever” (Romans 10).

Why is it described as living water?  Because they’re at a well. That’s a great analogy, right?  But it also has some Old Testament foundations.  Jeremiah 2:13 talks about disobedient Israel being guilty of foolishly forsaking God, the fountain of living waters, to hue for themselves cisterns, broken cisterns that can hold no water.  I mean, they lived in a world where water was life, crucial, essential.  Jeremiah 17:13, Jeremiah warned that all who forsake the Lord will be put to shame.  Those who turn away on earth will be written down because they have forsaken the foundation of living water, even the Lord.  Psalm 36:9, “God is the fountain of life.”  Isaiah 12:3, “The redeemed in Him will joyously draw water from the springs of salvation.”  Isaiah 55:1, “Ho! Every one that thirsts, come and drink water.”  Water is life.  You draw your life from God.

God wants to give you the gift of life. This is running water, flowing water.  In John 6 and verse 35, Jesus said, “I am the bread of life, he who comes to Me will not hunger.  He who believes in Me will never thirst.”  And then in John 7:37, “On the last day, the day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried out saying, ‘If anyone is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink.  He who believes in Me, as the Scripture said’”...and this is from Isaiah...“‘From his innermost being will flow rivers of living water.’”  And that’s what Jesus says here.  You would have asked and He would have given you living water.  In fact, in verse 14 He says, “It will become in you a well of water springing up to eternal life.”  It’s a water that once you receive, you’ll never thirst.  There’s the perseverance of the saints.  There’s the security of the believer.  Once you receive this water, once this water is placed in you, it flows forever and flows forever, and flows forever.  It is a well of water, springing up eternally.

This is the gospel.  Again, mercy without regard to morality, mercy without regard to religion.  You just ask. It’s the gift; it’s the gift.

Well she’s trying to figure out what He’s talking about.  Verse 11, “She said to Him, ‘Sir, You have nothing to draw with and the well is deep.  Where then do you get that living water?’”  This is sarcasm. This is a kind of scorn, kind of mockery. This woman is very used to defending herself.  “You’re not greater than our father Jacob, are you?  Who gave us the well and drank of it himself and his sons and his cattle?”  Who do you think you are?  You’ve got something better than this?  How are you going to give me water when you don’t have a bucket?  How you going to drop the rope a hundred yards, or a hundred feet rather, pull up the water?  Do you have some other well?  Are you greater than Jacob?  Genesis 33:18 and 19, “Dug the well.”  This is skepticism, mockery.  Again, mercy responds kindly, patiently.  Verse 13, “Jesus answered and said to her, ‘Everyone who drinks of this water will thirst again.  But whoever drinks of the water that I will give him shall never thirst, but the water that I will give him will become in him a well of water springing up to eternal life.” There’s the eternality of salvation.  Wow.

That leads us to a very brief third principle in evangelism.  First you have an unexpected condescension, and then you have an unsolicited mercy offered.  And then you have unparalleled blessings promised, unparalleled blessings promised.  In verse 14, our Lord promises an endless supply of satisfying water forever and really gets specific—we’re talking about eternal life. This is the fountain of youth.  This is the fountain of eternal life.  Now His point is unmistakable, unmistakable.  This is permanent, consistent, full, satisfying, everlasting mercy and blessing from God to the sinner who asks.  The analogy has now moved to its point.  The doctrine is the doctrine of eternal life. He’s offering her eternal life which is a spiritual reality—the gift of mercy, the gift of grace for all who ask.  What is it?  It’s living water.  It’s satisfaction forever, soul satisfaction forever.

She responds in verse 15, “Sir, give me this water so I will not be thirsty or come all the way here to draw.”  She still doesn’t get it.  Give me this water.  And all I can see in her is incredulity, who is this man and what is He talking about?  What is she talking about?  Does she get some of it?  Maybe.  Is she starting to think in terms of spiritual things and eternal things?  Maybe.  Or is this just more mockery?  Or is it mingled?  I don’t know at what point she is, as the Spirit of God works on her heart through the words of the Savior.  I don’t know.

But it all comes clear in the next section, next week.  All right?  Let’s pray.

We’ve been greatly blessed, Lord, with the experience of our Lord with this woman and so much more to come. We see His seeking heart. We see His condescending grace and mercy. We see His easy promise of blessing and salvation to the unworthy sinner who simply asks, who simply asks.  “We have not because we ask not.  If we ask, You hear and You give life to the one who asks.”  But it’s not just that simple, for there is the matter of sin and how we face that as we will see next time.  Help us to learn from this and to be better able and more faithful to proclaim this glorious message as You give us opportunity.

Father, now we look to You to take what we’ve learned today and give us opportunity to use it, to be seekers of the lost, as the Savior is, and to bring to them that unexpected condescension, that unsolicited mercy, and those unparalled blessings of the gospel. Thank You for giving us the time together today to worship You and to fellowship with each other, and may we be enriched to Your praise and glory, we pray in the Savior’s name.  Amen.

**Messiah: The Living Water, Part 2**

**John 4:16-26**

Code: 43-21

I always feel like I need to give a bit of an explanation to those that are visitors with us. We do what we would call sequential Bible exposition, which means we just keep moving through books of the Bible. And we find ourselves now in the gospel of John. So you might to take a Bible. If you have your own, that’s great. I know most of you do. But there are some in the pews for you if you don’t. Find the book of John, look at chapter 4, and we are looking in some depth at an account that John the apostle gives us of Jesus meeting with a Samaritan woman by a well. A very, very familiar and famous biblical story.

It’s a rather prolonged story as narratives in the Scripture go, chapter 4, verse 1, running all the way down to verse 42. So we have to take it in segments. And we have to do that even though I’m not adding anything to it. You know, I resist sort of adding anything that isn’t obviously there, or nearly obviously there. But even with just a basic consideration of this text, we’re going to have to divide it into probably four messages before we get through the whole passage, so this is number two. There is so much instruction here.

Now keep in mind that the gospel of John has one purpose and that purpose is articulated at the end of the gospel in chapter 20 and verse 31. “These have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God and that believing you might have life in His name.” This is, first of all, a polemical book, and that is to say it presents evidences that Jesus is the Son of God. Then it is an evangelistic book in that it calls for you to believe that and by believing that have eternal life in His name. That is John’s purpose. And no matter where you are in the gospel of John, what chapter, what account, you’re going to find the focus is going to be on the majesty and the glory and the deity of the Lord Jesus Christ. And that is true here. His deity shines forth in the account of the woman at the well when He tells her...her entire history, her immoral history. This is a woman He has never met, nor has He met anybody in her family, nor does He know anybody in her past. And yet He knows her history. This is a revelation of His deity.

But, He is the Word, the eternal Word made flesh, so you see here also a revelation of His humanity, as we see in verse 6, when He sits down by the well because He’s completely spent. The Greek word there is “He is totally exhausted.” He is at the point of total exhaustion. As man, He was exhausted. As God, He was omniscient and that majesty of the combination of deity and humanity in Christ is the theme that we’re going to see as we go through this incredible account of His life written by John.

Now at the heart of this discussion is verse 21 to 24, that little unit of truth is the subject of worship, worship. And this becomes the theme here in this account. Now I want to maybe talk to you about the word “worship” in a way you haven’t thought about it before. Worship is synonymous with salvation. There are only two kinds of people in the world. There are people who worship God acceptably and people who don’t. Those are the only two kinds there are. There are saved people and lost people, or as my grandfather used to say, there are the saints and the ain’ts, and that’s it.

When we talk about worship then, we’re talking about the essence of what it means to be saved, to confess Jesus as Lord, to submit to God and His revelation of Christ, to obey God who said, “This is My beloved Son, listen to Him.” Salvation is an act of obedient worship. It is bowing the knee to God, the triune God, as we’ve been singing this morning. So one could say the purest definition of worship is salvation. One, in fact, cannot worship unless one is truly saved, because you cannot bow the knee to God in any way until you have bowed the knee to God in the command to obey the gospel of His Son. So worship is about salvation. This then, while the discussion is on the theme of worship because that’s how the woman introduces it, is really a profound insight into the nature of true salvation being worship.

And so again I say, there are only two kinds of people in the world: the people who worship God acceptably, and the people who do not. The people who worship God acceptably are believers—Christians--possessing eternal life on their way to heaven where they will worship Him acceptably and perfectly forever and ever. The people who do not worship Him now will be crystalized into permanency in hell in a condition where they will be unable to worship Him forever. Those are the only two possibilities. So this is a very, very decisive section of holy Scripture.

I don’t need to tell you how important worship is. I really don’t need to tell you that it starts with confessing Jesus as Lord. That’s where worship begins, you know that. But I do want you to understand something else from this passage, if I may press that home, and that is how Jesus led this woman to be a worshiper. How Jesus led this woman to salvation. In fact, her salvation is so manifestly evident that immediately she is the human witness that brings people in her village to salvation. The transformation of her life is so evident that she becomes the means, the human instrument the Lord uses to bring others to the knowledge of Himself.

As we look at this, yes we want to see the glory of Christ. But we also want to see how He evangelized this woman. What are the components and what is the sequence as He comes to this very, very indifferent, outcast, immoral woman who has no thought about Him, doesn’t know anything about Him, doesn’t care anything about Him, doesn’t know who He is, has never heard Him teach, has never seen a miracle, or heard about a miracle? She is completely indifferent. She is not like Nicodemus. Nicodemus was not religiously, spiritually indifferent. He was a teacher, *the*teacher in Israel, Old Testament scholar, knew he didn’t have eternal life, knew he wasn’t in the kingdom, knew he wasn’t right with God because all Pharisaic hypocrites know they’re hypocrites. And in the darkness of night, he comes to Jesus with his heart crying out for the truth. This is not this woman. This woman has no spiritual interest at the beginning.

Now what’s important about that is this. As you live your Christian life in the world, it may be that somebody will walk up to you and say, “Hey, by the way, could you tell me how to become a Christian?” But I doubt that you could remember too many times when that has happened. Most of the time you have to take the initiative. And that’s exactly what Jesus does here. You’re in the world, you’re going to be looking into the faces of the people who are at the moment disinterested in what you want them to become completely interested in, and so you will follow a pattern that our Lord establishes here and you will see how effective it can be by His grace.

So let’s go back into the story. Jesus is heading north. He is leaving Judea. He has been baptizing there and preaching, His ministries overlapping with John the Baptist. Jesus is ready to leave because it’s getting too hot down there. The leaders of Israel are hatching plots. They’re planning already to eliminate Him. He doesn’t want to be pushed into a situation that’s premature. He knows the timing of God is perfect. He knows when His hour is supposed to come. So He vacates Judea where He has been preaching the kingdom, preaching repentance, baptizing people in the same way that John did to prepare them for the coming of the kingdom.

So He leaves. He heads north by necessity. He goes through Samaria--one could say geographical necessity--the coastal route was longer, the across the Jordan and up Perea route was longer. The shortest route was through Samaria, a lot of Jews wouldn’t go that way because they wouldn’t walk on cursed ground and associate with cursed people, which they viewed the Samaritans as being, because they had literally abandoned their Judaism and intermarried with the idol worshipers after the northern kingdom had been taken into captivity...722.

So they were hated and despised. We know all that by the Jews for being half breeds who abandoned their Judaism and intermarried with idolaters. So many Jews wouldn’t go through Samaria. Those kinds of things didn’t bother Jesus. He wasn’t a racist. He didn’t have any ethnic animosity. He saw them as a mission field and He knew He had an appointment with a woman by a well. So necessity from a geographic standpoint may have been the case. But necessity from a divine standpoint was absolutely the case. And so as He heads there--twenty miles or so walking that morning and a challenging walk to be sure. Not a flat walk, but a very rigorous one. He finally reaches this location where Jacob’s well is by the town of Sychar. The well is about a mile and a half, a mile or a half a mile away.

He sits down, verse 6, He’s weary and a woman of Samaria comes. I told you last time, women went to get water. They usually went at dusk. This happens to be noon. Why is she coming at noon? Why doesn’t she go when all the other women go, at dusk? The answer may be that everybody in town knew her and they knew the kind of woman she was, and she didn’t want to get in the situation which she tried to avoid most of the time, and that is the scorn that would heaped upon her as an immoral woman who had had multiple husbands and was currently living in adultery. So maybe she came to avoid that.

There are also some scholars who think there were wells closer to Sychar, and she went to this one which was further away, which would again be another reason she went here to avoid the near local encounter with folks. Whatever may have been her motivations, God had her right where she was supposed to be.

Jesus is sitting there and He is completely exhausted. The word “wearied” means that. And He says to her, “Give Me a drink.” And if you were wondering why He didn’t ask one of His disciples who were traveling with Him to give Him a drink, He explains in verse 8, “His disciples had gone away into the city to buy food.” It didn’t bother them to be in a Samaritan area, didn’t bother them to interact with Samaritans. It didn’t bother them to eat Samaritan food. This is not a biblical prescription that God had ordained. In fact, this was the mission field, not the enemy. And while they were gone, perfect setting, in the isolation of just the two of them together, Jesus says to the woman, “Give Me a drink,” “give Me a drink.”

And with that, we come to the first point. In understanding how our Lord evangelizes an indifferent and ignorant outcast begins with unexpected condescension, unexpected condescension; making a connection, making a connection. It’s a beautiful connection to make because He obligates Himself to her. He puts Himself in a position to have her do something for Him which then obligates Him to him (her). It’s really a beautiful gesture.

It’s shocking though, on the other hand, and the shock of it is that she is a Samaritan woman. It lets us know that for sure. He’s passing through Samaria, verse 4; He’s coming to a city of Samaria, verse 5; He’s talking to a woman of Samaria, verse 6. She is again referred to as a Samaritan woman in verse 9. We can’t escape the fact that she’s a Samaritan. This is important because, as John tells us in the little parenthetical statement at the end of verse 9, Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.

So when He speaks to this Samaritan woman, it is a shocking condescension. It is an unexpected condescension. And she responds to it by acknowledging that. She says to Him in verse 9, “How is it that You being a Jew asks me for a drink since I am a Samaritan woman?” Our Lord, as I said, paid absolutely no attention to the traditions, to the hostilities of a nation of Jonahs who had their references. He saw this as a mission opportunity, regardless of who she was. And after all, He was the Savior of the world.

So it starts out, as we saw last time, with unexpected condescension. And then it moves to unsolicited mercy offered. And the reason I referred to it that way is because she’s not asking for anything. But He’s going to offer her something. This is just a magnificent insight. “Jesus answered and said to her,” in verse 10, “‘If you knew the gift of God and who it is who says to you give me a drink, you would have asked Him and He would have given you living water.’” She’s not asking for anything. She’s not making a request. He made the request. He initiated it--is what we have to do most of the time in evangelism. And then He takes her to this offer from God. “If you knew the gift of God,” and He acknowledges that she can’t know, she can’t understand. And this is very abrupt and out of nowhere. “But if you knew the gift of God and who it is who says to you give Me a drink,” that is the one who can dispense that very gift, you would have asked Him. meaning Himself, and He would have given you living water.

I just want to remind you of one word here and that’s the word “asked.” Connect that with the word “gift,” right? This is what sets the gospel of Christianity apart from every other religion in the world. Every other religion in the world says do this and God will accept you. Do that and God will accept you. Do this morally. Do this ceremonially. Do this ritually. Do this, do this. Better yourself and God will accept you. Christianity says ask, ask. That’s all the sinner can do. All the sinner can do is ask. All the sinner can do, like Luke 18, the publican, is fall on his face and say, “God, be merciful to me a sinner.” All he can do is ask. Cry out for the living water.

So He says to her, “You have no idea of what I’m offering you, but it is a gift from God that constitutes living water.” That means water that gives life, and water was the life-giving thing, wasn’t it? Of course in that part of the world in ancient days, the need for water was profound and constant. And He’s saying, “I’m able to give it to you, all you have to do is ask.” She has no idea what He’s talking about.

At first this sounds a little...well, it sounds a lot odd. What in the world is this guy talking about? Who is He? She knows He’s a Jew, probably because of the tassels on His robe. And she’s struck by the fact that He doesn’t understand the Jewish/Samaritan protocol; they’re not supposed to be communicating. And here He is making her strange offers about gifts from God and living water and telling her that He’s the source of that. And she thinks this is absurd. And so she reacts in what is sarcastic, I think, in verses 11 and 12. “She said to Him, ‘Sir, You have nothing to draw with and the well is deep.’” Best estimate is about a hundred feet. Where then do you get that living water? I think she thinks He’s maybe a little delusional, and maybe heat stroke. Who is this man, and what in the world is He talking about?

And then her scorn is elevated in verse 12 when she says, “You’re not greater than our father Jacob, are You, who gave us the well and drank of it himself and his sons and his cattle?” You can go back to Genesis when he dug those wells and remember that account. “Who do You think You are? What are You talking about, offering living water as a gift from God? You don’t even have anything to draw water with. And where do You get this water? Are You superior to Jacob who gave us this well that has been here since then?”

Yeah, I think there’s a note of confusion there, but I think it’s more mockery. And Jesus responds to her scorn with mercy, with patience and goes from what I call an unsolicited mercy to an unparalled blessing. Look at verse 13. “Jesus answered and said to her, ‘Everyone who drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him shall never thirst, but the water that I will give him will become in him a well of water springing up to eternal life.’”

Now it’s just getting really outrageous. He’s going to give me water that gives life, but He’s going to give me water that gives eternal life? Eternal life?

But, you know, this is exactly what the evangelist must do, find a point of contact. Move from the point of contact to the gift of God which is eternal life, the gift of God which is living water, bubbling up as we saw last week, everlastingly. This is what we...this is where we start our evangelism with the offer of the mercies of God and the unparalleled blessing of God that is promised to sinners.

But she really has a high degree of incredulity at this point. The whole thing doesn’t make sense. But she goes along with it in verse 15. “And the woman said to Him, ‘Sir, give me this water so I will not be thirsty nor come all the way here to draw.’” I think that’s sarcastic. I think she’s playing the game with Him. “Okay, give me the water. There’s only one well here; You can’t even get into that well. But go ahead, give me the water that will cause me never to thirst again and never have to come back here.” She plays the role for the moment.

And she likely turned at that point to take her water and go back to the village, wondering about this somewhat delusional stranger making such strange claims. And then in verse 16 we come to the next element in this encounter. “He said to her, ‘Go call your husband and come here.’” That’s a bold command and that’s a very strong command. And Jesus always spoke with a great amount of authority, perhaps authority the likes of which no one has ever possessed but Him. This is a command. Go call your husband and come here--which means that she was probably on the way. And He commands her to go call her husband and bring him back. “To which she responds correctly, ‘I have no husband.’” That brings us to the fourth component in His personal evangelism. First there was that condescension to talk to her about something that God had for her that was wonderful, living water, to extend that to the fact that it was eternal life, unparalleled promise. But there’s something else that has to be talked about. And so the fourth point is an unhesitating conviction…an unhesitating conviction sought. “Yes,” unexpected condescension offered, unsolicited mercy granted, unparalleled promise given, but--stop right there. If you had a person at that point pray a prayer, you might well have a false convert, because there’s something that hasn’t been dealt with and that’s sin. If you evangelize purely on the basis of all the gifts of God, everybody signs up, everybody signs up.

So you come to this necessary conviction, and this will change her entire perception of Jesus and confront her sin in a very direct way. And I would say at this point what you all know, it is critically essential and necessary to bring the sinner to face the guilt of sin and feel the weight of divine judgment, to be measured against the holy Law of God, to be told of the consequence of that sin because faith must be accompanied by...What?...repentance. She’s an adulterous woman and she knew the Old Testament law of adultery.

Samaritans accepted the Pentateuch. Most historians think they accepted only the Pentateuch, but that’s enough. Exodus 20, “Thou shalt not commit adultery,” and there’s plenty in the Pentateuch about the penalty for adultery was death, death. It’s wonderful to present to the sinner all the glories of the gospel, all the blessings, the gift of God, the living water, the eternal life. But it’s not enough to stop there, not enough to present the positive truth of soul-satisfying blessing from God. If all you do is that and then ask for a response, you’re going to get a false conversion, and then you’re going to get somebody who is deceived about their true condition.

Well, like all sinners, she doesn’t want to tell the whole truth, so she says, “I have no husband.” Well, that was right and Jesus acknowledged that. He said at the end of verse 18, “You have truly said.” I mean, it’s not the whole truth but she didn’t have a husband. When she said that, there was a mega shift in the conversation. No more talk of blessing, no more talk of mercies, no more talk of satisfaction, everything changes now. She will not be able to take a drop of living water. This initially indifferent, ignorant, careless sinner must be brought to conviction and repentance over her wretched condition. Since she’s unwilling to tell the whole truth, Jesus tells it for her.

Back to verse 17. “Jesus said to her, ‘You have correctly said,’” and He says it again at the end of verse 18, “You have said truly.” I mean, it’s a nice gesture. He’s affirming what little honesty there is in her. “You have correctly said I have no husband, however, you just left something out, you’ve had five husbands and the one whom you now have is not your husband.”

We know divorce was very common among the Jews in Israel. It was also equally common, maybe more so, among the Samaritans. And so we can assume that this woman lived this kind of life where she was an adulteress on repeated occasions and consequently led to repeated divorces and now she’s following the same pattern, living with a man who is not her husband. She’s an adulteress living in an immoral relationship.

And by the way, I just want to make a footnote here because this comes up in conversations. Jesus says, “The one you now have is not your husband.” She had a man in her life living with her but he was not her husband. So I need to remind you that living together doesn’t make a marriage? Living together doesn’t make a marriage. Living together is idolatry--adultery without marriage. Marriage is...marriage is always restricted to a covenant, a binding, formal, social, official, public covenant.

Well, this changes everything because our Lord has just told her her history and they’ve never met. Back in chapter 2, verses 22 to 25, you remember John said nobody needed to tell Him what was in the heart of man because He knew what was in the heart of man? His omniscience to the thoughts of people. Well, it also goes to their history. He knows everything there is to know, and He knows her history, the history of her iniquity. Her sinful life has been exposed, she can’t hide, there’s nowhere to go. And her response is an amazing and wonderful response. It’s in verse 19, “The woman said to Him, ‘Sir, I perceive that You are a prophet.’” Now He’s no longer a delusional stranger; He’s a prophet.

When the word “perceive” is used in the original language, it’s *theoreo,* which means “to come to the knowledge of.” It’s used in John chapter 6 of beholding the Son in a knowing way. She came to know and believe that He is at least a prophet, because He can’t know this unless God is telling Him. He knew her sin. “You are a prophet.”

Now that she knows He’s a prophet, she feels the conviction. That’s very evident. And she wants more. “You’re a prophet; You speak for God”--and she wants more. So she poses a question. Verse 20, “Our fathers worship in this mountain and You people say that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship,” and you fill in the rest. Where do I go to worship? That’s the question, “Where do I go to worship?” Her soul is bowing slowly. Her soul is bowing slowly and she knows that being right with God is a matter of worship. She doesn’t know where.

In evangelism, there is condescension, there is the offer of mercy, an unparalleled blessing and eternal life. There is the necessary confrontation and conviction of sin to bring the sinner to repentance. And this must be addressed, unacceptable worship must be abandoned, unacceptable worship must be abandoned.

And what He says to the woman in this passage is that the way you viewed worship must be abandoned. Let me give you the whole picture. She’s saying, “Where do I go? Do I go to Mount Gerizim where the Samaritans have their temple? Do I go to Jerusalem where the Jews have their temple? Where do I go?” And Jesus says, “Woman, believe Me, an hour is coming when neither in this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know for salvation is from the Jews. But an hour is coming and now is when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers. God is spirit and those who worship must worship in spirit and truth.” There is that monumental text, the most definitive text in the gospels on the matter of worship and it starts with a denunciation of the external forms of worship--unacceptable worship must be abandoned. She needs to know that.

Now Samaritan worship on Mount Gerizim was a corrupted form of Judaism. It had been established by an apostate Jewish priest who married the daughter of Sanballat who was the enemy of Nehemiah in the rebuilding of Jerusalem after the Babylonian captivity. It was a false religion. It had...it had Jewish elements to it, including the Pentateuch, and then it was all mixed up with the pagans who came in after the 722 captivity and intermarried with the remaining Jews in the northern kingdom.

So she goes back to her religion, back to her forefathers. “Our fathers worship in this mountain.” But the compelling thing I want you to see is she knew she needed to bow before God. She knew she needed to go to God and bow her knee and acknowledge Him and she didn’t know where to go. All she knew was external religion, because that’s all sinners ever know. That’s all they ever know. She is stunned by Jesus’ knowledge of her iniquitous pattern of life. Her conscience is pained. Her soul is pierced. She is unmasked as an adulterous covenant breaker. She is a stranger to righteousness. The weight of guilt which she spent a lot of her time trying to avoid has now come down in full force on her head. The reality breaks on her once indifferent mind that she needs to be right with God. And maybe that’s the path to living water and eternal life. She had to go to God.

Where does she go? She wants to repent, but where does she go? She wants to make her life right, but where does she go? Does she go to Samaritans’ temple on Mount Gerizim and offer a sacrifice, have a priest offer a sacrifice? Does she go to Jerusalem and have a priest there offer a sacrifice? What does she do? How does she find peace? How does she get forgiveness? Sinners naturally see religion as external. Where do I go? What church do I go? What place? What ritual? What ceremony? Because that’s all they know because their hearts have never been changed. They don’t know the internal life of God.

So she looks through her past leaders on this mountain Gerizim--temple that had been built long ago was still standing there and services were conducted there. “Is that where I go? Or maybe I should go to Jerusalem,” she says, “because that’s the place where You say--You Jews--say men ought to worship.

But I love her question. “I need to worship. I need to bow before God.” But in so doing she needed also to abandon her misconceptions about religion, and that’s what Jesus addresses in verse 21 and following. And He says it simply, “Woman, believe Me.” And there’s the thing you want to underline: “Believe Me.” That’s the key, “Believe Me.” You must believe what I tell you.

“An hour is coming”--and He says it again in verse 23--“an hour is coming and now already is when neither in this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father.” Not long after this, a few decades, 70 A.D. comes. The Romans come at the end of the Jewish rebellion that started in 66 and the Romans come and they destroy Jerusalem and they crush the temple and don’t leave one stone upon another and there’s no more temple worship. And then the Roman powers go up into the area of Samaria. They arrive at Mount Gerizim and historical accounts tell us they took out their swords and they slaughtered thousands of Samaritans on Mount Gerizim and brought an end to that worship as well. Jesus is giving the prophecy of what’s coming and coming very fast, and it already now is in the sense that the New Covenant is almost in place. It’s not long until it be ratified in His death on the cross. Our Lord’s answer is a very crucial, crucial answer. Listen carefully to what I say.

True worship doesn’t demand a place. It’s not about a place, it’s not about a rite, it’s not about a ritual, it’s not about a ceremony of any kind. True worship is always about loving God, honoring God, obeying God, serving God from the heart, from the heart. So He says, “Not here, not in this mountain, not in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. You worship what you do not know.” This is a critique, a simple and brief critique of Samaritan religion, which was limited as I said to the Pentateuch, and then the mixed in pagan, idolatrous elements of religion from those with whom they intermarried.

“You don’t even know what to worship. At least we Jews worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews.” That is, the Scripture was given to the Jews, the Messiah comes through Israel, that’s all He means by that. It’s not for the Jews only, but it’s from the Jews. But He’s saying we have the right data, we have the Scriptures, the oracles of God (Romans 3, Paul says). We have the truth. We know the truth. That’s not a commendation of Jewish religion, by the way, because it was apostate and Jesus denounced it repeatedly.

But nonetheless God had deposited the truth with them, and through them would come Messiah. So we have that on you. You don’t even know what you’re doing. We at least have the revelation of God about worship. But in either case, whether in your ignorance or our apostasy, it doesn’t matter because the hour is coming and now is when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth because there won’t be a temple here or there, in neither place.

Do you understand what happened at the death of Jesus Christ when the veil, sorting out the holy place from the Holy of Holies, was torn and ripped, shredded from top to bottom? Do you understand that that was the symbol of the end of the entire Old Testament system of external, ceremonial, symbolic worship? Do you understand at that moment it was over and our Lord is affirming this, and what He’s saying is this, there are no more temples, there are no more places of worship where God is to be sought and found? There’s no more priesthood. There’s no more altars. There’s no more sacrifices. There’s no more vestments. There are no more incense, candles, all that goes with it. Whether it is the ill-informed worship of the Samaritans or the apostate worship of the Jews, it all disappears, it all passes away. No more mountains, no more temples, no more priests, no more sacrifices, no more altars, no more vestments, no more feasts, no more Sabbaths, none of it--all that is ripped apart, disappeared. And the punctuation point was made in 70 A.D. I mean, it had always been that God wanted heart worship, that’s why Amos said, “Stop your songs, your hearts aren’t right. I hate your feasts. I hate your Sabbaths. I hate what you’re doing.” Malachi said the same thing, “All you ever bring Me is lame animals.” Isaiah 1 said the same thing: your whole head is sick from top to bottom. It’s always been about the heart, but all those symbols that once pointed them in the direction of heart worship are gone, are gone.

Now every place is a sanctuary and every believer is a priest, right? You know, some people don’t get that. We still have a form in Christendom in the Roman Catholic system of Christianized Judaism where you have priests who wear distinctive clothes as they did in Judaism, who function on altars in a kind of temple sanctuary on earth, where you have ornate buildings where candles burn and incense is offered. One writer says, “These men robed in gorgeous vestments within a roped off sanctuary stand before a bloodless altar with a background of burning candles, crosses and smoking incense and conduct worship for the people who watch.” Tragic substitute for the spiritual worship our Lord calls for here.

Christ ushered in a new era of worship, doesn’t focus on externals or on symbols, but on what is internal and what is real and what is genuine. All you need to worship is the truth in the Scripture and a heart that loves God anywhere and everywhere. Such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers. He wants worshipers who worship in spirit and in truth. He is a spirit, verse 24. And those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.

By the way, we worship the Father, we worship the Father. Twice in verse 23 refer to meaning God, the true God, God Himself, but it’s not limited to Him. He is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. The very term “Father” ties Him into Christ as Son. He’s not a Father if He doesn’t have the Son. So we worship the God who is Father and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ, as so often is repeated in the New Testament. We worship the God who is also the Holy Spirit--God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit, the true God. And we start with truth, right? We start with the truth about God; God is the Trinity.

How important is that? Well, let me give you an illustration. I was reading this week in some material on Mormonism, and I pulled out things that Mormons believe about God. So let me tell you what I drew. These essentially are from their own writings. God the father was once a finite mortal on another planet. After his death and resurrection he progressed to become the god of this planet. God is an exalted man as we can become exalted men. God has a tangible body of flesh and bones. The father, the son, and the holy spirit are distinctly different beings who can only be in one place at a time.

God the father is under the jurisdiction of a higher god who also has multiple gods above him. God lives on his own planet near the star Kolob. There is a heavenly mother as well as a heavenly father. They are our heavenly parents. We humans were born as spirit beings to heavenly father and heavenly mother in a pre-mortal state and raised from infant spirits to adult spirits prior to our mortal birth on earth. Jesus and Lucifer are brothers. They, along with millions of other spirit children, were born to our heavenly father and our heavenly mother. Heavenly father as a resurrected physical being had sexual relationships with Mary, literally to procreate Jesus. Man has the ability to become a god and rule his own planet, produce spirit children as the heavenly father did. Sex is an eternal privilege for good Mormons who attain godhood in order for them to procreate their own spirit children to populate their own world, their own planet as god did. Polygamy will be the norm in the celestial kingdom.

Would you say that’s worshiping the Father? The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the One who is the Triune God--the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit. Terrifying deception; only an illustration, only an illustration of the many, many misrepresentations of the true God. The Father seeks true worshipers. That means they worship Him in truth. They worship Him according to who He really is as revealed in Scripture. And just to remind you, God is not a man. He’s not a mortal. He is spirit and those who worship Him worship Him in spirit and in truth, from the heart and according to the truth. Not in places, not by ceremonies or symbols, or shadows or forms or externals, and certainly not in lies and misrepresentations. We worship Him in the truth. The truth about Him is everything. I read you from the Psalm earlier, where it gives His attributes. All of Scripture is God’s self-disclosure. So according to the Word of God, we worship Him.

