

A Daily Devotional on the Gospel of John

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In the Beginning

¹ In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. ⁴ In him was life, and the life was the light of men. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. – John 1:1-5 ESV

As suggested by the book's title, the author of the fourth Gospel is believed to be the apostle John. This belief is based on the writings of the early church fathers and evidence from within the text itself. One of the key internal proofs for John's authorship is found in chapter 21. The scene depicted in this passage is that of the resurrected Christ appearing to His disciples. Believing their Messiah and friend to be dead, seven of them have returned to their fishing boats. Jesus appears on the shore and calls out to them, but they fail to recognize him. This stranger suggests that they cast their nets on the other side of the boat and, when they do, they find their nets full of fish. And, in verse 7, the author states that the first to recognize the stranger as Jesus was "That disciple whom Jesus loved" (John 21:7 ESV).

This is a direct reference to an earlier event in the life of Jesus when He had gathered His disciples in the upper room to take the Passover meal. At one point in the evening, Jesus announced that one of them would betray Him. And the author describes an exchange between Simon Peter and the "disciple whom Jesus loved."

One of his disciples, whom Jesus loved, was reclining at table at Jesus' side, so Simon Peter motioned to him to ask Jesus of whom he was speaking. So that disciple, leaning back against Jesus, said to him, "Lord, who is it?" – John 13:23-25 ESV

John was part of the inner circle, the group of three disciples whom Jesus invited to join Him on the mountaintop to witness His transfiguration. The other two members of this group were Peter and James. Throughout this Gospel account, the author refers to John six times, not by name, but by the third-party designation, "the disciple whom Jesus loved." Even when describing the crucifixion, the author records that Jesus personally addressed the "disciple whom he loved," assigning him the task of caring for His mother, Mary.

When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, "Woman, behold, your son!" Then he said to the disciple, "Behold, your mother!" And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home. – John 19:26-27 ESV

And the author later identifies himself as the one whom Jesus loved.

This is the disciple who is bearing witness about these things, and who has written these things, and we know that his testimony is true. – John 21:24 ESV

This should not be construed as a prideful statement on John's part, but an expression of his amazement at being the recipient of Jesus' underserved love. Nowhere in the book does he use his own name. It is almost as if he is deliberately trying to minimize his own importance in order to make much of Christ. After all, his entire purpose for writing this book was to showcase the life and ministry of Jesus, his friend, teacher, and Messiah. But what sets John's account apart from the other gospels is its emphasis on the deity of Christ. Unlike Matthew, Mark, and Luke, John does not open up with a description of Jesus' birth. Instead, he begins with a description of "the Word" – his unique reference to Jesus that is designed to accentuate His deity.

In the Aramaic translations of the Old Testament, the word used to describe God was *memra*. In the Greek, that word becomes *logos*. John specifically chose this word in order to stress the divinity of Jesus. Rather than beginning His gospel with the birth of Christ, John promotes the eternality of the one who came in the form of a baby. John stresses that "the Word" was "in the beginning" and "the Word was with God" (John 1:1 ESV). He stresses the preexistence of Christ and describes Him as being "fully God" (John 1:1 NET). For John, the most important thing about Jesus was His divinity. He had been more than just a man. He was the God-man. To John, the deity and humanity of Jesus were inseparable and vital to understanding His entire ministry, message, and mission.

Jesus had been a co-creator of the universe and all it contains. He was the second person of the Trinity, who had preexisted His own incarnation. According to Paul, Jesus had existed in the form of God but had left His place in heaven in order to take on human flesh.

Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. – Philippians 2:5-7 ESV

John will refer to the concept of "life" 36 times in his gospel. And he describes Jesus as the author and source of all life.

In him was life, and the life was the light of men. – John 1:4 ESV

Long before Jesus was born in Bethlehem, He had existed in eternity past, and He had played a vital role in the creation of the universe, giving life and vitality to every living thing. What God declared to be, Jesus brought into existence. Out of the darkness that enveloped the pre-creation scene, Jesus brought life and light into existence.

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.

And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. And God saw that the light was good. – Genesis 1:1-3 ESV

Jesus was the source of that light. And John is emphasizing that the light had penetrated the darkness once again. This time, in the form of the incarnate Christ, who entered into the world as light in the darkness, bringing life to those who were spiritually dead because of their sinful state.

John's view of Jesus is that of God entering the world. He is the same light that penetrated the darkness of the pre-creation void and filled it with life, meaning, beauty, and fruitfulness. And this same light had appeared a second time, entering the sin-darkened world in which John lived, shining the light of God's life-giving glory into the hidden recesses of men's hearts. John himself had been dramatically transformed by his own encounter with the Light of the world.

You can see the parallels between these opening verses of John's gospel and those found in the first of the three letters he penned.

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us— that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. – 1 John 1:1-5 ESV

Jesus was “from the beginning.” He was “the life...made manifest” or visible. He was “the light of men” who “shines in the darkness.” And because of His divinity, “in him is no darkness at all.”

John has set the stage for the rest of his account. He is now prepared to introduce Jesus, the God-man, and to describe how divinity took on humanity, or as he puts it, how “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14 ESV).

The Light and the Right

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

⁹ *The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. ¹⁰ He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. ¹¹ He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. ¹² But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, ¹³ who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. – John 1:6-13 ESV*

Up to this point in his gospel account, the apostle John has yet to mention the name of Jesus, choosing instead to refer to Him as the Word, the life, and the light. It seems that John is attempting to establish, from the outset, the divinity and eternality of Jesus. The birth of Jesus, while important to John, was only significant because the Word of God who was God took on human flesh. The co-creator of the universe became one with His creation by assuming the lowly nature of a man. The apostle Paul describes this divine demotion in stark terms:

*he gave up his divine privileges;
he took the humble position of a slave
and was born as a human being... – Philippians 2:7 NLT*

John was not trying to underplay the humanity of Jesus. He had spent more than three years of his life living with and learning from Jesus. John had shared many meals with Jesus and seen Him fall asleep in the bow of a fishing boat, exhausted from the day's activities. He had watched as Jesus wept over Jerusalem and the death of His friend, Lazarus. And he had been an eye-witness to the gruesome crucifixion of Jesus, watching in helplessness as his friend and teacher endured excruciating pain and eventually gave up His life. But John knew that the birth, life, and death of Jesus were meaningless if Jesus was not the Word of God and the light of men.

And John recalls how God had prefaced the arrival of Jesus in human form by sending a witness, a *martyria* – one who testifies. Unlike Jesus, this witness was a mere “man.” But he had been sent by God. In that sense, he followed in a long line of other men, the prophets of the Old Testament, whom God had sent to proclaim His Word to His chosen people.

But the people of Israel had endured a nearly 400-year period of silence, with no prophets or witnesses for God appearing on the scene. Malachi, the last of the prophets disappeared off the scene around 400 B.C. So, for four long centuries, the people of God had no word from God. He had gone silent. And those years had been anything but pleasant. The Israelites had no king and found themselves under the successive rules of the Persians, the Greeks, and, eventually, the Romans. Their land was under constant occupation by enemy forces, and they were subjected to the humiliation of living under Gentile rule. In 63 B.C., the Romans conquered Israel and subjected the land to military occupation and heavy taxation.

The people of God were relegated to living as little more than slaves in what had once been the land of promise. And their dire circumstances created in them an intense desire for the arrival of their long-awaited Messiah. The prophets had spoken of one who would come and rescue them from their suffering. He would be a warrior-king like David had been, wielding his sword on behalf of the downtrodden people of Israel and delivering them from their enemies. But with each passing year, their hopes of rescue grew dimmer as the Messiah's arrival failed to take place.

But John emphasizes that there was hope. A light had pierced the darkness. A baby had been born who would prove to be the very one for whom the Israelites had been waiting. And that baby's birth had been heralded by angels, proclaiming "the good news of great joy" (Luke 2:10 ESV).

"For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." – Luke 2:11 ESV

The word, "Christ" is the Greek equivalent of "Messiah." The angels were announcing the arrival of the Savior of Israel. The 400-years of silence had been broken. The long period of darkness had been broken by the arrival of the light of the world.

Eight days after His birth, the parents of Jesus took Him to the temple in Jerusalem to be circumcised. There, a "righteous and devout" man named Simeon pronounced a blessing on the baby.

*"Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace,
according to your word;
for my eyes have seen your salvation
that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
**a light for revelation to the Gentiles,
and for glory to your people Israel.**" – Luke 2:29-32 ESV*

The light had come. And some 30 years later, John the Baptist would begin to testify of the arrival of the light. The infant had become an adult and the earthly ministry of Jesus was about to begin. John the Baptist was given the responsibility to act as God's herald, announcing the arrival of the Messiah.

In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said,

*"The voice of one crying in the wilderness:
'Prepare the way of the Lord;
make his paths straight.'" – Matthew 3:1-3 ESV*

John makes it clear that John the Baptist “was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light” (John 1:8 ESV). He was the messenger, not the Messiah. His job was to proclaim the arrival of the King and His Kingdom. And John the Baptist knew his place, fully recognizing that Jesus was someone and something special. He humbly announced, “Though his ministry follows mine, I’m not even worthy to be his slave and untie the straps of his sandal” (John 1:27 NLT).

And yet, the apostle John records that the good news regarding the arrival of the light of men received an unenthusiastic response from the people.

The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. – John 1:9-10 ESV

You can almost sense the disbelief and disgust in John’s words. How could these people fail to recognize the arrival of the light? The creator of the universe had penetrated the darkness of their world and they acted as if nothing had happened. They were completely oblivious to the momentous nature of what was taking place right in front of them. And, to make matters worse, John describes the failure of the Israelites to recognize and receive their long-awaited Messiah.

He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. – John 1:11 ESV

The one they had longed for had finally appeared and they had chosen to reject Him. But John makes it clear that not all had rejected Jesus. He had been one of a handful of Jews who had chosen to follow Jesus because they believed Him to be the Messiah. John had been joined by Peter, who had said of Jesus, “You have the words that give eternal life” (John 6:68 NLT). It was Peter who also said of Jesus, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:16 ESV).

And John makes it clear that all those who received Jesus and “believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God” (John 1:12 ESV). John is writing these words after the fact – long after Jesus’ death, resurrection, and ascension. He is writing after the events of Pentecost when the Spirit of God had descended upon the disciples gathered in the upper room. John is penning these words with full confidence that Jesus was who He had claimed to be and who Peter had testified Him to be: “the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

And because Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the living God, all those who believed in Him received life. “In him was life, and the life was the light of men” (John 1:4 ESV). And that life was eternal in nature. The creator-God had given men their initial life, but the Son of the living God, the light of the world, had made it possible for men to have everlasting life. They were “were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God” (John 1:13 ESV).

John is describing the new birth, the Spirit-empowered transformation that takes place in an individual's life when they place their faith in Jesus. It is what Jesus described to the Pharisee, Nicodemus.

"I tell you the truth, unless you are born again, you cannot see the Kingdom of God."
– John 3:3 NLT

And Jesus qualified His statement by adding, "Humans can reproduce only human life, but the Holy Spirit gives birth to spiritual life" (John 3:6 NLT). And that is John's point in this passage. The new birth is not like human birth. It is not the result of human initiative. It is the miraculous work of God, made possible through the birth, death, burial, and resurrection of His Son, Jesus Christ. Those who received Jesus as the Christ and believed in His name as the Son of God enjoyed the amazing benefit of eternal life. They became children of God. Their acceptance of the Light provided them with the right to be adopted into God's family. It was just as Jesus had told Nicodemus:

"For this is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. God sent his Son into the world not to judge the world, but to save the world through him." – John 3:16-17 NLT

The Light had come. And He had made possible the right to become a child of God. But belief was the key. Faith was the means by which eternal life became accessible and possible.

"to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God." – John 1:12 ESV

God in Human Flesh

¹⁴ And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. ¹⁵ (John bore witness about him, and cried out, “This was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me.’”) ¹⁶ For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. ¹⁷ For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸ No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known. – John 1:14-18 ESV

In verse 14 John returns to the focal point of his entire gospel: The Word of God. But now, he adds another crucial element to the identity of this one who “was in the beginning with God” (John 1:2 ESV). This life-giving “light” penetrated the darkness of the sin-saturated world.

He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. – John 1:10 ESV

And adding an important point of specificity, John states:

He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. – John 1:11 ESV

But how did He come? In what form did the Word of God appear? In verse 14, John shares the incredible truth regarding the incarnation – the miraculous moment when God took on human flesh. In this one verse, John brings together the two seemingly opposing doctrines of God’s *transcendence* and *immanence*. The holy and wholly righteous God of the universe not only made Himself known to mankind, He became one with them.

...the Word became flesh and dwelt among us... – John 1:14 ESV

God had made Himself known before. He had regularly conversed with Adam and Eve in the garden. He spoke to Noah and Abraham. He appeared to Moses in the form of the burning bush. He revealed Himself to the people of Israel through the pillars of fire and smoke that led them through the wilderness. And God had repeatedly spoken to His prophets, providing them with the words to convey to His rebellious people, warning them of the judgment to come.

But what John is describing here is something different altogether. He is declaring that deity and humanity became one. The God of the universe stepped out of His heavenly palace and took up residence among us. Jesus, the Son of God, left His throne in glory and willingly assumed the nature of an ordinary human being. The apostle Paul describes this remarkable transformation this way:

...though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. – Philippians 2:6-7 ESV

At the time at which John wrote his gospel, there would have been few who denied the existence of Jesus. His ministry had made Him a celebrity throughout Judea. His miracles and messages had attracted huge crowds which gained Him the attention of the religious and political leaders. Ultimately, Jesus' growing celebrity status had threatened the powerful Jewish religious leaders, so they had Him crucified. And even that fateful event had been well-attended and well-documented. So, there would have been little debate over the humanity of Jesus.

But the deity of Jesus was a whole other matter. One of the primary reasons Jesus had been crucified was because the Jewish religious leaders had deemed Him guilty of blasphemy, for having claimed to be God. At one point, Jesus had said to a group of Pharisees, "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30 ESV). And their immediate reaction had been to stone Him to death. And they had justified their action by saying, "It is not for a good work that we are going to stone you but for blasphemy, because you, being a man, make yourself God" (John 10:33 ESV).

On another occasion, Jesus had said to the religious leaders: "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am" (John 8:58 ESV), and again, they responded by picking up stones to kill Him. Why? Because with His seemingly innocuous statement, Jesus had identified Himself as God. He had purposefully used the identifier "I am," a direct reference to God's own self-identification spoken to Moses at the burning bush.

God said to Moses, "I am who I am." And he said, "Say this to the people of Israel: 'I am has sent me to you.'" – Exodus 3:14 ESV

The religious leaders had picked up on Jesus' meaning and immediately understood that He was claiming to be divine. But they refused to accept that Jesus was anything but a man. He was nothing more than a non-descript, uneducated rabbi from the backwater town of Nazareth. He may have been a nuisance and a threat, but He was anything but God.

But for John, the deity of Jesus was essential to understanding the humanity of Jesus. God had taken on human flesh and John claims to have been one of many eye-witnesses to the reality of Jesus' divinity.

...we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.
– John 1:14 ESV

This is most likely a reference to the transfiguration of Jesus that John, James, and Peter had been privileged to witness. Matthew describes this event in his gospel account.

And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James, and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light. And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. – Matthew 17:1-3 ESV

John had been given an eye-witness glimpse of the glory of Jesus. The humanity of Jesus had been transfigured right before John's eyes, revealing the full divinity and holiness of the one he called master and friend.

John even recalls how John the Baptist had recognized the unique nature of Jesus, describing Him as far more than just another man. When John the Baptist had stated, "He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me" (John 1:15 ESV), he was declaring the divinity and eternality of Jesus.

But why is all this so important? Why is John beginning his gospel account by stressing the deity and humanity of Jesus? Because there were those who denied that Jesus had been divine. Just like today, there were many who were willing to admit that Jesus had been a good man, a wise teacher, and a worker of miracles. They would even confess that Jesus had lived a life worth emulating. But they could not bring themselves to believe that He had been God in human flesh. That was outside their capacity to comprehend and accept.

But for John, the deity of Jesus was a non-negotiable aspect of His identity. If Jesus was not God in human flesh, then He was just another man who died a martyr's death. And that death accomplished nothing of long-lasting value.

Yet, as his gospel will reveal, because Jesus was who He says He was, His death *did* have value. It was efficacious. There was a reason why God sent His Son to earth to live and die as a human being. The author of Hebrews reminds us, "without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins" (Hebrews 9:22 ESV). The entire Jewish sacrificial system had been ordained by God as a means for sin-stained men and women to receive atonement and cleansing for their sins. But those sacrifices had always been temporary and imperfect. The blood of the animals sacrificed on behalf of sinful men and women was incapable of providing permanent deliverance from the penalty of sin. They provided temporary cleansing from ceremonial impurity and nothing more. Again, the author of Hebrews provides us with an explanation.

Under the old system, the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer could cleanse people's bodies from ceremonial impurity. Just think how much more the blood of Christ will purify our consciences from sinful deeds so that we can worship the living God. For by the power of the eternal Spirit, Christ offered himself to God as a perfect sacrifice for our sins. – Hebrews 9:13-14 NLT

Jesus, the Word of God, had to become a man so that He could become the ultimate sacrifice for the sins of man. As John will share later on in this same chapter, when John the Baptist first saw Jesus, he described Him as "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29 ESV). Jesus said of Himself, "the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45 ESV). When the angel appeared to Joseph, letting him know that his fiancé was pregnant, he announced, "She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins" (Mathew 1:21 ESV).