For many years people have suggested that worship is some activity other than preaching. And I’ve been asked with such long sermons how much time do your people have to worship? And my response has always been without long sermons they don’t know how to worship. Your worship is informed by your understanding of the revelation. Your worship only goes up as high as it goes down, because the deeper you go into the truth about God, the higher you go in worship. Superficial knowledge of God leads to superficial worship. And then people need to be manipulated.

Worship, by the way, is not music. Worship is loving God. Worship is honoring God. Worship is knowing God for who He is, adoring Him, obeying Him, proclaiming Him as a way of life. Music is one way we express that adoration.

So Jesus tells the woman--back to the story--that her worship doesn’t require a place, it doesn’t require a priest, it doesn’t require a ritual, it doesn’t require a ceremony, it doesn’t require an offering. Just believe me, God wants you to worship according to the truth from the heart, bow to the true God in your heart. Bow your heart. We would say, confess Jesus as Lord.

One final feature then, this is the wonderful, wonderful conclusion. The woman in verse 25 says, “I know Messiah’s coming.” She knew because the Messiah is mentioned in the Pentateuch: Genesis 3:15 refers to Him, but more particularly, perhaps, she was thinking Deuteronomy 18:15 to 18, the prophet that would come. And surely the Samaritans had hung on to much of the Messianic theology that was sort of deep into Judaism before the division of the kingdoms and the captivity. She knows about Messiah. She knows Messiah is God’s anointed One who will come to fill the earth with righteousness and truth. She says, “I know that Messiah is coming, He who is called Christ, and when that one comes He will declare all things to us.” I want to know, I want to know. She wants the full truth. She wants the full truth. She wants to worship from the heart in truth. And she says, “I’m not going to have the full truth until He arrives,” and then this is the most glorious moment. Jesus said to her, “I who speak to you AM.” There’s no “He” in the original; it’s an I AM statement, the name of God. “I who speak to you AM.” The One speaking to you is the I AM. This is the final point in the glorious culmination. The incarnate Christ is revealed--the unveiling of Christ. She is ready for the truth, and He is there to give it to her. I who speak to you, I AM.

Twenty-three times in the gospel of John we read “I AM.” Seven times He says “I AM” something: the Bread of Life, the Branch, the Way, the Truth, the Life--all references to His eternal Godhood. He reveals Himself to her.

This is how it works with the sinner. It starts when we condescend in love and compassion; when we offer the marvelous realities of mercy and blessing, the promises of eternal life, and then we move to confront the sin. And if the sinner will turn under the power of the Holy Spirit and repent of sin and reach out for the truth, it is at that point that Christ is disclosed to the sinner. He reveals Himself to her.

In response to her faith, in response to her repentance, this outcast, immoral, ignorant woman that our Lord sat down to talk with was completely disinterested and now she wants the truth about the life of God that is eternal, that her heart craves so desperately. She wants forgiveness for her wretched life. And in that moment when she believes and when she repents, He is revealed to her.

This is a divine work, isn’t it? She knew nothing about Him at all when it started. Now she wants to know everything about Him that’s available so she can be a true worshiper.

You say, “Well, how do you know she was really converted?” I think the conversation continued. By the way, it’s just not recorded. But how do I know she was converted? Go down to verse 39, “From that city many of the Samaritans believed in Him because of the word of the woman who testified.” There were many of the people who believed in Him because of her testimony. “He told me all the things that I had done.” He has to be from God. And as she believed, they believed. When the Samaritans came to Jesus they asked Him to stay with them and He stayed there two days--two days of seminary, two days of theology, two days of unveiling divine revelation so they could fully understand the gospel. As a result, many more believed because of His word. And they were saying to the woman, it’s no longer because of you that we believe, but we have heard for ourselves and know that this is the one who is the Savior of the world. The key word “world,” that salvation had come not just to Israel, but to outcasts.

You know, I don’t want to overdo this, or turn it into some kind of an analogy, but I would simply say this: when you’ve taken the steps, and obviously we can’t know people’s history like Jesus did, but when you’ve taken the steps to make the condescending conversation begin, initiated it, and when you’ve taken the steps to unfold, and unpack the beauties of the promise of the satisfying gifts that God gives to those who come to Him, and when you’ve confronted sin, and when you’ve warned the people that they have to turn from false worship to true worship, if you’ve done all of that, then you can leave it to God to unveil the truth concerning Himself. That’s the divine work. That’s what heaven has to do.

Like Lydia--Remember the lady Lydia?--the Lord opened her heart. The vision of Christ, seeing Christ is the divine work, the divine work. Admittedly most of the time you may engage yourself in a conversation like that. You may walk away with no knowledge of the result. Certainly that’s happened to me many, many times. But that’s not your job. Only God can unveil the truth concerning His Son. Jesus said that. Jesus said, “The only people who are going to know Me are the ones to whom I disclose Myself.” But it’s our job to take them to that point so that the Lord can do that revelation in His sovereign purpose.

Father, we thank You for our time together this morning as we have tried to condense this amazing account into some principles that we can use and apply in our lives. We know we haven’t even come close to capturing the wonder of all of this. We’re so feeble in handling these vast, profound encounters with the Son of God on the pages of this gospel. Our failing and weak efforts notwithstanding, Lord, we still can see the picture. And we ask, Lord, that You might give us the privilege to sit down in our own lives with people who don’t know You and start with the glories and the promises, the soul-satisfying gifts of gospel grace, and capture the interest and the desire of the sinner, and then lead that sinner to recognition of sin in the hope that they would abandon all false forms of worship. And when those are abandoned, and they seek true worship, You would from heaven open their eyes and open their hearts and reveal Your Son. That’s our prayer. Use us to that end, we pray.

Father, we ask now that You would grant the light of the glory of God shining in the face of Jesus Christ to the hearts of those who are here who have been in darkness. We ask that they would see who have never seen before, that they would hear who have never heard, that they would understand who have never understood, and that by Your mighty regenerating power through the Holy Spirit, You would awaken them and let them see Christ in all His glory. Bring salvation, not just for our sake, O Lord, but for Yours, and for Your eternal glory that we may forever praise You. Thank You that we’ve been able to worship today, thank You for all the true worshipers. May we be faithful to be worshipers in every aspect of our lives, giving You honor, bowing the knee before You, and would You use us, Lord, to be the instrument by which others will bow as well? We give You praise and thanksgiving in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

**Messiah: The Living Water, Part 3**

**John 4:27-42**

Code: 43-22

I want you to open your Bible to the fourth chapter of the gospel of John. And I don’t know that I need to make an explanation of what I do with a passage, but when you deal with a narrative passage like this, there’s a story to tell, obviously, and this is a prolonged story, starting in John 4, verse 1 and running all the way to the forty-second verse. That’s a long account by any gospel measure. Most accounts are cryptic. That is to say, they are condensed—kind of a Cliff Notes version of what actually happened. And that would be true in this case. But nonetheless, it’s a long story and so it winds up being cut into pieces because somebody, I don’t know when, said we can’t preach for more than an hour.

I don’t know who made that rule but my whole life has been unduly constrained by that ridiculous rule that someone made. I...I would feel much more comfortable if, like the apostle Paul, I could preach until people actually fell out of the window and died. But since I am unable to do that, I have to prescribe myself to what is demanded of me. And so we don’t want a whole lot of loose babies running around in the patio at ten minutes after twelve, and that’s how it is.

But on the other hand, to divide up a story like this is a necessity for its own sake because there is so much in the story. And one of the things we endeavor to do when we teach the Word of God is to take you back so that the story comes to life in its own context, because whatever its meaning is, it was established in the original context to what this meant then is what it still means now and always will mean. Since it’s an ancient document and an inspired document, and it was revealed to a certain time and place and people, we have to reconstruct that in order to capture the heart of its meaning. And that’s what we do, and that’s why we stretch it out a bit. And this story could actually be drawn out because there are so many, many more issues that are introduced here.

Just the issue of worship alone could launch you for a prolonged period of time. You know that years ago I did an entire series on worship from chapter 4, verses 20 to 24—that worthy text—to expand the notion of worship. It ended up in a book called *Worship*, which is now available. And by the way, we give that book as a gift to all of our first-time guests who go to the visitors’ reception. So there is much here.

As we come to the last part of the story, from verse 27 to 42, there’s also much there. There’s a lot there about missions; there’s a lot there about evangelism. There are many texts there that have been preached as messages in and of themselves, and rightly so. But for us, since we’re trying to move sequentially through the gospel of John, we’re not going to take every possible side route that we could; we’ll try to stay within the story. But we don’t want to just tell the story—you can read the story, we can read it, fill in a few blanks. We want to draw conclusions from the story as to why it’s here and what the purpose of the Holy Spirit is to put the story here and to convey its truth to us. In this case, you don’t have to look very long until you know exactly why the story is here, why all 26 verses up to now and the rest to verse 42 are here, and you will see that when I read to you starting at verse 27.

Let’s pick up the story where we left off last week. “At this point, His disciples came and they were amazed that He had been speaking with a woman, yet no one said, ‘What do you seek?’ or ‘Why do You speak with her?’ So the woman left her water pot and went into the city and said to the men, ‘Come see a man who told me all the things that I have done. This is not the Christ, is it?’ They went out of the city and were coming to Him. Meanwhile the disciples were urging Him saying, ‘Rabbi, eat.’ But He said to them, ‘I have food to eat that you do not know about.’ So the disciples were saying to one another, ‘No one brought Him anything to eat, did he?’ Jesus said to them, ‘My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me and to accomplish His work. Do you not say there are yet four months and then comes the harvest? Behold, I say to you, lift up your eyes and look on the fields for they are white for harvest. Already he who reaps is receiving wages and is gathering fruit for life eternal so that he who sows and he who reaps may rejoice together. In this case, the same is true, one sows and another reaps. I sent you to reap that for which you have not labored. Others have labored and you have entered into their labor.’ From that city, many of the Samaritans believed in Him because of the word of the woman who testified, ‘He told Me all the things that I have done.’ So when the Samaritans came to Jesus, they were asking Him to stay with them and He stayed there two days. Many more believed because of His Word. They were saying to the woman, ‘It is no longer because of what You said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves and know that this one is indeed the Savior of the world.’”

The reason this entire story is here is so that the profession, the confession, and the declaration at the end of verse 42 can be made. This one is indeed the Savior of the world. It has already been declared that Jesus came to the world. John 1:9, there was “the true light which coming into the world enlightens every man.” John 1:29, the testimony of John the Baptist, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” Chapter 3, verse 16, “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life, for God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him.”

The declaration then of the writer, John, is that Jesus is the Savior of the world. That has come from John, the author; that has come from John the Baptist, the greatest prophet who had ever lived. And now it is a declaration made by a most surprising group of people, a group of folks from a village in Samaria called Sychar, they make this great declaration, obscure gaggle of Samaritan villagers are given the privilege of making this most monumental of all declarations that the Savior of the world has come and it is He—it is this One, Jesus Christ. This is a monumental moment in redemptive history, and they are *the* most unlikely collection of sinners. They are alienated from Israel. They are the product of inter-marriage between Jews and idolatrous Gentiles from centuries before, after the northern kingdom was taken into captivity.

They have a truncated understanding of God. Though they have the Pentateuch—that is their Scripture—they don’t go beyond that, so they have information about God as Creator and the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. There is much they know from the Pentateuch, but that’s all the Scripture they have. Somehow, however, they have a rather clear view of Messiah, that the Messiah was to come. And by the declaration of the woman, they know that when the Messiah comes, He will declare all things. Perhaps they knew what was in Isaiah 11:3, that the Messiah would have by the power of the Spirit full wisdom, full knowledge, and full understanding. So they have a bit of Scripture, they have some knowledge of the coming of Messiah left over from their time prior to the captivity. But they have long been infected by idolatry. They are separated from the truth. They are alienated from God. They are plagued by immorality. They are detached from divine revelation and the work of God through His people Israel.

So how is it then that this obscure group of Samaritan villagers are God’s chosen instrument to declare that this Jesus is the Savior of the world? Not the high priest of Judaism. Not the chief priests, not the priests (the common order of priests), not the Sadducees, the Pharisees, the scribes, the rabbis, not the Jewish Sanhedrin (the council), and not the population of Israel. But these rejected outcasts—despised, hated Samaritans with whom the Jews have no dealings, as we read earlier in the story; they are despised by the Jews. Sad to say, Israel was a nation of Jonahs.

You remember when God told Jonah to go to Nineveh, a Gentile city, and preach repentance, and that if they repented and believed in God, He would forgive them and spare them His judgment. Jonah didn’t want to go. He didn’t want to go. Why? Because he knew God was a God of compassion, God was a God of mercy. He says that in chapter 4, verse 2; he says, “I knew that if I went You would do this, You would forgive them.” And so he didn’t go until finally God rerouted him through a great fish, got him there, and then when they did repent and God did forgive and withhold judgment, he went out and asked God to kill him because Gentile conversion was so distasteful to that reluctant prophet.

Well, by the time you get to the time of Christ, they’re still a nation of Jonahs and they have disdain for the Gentiles and a special disdain for the Samaritans because they were once Jews who intermarried with idolaters. But it is to that people that God gave the privilege of making the first declaration that this is the Savior of the world. And isn’t that the point?

If the Jews had come to the conclusion that He was the Savior, they would have been glad to say He is the Savior of Israel. They would have been far more reluctant to say He is the Savior of the world. And in any case, it is appropriate that non-Jews, Gentiles, are the ones who declare Him to be the Savior of the world because they’re a part of that non-Jewish world.

And so it is that the whole story is to get us to the end where an entire village proclaims Jesus to be the Savior of the world. Salvation came through the Jews. We know that. Jesus said that back in verse 22 to the woman at the well. Salvation is of the Jews. What did He mean by that? That the truth about salvation came through Holy Scripture and the entire Old Testament came to the Jews. They were the caretakers of divine revelation in the Old Testament. And so, as Romans 3 and Romans 9 says, “To them was given the Law, the Scriptures, the Covenants, the promises, and it is to them that the Messiah came, both His father and mother in the line of David.”

So salvation comes through Israel, both Scripture and the Messiah, both the written Word and the living Word come through the Jews. The Jews, however, were never meant to be the end; they were meant to be the means to the end. They were to be a missionary nation. They were to take the truth of the true God, the one god and they were to proclaim Him to the ends of the earth. And when Messiah came, He would be the Savior of the world. They should have known that. They should have fully embraced that because that’s what the Old Testament says.

For example, the Servant chapters of Isaiah declare this. Chapter 42, which introduces the Messiah, says this, “Behold My Servant.” That’s the Messiah, which introduces the Messiah; says this: “Behold My servant”; that’s the Messiah, “whom I uphold, My chosen one in whom My soul delights.” This is God the Father, speaking of the Messiah, the Son of God. “I have put My Spirit upon Him; He will bring forth justice to the nations. He will not cry out or raise His voice, or make His voice heard in the streets. A bruised reed He will not break and a dimly burning wick He will not extinguish,” meaning He will not be lacking in compassion to those that are hurting. “He will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not be disheartened or crushed until He has established justice in the earth and the coastlands will wait expectantly for His Law. Thus says God, the Lord who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and its offspring. Who gives breath to the people on it and spirit to those who walk in it. I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness, You, My Servant, Messiah. I will also hold you by the hand, I will watch over you and I will appoint you as a covenant to the people as a light to the nations to open blind eyes, to bring out prisoners from the dungeon and those who dwell in darkness from the prison.”

The prophecy, Messiah, will be a light to the nations. In the forty-ninth chapter of Isaiah and verse 5, “And now says the Lord who formed me from the womb to be His Servant, to bring Jacob back to Him [meaning Israel] that Israel might be gathered to Him, He says”...this is important, verse 6, Isaiah 49...“it is too small a thing that you should be My servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob. It’s too small a thing that Messiah would come only to the tribes of Jacob and only to restore the preserved ones of Israel. I will also make you a light of the nations so that My salvation may reach to the end of the earth. Thus says the Lord, the Redeemer of Israel and the Holy One.”

Will He redeem Israel? Yes, but not only Israel. He is to be the Savior of the world. And so in this amazing story of the woman, we reach this marvelous, ultimate moment where these obscure Samaritan villagers make this proclamation that indeed this is the Savior of the world. This then becomes the message at the book of Acts, as the gospel is taken to the world, to the Gentile world. Peter goes to Cornelius and then Paul launches into the Mediterranean Gentile world to take the gospel and plant the church in the Gentile lands. The epistles written by the apostles and their associates declare that God is in Christ reconciling the world to Himself (2 Corinthians 5:19).

So this is a monumental declaration. Let me tell you the importance of it. You can put the emphasis in two ways on this statement, that the Savior will save people from throughout the world—from every tongue, tribe, nation, and people. That He is the Savior of the world in that He will redeem people from the world, from every part of the world. He’s the propitiation for our sins, but not for ours only but the sins of the whole world. So there’s the emphasis on the fact that He will save people from the whole world.

But there’s another emphasis to be made and that is this: that for the whole world there is only one Savior. He will save many people from all parts of the world but there is only one Savior for the world. So when it says He’s the Savior of the world, it means He’s the only Savior the world has. “I am the way, the truth and the life,” He said, John 14, “No man comes to the Father but by Me.” The apostles preached that in Acts 4, “There’s no salvation in any other name than the name of Jesus Christ.” He is *the* only Savior in the world, which means that unless you come to faith in Jesus Christ, you will die lost in your sins. Jesus said it that way in John 8:24, “You will die in your sins because you believe not on Me. If you die in your sins, you end up at divine judgment and eternal hell.” All religions of the world that do not point to salvation in Christ are Satanic-—all of them, all of them.

You hear so much in a political correct environment about the fact that we have to give equal honor and respect to every religion. We need to give respect to every person. We need to give love to every person caught up in every religion, but anything but the gospel of Jesus Christ is a Satanic religion. There is only one Savior and only one way of salvation, and that is by grace through faith alone apart from works.

This is beyond simply significant. This is an epic moment that we find in this text of John. In 1 Corinthians 16:22 the Bible says, “If any man love not the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be damned.” Anyone, anyone who rejects the one Savior is condemned.

Now this comes at the end of this encounter. Jesus had left Bethany, maybe walked twenty miles or so, a tough walk up to Jacob’s well in the area of Samaria near the little village of Sychar. He sat down on the well, you remember the story. His disciples went into the village a half mile to a mile away to get some food, which indicates that they didn’t hold to the ridiculous Jewish scruples that the Samaritans were cursed people and you shouldn’t interact with them, you shouldn’t participate with them. For many Jews you wouldn’t even go through their country; you’d go some circuitous way to avoid it. That didn’t hold with our Lord or His disciples. They were happy to go that way. They were glad to go into the village, interact with the people, buy their food, eat their food. That was not an issue for them. It’s showing Jesus’ disdain for the artificial rules that had been developed by the Jews to isolate them from other people in the name of supposed holiness.

Jesus arrives at the well. His disciples go into town to get some food for Him. He’s sitting there alone. This woman comes. It’s noon when she comes. Women don’t go to the well at noon; it’s too hot. She goes to the well at noon. We could speculate that perhaps because she wanted to avoid all the other women who went in the early evening when it was cooler because she tried to avoid exposure since she was such a wicked woman. She had had five husbands. She was living with a man who wasn’t her husband. She had probably been through many adulteries, consequently that kind of history. She was a scorned woman. She would be virtually deemed as a prostitute in that society.

And in her loneliness and isolation, she comes at high noon to get water, and there she encounters Jesus and they’re alone. She’s there; He’s there; the disciples have gone and the conversation starts. And you remember I showed you this is a model of how one engages an ignorant, indifferent, irreligious stranger into the gospel. And what does Jesus begin with? He begins by telling her the gift of God, the water of life, the eternal life that God has for her if she only asks, that’s how you launch the gospel. Let me tell you what God has for you if you only ask. You don’t earn it; you ask for it. And if you only knew who you were talking to, and you only understood that I could give you this living water, this gift of God, this eternal life if you only ask. That’s how you launch, that’s how Jesus launched the gospel. And she said, “I want that, I want that.”

And then He said, “Well, wait a minute; now we have to back up and talk about an issue.” And He exposed her sin, and she was shocked because He knew her history. He not only knew what people thought, we saw that in chapter 2, verses 23 to 25, but He knew their whole history because He knew everything. He was God; He is God, omniscient God. And she knew then that He was a prophet from God and that He was speaking the truth. She was exposed; she felt the weight of that conviction. She wanted to make it right. She wanted to repent. She wanted to connect with God so she said, “Where do I worship? Where do I go?” And Jesus at that point told her, “You’ve got to divest yourself of false religion.”

This is how you process a person. You make the offer of the glories and promises of the gospel, and then when they want that, when they desire that, you say, “We’ve got to deal with your sin.” And you bring them to the point of conviction. If the person says, “I want to deal with that sin, what do I do? Where do I bow? How do I connect with God? How do I worship God? How do I have a relationship with God? How do I find forgiveness?” You say, “The first thing you have to do is turn from your idols...turn from. Remember 1 Thessalonians 1, that they turned from idols to serve the living and true God. They have to disconnect from a false religion and then in the moment that she saw the light on that, and she said, “Well, when Messiah comes, He will show us everything we need to know.” He said, “I who speak to you am He.” And the revelation was complete.

She went from being indifferent, ignorant, unconcerned, physically irreligious to having a revelation of Christ. Incredible story. The last words that Jesus says to her, “I who speak to you am He,” and at this point the disciples came, verse 28, and the woman left. The conversation was over. The disciples didn’t come until He had said that final statement, that final revelation. That is so important.

Now that introduces us to some theological things that are going on in the story. I’ll tell you the rest of the story but I want you to understand that there’s a profound process going on here so that we understand that this is truly the son of God, the Savior of the world.

The first thing is this. This opens up for us the deity of Christ with evidence from providence. That’s point number one, evidence from providence. There are no miracles in this account, no physical miracles, no healings, no natural miracles, only His omniscience. But there are things going on that are so incredibly miraculous that though they’re not physical miracles, they’re something far greater, I think—they’re spiritual miracles. And the first one is that we can see that He’s the Son of God, and the evidence comes from providence.

What is providence? It’s that theological word that means God controls all contingencies, all circumstances, all exigencies, all choices, all events, all people, all time to converge to precisely fulfill His will. It is *the* massive miracle of redemptive history. Jesus walks twenty miles. He arrives at exactly the right moment. The woman seeking isolation arrives at exactly the right moment. The disciples are gone. Jesus is alone. He needs water; that becomes the entrée.

He goes through the whole process of bringing her to understand who He is and desiring a relationship with God and true worship, and at the moment that He has brought that revelation to its culmination, notice verse 27, “At this point,” and in the Greek that is very, very specific. “At this point,” at this specific moment. This is a critical juncture. The disciples had finished their business in Sychar. It took whatever time it took to do whatever they needed to do to get the food and walk back. They returned to the well at this moment, at this point. You wouldn’t use that phrase unless you were trying to make a point of the precise timing that was going on there. The very moment Jesus had declared who He was, and the woman turned with that in her and couldn’t get to the village fast enough to tell everyone, at that moment, as that conversation comes to an end, the disciples arrive. If they arrive earlier, the conversation gets interrupted. If they arrive earlier, they begin to ask questions. They engage in the conversation, and we know what their questions would be because they have them in their minds. If they arrive late, they don’t even know about the conversation. The timing is perfect. They’re not too early and they’re not too late. They arrive exactly on time to see Jesus shattering barriers of tradition and prejudice. They see Jesus do what He wants them to do. What does He want them to do? He’s going to tell them...He’s going to tell them before His ascension in Acts 1:8, He’s going to say, “You shall be witnesses unto Me in Jerusalem, Judea”...Then what?...“Samaria and the ends of the earth.” He’s showing them what He wants them to do.

Yes, the gospel was for Israel, but it was for the world. And when it couldn’t go through Israel, God put judgment on Israel and carved out a new channel—His church made up of Jew and Gentile. God foreordains everything. When it said that, of necessity, Jesus went through Samaria, it was a divine necessity to be at a certain point at a certain time. Every moment, every detail, a thousand details caused everything to converge exactly the way it did, and yet Christ moves, as He always does, effortlessly through the conversation. It’s not forced. It’s not hurried. It comes to its climactic end with the claim that He is the Messiah and she affirms that. He operated on that amazing schedule. He says over and over again, and particularly to the gospel of John that we are in debt for this, “My time has not come,” “My time has not come.” His time had not come. And there are occasions when He said, “My time has come; My hour has come.” He was operating on a divine timetable.

But they couldn’t know that. He told them, “It’s not for you to know the times or the seasons which the Father has put in His own power.” Jesus Christ is in fact God, and God is the time keeper of the universe, and He is the author of history. History is His story. He arranged the circumstances of everything for His own divine purposes.

So here’s this subtle but magnificent and beautiful look at divine providence. The disciples come back. They see Him speaking with a woman. That’s...that’s out of bounds, a man talking with a woman? A Jew talking with a Samaritan? A rabbi talking with an outcast?

But I want you to notice their reaction in verse 27. “Yet none of them said, ‘What do You seek, or why do You speak with her?’” What are You seeking from her? Why are You talking to her? They didn’t say that. They kept silent. Why did they keep silent? Well, though they are new disciples, though they haven’t been with Jesus very long, they’re beginning to learn what all disciples need to learn and that is trust. Here’s how your discipleship goes. When you’re new in Christ, you question everything. When you’re mature in Christ, you question nothing. And in the process you go from questioning everything to questioning nothing.

What is the mark of a really mature believer? Complete trust, complete trust. What is the mark of an immature believer? Endless questions. Why this? Why that? Why does it have to be this way? They’re in the process. They have taken some giant steps in mature discipleship, because what they’re essentially admitting is it’s not for us to question. We have learned to trust. He controls everything. Things don’t just happen. He’s in charge. My prejudices, my ideas—-not important. Something supernatural is going on here. And so while the questions are human, they’re restrained from asking. So they arrive with the questions. Why is He talking to that woman? And the woman leaves. It says, “So the woman left her water pot.”

I don’t know why John put that in there that she left the water pot. People say, “Why did she leave the water pot?” I have absolutely no idea. I don’t know the lady. The Bible doesn’t say anything. Can I make a few guesses? Yeah, the word for “water pot” is the same word used in John 2 of the water pots that they used at the wedding at Cana, and they were huge. So if you’re in a hurry, you’d probably leave your water pot. This would be the kind of water pot that she might have carried over her shoulder on a piece of wood with a rope, a substantial water pot, not a cup. And she wanted to get to town as fast as she could.

There’s another possibility. Originally Jesus had told her He was thirsty and wanted something to drink and the well was a 100 feet deep, so maybe she left the water pot so He could continue to have the water. She was in a hurry. She left. She headed for town, and she went into the city and said to the men....This is amazing; this isn’t the kind of women that rushes up to men without having those men back off for fear their wives would be looking. Why does it say she went to the men? Because typically at the gate of every village the men sat and adjudicated the issues of the town; met there. She ran into the men and she says, “Come see,” “come see.”

Why does she say that? Well, the rabbis used to say—and maybe this filtered over to Samaria—the rabbis used to say, “The man who teaches his daughter the Law is a fool.” That was the attitude they had toward women. And I’m sure it existed in Samaria. She wouldn’t be so bold as to say, “Okay, guys, get together, I’ve got something to tell you.” Not in that culture.

She says, “I defer to your judgment, I’m just telling you, come and see.” That’s a very wise response. You come and you see. And she poses the question with a negative answer. “Come see a man who told me all the things that I have done.” Can you imagine how they...they knew all the things she had done. This is a small village; married five times, living in adultery. I met a man who told me my whole history, my whole ugly history.

“Hey, lady, what happened to your shame?” I’ll tell you what happened to her shame, Hebrews calls it “a cleansed conscience.” That’s what happens when you’re regenerated; the conscience was cleansed; she had been purged. Her sin, which was once her shame, was now part of her testimony. This man told me everything I’d done, exposed my sin. She was compelled to face herself. She lost her shame. She wanted to share her discovery. She couldn’t wait.

Let me tell you, that’s a mark of true salvation. That’s a mark of true salvation. If you think you lead someone to Christ, ask yourself the question, “Is that person eager to get to the people that that person loves and cares about as fast as possible to share the joy?” People do that when they get a new car. People do that for a lot of events. People do that when their elementary kid is the student of the week. They put a bumper sticker so the whole world knows.

Somebody who comes to Christ and is totally transformed and forgiven and converted from hell to heaven; she can’t get there fast enough to tell them. You know, this is exactly what we see in Luke 15, when the woman found the coin. What did she do? Called all her neighbors together and had a celebration. When the man found the sheep, what did he do? Called his neighbors and had a celebration. When the father found the prodigal who came back, what did he do? Killed the fatted calf, called the whole village. And more importantly, what happens in heaven when a sinner repents? Heaven has a celebration. The angels of God rejoice. The angels around the throne rejoice because God rejoices, ’cause this is the great work that gives God joy. God is a God of joy and His joy is bound up in the salvation of sinners.

So she says, “Come and see,” “come and see.” And she defers to them as men; she’s gracious about that, and she’s open about the fact that everything that I’ve lived, all the wretchedness of my life. He knew; He knew it all. Come see this...this...Is this the Messiah? And she poses it negatively because she wants them to make the discovery. She doesn’t want to force that on them. And so they responded.

Verse 30, “They went out of the city and were coming to Him.” How could anybody know the whole history of that woman? How could any stranger know that? And she would have told them, “This is a man I don’t know. This is a Jew. This is a man who is not from here.” And so they move in that direction. See how God orchestrates all the details of everything, even the way the woman asks the question, poses the question. If she had said to them, “I’ve got to tell you, I just met the Messiah.” Ha! “Yeah, the Messiah just revealed Himself to me.” They would have mocked her. Every detail evidenced that God is in this whole situation, working through His Son; providence gives evidence that Jesus is in fact the Messiah, the Savior of the world, evidence from providence.

Number two, from priority—How do we know He’s the Savior of the world? Because of His priority, verse 31. Go back, “Meanwhile, back at the well, the men and the people from the town are coming, meanwhile the disciples are back at the well and they’re saying to Jesus, ‘Rabbi, eat. You need to eat.’” This again is a note regarding the humanity of Jesus. They were used to Him eating. They had been with Him for months and months and He ate like they did. And He just as a normal human would eat, and so they say, “Rabbi, eat.” And He said to them, “I have food to eat that you don’t know about.” And so the disciples were saying to one another, “No one brought Him anything to eat, did he?” Looking around, there’s nobody here. Where would He get any food? They think He’s talking about food. Jesus had spoken many times in these kind of analogical statements, these kind of illustrative statements, these kind of parabolic statements, even the conversation with the woman started about water, didn’t it? And ended up being a spiritual thing. And this is about food, but it ends up being a spiritual thing.

And so our Lord responds in verse 34, “Jesus said to them, ‘My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me and accomplish His work.’” “My food is to do the will of Him that sent Me and accomplish His work.”

What is God’s work? What is God’s work in human history? What is it? Redemption, salvation. That’s why Christ came. Luke 19:10, “The Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost.” That’s God’s work. What did we read in Isaiah? That God called Himself the Redeemer—the Redeemer—the Redeemer of Israel and the ends of the earth. That’s God’s work. God our Savior, who will have all men to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth. God who is not willing that any should perish but all should come to salvation. God is by nature a Savior, our God and Savior. He is so called many, many times by the apostle Paul in particular and especially in 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus—-“God our Savior,” “God our Savior,” “God our Savior,” “God our Savior.”

That is an Old Testament title for God. He is by nature a saving God—God who is the Savior of all men, especially of those that believe. He’s the Savior of all men in the sense that He even temporally and physically doesn’t give sinners what they deserve when they deserve it. If He did, they would all perish, we would all be dead the first time we sinned. God by nature is a Savior, is patient and gracious, and merciful and kind, hoping that His mercy leads us to repentance. And so He’s even in a temporal sense demonstrating that He’s a Savior by nature. In a spiritual sense, He does it eternally and spiritually when He brings us to true salvation.