Jesus took on human flesh so that He could live as a man. But He was born as a Jew so that He would be required to live according to the law given by God to Moses. And because He was divine, He was able to live in perfect obedience to God's law, making Him the sinless, unblemished, perfect sacrifice to atone for the sins of man.

According to John, Jesus had been "full of grace and truth" (John 1:14 ESV), and that fulness expressed itself in the form of "grace upon grace" (John 1:17 ESV). What John seems to be saying here is that Jesus provided a new measure of God's grace that was greater than that which had been made available through the law. Rather than temporary forgiveness from sin, God was making available permanent forgiveness and the right sinful men and women to be justified before Him. And it was all made possible through the God-man, Jesus Christ.

Up until the incarnation, the law reigned supreme. It was the only means by which sinful men could receive forgiveness. But as the apostle Paul states, "no one can ever be made right with God by doing what the law commands. The law simply shows us how sinful we are" (Romans 3:20 NLT). He communicated the same idea to the believers in Galatia.

"...no one can be made right with God by trying to keep the law. For the Scriptures say, 'It is through faith that a righteous person has life.'" – Galatians 3:11 NLT

John states that Moses brought the law, but that Jesus made possible grace and truth. It is only through faith in Jesus, that sinful men can receive the grace of God and be truly freed from the penalty of sin. The law could never save. But Jesus, the God-man can and does save. And He made salvation possible by taking on human flesh and making God known to man. He made the invisible God visible. He made the unapproachable God approachable. Because He was God in human flesh.

"I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me. If you had really known me, you would know who my Father is. From now on, you do know him and have seen him!" – John 14:6-7 NLT

No Comparison

¹⁹ And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" ²⁰ He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ."

²¹ And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" And he answered, "No." ²² So they said to him, "Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" ²³ He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said."

²⁴ (Now they had been sent from the Pharisees.) ²⁵ They asked him, "Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?" ²⁶ John answered them, "I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know, ²⁷ even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie." ²⁸ These things took place in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing. – John 1:19-28 ESV

Beginning with verse 19, John provides a more detailed introduction to the life and ministry of John the Baptist. He first alluded to this important character in verses 6-8.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light. – John 1:6-8 ESV

As John continues to establish the unique identity of Jesus as the God-man, he will use John the Baptist as a point of contrast. Like Jesus, John the Baptist was a man sent from God. But unlike Jesus, John the Baptist was just a man. He had been commissioned by God to prepare the way for the Messiah, by testifying to the people of Israel about His imminent arrival. The one for whom they had long waited had arrived. But as the text makes clear, John the Baptist was *not* the light. And John will confirm the contrast between the light and the witness to the light by using the testimony of the witness himself.

Unlike the three synoptic gospels, John's gospel provides few details concerning John the Baptist's ministry. He seems much more interested in using the testimony of John the Baptist concerning Jesus as proof of Jesus' claim to be the Son of God and the son of man. Yet a bit of background into John the Baptist's unique ministry and message can be helpful. So, Matthew provides some essential details concerning this rather strange character who had suddenly appeared on the scene in Judea.

In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said,

*"The voice of one crying in the wilderness:
'Prepare the way of the Lord;
make his paths straight.'"*

Now John wore a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. – Matthew 3:1-6 ESV

Luke records that the appearance of John the Baptist attracted large crowds of people who made their way to the Judean wilderness in order to be baptized by him. But there was tremendous speculation regarding his identity.

Everyone was expecting the Messiah to come soon, and they were eager to know whether John might be the Messiah. – Luke 3:15 NLT

As John the Baptist proclaimed the imminent arrival of the kingdom of heaven, the people couldn't help but wonder if he was the Messiah. And John records that even the Jewish religious leaders were curious about this strange-looking individual who was proclaiming the arrival of the kingdom.

...the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" – John 1:19 ESV

Notice that John prefaces this exchange between John the Baptist and the religious leaders with the words: "And this is the testimony of John." What follows is the clear testimony from John the Baptist that clarifies the identity of the Christ (Greek: Messiah). First and foremost, John the Baptist wanted to squelch any rumors about himself.

He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ." – John 1:20 ESV

John the Baptist had come to witness, not be worshiped. He had no interest in passing himself off as the long-awaited Messiah. But if he was not the Christ, then who was he? And why had he suddenly appeared on the scene preaching about the coming kingdom? The religious leaders were perplexed and continued their questioning by asking if he was Elijah or the prophet.

Their first inquiry had to do with an Old Testament prophecy found in the book of Malachi.

"Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction." – Malachi 4:5-6 ESV

Based on this passage, the Jews expected the long-dead prophet, Elijah, to reappear and his arrival would signal the imminent arrival of the Messiah. But John the Baptist confession that he was not Elijah led the religious leaders to ask whether he was "the Prophet."

As students of the Hebrew Scriptures, these men were well-versed in those passages that were associated with the coming Messiah. And they were familiar with the promise that God had made to the people of Israel during their days in the wilderness, prior to the arrival in the land of promise.

“The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen—just as you desired of the Lord your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly, when you said, ‘Let me not hear again the voice of the Lord my God or see this great fire any more, lest I die.’ And the Lord said to me, ‘They are right in what they have spoken. I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him.’” – Deuteronomy 18:15-18 ESV

The Jews had long believed that the arrival of the Messiah would be accompanied by the return of Elijah and the appearance of the Prophet of God. And this threesome would usher in a period of great revival and renewal in Israel. They would lead the people of God and help reestablish the nation to its former glory. But John the Baptist denies being the Prophet.

John the Baptist’s inquisitors were perplexed and knew that they were going to have to give a report to their superiors back in Jerusalem. So, they simply asked John: “Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?” (John 1:22 ESV). If he was not the Messiah, Elijah, or the Prophet, then who was he? And John the Baptist gives them the only answer he knows.

“I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord’”
– John 1:23 ESV

Knowing that these men were highly knowledgeable of the Hebrew Scriptures, John the Baptist identifies himself by quoting from the writings of Isaiah. In doing so, he affirms that they were right in assuming that his arrival had something to do with the Messiah. He quotes from what the Jews considered to be Messianic passage and applies it to himself.

*Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her
that her warfare is ended,
that her iniquity is pardoned,
that she has received from the Lord’s hand
double for all her sins.*

*A voice cries:
“In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord;
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
Every valley shall be lifted up,*

*and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.
And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,
and all flesh shall see it together,
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.” – Isaiah 40:1-5 ESV*

John the Baptist was nothing more than a voice crying in the wilderness. He was the witness, testifying to the arrival of the glory of the Lord. He was not the Word but was simply the voice. He was not the Messiah but was the one who had been chosen to announce His arrival. And that led the religious leaders to ask the next logical question.

“Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?” – John 1:25 ESV

This was a question regarding authority. If John the Baptist was not the Messiah, Elijah, or the Prophet, he had no right or authority to baptize anyone. The Jews understood baptism to be reserved for ritual cleansing. So, why was this unknown and unqualified individual “proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Luke 3:3 ESV)? The Jews, because they were God’s chosen people, believed they had no need for repentance. They viewed themselves as already in right standing with God by virtue of their status as descendants of Abraham and as heirs of the promise.

But Luke goes on to record that John the Baptist saw through the over-confident self-righteousness of his audience, and he delivered a stinging indictment against the religious leaders.

“Bear fruits in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” – Luke 3:8-9 ESV

Their heritage was no guarantee of righteousness. And their identity as Jews was not going to preserve them from the coming wrath of God against all those who have sinned against Him. That is why John the Baptist had come on the scene preaching, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matthew 3:2 ESV).

John confesses that his authority to baptize came from a source far superior to himself or the religious leaders of the Jews. And this supreme source was about to make Himself known.

“I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know, even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie.” – John 1:2-27 ESV

John was just a man who baptized repentant people with physical water. But there was another one who would follow who had the authority to offer true cleansing from sin and the baptism of the Holy Spirit. The messenger was proclaiming the arrival of the Messiah.

"I baptize with water those who repent of their sins and turn to God. But someone is coming soon who is greater than I am—so much greater that I'm not worthy even to be his slave and carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

" – Matthew 3:11 NLT

The Lord Will Provide

²⁹ The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” ³⁰ This is he of whom I said, ‘After me comes a man who ranks before me, because he was before me.’ ³¹ I myself did not know him, but for this purpose I came baptizing with water, that he might be revealed to Israel.” ³² And John bore witness: “I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. ³³ I myself did not know him, but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’” ³⁴ And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God.” – John 1:29-34 ESV

John the apostle is providing a chronological outline of the relationship between John the Baptist and Jesus, the Word of God, and the light of the world. He is using John the Baptist as a witness to the unique nature of Jesus’ deity and humanity. There had been some speculation among the Jewish religious leaders that John the Baptist might be the long-awaited Messiah of Israel, but he put that rumor to rest when he told them, “I am not the Christ” (John 1:20 ESV). He declared himself to be the precursor, sent to prepare the way for someone greater, “the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie” (John 1:27 ESV).

Now, John fast-forwards to the very next day, when Jesus arrived on the scene in the Judean wilderness. This was likely not the first time that Jesus and John the Baptist had met. In fact, there is a good chance that they had met long before because they were relatives. The Gospel of Luke records the encounter between the angel Gabriel and Mary, when he announced to her that she would conceive and give birth to a child.

*“The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God. And behold, **your relative Elizabeth** in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren.”* – Luke 1:35-36 ESV

Mary and Elizabeth were relatives, which means there is a good chance that Jesus and John the Baptist knew one another during their childhood and early adulthood. Extended family relationships were important in Jewish life and it only makes sense that the families of Jesus and John the Baptist had spent time together over the years.

Luke provides an important insight into John the Baptist’s background. His father, Zechariah, was a priest. His mother, Elizabeth, was a descendant of Aaron, the brother of Moses. And when the angel had visited Zechariah to announce that his barren wife was going to give birth, he provided insight into his son’s future role.

“...for he will be great before the Lord.... And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.” – Luke 1:15-17 ESV

Now, three decades later, the time had come for the son of Zechariah and Elizabeth to fulfill the role he had been destined to play. From this day forward, his relationship with Jesus would be forever changed. No longer would they interact as family members, but John the Baptist would now recognize Jesus as His Messiah and Lord.

When Jesus appeared at the shores of the Jordan River that day, John the Baptist immediately identified Him, not as his relative, but as “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29 ESV). It would appear that John, the author of this gospel account, has compressed the timeline, leaving out some of the details provided in the synoptic gospels. At this point in the story, Jesus had already been baptized by John. Matthew records that encounter.

Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.” – Matthew 3:13-15 ESV

And Matthew goes on to describe the scene that took place as John baptized his relative, Jesus.

And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; and behold, a voice from heaven said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.” – Matthew 3:16-17 ESV

This must have been when the light went on and John the Baptist fully recognized the identity of Jesus. He even confessed, “I did not recognize him as the Messiah, but I have been baptizing with water so that he might be revealed to Israel” (John 1:31 NLT). John had been following his divinely ordained instructions, proclaiming the coming kingdom and baptizing all those who would repent of their sins. And while doing God’s will, God’s Son had shown up. But this was something John had been expecting to happen. God had told him, “The one on whom you see the Spirit descend and rest is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit” (John 1:33 NLT).

It is unlikely that John fully understood what this message meant, but he had proclaimed it to all those who would listen.

“I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit!” – Mark 1:8 NLT

So, when Jesus showed up asking to be baptized, John had obliged Him, and immediately, the confirmation God had promised occurred. And John the Baptist gives his personal testimony as to what happened.

“I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him.” – John 1:32 ESV

He had been an eyewitness to a miracle. He had seen the Spirit of God descend upon Jesus in the form of a dove, just as God had promised. But not only that, he had heard the voice of God, audibly confirming the identity of Jesus.

“This is my dearly loved Son, who brings me great joy.” – Matthew 3:17 NLT

The witness was fully convinced. From that moment forward, John the Baptist harbored no doubts as to the true identity of Jesus. He was “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” The image of the sacrificial lamb was a vital part of the Jewish way of life. The offering on an unblemished lamb was and had been an instrumental feature of the Jewish sacrificial system and the means by which they could receive atonement for their sins. John’s statement, “Behold, the Lamb of God” recalls the story of Abraham and Isaac, recorded in the book of Genesis.

God had given Abraham a difficult assignment, designed to test his faith and to teach an invaluable lesson about God’s provision.

“Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.” – Genesis 22:2 ESV

Isaac was the son Abraham and Sarah had waited years to receive from God. And now, God was asking Abraham to offer him up as a sacrifice. As Abraham and his unsuspecting son made their way to the land of Moriah, Isaac innocently asked, “Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” (Genesis 22:7 ESV). And Abraham had responded, “God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son” (Genesis 22:8 ESV). It is doubtful that Abraham was expressing a belief that God would provide a substitute lamb to take the place of his son. He was simply acknowledging that God had been the one who had made possible the miraculous birth of Isaac to an elderly man and his barren wife.

That Moses believed his son to be the “lamb” God had provided for the sacrifice is made clear by the fact that he bound his son, laid him on the altar, and prepared to follow through with the command. But God intervened. He sent an angel to stay Abraham’s hand and to declare that he had passed the test.

“Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.” – Genesis 22:12 ESV

And then, suddenly, God revealed to Abraham the answer to Isaac’s question.

And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns. And Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. – Genesis 22:13 ESV

God provided the sacrifice. He offered up a substitute for the life of Isaac. And the momentous nature of this divine act did not escape Abraham. He named the place Jehovah Jireh – “The Lord will provide” (Genesis 22:14 ESV). God had graciously spared the life of Isaac by providing a stand-in or substitute in his place.

And centuries later, John the Baptist recognized that God had sent another substitute, an unblemished Lamb, who would take away the sins of the world. Jehovah had provided a Savior – His own sinless Son.

Come and You Will See

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

⁴³ The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, “Follow me.” ⁴⁴ Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. ⁴⁵ Philip found Nathanael and said to him, “We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.” ⁴⁶ Nathanael said to him, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Philip said to him, “Come and see.” ⁴⁷ Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him and said of him, “Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!” ⁴⁸ Nathanael said to him, “How do you know me?” Jesus answered him, “Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you.” ⁴⁹ Nathanael answered him, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” ⁵⁰ Jesus answered him, “Because I said to you, ‘I saw you under the fig tree,’ do you believe? You will see greater things than these.” ⁵¹ And he said to him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.” – John 1:35-51 ESV

As has already been stated, one of the things the apostle John is attempting is to establish and support the deity of Jesus. To do so, he has used the testimony of John the Baptist, who referred to Jesus as “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29 ESV). He also shared that he had been witness to the moment when the Spirit of God descended upon Jesus in the form of a dove. This had happened exactly the way God had told him it would happen. And it had been accompanied by a voice from heaven declaring, “This is my dearly loved Son, who brings me great joy” (Matthew 3:17 NLT).

But one of the most convincing comments to come from the lips of John the Baptist was his confession “I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God” (John 1:34 ESV). At no point does John the Baptist refer to Jesus as the Christ or Messiah. The only time he used the Greek word “Christ” was when he answered the question from the Jewish religious leaders, asking whether that was who he was. He simply told them, “I am not the Christ” (John 1:20 ESV).

But when speaking of Jesus, John the Baptist referred to Him as the Lamb and the Son of God. To the average Jews, the term “Christ” or “Messiah” had come to mean a human savior who

would appear on the scene much like David had. He would be a military and political leader who would rescue Israel from their subjugation to Rome and reestablish them as a formidable power in the Middle East. In their minds, the Messiah would be a man sent by God, but they had no suspicion or expectation that he would be God. So, when John the Baptist refers to Jesus as the Son of God, he is boldly proclaiming His divinity. This supports the claim made earlier by John.

No one has ever seen God. But the unique One, who is himself God, is near to the Father's heart. He has revealed God to us. – John 1:18 NLT

But John is not done establishing the deity of Jesus. He picks up the story by describing the events that took place the very next day. Jesus, having been baptized and anointed by the Holy Spirit, began His earthly ministry. The scene John describes most likely took place somewhere in the Judean wilderness, near the shore of the Jordan River where Jesus had been baptized. John the Baptist, standing with two of his followers, spots Jesus walking by and repeats his earlier claim: “Behold, the Lamb of God!”

Hearing these words, the two disciples of John the Baptist decided to follow Jesus. They were intrigued. They wanted to know more. And when Jesus saw them, He asked them, “What are you seeking?” (John 1:38 ESV). Basically, Jesus is asking them what it is they want. He is requiring that they state their intentions. But, interestingly enough, rather than answer His question, the two men ask Jesus where He is staying. They address Jesus as “Rabbi,” a term of respect that clearly reflects their understanding that Jesus was some sort of teacher. Their inquiry into where Jesus lived was most likely their way of asking where He did His teaching. They were signaling their interest in becoming His disciples. But at this point, these two men show no awareness that Jesus was the Messiah. And it does not appear that they understood Him to be divine. All they knew was that their teacher had proclaimed Jesus to be his superior.

“among you stands one you do not know, he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie.” – John 1:26-27 ESV

They probably understood Jesus to be their Rabbi’s teacher and now they wanted to become His disciples as well.