And so, our Lord is saying what satisfies Me, what satisfies Me? What delights Me is salvation, the work of salvation. In fact, “He went to the cross,” the writer of Hebrews says, “for the joy set before Him,” “for the joy.” You see that joy again in Luke 15—the joy of the celebration of the finding of the lost coin, the joy of the celebration of the finding of the lost sheep, the joy in the celebration of finding the lost son. In each case it says heaven’s rejoicing over the salvation of one sinner. God and all the holy angels and inhabitants of heaven are having a party all the time; it’s non-stop as sinners are coming to salvation. Jesus says, “That’s My food.” “That’s My food.”

You know, hunger disappears in times of intense prayer. That’s called fasting. When you’re praying intensely, deeply burdened about something, you’re pouring out your heart to God, you pray and fast. You have no appetite. But appetite also goes away in times of unbounded, exhilarating joy. There’s no interest in eating. Jesus lets His disciples know that He’s been laboring in the Father’s work, and the joy of the labor has revived Him. It’s revived Him.

They need to know that because they’re going to be sent as well. They’re going to get the Great Commission. They need to remember the words of Psalm 126:6 about the blessing that comes to those who are witnesses. They need to remember Daniel 12:3 how that those people who are faithful to proclaim the truth, end up shining like the stars. And Jesus said, “You didn’t choose Me, but I chose you and ordained that you would go forth and bear fruit,” John 15:16. His joy, His exhilaration, His delight was in the work of the Father in saving sinners. That’s His joy. That caused His heart to be so uplifted that He had no thought of physical hunger. There is evidence then of who He is from providence. There is evidence from priority, the focus of His life. He came to seek and save the lost.

Thirdly, there’s evidence from prophecy. There’s evidence from prophecy. Again, we know He knew the past; He knew the woman’s history. We know He knew what people think, John 2, “He knew what was in the heart of man.” So this is His omniscience. Now in this story, He knew the past of this woman. Now He shows He knows the future, He knows the future. Look at verse 35. “Do you not say there are yet four months and then comes the harvest?” Some people think that’s just a proverbial statement, that the form of this means that, you know, it’s common for people to say there’s four months until the harvest, that’s the time from the planting to the harvest. You can’t really prove that’s proverbial. It’s better to understand this as simply a reference to the fact that harvest was four months away. Harvest is four months away. And the better way to understand it would be that there was some grain there, there was something coming up out of the ground, but harvest was still four months away.

So He’s looking out over the fields between the well and the village, and He says, “Don’t say there are four months and then comes the harvest. Behold, I say to you, lift up your eyes and look on the fields, they are white for harvest.”

What’s that referring to? That’s a beautiful moment. Here come the villagers with their typically Middle Eastern, ancient white robes and when the harvest is white, it means that the tops of the grain have turned white and the harvest is ready. The green grain is still there but here come the white Samaritans and they’re like grain ready to be harvested. “Don’t say four months. I’m telling you, lift up your eyes, the harvest is now.”

What’s He talking about? He prophesies that those people are going to be saved that day. He not only knows the past of the woman, He knows the future of the village. And then He says this to His disciples, “Already he who reaps is receiving wages and is gathering fruit for life eternal.” Right now, you’re here and right now you are going to have the joy of reaping and receiving the benefit, the wages, the blessing that comes to those that gather fruit for life eternal. You’re going to be part of a revival right here. “And he who sows and he who reaps may rejoice together, for in this case the saying is true. One sows and another reaps.”

What does He mean by that? You’re going to reap what you didn’t sow. Who...who sowed? Who sowed into these Samaritans, Moses? They had the Pentateuch. Some of the prophets from which had developed their Messianic ideas; is it possible John the Baptist? There’s one other sower, the woman. She went and she told them what had happened to her. Something from Moses, something from the prophets, and something maybe had drifted from John the Baptist’s extensive ministry. Remember, he had moved north for the last number of months. And this is how it is. Some sow, some reap, and God...What?...gives the increase. So He’s teaching His disciples a lesson. And He’s saying, “I sent you to reap that for which you haven’t labored, others have labored and you’ve entered into their labor.” You’ve come at the end of the labor to reap the harvest, and you’re going to reap it today. What an amazing day, amazing day.

How does He know this? Because He not only knows what people think—He not only knows the past, He knows the future. He knows they’re going to be saved that day. After all, He’s the Savior; He’s the one who gives life. He’s the one who determines salvation. So evidence comes from prophecy.

You know, it says in verse 39, “That...from that city, many of the Samaritans believed.” Verse 41, “More believed.” The prophecy became true. Do you know that never happened in a village in Israel? In fact, the disciples were getting so tired of going into villages and proclaiming Christ and having Christ come in and being rejected and mistreated, that James and John came to Jesus and said, “Do You want us to call down fire from heaven and incinerate the town?” Jesus said, “Back off, guys.” This never happened. This never happened in Judea. He went to His own village in Galilee—the village of Nazareth—to preach one sermon; they tried to stone Him to death. This is a very significant event. The only time a town is converted and this is to tell us that He is the Savior of the world. And His people have rejected Him; He will go to the world. He tells the disciples what Paul says in 2 Timothy 2, “The hard-working farmer does what he does because he gets to taste the fruit.” Today you’re going to have a great experience.

Now remember, eventually they’re going to get the Great Commission. They’re going to go to the Judea, Samaria, the uttermost part of the earth. They need to know that when they go there will be fruit there. They need to know that they’ll taste the fruit. They’ll go, they’ll plant, they’ll water, they’ll labor—God will give the increase. They’ll enjoy the fruit. So this is a preview of things to come, after His ascension when the Holy Spirit came upon them and they were sent to the world. You’re going to find joy and rejoicing in the fact that God will honor your efforts.

One final element, we have to add this, evidence that this is indeed the Savior of the world from providence, priority, and prophecy—and then from His proclamation. Let’s call it, just for another “p”, His proclamation. “Many believed,” verse 39, “in Him because of the word of the woman who testified, ‘He told me all the things that I have done.’” So when the Samaritans finally arrived at the well, they came to Jesus; they were asking Him to stay with them. You know, it was wonderful that they received her testimony, but it was much more important that they heard from Him, agreed?

So He stayed there two days. I don’t know what those two days were like, but that must have been incredible. It’s the only time in His earthly ministry that ever happened. It’s the only time it ever happened where He actually spent two days with a whole town, revealing Himself who He was. And I’m sure He talked about the cross and the resurrection and the kingdom. And “many more believed because of His Word; and they were saying to the woman, ‘It’s no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we’ve heard for ourselves and know that this One is indeed the Savior of the world.’”

Let me tell you how this works. Your testimony to an unbeliever is good and it may cause one to believe. But what is more important is that they move from your testimony to the testimony of the Lord Himself contained on the pages of Scripture, right? So that’s what they’re saying. Some of us believe because of your testimony, but many more believed and now we can all say it’s no longer because of you that we believe, it’s because of Him, because He spoke to us and you know He speaks here, doesn’t He?

This is the Savior of the world. This is the Savior of the world. Providence, priority, focusing in on prophecy, the thing He said would happen happened; the whole town believed. And then the final note, they are completely convinced when they hear Him speak. This is the Savior of the world. All religions are not equal. There’s only one Savior in the world, and it’s Jesus Christ.

Father, we are again grateful, this morning, for the time to look into Your sacred truth, to have it come alive for us, to find our own food, our own satisfaction, our own joy in this. But it’s more than just an experience; it has to be something beyond that to satisfy You, to please You. May it be part of sort of a renewing of our commission to go and to sow and to water and to labor, sometimes where others have labored so that we can rejoice whether we reap or whether we sow when You bring in the harvest. Thank You for the declaration that Jesus is the Savior of the world. This church is an evidence of that. We have many from Israel, many Jews among us who love You because Your church is Jew and Gentile, in one body. But we have the world here as well and we all acknowledge that Jesus is the Savior of the world and the world must acknowledge that He is the only Savior. May everyone here acknowledge that this day, may they believe, and in believing have eternal life.

Now, Father, we acknowledge that salvation is a work from heaven, that sinners must be born from above, as You did that day in Samaria as You gave life to the people in that village. Give life to some today and draw them to Christ. May He be revealed clearly to them in a saving way. We give You all the praise and thanks in His name. Amen.

**Contemplating Unbelief**

**John 4:43-45**

Code: 43-23

I want you to now turn in the Word of God to the fourth chapter of the gospel of John, John chapter 4. And as the subject in Grace Today indicates, we’re going to be talking about believing, about unbelief and about faith. And this is a vital subject in the gospel of John.

Now keep in mind that we in John chapter 3 identified the fact that salvation is a work of God. You are born from above. In other words, our Lord said to Nicodemus, “You must be born again. You must be born from above.” You made no contribution to your human birth and you can make no contribution to your spiritual birth, it is a divine work of God. That is the divine side of salvation.

But there is also a human side of salvation. That work of God is through the sinner’s faith. And so while the gospel of John emphasizes the divine sovereign work of God in salvation, it also rightly emphasizes the necessity of the sinner’s faith and believing. In fact, one could say that the gospel of John is primarily about believing. It is the gospel of belief. The word in the Greek, the word *pisteuo* which is a verb, it comes in a noun form as well, is used about 100 times in the gospel of John. So the idea of faith and believing is spread throughout this entire gospel.

That shouldn’t surprise us because we are by now familiar with the purpose of the gospel of John as indicated in chapter 20 verse 31, “These—that is all that is written in this gospel—these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God and that believing you may have life in His name.” The book is evangelistic in the sense that it wants you to believe and receive eternal life, to be saved, as we would refer to it.

So the gospel of John is the gospel of believing. There is here ample evidence for us to believe in Christ--by His works, by His words, His signs and wonders. All of that is collected by John very carefully under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and laid out for a convincing case that we should believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. It’s more than that as well. In the gospel of John we are commanded to believe and we are also warned of the horrible results of unbelief.

This is not only the theme of the gospel of John, but this is the heart of the Christian faith. It is about believing in the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation. Briefly let me say this, all false religions whether they are non-Christian or quasi-Christian, all false religions offer salvation through some work, some human behavior, some religious ceremony, some moral accomplishments. In other words, Satan’s plan is to propagate religion across the face of the earth through all human history and convince people that they can be made right with God, escape judgment, escape hell, live forever in heaven by something they do, ceremonially, religiously, morally, or socially, philanthropy, purity of life, religious commitment, devotion to certain rituals and ceremonies, all of those become the panoply of things that Satan offers as a way of salvation. True Christianity, the true gospel says that salvation comes to those who believe…who believe. It is by faith alone, not works, not any element of works, or else we have cancelled out the hope of salvation. That is the Christian gospel.

It is becoming clear to us that many who call themselves Christians are a long way from this basic truth. Just this week, the new Pope Francis, I think startled many people in the world by declaring that atheists will go to heaven if they do good…atheists will go to heaven if they do good.

Let me clarify, no one will go to heaven by doing good, absolutely no one…certainly not atheists who not only don’t believe in the Lord Jesus, but they don’t even believe in God. To show how corrupt even quasi-Christianity has become, it is now declaring things that are the very message of hell itself. “Be an atheist, do good, and you’ll end up in heaven.”

The message of Scripture has always been salvation comes to those who believe. “Abraham believed God and it was counted to him for righteousness.” We go all the way back to the early chapters of Genesis and salvation even then was by faith in God. And then since Christ has come, it is by faith in God revealed in Christ. This is the Christian message. And the message is reiterated throughout the New Testament. “There is no salvation in any other name.” “I am the Way, the Truth and the Life,” Jesus said, John 14:6, “no man comes to the Father but by Me.”

There’s only one way to be forgiven sin, only one way to escape hell, only one way to get to heaven, and that is by believing in the Lord Jesus Christ. And Scripture directs the attention of the reader all the way through to this person of Christ who provides and who alone provides salvation.

So when we read through the gospel of John, we are going to be caught up over and over and over with the reality that salvation comes to those who believe and condemnation to those who do not believe. And the object of that faith is the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. This is the overwhelming emphasis of this entire book of John. As I said, the word “belief” in one way or another appears about 100 times.

Now just to remind you of that, go back with me to chapter 1 and I want to introduce this next section by digging down a little bit into this idea of believing because it is so very important. There is no more important message that can ever be given than this one, that salvation comes to those who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. And apart from believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, there is no salvation for anyone. That is the most important message. And John reiterates it, chapter 1 verse 12, “As many as received Him,” meaning the Lord Jesus Christ, “to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name.” Those who believe in His name.

Again in chapter 3, very familiar words in verse 16, “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.” Verse 18, “He who believes in Him is not judged. He who does not believe has been judged already because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.”

Just skipping along a little bit to chapter 6 and verse 28, they say to Jesus, the people do, “What shall we do so that we may work the works of God?” What does God want from us, how do we gain acceptance with God? How do we gain life from God? How do we enter the Kingdom of God? How do we please God? What does God want us to do? “Jesus answered and said to them, ‘This is the work of God that you believe in Him whom He has sent.’ So they said to Him, ‘What then do You do for a sign so that we may see and believe You?’”

It was all about believing. What do we do to work the works of God? And Jesus says, “Believe.” And they say then, “Prove to us that we should believe in You.” Which, of course, He did again and again. Chapter 8 tells us in verse 30 that He spoke many things and many came to believe in Him…many came to believe in Him.”

In chapter 12, a few more samples of John’s emphasis on believing. In chapter 12 verse 44, Jesus cried out and said, “He who believes in Me does not only or merely believe in Me, but in Him who sent Me.” When you believe in Me, you believe in the one who sent Me, the true and living God. In chapter 14, those precious words that we all know, “Do not let your heart be troubled, believe in God, believe also in Me.” Believe in God, believe also in Me.

In the seventeenth chapter when our Lord was praying His High Priestly prayer, He prays on behalf of those who would believe in Him. Verse 20, John 17:20, “I do not ask in behalf of these alone—meaning His disciples—but for those also who believe in Me through their Word.” He’s praying for those who believe in Him.

Now that’s just a half a dozen or so illustrations of the nearly hundred times you’re going to see this idea of believing in the gospel of John. Now let me probe a little more deeply into this because it is such an urgent message. The gospel of John reveals that all the aspects of salvation are connected to believing…they’re all connected to believing. For example, I just read you in John 1:12 that by believing we become children of God…by believing, we become children of God, that is reiterated in John 12:36. Believe in the light, meaning Christ, so that you may become children of light, or sons of light. John tells us then that by believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, sinners become children of God.

Let me give you another very important reality. By believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, sinners obtain eternal life. “God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life.” That message is familiar to all of us in John chapter 3 and verse 16. Down in verse 36 it is reiterated again, “He who believes in the Son has eternal life. He who does not obey the Son will not see life but the wrath of God abides on him.” Believe in Him, have life. Do not believe in Him, and perish.

Sinners then by believing in the Lord Jesus Christ become children of God. They obtain eternal life. That is reiterated again, that promise of eternal life, in the majestic words of Jesus as He was teaching in the sixth chapter of John, verse 40, “This is the will of My Father that everyone who beholds the Son and believes in Him will have eternal life.” Again, it’s about believing in the Lord Jesus Christ. Verse 47, “Truly, truly I say to you, he who believes has eternal life.” I mean, it’s unmistakable that eternal life comes to those who believe not only in God but in God revealed in Christ. By believing in the Lord Jesus Christ then, sinners become children of God and sinners obtain eternal life. Also, and we’ve already reiterated, but let me separate it out as a unique point, by believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, sinners escape divine judgment…sinners escape divine judgment which is what sinners should want to escape since it is everlasting.

Listen to John 5:24, the words of our Lord, “Truly, truly I say to you, he who hears My Word and believes Him who sent Me has eternal life and doesn’t come into judgment but has passed out of death into life.” Let me give you another truth about salvation. By believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, sinners become the children of God, obtain eternal life, escape divine judgment, and partake in the resurrection…partake in the resurrection. When our Lord came to the grave of Lazarus, He made this incredible promise, John 11:25, “I am the resurrection and the life, he who believes in Me will live even if he dies.” That’s the promise of resurrection.

Sinners by believing in the Lord Jesus Christ also possess the Holy Spirit…they also become the residents of the third member of the Trinity. What an incredible promise. John 7:38, our Lord says, “He who believes in Me as the Scripture said, from his innermost being will flow rivers of living water. This He spoke of the Spirit whom those who believed in Him who were to receive.” The Holy Spirit takes up residence for the purpose beginning with regeneration of sanctification and ultimately glorification in the one who believes in the Lord Jesus Christ.

In chapter 12 of John’s gospel and verse 46, we read this, “Everyone who believes in Me will not remain in darkness.” So sinners who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ become children of God, obtain eternal life, escape divine judgment, partake in the resurrection, possess the Holy Spirit and are delivered from spiritual darkness and from eternal darkness. And in that fourteenth chapter in the Upper Room, Jesus added this, John 14:12, “Truly, truly I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do he will do also and greater works than these he will do.” What is that saying? That we will be empowered for service. Not greater in kind, but greater in extent. Jesus never got outside His own nation.

What kind of a salvation is this? It is a salvation that makes us children of God, possessors of eternal life. We escape divine judgment, we partake in the resurrection. We possess the Holy Spirit. We escape spiritual and eternal darkness and we receive power for ministry and service. And this happens to those who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. All the elements of salvation come by faith, not by works. Not of works, Paul says in Ephesians, lest any man should boast.

Now all of that is how salvation comes in all its fullness to the sinner, by believing. Consequently we are commanded to believe. It is not a suggestion. It is not some kind of whisper in our ears. It is a thundered command. John 6:28, again, “What shall we do so that we may work the works of God? Jesus answered and said to them, ‘This is the work of God that you believe in Him.’” That’s what God wants from you. You believe in Him. And if you believe in Him, you will not perish, you will receive everlasting life.

Now what is the evidence that causes us to believe in Him? Well John is prepared to lay out that evidence as is Matthew and Mark and Luke. The four gospels were written to gather up the evidence and demonstrate that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God so that you might believe and have life in His name. There is ample evidence contained in the scriptures to point to the Lord Jesus. The gospel records prove to us that He is the one promised in the Old Testament. The gospel accounts of His words and His works demonstrate Him to be divine. His signs and miracles are ample proof. And so you have the record of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John to lay out His words, lay out His works and lay out His miracles to prove that He is who He claimed to be so that we will believe in Him.

Listen to John chapter 5 verse 36, “But the testimony which I have is greater than the testimony of John the Baptist, for the works which the Father has given Me to accomplish, the very works that I do testify about Me that the Father has sent Me. So look at My works. As the Father who sent Me, He has testified of Me, you have neither heard His voice at any time, nor seen His form. You do not have His word abiding in you for you do not believe Him whom He sent. You search the scriptures because you think in them you have eternal life. It is these that testify about Me but you are unwilling to come to Me so that you may have life.

If you don’t come to Christ, you will not have life. If you don’t believe in Him, you will perish and die in your sins. No atheist will go to heaven. No one who does not believe in God and Christ, the true Christ of Scripture, has any hope of going to heaven. All the evidence is in Scripture, he says to the Jews. Scripture is validated and fulfilled in Christ. Listen to His words, look at His works, see His miracles…ample evidence that He is who He claimed to be. He matches all the promises of the Old Testament. He demonstrates supernatural power over disease, over death, over demons, over nature. He is the promised Messiah. He is divine. He is God the Son. And yet He was in the world, the world was made by Him, the world knew Him not. He came unto His own and His own received Him not. That has consequences.

Listen to this, John 8:24, “Therefore I said to you that you will die in your sins for unless you believe that I am He, you will die in your sins.” So they were saying to Him, “Who are You?” And Jesus said, “What have I been saying to you from the beginning?”

If you do not believe in Jesus Christ, you will die in your sins. You may be religious. You may be…you may be super-religious. You may be involved in religion from the standpoint of leadership, and representation. Unless you are trusting Christ and Christ alone and not your works, you will die in your sins.

Now the gospel tells us that we then are given the responsibility to call on sinners to believe. That’s what we do. That’s what evangelism is…calling on sinners to believe. That’s what we do.

Now what overpowers unbelief? The universal problem is unbelief. You’ll die in your sins because you don’t believe on Me. Okay, the universal problem is unbelief. And I just want to clarify that because as obvious as it is, apparently some people are missing it. Because the premise of evangelism is so often very to do with Jesus Christ. The premise of evangelism runs something like this…do you lack purpose in your life? Do you lack meaning I your life? Are you unfulfilled? Are you unsatisfied? Do you not seem to get the things that you desire? Are you melancholy? Are you lonely? Do you feel alienated?

And while those things may be true about people, they have nothing to do with who Jesus Christ is. The whole point of evangelism is not to do some kind of pathology on the desires of the sinner, but to reveal the reality of who Christ is. The question is not would you like somebody, whoever he is, to fix you? But that’s the way so much contemporary evangelism goes. It’s so much about you and what you want and what you feel and what you don’t feel and what you don’t have and what you would like…and oh, incidentally, Jesus and who cares who He is, will deliver all that for you if you say these words.

There is no such illustration of evangelism anywhere on the pages of Scripture. It’s not about offering any Jesus and Jesus becomes incidental to that kind of approach, it really doesn’t matter who He is, it really doesn’t matter what He did. It just…it would be nice to have Him fix me and I can always give it a try and if it doesn’t work then, you know, I’ve just eliminated one more option. That is so far from what the gospel is all about and that’s so far from what evangelism is. The approach in evangelism is this. You’re headed to eternal hell. Why? Because you’re a sinner.

Do all sinners go to eternal hell? No, only the ones that aren’t forgiven. How do I become forgiven? By believing in the Lord Jesus Christ. When you put your faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, you are forgiven your sin and given eternal life as a gift of God. You need to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. You need to confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord and believe in your heart the full story of Christ which is ultimately validated by the resurrection. And if you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, you will be saved forever, from your sin and all its consequences. That’s how the gospel goes.

Now at that point the person might say, “I’m not interested in Jesus Christ.” Then there’s nothing more to say. It’s not about, “Well wouldn’t you like purpose? Wouldn’t you like happiness? Wouldn’t you like peace?” That’s not going to help if they don’t believe in Christ. So the goal of evangelism is to present Christ. That’s why there are four gospels and not four books on psychology.

Now there are levels of unbelief. I want to talk about them a little bit. We’re somewhere near John 4 but we haven’t seen the landing lights yet. We’re circling right now. There are several elements of unbelief and categories of unbelief. So let me just kind of unpack those for you if I can simply. There is that unbelief that only needs fulfillment. There is that kind of unbelief that is anticipatory, that is expectant, that is right on the edge and just needs fulfillment. That would be the kind of faith that Zacharias and Elizabeth had, waiting for the Messiah, waiting for the Messiah, waiting for the Messiah. And what happens? The angel appears, you’re going to have a son, he’s going to be the forerunner to the Messiah. They understand the message. Zachariah gives that tremendous benediction. They are…they’re now getting the fuller revelation of who it is they’re waiting for.

That would be Anna and Simeon. They’re in the Temple. They’re waiting for the Messiah and one day Joseph and Mary show up and the Messiah is there and all they need is to see who it is. That would be…that would be the early disciples. That would be Peter and Andrew, chapter 1 of John, right? They meet Jesus and what do they say? “We found the Messiah. We found the Messiah. Go tell the brothers, we found the Messiah.” That’s that kind of unbelief that has been brought all the way to the point where you say that’s the Messiah. And John the Baptist, you remember, said to those two disciples of his, “Behold the Lamb of God, follow Him, go after Him.” And they did. And they spent a day and a night with Him getting the full information of who He was. That’s what we see in chapter 1.

Here’s the point…no miracle occurred. Didn’t need miracles. It’s based on the Word of the Old Testament. They understood the Old Testament, they believed the Old Testament, they had a well-developed crystalogical doctrine. They understood who the Messiah was to be and what was to be fulfilled in the Messiah. They had accepted the Word of God. They had searched the scriptures which spoke of Him and they had embraced them and they only needed to be told who it is. That’s wonderful. And there are people who have had that in their background. There are people who have had a full presentation of the reality of Christ, they just at some point needed to be pointed to Him and told “Believe in Him.”

Then in chapter 4 we meet a second kind of unbelief, it’s a little deeper unbelief. It’s the unbelief that needs more than just the final fulfillment, it needs more information and that would be illustrated by the Samaritan woman and the people in the village of Sychar. Remember now, they are not true Jews, they have inter married with idolaters. Their religion is a hybrid kind of religion. They accepted the Pentateuch and they had some Messianic theology passed down from generation so they believed in the books of Moses, they believed in the coming of Messiah, and the woman at the well says, “We know that when Messiah comes, He will teach us everything.” So they connected Messiah with knowledge, that the Messiah will come and He’ll have full knowledge of everything. So they had a kind of a truncated idea of the Messiah and the Savior based on the Pentateuch, which is what they accepted as Samaritans and on some other information about the Messiah. Jesus talks to the woman, how does He demonstrate to her that He’s the Messiah? Because of His knowledge. They said…she said when Messiah comes He’ll teach us everything. Knowledge is what marked their messianic idea.

Well Jesus told her her history and she concluded this is the knowledge that only the Messiah could have. So she goes to the village and she says, “Look, I just met a man who told me everything, everything He could never have known. Is this the Messiah?” And the whole village comes and are converted…all of them. The harvest that Jesus talks about. And His soul is so satisfied. This is His delight. He says, “I just want to do the will of the Father and finish the work He gave Me to do, the work of salvation.” It’s a great moment. It’s the only time in all four gospels when a whole village repents and comes to faith in Christ and they aren’t even Jews. Again, no miracle…no miracle. Why? Because they were looking for the fulfillment of Scripture. They needed only more revelation…only more truth.

But there’s a third kind of unbelief and it’s the deepest kind of unbelief. It isn’t ready for the final fulfillment. It doesn’t have enough information. In fact, it’s such a deep kind of unbelief that it has no real confidence at all in the Messiah, or even the idea of Messiah. This is what our Lord faces in the text of John 4. So turn to John 4 and I want to show you why I say this. Look at verse 48, John 4:48. Jesus runs into this*basilikos*, that’s from the word *basileia* king, kingdom. This is a royal official he’s called, a royal official identified in this text, verse 49. But I want you to back up to verse 48 and listen to what Jesus said. “Unless you people see signs and wonders, you simply will not believe.” These are the people for whom Scripture is not enough. These are the people for whom divine revelation is not enough. This is the deepest kind of unbelief. It needs proof.

And, you know, the amazing thing is, Jesus graciously met those people where they were. He met them where they were. Chapter 5 verse 36, I read a little earlier, He says, “For the works which the Father has given Me to accomplish, the very works that I do testify about Me that the Father sent Me.” Look at the works that I do. That’s why He did them. They were held responsible for making the right conclusion based on what they saw. John 10:37, “If I do not do the works of My Father, do not believe Me. But if I do them, though you do not believe Me, believe the works so that you may know and understand that the Father is in Me and I in the Father, that I’m one with God.” He did the works.

Why did Jesus heal? Why did He cast out demons? Why did Her raise dead people? Why did He do these incredible miracles? He was reaching to that lowest level of obstinate unbelief. They want signs. This is like kind of a starter point to move people who are nowhere to the first step of entertaining the possibility that Jesus could be the one He claims to be.

Go back to chapter 2 verse 23. In chapter 2 and verse 23 Jesus was in Jerusalem at the Passover during the feast and many believed in His name. Why did they believe in His name? Because they observed His signs which He was doing. It wasn’t just Galilee, but Judea was full of people who in spite of the Old Testament, in spite of the Scripture they had had for centuries, had really no hope of coming to Christ, they needed to see signs and wonders. They needed to see miracles. These people have a superficial belief in His name. He doesn’t entrust Himself to them, you remember, because He knew what was in them. And then when introduced to one of them named Nicodemus who had come to this belief. What was his belief? What did they believe? Verse 2, “Rabbi, we know You’ve come from God, we—meaning those of us who believe—we know You’ve come from God as a teacher for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with Him.”

So what did they believe? They believed He was a teacher from God. Not more, but not less. We know You’re a teacher from God because of the miracles, we know that. That’s a start. That’s a beginning. And now when we come to chapter 4 we see that this kind of very deep unbelief is characteristic also of Galilee, verse 48, “Unless you people see signs and wonders, you simply will not believe.” Now remember, the disciples of John the Baptist, chapter 1, all they needed to hear from John was, “Behold the Lamb of God.” Jesus said, “Follow Me,” and they were off. They just needed the fulfillment. The woman at the well and the people in Sychar, they didn’t need miracles. They had believed enough of the Old Testament and had enough belief in Messiah that when Messiah demonstrated to be the one who had supernatural knowledge, they followed Him. There are no miracles in Samaria. But the unbelief is profound in Galilee and in Judea much deeper and it demands signs and wonders. And Jesus gave them.

Did they have any affect? Well some affect. There were some who believed. There were some who came to faith in Christ. Did they convince the entire nation that saw those miracles? No…no. He demonstrated His miracle power and they attributed His miracles to…whom?...Satan. They said, “He does what He does by the power of Satan.” They wanted to silence His words and they wanted to execute Him and they pulled it off.

Now when Jesus comes into Galilee, we’ll pick up the story here in chapter 4 and just look at the first few verses starting in verse 43, we have to contemplate at this point this matter of unbelief. So we can call this “Contemplating on Belief.”

“After the two days,” what two days? If you go back to verse 40, He had spent two days with the villagers from Sychar cause they asked Him to stay and teach them. It must have been two wonderful days, two days of intense instruction from their blessed Savior whom they had just come to know. He stayed there two days and even many more believed because of His teaching in those days.

After the two days then, He went forth from there to Galilee. That was the purpose when He left originally. If you go back to chapter 4 verse 3, He left Judea and went away again into Galilee and had to pass through Samaria to get there. So He reconnects with His purpose and heads toward Galilee. The little incident in Samaria,--do you remember?--proves the point of verse 42, that He’s the Savior of the world. He’s the Savior of the world, not just the lost sheep of the house of Israel, but He’s the Savior of the world. So He now having demonstrated that He is the Savior of the world will still take His message and His power demonstrations to the northern part of Israel, the land around the Sea of Galilee.

Now on the way there’s a very interesting comment made by John in verse 44. He goes into Galilee for Jesus Himself testified that a prophet has no honor in his own country. It…why does John put that in there? It’s a very interesting thing. It just kind of gets in the middle of verses 43 and 45 and you have to ask why is it there? It could have said there He went forth into Galilee and when He came to Galilee…so what’s verse 44 doing in there? “For Jesus Himself testified that a prophet has no honor in His own country.” Did He go in to prove that? Didn’t He have a purpose of proving a proverb? You know that proverb, “Familiarity breeds contempt.” Or as some have said, “This is the proof of man’s corruption that he never values what he’s familiar with.” We would say that, “Ah, a prophet has no honor in his own country. All experts come from out of town.” Did Jesus go to Galilee to prove that? Is this prophetic? Is John telling us that He’s not going to have any more success there then he had in Judea? Jesus’ work in Galilee would prove that true.

But even more specifically, see the word “country” there, His own country? That’s a very interesting word and a very important word. It is a word with the *patri* in it which is father in Greek or Latin, his fatherland, the place his ancestors came from. It’s used six times in the gospels and it always refers to Nazareth. And you know the story, what happened to Him when He went to Nazareth? He preached one sermon, what did they try to do? Stone Him to death, execute Him. So is that explaining the fact that He’s going in there to prove that point or is John giving us a prophecy that He will receive no honor in His own town? That’s true…that’s true.

And if we expand that word and it could be expanded in other contexts and say it could refer to the region around, it would still be true. Now it doesn’t mean that no one was converted in Galilee because there were some converted. In fact, in 1 Corinthians 15:6 after His resurrection, when He went to Galilee there were five hundred brethren gathered there. Five hundred out of the tens and twenties of thousands of people in Galilee, it’s a meager representation. So we could take the statement as a positive prophecy. He went there and gave testimony that a prophet has no honor in His own country, or we could take it in a negative way in which we would read it this way, that Jesus gave evidence of the fact that He had the power to overcome that human attitude, that proverbial human attitude. In any case, maybe the best way to understand it is simply to say it’s prophetic…it’s prophetic. He was not welcomed into His own town and while there were some who believed, the vast majority rejected Him. And this was in the face of many miracles.