In response to their question, Jesus stated, “Come and you will see” (John 1:39 ESV). His words feature an invitation and a promise. They think they’re about to get a tour of Jesus’ place of residence, but He is signaling something far more significant. Their decision to follow Him is going to open their eyes to things they have never seen before. They end up spending the rest of the day with Jesus and during that time, they begin to grow in their awareness of who He was. John states that one of the men, who he identifies as Andrew, went to search for his brother, Simon. We know from the other gospel accounts that these two brothers were fishermen. Upon finding Simon, Andrew excitedly announced, “We have found the Messiah” (which means Christ)” (John 1:41 ESV).

During his time with Jesus, something had opened the eyes of Andrew so that he was able to see who Jesus truly was. He had become convinced that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah. But, unlike his former Rabbi, John the Baptist, Andrew is not yet convinced of Jesus' deity.

Intrigued by his brother's announcement, Simon followed him to where Jesus was staying. And upon meeting Simon, Jesus does something a bit strange. He immediately changes Simon's name to Cephas, an Aramaic word that means "rock." In Greek, it translates into "Peter."

John provides no explanation for why Jesus did what He did. But there is some irony in this scene. As the gospel narratives unfold, they reveal that Peter was a hotheaded, impulsive, and opinionated man who was quick to speak and rash by nature. He would prove to be a loose cannon whose propensity to put the mouth in gear before the mind was engaged would end up getting him into hot water. And yet, it would be this very same man who would later testify of Jesus, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matthew 16:16 ESV).

And Jesus would respond to Peter's testimony by pronouncing a blessing upon him.

"Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." – Matthew 16:17-18 ESV

John continues the narrative by describing Jesus' departure for the region of Galilee, in the north. There He found Philip, who lived in Bethsaida, the hometown of Andrew and Simon Peter. Philip quickly accepted the invitation from Jesus to follow Him. Perhaps he had already been informed about Jesus by Andrew and Simon Peter. But whatever the case, he was fully convinced that Jesus was the Messiah, telling his friend, Nathanael, "We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph" (John 1:45 ESV).

Philip was familiar with the Old Testament prophecies concerning the promised Messiah and believed Jesus to be the fulfillment of them. But he was also fully aware that Jesus was the son of Joseph, from the unimpressive town of Nazareth. You can sense the common disdain for Jesus' hometown by Nathanael's reaction: "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:46 ESV).

But Philip challenges his friend to "Come and see" for himself. And Nathanael was not disappointed. As Jesus saw Nathanael, He declared, "Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!" (John 1:47 ESV). Nathanael is taken aback by Jesus' words, somehow sensing that Jesus knew him intimately. They had never met before, but Jesus revealed things about Nathanael that were personal and private. And then, Jesus blew Nathanael away by announcing, "Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you" (John 1:48 ESV).

The fact that Nathanael saw Jesus' words as proof of supernatural power is reflected in his response: "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" (John 1:49 ESV).

In a sense, Jesus tells Nathanael, "You ain't seen nothin' yet!" There was going to be far more convincing proof of who Jesus was and it would be confirmed by supernatural signs and wonders.

"you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man." – John 1:51 ESV

This imagery is reminiscent of the experience the Old Testament patriarch, Jacob had when he dreamed of a ladder descending from heaven.

And he dreamed, and behold, there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven. And behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it!
– Genesis 28:12 ESV

And Jacob was given an interpretation of that dream that assured him, "in you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed" (Genesis 28:15 ESV). Jesus was announcing that He was the fulfillment of that promise. It would be through Him that all the families of the earth would be blessed. In time, Nathanael and the rest of the disciples of Jesus would have ample proof that He truly was the Son of God, the King of Israel. Jesus had invited these men to "come and see." By following Him they would be given an opportunity to see the heavens opened and the power of God revealed on earth as never before.

Manifested Glory

¹ On the third day there was a wedding at Cana in Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there.

² Jesus also was invited to the wedding with his disciples. ³ When the wine ran out, the mother of Jesus said to him, “They have no wine.” ⁴ And Jesus said to her, “Woman, what does this have to do with me? My hour has not yet come.” ⁵ His mother said to the servants, “Do whatever he tells you.”

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

¹¹ This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory. And his disciples believed in him.

¹² After this he went down to Capernaum, with his mother and his brothers and his disciples, and they stayed there for a few days. – John 2:1-11

With the dawn of each new day, John seems to provide another new testimony to Jesus’ true identity. The first day featured John the Baptist’s announcement regarding Jesus: “This was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me’” (John 1:15 ESV). On day two, John the Baptist made introduce Jesus as “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29 ESV). The next day, Andrew had excitedly told his brother Simon, “We have found the Messiah” (John 1:41 ESV). The following day, Nathanael had boldly proclaimed, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” (John 1:49 ESV).

Now, according to John’s chronology, another day arrives that will bring yet more indisputable proof of Jesus’ identity. John refers to it as “the third day.” This could mean the events recorded in these verses occurred on the same day that Nathanael gave his testimony regarding Jesus, but it seems more likely that John is saying that the wedding took place three days later.

According to the closing verses of chapter 1, Jesus had His encounter with Nathanael in Bethsaida, on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee. But chapter 2 opens up with Jesus in the town of Cana, some 22 miles west of Bethsaida. The three days provide ample time for Jesus to make His way to Cana in order to attend the wedding.

Seven days have passed according to John’s timeline, and now he records what he describes as “the first of his [Jesus] signs” (John 2:11 ESV). It is interesting to note that John began his gospel account by linking Jesus with the creation of the universe.

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 were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. – John 1:1-3 ESV

The book of Genesis provides its own timeline for the creation account.

And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation. – Genesis 2:2-3 ESV

It is certainly no coincidence that John is describing an event taking place on the seventh day since Jesus began His earthly ministry. He has gone out of his way to establish Jesus as the Son of God. He is the Word of God who was with God at the very beginning when the earth was formed. But unlike the creation account, John describes Jesus as working, not resting, on the seventh day. Jesus is about to do something new. As the Son of God, He is going to exhibit His power by transforming water into the finest wine. He is going to re-create, taking that which is ordinary and turn it into something truly extraordinary and unexpected.

The events recorded in this chapter have nothing to do with the Sabbath, so Jesus is not violating the Mosaic law's prohibition against work on God's designated day of rest. John is simply using this occasion to further support his claim regarding the deity of Jesus. A wedding was a happy occasion, a time of new beginnings. And here, at the very onset of His earthly ministry, Jesus attended a wedding in Cana, just 9 miles north of His hometown of Nazareth. The fact that His other was in attendance hints that this was either the wedding of a relative or close family friend.

Because this event took place so early in Jesus' public ministry, He had not yet had time to call all of His disciples, so when John mentions them in verse 2, he is probably referring to the five who were introduced in chapter 1.

To set the scene, John describes what would have been a disastrous situation for the groom and his family. The wedding feast was their responsibility and they had a social obligation to provide for all their invited guests. To run out of wine during the festivities would have been an unacceptable faux pas. Mary, the mother of Jesus, asks Him to intervene. John provides no insight into Mary's thought process.

Mary had long known that there was something special about her son. Even before He was born, the angel had told her:

“Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” – Luke 1:30-33 ESV

Her husband had received similar news regarding the identity of the baby in Mary's womb.

"She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." – Matthew 1:21 ESV

But up until this moment, Mary had never seen Jesus perform any miracles or signs. As John has indicated, this would be "the first of his signs." So, there's no reason to believe that Mary's request for Jesus to intervene was anything more than a mother's desire to see her son help a friend in time of need.

The response of Jesus seems harsh and disrespectful to western ears. When Mary announced to Jesus, "They have no wine," He somewhat flippantly remarked, "Woman, what does this have to do with me? My hour has not yet come" (John 2:4 ESV).

But the tone of Jesus' response is far less sarcastic and disrespectful than it sounds. He is simply telling her that, while He understands the gravity of the situation, it had nothing to do with Him. Jesus came into the world for far greater purposes. His use of the phrase, "My hour" is a clear reference to His future crucifixion and death. That was why He had come. In fact, He made that point perfectly clear in the prayer He prayed to His Father in the garden on the night He was betrayed.

"Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? But for this purpose I have come to this hour." – John 12:27 ESV

Jesus had a far more important calling than to find wine for a wedding feast. But He willingly obliged His mother's request, telling the servants to fill six stone jars with water. These instructions must have left the servants scratching their heads. First, because the need was for wine, not water. Secondly, because Jesus told them to use jars that were reserved for holding the water used for ceremonial cleansing. Jews would not have considered this to be potable water.

But the servants obliged Jesus, using water from a nearby well to fill each of the vessels to the brim. Then, Jesus instructed them: "Now draw some out and take it to the master of the feast" (John 2:8 ESV). What happened next is the point of the entire story. The master of the feast, after having tasted the contents of the jars, exclaimed, "Everyone serves the good wine first, and when people have drunk freely, then the poor wine. But you have kept the good wine until now" (John 2:10 ESV).

This wasn't just any wine, it was a wine of the highest quality. In the master's estimation, the groom and his family had saved the best for last. The disaster had been averted and the joy of the occasion continued unabated. But John simply states, "This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory. And his disciples believed in him" (John 2:11 ESV).

That is the real point of the whole story. As will be the case with so many of Jesus' miracles and messages, this one was done so that His disciples might believe in Him. He manifested His glory so that His followers would come to know His true identity. As John made clear in chapter 1,

“All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made” (John 1:3 ESV).

Turning water into wine was nothing for the Creator of the universe. And this miracle would be just the first of many these men would witness over the ensuing years. But that Jesus could transform ordinary water into fine wine was nothing when compared with His plan to transform dead sinners into living saints. Jesus would later declare the goal of His incarnation: “I came that they may have life and have it abundantly” (John 10:10 ESV).

The guests at the wedding would drink the wine that Jesus created. They would enjoy its superior taste and, perhaps, feel the effects of its fermentation. But the benefits of the wine would be short-lived. Any joy it may have produced would be far from lasting. And even the six jars would eventually be drained dry by the thirsty wedding guests.

But Jesus had come to provide real, lasting life – abundant life – a life without end. But as the grapes must be crushed in order to produce fine wine, so Jesus would have to be crucified so that He might offer new life to those who were dead in their trespasses and sins. Jesus came to manifest His glory.

...the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. – John 1:14 ESV

The miracle in Cana would be the first of many He would perform in order to display His glory – the glory of the Son of God – the Word of God made flesh, who came to bring light and life to those mired in darkness and marked by death. Something new was happening. The Messiah had come. And the next three years were going to be filled with further evidence of His glory.

Cleaning House

¹² After this he went down to Capernaum, with his mother and his brothers and his disciples, and they stayed there for a few days.

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

¹⁸ So the Jews said to him, "What sign do you show us for doing these things?" ¹⁹ Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." ²⁰ The Jews then said, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?" ²¹ But he was speaking about the temple of his body. ²² When therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the Scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken. – John 2:12-22

After Jesus had performed his first miracle at the wedding in Cana, He traveled to the city of Capernaum, some 13 miles away on the northeastern shore of the Sea of Galilee. He was accompanied by His five disciples, as well as His mother and brothers. These would have been the half-brothers of Jesus because they were the offspring of Joseph, while He had been conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit. The fact that Jesus had other brothers and sisters (Mark 6:3), eliminates the Catholic doctrine of Mary's perpetual virginity, which was first introduced sometime in the second century. She and Joseph went on to have other children besides Jesus.

But this little entourage made their way down to Capernaum from Cana. The Bible records geographic locations, not by their coordinates on a compass, but by their elevation. Topographically, the town of Cana was located at a higher elevation, so as one traveled to Capernaum, they would descend into the valley around the Sea of Galilee. We know from Matthew's gospel that Jesus would eventually make Capernaum His base of operations whenever He was in the region of Galilee. As Matthew points out, this move was in direct fulfillment of an Old Testament prophecy regarding the Messiah that was recorded by Isaiah.

While in Galilee, he moved from Nazareth to make his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the region of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah would be fulfilled:

***"Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali,
the way by the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—
the people who sit in darkness have seen a great light,***

***and on those who sit in the region and shadow of death a light has dawned.” –
Matthew 4:13-16 NLT***

The “light” was beginning to spread His influence. In just a matter of days, Jesus has traveled from the southern region of Judah, where He was baptized by John the Baptist. While the exact site of His baptism is not known, it is believed to have taken place on the eastern shore of the Jordan, just north of the dead sea. He made His way from there to Cana in Galilee and then on to Capernaum. But after only a few days of rest, Jesus was on the move again. This time, He returned to the region of Judea, in order to celebrate the Passover in Jerusalem.

The Passover of the Jews was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. –John 2:13 ESV

This initial trip by Jesus into the capital city is recorded only by John. And, once again, John is using the circumstances surrounding this event to prove the identity of Jesus as the Son of God. John provides scant details regarding Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem. But his abbreviated narrative describes Jesus as making His way to the temple. It brings to mind another trip Jesus had made to the very same spot some 18 years earlier.

Every year Jesus’ parents went to Jerusalem for the Passover festival. When Jesus was twelve years old, they attended the festival as usual. After the celebration was over, they started home to Nazareth, but Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem. His parents didn’t miss him at first, because they assumed he was among the other travelers. But when he didn’t show up that evening, they started looking for him among their relatives and friends.

When they couldn’t find him, they went back to Jerusalem to search for him there. Three days later they finally discovered him in the Temple, sitting among the religious teachers, listening to them and asking questions. All who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. – Luke 2:41-47 NLT

The first time, Jesus had entered the temple as a young boy, desiring to discuss theology with the religious leaders. But this time, He made His way into His Father’s house with the full authority that was His as the Son of God. And Jesus did not like what He saw.

In the temple he found those who were selling oxen and sheep and pigeons, and the money-changers sitting there. And making a whip of cords, he drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and oxen. And he poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. – John 2:14-15 ESV

What Jesus found was a carnival-like atmosphere taking place within the large open courtyard surrounding the temple itself. This was most likely the Courtyard of the Gentiles, a space reserved for non-Jews, who had become converts to Judaism. It was the only place on the temple mount where they were allowed. But the priests had transformed this spot into a marketplace where they sold unblemished animals to all the pilgrims who came to offer

sacrifices to Yahweh. Because of the Passover celebration, this area would have been jam-packed with thousands of pilgrims, as well as corrupt “bankers” who profited by requiring the everyone to exchange their foreign currency for temple-approved silver coins. This “pure” money was then used to buy sacrificial animals from the many vendors who had been licensed by the priests.

Anyone who brought their own animal to offer as a sacrifice had to have it approved by the priests. It wasn’t uncommon for the priests to deem an animal as impure and therefore, unacceptable. They would then require the individual to purchase one of their unblemished lambs, on sale in the temple courtyard. The “rejected” lamb would then be recycled and sold to the next pilgrim in need of an unblemished lamb. It was an atmosphere rife with graft and greed.

And Jesus responded with righteous indignation.

*“Take these things away; do not make my Father’s house a house of trade.” – John 2:16
ESV*

Don’t miss how Jesus describes the temple. He calls it His Father’s house. This was the same description Jesus had used 18 years earlier when explaining to His parents why they had discovered Him in the temple.

“Didn’t you know that I must be in my Father’s house?” – Luke 2:49 NLT

For John, the words of Jesus provided further proof of His deity. For Jesus, His statement explains the authority by which He did what He did. He was cleansing His Father’s house. Men had turned it into a marketplace where they worshiped money and bowed down to the idol of their own greed. But Jesus was not going to put up with their abuse of His Father’s dwelling place. The Levitical priests, who were responsible for the care of the temple, were guilty of abusing their God-given authority and of fleecing the flock of God for their own personal gain.

Centuries earlier, the prophet Malachi had predicted that this day would come.

“Look! I am sending my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. Then the Lord you are seeking will suddenly come to his Temple. The messenger of the covenant, whom you look for so eagerly, is surely coming,” says the Lord of Heaven’s Armies.

“But who will be able to endure it when he comes? Who will be able to stand and face him when he appears? For he will be like a blazing fire that refines metal, or like a strong soap that bleaches clothes. He will sit like a refiner of silver, burning away the dross. He will purify the Levites, refining them like gold and silver, so that they may once again offer acceptable sacrifices to the Lord. Then once more the Lord will accept the offerings brought to him by the people of Judah and Jerusalem, as he did in the past.” – Malachi 3:1-4 NLT

Years would pass before the disciples understood the significance of this event. John, one of those disciples, confesses that the time came when “His disciples remembered that it was written, ‘Zeal for your house will consume me’” (John 2:17 ESV). They didn’t fully understand what Jesus was doing at the time. Neither did the religious leaders. They angrily enquired, “What sign do you show us for doing these things?” (John 2:18 ESV). What they were wanting was some kind of proof or evidence that Jesus had the authority to back up His actions.

They exhibit no remorse for their own actions. They display no sorrow over Jesus’ accusations against them. They simply want to know who Jesus was and why He thought He had the right to do what He just did. And the answer Jesus gave left them scratching their heads in confusion.

“Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” – John 2:19 ESV

Their immediate response makes it clear that they had taken His words literally.

“It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?” – John 2:20 ESV

But as John points out, “He was speaking about the temple of his body” (John 2:21 ESV). The priests wanted Jesus to do a sign that would prove His authority to speak and act on behalf of God. And Jesus told them that they would one day have the sign for which they were looking. It would come in the form of His own death and resurrection. Of course, they would end up rejecting that sign. The Jewish religious leaders would refuse to acknowledge Jesus as the Son of God. They would eventually see to it that He was put to death by the Romans. And when the rumors of His resurrection began to circulate, they would discount and discredit them.