Now John only gives two miracles in sixteen months in Galilee…two. He only records two. He was there for 16 months and did them daily. John gives us this one about the nobleman and the feeding of the five thousand men plus men and children in chapter 6. John’s very selective. But there were many other miracles that we read in Matthew, Mark and Luke who also record His Galilean ministry. He healed a demon-possessed man. He healed Peter’s mother-in-law and He healed many others who believed on Him. He healed a leper who received Him as Messiah, healed a paralytic, healed more and more. The word multitudes appears. He healed a Centurion’s servant, raised a widow’s son, healed Jairus’ daughter, the woman who touched Him, two blind men, a dumb man and on and on and on it goes. Fed five thousand, fed four thousand, walked on water, calmed a storm…all kinds of miracles. John only gives us just a couple. But there were relentless miracles day after day after day and basically was met with unbelief…it was met with unbelief. That is why we read in Matthew chapter 11, familiar words, “He began to denounce the cities in which most of His miracles were done because they didn’t repent. Woe to you Chorazin, woe to you Bethsaida, for if the miracles had occurred in Tyre and Sidon which occurred in you, they would have repented long ago in sack cloth and ashes. Nevertheless I say to you, it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the day of judgment than for you. And you, Capernaum, the main town in which He did His miracles in Galilee, “You, Capernaum, will not be exalted to heaven, will you? You will descend to Hades for if the miracles had occurred in Sodom which occurred in you, it would have remained to this day. Nevertheless I say to you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment than for you.” You’re better off to be in hell because you were killed in the fiery destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah than you are to be in hell having looked at and seen and experienced the miracles of Jesus in Capernaum. Which is to say another way, you’re better off to be a condemned homosexual than you are to be a condemned religious Jew.

So He goes into Galilee and He’s going to receive no honor or just a minor amount of respect and faith, small group. But the initial reception was welcoming, verse 45. “So when He came to Galilee, the Galileans received Him.” And again, this is the receiving that’s like the believing in chapter 2. They received Him because of His miracles, having seen all the things that He did in Jerusalem at the feast for they themselves also went to the feast. They were down there for the Passover before and after the Passover is followed by the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Everybody went to Jerusalem for that and that’s …that’s where they saw these miracles. So here again, this is respect, this is some degree of interest, this is the Nicodemus attitude, we know You must be a teacher come from God because nobody can do what You do if God’s not with him. It turns out to be terribly superficial as the rest of the story indicates…superficial faith.

But occasionally…occasionally though He is without honor in His own town and largely without honor in His own region, occasionally there is a story like the healing of the royal official’s son. That story’s in verses 46 to 54. And what marks that story is verse 50, the man believed the Word that Jesus spoke. Verse 53, “He himself believed and his whole household.”

Here we have in the middle of the unbelief and the rejection, the story of a man who believed and a family and a household who believed. This is John’s point. You can have an entire region, cities exposed to Jesus’ ministry, teaching, words, works, miracles, signs, they can receive Him to a certain degree, identify Him as a teacher from God. The only way that they will ever be forgiven and receive salvation is by believing in Him…believing in Him.

I want to close, and we’ll go to that story next time, but I want to close by having you turn to Acts 16 because I want to reiterate this truth in another context, that salvation is all about believing, nothing more and certainly nothing less. You cannot be saved if you do not believe and you cannot be saved if you think that believing and working are necessary.

The jailor in Philippi comes and he says to Paul and Silas, verse 30, who had been his prisoners, singing hymns, praising God. An earthquake came, the jailor awoke, you know the story. He’s about to kill himself because he’s lost his prisoners and he could pay with his own life. Paul tells him, “Don’t harm yourself, we’re all here.” He calls for lights, rushes in, trembling with fear, falls down before Paul and Silas and he asked the right questions, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” Okay? What must I do to be saved? That is the question.

Listen to this answer. They said, “Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved, you and your household.” How is one saved? By what? Believing in the Lord Jesus, that’s how you’re saved, believing in the Lord Jesus, in His person, in His work, His death, His resurrection, all that the gospel record affirms to be true about Him. And they spoke the word concerning the Lord to the jailor together with all those who were in his house.

You have to believe. You have to believe in the Lord Jesus. Well they didn’t have enough information to believe in the Lord Jesus yet, so they told them all about the Lord Jesus. They took them that very hour of the night, washed their wounds, the jailor did, the wounds of the prisoners Paul and Silas, and immediately he was baptized, he and all his household and he brought them into his house and set food before them, rejoiced greatly having believed in God with his whole household. In one moment, one evening, those people in that family and that household were saved. They went from death to life, darkness to light, hell to heaven by hearing the word concerning Christ, Romans 10, believing it they were immediately baptized to proclaim that union with Christ in His death and resurrection. They were full of joy. Conversion had come to a household of a jailor.

Did they have to go on some religious pilgrimage? Did they have to do some penance? Did they have to achieve some moral stature? Did they have to clean up their act? No. What must I do to be saved? Believe in the Lord Jesus. Believe in the Lord Jesus. If you don’t, you will die in your sins.

Now next time we’re going to come to the story of how the royal official with the sick son came to believe. Let’s bow in prayer.

Again, Lord, we always feel like we have feasted on Your truth, on Your Word, as inadequate as our words might be, Your word is life to us and joy and peace and power. Thank You for the experience that we’ve had even today with the Savior in these very few verses. What a thrill it is for us to know the truth, to know the true One, the true and living God through the living Lord Jesus Christ. I pray for those who don’t believe, who fight that, who are unwilling to turn from their sin and put their trust in You as Savior, I pray, Lord, that they might feel so heavy upon them the weight of the reality that they will die in their sins and perish forever in conscious torment in hell, that that burden will be so heavy they can’t rest, they can’t sleep until they have come to trust in You, to put their faith in Christ.

Father, do Your work in every heart, we pray. May Christ be exalted in us and through us, refresh us in the joyous opportunity we have to tell others that they must believe, they must believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. Give us zeal and faithfulness to declare that message, we pray in His wonderful name.

**Saving Faith in a Herodian Household**

**John 4:46-54**

Code: 43-24

We come now to the Word of God and it is a privilege for us to hear the very voice of God through His Word. Let’s open to the fourth chapter of John’s gospel. We are wrapping up this fourth chapter, looking at the final segment, the final story in chapter 4 from verses 46 to 54. It is a miracle story about healing. It is designed as would be consistent with John’s purpose, to demonstrate the deity of the Lord Jesus Christ through His supernatural power. But it is also a story about believing. It is a story particularly about believing and what it means to believe.

Let me remind you of the story by reading it, starting in verse 46. Speaking of our Lord Jesus, it says, “Therefore He came again to Cana of Galilee where He had made the water wine. And there was a royal official whose son was sick at Capernaum. When he heard that Jesus had come out of Judea into Galilee, he went to Him and was imploring Him to come down and heal his son, for he was at the point of death. So Jesus said to him, ‘Unless you people see signs and wonders, you simply will not believe.’ The royal official said to Him, ‘Sir, come down before my child dies.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Go, your son lives.’ The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and started off. As he was now going down, his slaves met him saying that his son was living. So he inquired of them the hour when he began to get better. Then they said to him, ‘Yesterday at the seventh hour the fever left him.’ So the father knew that it was at that hour in which Jesus said to him, ‘Your son lives.’ And he himself believed and his whole household. This is again a second sign that Jesus performed when He had come out of Judea into Galilee." The first sign: the wedding at Cana, the miracle of making water into wine. This is the second, the first recorded in John chapter 2.

This is a miracle story. Not unusual in the gospels. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are full of miracle stories. Jesus’ ministry began in the south, in Judea, the southern part of the nation Israel, and He did many miracles in Judea. In fact, verse 45 says that when He came to Galilee, the Galileans received Him, having seen all the things that He did in Jerusalem at the feast, for they themselves also went to the feast. So around the Passover, down in the area surrounding Jerusalem, Jesus had done many miracles. And, of course, at the Passover season and the subsequent festival after the Passover, the Galileans were there as they always were at this great event in the calendar year of Israel, and so they saw the miracles of Jesus. He did them in Judea in the beginning of His ministry. He did them in Judea at the end of His ministry. And in the middle of that three-year period of ministry, for about sixteen months or so, He was in Galilee and that’s where we find Him in verse 46. He is in Galilee, verse 45 says, He came to Galilee, the Galileans received Him, they received Him in the same way that the people of Jerusalem received Him, as it says in chapter 2:23, they believed in Him as a miracle worker. They received Him as a miracle worker but you remember in John 2:23 to 25 it said, “Jesus didn’t commit Himself to them because He knew their hearts and He knew that that kind of faith was a superficial faith. They believed in Him as a miracle worker. And I want to establish that that was universal. There is nowhere in Matthew, Mark, Luke or John where the leadership who rejected Him as Savior and Messiah ever questioned His miracle power.

No one ever questioned that. It was impossible to question that. The miracles were too common, and too complete, and too unmistakably divine and there were far too many of them to deny. And so it was that kind of reception that we saw in chapter 2:23, the kind that Nicodemus gave Him. Nicodemus is an illustration of someone who saw in Him a miracle worker and Nicodemus said, “Nobody can do what you do unless God is with him.” So that was the same kind of attitude, the same level of belief that you find in Galilee. They believed in Him as a miracle worker.

And I would just suggest to you that that’s a rather common way to believe in Jesus, to believe that He is a miracle worker. And there’s plenty of evidence, of course, for that. He came and essentially banished disease from Palestine for the duration of His ministry. The record is contained in the gospels, the four gospels, for anyone to read. There’s never been a successful detraction from the testimony of the gospel writers. There has never been an effective assault on the miracles of Jesus that has somehow been able to debunk them in any way because it’s just too obvious, too many eyewitnesses, too many places, too many times, too many unique and differing events.

In fact, the miracles of Jesus were so ubiquitous that at the end of the gospel of John, the very final statement, 21:25 says, “And there are also many other things which Jesus did which if they were written in detail, I suppose that even the world itself would not contain the books that would be written.”

So what you have is a very extensive record of the miracles of Jesus in the gospels, but that’s a drop in the bucket compared to with what could have been written and the details of which would have literally filled the world with books. So here is one of those accounts of one of those many, many miracles that Jesus did. But this one specifically suits John’s purpose because this is a miracle about believing, about believing. In fact, that comes up in verse 48 where Jesus says, “Unless you people see signs and wonders, you simply will not believe.” Comes up in verse 50, “The man believed the Word that Jesus spoke to him.” It reappears in verse 53 at the end, “He himself believed and his whole household.” It is a story of a miracle but it is more than that, it is about believing. And I simply remind you that the purpose for the writing of the gospel of John, according to chapter 20 verse 31, is that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God and that believing you might have life in His name. So John’s gospel is the gospel of believing…the Greek word believe, *pisteuo* is used about a hundred times in the gospel, and almost all of those times it has to do with believing for salvation. John’s message is against the background of Judaism which is a system of religion like every other system of religion in the world, that believes you gain heaven by something you do. Oh faith is a part of it, but not all of it. These are work systems. They had to do with ceremonies and rituals and routines and forms of morality and obedience and kindness and good deeds. And the accumulated effect of the goodness of a person is what gains heaven. This is contrary to all of that, and that, by the way, is inimitable to every false religious system on the planet. There are only two kinds of religion that exist. One is the religion of human achievement, and the other is the religion of faith, and that’s the true gospel. Everything else is some mixture of believing and doing and that kind of religion fills hell, populates hell. The only religion that populates heaven is that which is connected to faith and faith alone, for by grace are you saved through faith is Paul’s summation of that in Ephesians 2.

And we’ve already learned this in the gospel of John, chapter 1 verse 12, “As many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God.” How do you become a child of God? By receiving Christ. What does that mean? “Even to those who believe in His name.” Believing is receiving, fully believing in His name. What do you mean His name? All that He is, everything that is true about Him. That’s the idea of the use of name in the language of Scripture. When God says, “My name is I AM that I AM,” He means My name is who I AM. And when you say you believe in the name of Jesus Christ, that means to say that you believe in everything that He is and does. You believe fully in all the gospel.

So, to become a child of God is simply a matter of believing in His name. In the third chapter we saw it again in that familiar sixteenth verse, “For God so loved the world He gave His only begotten Son that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.” It’s not connected to works, rituals, ceremonies, accomplishment, morality, goodness…it’s believing, believing. He who believes…verse 18…in Him is not judged. He who does not believe has been judged already because he has not believe in the name of the *monogenes*, the primary one, the supreme one who is the Son of God. John 3:36 ends the chapter, “He who believes in the Son has eternal life. He who does not obey the Son will not see life.” You believe, you have life; you fail to believe which is an act of obedience because you’re commanded to believe, and you perish.

We find this emphasis all through the gospel of John, just a couple of other illustrations. In the eighth chapter and verse 21, He said to them, Jesus did, “I go away and you will seek Me and you will die in your sin. Where I’m going you can’t come.” You’re not going to get to heaven. You’re going to die in your sin, you’re going to perish.

Why is that the case? How is it that that will happen? That’s the question. Verse 24, “Therefore I said to you, you will die in your sins for unless you believe that I AM.” In other words, believe in who I AM, “You will die in your sins.”

In the tenth chapter and the twenty-second verse, this is so very foundational to everything that is true about the Christian gospel. Chapter 10 verse 22, “The Feast of Dedication took place at Jerusalem in the winter. Jesus is walking in the Temple in the portico of Solomon,” one of the porches inside the Temple. “The Jews gather around Him,” these would be the leaders of Israel, were saying, “How long will You keep us in suspense? If You’re the Christ, tell us plainly.”

“Jesus answered them, ‘I told you and you do not believe. The works that I do in My Father’s name, these testify of Me.’” What else can I do? I’ve done all these works, eliminating disease, casting out demons, doing natural miracles, raising dead people. You will not believe, that’s the problem. Verse 26, “You do not believe because you are not of My sheep. My sheep hear My voice, I know them. They follow Me and I give eternal life to them and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of My hand.”

You don’t believe. My sheep hear Me and they believe. You refuse to believe. You will die in your sins, you will perish. This is repeatedly the message of the gospel of John, believe and die, and perish, forever in hell. Disbelieve and die and perish forever in hell. Believe in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and spend forever in the glory of heaven. Eternal salvation comes to those and only those who believe in the full true person and work of Christ, the true gospel, not a truncated gospel, not a superficial gospel, not a shallow gospel, not an inadequate gospel, not a false gospel, but the true gospel…the true gospel.

A very instructive text on this, just to look at for a moment, would be the eleventh chapter of Hebrews. Turn to that chapter because the eleventh chapter of Hebrews is the faith chapter in the Bible and we have here an important definition of what it means to believe. You know, it’s very popular to say today I’m a believer, I believe, I have strong beliefs, I’m a person of faith. Sometimes people say, “I’m very spiritual,” meaning they believe in certain things. And when we talk about believing in something, we can be talking in very nebulous sort of intuitive self-designed and devised kind of notions. But that is not how the Bible describes saving faith.

First of all, verse 38, the end of chapter 10, quotes that great Old Testament principle of Habakkuk 2:4, “The just shall live by faith. It’s always been that way. Salvation was always by faith, never by works in the Old Testament or the New…the just shall live by faith. And here it is repeated in verse 38 by the writer of Hebrews. “My righteous ones shall live by faith.” Verse 39, “We’re not of those who shrink back to destruction but of those who have faith to the persevering of the soul.” You come to the truth, you either have faith in it to the salvation of your soul, or you walk away from it and you literally shrink back to destruction.

What kind of faith are we talking about here? Well it’s defined for us in the next verse, chapter 11 verse 1. “Now faith is…now faith is,” here’s the definition, okay? “It is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” So we know right away faith involves something we don’t have and faith involves something we can’t see. You remember when I read 1 Peter 1 it says that we love Christ but we’ve not seen Him. We don’t see Him now. “But having not seen Him, we love Him.” Faith involves something not yet attained, something not seen. That’s faith.

If you just took that, you could be misled because there are lots of things in life for which we exercise faith, things that we can’t see, things that we hope for, things that we aren’t sure about. I just went through a surgery on my hand, they put me to sleep. That’s the last thing I know. I do know the doctor wrote a big happy face on my right hand and put “yes” so he didn’t do something to my left hand. I trusted he could find the happy face in the OR. We all know the story about the people who had the wrong leg cut off. Human faith…look, human faith has two components. One is, it’s based on experience…it’s based on experience. In other words, you know that that usually goes right. It’s like when you go to a restaurant, you look at the menu and you eat what they give you, you have no idea who’s in the kitchen or what they’re doing. You assume that this is what you ordered and it’s safe.

Why? Because people do it all the time and it generally is. But it isn’t always safe. We’ve all had food poisoning and we’ve all seen those terrible reports on the news about what people in the kitchen are doing to the food before they serve it. But experience tells us that it…you can trust this but sometimes it’s wrong…sometimes it’s wrong. And sometimes it’s fatally wrong. Some people go into surgery and they never come out. Some people are taking in things to their body that they think would be okay for them and it kills them. We understand that.

We’re not talking about that kind of faith. We’re not kind of talking about a human kind of faith based upon a repeated experience. We’re talking about something for which you have had no experience. You are putting your eternal destiny in the hands of the Lord Jesus Christ and you have never done that before. You don’t have that experience to build on.

So why do you do that? Why would you say no to your sin, no to your own ambition, no to your own will, no to everything that you cherish and everything you want to do? No to all the things that delight your fallen nature and embrace Christ fully? Why? Well, because that’s the only way to get to heaven. You haven’t seen heaven. You don’t know anything about heaven other than what’s revealed in the Scripture. You…contrary to what you read in silly books, people don’t go to heaven and come back. You’re…you’re taking a step that is the most serious step you’ve ever taken in your life and it literally is your life now and forever and you have no experience. So you better be sure this is a move that you really want to make. You need to know that it’s not going to go wrong. And that’s what verse 1 is saying…faith is the assurance, faith is the conviction…I want to talk about those two words…faith is assurance, and faith is conviction.

What do you mean assurance? The Greek word *hupostasis* literally to stand under, foundation, it speaks of a foundation. You’re sitting on a concrete foundation. It’s not subject to whim. It’s not subjective. It’s objective. It’s concrete, it’s full of rebar. So we believe in something that is absolutely firmly established and concrete. What is that? The Word of God, right? The Word of God. We believe in the promises of God. We believe in the commands of God. We believe in the truth of God as revealed in Holy Scripture. So when we talk here about the assurance of something hoped for, it’s not assurance in a subjective sense. It’s not some personal feeling or intuition. Faith is the foundation, the concrete certainty about truth which comes down then to the truth of the Word of God which then focuses on the reliability of the gospel…the reliability of the gospel, the truth of the gospel contained in Scripture. We’re talking about a certainty.

And although we haven’t been to heaven and back, the One who dwells in heaven has sent us full and complete and accurate information about it. Everything we need to know is revealed on the pages of the reliable Word of the living God. And so it is a firm, certain, concrete assurance in which we believe, and that then leads us to the second word, conviction…conviction. Conviction goes right alongside assurance, conviction. That means something that we hold to with absolute commitment.

So when we talk about believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, this is not pie in the sky, this is not some kind of esoteric feeling, this isn’t some Jesus of our own imagination. This is to we believe in the absolute veracity and reliability of Holy Scripture and the gospel contained in that Scripture, to the point that we will bank our everlasting life on the truth of Holy Scripture and it becomes for us the dominating conviction that drives our living and informs our hope. That’s the kind of faith we’re talking about, a real faith in truth as revealed in Scripture that focuses on the person of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now we are all called to believe that gospel truth, based on that firm foundation producing that strong conviction. Not to do so is the ultimate human tragedy and it is an eternal tragedy at that because everyone will live forever in consciousness, conscious joy or conscious torment. John then takes up the issue of believing as the issue of all issues, believing in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and all that He is, building your life in time and eternity on the firm foundation, on the conviction that Holy Scripture containing the gospel is absolutely true…absolutely true.

Earlier in the book of Hebrews, and this might be instructive for us for just a moment, people are warned by the writer of Hebrews about the danger of coming to the edge of believing and walking back. Look at chapter 2 verse 2, we read, “If the Word is spoken through angels,” that refers to the Law of Moses, “the Word spoken through angels proved unalterable and every transgression and disobedience received a just penalty,” and that was the nature of the Mosaic Law, you break it and you’re punished. If that, if violating the Law of Moses had that kind of consequence, how will we escape if we neglect so great a foundation. If they didn’t escape who broke the Law of Moses, how will we escape if we ignore the gospel of salvation. It was first spoken through the Lord, and confirmed to us by those who heard. What does that mean? The Apostles. And how was it confirmed? God testified by signs and wonders and various miracles and gifts of the Holy Spirit according to His own will.

So the gospel came, Jesus spoke it, the Apostles spoke it, and it was attested and confirmed by miracles. Jesus wasn’t the only one who did the miracles. Do you remember? He delegated the power to the Apostles who healed the sick and raised the dead as well. How will you escape the judgment of God if you neglect such a salvation which was confirmed to us through signs and miracles. That’s why the gospel records are full of those signs. It just puts you on notice of the danger you live in if you reject what has been confirmed.

Chapter 4 and verse 1 and 2 warns about failing to enter in to that salvation rest, coming short of salvation rest. And then verse 2 describes why, “For indeed we have had good news preached to us, just as they also. But the Word they heard did not profit them because it was not united by faith in those who heard, for we who have believed enter that rest…enter that rest.” It’s a matter of believing and so they are warned. You have heard the Old Testament, he’s telling these Hebrews, you have heard concerning Christ the fulfillment of the Old Testament. You have heard of all the miracles proclaimed by those who were there. You know the apostolic testimony. If you walk away from this, you enter into the severest judgment. Chapter 6 repeats it again in verse 4. If you’ve been enlightened, tasted the heavenly gift, made a partaker of the Holy Spirit, tasted the good Word of God, the powers of the age to come, all of that describes the ministry of Jesus and the Apostles. If you’ve been exposed to all of that and then fallen away, turned your back and walked away, it’s impossible to renew you again to repentance because if you rejected with that full revelation, you’re now guilty of crucifying the Son of God and putting Him to open shame. Don’t walk away, don’t come all the way to the full revelation in Christ, turn your back and walk away. That is deadly dangerous.

One more, chapter 10 verse 26, “If you go on, or if we go on sinning willfully, that’s unbelief, the ultimate and damning sin, if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins.” All that remains is an expectation, a terrifying expectation of judgment and the fury of a fire which will consume the adversaries. And then he goes back to the comparison with the Law. “Anyone who set aside the Law of Moses, dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled underfoot the Son of God and has regarded as unclean the blood of the Covenant by which He was sanctified and has insulted the Spirit of grace. For we know Him who said, ‘Vengeance is Mine, I will repay.’” And verse 31, “It’s a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of a living God.” You don’t want to know the truth, be brought all the way to the truth, turn your back and walk away. You will receive the most severe punishment.

Now let’s take that concept, go back to John 4 and think about it in connection to the nation Israel: Judah, Judea and Galilee. They had the Old Testament so they had the revelation of God speaking of the coming Messiah. They not only had the revelation, what the prophets wrote, what I read you from Peter what the prophets wrote and searched to see about the sufferings and glories of the Messiah to come, they had that revelation. They also had the fulfillment of that revelation. John said, “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” The Messiah comes. There’s a…there’s a completion of all the Old Testament prophecies in Christ. So they have the Old Testament and they have the completion in the New Testament concerning Christ. In addition, they have all the miracles, all the miracles attesting to His deity. That is the complete revelation.

Let me give you a way to look at that that takes you back through John. In chapter 1, Jesus met some of the disciples of John the Baptist. John had said, “There’s the Lamb of God, go follow Him,” so they did. He never did a miracle for them, and they believed in Him as their Messiah. Why? They had the Old Testament knowledge. They had a complete Old Testament knowledge. All they were waiting for was the fulfillment. And when the Messiah came, they believed in Him. No miracles…no miracles.

Then you come to the woman at the well and the village of Sychar, all of those Samaritans. No miracles, they had some knowledge of the Old Testament, the Pentateuch. They had some idea of Messiah. Jesus gave them more. He spent two days with them explaining more about the Old Testament, more about it and they believed…again no miracles. Yes He demonstrated divine knowledge, but there were no miracles. It was enough for the first disciples to see that Jesus was the fulfillment of the Old Testament. It was enough for the Samaritans to have the full understanding of the Old Testament filled out and then see that Jesus was the fulfillment of the Old Testament and they were redeemed, they were believers. They believed.

But when it came to the rest of Israel…Judah and Galilee…they fit in to verse 48. “Unless you people see signs and wonders, you simply will not believe.” You’re so stubborn that even though it is clear that I am the fulfillment of the Old Testament, that I am the only one who could fulfill the Old Testament detail by detail, and He manifested that all the way through to His resurrection, you demand more and more signs and wonders. That is the deepest kind of unbelief. And by the way, when unbelief rejects the light, the darkness deepens. Now every heart, Romans 1, every heart, every human being has the light of the knowledge of God. His Law is written in the heart, Romans 2. Conscience activates that knowledge of the Law and convicts the sinner, the Law of God written in the heart, Romans 2. Romans 1, “That which may be known of God is manifest in them, God has placed it in them. That’s the light of the knowledge of God that every pagan in every corner of the planet has. But when you reject the light, the darkness deepens and deepens and deepens and deepens and deepens. When you come all the way to the full light and turn around and walk away, you cannot be renewed to repentance because you rejected with full revelation. That’s where Israel was.

So here in this little passage that I read you in John, we have an illustration of what was very unusual. Someone actually being saved. Look at the end of the ministry of Jesus in Judea, there were 120 gathered in the Upper Room. At the end of the ministry of Jesus in Galilee, according to 1 Corinthians 15:6, there were five hundred. That’s all out of the multiple tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands that lived in the land of Israel and Jesus crisscrossed every aspect of that land. They had the Old Testament. They had the fulfillment. They had the signs and He said, “You still will not believe. It comes down to believing. But here is an illustration of belief and how one man believed and the process involved in that faith.

Let’s look at him and meet him in verse 46. This will take just a few minutes to buzz through. “He came again to Cana of Galilee where He had made the water wine,” back in chapter 2. “There was a royal official whose son was sick at Capernaum.” Royal official *Basilikos,*that’s a connection to the word *basileus* which is king. This was somebody who was an official of the king. There was only one king in that part of the world and that was the king of Galilee and Perea, an Idumaean Herod Antipas who was the son of Herod the Great, who was the Idumaean non-Jewish ruler of that part of the world. The Jews didn’t like him. He was a vassal king that served the purposes of Rome and ruled as a petty tyrant. He was a very evil bad man. You remember John the Baptist denounced him for marrying his brother’s wife and getting involved in incest. And then you remember in a drunken orgy one night this daughter of his wife did a dance and he said, “I’ll give you anything you want.” And she wanted the head of John the Baptist on a platter. He’s a bad man…Herod. He’s afraid of Jesus. He was afraid of John the Baptist. In fact, when Jesus started ministering, he thought John the Baptist that he beheaded came back from the dead to get him. And by the way, in the entire ministry of Jesus, there was one town in Galilee Jesus never went to, Tiberius…never…one time, the home of Herod. Herod wanted Him dead. Herod was afraid of Him. Bad man.

Here’s a royal official connected to Herod…Herod Antipas, the ruler of Galilee and Perea. He has a son who is sick at Capernaum. Capernaum is the lake town at the north end of the lake, the Sea of Galilee as it’s called. He has a son. He believes this. He believes Jesus is a miracle worker. He believes what the rest of the people in Galilee believe. And what do they believe? Verse 45, “He came to Galilee, the Galileans received Him, having seen all the things that He did in Jerusalem at the feast for they themselves also went to the feast.” When He was at the feast, He did miracles. John 2:23, “Now when He was in Jerusalem at the Passover during the feast, many believed in His name, observing His signs which He was doing.” They believed but superficially. Remember that? He didn’t trust Himself to them for He knew all men. And because He didn’t need anyone to testify concerning man, for He Himself knew what was in man.

In other words, they had a superficial faith. What did they believe? They believed He could do miracles, period, paragraph. Nicodemus was one of them. Nicodemus said, “Nobody can do what You do unless God is with him.” Nobody can do these signs that You do unless God is with Him. That’s what they believed. So that was the popular idea. They believed Jesus was a miracle worker. That’s true and that’s a starting place, but that better not be the ending place. And here’s a man who like Nicodemus believed Jesus was a miracle worker. Here is a man who caught the wind and look, Capernaum was the headquarters of Jesus’ miracle ministry in Galilee. You read Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, you’re only going to find a couple of miracles in John done in Galilee, but myriads of them are recorded by the other writers. Massive miracles going on in Galilee and centered at Capernaum.

So here’s where the royal official was. In fact, Capernaum had so many miracles that in Matthew 11:24, Jesus said about that city that if Sodom had seen what Capernaum seen, it would still be around…it would still be around. It will be worse for Capernaum in the time of judgment then for the wretched homosexual city of Sodom. Hell will be hotter for the Capernaum people than the Sodomites because of what they saw of the miracles of Jesus. So this is His town. So He knows there’s a miracle worker named Jesus. When he heard that Jesus had come out of Judea into Galilee and He had a sixteen-month or so ministry in Galilee, he sent to Him…we don’t know exactly when this happened during His Galilean ministry, but after He had done enough miracles at Capernaum for him to know He was a miracle worker, he comes to Him. Okay, that’s going from Galilee up to Cana of Galilee from Capernaum, the Sea of Galilee in the low country and lake side, all the way on the back side of Nazareth, that’s got to be sixteen-seventeen-eighteen miles uphill walking. He comes a long distance and when he arrives at Jesus, he is imploring, steadfastly pleading with Him to come down…down the hill all the way back to Capernaum and heal his son because his son is at the point of death.

Now this is very often what moves someone from this rather philosophical view of Jesus that says, “Look, I’m not denying He’s a miracle worker, I’m not denying His power, His supernatural power, everybody saw it, nobody denied it, nobody tried to deny it. But what moves a man from having a sort of detached view of Jesus as a miracle worker, to moving a much more closely to the reality of who He is is desperation. And that’s still true…that’s still true. You know, Jesus put it this way in Matthew 9 when He said, “The people who aren’t sick aren’t looking for a doctor. It’s desperation that drives people and it drove this man…it drove this man, this royal official under hated Herod to come to Jesus and to beg Him to give life to his son. The royal official said to Him…again in verse 49…’Sir, come down before my child dies.’” So he believed that He could heal people. He didn’t necessarily believe He could raise dead people. He has a belief in Jesus as a miracle worker. We could call it a sort of fearing faith, a kind of faint faith. He’s like the man, you remember, who said in Mark 9, “Lord I believe, help my unbelief.” It’s a partial faith. He believes that He’s a miracle worker because there’s plenty of evidence of that. And it was Jesus, you know, who said, “Unless you people see signs and wonders, you simply will not believe.” So this is what that is. You…you believe, you believe I’m a miracle worker. That’s fine, that’s true. That’s not enough.

But Jesus accepted that faith because He did miracles to bring people to that initial step. That’s a place to start. Somebody might suggest, “Well why would Jesus accommodate that kind of superficial faith?” Because all faith has to start somewhere, doesn’t it? Why do you think He did the miracles? So the people would draw this conclusion that He was a miracle worker and make the necessary connection that this is supernatural which they also made and then go from there to the next steps.

Jesus then responded to the man’s plea. Said to him, “Go, your son lives.” At that very moment that son’s body was instantaneously, miraculously healed. And something also happened to the father. Verse 50, “The man believed the Word that Jesus spoke to him and started off.” At first he believed Jesus was a miracle worker, he believed in His works. Now he believes in His words.

Many times in the gospel of John you’re going to hear that, “Believe Me for the works, believe Me for the words.” Jesus was not only a miracle worker, He was truth teller. Everything He said pointed to His deity. “Never a man spoke like this man,” they said about Him. So this man is moved from believing in the power of Jesus to believing in the truth of Jesus, in the words of Jesus, the trustworthiness of what He said. This is essential. It’s wonderful to read the gospel account and see Jesus as a miracle worker. But you’ve got to get beyond the works to the words, right? Because the works have no saving power, the words have the saving power and the man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him. And he started off.