But the actions and words of Jesus would stick with His disciples who had been there that day in the temple courtyard. And three years later, when they saw their resurrected Lord, they would recall His words and believe.

When therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the Scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken. – John 2:22 ESV

Misguided Belief

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

¹ Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. ² This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.” – John 2:23-3:2 ESV

As someone who seems obsessed with providing evidence for the identity of Jesus, John can be maddeningly stingy when it comes to the details. Even when describing Jesus’ cleansing of the temple, John cuts to the chase, providing the basic facts about what happened but leaving a great deal up to the reader’s imagination. He does the same thing in verse 23, where he makes an almost cursory allusion to the signs Jesus performed in Jerusalem.

Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. – John 2:23 ESV

It’s difficult to read that verse without wanting to ask, “What signs?” But John appears to have no interest in explaining the nature of miracles Jesus performed. It’s not that the signs were unimportant to John because they will become the basis for what he describes in chapter three. It’s almost as if he assumes his audience is already familiar with the topic and he has more important matters to discuss.

The miracles performed by Jesus were an essential facet of His ministry, and, as John alludes to, they produced a certain measure of belief in Jesus. And that seems to be the primary point John wants to make. For John, the details concerning the signs Jesus did were irrelevant, but the belief they produced was not. It is likely that Jesus healed the lame, gave sight to the blind, and cast out demons. And when He did, the people marveled at His indisputable supernatural powers. Not only that, they believed in His name. But what does that mean? What was the nature of their belief and why does John state that their belief was in “the name” of Jesus?

To understand what’s going on, you have to go back to verse 20 of chapter one. The priests and Levites had sent a delegation to make inquiries about John the Baptist. His activities in the Judean wilderness had stirred up a lot of attention and resulted in much speculation as to his identity. And one of the first assumptions people made was that John the Baptist must be the long-awaited Messiah. This seems quite clear because when the delegation asked John the Baptist who he was, he declared, “I am not the Christ.” He knew what the people were saying about him. His call to repentance and his declaration that the kingdom of heaven was at hand had caused people to speculate that the Messiah had finally arrived.

Messiah-fever had begun to spread. And so had the news of Jesus' miracle at Cana. So, when He had shown up in Jerusalem, cleansed the temple, and started performing miracles, the people believed in His name: Jesus Christ – Jesus the Messiah. Remember what Andrew told his brother Simon.

“We have found the Messiah” (which means “Christ”). – John 1:41 ESV

Philip had told Nathanael:

“We have found the very person Moses and the prophets wrote about! His name is Jesus, the son of Joseph from Nazareth.” – John 1:45 ESV

And upon meeting Jesus, Nathanael had confessed:

“Rabbi, you are the Son of God—the King of Israel!” – John 1:49 ESV

This news had spread. Word had gotten out that the Messiah had come. So, when Jesus performed signs and wonders, the people took it as evidence that He truly was the Messiah.

But John's primary concern is in the *object* of their faith or belief. The people were believing Jesus to be the Messiah, but their understanding of what that meant would prove to be inaccurate. They were expecting the Messiah to be a conquering king and a mighty military leader like King David had been. They were looking for a deliverer, a political savior of sorts, who would lead them against the Roman occupying forces and set them free from the centuries-long misery of subjugation and suffering they had experienced since the Babylonian invasion.

And John points out that Jesus was aware of their misguided and misunderstood belief in Him.

But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man. – John 2:24 ESV

Jesus was not fooled by their expressions of faith. He knew their belief in Him was solely based on their deeply held desire that He deliver them from Roman rule. If they had their way, they would take Jesus by force and attempt to thrust Him into their preconceived idea of a super-savior. You see this same fanatical fervor in John's account of Jesus' miraculous feeding of the 5,000.

When the people saw the sign that he had done, they said, “This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!”

Perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself. – John 6:14-15 ESV

Jesus had not come to be their earthly king. He would lead no armies against the Romans. There would be no battles waged, rebellions launched, or earthly kingdom established – at least, not yet. And that is the point John is attempting to make.

Chapter three opens with an encounter between Jesus and a member of the Pharisees. This highly revered religious leader schedules a somewhat clandestine meeting with Jesus, choosing to meet with Him under the cover of darkness. Due to his prestigious role as a Pharisee and his standing within the community, he wants his meeting to remain a secret.

John is going to use this Pharisee to illustrate the stark difference between what the people believed about Jesus and what Jesus would reveal to be the true nature of His incarnation. Nicodemus, as a Pharisee, would have been well-educated and a student of the Hebrew scriptures, and would have been highly familiar with the many Messianic prophecies they contained. So, when he meets Jesus, he states his own belief that Jesus is a God-ordained messenger from God.

“Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.” – John 3:2 ESV

His use of the terms “rabbi” and “teacher” indicate his respect and professional admiration for Jesus. He admired Jesus for His obvious divine anointing. He was intrigued by Jesus’ works and words. But he also knew that any association with Jesus could prove detrimental to his role as a Pharisee. Even at this early stage in His earthly ministry, the Pharisees and other Jewish religious leaders were beginning to see Jesus as a potential threat. These men were members of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish religious council, that was comprised of the high priest and 70 members who represented the various sects within Judaism, including the Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, and Zealots.

They held sway over the people of Israel, functioning as a kind of supreme court or religious council. Their authority was second only to that of the Roman government. And they took exception to anyone who might attempt to disrupt or displace their sovereign rule over the people. Even the thought of a Messiah would have been threatening to their authority. Someone claiming to be the “chosen one” of God could cause all kinds of trouble, promoting political unrest, stirring up the common people, and, ultimately, angering the Roman government. And, if that happened, the Romans would step in, putting a swift end to any rebellion and holding the Sanhedrin responsible for allowing it to happen.

So, Nicodemus shows up at night, but his presence and his words indicate that he believes Jesus just might be the one for whom they have been waiting. Even he, as a member of the Pharisees, longs to see the Messiah. He greatly desires to see the kingdom of God reestablished on earth in the form of a revitalized Jewish state. But he is about to get a personal lesson from the Messiah Himself that will reveal just how misguided and misinformed he really was about God’s plans for Israel’s future.

Born from Above

³ Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” ⁴ Nicodemus said to him, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?” ⁵ Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. ⁶ That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ ⁸ The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” – John 3:3-8 ESV

Whatever signs Jesus had performed that day in Jerusalem had gotten the attention of the people and many had believed. But there were others in the crowd who, while impressed by Jesus’ exploits, were choosing to reserve judgment. This included the religious leaders of Israel. Among them were the Pharisees, a fairly conservative religious sect that was comprised predominantly of men from the working class of Israel. On the evening of the day when Jesus had cleansed the temple and performed signs and wonders, Nicodemus, a member of the Pharisees, came to call on Him.

Nicodemus came alone. And he does not appear to have been sent by his colleagues in the Sanhedrin, the religious council of Israel. Nicodemus had been impressed by the miracles of Jesus and his curiosity about Jesus got the best of him. He had to more. So, he showed up, addressing Jesus with the respectful title of “Rabbi.” But he seemed to know that there was more to Jesus than met the eye.

“Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.” – John 3:2 ESV

Nicodemus sensed that Jesus was anointed by God, and he wanted to know more about Him. His statement stands in stark contrast to that of his religious peers, who, upon hearing that Jesus had healed a blind, mute, and demon-possessed man, had accused Jesus of being in league with the devil.

Then a demon-possessed man, who was blind and couldn’t speak, was brought to Jesus. He healed the man so that he could both speak and see. The crowd was amazed and asked, “Could it be that Jesus is the Son of David, the Messiah?”

But when the Pharisees heard about the miracle, they said, “No wonder he can cast out demons. He gets his power from Satan, the prince of demons.” – Matthew 12:22-24 NLT

But Nicodemus was intrigued. He believed there was something different about Jesus. Unlike his fellow Pharisees, Nicodemus believed that the miracles Jesus performed were done by the power of God, not Satan. But Jesus responds to Nicodemus in a rather strange and cryptic manner.

“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” – John 3:3 ESV

With this rather abrupt statement, Jesus seems to be cutting to the heart of the matter. He knows that Nicodemus has shown up because he is curious to know if Jesus might be the long-awaited Messiah. As a student of the Scriptures, Nicodemus would have expected the arrival of the Messiah to usher in a new age, featuring the much-anticipated revitalization of the kingdom of Israel. Nicodemus seems to have a glimmer of hope that Jesus is the anointed one of God, the Messiah.

But Jesus reveals to Nicodemus a detail about the coming kingdom of God about which he was ignorant. Nicodemus could long for it, but he would never see it unless he was “born again.” The Greek word Jesus used is *anōthen*, and it can mean “again” or “anew.” But it can also mean “from above” or “from a higher place.” It seems that Jesus had the second meaning in mind, speaking of this new birth as being spiritual in nature. Yet Nicodemus clearly understood Jesus to be talking about a second physical birth, an image that left him scratching his head in confusion.

“How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?” – John 3:4 ESV

Nicodemus, while a wise and well-educated man, was completely puzzled by the words of Jesus. The condition Jesus had placed upon seeing the kingdom of God was a second birth. It made no sense. It was physically impossible. And what Jesus says next doesn’t seem to help clear up the matter.

“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.” – John 3:5 ESV

Jesus provides a bit more information, but it seems to provide little in the way of clarification. Notice that the focus has shifted from *seeing* the kingdom of God to actually *entering* it. The new birth Jesus is speaking about will be the key to anyone entering and enjoying life in the kingdom the Messiah will establish on earth.

Verse 5 has been proved to be a difficult passage to interpret. And there are a number of different views as to what Jesus meant by “water and the Spirit.” In the Greek text, the definite article “the” before “Spirit” is not present. It was added by English translators for clarification. So, verse 5 could be translated, “unless one is born of water and spirit.” The point Jesus seems to be making is that this new birth will be from above and it will involve a spiritual cleansing that makes the recipient worthy of entrance into the kingdom of God.

This imagery of cleansing by the Spirit is found throughout the Old Testament and Nicodemus, as a student of the Scriptures, should have been aware of it.

And he who is left in Zion and remains in Jerusalem will be called holy, everyone who has been recorded for life in Jerusalem, when the Lord shall have washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion and cleansed the bloodstains of Jerusalem from its midst by a spirit of judgment and by a spirit of burning. – Isaiah 4:3-4 ESV

Isaiah went on to talk about a future day when the Spirit of God will be “poured upon us from on high” (Isaiah 32:15 ESV). Even John the Baptist had understood that Jesus was going to bring about a different kind of baptism, one that would include a kind of purification that was far from symbolic or ceremonial in nature.

“I baptize you with water; but someone is coming soon who is greater than I am—so much greater that I’m not even worthy to be his slave and untie the straps of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.” – Luke 3:16 NLT

Jesus’ reference to “water and spirit” is meant to let Nicodemus know that the kingdom he longs to see will only be occupied by those who have received purification from above. Jesus is not talking about physical birth, but spiritual rebirth or regeneration. The kingdom He will eventually establish on earth will be reserved for those who are righteous and holy, having been cleansed from the stains of their sin by faith in the Son of God. And that day will be in fulfillment of God’s promise recorded by Isaiah.

“Though your sins are like scarlet, I will make them as white as snow. Though they are red like crimson, I will make them as white as wool.” – Isaiah 1:18 NLT

Sensing that Nicodemus was still struggling to understand what He was saying, Jesus provides him with an important point of clarification: “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit” (John 3:6 ESV). Jesus is informing his learned visitor that there are two types of birth – one physical and one spiritual. Nicodemus had already experienced the first, but he was in need of the second. And it was going to require belief. But there would have to be more to that belief than simply an acknowledgment that Jesus was a teacher sent from God.

Nicodemus, like every other Jew of his day, thought of the kingdom of God in physical terms only. It would be a literal kingdom ruled by a literal king who would sit on the throne of David in Jerusalem. And, as far as he understood, entrance into that kingdom was reserved for all those who could claim to be a descendant of Abraham. Nicodemus believed he had an inherited right to the kingdom God due to his birth into the line of Abraham. But Jesus is letting him know that there was going to be another birth required – a new birth – a birth from above.

Nicodemus, like every other Pharisee, took great pride in his position and viewed himself as one of the spiritual elite of Israel. But Jesus was breaking the news that his flowing robes, biblical knowledge, sterling reputation, and longing for the kingdom of God would not be enough to guarantee his entrance into the coming kingdom of God.

Jesus knew that this information had left his visitor perplexed so, He told him, “don’t be surprised when I say, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows wherever it wants. Just as you can hear the wind but can’t tell where it comes from or where it is going, so you can’t explain how people are born of the Spirit” (John 3:7-8 NLT).

The things Jesus was describing to Nicodemus were virtually impossible for him to comprehend. Like the wind, the ways of God are invisible and imperceptible. You can hear the wind, but you can’t see it. You can feel the wind, but you can control it. And the new birth Jesus is attempting to describe to Nicodemus is just as impossible to understand. Without the illuminating and regenerating power of the Holy Spirit, Nicodemus would remain incapable of understanding the nature of the new birth and his need for it. And his continued confusion is illustrated by his response: “How can these things be?” (John 3:9 ESV).

But Jesus will go on to answer that question with a clear and concise explanation of how sinful men and women can be made right with God and gain access into His kingdom and presence. And it will all be through belief in God’s Son.

Believe It, Or Not

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

¹⁶ “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.” – John 3:9-18 ESV

This section contains one of the most well-known verses in the entire Bible: John 3:16. But we rarely view this beloved verse within the context of Jesus’ encounter with Nicodemus. Yet, it is a continuation of a theme that begins in chapter two.

*Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, **many believed in his name** when they saw the signs that he was doing.* – John 2:23 ESV

The entire conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus was based on the topic of belief. Nicodemus had come to Jesus, believing Him to be “a teacher come from God” (John 3:2 ESV). And based on the fact that Jesus immediately directed the conversation toward a discussion of the kingdom of God, it seems clear that He knew Nicodemus believed Him to be the Messiah. At least, this learned Pharisee had hopes that Jesus might be the Anointed One of Israel.

But Jesus surprised Nicodemus by announcing that entrance into God’s kingdom was going to require a “new birth” – a birth from above made possible by the Spirit of God. Only those who are born of the Spirit will receive the cleansing necessary to enter into God’s kingdom. And this unexpected news left Nicodemus exclaiming, “How can these things be?” (John 3:9 ESV).

He was nonplused and totally perplexed by the words of Jesus. None of it made any sense. Nicodemus was having a difficult time believing what he was hearing. And this led Jesus to explain the kind of belief necessary to experience the new birth. It was not going to be enough to simply believe in His miracles. Even a strong belief that He might be the long-awaited Messiah would prove insufficient. The presence of belief was not the issue. Even the object of one’s belief was not what really mattered.

Nicodemus believed himself to be a righteous man. But he was wrong. The Jews believed themselves to be the children of God, and deserving of a permanent place in His kingdom. But

they too were sorely mistaken. Their faith was misplaced. Their belief was mistaken. The apostle James provides a sobering statement regarding insufficient or unbelieving faith.

You say you have faith, for you believe that there is one God. Good for you! Even the demons believe this, and they tremble in terror. – James 2:19 NLT

The people had seen Jesus perform miracles and believed in His name. But they had no idea who He really was. Nicodemus had witnessed the same supernatural signs and believed Jesus to be someone special, a teacher sent from God. But he was totally unaware of Jesus' true identity or the purpose behind His earthly ministry.

Of all people, Nicodemus, as a teacher of the law and an expert in the Hebrew scriptures, should have understood that no one comes to God without cleansing. The whole sacrificial system was based on this idea. The high priest could not enter into the presence of God and offer atonement for the sins of the people until he had been thoroughly cleansed himself. The rite of purification was a central theme within the Mosaic law. Yet, Nicodemus was having a difficult time accepting Jesus' words concerning the necessity of the new birth.

This led Jesus to say, "Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony" (John 3:11 ESV). He accused Nicodemus of refusing to believe. And Jesus, in using the plural pronoun "we" is speaking on behalf of the Godhead. Jesus had been anointed by the Spirit and verbally endorsed by His Father at His baptism. And Jesus had performed signs that clearly evidenced His divine mandate. He was the Son of God.

Nicodemus was having a difficult time believing what Jesus had to say about the new birth. And Jesus stated, "if you don't believe me when I tell you about earthly things, how can you possibly believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ever gone to heaven and returned. But the Son of Man has come down from heaven" (John 3:12-13 NLT). Jesus refers to the new birth as an "earthly thing" because it is designed to take place on this earth. It is a supernatural event that takes place within this temporal plain and yet has eternal ramifications. It is the key to our entrance into God's eternal kingdom.

But this is where Jesus dropped a major truth bomb on the unsuspecting Nicodemus. He states, "No one has ever gone to heaven and returned. But the Son of Man has come down from heaven" (John 3:13 NLT). With this rather cryptic statement, Jesus was associating Himself with the prophecy found in Daniel 7:13-14.

As my vision continued that night, I saw someone like a son of man coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient One and was led into his presence. He was given authority, honor, and sovereignty over all the nations of the world, so that people of every race and nation and language would obey him. His rule is eternal—it will never end. His kingdom will never be destroyed.

Jesus was proclaiming Himself to be the Messiah. But He was also going to explain that there was a vital aspect to the Messiah's mission that was missing in Nicodemus' understanding. This is where Jesus begins to explain to Nicodemus what was missing in His messianic doctrine. And He uses a story from Scripture with which any Jew would have been familiar.

“And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.” – John 3:14-15 ESV

This verse contains the key to understanding the new birth. Jesus was announcing the necessity of His substitutionary death on behalf of sinful men, and their obligation to look to Him for salvation. The story to which Jesus refers to an actual event in Israelite history when the people were traveling from Egypt to the promised land. They found themselves weary and worn out from the journey and, in their impatience, they “spoke against God and against Moses” (Numbers 21:5 ESV). As a result of their rebellion against Him, God sent poisonous snakes among them “and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died” (Numbers 21:6 ESV). When Moses interceded on behalf of the people, God instructed him to “Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live” (Numbers 21:9 ESV).

The people, when bitten, had to believe the word of God and look at the serpent in order to receive healing for their sin. The bronze serpent on the pole was a representation of their rebellion against God. They had to look and believe that this substitute for their sin could bring them forgiveness and healing. And Jesus uses this story to reveal that He too will be “lifted up” and “whoever believes in him may have eternal life” (John 3:15 ESV). Jesus was speaking of His crucifixion. The day was coming when He would be nailed to a cross so that He might take on the sins of the world. He would bear the sins of mankind, becoming the substitutionary atonement that would provide forgiveness and healing to all those who looked on Him and believed.

And this is where John 3:16 takes on a whole new depth of meaning. When kept in the context of chapter 3 and Jesus' dialogue with Nicodemus, this verse becomes so much more meaningful. In it, Jesus is explaining to Nicodemus the key to the new birth and eternal life in the kingdom of God.

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” – John 3:16 ESV

Jesus makes it clear that all humanity stands condemned before God. They have all been bitten by the serpent of sin and are doomed to experience the pain of death – eternal separation from God. But Jesus had good news for Nicodemus.

“Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.” – John 3:18

ESV

Nicodemus, though a Pharisee, stood before God as condemned and worthy of death. His status as a descendant of Abraham was not going to save him from the wrath to come. Every one of those people who had been bitten by a poisonous snake in the wilderness had been one of the chosen people of God. Yet when they refused to look on and believe in God's plan for their salvation, they had died. They had believed that their status as the descendants of Abraham made them invincible and untouchable. But they were wrong. Deadly wrong.

And Jesus is trying to let Nicodemus know that everything he believed about the righteousness of man, the role of the Messiah, and the kingdom of God, was wrong. Jesus was the Messiah, just as Nicodemus suspected Him to be, but He had not come to rule and reign, but to suffer and die. And as Jesus would later say of Himself, "the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve others and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45 NLT).

The day was coming when Nicodemus and all those who had believed in Jesus' name were going to have to decide whether they believed in His sacrificial death on the cross on their behalf. They would have to look upon the One who was lifted up in their place and believe that His death had paid for their sins. If they did, they would experience the new birth, a Spirit-empowered purification from their sinful state and a transformation into a new creation, covered by the righteousness of Christ.

Not What He Expected

¹⁹ *“And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. ²⁰ For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. ²¹ But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God.”*— John 3:19-21 ESV

Nicodemus’ head must have been ready to explode. In just a few short minutes, Jesus has delivered some of the most shocking and paradigm-shifting news this Pharisee has ever heard. Nicodemus’ entire belief system has been shaken to its core. For starters, Jesus has informed him that unless he is born again, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That was news to Nicodemus. As a Jew and a well-respected member of the Pharisees, he believed himself to already have full rights and privileges to a place in God’s coming kingdom. When the Messiah finally came and restored the Jews to power and prominence, Nicodemus believed he would be among those who enjoyed the joys and delights of a reinvigorated kingdom.

But Jesus had put a strange and unexpected condition on anyone who hoped to be a part of the coming kingdom of God: “unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3 ESV). Then Jesus upped the ante by adding a further requirement: “unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (John 3:5 ESV).

Nicodemus was having a difficult time understanding what Jesus was saying. His mind was focused on earthly, temporal concepts of the kingdom, while Jesus was speaking of spiritual matters. His concept of the coming Messiah was centered around a human deliverer who would lead Israel in an overthrow of the Roman occupying forces and reestablish the Davidic dynasty and Israel’s dominance in the region. But all that Jesus has shared with this highly esteemed religious leader has been spiritual in nature. It is not that Jesus is eliminating the idea of an actual physical kingdom of God, but He is letting Nicodemus know that something new is happening. The kingdom was coming, but not in the form Nicodemus expected. And entrance into that kingdom was going to require far more than Nicodemus could ever imagine.

While Nicodemus was secretly longing that Jesus was the Messiah and had come to set up the kingdom of God on earth, Jesus let him know that the real reason for His coming was to offer eternal life.

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” — John 3:16 ESV

In all his study of the Hebrew scriptures, what Nicodemus had failed to understand was that when the Messiah came, His mission would be to suffer and die, not rule and reign. He would come to wear a crown of thorns, not a crown of gold. He would be lifted up and nailed to a Roman cross rather than placed on a royal throne in David’s palace.

Jesus, the Son of God, had come to earth in order to provide sinful mankind with a means to escape the coming condemnation of God. He was going to become “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29 ESV). He would sacrifice His life in the place of humanity, taking on the sins of the world in order to satisfy the just and righteous judgment of God. The apostle Peter would later describe the full impact of Jesus’ sacrificial death on our behalf.

He personally carried our sins in his body on the cross so that we can be dead to sin and live for what is right. By his wounds you are healed. – 1 Peter 2:24 NLT

And Peter was presenting the atoning death of Jesus as the fulfillment of the prophecy that Isaiah had penned centuries earlier.

But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. – Isaiah 53:5 ESV

But Jesus reveals a sad truth to his mystified and mind-muddled guest.

“...the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil.” – John 3:19 ESV

Jesus’ reference to Himself as the light ties directly back to the opening lines of John’s gospel.

In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. – John 1:4-5 ESV

The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. – John 1:9-11 ESV

Now we can see where John got the idea of Jesus being the light of men and the true light that shines in the darkness. He had heard it directly from the lips of Jesus Himself. And Jesus reveals that his entrance into the darkness of this world would be met with disbelief and indifference. His life, death, and resurrection would fail to convince many that He truly was the Son of God and the Savior of the world.

Everyone, including Nicodemus, recognized that there was something remarkable about this itinerant Rabbi from Nazareth. His message and miracles were like nothing they had ever heard or seen before. Some were impressed. Others were intrigued. A few were even convinced. But the majority continued to reject the light because they preferred to continue living in the darkness of sin.

But Jesus had come to illuminate the darkness of sin and to eliminate the penalty that accompanied it. And throughout the years of His earthly ministry, He continued to declare His divine mission to bring light to a sin-darkened world and life to a spiritually dead people.

Jesus spoke to them, saying, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." – John 8:12 ESV

"As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." – John 9:5 ESV

"I have come into the world as light, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness." – John 12:46 ESV

And Jesus makes it clear that the peoples' refusal to believe in Him would be based on their love affair with sin.

"...people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil." – John 3:19 ESV

No one likes having their sins exposed. So, they try to keep them concealed. They attempt to hide them from others. Darkness serves as a metaphor for the secrecy that accompanies a life of sinfulness. But that darkness takes a variety of forms. Too often, we can try to veil our sinfulness with acts of self-righteousness. That is exactly what Jesus accused the Pharisees of doing.

"What sorrow awaits you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees. Hypocrites! For you are so careful to clean the outside of the cup and the dish, but inside you are filthy—full of greed and self-indulgence! You blind Pharisee! First wash the inside of the cup and the dish, and then the outside will become clean, too."

"What sorrow awaits you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees. Hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs—beautiful on the outside but filled on the inside with dead people's bones and all sorts of impurity. Outwardly you look like righteous people, but inwardly your hearts are filled with hypocrisy and lawlessness." – Matthew 23:27-28 NLT

So, we can attempt to cover our sins with a thin veneer of righteous-looking deeds or we can simply commit our sins in secrecy, hidden away from the sight of others. As long as no one sees what we are doing, our reputations remain intact. The apostle Paul warns that even believers can find themselves attempting to harbor secret sins, hidden away from the eyes of others. But light has a way of exposing what is hidden.

Take no part in the worthless deeds of evil and darkness; instead, expose them. It is shameful even to talk about the things that ungodly people do in secret. But their evil

intentions will be exposed when the light shines on them, for the light makes everything visible. – Ephesians 5:11-14 NLT

Jesus made it painfully clear that “everyone who does wicked things hates the light” (John 3:20 ESV). Their sinful natures crave hiddenness and despise exposure. Like a roach that scatters when a light is turned on, a sinner will tend to run from the illuminating light of the gospel “lest his works should be exposed” (John 3:20 ESV).

One of the most indicting statements Jesus ever made was directed at the sect to which Nicodemus was a member. Luke records a scene in which Jesus was confronted by the Pharisees for having eaten with tax collectors and sinners. They were appalled by His actions and arrogantly asked, “Why do you eat and drink with such scum?” (Luke 5:30 NLT). And Jesus simply responded:

“Healthy people don’t need a doctor—sick people do. I have come to call not those who think they are righteous, but those who know they are sinners and need to repent.” – Luke 5:31-32 NLT

The Pharisees were living in darkness, convinced that their outward displays of righteousness were enough to cover up their inward need for repentance and restoration. They were diseased, dying, and in need of a doctor, but refused to admit it. Because they loved the darkness rather than the light.

Even Nicodemus would refuse to have his deeds exposed by the light. He had come under the cover of darkness, attempting to find out if Jesus was the Messiah. But he would walk away, still in the dark, both physically and spiritually. He had come into the presence of the light but would walk away just as he had come.

Jesus leaves Nicodemus with a final word that re-emphasizes the spiritual nature of all that He has said.

“...whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God.” – John 3:21 ESV

Salvation is a work of God. And this would have been a foreign concept to Nicodemus. He had been raised to believe that human effort was the essential ingredient for finding acceptance with God. Good works were the criteria by which men were judged by God and deemed worthy of His love. But Jesus was letting Nicodemus know that no man could earn a right standing with God through self-effort. The apostle Paul, a former Pharisee himself, put it this way:

Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it. – Ephesians 2:9 NLT

For no one can ever be made right with God by doing what the law commands. The law simply shows us how sinful we are. – Romans 3:20 NLT

For no one will ever be made right with God by obeying the law. – Galatians 2:16 NLT

This would have been shocking news to Nicodemus. And he would walk away that night with his head spinning from all that he had heard. Jesus had just enlightened him as to the true means by which sinful men can be made right with a holy God. Now, Nicodemus had a decision to make.

A Heavenly Calling

²² After this Jesus and his disciples went into the Judean countryside, and he remained there with them and was baptizing. ²³ John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because water was plentiful there, and people were coming and being baptized ²⁴ (for John had not yet been put in prison).

²⁵ Now a discussion arose between some of John's disciples and a Jew over purification. ²⁶ And they came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, he who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you bore witness—look, he is baptizing, and all are going to him." ²⁷ John answered, "A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven. ²⁸ You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, 'I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.' ²⁹ The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete. ³⁰ He must increase, but I must decrease." – John 3:22-30 ESV

Jesus' discussion with Nicodemus ended somewhat abruptly, with John providing no details concerning the Pharisee's final reaction to all that he had heard. The next time John mentions Nicodemus is in chapter 7, in reference to a meeting of the Sanhedrin, the high council of the Jews, of which Nicodemus was a member. They had called a meeting in order to discuss the disturbing reactions of the people regarding Jesus.

...some of the people said, "This really is the Prophet." Others said, "This is the Christ." But some said, "Is the Christ to come from Galilee?" – John 7:40-41 ESV

Even the high priest's personal guard, who had heard Jesus speak, reported, "No one ever spoke like this man!" (John 7:46 ESV). But Pharisees reacted angrily, shouting, "Have you also been deceived? Have any of the authorities or the Pharisees believed in him? But this crowd that does not know the law is accursed" (John 7:47-49 ESV). These men, who prided themselves in their superior knowledge of the Hebrew scriptures believed themselves to be too astute to be fooled by this charlatan from Nazareth. But the people were fools and easily deceived. But John adds an interesting note concerning Nicodemus, "who had gone to him before, and who was one of them" (John 7:50 ESV). Nicodemus risked his reputation by speaking up on the behalf of Jesus.

"Does our law judge a man without first giving him a hearing and learning what he does?" –John 7:51 ESV

It seems clear that Nicodemus' nighttime discussion with Jesus had made an impression on him. The words of Jesus had been bouncing around in his head and he was wrestling with what he believed about this man from Galilee. The next time we hear about Nicodemus is in chapter 19, in reference to the death and burial of Jesus. John records that Joseph of Arimathea, who he describes as a disciple of Jesus, had sought permission from Pilate to bury the body of Jesus. And John adds that Nicodemus, "who earlier had come to Jesus by night, came bringing a

mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds in weight” (John 19:39 ESV). This prominent member of the Pharisees took the risk of bringing spices and oils to anoint the body of Jesus. This does not prove that Nicodemus believed Jesus to be his Messiah and Savior, but it is hard to imagine that Nicodemus did not have the following words of Jesus in mind.

“And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.” – John 3:14-15 ESV

After his late-night encounter with Jesus, Nicodemus had returned to his life as a Pharisee, but with much to think about. But John describes Jesus as returning to the Judean wilderness, where He had been baptized by John the Baptist.

John sets up another contrast between these two men. He describes both Jesus and John the Baptist as baptizing all those who came. In the very next chapter, John points out that Jesus “was making and baptizing more disciples than John” (John 4:2 ESV), but adds the following point of clarification: “although Jesus himself did not baptize, but only his disciples” (John 4:3 ESV).

John the Baptist had appeared on the scene first and he had garnered his fair share of disciples. But with the arrival of Jesus, things began to change. The disciples who had chosen to follow John the Baptist were confused by the notoriety of Jesus and had begun to see Him as competition. And they brought their concern to John the Baptist.

“Rabbi, he who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you bore witness—look, he is baptizing, and all are going to him.” – John 3:26 ESV

With the arrival of Jesus, John the Baptist had not shut down his ministry and sought early retirement. He had continued to preach his message that the kingdom of heaven was at hand, and he baptized all those who were willing to repent and seek forgiveness for their sins. But further down the Jordan River, Jesus and His disciples were doing the same thing.

The disciples of John the Baptist have just had a discussion with a Jew concerning the exact nature of the baptisms they were performing. The Greek word John uses is *katharismos*, and it refers to the practice of ceremonial cleansing or washing with water. It seems likely that the debate or discussion between John the Baptist’s disciples and the unnamed Jews had centered around a question of just what kind of baptism Jesus and His disciples were performing. John the Baptist had made it clear, “I baptize you with water for repentance” (Matthew 3:11 ESV). But what was the nature of the baptism or ceremonial washing that Jesus and His disciples offered?

The real issue seems to be the practice of ritual and completely external ceremonial cleansing. Jesus had come offering something completely different. He had told Nicodemus that entrance into the kingdom of God would require birth from above. His ministry was focused on heart

purification, not some form of external and temporary physical cleansing. And what Jesus was saying and doing could have been seen as contradictory to the accepted teachings of Judaism. So, this could be what motivated John the Baptist's disciples to bring their concerns to him.

But he responded by reminding his disciples that "A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven" (John 3:27 ESV). As far as John the Baptist was concerned, Jesus was doing what He was doing by the sovereign will of God. And if God wanted to make the ministry of Jesus more impactful and successful, so be it.

John the Baptist reminded his disciples that he had never claimed to be the Messiah. He had simply been the faithful witness, preparing the way for the one "the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie" (John 1:27 ESV). He wanted his followers to know that his star was fading because the one he had been proclaiming had finally appeared. The focus was shifting away from John the Baptist and onto the ministry of Jesus, and he was perfectly at peace with that transition.

"He must increase, but I must decrease." – John 3:30 ESV

John the Baptist was fully convinced that Jesus was the Messiah. Which is why he told his disciples, "It is the bridegroom who marries the bride, and the bridegroom's friend is simply glad to stand with him and hear his vows. Therefore, I am filled with joy at his success" (John 3:29 NLT). He had never been the star of this show. He had simply been the first act, preparing the way for the principal protagonist in God's divine play. And now that Jesus had appeared on the scene, John the Baptist was willing to fade into the background, having played his part and completed his divine task.

But it's interesting to note that, a short time later, John the Baptist would seem to have a change of heart. His confidence in Jesus' identity as the Messiah would be put to the test by an unexpected change in his own circumstances. He would find himself arrested and imprisoned for having accused King Herod of committing adultery with his deceased brother's widow. Suddenly, his optimistic outlook began to fade and he sent two of his disciples with a question for Jesus that reveals his growing doubt.

"Are you the Messiah we've been expecting, or should we keep looking for someone else?" – Luke 7:19 NLT

His less-than-satisfactory circumstances were causing him to question whether Jesus really was the Messiah. You can sense that John the Baptist had been expecting Jesus to fulfill the commonly held view that the Messiah would restore the Davidic kingdom. Things would get better, not worse. And with his arrest, he had questions as to whether Jesus really was the one they had been expecting.

But Jesus had an interesting answer to John the Baptist's inquiry.