As he was now going down, his slaves met him saying that his son was living. I mean, full of life. So he inquired of them the hour when he began to get better. And they said to him, “Yesterday at the seventh hour the fever left him, the seventh hour.” There’s a big discussion about whether that’s Jewish time which starts at 6 A.M. and makes it one o’clock, or whether it’s Roman time at noon and makes it seven o’clock.

But that’s not the point. The point is now what time was it. The point was what time was it when the healing happened so he could connect that with the words of Jesus. And they said the seventh hour, so the father knew that it was at that hour in which Jesus said to him, “Your son lives.”

Now it says, “He himself believed.” Well wait a minute. He already believed, what do you mean he himself believed? Well this is a very emphatic statement that it’s got an emphatic pronoun in there, so his faith has gone to another level. And not only that, he himself believed and his whole household. Well you’ve heard that biblical language before, haven’t you? Remember the Philippian jailor, he believed and his whole household. Now we’re talking about not believing Jesus is a miracle worker, and not believing in His works and then believing in His words, but believing in His person…believing in the name of Christ. I think somewhere in the encounter with this man, Jesus filled in the blanks of who He was, of His person. It simply says, “He himself believed.” But he already believed? Yeah, he believed He was a miracle worker. That’s not enough. Yeah he believed His words were true, that that’s not enough. Now he believed in His person…in His name, in the fullness of who He is along with His whole household. So you had a village saved in chapter 4, in the beginning of the chapter. Now you have a household saved. That could mean kids, wife, in-laws and even servants. Salvation comes to the house of a Herodian. Remember the Herodian court, one of those called Herodians in Matthew 22:16, hated by the Jews. So Samaritan village and a Herodian house. And this is to remind us of verse 42 that He is the Savior of the world. He’s the Savior of the world. Not just different nations, like Jews and Gentiles, Samaritans illustrating the Gentiles. Not just different races but different ranks. He saved some fishermen in chapter 1. He saved an immoral woman who was a half-breed in chapter 4. Eventually he saved a high level erudite Jewish Pharisee, Nicodemus, and here He saves the household of some Herodians. This again reminds us that the gospel is to the world. Whoever believes will not perish but have everlasting life.

What are we talking about when we say, “Put your faith in Christ. Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you’ll be saved?” Believe in Him as a miracle worker. Believe His works to be the very works of God. No one can do what He did except God is with him. Believe His words to be the very words of God. When He spoke, God spoke. More than that, believe in His full person as the Son of God. And that’s the purpose of John, “These things are written that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God and that believing you might have life in His name. That day, that little family and household had life in His name. And not long after this, of course, months…He carried the full weight of their punishment on the cross and died for all their sins, providing a full atonement.

Where are you on that line? Pretty hard to deny Jesus was a miracle worker, really impossible, really contrary to history. Impossible to deny that His words were divine, supernaturally. No one ever heard anyone speak like He spoke. That’s one of the things you find when you study the gospels and you study the words of Jesus. They’re just obviously transcendent and divine.

But that’s not enough either. You can call Him the greatest worker that ever lived. You can say He’s the greatest teacher that ever lived. That’s not enough. You have to believe in His person as a Son of God and the Savior of the world, believing in Him in that full sense of who He is and what He came to do is the only way to have eternal life. It’s a gift God gives to those who believe in His Son.

Father, we again come before You at the end of this wonderful time together in service, ministry, worship, fellowship. Thankful for the simple straightforward message of the gospel that we don’t have to achieve something to have eternal life. It is a gift, it comes to those who simply believe. But we also have been warned again of the tremendous horrific danger of knowing the truth and not believing. How will we escape who neglects so great a salvation? How much severer punishment shall he be thought worthy who tramples underfoot the blood of the covenant, does despite to the Spirit of grace? It’s a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

So, Lord, I just pray that there would be those who have been brought to understand the truth concerning Christ and the fullness of who He is, and that they would come to believe that You would grant them the gift of faith. We know it is a divine gift and yet we know the sinner is commanded to believe. So, Lord, awaken the dead sinner, scatter and shatter the darkness and bring faith, saving faith, for Your praise and Your glory we pray. Amen.

**The Damning Power of False Religion**

**John 5:1–16**

Code: 43-25

I do want you to open your Bible now to the fifth chapter of the gospel of John…the fifth chapter of the gospel of John. This is a very important portion of Scripture and not for the reason that most people think. It’s a story about a man whom Jesus healed. That in itself is a rather common occurrence in the New Testament. And for the man, of course, a remarkable experience.

But that really is only incidental to the point of this passage and we want to get a grip on the point of the passage, don’t we? That’s very, very important. We have been told this story many times. For a couple of reasons this story is memorable. One of them is because of the name of the pool, the Pool of Bethesda. From the time you were in Sunday School, you heard about the man by the pool of Bethesda, And another indicator of this story and its familiarity is the fact that there were 38 years that this man had been ill. We all know the story of the man who was ill for 38 years by the pool of Bethesda whom Jesus healed.

But there’s so much more to the story than just that. Those, of course, make it memorable for us. But this is not a story about a healing, this is a story about false religion. This is a story about the power of false religion, the devastating grip of false religion, the damning force that false religion exerts on people’s minds and souls, even in the face of the truth.

The remarkable emphasis of this story is found in its conclusion. Go down to chapter 5 verse 16 and you read these words, “The Jews were persecuting Jesus. The Jews were persecuting Jesus.”

When John speaks of the Jews, he’s not simply talking about any Jewish people in Israel. He uses that as a technical term for the leaders, the religious leaders. They are in the gospel of John the ones in view when John refers to the Jews. The religious leaders then were persecuting Jesus. The Greek verb *dioko* means to chase, or to pursue, or to run down. And with hostility, in this case, and thus it’s translated, to persecute, it’s a present tense verb, or a verb of continuous action in the imperfect. It means they have been continually after Jesus. This then is a miracle that triggers persecution…persecution that runs all the way to the cross, all the way to the execution of Jesus at Calvary.

Now let me give you a little bit of background up to now. We have gone through the opening four chapters of the gospel of John which have clearly indicated to us that Jesus is God. He is introduced to us in the first chapter as the Creator, the One who made everything that exists and without Him was not anything made that was made. We are told that He, the eternal Word, God, became man, took on human flesh, and we beheld His glory.

We have seen Him directed…His disciples, the disciples of John the Baptist directed to Him as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. We have been introduced to Him, therefore, as the Messiah. We have heard from His own lips that He is the only Savior, that whoever believes in Him will be saved from perishing forever in hell. Those who reject Him will be judged. We have seen His works, His mighty works, as well as heard His powerful words. We’re aware of the miraculous indications of His knowledge. He knew what was in the mind of man. He knew the history of the Samaritan woman that He had never met. So we have seen His deity on display. We’ve heard powerful words, we’ve even seen His miracle power just in the end of chapter 4 in the healing of the nobleman’s son, a miracle in behalf of a boy who was near death.

Those are just samples of what Jesus was demonstrating in the ministry that He was carrying on. As we come to chapter 5, I just remind you that we’ve already gotten into the Galilean ministry, a ministry of about sixteen months, after almost a year in Judea where He was ministering then He went to Galilee and He will be there for about sixteen months or so and then wrap up the final months of His ministry back in Judea up to Passion week and His death and resurrection.

Now all through the early days, months of His ministry, His words and His works are giving testimony to His deity, that He is the Messiah, to put in the language of John, that He is the Christ, the son of God and that we are to believe in His name and by believing in His name, we have eternal life. But here we find the Jews were persecuting Him. That catches us somewhat by surprise in the gospel of John. The works of the Lord Jesus generated unprecedented sensation in Israel. His miracles which He was doing on a daily basis in front of massive crowds of people were drawing even bigger crowds were amazed. Matthew 9:33, the crowds were amazed and were saying nothing like this has ever been seen in Israel, Mark 2:12. They were all amazed and were glorifying God saying, “We’ve never seen anything like this.” The miracles were the authenticating signs of His deity and His Messiahship.

In the eleventh chapter of Matthew, a familiar section, John the Baptist who is imprisoned hears about the works of Christ and sends His disciples to say to Him, “Are you the Messiah? Are You the expected one?” Jesus answered and said to them, “Go and report to John what you see and hear.” Here’s the evidence. “The blind receive sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised up and the poor have the gospel preached to them.” So His signs were His works, miracle works, and His Words, preaching the true message of salvation. It is the works of Jesus and the words of Jesus that authenticate His Messiahship and His deity. And both created sensation in Israel through His powerful teaching, powerful preaching, the crowds were drawn and they said things like, “Never has a man spoke like this man has spoken, “ John 7:46. They were shocked at Him because He spoke as one having authority and not as the scribes and the Pharisees, Matthew 7 at the end of the Sermon on the Mount.

The people were excited by the sensational power of Jesus’ words and works. And they marveled at everything He did and everywhere He went He was mobbed by crowds, Matthew 4:25, “Large crowds followed Him from Galilee and Decapolis, and Jerusalem, and Judea, and beyond the Jordan.” That covers everywhere in and around the land of Israel.

Matthew 13:1, “Large crowds gathered to Him, so He got into a boat and the whole crowd was standing on the beach.” In other words, in order to get some space from the crush of the crowd, He got in a boat and went off shore into the water so that He could create some distance and speak to the people.

Luke 12:1 says, “So many thousands of people gathered together, they were stepping on one another.” Huge crowds everywhere He went created by the sensation of His teaching and His miracles.

If you’ll just go into chapter 6 for a moment and you look at verse 2, “A large crowd followed Him because they saw the signs which He was performing on those who were sick.” That is the sensation that drew the crowds. In verse 5 Jesus lifted up His eyes and seeing that a large crowd was coming to Him, asks Philip about feeding that crowd. Down in verse 10, Jesus says, “Have the people sit down. There was much grass in the place. The men sat down and number about five thousand.” Five thousand men means five thousand women meant ten or fifteen thousand children. This is a massive crowd of people that typically are following Jesus, overwhelming, unparalleled popularity for the miracle working teacher.

However, it is motivated by curiosity. It is superficial. Why? Because these people are captive to a false religious system. That is immensely effective and powerful. It has been in place for generations. And it has a stranglehold on people. It is important for us to understand the power of false religion. We’ve all come across it in our endeavor to communicate the gospel to people who are Roman Catholics or Mormons, or Jehovah’s Witnesses or in some other cult, or who are Muslims, or Hindus, or Buddhists, or whatever it is that they might be. We understand the massive captivating power of false religion that captures the mind. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 10 that it imprisons people in massive fortresses, idealogical fortresses from which it is so hard to deliver them. And we see that in the incident that we’re going to look at in chapter 5. But going in to chapter 6 for a little bit, if you drop down into verse 26, Jesus says to this massive crowd that followed Him and He fed them, “You seek Me not because you saw the signs but because you ate the loaves and were filled.” It’s very superficial interest in Him, very superficial. Go down to verse 64 of that chapter. “There are some of you who do not believe. For Jesus knew from the beginning who they were who didn’t believe and who it was who would betray Him.” Verse 66, “As a result of this, many of His *mathetes*, His followers, His disciples withdrew and were not walking with Him anymore. They were faced with a choice, either follow Jesus and abandon the system of Judaism, or leave Jesus and be loyal to the system.

Ultimately those who were once even His students, His disciples rejected Him and followed the system in which they were so powerfully engulfed.

Behind this system were, of course, primarily the scribes and the Pharisees. Engulfed in it were the rabbis and accommodating it were the Sadducees and even the Herodians. That system was devilish and it was damning…it was deadly.

What did the leaders say about Jesus? Because whatever they said about Jesus, they said often and to the people to keep the people loyal. According to John 8:48 they said He is a Samaritan and He has a demon. They told the people that Jesus was demon-possessed. In Matthew 12:24 they said He does what He does by the power of Beelzebub, does what He does by the power of hell, the power of Satan. They spent their time working on the people in their system to keep them loyal to the system, to not allow them to defect to Jesus so that by the end of His ministry, in Judea they gather in the Upper Room, there’s 120 believers after three years of this miracle ministry. And then, according to 1 Corinthians 15, there was a gathering of five hundred, most likely in Galilee.

Six hundred people committed to Christ, gathered in His name after a miracle ministry of three years across that land, you would have thought that there would have been a rising tide of faith in Christ, that there had been a rising tide of trust and belief in Him, they would be confessing Him as Lord and Messiah. That is not the case. There is a rising tide through the gospel of Matthew, the gospel of Mark, the gospel of Luke and the gospel of John, a rising tide of opposition that could be traced back to the relentless influence of the religious leaders of Israel who kept up the mantra that Jesus was from hell, that He was working in the power of Satan and that He was demon possessed, if not insane

Now, we’re not surprised by this because you remember in John 111 whom we just got started in the gospel, we read this, “He came unto His own and His own…what?...received Him not. He was in the world, the world was made by Him, the world knew Him not.” So we’ve had warning that He is going to be rejected in chapter 1 verse 11, and then in chapter 3 and verse 32, where we read this, “No one receives His testimony.” They piled up to see His miracles. They were in awe of what He said. But there was general indifference to Him as the Messiah and the Son of God. Why? Because of the relentless influence of the religious leaders of Israel.

And I want you to see this in John so look at chapter 7 verse 25, I’ll just give you a few glimpses of how this progresses through the gospel of John. Chapter 7 verse 25, “Some of the people of Jerusalem were saying, ‘Is this not the man whom they are seeking to kill?’” So here we are relatively early in the gospel of John, and the people already know the leaders want Him dead. They already know that they’ve designated Him as something like a Samaritan, a traitor, and an outcast, and a demon-possessed man. They want Him dead, the people know that.

In chapter 7 and verse 30, it says, “So they were seeking to seize Him and no man laid His hand on Him because His hour had not yet come.” They wanted to capture Him to execute Him. In verse 44 of the same chapter, “Some of them wanted to seize Him, but no one laid hands on Him.” In chapter 8 verse 20, God is restraining them from doing what they want to do up to this point. Again in verse 20 of chapter 8, “No one seized Him because His hour had not yet come.”

So here we are three times in a row, they wanted to seize Him, to execute Him, to kill Him, the people knew that, but they didn’t do it because they were literally restrained by God because it wasn’t the right time. Chapter 8 verse 52, the Jews again, remember who John is referring to when he calls them the Jews, said to Him, “Now we know that You have a demon. Abraham died and the prophets also and you say if anyone keeps My Word, he will never taste of death.” To say that, you must be demon possessed. This was their constant comment about Jesus.

End of chapter 8 verse 59, “Therefore they picked up stones to throw at Him, but He hid Himself and went out of the temple.” A demon-possessed man who needs to be executed, He needs to be killed even by a mob. In verse 22 of chapter 9, chapter 9 is the man born blind. Jesus heals the man born blind, and the leaders, the Jews, come and confront the parents of the man and the man and his parents in verse 22 said this because they were afraid of the Jews. This is an insight into how the people felt about their leaders. They were afraid of them. They feared them. They were the ones that they believed had charge of their eternal souls and their destiny and their place in the Kingdom. And they wanted to comply with them. They were completely engulfed under their power and authority. For the Jews had already agreed…again, the Jews, the leaders, that if anyone confessed Him to be Christ, the Messiah, he was to be put out of the synagogue. Anybody who affirmed that He was a follower, or she was a follower of Jesus Christ would be *persona non-grata* in the social life of Israel because everything revolved around the synagogue. They would be unsynagogued, they would be excommunicated. They would be considered an outcast. They couldn’t participate in social activities of any kind, even within a family. So the people knew what the price was if they followed this demon-possessed man…the price was high.

In chapter 9 and verse 24, a second time, “They called the man who had been blind and they knew He could see and they said, “Give glory to God, we know that this man is a sinner.” He’s a sinner, he’s demon-possessed, he’s like a Samaritan, he’s an outcast and a traitor. That’s what they said to the people. And anyone who followed Him would be literally put out of the society of Israel. The price was high.

Chapter 10 and verse 19, very important. A division occurred again among the Jews because of these words, “Many of them were saying, ‘He has a demon and is insane, why do you listen to him?”

All right, now we’ve got another element. He is insane. He is a maniac. He is a madman. Down in verse 31, the Jews again picked up stones to stone Him. Verse 39, “They were seeking again to seize Him and He alluded their grasp.

Maybe just one more from the eleventh chapter and verse 53, “From that day on they planned together to kill Him.” And that leads right in to the Passion Week where they were able to get the Romans to execute.

The tide is the tide of hatred. And it is promulgated by the leaders of Israel who are the gatekeepers of an apostate, damning religious system. They’re in the business of producing, Jesus said in His own words, sons of hell just like themselves. They were so effective that when you come to Matthew 27:23 and 25, the people all scream, “Crucify Him, crucify Him, crucify Him, we will not have this man to reign over us.” That is the power of false religion. It is the power to capture the souls of sinners.

Now let’s go back to chapter 5. In John’s gospel, this entire flow of persecution against Jesus starts from this story. Verse 16, “And they were persecuting Jesus,” the Jews were. The tide of hatred is triggered by what happens in chapter 5 verses 1 to 16. Yes it is a miracle, yes it is an amazing miracle, healing a man who was 38 years ill, that’s a wondrous evidence of the deity of Jesus Christ. But the miracle is not the reason for the story. It is to show us the reaction to Jesus. This miracle triggers the hostility of Israel. Here is the trigger, you could say, that launches the people from interest with reservations to rejection without reservations; from interest with reservations to rejection without reservation.

And so, in chapter 5, 6 and 7, opposition is the theme…opposition to Jesus now becomes the theme. Up through chapter 4, it was the deity of Christ on display by His omniscience, by His miracle power, by His authority exercised in the Temple and even by the declarations of John in chapter 1 of His deity as the Creator. All of the first four chapters focus on the person of Christ and His deity, and focus on His words, the things that He said. Now you come into chapter 5 and you see the opposition begin to rise.

Let’s look at the story. “After these things, there was a feast of the Jews and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. Now there is in Jerusalem by the sheep gate a pool which is called in Hebrew Bethesda, having five porticoes. In these lay a multitude of those who were sick, blind, lame and withered waiting for the moving of the waters, for an angel of the Lord went down at certain seasons into the pool and stirred up the water. Whoever then first after the stirring of the water stepped in was made well from whatever disease of which he was afflicted. A man was there who had been ill for 38 years. When Jesus saw him lying there and knew he had already been a long time in that condition, He said to him, ‘Do you wish to get well?’ The sick man answered Him, ‘Sir, I have no man to put me into the pool when the water is stirred, but while I am coming, another steps down before me.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Get up, pick up your pallet and walk.’ Immediately the man became well and picked up his pallet and began to walk.” Here comes the problem. “Now it was the Sabbath on that day. So the Jews were saying to the man who was cured, ‘It is the Sabbath and it is not permissible for you to carry your pallet.’ But he answered them, ‘He who made me well was the one who said to me, Pick up your pallet and walk.’ They asked him, ‘Who is the man who said to you pick up your pallet and walk?’ But the man who was healed didn’t know who it was for Jesus had slipped away while there was a crowd in that place. Afterwards Jesus found him in the Temple and said to him, ‘Behold, you have become well, do not sin anymore so that nothing worse happens to you.’ The man went away and told the Jews that it was Jesus who made him well. For this reason the Jews were persecuting Jesus cause He was doing these things on the Sabbath.”

Now it isn’t that this sort of initiated their hatred of Jesus. That had been initiated a long time earlier when He attacked the Temple back in chapter 2 verses 13 to 22. We have a record of what He did at the very beginning of His ministry many, many months earlier. But they didn’t forget that. They didn’t forget His assault on their Temple.

But in specific in the gospel of John, here’s the trigger event that launches the persecution that keeps escalating through the passages that I read you a moment ago. There are three elements to the story and they’re around the personalities. Three personalities—Jesus, the Jews, and the man, and three amazing realities. The amazing compassion of Jesus, the amazing contempt of the Jews, and the amazing complacency of the man. And maybe that’s the most surprising of all.

All of this comes together to launch, to trigger, to ignite the persecution. Now let’s start with the amazing compassion of Jesus, that’s how the story begins. By the way, do we need to remind you that God is a God of compassion? I don’t think so. Psalm 86:15 describes God as full of compassion. It’s repeated in Psalm 111, Psalm 112, Psalm 145 and referred to all over the Old Testament…God is a God of compassion. You read in the gospels in Matthew, in Mark, that Jesus was moved with compassion many times. He is God, He has the same compassion as God has…that means sympathy, feels to some degree the pain of fallen sinners and He is merciful. All His works and all His words are compassionate. He has compassion for the physical suffering, that’s why He heals people. He has compassion for the demonic suffering, that’s why He delivers people. He has compassion for the sin suffering, that’s why He saves people. God is by nature compassionate and so is Jesus. Here is an illustration then of the compassion of Jesus to a man who had received no mercy. Jesus shows him mercy, he had received no mercy. His statement in verse 7 indicates that no one would help him get into the water, while I’m coming, somebody else steps in front of me. Whatever his infirmity was, it slowed him down. And other people with other debilitating illnesses or handicaps were able to get to the water before him and no one was saying, “Since you’ve been here so long, why don’t you go first?” There was no mercy for this man, but there would be mercy from Jesus after nearly 40 years, the compassion is really clear.

Let’s pick it up in verse 1, “After these things,” that is the things that had gone on in Galilee, including the healing of the nobleman’s son at the end of chapter 4, and the other miracles that He did in Galilee. John doesn’t record them but the other writers do. John records only one healing in Galilee, that’s the one at the end of chapter 4, the nobleman’s son.

“But after His ministry in Galilee, there was a feast of the Jews.” It is an unidentified time and it is an indefinite feast. We don’t know if it’s Passover in April, we don’t know if it’s the Feast of Tabernacles in October, we don’t know if it’s the Feast of Pentecost. We don’t know what feast it is. But we do know in Deuteronomy 16:16 that there were three feasts every year that all men had to attend. And it would be most likely one of those feasts, we don’t know which one, it doesn’t really matter. But it was a feast of the Jews, Jesus would have attended.

By the way, just as a footnote. Even though the system was apostate and the priests who were doing the functions of those feasts and festivals were all an abomination to God, it was still a command to celebrate those feasts that came from the Word of God and so Jesus was faithful to fulfill all righteousness, to do what God had commanded him to do even though the people who were doing it when He got there were absolutely unworthy. He was faithful to be obedient to God on all God’s requirements.

So, He goes to Jerusalem with all the other men and all the others who went to the feast. We don’t know again when but it is more likely that He interrupted His Galilean ministry and went down to this feast and came back. The reason I say that is in chapter 5, you have Him in Jerusalem; in chapter 6 you have Him back in Galilee; chapter 7, back in Jerusalem, Judea again. So rather than put this at the end of His Galilean ministry and then have to figure out how He got back to Galilee in chapter 6, it’s better to just see it as a trip to Jerusalem for a feast sometime during His Galilean ministry. It’s important to know that.

Now there is in Jerusalem—by the way, the word “is” is important because John is writing between 80 and 90 A.D. at the end of the first century and Jerusalem was destroyed in 70 A.D., okay? So at least ten years, maybe twenty years before John writes this, the city has been destroyed, the Temple has been destroyed, the wall has been destroyed to some degree and some say why does He say there is in Jerusalem? Well that can be the historic presence. Sometimes when I tell a story, a biblical story, I would say even though I’m talking about two thousand years ago, there is in the city this gate, or there is in this city a man—you use it in historical present sense.

There’s another possibility and that is equally possible. There’s a fourth century testimony from a pilgrim who visited Jerusalem several hundred years later that He was able to see the sheep gate, or the ruins of the sheep gate still standing and the remnants of whatever it was that framed up that pool still there. In any case, there was at the time that Jesus went there, the sheep gate and the pool. If you want more information on the sheep gate, go to Nehemiah chapter 3 verse 1 and start there and Nehemiah mentions the sheep gate several times. What was it for? It was the gate in which the sheep were brought for sacrifice at the Temple. So it’s near the Temple and near this place, there’s a pool. There were pools scattered all over the city of Jerusalem for the reason that you would assume—for water, for purification, for bathing, for cooling off in the heat. They were public pools and they were many places.

Some interesting historians tried to identify this as a certain pool that was 75 feet deep. That is impossible because you’d have a pile of crippled people at the bottom of the pool. So whatever the depth of the pool was, they could get in and get out. So it’s not that pool that some have suggested, And by the way, it’s called the Pool of Bethesda and Bethesda means house of mercy—house of mercy. That may go along with the idea that there was a superstition about an angel coming to stir the waters and that it had healing properties.

If you look at your Bible, you will notice in chapter (verse) 3 a line before the word waiting, or after the word withered, that runs all the way down to the end of verse 4. What that’s telling you is something has been added. Ancient manuscripts do not have this. This has been added by a scribe. We didn’t know that until we found more ancient manuscripts and when we found the older manuscripts, we realized this wasn’t there. It was added. So completely disregard the idea that an angel came down and stirred up the waters and that whoever stepped in was made well from whatever disease he had if he was the first one in the pool. That appears much later than in the original. Some scribe added that maybe because there was that superstition. That might be in the mind of the man in verse 7 when he says, “I have no man to put me in the pool when the water is stirred up, when I’m coming, another one steps down.” So probably that superstition did exist.

Well you say, “How would that superstition develop?” Well it may have been, this was a spring-fed water source and it may well have been that it did have some therapeutic value to ill people, as water does. And perhaps over the years they kind of associated that with miracle power. It’s hard to say. Sufficient for you to know that the original text of Scripture reads like this, “In these lay a multitude of those who were sick and blind, and lame, and withered and a man was there who had been ill for 38 years.”

Now this pool had five porches which means it was a fairly large pool. Five patios, verandas that would have a covering to keep the sun off them, but it would be open with colonnades and they would be there around the pool. Apparently the traditional belief, the superstition was that there was some angel that came and stirred the pool. Maybe that story had been in tradition and some scribe though he’d put it in at a later time to try to explain this belief, but it is not in the original text. If they did believe it, they believed it foolishly. It was magic, it was nothing but superstition.

There’s a man there who has been ill for 38 years and he’s been unsuccessful in getting into the water and being delivered from whatever his illness is. When Jesus saw him lying there and knew he had already been a long time in that condition, Jesus again, here is His omniscience which is the declaration of His deity, He said to him, “Do you wish to get well?” Now, you know, people have mocked that. “What…what…what do you mean?” He said to him, “Do you wish to get well? What a ridiculous question.” He’s been there with all these other blind people and deaf people and lame people hoping to get in when the waters are stirred and that may have been nothing more than some bubbling up that was a physical phenomena in the nature of the spring-fed pool. But he had been there a long time. Of course he must wished to get well. But, you know, it is the right question. It’s better that saying “Are you having a nice day?” or “He there, how are you?”

To gain the man’s immediate attention, He directed His conversation at his immediate need. If he had completely given up on this issue, he wouldn’t have probably been there with all those other people in order to be disappointed another time after 38 years of this. So our Lord speaks directly to the issue as He did with the woman at the well when He talked about thirst and moved right into her spiritual thirst.

And the question is a fair question: do you wish to get well? Have you lost all hope? It’s a fair question. Thirty-eight years, do you have anything left that could be even considered hope or are you completely in despair? Is it nothing but a passive kind of despair? Is there anything left of hope within you? Whatever motive our Lord had to ask him, the obvious thing is He wants to direct the man’s attention on his need and the fact that it’s never been solved. And that shows that He cares. Nobody else around there was compassionate. Nobody else was making sure he got in first or at all. It was a man who had lived almost 40 years without any mercy from anybody, even people who were miserable themselves. But now for the first time, here’s somebody who cares about him. This is the compassion of Jesus. A stranger pities him. A stranger extends kind conversation to him. Keep in mind that this man by virtue of his illness over this amount of time is considered a piranha and an outcast by the Jewish leaders because they would believe this is punishment from God because this is a wicked man. Nobody of any importance spiritually would have spoken to this man.

But our Lord speaks to him. “And the sick man answered Him, ‘Sir, I have no man to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up. But while I’m coming, another steps down before me.’” He had bought in to the superstition. He doesn’t make any mention about angels stirring the water. Whatever the superstition was, he had bought into it and he had been unable to have it make a difference in his life.

Why…you say, “Well why would anybody believe something like that?” This is the ancient world, folks. Papyrus Ebers, Egyptian medical book says, “To prevent hair from turning gray, anoint it with the blood of a black calf boiled in oil or with the fat of a rattlesnake.” Here’s another one. Some of you men need this. “When hair falls out, apply a mixture of six fats, those of the horse, the hippo, the crocodile—a little harder to come by--, the cat, the snake and the ibex. To strengthen it, anoint it with the tooth of a donkey crushed in honey.” Now if you think that will make hair grow, you’re really mistaken. But this is the ancient world. They believed in magic water, lizard’s blood, swine’s teeth, putrid meat, stinking fat, moisture from pig’s ears, goose grease, animal fat, etc., etc., as being remedies. People believing that somehow bubbling water could give them some kind of cure isn’t a stretch because bubbling water can be therapeutic. But he’s not been able to take advantage of it.

And here comes the compassionate Jesus. This man, by the way, has no idea who Jesus is…no idea. He’s not a believer, he doesn’t even know who He is. Immediately Jesus says to him in verse 8 three commands, “Get up, pick up your pallet and walk.” Three commands. Get up, pick up, and walk. The power is unleashed at that moment. Immediately, verse 9, “The man became well, picked up his pallet and began to walk.” I mean, it’s just really a stunning moment which means he was in a prone position with this illness. And he began to feel strength come into his long, useless legs and arms. And as he began to stand up, he had the power and the strength to stand up. You have to understand that the healings of Jesus were complete and instantaneous. They needed no rehabilitation, there was no progression. He was like a young man, full strength. He stood up. Nothing about faith. He didn’t have to believe for this to happen. He didn’t even know who Jesus was.

So this miracle was not about his faith. No, not at all. But it starts out with a demonstration of the compassion of Jesus, and the man’s response, and he began to walk. Now here’s the rub. “Now it was the Sabbath on that day.” That’s the point of this whole miracle. Jesus could have done this thing on the next day. This man did not have a terminal illness. This man had a chronic problem. This man could have been healed three days later or two days earlier. Jesus picked the Sabbath because that’s the whole point of what’s happening here. He picked the Sabbath for the express purpose of exciting a confrontation with the leaders of Israel.

He told the man, “Carry your bed.” Didn’t He know that would rattle the Jewish leadership? Of course He knew that. Of course He knew that. They had perverted the law. God had given the Sabbath Law all the way back in Exodus 20 and repeated it a number of times in Exodus and in Deuteronomy. God had given the Sabbath as a time of rest, relaxation, enjoyment, doing good. The only thing you were not to do was the normal work, the normal business, the normal jobs. In Jeremiah 17:21, “Take heed for yourselves and do not carry any load on the Sabbath or bring anything in through the gates of Jerusalem.” That’s commerce. Don’t keep the normal commerce. But they had added dozens and dozens of prescriptions and binding commands to behaviors on the Sabbath Day. In fact, in Matthew 23, the burden was so oppressive that people couldn’t carry it and they didn’t give them any help…impossible burdens. And they had therefore perverted the Sabbath into the worse day of the week, the day of the greatest amount of bondage.

In Luke 6, He entered the synagogue on Sabbath, was teaching. There was a man there whose right hand was withered. The scribes and Pharisees were watching Him closely to see if He healed on the Sabbath so they might find reason to accuse Him. So He accommodated them. He knew what they were thinking, as He always did. He said to the man with the withered hand, “Get up and come forward.” He got up and came forward. Jesus said to them, “I ask you, is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath to save a life or destroy it? And looking around at them all, He said to him, ‘Stretch out your hand.’ He did so and his hand was restored and they themselves were filled with rage and discussed what they would do to Jesus.” They wanted Him dead because of what He was doing on their precious Sabbath. The Sabbath was the focal point of their apostate, self-righteous, legalistic, religious system.”

Jesus even declared to them that He could do whatever He wanted on the Sabbath. Listen to Mark 2:27, “The Sabbath was made for man,” Jesus said, “and not man for the Sabbath. And the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.”

So Jesus purposely brought about a Sabbath confrontation. This was never about the faith of the man. This was about the confrontation with the leaders. And that leads us to consider how serious they saw this breech and how Jesus paid no attention to their traditions. He refused to observe the legalistic man-made Sabbath regulations of rabbinic tradition. It was a major point of contention between Him and the religious establishment; Matthew writes about it. Mark, Luke, John, as we’re seeing here. The Lord deliberately heals this man on the Sabbath, deliberately tells him to pick up his bed, deliberately tells him to walk. He knows He is defying the Jews that are always around watching Him. He has no interest in rabbinic tradition, only the Law of God. He knows that they have substituted the traditions of men for the Law of God. He knows the Sabbath is a means to glorify God and honor God. It is a gift to mankind. They have turned it into a burden and a way in which they can demonstrate their false righteousness. And so He attacks them at the heart of their system and He does it by an act of compassion, amazing compassion to a man who is ill for such a long time.

The amazing compassion of Jesus is then followed by the amazing contempt of the Jews. Look at verse 10. “The Jews were saying to the man who is cured, ‘It is the Sabbath, and it is not permissible for you to carry your pallet.’ But He answered them, ‘He who made me well was the one who said to me, Pick up your pallet and walk.’ They asked him, ‘Who is the man who said to you pick up your pallet and walk?’” They couldn’t care less whether that man could walk. They couldn’t care less whether that man had any healing. They were ugly, indifferent. They had nothing but contempt for that man, believing that he was in that condition because God had punished him. And they were not because they were being approved by God. They have nothing but contempt for that man, but more importantly, they have nothing but contempt for Jesus and what He has done. They want to know who did this? Who told you you could carry your bed? Forget the miracle, ignore the miracle, who told you you could carry your bed? Who is the man who told you that?

He’s intimidated. This man is intimidated. And that’s what leads to the third and most compelling part of the story, the complacency of the man. The compassion of Jesus, the contempt of the Jews, and then the complacency of the man. This is really amazing. Pick it up in verse 14, “Afterward Jesus found him in the Temple.” Now remember there would have been tens of thousands of people in the Temple but Jesus knew what was in people and He knew where they were, knew where they had been and where they were going. Found him in the Temple. He went after him and said to him, “Behold, you have become well. Do not sin anymore so that nothing worse happens to you.” Personal touch. He found the man in the massive crowd, in the Temple He finds that man who is now walking and no doubt talking to everybody he can find about what has happened to him. That man has no idea who did this, where the power came from. Jesus finds him and I think they had a conversation longer than is recorded here. I think this kind of fits in to John 21:25 that if everything Jesus did and said was written down, the books of the world couldn’t contain it.

But the end of the conversation went like this. “You have become well. You’ve been healed. Do not sin anymore so that nothing worse happens to you.” What’s the implication of that? That his 38 year illness was connected to sin. Is that always the case? No, in chapter 9 a man born blind, what did the Jews say? “Who sinned, this man or his parents?” And what did Jesus say? Neither. Sometimes you’re sick and it’s not a direct punishment for sin. But sometimes sickness is a direct punishment for sin. Paul said to the Corinthians, “Some of you are weak and sick and some of you have even fallen asleep because of the way you’ve desecrated the Lord’s table.” David said that God’s hand was so heavy on him for his sin that his life juices were drying up. Moses said in Deuteronomy 28, to the people of Israel, “If you do not obey God, God will cause these diseases to come on you.” In the case of this man, his sickness was related to sin—to his sin. We don’t know any more than that. And Jesus’ final sobering warning to the man is, “You’ve been made well, now you need to go a different direction, away from the sin that has marked your life.” That tells me the man is unsaved. And Jesus is saying, “Thirty-eight years of illness as a result of sin, but that is nothing compared to the wrath of God in hell that you could experience forever. You’ve been made well. Go and sin no more.”

Jesus had to have told the man what He meant by that which is an indication that He had given him the necessity of believing in Him as the way to be forgiven and delivered from the power of sin. You think you have troubles looking back over 38 years? It is nothing compared to what’s ahead of you if you don’t turn from sin.

Here’s the most shocking part of the story. “The man went away and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had made him well.” He picked sides, didn’t he? Whose side did he pick? The Jews. Amazing, four decades of terrible suffering, healing, warning, the truth of forgiveness made clear to him, I’m sure, he walked away from Jesus and declared his loyalty to the Jews who hated Jesus. He knew they hated Jesus. He knew they were after Jesus. Everybody knew they were after Jesus. And he turned Jesus in. That’s the power of false religion. In the face of the compassion of Christ, in the face of an amazing miracle, in the face of healing, this man declared his loyalty to the Jews who hated Jesus and wanted Him dead. This has to be the most startling act of ingratitude and unbelief in all the healings that Jesus did. He has no intention of worshiping the Lord Jesus. He has no intention of following Jesus. He knows the Jews are hostile. They had a conversation back in 10 to 12, again a cryptic part of that conversation. They must have revealed and declared to Him how they felt about the man who did this. And in order to put himself back in good graces for having violated the Sabbath, there’s sort of a penitence here and he’s aiding his desire to be in good graces with the religious leadership by turning in Jesus to ingratiate himself with the religious establishment. This is the power of false religion.

As a result, for this reason, verse 16, the Jews were persecuting Jesus because He was doing these things on the Sabbath. Yes it is a miracle story, but it is a tragically sad miracle story. Not a story about a man who was healed and then became a believer. But a man who was healed and became a rejecter. And if that surprises you, keep this in mind. Almost all the people Jesus healed rejected Him because He healed massive numbers of people and there were only a few at the end. That is the power …damning power…of false religion. He took his side with those who had their prescriptions for behavior on the Sabbath. That triggers the persecution that then flows, as I read to you, all the way to the cross.

Our Lord here is confronting Jewish legalism at its very heart, the Sabbath. He challenges the traditions with His authority as Lord of the Sabbath, as God. He heals a man. He warns him about living in sin and the need to turn from sin and the man goes right back loyal to his damning religion and turns Jesus in. He has been successfully turned into a son of hell, as Matthew 23 says. That’s what they did.

You know, when Jesus was talking to His disciples and He saw the widow put her money in, remember, put her coins in. He said, “Beware of these men, this is what they do. They bring a widow to the point where she goes and gives her last two cents to go home and die. That’s how captive she is to a religious system that has taught her she can buy her salvation.” Jesus says beware of them. And then He says, “Not one stone will be left on another, I’m going to bring this whole thing down.” Before John every wrote this, 70 A.D., the Romans came as the instruments of divine judgment and smashed Jerusalem and the Temple and the religious system.

What about you? What about you? Do you love Christ? Do you embrace Him as your Lord and Savior? Or are you captive to a religion that your loyalty that is led by false teachers telling you lies and making you a prisoner of their deception? I warn you as Jesus warned. There’s only one hope of salvation and that’s in Him. Reject Him and you are lost forever. And the punishment is forever outside of His presence. The man made his choice, wrong choice, tragic choice, a kind of a microcosm of Judas who encountered Jesus, saw His power, heard His words, heard His warning and chose hell. Tragic story. Sets the tone for the rest of the gospel and the rejection to come.

Father, again, this morning, we acknowledge that the Word comes with authority. My word has no authority, my thoughts, my ideas. But Your Word is authoritative, it is true and it is weighty, it is serious and it has to be treated in that fashion. Every soul, every heart, every life here this morning, or hearing this message has been confronted by the truth. The compassionate Christ comes. He offers deliverance and salvation and the truth and He warns about clinging to false religion, the power of false religion to hold its people captive. O, God, we pray that You would be gracious and open the eyes of those who perhaps before have not seen this, that they may see it now and bring the truth to bear so that the fortification of deception and lies is smashed and they are delivered and led captive to Christ. That’s our prayer.

Before I finish the prayer, I have a great, great nagging anxiety that never leaves about the people who are caught up in false religion because of its power and its deception. And I pray that God will grant escape through this message to many.

Father, now we ask that You would grant us wisdom to understand this truth and wisdom to apply it in every life. First in our own, if there’s any question about our own spiritual condition and then to bring it to bear on the lives of those we know and meet and love. There’s joy in our hearts because we have been delivered out of darkness into light, out of the kingdom of Satan into the Kingdom of Christ. We are blessed as we were reading earlier to have tasted Your kindness. We pray that for others. Rescue them, Lord, deliver them for Your truth and Your Spirit. And use us as instruments to do that. Now that the message has been delivered, this is not the end, this is the beginning. Where does it go from here? From us to someone else. Give us that opportunity, we pray for Your glory in Christ’s name, Amen.

**The Most Startling Claim Ever Made, Part 1**

**John 5:17–20**

Code: 43-26

Open your Bible now to the fifth chapter of the gospel of John. We are embarking now on a passage that may be the Holy of Holies of the gospel of John. This is the inner sanctuary in a very real sense.

In John chapter 5, verses 17 to 47, that entire section, long section is one discourse.  All of this section comes from the very mouth of the Lord Jesus Christ.  And He is speaking to the Jewish leaders of Israel who are designated by John as the Jews.  They want Him dead.  They consider Him a blasphemer of the worst kind. They are convinced that He is a threat to their religion, their self-styled secure religious position and power. They see Him as scorning the conventional wisdom as dishonoring God, as threatening the sanctity of their religious system.  He has already attacked the Temple with such passion that He evacuated the Temple all by Himself at the very height of a Passover celebration. That’s how He launched His ministry.

They have heard Him repeatedly attack the hypocrisy of their false religion. They have watched Him show nothing but disdain for their non-biblical traditions and additions by which they have attempted to embellish the Scripture.  He is their arch enemy by their own choice.

As we come to verses 17 to 47, Jesus speaks directly to them, directly to the leaders. And the purpose of the entire section is to declare to them that He is in fact God, that He is the Messiah and more, He is God.  He gives that testimony of His equality with God to begin this long section and then He calls on witnesses to the truth of that witness from John the Baptist, witness from His miracles, witness from God the Father, witness from the Scripture. And so here is His own testimony to His own identity.

And let me just say that you all understand this but be sure.  The heart and soul of the Christian faith, the heart and soul of the gospel is a right view of Jesus Christ.  There are some who see Jesus as a man only, a good man, a noble man, maybe an elevated man, maybe a highly spiritual sensitive man. That’s not an option.  Needlessly, pseudo-scholars and skeptics have argued the identity of Jesus throughout history. The attack on His deity, the fact that He is God, fully God, started with the Jewish leaders here in His own country of Israel during His ministry. They attacked Him for His claim to be deity. They saw it as outright blasphemy.

Subsequent generation to theirs picked up the assaults, though Jesus was now gone, the gospel was being proclaimed in Israel and around the world and they continued to attack Jesus as a transgressor, a sinner, a blasphemer, a man who disdain for the true wisdom, a man who was a powerful deceiver, led people astray when He was alive, and now His disciples were leading people astray continually.

Throughout all of human history, the pseudo-scholars and the skeptics have kept up this attack and it goes on even today.  And even within what is called Christianity, some kind of Christianity that sees Jesus as human and not divine.  The testimony of the gospel of John is to dispel all such queries.  Remember chapter 20 verse 31, John gives His purpose, that you might believe that Jesus is the Son of God, that is to say that He has the same nature as God because when you believe that, you can have life in His name.  If you do not believe that, you cannot have eternal life, you will perish in hell in your sins.

So the question of who is Jesus Christ is the most important question.  The Holy Spirit has declared that He is God in chapter 1.  The early disciples declared that He is God in chapter 1.  John the Baptist declared that He is the Lamb of God, the Messiah, the Savior early in the gospel of John.  His authority over the Temple was a declaration that He is divine.  His miracles are proof that He is divine.  His omniscience, the fact that He knows what people think and He knows their history, never having met them, indications of His omniscience show that He is God. And John has covered all of that.

And then as chapter 5 began, John recorded one of the most important miracles that Jesus ever did.  Apparently it didn’t lead to the salvation of the man He healed, even though the man had been ill for 38 years and Jesus healed him on the spot, instantaneously and completely, told the man to pick up his bed and go home—which he did.  That miracle Jesus purposely did on  the Sabbath.  He had already declared that He was Lord over creation, John had in chapter 1, that He was Lord over disease and demons in His miracles, that He was Lord over the Temple which He attacked and assaulted.  And now He declares that He is Lord of the Sabbath and He has no interest in the Jewish traditions that have encumbered the Sabbath with bondage.  He does this miracle purposely on the Sabbath.

And then when they come at Him, look at verse 16, and they begin persecuting Him because He was doing these things on the Sabbath, we learned that He had a pattern of doing that, that He was doing on the Sabbath what they by their tradition had decided was not legal because it was a form of work.  And they had the man carrying his rolled up pallet under his arm and they said that constitutes work.  So Jesus was doing work and causing someone else to do work on the Sabbath. And so they began to persecute Him, that’s why He did it.

At this point He could have had a discussion with them about the true use of the Sabbath.  He could have said, “Let’s talk about the Sabbath, don’t you think good things should be done on the Sabbath, don’t you think there’s a difference between man rolling up his little pad and walking off with it, then a man selling pads, selling beds, or delivering beds to people who bought them on a different day?  This is not work.  He could have had a discussion about the man carrying the bed and He could have had a discussion about what ought to be done on the Sabbath.  And He could have had a discussion about, “Don’t you think it’s good to do things on the Sabbath?”  And He did have that discussion with them on other occasions.  But on this occasion, they make the Sabbath the issue and He uses that as a launch point, to elevate the discussion beyond what happened on the Sabbath, it becomes a Christological discussion, it becomes a discussion about who He is.  And here, triggered by this miracle on the Sabbath and the immediate hostility the Jews had toward Him, He gives the greatest, most extensive declaration of His deity that He gives anywhere.

Now I want us, this morning, to begin to look at this.  And the first section is verses 17 to 24. This is so profound and so rich and so deep, however, that it’s going to take us a couple of weeks to get through just that.  It answers the question, “Who is Jesus Christ?”  Now remember, the Jewish leaders had made their decision by now.  He had had a prior ministry in Judea for months and months and months…better part of a year. Then He had gone to Galilee where He would be for about 16 months or so.  While at some point in His ministry, on  one of those trips back to Jerusalem that all Jewish males had to make at special feasts, He comes back, it’s a Sabbath and He does this healing.  So many months, perhaps more than a year has passed, they had fixed in their minds what they think of Jesus.  It comes out in the gospel of John in chapter 8. They call Him a Samaritan which was a label that belonged to unfaithful, apostate outcasts.  In chapter 7 and in chapter 8 they say He’s possessed by demons.  In chapter 10, verse 20, they say He’s insane.  In chapter 8 verse 41 they say He is a bastard child, He’s illegitimate.  In Matthew 12:24 tells us that they finally declared that what He did, He did by the powers of hell…the power of Satan.

This established their view.  And by the way, that view has been perpetuated down through the history of the Jewish religion through the centuries.  And so they come after Jesus with those conclusions to persecute Him as a blasphemer.  And that’s the ultimate indictment, He is a blasphemer.  And that’s precisely what they say He was, by declaring Himself to be God.

There was never any question in the Jews minds that He said He was God. They got it.  That’s what they said was His ultimate blasphemy. They said He makes Himself equal with God.  Look at the end of verse 18.  He’s calling God His own Father, making Himself equal with God.  They knew that’s His claim.

Now if it’s true, it’s true and He is God.  If it’s a lie, He’s not God, He’s the devil.  He’s the ultimate deceiver.  What you can’t say is something in the middle. You can’t say He’s a model of spiritual life, because models of spiritual life don’t call themselves God.  Crazy people do, lunatics do.  You can’t say that He is a noble teacher because everything starts with a massive preposterous lie if He’s not God.  This is the most staggering claim anybody has ever made and then supported it. So you don’t come to Jesus with the option that He’s a good teacher, that’s what the skeptics have sort of landed on just to be kind, and that’s what the pseudo-scholars of fake Christianity have perpetuated through the years so that they can still have Christianity and still have a comfortable Jesus.

But that’s not an option.  He said He was God.  If it’s true, He is God.  If it’s a lie, He’s the ultimate deceiver and He’s insanely deceived Himself.  We have to make a choice.  There’s no middle ground.  The choice needs to be informed by the truth, the truth is here, let Him give His own testimony.  And then let Him substantiate it which He will do in this chapter by more than two or three witnesses.

If you’re going to reject Christ, then reject the Bible.  You have to reject it all.  If you reject the deity of Jesus Christ, you have just detonated a bomb that has exploded your Bible, throw it away.  You have demolished the Bible.  There is no such thing as well-intentioned scholarship that denies the deity of Jesus Christ.  That is devilish and it disintegrates the Scripture completely.  If Jesus is not God, there is no Christianity, the Bible is all a fabrication from hell.

On the other hand, however, any study of the Word of God, any diligent faithful study of the account of His life and words leave no legitimate doubt that His claims were absolutely true.  He was unhesitating in making those claims and supporting them.  He did it frequently.  He did it to the hostile Jews here in chapter 5, again in chapter 6, again in chapter 8 and on many other occasions.  He did it with His disciples over and over again, most notably you could see it in John 16:28.  He made the same declaration of His deity and His heavenly origin even in His high priestly prayer to the Father.  So if He’s a blasphemer, He carried His blasphemy to His enemies, to His friends, and even to God.

You have to understand that when you study the life of Jesus, He is assumed the prerogatives that belong only to God.  He said, for example, that He exercised sovereign control over people’s eternal destiny.  He said that He had absolute authority over the divine Law of God.  He said that He had power supernaturally to answer prayer, that he had authority to forgive sin, that He had absolute control over angels, holy and fallen, that He had power over the Kingdom of God. And He declared that He had the right to be honored and glorified and praised and worshiped and obeyed.  Those are prerogatives that belong only to God.

He accepted without correction the title of Son of God, Son of Man, the messianic title, Messiah, King.  He took the sacred name of God and applied it to Himself, the I AM, the tetragrammaton I AM over and over again. He referred to Himself as the I AM, the very sacred name of God that a Jew wouldn’t even let across his own lips because it was too sacred.  Jesus took it and claimed it for Himself.  All these lines of testimony, all these lines come together and converge in one escapable truth, Jesus claimed to be God, not to be another God equal to God, but to be God.

The Jews probably thought, at least some of them, that He was claiming to be another God which would have been, of course, preposterous because there was only one true God and the Ten Commandments pronounced judgment on anybody who has another God.  Jesus didn’t say He was another God, He said, “I and the Father are a unity, we are one.”  He said in John 14, “If you’ve seen Me, you’ve seen the Father.”  He didn’t say I’m another God, He said I am God.  I am one with the Father.  This is Trinitarian.  To say anything other than that about Jesus is to obliterate the teaching of Scripture.

Devoutly, monotheistic Jewish followers of Jesus, His disciples, His apostles, those who believed in Him had no problem acknowledging that His claim was true.  They affirmed that He is God, not another God, but the One true God and it is that conviction in the hearts of His original followers that is still the conviction in the hearts of His true followers today.  And those of you who are Christians, those of you who belong to the Lord Jesus Christ, you believe that Jesus is God, Amen?  You affirm that.  Not to affirm that is to dismiss the Jesus of Scripture and make it impossible to be saved.

The testimony that Jesus gives here and that John records, starting in verse 17, is from His own mouth.  I know John has given us the testimony of the Holy Spirit in the writing of chapter 1, the testimony of John the Baptist, the testimony of the disciples, the testimony of Jesus’ actions and knowledge, all of that. But here is the claim to deity from the very mouth of Jesus.  It is, in one sense, astounding; another, it is precious.  In one sense understandable, in another, incomprehensible.

Now as I said, this discourse runs all the way to verse 47 and it stretches your capacity to reason and then leaves you and goes beyond it.  I warn you about that.  Whenever you get into Trinitarian truth, you’re going beyond your human reason.  You shouldn’t be surprised by that, there are lots of things in the Scripture that exceed your ability to grasp them, certainly this is one of those great truths.

Jesus gives this discourse as a defense of what He did on the Sabbath. That gives Him the opportunity to raise the whole issue of His identity.  What He did on that Sabbath provoked hatred, persecution, and it would continue to escalate until they would finally murder Him by the hands of the Romans on the cross.  Jesus knew that.  Somebody might say, “Did He want to die?”  Not only did He want to die, He came to die…He came to die.  He didn’t try to bend, to cool them off.  He didn’t try to defend Himself in such a way that maybe they wouldn’t see it quite as blasphemously as they saw it.  He even made it worse.  The pinnacle of the testimony of John in these chapters leading up comes right here in chapter 5, starting in verse 17.  Now remember, He is talking to hypocrites, apostates, false religious leaders who belong to the kingdom of darkness, and the kingdom of Satan.  And they remain there because they refuse to believe He is who He says He is.  And by the way, that’s what ultimately damns everyone, a failure to embrace Christ for who He is.

Now I want you to look at verses 17 to 24 as a unit, even though we won’t cover it all.  And in verses 17 to 24, our Lord claims to be God in five ways.  He claims to be God in five ways.  He is equal to God in nature, essence, person, meaning, the substance of who He is.  He’s equal to God in works.  He is equal to God in power.  He is equal to God in authority.  And then most shockingly, He is equal to God in honor, or worship.  This is by any measure bold, it is by the estimation of the people to whom He’s speaking, blasphemous beyond blasphemous.  They understood exactly what He was claiming, exactly. They interpret His statements as it goes.  He says something, they interpret it accurately.  Here the line is drawn regarding Jesus, folks.  This is the line being drawn. Either He is a liar and a deceiver and a deadly deceiver at that, He is the devil, or He is who He said He was, He is God.  Those are the choices, there are no others.

First of all, let’s look at the initial claim.  He claims to be equal with God in nature, or essence.  Verse 17, “But He answered them, My Father is working until now and I Myself am working.”  Now that is a simple statement.  You get it.  But it is so profound.  Let me tell you how the Jews thought.  One of the queries that shows up in rabbinical discussions through the centuries is this one.  Does God keep the Law?  Does God keep the Law?  Well immediately, the simple answer, of course He keeps the Law.  God has to keep the Law.  It’s His Law.  He made the Law.  He has to keep the Law.

Well if you rush to say that yes God keeps the Law, you now have a problem because what about the Sabbath?  Does God rest on the Sabbath?  Well somebody might say, “Of course He rests on the Sabbath because in Genesis 2:2 it says that on the seventh day, God…what?...God rested.  But I remind you that that, if taken too far, creates a very serious problem because if God isn’t doing anything, every time Saturday comes around, the whole universe collapses.  So they had a problem.

Now the Jews had developed 39 categories of behaviors on the Sabbath, 39 categories to kind of restrict behavior.  And in order to accommodate God, cause they couldn’t conclude that God didn’t do anything, they knew the sun came up, they knew the wind blew, they knew the rain fell, they knew the grass grew, they knew God continued to do His work of judgment and His work of redemption.  They knew God was working on the Sabbath so they had to accommodate God a little bit in their Sabbath Law and they came up with a couple of rules that would kind of work for God. One of them was this, you could carry something but not above your shoulders.  On the Sabbath you could carry it here, but you couldn’t put it above your shoulders.  If it went over your shoulders, that’s work.  So they said, God works on the Sabbath but He does light work.  He never really kind of pushes the universe above His shoulders, metaphorically speaking.

And the second rule that they developed to kind of accommodate God, was the idea that you could move something from one place to another in the house but not from one house to another.  So if you had a basket of food, you could take it from one room to another room, but you couldn’t take it to the people next door. And they said, God only has one house, the whole universe is His house.  There is no other house, so God never does anything from His house to any other house cause there is no other house.  So yes, God keeps the Law because He just works in the house and He does light work.  I mean, that’s the stupidity to which it had arrived.

Jesus takes a shot at that entire ridiculous discourse when He says, “My Father is working until now.  He never stops.  He never slows down.  He doesn’t do light work.  He doesn’t diminish His efforts.  He is working—present tense—all the time at the same pace, at the same volume, in the same way.  My Father is working.”  By the way, it blew their minds that He said, “My Father,” no Jew would ever say that.  While they would acknowledge that He was the Father of the nation in terms of creation and covenant promise, no Jew personally would call God his personal Father because that would be way too familiar and because of the way they spoke a father and son having common nature, that might make it seem that they were claiming to have the nature of God and that would be blasphemy.  Jesus had no problem saying what they would never say, He said My Father, the One who has the same nature as I have is working until now.  He was saying to them the work of God goes on, it goes on all the time.  He constantly works to this very second, God works.  It’s one of those amazing things that Einstein died and never discovering after all of his work in science, he knew there was a power component somewhere in the midst of the atom that kept the entire universe moving and he never could identify what it was.  It is God…it is God.  He never rests from His government.  He never rests from sustaining the physical world, He never rests from keeping everything in orbit, everything in rotation.  He never rests from His rule. He never rests from His justice judgment.  He never rests from His blessing, mercy, grace, love, never rests.

Oh, by the way, Isaiah 40:28 says, “He also never faints and never gets weary.”  He doesn’t need to rest.  He doesn’t need to rest.  When God works, He dissipates no energy.

Oh, by the way, He doesn’t draw His energy from any other source like you do.  He is constant, undiminished, eternal, infinite energy.  God is working all the time.

And then Jesus says the shocking corollary, “And I Myself am working.”  I work at the same level God does.  God doesn’t pay any attention to the Sabbath and neither do it.  As a man coming into the world, of course.  He was there at the feast at this time when He did the healing because He was obedient to the Law of God.  And yes, on the Sabbath He did what others did in His humanity. But in His deity, He never stopped working.  And according to Hebrews chapter 1, in one of the most remarkable statements ever said about Him, it says that speaking of Christ, He upholds all things by the word of His power. That is the ministry of sustaining the universe.

In John 1:1 it says He created the universe.  In Hebrews 1 it says that He sustains the universe.  So there is Jesus standing there, looking at those men, talking to them.  And He at the same time is holding together the entire universe.  He is claiming then to be the same nature as God, the same essence as God.  God continues to do His work.  I continue to do My work.  God is never restrained.  His work is never diminished because it is a Sabbath, and neither is My work.  Sabbath has no application for God.  It has no application for the divine work of Jesus.  He is the Lord of the Sabbath and He made the Sabbath for man.

Now the Jews knew exactly what He was saying and this is so outrageous it’s beyond comprehension.  He is saying that as the eternal God does His work all the time, so He is claiming to do the same thing, to work the same pattern that God works.  Verse 18, “For this reason, therefore, the Jews were seeking all the more to kill Him, because He was not only breaking the Sabbath but also was calling God His own Father, making Himself equal with God.

Just “My Father,” was enough to bring the indictment of blasphemy because that said there’s a shared nature.  Evil people were called sons of Belial because their nature was Satanic.  Angry people were called “sons of thunder,” because their nature was volatile.  They knew that Jesus by calling God His Father was claiming to be one in nature and essence with God.  And so it wasn’t only that He had broken their Sabbath, but that He called God His own Father and even made Himself equal with God by saying that God and He function the same way and they were seeking all the more to kill Him.

If you want to follow the pattern of how this unfolds in the gospel of John, this attitude, just follow for a moment John 7:1.  “After these things Jesus was walking in Galilee for He was unwilling to walk in Judea because the Jews were seeking to kill Him.”  Verse 19, He says, “Why do you seek to kill Me?”  The crowd answered, “You have a demon.”  Verse 25 chapter 7, “Some of the people of Jerusalem were saying, ‘Is this not the man whom they are seeking to kill’”

Go over to chapter 8 verse 37, “I know that you are Abraham’s descendants, Jesus says, yet you seek to kill Me because the Word has no place in you.”  Verse 40, “But as it is, you are seeking to kill Me, a man who has told you the truth which I heard from God.”  Verse 58, same chapter, “Jesus said to them, ‘Truly, truly I say to you, before Abraham was born, I AM.’”  There He declares Himself to be the I AM, therefore they picked up stones to throw at Him.

Chapter 11 verse 53, just shows the progression.  “From that day on they planned together to kill Him.”  Together—all the forces of priests and chief priests and rabbis come together to kill Him, they want Him dead.  And the accusation they render against Him is this extreme blasphemy of claiming equal nature with God.

Then He even raises their fury in verses 19 and 20 because He claims to be equal with God in works…equal with God in works.  “Therefore, Jesus answered, verse 19, and was saying to them—same group, coming off of their accusation—Truly, truly, Amen, Amen.  He’s going to deliver truth to them in the midst of their error.  By the way, that’s what Jesus said when He talked to Nicodemus.  Three times when He was talking to Nicodemus in chapter 3, He said, “Truly, truly,” three different times because He was speaking the truth into the error in which Nicodemus lived.  Here it is again, truly, truly, again in verse 24, truly, truly.  Again in verse 25, truly, truly.  This is truth coming to these that are captive to error.  Fearless, resolute truth, “Truly, truly I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself  The Son can do nothing of Himself unless it is something He sees the Father doing.”  Let’s just stop there.

It is something He sees the Father doing.  I want you to capture this one idea, the Son can do nothing of Himself.  The Son can do nothing of Himself. What does that say?  Well it says that He does not act independently.  It says He can’t act independently.  He can do nothing of Himself.  That’s the negative.

The positive is then what does He do?  Whatever the Father does, He does. Whatever He sees the Father doing, whatever the Father does, these things the Son also does…listen…in like manner.  He does what the Father does the way the Father does it exactly.  Really an amazing statement.  It speaks to the impeccability of Christ.  Theologians through the years have discussed whether or not Jesus could have sinned.  That would be a long term theological discussion.  I think the answer comes in a number of passages, but here’s one of them. The Son can do nothing but what He sees the Father doing.  That’s all He can do.  He can only do what the Father does. The Father cannot sin.  The Father cannot do evil.  To say that He can is a blasphemy and to say that the Son can is a blasphemy, in my mind, as well.  He cannot.  He never acts independently of the Father.  He cannot.  It is impossible.  It is inconsistent with His nature unless He says…unless He sees the Father doing it, He can’t do it.  Whatever the Father is doing, He is doing the same in the same manner. The one who always does and only does what God the Father does is equal to God.  That’s the point.  He forever does what God does…forever.  And does it in the same way.  John 8:29, “He who sent Me is with Me.  He has not left Me alone for I always do the things that are pleasing to Him…”  Always, everlastingly He does what pleases God, He does what He sees God doing.

John 14:31, “So that the world may know that I love the Father, I do exactly as the Father commanded Me, exactly.”  He can only do and only does what the Father does.  To see Jesus in action is to see God in action.  What God does, Jesus does.  What Jesus does, God does.  To accuse Jesus of sin is to accuse God of sin.  To accuse Jesus of violating the Sabbath is to accuse God of violating the Sabbath.  To accuse Jesus of blasphemy is to call God a blasphemer.  Jesus is not another God.  He is one with His Father and He gives four reasons, all four of them introduced by a Greek preposition.  The proof, and we’ll look at this as we go later, for whatever the Father does, look at the word “for” in the middle of verse 19, “For whatever the Father does, the Son does.”  Verse 20, “For the Father loves the Son and chose Him all things.”  Verse 21, “For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to whom He wishes.”  Verse 22, “For not even the Father judges anyone, but He has given all judgment to the Son.”  He does what the Father does.  He loves the way the Father loves.  He has the power of life the same way the Father does. And He judges the same way the Father judges.  He does the works of the Father…a work of judgment, the work of resurrection, all based upon a common, divine, infinite, eternal love.  He is one in every sense with the Father. That’s functional language that basically demonstrates or assumes ontology, or being.

So in verse 19 He stuns them again by saying, “Not only am I one with the Father in essence and nature, but I do exactly what the Father does, I do what the Father shows Me, I do what the Father wills for Me to do and I cannot do anything other than that.”  He is saying I cannot sin.  I cannot do anything wrong.  What I do is what the Father does. What I do is what the Father wills.  You are indicting Me for what God desires and what God is doing.  How far from God you are.

And by the way, He gives them marvelous motivation behind this.  Verse 20, “For the Father loves the Son and shows Him all things that He Himself is doing.”  Somebody might say, Well you do what the father does, you only do what you see the Father doing, maybe you don’t see the full picture…right?  Maybe you don’t get the full picture.  Maybe you’ve got limited knowledge.