“Go back to John and tell him what you have seen and heard—the blind see, the lame walk, those with leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised to life, and the Good News is being preached to the poor.” And he added, “God blesses those who do not fall away because of me.” – Luke 7:22-23 NLT

In a sense, Jesus told His imprisoned friend to take his eyes off his own circumstances and to look closely at what was happening all around him. Jesus used prophetic terminology to describe His earthly ministry. He was doing the very works that the prophets had ascribed to the coming Messiah.

*“I, the Lord, have called you to demonstrate my righteousness.
I will take you by the hand and guard you,
and I will give you to my people, Israel,
as a symbol of my covenant with them.
And you will be a light to guide the nations.
You will open the eyes of the blind.
You will free the captives from prison,
releasing those who sit in dark dungeons.” – Isaiah 42:6-7 NT*

*The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is upon me,
for the Lord has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to comfort the brokenhearted
and to proclaim that captives will be released
and prisoners will be freed. – Isaiah 61:1 NLT*

Jesus was pointing to the evidence of His works. He was doing the very ministry that the prophets had predicted the Messiah would do. But notice that Jesus leaves something out. He does not stress that He will “free the captives from prison” or release “those who sin in dark dungeons.” He doesn’t tell John the Baptist that the “captives will be released and prisoners will be freed.” Because John the Baptist would never experience freedom from his imprisonment. He would be beheaded by Herod.

Jesus had come to bring spiritual healing to people who were spiritually blind, lame, poor, and imprisoned by sin. He had come to provide something far more significant than ceremonial cleansing from sin. His ministry was from above and His miracles were intended to point to a form of healing that would be eternal and not temporal in nature.

God Is True

³¹ *He who comes from above is above all. He who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks in an earthly way. He who comes from heaven is above all.* ³² *He bears witness to what he has seen and heard, yet no one receives his testimony.* ³³ *Whoever receives his testimony sets his seal to this, that God is true.* ³⁴ *For he whom God has sent utters the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure.* ³⁵ *The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand.* ³⁶ *Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.* – John 3:31-36 ESV

These closing verses of chapter 3 act as a kind of closing statement that summarizes all that has taken place since the initial encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus. It appears that the apostle John is the one providing this summary, in an attempt to reinforce his overarching theme of Jesus' divine nature. John takes various aspects of the chapter 3 chronology and uses them to support his premise that Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah of Israel.

John the Baptist had clearly stated, "I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him" (John 3:28 ESV). He knew his role as the precursor to the coming Messiah. And with the Messiah's arrival, John the Baptist knew that his role would naturally diminish.

"He must increase, but I must decrease." – John 3:30 ESV

He would be little more than a friend of the bridegroom, a spectator watching as his friend took center stage. And John the Baptist found great joy in accepting his diminished importance because the one for whom the nation had long waited had finally appeared.

And John points out that the appearance of the Messiah was not an everyday occurrence. He had come "from above." The Greek word John used is *anōthen*, and it is the very same word Jesus used when speaking to Nicodemus about the new birth.

*"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is **born again** he cannot see the kingdom of God."* – John 3:3 ESV

Jesus had been trying to let Nicodemus know that entrance into the kingdom of God would require something other than physical birth into the family of Israel. It would require a spiritual birth – from above. That's why Jesus informed Nicodemus, "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit" (John 3:6 ESV). Entrance into God's eternal kingdom was going to require that all men be "born of the Spirit" (John 3:8 ESV), and Jesus had come to make that possible.

John goes on to emphasize Jesus' divine nature by dispelling the long-held belief among the Jews that the Messiah would simply be a man, after the likeness of King David. Their expectation was like that of their ancient ancestors, who had demanded of the prophet Samuel, "Give us a king to judge us like all the other nations have" (1 Samuel 8:5 NLT).

Even after centuries of lousy leadership under a long line of human kings, the Israelites were still hoping for someone to show up who would follow in the footsteps of David. But John is emphasizing that Jesus, the Messiah, was from above and not of the earth. He had not only been sent *by* God, but He was actually God in human flesh. This further supports the opening statement of John's gospel: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and **the Word was God**" (John 1:1 ESV).

Two times in verse 31, John asserts that "He who comes from heaven is above all" (John 3:31 ESV). In other words, Jesus, because of His divinity, is superior to anything and everyone that is of this earth. He is the Word of God. He speaks on behalf of God and as God, and "He bears witness to what he has seen and heard" (John 3:32 ESV). Jesus was revealing divine truth, received directly from the throne room of God in heaven. He was not a mere mortal speaking man-made words, but He was the Son of God speaking the words of God. He would later claim: "The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority, but the Father who dwells in me does his works" (John 14:10 ESV). And Jesus would later expand on His divine authority to speak His Father's words.

"For I have not spoken on my own authority, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment—what to say and what to speak. And I know that his commandment is eternal life. What I say, therefore, I say as the Father has told me." – John 12:49-50 ESV

And yet, John sadly notes that "no one receives his testimony" (John 3:32 ESV). Jesus was the incarnate Word of God, speaking on behalf of His Heavenly Father. And the gist of His message was the gracious offer of eternal life that would be made available through His death and resurrection. But the people did not believe His testimony. They refused to accept that He spoke for God.

But John counted himself among the few who had chosen to believe the testimony of Jesus. And, writing long after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, and having experienced the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, John's early belief in Jesus had been fully justified and proven well-founded. That is why he was able to say, "Whoever receives his testimony sets his seal to this, that God is true" (John 3:33 ESV).

Verse 34 seems to be John's personal testimony that his belief in Jesus had resulted in his anointing by the Holy Spirit.

For he whom God has sent utters the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure. – John 3:34 ESV

The indwelling presence of the Spirit was all the proof John needed to believe that Jesus had been sent by God and had spoken on His behalf. John remembered the promise that Jesus had made to His disciples.

“I tell you the truth, anyone who believes in me will do the same works I have done, and even greater works, because I am going to be with the Father.” – John 14:12 NLT

Jesus rather obliquely refers to His ascension, indicating that His departure would be necessary in order for the Spirit of God to come. And just a few verses later, John records the further promise of Jesus that would be the key to accomplishing greater works than He had done.

“And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, who will never leave you. He is the Holy Spirit, who leads into all truth.” – John 14:16 NLT

For John, this was all about authority. Jesus had been sent by God. He spoke on behalf of God. And all that He said was the truth of God. John is trying to get his readers to understand that Jesus was divine, which is why he states, “The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand” (John 3:35 ESV). Jesus possessed divine authority over the wind, waves, disease, and demons. His word was greater than that of kings, religious councils, or political parties. God loved Jesus so much that He imbued Him with all His divine authority. And Jesus would later tell His followers that they would experience that same love of God and have access to the full authority of God.

“When I am raised to life again, you will know that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you. Those who accept my commandments and obey them are the ones who love me. And because they love me, my Father will love them. And I will love them and reveal myself to each of them.” – John 14:20-21 NLT

Having received the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit, John was fully convinced that Jesus was exactly who He had claimed to be. John knew the full extent of God’s love because He had been filled with God’s Spirit, just as Jesus had promised. God the Father and God the Son had taken up permanent residence in John’s life in the form of indwelling Holy Spirit (John 14:23). And it had all begun when John had believed that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God sent from above. So, he reminds his readers that it all begins with belief.

Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him. – John 3:36 ESV

His emphasis is on eternal life, which will be experienced within the coming kingdom of God. Jesus had not come to set up an earthly kingdom. He had not come to sit on a throne but to die on a cross. He had come “to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45 NLT). And John had witnessed that selfless, sacrificial act with his own eyes. He had seen Jesus crucified and buried. But he had also seen Him in His resurrected state and had stood by as Jesus ascended back into heaven where He was restored to His rightful place at His Father’s side.

John wants his readers to believe. He wants them to have the same remarkable experience he has had. And he warns them that, if they refuse to believe, they will remain under the righteous

wrath of God. There was only one way to escape God's pending judgment and that was through faith in Jesus Christ, His Son.

"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." – John 3:16 ESV

An Unscheduled and Ill-Advised Rest Stop

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

Chapter 3 featured Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus, who was a well-respected member of the Pharisees, an extremely orthodox sect of Judaism. This learned man, who also happened to be a member of the Jewish ruling council called the Sanhedrin, was well-versed in the Hebrew Scriptures, with special knowledge of the Mosaic Law. Yet, with all his knowledge and wisdom, he had been unable to comprehend the words of Jesus. In fact, Jesus exposed Nicodemus' surprising lack of understanding when He somewhat sarcastically asked, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?" (John 3:10 ESV).

Nicodemus prided himself in his knowledge of both the written and oral traditions of Israel. But he had been unable to understand what Jesus meant when He said, "unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God" (John 3:5 ESV). Nicodemus' wisdom had proved insufficient because his mind was stuck on a horizontal plane, and incapable of comprehending the spiritual nature of Jesus' words.

Now, John shifts the scene of the story as he describes Jesus' departure from Judea to the northern region of Galilee. Jesus is vacating the confines of Jerusalem because the Pharisees have gotten wind of His growing popularity.

...when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John (although Jesus himself did not baptize, but only his disciples), he left Judea and departed again for Galilee. – John 4:1-3 ESV

Jesus had come to Jerusalem in order to celebrate the Passover, but He had found the temple of His Father being desecrated and profaned by those who were supposed to be the spiritual leaders of the nation. Rather than encouraging the people to "worship the Father in spirit and truth" (John 4:23 ESV), they had turned the house of God into "a house of trade" (John 2:16 ESV). They were using the God-ordained sacrificial system as a means for making money, rather than making atonement for the sins of the people.

So, John describes Jesus, the Messiah of Israel, as turning His back on the city of Jerusalem and heading for Galilee. But to get there, Jesus was going to have to journey through the region of Samaria. And this seemingly insignificant geographic detail is far more important that one might realize.

The seismic nature of the shift in location is easily overlooked by modern readers. But John's original audience would have recognized the fascinating juxtaposition between chapters 3 and 4 that John was creating. To understand what is going on, you have to know the historic significance of Samaria and its inhabitants. The land of Samaria had originally belonged to the tribe of Ephraim and the half-tribe of Manasseh. It had been part of the land of Canaan that God had promised as an inheritance to the nation of Israel. After God had divided the nation in two, due to the sins of Solomon, Samaria had become part of the northern kingdom of Israel. But when the people of Israel had continued to rebel against God and had refused His repeated calls to repent, He had brought the Assyrians against them as punishment for their sin. The book of 2 Kings describes what happened as a result.

The king of Assyria transported groups of people from Babylon, Cuthah, Avva, Hamath, and Sepharvaim and resettled them in the towns of Samaria, replacing the people of Israel. They took possession of Samaria and lived in its towns. But since these foreign settlers did not worship the Lord when they first arrived, the Lord sent lions among them, which killed some of them.

So a message was sent to the king of Assyria: "The people you have sent to live in the towns of Samaria do not know the religious customs of the God of the land. He has sent lions among them to destroy them because they have not worshiped him correctly."

The king of Assyria then commanded, "Send one of the exiled priests back to Samaria. Let him live there and teach the new residents the religious customs of the God of the land." So one of the priests who had been exiled from Samaria returned to Bethel and taught the new residents how to worship the Lord.

But these various groups of foreigners also continued to worship their own gods. In town after town where they lived, they placed their idols at the pagan shrines that the people of Samaria had built. – 2 Kings 17:24-29 NLT

These foreigners ended up intermarrying with the Jews who had been left in the land. And 2 Kings describes how these "Samaritans" practiced a syncretistic brand of religion that combined the worship of Yahweh with the worship of false gods.

These new residents worshiped the Lord, but they also appointed from among themselves all sorts of people as priests to offer sacrifices at their places of worship. And though they worshiped the Lord, they continued to follow their own gods according to the religious customs of the nations from which they came. – 2 Kings 17:32-33 NLT

To the Pharisees and other orthodox religious groups in Israel, the Samaritans were considered "half-breeds" who had refused to maintain the purity of the nation's bloodline. Not only that, but they were also guilty of idolatry and, therefore, in violation of the Mosaic Law. And to make matters worse, they had established their own place of worship on Mount Gerazim, refusing to recognize the temple in Jerusalem as the dwelling place of God. And much to the chagrin of the

Pharisees, the Samaritans rejected all the writings of the prophets and the Jewish oral traditions, which the Pharisees held near and dear.

So, when John describes Jesus as having “to pass through Samaria,” there is an intentional tension in his words. It was impossible for Jesus to travel from Judea to Galilee without having to make his way through this land occupied by “half-breeds” and heretics. And any self-respecting, God-honoring Jew would pass through this region as quickly as possible, making certain to avoid any interaction with the inhabitants. To the Jews, the Samaritans were considered unclean and of no more value than a dog. They were to be avoided at all costs.

All of these details are essential if one is to understand the significance of all that John is about to describe. Jesus’ transition from Jerusalem to Galilee takes on a special significance because He must pass through the region of Samaria. And the intense animosity between the Jews and Samaritans would have been well-documented and fully understood in John’s day. A contemporary reader of John’s gospel would have expected Jesus and His entourage to expedite their passage through Samaria, spending as little time in the region as was physically possible.

But John describes Jesus as arriving at the town of Sychar, located in the heart of Samaria, at about Noon. The inference is that Jesus has only a few hours left before darkness falls, so He should have been in a hurry to complete His journey to Galilee. But instead, He decides to take an unscheduled and highly unrecommended rest stop at the base of Mount Gerazim, where the Samaritans practiced their syncretistic brand of religion.

Again, the details are critical to understanding what follows. Sychar, also known as Shechem, was located in the valley between Mount Gerazim and Mount Ebal, and this spot held a special significance for the Jewish people. It was there, during the initial conquest of the land of Canaan, that Joshua had instructed the people to build an altar to the Lord, to recommit themselves to the covenant, and to give thanks for their recent victories over Jericho and Ai.

Then Joshua built an altar to the Lord, the God of Israel, on Mount Ebal. He followed the commands that Moses the Lord’s servant had written in the Book of Instruction: “Make me an altar from stones that are uncut and have not been shaped with iron tools.” Then on the altar they presented burnt offerings and peace offerings to the Lord. And as the Israelites watched, Joshua copied onto the stones of the altar the instructions Moses had given them.

Then all the Israelites—foreigners and native-born alike—along with the elders, officers, and judges, were divided into two groups. One group stood in front of Mount Gerizim, the other in front of Mount Ebal. Each group faced the other, and between them stood the Levitical priests carrying the Ark of the Lord’s Covenant. This was all done according to the commands that Moses, the servant of the Lord, had previously given for blessing the people of Israel.

Joshua then read to them all the blessings and curses Moses had written in the Book of Instruction. – Joshua 8:30-34 NLT

Notice the reference to “all the Israelites – foreigners and native-born alike.” Here, centuries later, the Messiah of Israel was making His way to this very same spot, accompanied by native-born Jews, and He would encounter a woman who was considered a foreigner and a violator of the covenant of Israel. But the message Jesus had to share with her would be similar to that which He had shared with Nicodemus, a native-born Jew, a Pharisee, and a so-called keeper of the law.

The Gift of God

⁷ A woman from Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her, “Give me a drink.” ⁸ (For his disciples had gone away into the city to buy food.) ⁹ The Samaritan woman said to him, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?” (For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.) ¹⁰ Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.” ¹¹ The woman said to him, “Sir, you have nothing to draw water with, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?” ¹² Are you greater than our father Jacob? He gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did his sons and his livestock.” ¹³ Jesus said to her, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴ but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.” ¹⁵ The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water, so that I will not be thirsty or have to come here to draw water.” – John 4:7-15 ESV

It is interesting that John makes special note that Jesus stopped in “a town of Samaria called Sychar, near the field that Jacob had given to his son Joseph” (John 4:5 ESV). This reference to Joseph has special significance because of the role he played as Israel’s “savior” hundreds of years earlier. Joseph had been sold into slavery by his jealous brothers, and he ended up in Egypt. But through a series of divinely orchestrated events, Joseph eventually became the second highest-ranking official in all of Egypt. Years later, when a famine struck the land of Canaan, Jacob sent his remaining sons to Egypt to seek food. But what they discovered was their long-lost brother. And to their surprise, rather than use his position and power to punish them for their past treatment of him, Joseph showed them mercy and grace. He provided them with forgiveness for their sins against him as well as well-watered land for their flocks. So the Israelites, just 70 members strong at that time, settled in Egypt. And, in response to his brothers' concern that he might seek to harm them, Joseph told them:

“Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.” – Genesis 50:20 ESV

Jacob and Joseph would both die in Egypt. But, years later, when the sons Jacob returned to the land of Canaan, they brought the bones of Joseph and buried them in Shechem (Sychar), near the spot where Jesus had chosen to take His midday rest stop.

John mentions, almost in passing, that Jesus was weary from His journey. This rather oblique reference is intended to remind the reader that Jesus, while fully God, was also fully human. And in His humanity, Jesus experienced the same physical attributes as any other man, including hunger, thirst, fatigue, and pain. In this little scenario, Jesus would have looked like any other travel-worn Jew making his way through the region of Samaria. So, when the Samaritan woman appeared on the scene, she would have taken very little interest in this unknown Jewish man – until He spoke to her.

John indicates that Jesus was the first to speak, saying to the woman, “Give me a drink” (John 4:7 ESV). While this scene may appear somewhat innocuous to us, for the original readers of John’s gospel, this encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman would have been shocking. Here was Jesus, a Jewish male, daring to strike up a conversation with a Samaritan woman. This kind of thing wasn’t done in Israel. First of all, Jesus broke social protocol by speaking to a woman in public. And to make matters worse, the woman to whom He spoke was a lowly Samaritan. She would have been considered idolatrous and, therefore, unclean. Yet, shockingly, Jesus chose to speak to her.

Even the woman reveals her surprise that this Jewish man would dare to address her.

“How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?” – John 4:9
ESV

Just so his audience understands the gravity of the moment, John adds an important aside: “For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans” (John 4:9 ESV). This entire encounter was out of bounds and unexpected. Jesus, the Jewish Messiah, was smack-dab in the middle of Samaria, in the middle of the day, and speaking to an unclean Samaritan woman. Not only that, but He was also asking her to serve Him water from the vessel she used to draw from the well. What Jesus was about to do would render Him ceremonially unclean and in need of purification.

But Jesus shows no concern for His own spiritual well-being. Instead, He seems focused on the plight of the woman and replies to her, “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water” (John 4:10 ESV).

In a sense, Jesus was informing the woman of His true identity. He was much more than an unidentified Jewish man asking for a drink of water. He was someone who had the power and authority to offer her “the gift of God,” a source of “living water.”

Confused by Jesus’ words, the woman responded, “Sir, you have nothing to draw water with, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?” (John 4:11 ESV). At this point in the exchange, the reader should recall the earlier conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, the highly orthodox member of the Pharisees. He too had been perplexed by the words of Jesus concerning the new birth from above and had quizzically replied, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?” (John 3:4 ESV).

Don’t miss the contrast: A well-educated Jewish Pharisee and an idolatrous Samaritan woman. Both found themselves in a conversation with Jesus, the Son of God. But their minds were stuck on a horizontal plane, and incapable of understanding the spiritual nature of Jesus’ words. The woman, well-acquainted with the task of drawing her daily water from the well, could not understand what Jesus meant by His reference to “living water.” In her mind, Jesus was offering her a source of free-flowing water, like that found in a mountain stream. It stood in stark

contrast to the well water to which she was accustomed. Access to water from a stream would mean she would no longer have to go through the arduous task of drawing stagnant water from a well. But as far as she could see, Jesus had no means of providing the “the gift” of which He spoke.

The woman not only found Jesus’ words confusing, but also a bit off-putting. Who was He to denigrate the water from Jacob’s well? Was it not good enough for Him? It had served to meet the needs of Jacob, so it was good enough for her. But Jesus pointed out the limitations inherent in Jacob’s well and the water it provided.

“Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again...” – John 4:13 ESV

Remember what Jesus said to Nicodemus: “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit” (John 3:6 ESV). Jesus was trying to get Nicodemus to understand that there was a physical and a spiritual dimension to life. Being born into the family of Israel was not going to be enough to earn Nicodemus entrance into the kingdom of God. And drinking water from the well of Jacob was not going to satisfy the Samaritan woman’s spiritual thirst. Both of these individuals had a need that could only be met through Jesus. He was the light of life and the source of living water.

And Jesus informed the woman that the gift He was offering her was far greater than any water she might draw from a well.

“...whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.” – John 4:14 ESV

At this point in the story, we know nothing about this woman, other than her status as a Samaritan. Her very presence at the well reveals her need for and dependence upon water in order to survive. But Jesus knew there was a much greater need in this woman’s life. Her thirst was far more than physical. Just as Nicodemus was going to need a different kind of birth if he wanted to enter God’s kingdom, the Samaritan woman was going to need a different kind of water if she ever wanted to have her deep spiritual thirst satisfied. But the woman’s response to Jesus reveals just how blind she was to her own neediness.

“Sir, give me this water, so that I will not be thirsty or have to come here to draw water.” – John 4:15 ESV

She was intrigued by the thought of a source of free-flowing water. And if this unknown Jewish man could tell her where to find it, she was all ears. The thought of never having to draw water from the well again was appealing to her. But like Nicodemus, she was missing the point. She was neglecting to see her real need. Nicodemus had seen himself as fully righteous and fully deserving of entrance into God’s kingdom. But he had been wrong. Just like everyone else, he required a birth from above. And this woman was never going to satisfy her real spiritual need

with water from a well. Her sins, like those of Nicodemus, were great. Yes, they may have been of a different sort, but they were sins, nonetheless. And she, like Nicodemus, stood before the Son of God, condemned by her sin and in need of a Savior.

Which brings us back to the story of Joseph and his brothers. The day came when they found themselves standing in front of the brother they had sold into slavery and left for dead. They were guilty and deserving of judgment. But Joseph showed them mercy. He extended grace. He used his power and authority to reward rather than punish them.

And like the brothers of Joseph, this unidentified woman was going to discover the joy of having her sins forgiven. Jesus was about to let her know that God “brought me to this position so I could save the lives of many people” (Genesis 50:20 NLT). And she would be graciously and unexpectedly included among the saved.

In Spirit and Truth

¹⁶ Jesus said to her, “Go, call your husband, and come here.” ¹⁷ The woman answered him, “I have no husband.” Jesus said to her, “You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband’; ¹⁸ for you have had five husbands, and the one you now have is not your husband. What you have said is true.” ¹⁹ The woman said to him, “Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. ²⁰ Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship.” ²¹ Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. ²² You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. ²³ But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. ²⁴ God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.” ²⁵ The woman said to him, “I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ). When he comes, he will tell us all things.” ²⁶ Jesus said to her, “I who speak to you am he.” – John 4:16-26 ESV

The woman wanted what Jesus had to offer. The thought of a source of freely flowing water that would eliminate her constant need to draw water from the well of Jacob was more than appealing to her. But, like Nicodemus, she was missing the point of Jesus’ words. She had come to the well to meet a physical need. Her mission had been to draw water from the well for use in drinking, bathing, and cleaning. Water was a daily necessity that made living in that arid region possible. Without it, life would be impossible.

But even water has its limitations. It can be consumed to quench thirst, but in time, the thirst will return. Water can be used to wash away the dirt and grime of life, but it can’t prevent one from becoming filthy again. That’s why the woman was forced to return to the well on a daily basis. Her need for water was insatiable.

Yet Jesus had piqued the woman’s interest with His mention of “living water.” But don’t miss how He had opened His conversation with her.

“If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.” – John 4:10 ESV

The woman was clueless as to Jesus’ identity. When she had arrived at the well, she was surprised to find an unknown Jewish man waiting there. And her surprise turned to shock when this stranger dared to speak to her – “For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans” (John 4:9 ESV). Yet Jesus assured her that, had she known who He was and the nature of the gift He had to offer, she would have been the first to speak that day.

Jesus, in need of water to satisfy His thirst, had stopped at the well. But as the woman pointed out, He had “nothing to draw water with” (John 4:11 ESV). So He had asked her for help because she was the only one who had the means by which to satisfy His need. Yet, the inference behind the story is that the woman had a need for something far greater than water.

And if she had only known the true identity of the stranger at the well and what He was capable of offering her, she would have been begging Him for the gift of God.

It is easy to overlook the fact that both Nicodemus and this woman were worshipers of Yahweh. He was an orthodox member of the sect of the Pharisees. She was a Samaritan. He worshiped the God of Abraham at the temple in Jerusalem. Her people chose to worship Him at Mount Gerizim. Nicodemus prided Himself on his identity as a purebred Jew and a strict adherent to the Mosaic Law. The Samaritan woman, though viewed as a half-breed by the Jews, believed that her people were worshiping Yahweh in the manner prescribed by Moses. But what both failed to take into account was their need for a Savior. While the Jews and the Samaritans believed in the prophecies concerning the coming Messiah, they were clueless as to His real mission.

The primary message found in chapters 3 and 4 is that of need, and Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman had the same need in common. The need for eternal life. But in order to have eternal life, they would have to experience cleansing from their sin. Jesus had described it to Nicodemus as birth from above. He described it to the woman at the well as living water. Both of these individuals, despite their obvious differences, would be denied access into God's kingdom for the very same reason: Sin.

Nicodemus, while outwardly righteous in appearance, was guilty of hypocrisy, just like the rest of his fellow members of the Pharisees. Jesus would have some harsh words of indictment against these well-respected members of Israel's religious elite.

"What sorrow awaits you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees. Hypocrites! For you are so careful to clean the outside of the cup and the dish, but inside you are filthy—full of greed and self-indulgence!" – Matthew 23:25 NLT

"What sorrow awaits you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees. Hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs—beautiful on the outside but filled on the inside with dead people's bones and all sorts of impurity." – Matthew 23:27 NLT

But the woman at the well had her own set of issues. Not only was she a Samaritan and, therefore, guilty of practicing idolatry, but she was also guilty of violating the law of God. As Jesus was about to point out, she was an adulteress. When he asked her to go get her husband, she confessed that she was unmarried. But Jesus knew more about her than she could have ever imagined, and He revealed to her the true nature of her need.

"You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; for you have had five husbands, and the one you now have is not your husband. What you have said is true." – John 4:17-18 ESV

Suddenly, Jesus shifted the topic of conversation away from water to sin. He made it painfully personal. And while the woman's statement had been anything but a confession, Jesus

declared that what she had said was more true than she realized. She had no husband because she was in an adulterous relationship. She was guilty of sin.

But in a somewhat awkward attempt to change the subject, the woman declared, “Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet” (John 4:19 ESV). She desperately wanted to talk about something other than her five failed marriages and her current live-in relationship. So, sensing that Jesus had some kind of prophetic powers, she decided to ask Him about an important point of controversy between the Jews and the Samaritans.

“Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship.” – John 4:20 ESV

By refocusing the topic of conversation, she was hoping to divert attention away from her own personal problems. But Jesus was not going to allow that to happen. He addressed her question, but in a way that brought the focus right back on her. In essence, Jesus let her know that the issue had less to do about *where* God should be worshiped, but the *motive* behind the worship. The Jews and Samaritans were busy debating about location, but Jesus was far more interested in motivation. Why were they worshiping God?

And Jesus dropped a bombshell on her that must have left her reeling.

“Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father.” – John 4:21 ESV

The worship of God wasn’t about a temple in Jerusalem or a shrine on Mount Gerizim. It was a matter of the heart. While the Jews had a more accurate understanding of God, they were guilty of worshiping Him falsely. Jesus would later declare of the Jews, “These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship is a farce, for they teach man-made ideas as commands from God” (Matthew 15:8-9 NLT).

And He told the Samaritan woman, “You worship what you do not know” (John 4:22 ESV). The Samaritans practiced a form of syncretism that blended the worship of Yahweh with that of false gods. Their doctrine was polluted and filled with pagan ideas that rendered Yahweh virtually unrecognizable.

Jesus fast-forwarded the conversation to the future, revealing that a day would come when “when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him” (John 4:23 ESV). Worship will no longer be about location and the ritual observation of rules and regulations. It will be about a relationship with God based on spirit and truth. And Jesus informed the woman that the future hour to which He referred was actually “now here.” It had arrived. And He had been the one to usher it in.

But what did He mean by “spirit and truth?” And how had His arrival changed the nature of man’s worship of God? The two terms “spirit and truth” are actually meant to convey one idea.

Jesus is attempting to define worship that which is “truly spiritual.” In other words, it is not some physical activity practiced in a particular place and according to some man-made set of governing rules. It is a matter of the heart, not the head. It is spiritual in nature and not physical. Going through the religious motions either in Jerusalem or on Mount Gerizim was not going to cut it. Both the Jews and the Samaritans had been guilty of worshiping the one true God falsely and unfaithfully.

But Jesus had come to make the true worship of God possible, by restoring sinful men and women to a right relationship with Him. To do so, they would have to be born of the Spirit, just as He had told Nicodemus. They would have to have their spiritual thirst quenched by the living water Jesus would provide. And just a few chapters later, John will describe Jesus standing in the temple courtyard, shouting:

“Anyone who is thirsty may come to me! Anyone who believes in me may come and drink! For the Scriptures declare, ‘Rivers of living water will flow from his heart.’” (When he said “living water,” he was speaking of the Spirit, who would be given to everyone believing in him. But the Spirit had not yet been given because Jesus had not yet entered into his glory.).” – John 7:38-39 NLT

The true worship of God would be made possible by the presence of the indwelling Spirit of God. And to receive the Spirit, one would have to accept the gracious gift of salvation made possible through the sacrifice of God’s own Son.

These words left the woman in a state of confusion. She was having a difficult time following what Jesus had to say. But she proclaimed her belief in the coming of the Messiah and her hope that He would clear up all the confusion regarding where to worship God. And that’s when Jesus boldly proclaimed to her, “I who speak to you am he” (John 4:26 ESV). The not-yet had become the now. The long-awaited Messiah had shown up and He was talking to her. The answer to her question regarding the true worship of God was standing right in front of her.

Not What They Expected

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

³¹ Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, saying, "Rabbi, eat." ³² But he said to them, "I have food to eat that you do not know about." ³³ So the disciples said to one another, "Has anyone brought him something to eat?" ³⁴ Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work. ³⁵ Do you not say, 'There are yet four months, then comes the harvest'? Look, I tell you, lift up your eyes, and see that the fields are white for harvest.

³⁶ Already the one who reaps is receiving wages and gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. ³⁷ For here the saying holds true, 'One sows and another reaps.' ³⁸ I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor.'" – John 4:27-38 ESV

The Samaritan woman had come to the well to draw water. The disciples had gone to a nearby town to find food. John's emphasis on the contrast between the physical and the spiritual is all over this section of his gospel. With his depiction of Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman, John accentuates the stark contrast between earthly and the heavenly, the temporal and the eternal. The woman's life depicts mankind's obsession with meeting physical needs. The water was a symbol of her insatiable need to satisfy her earthly desires. Jesus' revelation concerning her five failed marriages speaks volumes about her neediness, insecurity, and susceptibility to her own passions and desires. That she was living with yet another man, outside the bonds of marriage, reveals her deep-seated desire for acceptance and love. She had tremendous physical, emotional, and psychological needs. Yet, she was blind to the fact that her greatest need was spiritual in nature.

All the while Jesus had been attempting to quench this woman's spiritual thirst, His disciples had been in search for food. And John points out their shock when they returned to find Jesus speaking to a woman, and a Samaritan woman at that. This was unacceptable behavior for someone like Jesus. The disciples, as Jews, would have been appalled that their teacher had been willing to risk becoming ceremonially unclean through interaction with a Samaritan. And while they were dying to know what had prompted Jesus' actions, they kept their questions to themselves.

Meanwhile, the woman had made her way back into town, anxious to share the exciting news of her unexpected encounter with Jesus.

The woman left her water jar beside the well and ran back to the village, telling everyone, "Come and see a man who told me everything I ever did! Could he possibly be the Messiah?" – John 4:28-29 NLT

John's mention of the water jar is an important part of the story that can be easily overlooked. That jar was an essential part of her daily routine. It was the key to her drawing water from the well, which, as she had told Jesus, was deep. Without the jar, she would have no means of satisfying her thirst. But her willingness to leave it behind is a subtle statement by John that she had found something far more important and significant. It is reminiscent of the words of Jesus, spoken during His sermon on the mount.

"So don't worry about these things, saying, 'What will we eat? What will we drink? What will we wear?' These things dominate the thoughts of unbelievers, but your heavenly Father already knows all your needs. Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously, and he will give you everything you need." – Matthew 6:31-33 NLT

Jesus would later reiterate this same thought to His disciples, telling them, "That is why I tell you not to worry about everyday life—whether you have enough food to eat or enough clothes to wear. For life is more than food, and your body more than clothing." (Luke 12:22-23 NLT). And He would add a further note of instruction:

"Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and he will give you everything you need. So don't be afraid, little flock. For it gives your Father great happiness to give you the Kingdom." – Luke 12:31-32 NLT

By leaving her water jar behind, the Samaritan woman was putting the teaching of Jesus into action. She was illustrating what it means to seek the Kingdom of God above all else. Suddenly, the earthly things that had meant so much to her, lost their value and appeal. She had discovered something of far greater worth.

"Come and see a man who told me everything I ever did! Could he possibly be the Messiah?" – John 4:29 NLT

Her interest was piqued. She was curiously intrigued by all Jesus had said to her. And her excitement was contagious because she eventually returned with a crowd of her fellow townspeople in tow.

But John returns our attention to the contrast between the physical and the spiritual by describing the disciples' attempt to get Jesus to eat. They had gone out of their way to get food, even risking their own purity by entering into a Samaritan town to purchase it, and now they expected Jesus to satisfy His physical hunger with it. But Jesus refused their offer, informing them instead that He had "food to eat that you do not know about" (John 4:32 ESV). This admission confused them because they could not imagine where Jesus had found anything to eat. And what Jesus said next did little to clear up their confusion.

"My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work." – John 4:34
ESV

And just a few chapters later, John records the words of Jesus as He declares His resolute determination to accomplish His Father's will.

"For I have come down from heaven to do the will of God who sent me, not to do my own will. And this is the will of God, that I should not lose even one of all those he has given me, but that I should raise them up at the last day. For it is my Father's will that all who see his Son and believe in him should have eternal life. I will raise them up at the last day." – John 6:38-40 NLT

The disciples were focused on the physical, while Jesus had His eyes set on accomplishing the spiritual and eternal will of His Heavenly Father. And, interestingly enough, just before Jesus made that statement to His disciples, He had told them:

"I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry again. Whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. But you haven't believed in me even though you have seen me. However, those the Father has given me will come to me, and I will never reject them." – John 6:35-37 NLT

Hunger and thirst. Jesus had come to meet a need the disciples didn't yet know they had. They were more concerned about a physical meal and the coming of the Messiah's physical kingdom. But Jesus was on a mission from God to satisfy man's spiritual hunger and provide a means by which sinners could gain access to the kingdom of God.