No, the Father loves the Son and shows Him all things that He Himself is doing.  God has not kept any secrets from the son.  Incredible statement.  There’s nothing that the Father knows the Son doesn’t know.  Oh in His incarnation for a time on earth, He restricted the use of His divine attributes.  He didn’t abandon His divine attributes, He didn’t give them up or He would cease to be God. But He restricted the use of those attributes in submission to the Father.  So on one occasion He said He didn’t know the time of His own return because that was in the Father’s power.  But here He tells us that in His divine person, the Father has shown Him all things that He is doing.  There are no secrets.  The Father loves the Son with such a perfect consummate, eternal, infinite love that He holds nothing back.  He gives Him all the treasures of divine truth because of love.

I think the Apostle Paul in Colossians helps us to understand this because in Colossians chapter 1 in talking about Christ, He says this, verse 19, “It was the Father’s good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him.”  It was the Father’s good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him. That is all the fullness of the Godhead, verse 9 of chapter 2.  You go from one…chapter 1 verse 19, the Father’s good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him, to chapter 2 verse 9, “For in Him all the fullness of deity dwells in bodily form.”  All that God is in Christ which means all His nature, all His attributes, all His knowledge, all His wisdom.

And another way to see it Paul says in Colossians 2:3, “In Christ are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.”  The Father has all wisdom, all knowledge. The Son has all wisdom, all knowledge. The Father hides nothing from the Son, but from our viewpoint there is much that is hidden in the Son that we can’t understand because we’re not divine.  The Father loves the Son so much that eternally…eternally He is granted the fullness of everything that He is to the Son.  He has no less knowledge, less wisdom, less power, less work than the Father.  And it’s all based on love.  Perfect union of the two guaranteed by mutual love.

I want to wrap up this session by just looking at that one point for a moment.  Do you see this statement in verse 20, “For the Father loves the Son and shows Him all things that He Himself is doing.”  The reason the Father has given everything He is to the Son eternally, going back and forward, is because He loves Him with a love that is incomprehensible.  It might shake you up to hear this, but at the heart of God’s redeeming work is not God’s love for you, not God’s love for Me.  Not God’s love for the world.  Not God’s love for sinners.  At the heart of redemption is God’s love…the Father’s love for the Son and the Son’s love for the Father.

You say, “Didn’t Jesus die because He loved us?”  In a secondary sense, but I a primary sense, Jesus died because He loved the Father.  “Didn’t the Father send Jesus to the cross because He loved us?”  In a secondary sense.   In  primary sense He sent the Son to the cross because He loved the Son.  You say, “How am I to understand that?”

You’re to understand it this way, that the whole purpose of redemption, the whole purpose of creation, the whole purpose of the world, the universe, human history is so that God can collect a bride to give to His Son a bride that’s an expression of His love. That’s why in John 6 and John 17 Jesus refers to believer as those the Father gave Me, or has given Me, or is giving Me, or will give Me.  Every individual believer is a love gift from the Father to the Son.  It’s not so much about the Father loving you, or the Son loving you, it’s about the Father loving the Son and the Son loving the Father. The Father loves the Son so much, you can give without loving, but you can’t love without giving and perfect love gives a perfect gift, an infinite love gives an infinite gift so that the infinite love of the Father for the Son deems that the Father will give to the Son a redeemed humanity, collected one day in heaven forever and ever and ever to praise and serve and glorify the Son and always be an everlasting expression of the Father’s love.  And we learned from 1 Corinthians that when they’re all gathered, including us, in heaven and the Father gives the gift to the Son, the Son will turn right around and give us back to the Father so God may be all in all.  You are caught up in a divine love relationship between the Father and the Son. The Father is willing to send the Son so that He can give the Son the gift of His love.  The Son is willing to go to the cross so that He can give back to the Father the gift of His love.  That’s the sweeping truth of redemption.  This infinite transcendent love that exists between the Father and the Son, and we might add even the Holy Spirit, of course, who is equal, is the reason for redemption.

God could have gone on  being God in a Trinitarian existence and never created anything.  But He wanted to give to the Son a redeemed humanity that displayed His grace and mercy as an act of His love so you will forever in heaven be a gift from the Father to the Son that the Son turns and gives back to the Father.  And because of this love that the Father has for the Son, He holds back nothing from the son eternally.  All treasures of wisdom and knowledge are in Him.  All the fullness of deity dwells in Him.

And then Jesus closes out verse 20 by saying, “And the Father will show Him greater works than these so that you will marvel.”  You’ve seen some of the evidences of the Father’s love, the works that I’ve done, the miracles that I’ve done, the things that I’ve done, evidences of omniscience, omnipotence, you’ve seen that.  You’ve seen these miracles.  But that’s not all.  The Father has more that He will share with Me, greater works and you will marvel.

What are those greater works?  They’re listed in verses 21 and 22. The first one is the power of life and resurrection.  The second is the authority of judgment, verse 22.  The Father grants the Son to give life and the Father grants the Son to render final judgment. Those are the marvelous works. They come together in verses 24 to 29 in the resurrection that Christ produces and the subsequent judgment.

So the Lord Jesus is one in nature with the Father and one in work with the Father.  He does exactly what the Father does.  This is the vision of Christ that you need to have.  And I think sometimes we have pulled Him down to nothing more than a kind and generous man.  Far from it.  Next time we’re going to see that He’s equal in power, equal in authority, and then the most consequent and yet shocking, that He’s equal in honor to God the Father.  Let’s pray together.

We acknowledge, show God that these are transcendent realities and they must be, they have to be because we’re talking about You, the eternal, transcendent, all-glorious, Trinitarian God.  We have done our best to grasp these truths. We know that even unbelieving hostile, hating religious hypocrites understood what Jesus was claiming.  How much more do we understand?  They resented it. We embrace it.  They rejected it.  We believe it.   They were condemned by their unbelief and we have been saved by our faith. And we thank You that You have brought us to the understanding of these truths, not only to understand them, even His enemies did, but to believe and embrace them and rejoice in them. Thank You for all that Christ is. And may we as we were reading earlier from Peter, live to bring honor to His glorious name through our behavior. Show forth the excellencies of His glory.

Father, it’s been such a blessing to be together today to hear Your Word read and to hear Your Word opened up even to my own heart. We feel like we’re barely on the edge of a vast ocean of spiritual reality that we couldn’t comprehend.  We kind of walk away with a little bucket full but it’s the best that we can do.  While we can’t comprehend all of it, we believe and by believing we have life. Thank You for that gift.  Bless this truth to our hearts, may it give us comfort and encouragement and may it increase our worship and our love for the Savior and may it empower us to have an effective witness for Him to those who need to know Him.  And we pray that You’ll work Your work of salvation in hearts even today in the name of Christ.

**The Most Startling Claim Ever Made, Part 2**

**John 5:21–24**

Code: 43-27

Now open your Bible, if you will, to the fifth chapter of the gospel of John and we’re going to try to pick up where we left off two weeks ago.  We have to do a little bit of that this summer because there’s an occasion or two when I will be gone, but we’ll just keep moving through John, nonetheless. But I do want to go back to the passage where we left off and that would be John 5:17 to 24 with apologies to those of you who haven’t been with us, we’ll try to get you in some kind of a context to grasp this wonderful, this staggering portion of Scripture.  Let’s just look at chapter 5 of John and verse 17, let me read down to verse 24 so you have it in mind.

“Speaking of Jesus…it says…He answered them, ‘My Father is working until now and I Myself am working.’ For this reason, therefore, the Jews were seeking all the more to kill Him because He not only was breaking the Sabbath was is calling God His own Father, making Himself equal with God.  Therefore Jesus answered and was saying to them, ‘Truly, truly I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself unless it is something He sees the Father doing, for whatever the Father does, these things the Son also does in like manner.  For the Father loves the Son and shows Him all things that He Himself is doing and the Father will show Him greater works than these so that you will marvel. For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so, the Son also gives life to whom He wishes, for not even the Father judges anyone, but He has given all judgment to the Son so that all will honor the Son even as they honor the Father.  He who does not honor the Son, does not honor the Father who sent Him.  Truly, truly I say to you, he who hears My word and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life and does not come into judgment but is past out of death into life.’”

Now the claim that Jesus is making here is bound up at the end of verse 19 in the very words of the Jews to whom He made the claim. They understood that He was claiming…end of verse 18…to be equal with God…to be equal with God.  That is the claim that Jesus makes in this passage.  That is a startling claim to the Jews.  It is a shocking claim to them, and in fact because they don’t believe it, it is the ultimate blasphemy.  As we titled this little series, “The Most Startling Claim Ever Made,” clearly that has to be it because a greater claim could not be made than to say one is equal to God.  They are stunned by it. They are outraged by it.  And the only thing they know to do with such a blasphemer is to kill Him. So verse 18 says, “They were seeking all the more to kill Him.”

Now this claim that Jesus makes to be equal with God puts us in a position to define Jesus.  It leaves us with three options.  Jesus’ claim forces us to three options.  He says He’s equal to God, option number one, that is true, that is a true claim and He is equal to God.  That’s option number one.  Option number two, that claim is false and He knows it.  So He is a deceiver and He is a blasphemer with intent.  He is an intentional blasphemer because He knows it’s a lie.  The third option is that the claim to be equal with God is false, and He doesn’t know it.  In which case He is delusional, He is a madman.  He’s on the level of someone who thinks he’s a poached egg.  He’s bereft of his mental faculties.

Those are the only options.  Option number one, again, it is true, He is equal to God.  Option number two, it is false, He knows it’s false and therefore He’s a blaspheming deceiver.  Option number three, it is false, that He doesn’t know it’s false, and therefore He’s a blaspheming delusional madman.  There are no other options.  There are none.  It is an outrage to then say that He’s a good teacher.  It is an equal outrage to say He’s some kind of a spiritual example.  Example of what?  Delusional, deception, blasphemy?  It is not possible to make Him into a model of religion, or some kind of pattern of spirituality or virtue, that is not a possible option.

Now, up to this point He has proven that the latter two options are ridiculous because deceivers and delusional people don’t raise the dead.  And they don’t control the demonic world, and they don’t conquer disease, and they don’t take power over nature.  All of which He did.  And they don’t speak with profound reason, divine wisdom, omniscient insight so that they know the thoughts of men and the history of people they’ve never met.

Option number two, that He is a deceiver and knows it, vanishes under the power of His miracles.  Option number three, that He is delusional also vanishes under the power of His miracles.  We’re left with only one possibility.  He is who He claimed to be.  His miracles were never denied.  Read through all four gospels, there’s never one verse, one line indicating that His miracles were denied. They were undeniable.  They were shocking.  Yes they were sensational. They were supernatural.  And they were ubiquitous, they were everywhere and they were constant, they were all the time.  No one had ever seen anything like it, the people said that.  Never has there ever been anything like this in Israel.  No one ever heard anything like the words He spoke demonstrating supernatural knowledge, wisdom and insight.  They said never a man spoke like this man…lucid, clear, rational, wise, profound.  This is not a delusional man.  And the miracle worker is not a deceiver.

Even Nicodemus, THE teacher in Israel said, “We know that You are a man come from God because no one can do the signs that You do unless God is with Him,” John chapter 3 verse 2.  And, in fact, this was universally the verdict on Jesus because there were tens of thousands of people who followed Him.  He didn’t do His miracles in a corner.  He didn’t do His miracles in a highly controlled environment like false miracle workers do today.  He did His miracles every day out in the open, in the street, in the villages wherever He was.  He did His miracles before masses of people day after day after day after day, literally adding up to hundreds of thousands of eyewitnesses.   Huge crowds, all of them amazed, all of them drawing the same conclusion that He was doing things they had never seen or heard of.  They even believed that He was from God.  They followed Him as such.  The crowds followed Him everywhere He went.  Albeit with superficial curiosity, with kind of a meager astonishment and we find that as soon as chapter 6, and we’ll see that in a little bit, they started to leave Him, they started to fade away.  In spite of all the miracles, they started leaving. And this demonstrated the power of the false religion to which they were bound.  False religion holds men captive. When Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4, “The God of this world has blinded their minds,” He doesn’t mean that Satan himself comes in and blinds people’s minds.  What He means is that Satan disguised as an angel of light concocts false religious system that hold people in bondage and blindness.

This is how it is.  And the system of apostate satanically controlled, hypocritical, legalistic Judaism that dominated the population of Israel was so powerful that in the face of all that Jesus did, the people still ran back to their false leaders. That’s illustrated, isn’t it, at the beginning of chapter 5.  Jesus goes to the pool of Bethsaida on a Sabbath, He finds a man there who has been 38 years with some kind of infirmity. The man believes in a local superstition that if somebody gets in the water first when the water bubbles, that person is going to be healed.  How that superstition developed, we don’t know, but he can’t get there because his infirmity debilitates him.  Jesus comes along, he doesn’t know who He is, has no idea, says, “Pick up your bed and walk.”  He picks up his bed and walks, instantaneously, completely, and fully healed. The man walks away.  It’s a Sabbath day.

The Jewish leaders castigate Jesus for doing that on a Sabbath. They say He violated the Sabbath by working on the Sabbath doing that healing as if it were work.  Jesus goes to the Temple to find the man after the man leaves.  He went by the Temple, no doubt, to offer thanks to God.  Jesus finds him in the Temple, sits down with him, and at that point reveals Himself to him, we can assume that, and closes the conversation by saying to the man, “Go and sin no more, you’ve got to repent, you’ve got to deal with your sin.”  And I’m sure that was just the final statement.  He wasn’t saying to him, “Go and fix yourself.”  Jesus knew the man could not stop sinning on his own.  When Jesus said “Go and sin no more,” He was simply reiterating with a final warning that you better turn from your sin and embrace salvation.  I’m sure He gave him a full gospel presentation. The man didn’t follow Jesus, the man went right back to the Jewish leaders and turned Jesus in so they could find Jesus.  That’s the bondage of false religion.

Here’s a man 38 years with an infirmity, Jesus comes along, delivers him on one day and the man so bound by that false religion doesn’t follow Jesus, goes right back to the system of which he is a part. That’s a…that’s a microcosm for the whole nation. He was healing people everywhere all the time through the three years of His ministry who were just going back into the system.  That’s because the god of this world invented that form of Judaism to hold people bondage…in bondage.

The leaders, represented by the term “the Jews” all through John, were persecuting Jesus, according to verse 16, the persecution had already began and it escalated so that they wanted to kill Him, not just persecute Him, verse 16, they wanted all the more to kill Him when He declared that He was equal with God.

This is the sad reality that Jesus comes who is God in human flesh.  He comes to bring salvation, first to Israel and the nation under the spell of the satanic false religious system proffered by those called the Jews which are the Pharisees and the scribes and the religious elites.  That is such a powerful bondage that they can’t escape it on their own.

Now how is Jesus going to deal with the issue?  There, verse 16, it says they were persecuting Jesus because He was doing things on the Sabbath.  He could have said, “Let me talk about the Sabbath, you’re overestimating the restrictions on the Sabbath, you’re way out of line making silly restrictions about the Sabbath that God never intended.”  He could have said, “The Sabbath was made for man and it was to be a day of rest, make things easy.  You’ve made it difficult, more difficult than any other day, you’ve loaded it up with bondage and rules.”  He could have had a discussion about the Sabbath.

He could have also said, “Look, what I did was a good deed and good deeds should be done on the Sabbath.”  On one other occasion, you remember, He said, “If your ox falls into the ditch on a Sabbath, you going to let it die, or you going to get it out?  There’s some things that overrule those kinds of restrictions and you should know that.”  And this man 38 years with this infirmity is delivered.  They had no interest in that man. They had no compassion for that man.  Legalism never does.  Jesus could have discussed those issues but He didn’t.  He elevated the discussion from Sabbath to Christology, to His own identity.  Instead of trying to explain it away to cool the Jews off, He elevated it to fire up their fury.  That’s what He did.

You say, “Well did He want to die?  Because that’s where it was going.”  Answer…yes.  So rather than try to deescalate the impact of what He did on the Sabbath, He escalated it into the ultimate…the ultimate confrontation, the ultimate conflict, the claim that He is equal to God.

Now this speech to these Jewish leaders starts in verse 17, it goes to verse 47, the whole chapter.  So we’ve got a lot more to look at. But in just verses 17 to 24, our Lord declares His equality with God six ways…six ways.  Last time we looked at just the first few.  The answer is really in summation this…I do whatever I choose to do, whenever I choose to do it because I’m God.  I’m not subject to your laws.  The Sabbath was made for man, I’m not merely a man.  I mean that’s the big answer and He begins to delineate that by making these claims in six features.

Number one, He is equal to God in nature.  Verse 17, “He answered them, ‘My Father is working until now and I Myself am working.’”  He says “My Father,” and they go ballistic.  No Jew would call God His Father because in their view, father and son share the same life principles, share the same essence.  Jesus is saying, “I am of the same nature as God.”  They pick it up, verse 18, “For this reason the Jews were seeking all the more to kill Him because He not only was breaking the Sabbath, but also was calling God His own Father which makes Himself equal to God.”  You can’t say, “My Father,” because that’s to say you have the same nature as God. And then to add to that, He expresses it in another way.  “The Father is working until now,” in other words, the Father doesn’t pay any attention to the Sabbath, the Father doesn’t rest, and I don’t either because that’s an affirmation that I’m the same as Him.  He’s working, never stops, I Myself am working, never stops.  God never rests, I never rest.  He’s working, I’m working.  They got it.  He was making Himself equal to God in nature.

Secondly, in verses 19 and 20 He declared Himself to be equal with God in works.  Therefore Jesus answered and was saying to them, “Truly, truly I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself unless it is something He sees the Father doing, for whatever the Father does, these things the Son also does in like manner.”  We talked about that a couple of weeks ago.  He and His Father are one in nature, and they are therefore one in function, one in duty, one in work.  The Son can do nothing of Himself.  In other words, He doesn’t operate independently from God.  Every human being operates independently from God.  We couldn’t possibly blame God for everything we do.  No human being could say, “Whatever God does, I do and that’s all I do, I only do what God does, I do nothing else.” That is such an outrageous claim coming from the lips of a man, and here stands this Galilean carpenter in a normal Galilean garb with His sandals on and His feet dirty from the dust of Jerusalem, looking into the eyes of these Jewish leaders and telling them that He is of the same nature as the eternal God and that He only does what the Father does.  Stunning.  Perfect unity with the Father…and by the way, it’s a unity defined as love, based…that’s a love-based unity, the Father loves the Son and therefore shows Him all things that He Himself is doing.  The Father will show Him greater works than these so that you will marvel.

In other words, the love of the Father is so perfect for the Son that the Father has no secrets from the Son. The Father tells the Son everything, everything has …He’s always known everything, He has known everything eternally, the Father has always will, that He always knows everything there is to know, there are no secrets in the Trinity. The Father doesn’t know something the Son doesn’t know, the Father doesn’t do something the Son doesn’t do. The Father doesn’t will something the Son doesn’t will because of the perfect love in the Trinity.

So He is equal to God in works.  And while they may not see that yet, because they’re going to say, “Well God has done some greater works than we’ve seen You do.” So at the end of verse 20, Jesus says, “The Father will show greater works than these so that you will marvel.”  And what are the greater works?  Verses 21 and 22, the final resurrection and the final judgment.  Whatever it is that those people think is different about Jesus than it is than God is going to be resolved in the end when those people and all the others who reject Christ show up in the final judgment, are raised from the dead by the power of Christ and face Him as the eternal judge.  So the final marveling is future.

So Christ is equal to God in nature. He is equal to God in work.  He doesn’t nothing independently of God.   Whatever God does, He does in the same way God does it.  And there’s no secret that God has, there’s nothing God knows therefore God does that Jesus doesn’t know and do because perfect love in the divine Trinity communicates everything perfectly.

Thirdly, this is where we left off, Jesus claims to be equal to God in power…equal to God in power.  Now there are a lot of ways to talk about power. We use the word “power” for all kinds of things.  But this is the ultimate power.  Notice this, verse 21, :For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son also gives life to whom He wishes.”

What is the ultimate power in the universe?  What is it?  The ability to do what?  Give life.  That’s the ultimate power, to give life.  The Father gives life. Acts 17, Paul on Mars Hill talking about God who gives life and breath to all. God in whom we live and move and have our existence and have our being.  But remember John 1 which said, concerning the Word who is Christ, “That nothing was made that wasn’t made by Him because in Him was life.”  This is the ultimate power.

It is characteristic of the eternal God that He has life as an attribute, underived, underived, uncaused…uncaused.  This is the doctrine of divine aseity…divine equal, from the Latin, a-seity, from Himself.  You live because you derived life.  You were given life by your parents and they by their parents and it all goes back to a point in time when there was no life, except the triune God who is the eternal life and He gave life to everything.  And it came in many forms.  We talk about biological life. We understand what that is in the world of biology, that would include humans and all of the animate living creation.  There is even inanimate life.  If you look at this pulpit or the floor or the static building that you see or anything else that isn’t obviously moving, you might consider that that thing doesn’t have life, but oh does it have life, it is in motion at an incalculable speed and incalculable complexity as the atoms that make up what you think is static are moving endlessly, driven by an internal energy which is invisible and incalculable and imperceptible.

There is also that other invisible life which is spiritual life which we can’t see in each other but which is evident.  All of that life, the whole of the universe whether it is apparently inanimate, or animate, invisible is all from God who made everything, or from Christ without whom nothing was made that was made.  Here is this Galilean carpenter standing there saying that He is the one who has created the entire universe and He gives life only to whomever He wishes.  Nothing exists that He didn’t wish to exist.  Nothing came into existence by any random process…nothing.  He is equal to God in power and at the ultimate level which is the ability to make something live, make something exist that previously did not exist.

It’s a staggering, staggering claim.  Jesus said at the grave of Lazarus, “I am the resurrection and the life.”  He is the living one and that’s repeated we’ll see in chapter 6 of John as well.

So our Lord is making these amazing claims…equal to God in nature, equal to God in work, equal to God in power.  Number four, equal to God in authority…equal to God in authority.  Genesis 18:25 says, “God…God the Father is the judge of all the earth.”  The Jews certainly believe that.  Listen to what Jesus said in verse 22, “For not even the Father judges anyone but He has given all judgment to the Son.”

These internal realities in the Trinity are stunning for us and really hard for us to grasp because it’s hard to understand that He is God and yet with God.  He is God and yet separate from God.  It’s hard to understand that God is the judge and yet Christ does the judging because we can’t understand the internal workings of the Trinity.  And, dear friends, that profound mystery alone should prove to you that the Bible was written by God because men would resolve those kinds of apparent paradoxes.  The Father has given all judgment. The Father who is the judge of the whole earth has given all judgment to the Son.  In Genesis1, God creates, John 1, when the Son creates.  In the Old Testament God’s the judge.  In the New Testament the Son is the judge.  How can that be?  Because the Son does everything the Father does in the same way the Father does it.

He is claiming…Jesus is claiming to be the supreme judge of all beings.  Back in chapter 3 and verse 18, He said, “He who believes in Him, that is in the Son, is not judged.  He who does not believe has been judged already because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.  And the Son that is rejected, the one who is rejected becomes the judge.  He becomes the judge.

And by the way, the phrase in that verse has been judged already means that people aren’t waiting for judgment in the future.  This is the illusion of religion, that you live your life and you do good, and you do good, and you do good and if the good outweighs the bad, you know, God’s keeping a record and at the end He’ll make a judgment.  No.  You’ve been judged already.  All that work doesn’t mean anything. All that goodness doesn’t mean a thing in terms of your eternity.  You’ve been judged already because you believe not on the Son.

You say, “Well what about the future judgment?”  That’s only the execution.  The verdict was made when you arrived in this world rejecting the Son and it continues to be the same verdict until you believe.  And if you never believe, that verdict is set.  The final judgment is just the execution.  What you do along the way of good works is meaningless.  So the Son is equal to the Father in judgment, startling claims.

All of that leads to an amazing claim in verse 23…an amazing claim.  “So consequence here, So, that all will honor the Son even as they honor the Father.” That’s a positive statement.  Since the Son is the one who gives life to whom He wishes, since the Son is the one to whom all judgment is committed…let me say it simply…since the Son is the reason you exist and the Son is the one who determines your eternal destiny, since the Son is the beginning and the end, since the Son is the alpha and the omega, the Son is to be honored even as the Father is honored.  You can understand how absolutely devastating such a claim was coming from a man standing there talking to them.  This is the consequence of all the previous claims, “So that the only possible right response to the one who created everything and who will bring everything to its consummation, and who, by the way, in the middle upholds everything by the word of His power, the only possible response is that He is to be honored in the same way that God is to be honored.

You know, you read theologians who say, “Well Jesus never claimed to be God.” That’s absurd, of course He did.  Of course He did, right here, there’s no mistaking that.  He insists that He is to be worshiped in the same way God is.  He is to be honored, praised, adored, respected, trusted, obeyed in the same way as God the Father.  That’s the positive statement at the beginning of verse 3.  Then he flips it to a negative in verse 23, “He who does not honor the Son, does not honor the Father who sent Him.”  They were all fiercely loyal, those Jews, to the Old Testament revelation of the one true God.  Look, they had had their idolatry scrubbed out during the Babylonian captivity. They no longer tampered with idols. That went away. They were monotheists to the bone, one true God, no other God tolerated.  Here they are face-to-face with a Galilean carpenter who is a miracle working preacher who says they are to worship Him in the same way they worship the one true God.  They have to give Him equal honor, equal respect. Equal worship.

In the sixth chapter and verse 28, the people say, “What shall we do so that we may work the works of God?”  What does God want out of us?  And Jesus answered and said to them, “This is the work of God that you believe in Him whom He sent.”  You want to do God’s work?  Then you have to believe in Me which means believe that I am who I claim to be and who God has declared Me to be…remember at the baptism, God says out of heaven, “This is My beloved Son in whom I am well-pleased.”

Listen to John 15:23, “He who hates Me, hates My Father also.  He who hates Me, hates My Father also.”  It’s a popular thing today, strange but popular thing in evangelical Christianity to imagine that Jews in particular and maybe some other groups as well, but particularly Jews, don’t have to believe in Christ, that somehow if they’re just good Jews and they believe the Old Testament and believe in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of Israel, the Creator God of the Old Testament that God doesn’t require them to believe in Jesus, that’s a very popular doctrine proffered by some very popular evangelical preachers. They don’t need to believe in Jesus.  If that were the case, Jesus never would have said this, “If you don’t honor the Son, you don’t honor the Father.  If you hate Me, you hate the Father.”  That is an absurdity as well as a damning lie to pass on to Jews.

I remember having a conversation with Larry King one night after we did a television program who is Jewish and we developed a pretty good friendship then, and he said to me, he said, “You know, John, I’m going to be okay…going to be okay.”  I said, “What do you mean you’re going to be okay?”  “I think I’m going to make it to heaven.”  I said “Based on what, Larry?”   He said, and he named a certain evangelist and said, “He told me because I’m Jewish, I’m going to be okay.”  That may be the worst thing that anybody told him.  But to come from a Christian evangelist to tell him that?  There is no way to God except through Christ…no way.

So here is Jesus making these claims.  He is either to be worshiped or He is to be shunned.  And He demands worship.  You cannot embrace God at all without embracing Jesus.  So much more to say about that.  But let’s go on to a final claim.

Equal I nature, equal in works, equal in power, equal in authority, equal in honor and equal in truth…equal in truth. This takes us to verse 24.  “Truly, truly I say to you, he who hears My Word and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life.”  Hears and believes are one and the same.  When He says “He who hears My words,” He means hear it with faith.  And then says, “And believes assumes you heard.”  How could you believe if you hadn’t heard?  So that’s just…those are just synonyms.  What it says here is to have eternal life, you have to hear and believe My Word and you have to hear and believe the Word of Him who sent Me.  That is to say, you must believe what came from God and what came from Christ.  To make it real simple, the Old and the New Testament.  It’s not enough to believe the Old Testament and stop at that point.  In fact, Jesus uses truly, truly again, that little formula appears 25 times in the gospel of John.  You already saw it back in verse 19.  And Jesus used it because He was saying things to them that were true against the backdrop of their deception and the lies that they believed.  And it’s a statement for the purpose of being emphatic, “Truly, truly I say to you, eternal life, which is escape from judgment, deliverance from condemnation, eternal life comes to those who hear and believe My Word and who hear and believe the Word of Him who sent Me.” Those are the people who have eternal life, those are the people who do not come into judgment but are passed out of death into life.  You escape judgment, you escape eternal death only when you believe what the Father says and what the Son says because they both speak the same truth.

All the teaching, all the claims, all the commands that come from Christ, all the revelation concerning Christ that fills the New Testament, all the revelation, all the claims, all the commands, all the truths, all the doctrines, all the realities from the Father that make up the Old Testament, that point to Christ and to the need of man, they all must be believed cause they’re equal in truth.  Anybody who says that Jesus is inferior to God, fails to understand all of this and puts his eternal soul in jeopardy.  To say, as the Mormons do, that Jesus is a created spirit brother of Lucifer who was created by a god who was created by another god is a damning heresy.  If there are any Mormons here today, listening to this, my fear is that just like the Jews, you will hear everything I say and you will run back into the bondage of the corrupt system that holds you captive.  You must flee.  This is the truth.  This is the truth.

This is not just John’s record of what Jesus said as if it sort of stands isolated in the New Testament.  Let me close by taking you to Hebrews chapter 1.  Hebrews chapter 1.  This sounds like an echo of John 5:17 to 24.  We said equal in truth, listen to this, “God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets, in many portions and in many ways…”  Okay, that’s how God spoke in the Old Testament.  In many portions, in many different ways, He spoke through visions, voices from heaven, spoke through the *urim and thummin*on the breast of the High Priest.  He spoke sometimes through lots, he spoke through dreams, he spoke directly to prophets and writers of Holy Scripture, in many ways, in many different portions.  In these last days has spoken to us in His Son.  This is the presentation of Christ. The prophets revealed God but Jesus reveals God fully.  In Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily.

The prophets received many portions and in many ways the truth about God.  It was a fragmentary revelation of God.  Jesus is the full revelation of God.  In Him God did not display some facets of Himself, but fully reveals Himself.  We see the glory of God shining in the face of Jesus…Paul says.  In these last days, that is the days in which the Lord has come, God speaks to us in His Son.  In Christ, the revelation of God is full, it is complete.  Not in the drifting hues and separated colors of the Old Testament, but in the pure blazing light, uniting in one person the whole spectrum of divine revelation.  Christ is God revealed in His fullness.

And then He goes on to say He is the heir of all things.  He is the one through whom He made the world.  He is the radiance of His glory, the exact representation of His nature, upholds all things by the Word of His power.  He’s the one who made purification of sins and then He sat down at the right hand of the majesty on high.

The writer of Hebrews is saying the Son, Christ, is the end of all things. That is He’s the heir.  He is the beginning of all things, He is the creator.  He is the center of all things, He upholds everything by the Word of His power.  He is the beginning.  He is the end, the Alpha and the Omega.  He is also the middle.  He appointed Him, His Son, heir of all things. All things were made by Him and for Him, for Him.  He is the one who takes the title deed in the book of Revelation and takes back the universe as His own.  He is the ultimate heir of everything because He is the Creator of everything.  It was through Him that the world was made.

By the way, the word “world” is often *kosmos*in the Greek.  It is not such here.  It is the word *aiones(?)*.  *Aiones* doesn’t technically mean world.  It means ages.  It is stressing the fact that He didn’t just make the world, that is to say the earth and the complex systems of life that are here.  This is not strictly the physical earth, but is a reference to the fact that He has created ages. That is to say He has created time and space and force and energy and matter and everything.  He is the Creator of absolutely everything.  He is the Creator of the incalculable microcosm of the universe, stunning, incomprehensible creation.  He’s the Creator of your heart that beats 800 million times in a lifetime.  He made it all.

He is also the radiance of the glory of God.  What do we understand by that? *Apaugasma*, brightness, He puts God on display.  He’s called in John 1 the light, right?  We talked about that.  He is the light.

How are we to understand that He is the light that shines from God?  Maybe you can understand it this way.  The radiance of the sun reaches the earth, lights the earth, warms the earth, gives life and growth to the earth.  So in Christ, the glorious light of God shines into the hearts of men, produces light and life.  The brightness of the sun is the same as the sun.  It is as old as the sun.  The brightness of the sun has always been with the sun, never was the sun without its brightness. The brightness of the sun cannot be separated from the sun and yet the brightness of the sun is not the sun.  Maybe in some way that illustrates how Christ is the brightness of God.  Without the sun there is no light.  He said, “I am the light of the world,” John 8:12.  So He is God on display…the glory of God shining in the face of Christ.

Further describing who He is, He is the exact representation of His nature…the exact substance of God’s nature.  He is what God is.  There is no difference.  He is the essence of God.

You know, it’s just so parallel, it reminds us of one of the great doctrines of Scripture called *analogia scriptura.*And that is to say Scripture is analogous to itself, when compared with itself, it will be found to be absolutely true and consistent.

He is the one, also, according to verse 3, who upholds all things by the Word of His power. Compare Colossians 1:17…Colossians 1:17.  “He is before all things and in Him all things hold together.”  He holds the universe together.  He created it, He’s the end of it, it will all resolve in His glory and He sustains it, supporting it, just beyond comprehension.  If the earth’s rotation slowed down a little bit, we would alternately freeze and burn.  If the surface temperature of the sun was a little hotter or a little cooler, we would all alternately freeze and burn.

If the globe which is tilted on its axis in an exact angle of 23 degrees, where altered, we would lose our seasons.  Vapors from the ocean would move north and south and pile up continents of ice everywhere.  If the moon didn’t remain at an exact distance from the earth, the ocean tide would inundate the land completely twice a day.  If the ocean slipped to a few feet deeper than it is carbon dioxide and the oxygen in the earth’s atmosphere would be completely absorbed and no vegetable life could exist.  If the atmosphere didn’t remain constant, but thinned out, meteors which explode harmlessly when they enter the atmosphere would hit the earth and we would be constantly bombarded to death.

Who holds all this in a delicate balance?  That Galilean carpenter standing there looking at those Jews that day.  This is who He is.  And, says the writer, when He made purification of sin, when He did His work on the cross and rose from the dead, He went to take His rightful place and sat down at the right hand of the majesty on high, right where He belonged, the very place from which He came.

Now go back to John 5 and let’s wrap it up. What is the end of this?  What is the response of these Jews to what Jesus says?  Let’s just look at verse 37 and kind of jump ahead.

“And the Father who sent Me, He has testified of Me.”  How?  At His baptism, “This is My beloved Son whom I’m well-pleased,” through His miracles, through His words, through John the Baptist.  He says to them, “You have neither heard His voice at any time, nor seen His form.  You do not have His Word abiding in you, for you do not believe Him whom He sent.”

Can I say it any better?  Of course not.  If you don’t embrace the Son, you don’t know God at all.  You search the Scriptures cause you think in them you have eternal life.  It is these that testify about Me and you are unwilling to come to Me so that you may have life.  Whoever doesn’t come to the Son, doesn’t have life.  This is the Christian message.  Neither is there salvation in any other name, there’s no other name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved.  I am the way, the truth and the life.  No man comes to the Father but by Me, John 14.  The Father give His testimony, you don’t know Him, you don’t know His voice, you don’t know His will, you don’t have His Word in you because you don’t believe in Me. And you go on probing the Old Testament because you think that by doing that you’ll earn eternal life.  And the Old Testament points to Me and you’re unwilling to come to Me that you might have life.

That is the simple message that has been preached since that day in Jerusalem by every faithful preacher and evangelist throughout the history of the church.  There’s no salvation apart from Christ who is the Son of God.  And for those who think somehow it’s a noble thing to just assign Him the identity of a good teacher, you don’t have that option.  Either His claim is true, or He’s a blasphemer.  And if His claim is true, then Christianity is real and the gospel is true.  If He’s not God, there is no Christianity.  The whole thing is a deception.  But the evidence is sustainable, powerful, unconquerable that He is who He claimed to be.  And that you must believe to be saved.  Confess Him as Lord, believe in your heart, and receive eternal life.

Father, we thank You, this morning, that You have given us the opportunity to gather. Thank You that You have drawn us into this passage because we are profoundly enriched and blessed by its truth. What is more wonderful than knowing Christ?  Knowing everything we can about Him?  Grasping who He is?  For this leads to worship and praise and love and adoration and obedience and faithfulness and righteousness.  We pray for those who have not believed. Shatter the darkness, give life, draw them to Yourself that they might believe.  May the sinner live in fear who rejects cause the consequences are so dire and everlasting.  Lift up Christ and through Him draw men to Yourself.

For those of us who know the Lord, may this help us to love Him more and obey Him more eagerly, more faithfully.  How great is Your goodness to us and Your grace that You would give us life in His name who are unworthy sinners?  Fill our hearts with grateful praise.

Father, we do ask that You would do a work in hearts.  I have no power to do that, none whatsoever.  That all belongs to You. All we can do is sow the seed of the truth. We ask that You would confirm it, affirm it, use it to penetrate hearts for Your glory, we pray in the name of Christ.  Amen.

**27 The Dead Will Hear Christ**

**John 5:25–29**

Code: 43-28

**A NOTE ABOUT THIS TRANSCRIPT**

The following sermon transcript does not match the *video* version of the sermon—it matches only the audio version. Here's a brief explanation why.

John MacArthur routinely preaches a sermon more than once on the same date, during different worship services at Grace Community Church. Normally, for a given sermon title, our website features the audio and video that were recorded during the same worship service. Very occasionally, though, we will post the audio from one service and the video from another. Such was the case for the sermon titled “The Dead Will Hear Christ,” the transcript of which follows below. The transcript is of the audio version.

Open your Bible to the fifth chapter of the gospel of John, John chapter 5 verses 25 to 29.  We have been looking at really one of the great messages or discourses or sermons that our Lord ever gave, this lengthy presentation of His deity that began in verse 17 and runs all the way to verse 47.  And we’ve made it down to verse 25 at this point, and we don’t want to move too rapidly through this because of its profound richness.  But let me read verses 25 to 29 as a setting for our message.

“Truly, truly I say to you, an hour is coming and now is when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live.  For just as the Father has life in Himself, even so He gave to the Son also to have life in Himself.  And He gave Him authority to execute judgment because He is the Son of Man.  Do not marvel at this for an hour is coming in which all who are in the tombs will hear His voice and will come forth, those who did the good deeds to a resurrection of life, and those who committed the evil deeds to a resurrection of judgment.”

Every person who has or will live on this earth will experience resurrection.  I know that we as believers understand the Christian resurrection that God has planned for His people, but you need to understand also that every human being who has ever lived will be raised from the dead and there will be a literal, physical resurrection of the ungodly just as there will be of the godly. There will be a physical resurrection unto judgment or damnation just as there will be a physical resurrection unto life.  All men who ever live on this earth will be raised from the dead.  When the body goes into the ground, that is not the last appearance of that person in visible form.  Eternity is not just a place for spirits, it is a place for resurrected bodies containing spirits.  The resurrection is the subject of this passage as you could easily see.  And it is in this passage that our Lord makes the astounding claim that He is the one who raises the dead and then judges all of them.

I remember the scenario here.  Jesus is talking to Jewish leaders in Israel.  He is, as far as they are concerned, a false teacher, a pretender to be a representative of God and even though they know He does miracles, they have explained them as power coming from hell.  They reject Him.  They look at Him as the ultimate blasphemer without comparison, without parallel, without equal because He claims to do the very things that God alone does in the very way that God does them.  In fact, as we remember from verse 18, He makes Himself equal with God and that’s their assessment, their accurate assessment of exactly what He was saying.

But how does it come down to the subject then of resurrection, this claim to deity?  Well, it gets to this point because in our Lord claiming to be God back in verses 21 and 22, He says that He raises the dead and He judges as God raises the dead and gives life and judges. So He’s the one who introduced the subject of resurrection and judgment.  So it’s all a part of this message that Jesus is giving, this monologue that He is giving about His identity to these Jewish leaders.

They reject Him as a blasphemer.  Back in verse 16 they were persecuting Jesus, first of all because He was violating their traditional Sabbath rules.  Even worse, as I noted in verse 18, He was calling God His Father which is to say He has the same essence of God, making Himself equal with God. that was the ultimate blasphemy.  Condemned for healing on the Sabbath as some kind of violation of their tradition, and then condemned for being the ultimate blasphemer.

Jesus responds to these condemnations by elevating His claims, not by backing off, not by trying to mitigate, not by trying to explain anything away, not by trying to soften the blow but rather elevating it.  And we saw in verses 17 to 24 just two weeks ago, that He claims to be equal with God in person, equal to God in works, equal to God in power, equal to God in judgment or authority, equal to God in honor, and in verse 24, equal to God in truth.  What He says is as true as what God says and as God is to be heard and believed, so He is to be heard and believed.

So in verses 17 to 24, He makes these amazing, astonishing claims of equality with God, and in the middle of it, verses 21 and 22, are these two claims that essentially are the most elevated of all claims, He has the power to give life and the power to judge. That is to say, He brings people into existence and then determines the nature of their eternal existence.  He is God a very God, it is unmistakable.

Now they’re obviously going to be shocked, traumatized by this astonishing kind of claim from this Galilean carpenter standing in front of them, that He is the one who gives life to all and determines everyone’s eternal destiny.  He doesn’t back off.  In verses 25 to 29, as I just read, He demonstrates that He has the power to give life and the power and authority to judge.  He has the power, He will use it. So He discusses in verses 25 to 29 two types of resurrection—two times of resurrection.  And that’s just going to be a simple outline for us this morning. There is, of course, a physical resurrection, we understand that.  There is also a spiritual resurrection.  Along the same line, there are two resurrections that are eternal. There is a resurrection to eternal life, and there is a resurrection to eternal damnation.  All this is folded in in these brief verses.

Let’s look, first of all, at verses 25 and 26 and take a look at the truth of spiritual resurrection…spiritual resurrection. That’s the subject.  “Truly, truly I say to you, an hour is coming and now is…and ‘now is’ is the key there…if something now is, then He is saying it is happening now.” That means it can’t be the future physical resurrection. The resurrection that was then already happening was a spiritual resurrection. So He says to you, “I say to you, an hour is coming and now is when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live, for just as the Father has life in Himself, even so He gave to the Son to have life in Himself.”  Those two verses point to the spiritual resurrection.  This is an emphatic, authoritative, absolute statement and that is why again we see “Truly, truly.”  We saw it in verse 24. We saw it earlier in Jesus’ discussions with Nicodemus.  It was used by Jesus in speaking to Nicodemus several times.

And the reason we see this so frequently is because this is brand new information. This is contrary to everything they’ve ever known and believed and affirmed and taught.  And it is also the most solemn way to introduce a thought, “Truly, truly,” to emphasize the urgency of this.

All right, “An hour is coming and now is,” an hour is coming and now is.  Something has arrived already and yet has a future aspect.  Something has arrived in the present but has a future aspect.  What could that be?

Well obviously spiritual resurrection. The New Testament era began when our Lord began His ministry.  It will not be completed, the ministry of the Lord begun when He arrived, the ministry of redemption, the ministry of salvation, the ministry of sanctification, it will not end until the work of redemption is finally complete.  This is just our Lord’s way of saying redemption has begun, regeneration has begun. When He said to Nicodemus He said, “You must be born from above, you must be born again,” that is both now, Jesus says, and to come.  This is an ongoing ministry, the saving work of the Lord Jesus is already beginning to make people alive.  As Jesus spoke to the Jews that day, He had the power in that very hour to give people life.

Back up to verse 24, “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My Word and believes Him who sent Me,” those are present tense, “now who hears My Word and believes Him who sent Me has eternal life.”  That’s present tense, that’s all present tense.  And so that is the “now is” of verse 25.  An hour is coming, yes…and now is, when the dead, the spiritually dead, will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live.  Jesus is simply saying that that has begun.  The ministry of salvation through the Lord Jesus Christ has begun.  Even before the cross, He gave life. Even before His own resurrection, He was giving life to people.

At the end of chapter 3 when Jesus closes out His message to the disciples, He says this, “He who believes in the Son has eternal life.”  He who believes in the Son has eternal life.  You remember in chapter 4, the next chapter, and verse 42, they were saying to the Samaritan woman, “It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves and know that this one is indeed the Savior of the world.”  They were believing.  In fact, in verse 39, they believed in Him because of the Word the woman gave.  And then in verse 40, they were asking Him to stay with them and He stayed there two days and many more believed because of His Word. and go back to verse 24 and chapter 5, “Who hears My Word and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life.”  So they were believing and they were being given eternal life.

I want to make that clear because I think there can be confusion between say the Old Testament and the resurrection of Jesus Christ when the fullness of the cross and the resurrection which are at the heart of the gospel are clear and accomplished.  In the period between the arrival of Christ and His own death, He was still giving spiritual life to those who believe. What did they believe?  They believed in the true and living God. They believed that He was holy and righteous. They believed that they had offended Him. They believed that they were sinful. They believed they needed mercy and grace. They believed that He had sent His Son to be their Savior, the Savior of the world as the Samaritan from Sychar put it.  They believed all that had been revealed to that point, even though they could not yet believe in the work of Calvary in the open tomb, just believing in the Son of God was all that they had to believe because that was all that God had up to that point revealed.  He had begun to give life.  And that’s why He says, “It now is.”

But at the same time, an hour is coming. When He uses the term “hour,” He’s not talking about one hour, He’s talking about an era…an era, a period of time.  We also know from back in chapter 1 and verse 12, “As many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name.”  And there again the same idea.  If they believed in who He was, John 3:16, “God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believes in Him…” it doesn’t say anything about the cross or the resurrection yet, but it is about believing in Him as the Son of God, the Savior of the world.  That would incorporate, obviously, the belief that God was holy and they were sinful, and they needed salvation and that salvation would be in Him though they didn’t know yet exactly how it would work out.  The Holy Spirit hadn’t come yet in the full sense of convicting the world of sin and righteousness and judgment.  Pentecost hadn’t happened yet and therefore the Holy Spirit hadn’t come and filled the church and taken up residence in the believers to cause them to have the power to give the witness to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the world, that their promise in Acts 1:8.  So those things hadn’t happened. That’s the hour that is coming.  So when we look at that little phrase, “An hour is coming,” we could say about that hour that’s the fullness of the revelation of the cross and the tomb and the arrival of the Holy Spirit and the work of the spirit through the church in taking the gospel to the ends of the earth. That hour is coming in its fullness, but there’s a sense in which it now is.

You have to believe. For example, that the disciples in John 1 who came to Jesus, affirmed who He was, left following John the Baptist, followed Jesus who was identified as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, that they had found the Messiah was their own profession, their own confession, you have to believe that they were given eternal life.  You have to believe that the Samaritans were given eternal life for believing in the name of Jesus.  You would be unfair.  There would be no legitimate reason to withhold from them salvation. It would be given to them similar to those who were redeemed in the Old Testament with the addition that the Old Testament saints were looking forward to the one who would come and those early believers in the New Testament, before the cross, before the resurrection, before the arrival of the Holy Spirit, were affirming who the one who had come actually was.  It was already the hour of life, but it was only beginning…only beginning.  In fact, when that hour actually arrived in its fullness on the Day of Pentecost, three thousand were saved, and then five thousand were saved and it was explosive from there on.

So what our Lord is referring to here is not literal physical resurrection, but spiritual resurrection because that’s the only time that was happening at that present time.  People were spiritually dead…go back to verse 25…when the dead, spiritually dead.

You say, “Spiritual death, doesn’t that show up in Ephesians?  Do we have any indication that people were called spiritually dead in the gospels?”  We do in Matthew 8:22, “Let the dead bury their dead.”  Jesus early in His ministry is calling unregenerate people dead in Matthew 8:22.  Spiritual death was a reality from the fall of man.  All men are born in a state of spiritual death, and when Paul talks about people being dead in trespasses and sins, he’s not inventing a new doctrine, he’s not designing some kind of new idea, he’s simply declaring what has always been the case.  All men are born dead in trespasses and sins.  That’s how it is.  And so, God is in the business of making people alive.  All the Old Testament saints were dead in trespasses and sins and made alive, those who came to true faith in God.

Let me broaden it out a little bit.  One of the themes in the gospel of John is that Christ is in the business of making dead people live.  If you go back to chapter 1 verse 4, you read, “In Him was life…in Him was life.”  If you go to chapter 3, familiar verse, verse 15, “Whoever believes will in Him have eternal life.”  Verse 16, “Whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.”  You go to verse 36 which we read earlier, “He who believes in the Son has eternal life.” Chapter 4 verse 14, Jesus says to the woman at the well, “Whoever drinks of the water that I will give him shall never thirst, but the water that I will give him will become in him a well of water springing up to eternal life.”

You come to chapter 5, go down to verse 39, “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life.  It is these who testify about Me and you’re unwilling to come to Me so that you may have life.”  Chapter 6 is the same thing, verse 27, “Do not work for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life which the Son of Man will give to you.”  Verse 33, “For the bread of life is that which comes down out of heaven and gives life to the world.”  Verse 35, “I am the bread of life, he who comes to Me will not hunger, he who believes in Me will never thirst.” Verse…the end of the chapter, verse 68, essentially the same thing.  “Lord, to whom shall we go?  You have words of eternal life.”  Just a few other samples because this is such an important aspect of the ministry of Christ, it’s the heart of it.  “Ten:10, the thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.”  Verse 28, “I give them eternal life and they will never perish.”  Chapter 11 verse 25, Jesus said to Martha, “I am the resurrection and the life.  He who believes in Me will live, even if he dies.”  And then our familiar theme verse, John 20:31, “These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.”  Nothing is more characteristic, nothing is more  inimitable, nothing is more essential in the ministry of Jesus than giving life…giving spiritual life to those who are spiritually dead.  This is not about a man teaching ethics, or morality, or virtue, or religious ideologies. This is one who gives life to dead people, spiritually dead.

How do they receive that life?  Go back to John chapter 5, you’re familiar with this, this is familiar to any believer.  They receive that life because they hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live.”  He is the only one, the only voice with the only message that gives life in a world of spiritual death and desolation.  Only those who hear His voice come alive spiritually.

You can imagine a world full of corpses lying all over, and one lone living man moving among millions of corpses, calling them to live. This is what the work of Jesus is, spiritually speaking.  They that hear shall live.

Now this is not just a general hearing, but this is an effectual hearing with the heart.  This is not just information, this is transformation.  This is…this is part of the work of the Spirit that we saw in John 3 in regeneration. This is God reaching down and giving life and then speaking with a voice that the heart hears, the soul hears.  New life pours in to the soul.  This is not a superficial hearing.

You remember that in Matthew 7, Jesus will say one day to people, “Depart from Me, I never knew you.”  And who are those people that He says depart from Me I never knew you to?  They say, “Lord, Lord, we’ve done all this in Your name.  We’ve proclaimed Your name. We’ve done miracles in Your name.  We’ve cast out demons in Your name.”  He says, “Depart from Me, I don’t know you.”  This is not superficial. This is not a physical hearing. This is an effectual hearing, this is a hearing in the believing heart and the believing soul, this is based upon God’s gracious awakening of the dead soul.  There was only one voice that could penetrate spiritual death, only one voice, and that’s the voice of the Son of God.  Mark it down, verse 25, “The dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live.”  You may be the witness, I may be the preacher, but the voice they have to hear is not our voice, the voice they have to hear is the voice of God, for He alone can give life.

Men don’t come alive on their own. Dead men don’t come alive by some religious motion, or ceremony. They don’t come alive by some ritual. They don’t come alive through the cleverness of a teacher.  They don’t come alive by self-improvement.  They come alive when the voice of Christ calls out. Ephesians 5:14 says, “Awake, you that sleep, and rise from the dead and Christ will give you life.”

It would be good to turn to Ephesians chapter 2, I think, because this is so well illustrated here.  “You were, with everybody else, dead in your trespasses and sins.  You walk according to the course of the world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit working in the sons of disobedience.”  That describes the condition of all human beings.  “You were living in the lust of your flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh, the mind.  We’re by nature children of wrath even as others, but God being rich in mercy because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ, by grace you have been saved and raised us up with Him and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.”

What Paul is saying is, it’s a divine miracle.  It’s a divine miracle.  God does this through Christ.  He gives life to the dead.  He raises us from the grave.  And then throughout all the ages to come, He shows us the surpassing riches of His grace in His kindness.  “We are therefore,” verse 10, “His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus.”  Only Christ can give life.

Jesus is then saying to these Jewish leaders, “I am the very one who gives spiritual life to those who are spiritually dead.”  Over in verses 39 and 40, which you read earlier, just a little reprise there, He says to these Jewish leaders, “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life. But it is these that testify about Me, that I’m the only source of eternal life, and you’re unwilling to come to Me so that you may have life.”

If you don’t come to Christ, you will die in your sins because He is the only one who gives life…the only one who gives life.  Verse 26, “Just as the Father has life in Himself, even so, He gave to the Son to have life in Himself.”  Verse 21, “The Son gives life.”  Verse 26, “The Son has life.”  He can give life because He has life.

Chapter 1 verse 4, “He is life.”  He gives life because He has life, because He is life.”  You can’t give what you don’t have.  I can’t give you life.  There’s no mechanism that I can employ to give you life.  Only God can give you life.  Only Christ can give you life.  God is the life-giver, Christ is the life-giver, no preacher, no teacher, no religious leader, no mystic, no form of religion, no laws, no routines, no rituals, no church can give you life.  Life is the sole possession of the Trinity.  Life is the sole possession of God who is the life-giver and of Christ who is also the life giver.  That life comes only to those who hear His voice, and by that voice have their heart awakened.  And that is a divine work, not apart from our faith, and not apart from the truth concerning Christ.  For them it was the truth that He was the Son of God. For us, it’s the truth that He was not only the Son of God, but the Son of God who died and rose again and descended and sent the Holy Spirit.

“I am the way,” Jesus said, “I am the truth, and I am…what?...the life.”  As God is life, so Christ is life.  As God is the fountain of life, so Christ is the fountain of life.  As Christ is the fountain of life, so the Spirit is the fountain of life.  Each member of the Trinity has power, equal power and they share the same attributes in a marvelous mystery.

But lest you be needlessly misinformed, let me just pick out one little interesting statement.  “As the Father has life in Himself, even so He gave to the Son also to have life in Himself.”  There is an old, old heresy called Sabellianism which says that there is only one God but He shows up in three different forms.  It’s also called Modalism, sometimes He’s the Father, sometimes He’s the Son, and sometimes He’s the Spirit.  It’s very popular today, it dominates millions of people in what’s called oneness Pentecostalism  or the Jesus-only Movement.

There’s a problem with that, and even far back as Athanasius that problem was identified as being resolved in this verse.  If the Father is sometimes the Father and sometimes the Son, and sometimes the Spirit and just shows Himself in different modes, then it cannot be said that the Father gave to the Son anything because you could only give something to someone if that someone exists.  This was one of the early attacks on the Sabellian heresy.  If there’s only one person, then there is no one to give anything to.

And you might say, “Well didn’t Jesus have life?  Isn’t He the eternal life?”  Yes.  Yes in the fullness of His glory He had life but in some mystical way, He eternally proceeds from the Father, He eternally proceeds from the Father.  He is the eternally begotten Son of the Father.  Yes it’s mysterious.

But I would even go a step beyond that and I would say that in His humiliation He willfully, personally, voluntarily restricts the use of His divine attributes so that even in His incarnation, He only does that which the Father desires Him to do.  I would say that the Father, therefore, has allowed Him even in His incarnation to give life.  He could have called ten thousand angels, right?  The Father had not given Him permission to do that.  He could have known the time of His return, but He said the Son of Man doesn’t know that.  There’s willful restriction in His humiliation of His divine prerogatives.  His nature doesn’t change, but He chooses to limit Himself to that which the Father wills. And here we find that the Father wills that Jesus even in the humiliation of His incarnation is still giving life.

We shouldn’t be surprised by that.  He created fish.  He created bread.  We shouldn’t be surprised by that, He raised people from the dead.  But here is something beyond all of that, He was even during the years of His incarnation and the ministry that He began at the age of 30, permitted by the Father to give life…to give life.  First John 5:11, “This is the record that God has given unto us, eternal life.  And this life is in His Son.”  This life is in His Son.  Jesus restricted the use of His divine powers to only those God desired Him to use.  He would have restricted His life-giving power, perhaps He did for the first 30 years of His life, but not now.  And He demonstrated it by raising dead people.  More importantly He was giving spiritual life.  He was bringing people alive spiritually, those who hear will live eternally.

So, Jesus then claims even then, right there standing in front of those Jews, to be giving life, to be raising spiritually dead people.  He has the power of spiritual resurrection.

Secondly, verse 27 to 29, the power of physical resurrection…the power of physical resurrection.  “And He gave Him authority to execute judgment because He is the Son of Man,” and here’s how that judgment will work.  “Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming, not now is, but is coming, this is all future, in which all who are in the tombs will hear His voice and will come forth, those who did the good deeds to a resurrection of life, those who committed the evil deeds to a resurrection of judgment.”  Clearly now we’re talking about something that is all future…future.  Verse 22, “The Father has given all judgment to the Son.”  Verse 27, “He executes that judgment.”  The word “execute” appears in verse 27.

The Son of Man is an interesting title.  It’s a Messianic title from Daniel 7.  It appears as His title in judgment, whereas Son of God back in verse 25 appears as His title in spiritual resurrection.  It takes God to raise the dead.  Why is He called Son of Man in judgment?  Because as Son of Man, He is the Messiah. But as Son of Man He understands perfectly because He lived as a man and being tempted in all points like as we are, yet without sin, He has perfect knowledge of all human experience and therefore His justice, of course, is secured by experience as well as divine knowledge as just and accurate and perfect judgment.  It is not just God judging man, it is not just man judging man.  If it was just God, there would be no experience of man’s dilemmas.  If it was just man, there would be no divine omniscience.  He is the God/Man, His judgment cannot be impugned, either from the side of divine omniscience, or the side of human experience.

So God gives Him authority to execute judgment because He is the Son of Man.  Do not marvel at this.  Do not marvel at this.”  I mean, this is a preemptive statement because what He’s going to say is so shocking.  An hour is coming in which all who are in the tombs will hear His voice.”  Don’t be shocked by what I’m going to tell you, but an hour is coming when the voice will be hear d again and it will empty the graves of this planet, it will empty them.  It will draw out of graves bodies no longer there. They will be created for eternity.  When He says the tombs are empty, all He means by that is not necessarily that there better be something there or nothing’s coming out.  What will that do to all the cremated folks?  All He means is that the dead will take on a physical form.  This has no present aspect, this is not now is, this is future. This is not the effectual heart-hearing that brings salvation.  This will awaken dead people. And this will bring bodies to join their spirits already out of the presence of God or in the presence of God.  The same voice that wakes the spiritually dead, will pierce the clods and the waters of the world and the dirt and dust and find the dead and bring those long-forgotten forms into the world of the visible.

This is astonishing power. mind-boggling power.  How do you literally in a moment recreate every human being who has ever lived and join that recreated form suitable for heaven or hell with the spirit of the person already in the presence of God or out of His presence?  The power is beyond imagination…beyond comprehension.  But that hour will come…that hour will come.

As we said earlier, an hour is a period of time.  The hour that now is has gone on for two thousand years.  The hour that will come will go on for a long time also.  It will begin with the Rapture of the church when believing Christians who are alive will be caught up in the air and they’ll be changed on the way up.  It will be followed by resurrections through the period of the Tribulation time.  There will be a resurrection at the end of the Tribulation, Daniel talks about that, resurrection of Tribulation believers and Jews.  There will then be a millennial kingdom of a thousand years and at the end of that, the dead from all human history who are unregenerate and ungodly will be raised and brought before the Great White Throne Judgment of Revelation 20 to be judged. So there is a period of time, starting with the Rapture of the church, ending with the final hours of the great time of the millennial Kingdom when that judgment will be carried out.  It isn’t all in one moment.  People confuse this.

There was already a resurrection, the resurrection of Christ.  There was even a kind of a preview of resurrection, you remember, at the death of Christ, the tombs were open and believers came out.  There will be in the future the resurrection of the just…the just, the righteous and that will include the Rapture of the church, the resurrection of believers at the end of the time of Tribulation. And there will be resurrections, no doubt, during the millennial kingdom when believers die, they’ll come back, and they’ll die and they’ll come back, and they’ll die and they’ll come back.  Then there will be the resurrection of the unjust at the end of the thousand years.

So there are components of the resurrection to come.  But simply stated, it can be divided into two parts in verse 29.  All will come forth because they’ll hear His voice, the power is His, so it will be the same power that He exerted at the grave of Lazarus when He said, “Lazarus, come forth,” only this time He won’t say “Lazarus.”  He’ll just say, “Come forth.”  And they will come forth.  And those who did the good to a resurrection of life, and those who committed the evil to a resurrection of judgment.  That’s believers and unbelievers.

It poses an interesting question. Why does it say those who did good to resurrection of life?  Is that how you get saved?  Is that how you get to the resurrection of life by doing good?  Why does He say that?  Doesn’t the Bible say, “By the deeds of the Law no flesh will be justified?”  Doesn’t the Bible say, “Not by works lest any man should boast?”  Why does He say that?

Because the contrast demands it.  The contrast demands it.  He can’t compare believer’s faith with unbeliever’s faith because unbelievers don’t have any faith.  He can’t compare believer’s life with unbeliever’s life because they don’t have any life.  They’re dead. But He can compare their works, that’s the only common commodity.  We have faith, they don’t.  We have life, they don’t.  We have works, they do.  So on the basis of that, He makes the comparison.  Believer’s works are *ta agatha(?)*, the excellent things.  Unbeliever’s works are *ta falla(?)*, worthless things..  In the end, it’s the same thing Jesus said, “By their fruits you will know them.”  Believers whose faith is proven by their good deeds are compared to unbelievers whose good deeds demonstrate they have no faith.  So two resurrections are coming.  Spiritual resurrection, Jesus says, and it’s already begun and yet it’s coming.  And it will hit with a bang on Pentecost and after that, as the church grows by the thousands, and it will go through history and we’re part of it, spiritual resurrection.  But there’s also going to be a physical resurrection and every person who has ever lived in the history of the world will be raised to life in a form suited for heavenly blessing, or the punishment of hell.

“What will that body be like?”  Well for us, Philippians 3 says it will be like unto His glorious body.  That is His resurrection body.  It was visible, He walked, He talked, He ate, but at the same time He walked through a wall, rearranging the molecules to pass through a wall. I can’t say any more than that.  I do know that 1 Corinthians 15 says that God’s designed a whole lot of bodies and He can take care of it. But there also needs to be clear understanding that there’s a body for torment so that when you want to dismiss as merely some kind of metaphoric concept the idea of torture in hell or fire in hell or weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth, you have to stop yourself before you go too far and remind yourself that there will actually be a form in which the people in hell will exist that will experience suffering, torment.

“How do you avoid that?”  Back to verse 24.  “Truly, truly I say to you, he who hears My Word and believes Him who sent Me has eternal life and doesn’t come into judgment but has passed out of death into life,” to hear the Word of Christ, the voice of Christ, and believe Him.  It is a work of God, but not apart from faith.  What can the sinner do?  We’ve said it again and again since the third chapter, “Believe…believe…believe.”  Do I have to remind you of the simple statement of John 3:15?  Whoever believes will in Him have eternal life.  Believe…believe.  Cry out to God to grant you faith to believe.  Pray with me.

We are so stunned by the words that come out of the mouth of our Lord Jesus and they’re familiar to us, we can’t comprehend the experience of those who stood there that day and listened to Him say these things. But it’s all true.  I pray, Lord, that You will speak loudly, savingly, let Your voice be heard in hearts today, hearts of people who have been here in this church for a long time and have grown accustomed to their unbelief, who have grown comfortable with their sin, who haven’t seen You hand of judgment yet and have not recognized that Your patience and forbearance is meant to lead them to repentance and faith.  Lord, burst into their darkness and bring light, burst into their deadness and bring life, burst into their unbelief and bring faith.  Cause sinners to cry out for You to empower them to believe, to escape the judgment of condemnation and enter into the blessings of eternal life.

Father, now we ask that again we might live lives that are overwhelmed with thanksgiving. We have escaped hell.  How can we become so petty, to trivialized, so upset about things that don’t matter, so selfish?  Help us to live in constant joy because we have eternal life through Christ, we pray in His name.