This entire exchange between Jesus and His disciples was meant to refocus their attention. They were obsessed with physical and temporal matters. Their attention was focused on their own needs and their own self-centered understanding of the kingdom. Here they were, standing in the middle of Samaria, surrounded by people they believed to be unclean and unworthy of God's attention. And yet, Jesus said to them:

"You know the saying, 'Four months between planting and harvest.' But I say, wake up and look around. The fields are already ripe for harvest. The harvesters are paid good wages, and the fruit they harvest is people brought to eternal life. What joy awaits both the planter and the harvester alike!" – John 4:35-36 NLT

It seems likely that, as Jesus spoke these words, the Samaritan woman and the townspeople had come into sight. And His mention of eternal life in conjunction with a crowd of Samaritans would have shocked His disciples. But He wants them to wake up and understand the unique nature of the moment. They were standing in the presence of the Messiah, the Son of God, who had come to do the will of His Father. And the need He had come to meet was spiritual in nature, not physical. Even the physical differences between the Jews and the Samaritans were insignificant in light of God's plan to bring redemption to all mankind through His Son's death and resurrection.

And Jesus wants His reluctant disciples to understand that they are going to play a significant part in the coming harvest of souls.

“You know the saying, ‘One plants and another harvests.’ And it’s true. I sent you to harvest where you didn’t plant; others had already done the work, and now you will get to gather the harvest.” – John 4:37-38 NLT

Jesus had come sowing the good news of salvation that He had come to offer. He would plant the seeds, but the disciples would reap the harvest. But they would have to be willing to reap wherever the seeds had been sown – even if that meant returning to the “fields” of Samaria.

This was a head-scratching, paradigm-shifting scene for the disciples. And while John does not give us their response to Jesus’ words, it doesn’t take much imagination to think of them staring at one another in equal parts confusion and consternation. Everything about this scenario was distasteful to them. They were in a place they didn’t want to be. They were soon to be surrounded by Samaritans whom they considered unclean and unworthy of God’s mercy and grace. And yet, their Rabbi and teacher was inferring that these very same people would be included in the kingdom of God.

Whether they realized it or not, the disciples were slowly discovering that God’s will stood in stark contrast to their own. His plans for the world looked nothing like what they were expecting or hoping. And this would be just the first in a series of eye-opening, expectation-shattering lessons they would receive from the lips of Jesus.

The Savior of the World

³⁹ Many Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me all that I ever did." ⁴⁰ So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them, and he stayed there two days. ⁴¹ And many more believed because of his word. ⁴² They said to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is indeed the Savior of the world."

⁴³ After the two days he departed for Galilee. ⁴⁴ (For Jesus himself had testified that a prophet has no honor in his own hometown.) ⁴⁵ So when he came to Galilee, the Galileans welcomed him, having seen all that he had done in Jerusalem at the feast. For they too had gone to the feast. – John 4:39-45 ESV

Like the Samaritan woman, Nicodemus, a prominent Jewish religious leader, had enjoyed a personal, one-on-one encounter with Jesus. He had heard with his own ears how Jesus described the requirement for entrance into the kingdom of God:

"...unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." – John 3:3 ESV

Jesus had gone on to explain the need for spiritual new birth – a birth from above – made possible by God and accessible only through belief in His Son.

"...whoever believes in him may have eternal life." – John 3:15 ESV

But Nicodemus had simply walked away from that late-night discussion with Jesus. There was no indication by John that this prominent member of the Pharisees had accepted what Jesus had said and believed in Him for eternal life. But John had opened his gospel with the sad, but accurate news that Jesus would find few among His own people who would receive Him as their Messiah and Savior.

He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. – John 1:11-13 ESV

Yet in the case of the Samaritan woman (who was considered a non-Jew), she had literally run away from her encounter with Jesus, leaving her water jar behind, and making her way into her village so that she could tell them about her experience.

"Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?" – John 4:29
ESV

And John indicates that many of her fellow villagers "believed in him because of the woman's testimony" (John 4:39 ESV). When they had heard her story of how Jesus had somehow known

all about her five former husbands and had exposed the truth behind her current adulterous relationship, they had believed. Their belief was based on her words and nothing else. It was on the basis of the woman's personal testimony that they made their way to the well to see Jesus for themselves. Their curiosity was piqued, and they wanted to see if Jesus just might be the Christ, the Messiah.

As Samaritans, they worshiped the same God as the Jews and shared a common belief with them concerning the Messiah. So, when their neighbor had come to them with her story about an encounter with a strange Jewish man who had revealed hidden secrets concerning her life, they had wanted to know more. According to John, they were so intrigued by Jesus that they convinced Him to remain with them for two more days. And the result was that "many more believed **because of his word**" (John 4:41 ESV).

John makes it clear that the nature of their belief had changed. They had gone from believing what the woman had said *about* Jesus to believing *in* Jesus.

They said to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is indeed the Savior of the world." – John 4:42 ESV

Her story had led them to believe that Jesus just might be the Christ. But, now that they had heard Him for themselves, they were convinced that He was the Savior of the world. This designation concerning Jesus is unique to the writings of John. It appears here and in one other place: 1 John 4:13-14.

*By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be **the Savior of the world**.*

It coincides with the message the angel gave to Joseph concerning his betrothed's unexpected pregnancy.

*"do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. For the child within her was conceived by the Holy Spirit. And she will have a son, and you are to name him Jesus, **for he will save his people from their sins**." – Matthew 1:20-21 NLT*

In Greek, the word "save" is *sōzō* and it means "to save, keep safe and sound, to rescue from danger or destruction." It is the root word from which the designation "Savior" is derived. This was a common term among the Greeks and Romans and used to refer not only to their deities but to men of great distinction.

But the Samaritans were using this term to describe Jesus as their long-awaited Messiah. Like the Jews, they believed He would come to redeem God's people from their oppression at the hands of foreign powers. The Samaritans, as half-Jews, were just as anxious to see the arrival of

the Messiah because they believed He would restore order to the entire world by establishing His kingdom and righting all wrongs.

It's interesting that these verses contain no mention of the disciples. But it seems obvious that they would have remained with Jesus throughout His two-day stay among the Samaritans. And it seems equally clear that they would have been appalled at the idea of spending an additional 48 hours among a people whom they believed to be unclean and unacceptable to God. Yet, here was their Rabbi and teacher spending extended time with these unworthy "dogs" and sharing with them His message of new birth from above and the promise of eternal life.

John would have been one of the ones who stood by in amazement as he watched Jesus interact with the Samaritans. And his emphasis on their "belief" in Jesus is intended to drive home the words that Jesus spoke to Nicodemus: "so the Son of Man must be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him will have eternal life" (John 3:14-15 NLT).

Jesus had made it perfectly clear to Nicodemus that the Son of God had come to offer salvation to "the world," not just the Jews.

*"For this is how God loved **the world**: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. God sent his Son into **the world** not to judge **the world**, but to save **the world** through him."* – John 3:16-17 NLT

And the Samaritan woman and her neighbors were evidence that the Son was no respecter of persons. His message of salvation, while offered to the Jews, was not reserved for them alone. He had come to provide salvation to all who would believe in Him, regardless of their country of origin, economic status, religious affiliation, or educational background.

It was the prophet Isaiah who wrote concerning the coming Messiah:

*God, the Lord, created the heavens and stretched them out.
He created the earth and everything in it.
He gives breath to everyone,
life to everyone who walks the earth.
And it is he who says,
"I, the Lord, have called you to demonstrate my righteousness.
I will take you by the hand and guard you,
and I will give you to my people, Israel,
as a symbol of my covenant with them.
And you will be a light to guide the nations.
You will open the eyes of the blind.
You will free the captives from prison,
releasing those who sit in dark dungeons."* – Isaiah 42:5-7 NLT

Jesus had come to fulfill the words of that prophecy and the Samaritans were living proof that He was a light to guide to the nations, opening the eyes of the spiritually blind, setting free those held captive by sin, and bringing release to all those sitting on death row, condemned to suffer the consequences of their rebellion against God. Jesus was the Savior of the world. And while not everyone living in the world would accept His offer of salvation, He made it available to all, and “to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God” (John 1:12 ESV).

The Man Believed the Word

⁴⁶ So he came again to Cana in Galilee, where he had made the water wine. And at Capernaum there was an official whose son was ill. ⁴⁷ When this man heard that Jesus had come from Judea to Galilee, he went to him and asked him to come down and heal his son, for he was at the point of death. ⁴⁸ So Jesus said to him, "Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe." ⁴⁹ The official said to him, "Sir, come down before my child dies." ⁵⁰ Jesus said to him, "Go; your son will live." The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and went on his way. ⁵¹ As he was going down, his servants met him and told him that his son was recovering. ⁵² So he asked them the hour when he began to get better, and they said to him, "Yesterday at the seventh hour the fever left him." ⁵³ The father knew that was the hour when Jesus had said to him, "Your son will live." And he himself believed, and all his household. ⁵⁴ This was now the second sign that Jesus did when he had come from Judea to Galilee. – John 4:46-54 ESV

After their two-day, unplanned stopover in Samaria, Jesus and His disciples left for the northern region of Galilee. He did so, in spite of the popular proverb He had quoted to His disciples: "a prophet has no honor in his own hometown" (John 4:44 ESV). Jesus was returning to Galilee, but He made His way to Cana, rather than His own hometown of Nazareth. He returned to the scene of His first miracle, where He had turned the water into wine.

In verse 45, John indicates that Jesus received a warm welcome in Galilee because many of the people had been eyewitnesses to the signs He had performed in Jerusalem during the Feast of Passover. With this reference to Jesus' signs, John provides a link back to the miracle performed at the wedding feast in Cana. While the guests at the feast had no idea that Jesus had transformed ordinary water into wine, His disciples were fully aware of what had transpired.

This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory. And his disciples believed in him. – John 2:11 ESV

And when Jesus had gone on to perform additional signs in Jerusalem during the Passover festival, John records, "many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing" (John 2:23 ESV).

The basis for their belief was the nature of the miraculous signs Jesus performed. And John makes it clear that the warm reception Jesus received in Galilee was due to "all that he had done in Jerusalem" (John 4:45 ESV). They too were attracted to and enamored by the miracles of Jesus. And His reputation as a miracle worker was spreading rapidly throughout all Israel. Which sets up the next encounter Jesus will experience.

While in Cana, Jesus received a visit from an unnamed government official who came seeking healing for his deathly-ill son. While we know little about this man, it is likely that he was a Jew who was in the employment of Herod Antipas, the unofficial "king" of the Jews, appointed by the Romans. This distraught father had made the 13-mile journey from Capernaum to Cana in the hopes that he could convince Jesus to return with him and heal his son.

But this man's impassioned plea for help was met with what a somewhat caustic response from Jesus.

"Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe." – John 4:48 ESV

While it is unclear in our English translation, Jesus used the plural pronoun "you," indicating that His comment was aimed at the Jewish people. Their belief in Him was fickle and focused solely on His ability to entertain them with His supernatural miracles. They loved the idea of a miracle-working Messiah. But Jesus had made it clear to Nicodemus that the key to eternal life was to believe in Him, not just the miracles He performed.

"Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God." – John 3:18 ESV

They were believing in the miracle-performing reputation of Jesus, but not in the name of Jesus. It was not enough that He came declaring Himself to be the Son of God. They needed proof. They demanded signs. And the apostle Paul would later condemn his own people for their stubborn refusal to acknowledge the greatest sign ever given that proved the deity of Jesus.

Since God in his wisdom saw to it that the world would never know him through human wisdom, he has used our foolish preaching to save those who believe. It is foolish to the Jews, who ask for signs from heaven. And it is foolish to the Greeks, who seek human wisdom. So when we preach that Christ was crucified, the Jews are offended and the Gentiles say it's all nonsense. – 1 Corinthians 1:21-23 NLT

Undeterred by the seeming slight from Jesus, the desperate father begged Jesus to come to Capernaum and heal his son before it was too late. He was running out of time. His son was at death's door and they still had a 13-mile journey ahead of them. If only he could get Jesus to agree to accompany him back to Capernaum, there might still be a chance that his son could live.

And Jesus answered the man's impassioned plea with the simple response, "Go; your son will live" (John 4:50 ESV). On that matter-of-fact statement from the lips of Jesus, the official "believed what Jesus said and started home" (John 4:50 NLT). He didn't argue. He didn't continue to plead with Jesus to come with him. He simply turned and began the 13-mile return trip home – believing the words of Jesus. No sign. No miracle. No proof.

The belief this man exhibited was of a different sort than those in Cana who believed because of the signs Jesus had performed in Jerusalem. It stood in stark contrast to the belief of Jesus' disciples which had been based on His ability to turn water into wine. This man had believed *the words* of Jesus. And this distinction is significant. It brings to mind the testimony of God Himself, spoken at the baptism of Jesus.

*“This is my Son, my Chosen One; **listen to him!**” – Luke 9:35 ESV*

The Jews were enamored by the *works* of Jesus but they refused to listen to His *words*. As long as He kept performing miracles, they kept believing, but that belief was misplaced. They were so busy seeking a sign, that they missed the Savior.

Later on, in his gospel, John records the words of Jesus declaring the divine origin of His message.

“For I have not spoken on my own authority, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment—what to say and what to speak.” – John 12:49 ESV

And this was not the first time Jesus had claimed His words to be divinely inspired and spoken on behalf of His heavenly Father.

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

The people should have been listening to the *words* of Jesus, but they were too busy focusing their attention on the *works* of Jesus. And with their obsession over His miracles, they were missing the meat of His message.

“Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority, but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, or else believe on account of the works themselves.” – John 14:10-11 ESV

In a sense, Jesus was stating that there were two sources of belief: His miracles or His message. But the truest form of belief was to receive the words of Jesus as the words of God because He spoke as God. And Jesus went on to assure His disciples that they too would go on to perform miracles and signs.

*“Truly, truly, I say to you, **whoever believes in me** will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father. Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it.” – John 14:12-13 ESV*

Their ability to perform miracles would be based on their belief in Him and who He claimed to be. He was the Son of God and had the full authority of God to share His power with those who placed their faith in Him.

John's entire gospel is focused on the divinity of Jesus. He is declaring the divine Sonship of Jesus and providing indisputable proof that this Rabbi from Nazareth was indeed who He claimed to be: The Son of God and the Savior of the world.

And as further evidence of Jesus' deity, John describes the scene that took place when the father ran into his servants on his way home. They met him alone the way with the good news that "his son was alive and well" (John 4:51 NLT). And when the father asked at what time his son had begun to improve, he was told, "Yesterday afternoon at one o'clock his fever suddenly disappeared!" (John 4:52 NLT). And John closes his account with the following words:

Then the father realized that that was the very time Jesus had told him, "Your son will live." And he and his entire household believed in Jesus. — John 4:53 NLT

When Jesus had said, "Your son will live," the man had taken Him at His word and headed home. Now, he received confirmation that His faith had been rewarded. His son was well. Jesus had spoken, the man had believed, and his son had been healed. But notice how John ends this story with the words, "he and his entire household believed in Jesus."

Their belief was not in the miracle but in the one who had spoken the miracle into existence. They believed *in Jesus*. Their faith was not focused on the healing of their family member. It was directed at the one who spoke with the authority of God.

Lord of the Sabbath

¹ *After this there was a feast of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.*

² *Now there is in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate a pool, in Aramaic called Bethesda, which has five roofed colonnades. ³ In these lay a multitude of invalids—blind, lame, and paralyzed. ⁵ One man was there who had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. ⁶ When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had already been there a long time, he said to him, “Do you want to be healed?” ⁷ The sick man answered him, “Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up, and while I am going another steps down before me.” ⁸ Jesus said to him, “Get up, take up your bed, and walk.” ⁹ And at once the man was healed, and he took up his bed and walked.*

Now that day was the Sabbath. ¹⁰ So the Jews said to the man who had been healed, “It is the Sabbath, and it is not lawful for you to take up your bed.” ¹¹ But he answered them, “The man who healed me, that man said to me, ‘Take up your bed, and walk.’” ¹² They asked him, “Who is the man who said to you, ‘Take up your bed and walk’?” – John 5:1-12 ESV

With the opening of chapter 5, John begins to explore the growing tension between Jesus and the religious authorities. While the meeting between Jesus and Nicodemus, a Pharisees himself, had been somewhat controversial, it had remained cordial. But with Jesus' return to Jerusalem, the anger and resentment of the Pharisees and Sadducees will become increasingly more evident and intense.

John will not abandon the theme of belief that has characterized the first four chapters, but he will now juxtapose it with the growing unbelief of the religious elite of Israel. In a sense, John will use the Pharisees and Sadducees as a counterpoint to Jesus. These men were to have been the shepherds of Israel, leading the people to the truth of God's Word and exemplifying a life of obedience. But as John will point out, their legalistic, rule-keeping mindset and arrogant self-righteousness stand in stark contrast to Jesus' commitment to put the will of God above all else.

“For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.” – John 6:38-40 ESV

Jesus was on a mission and He would not allow anything or anyone to hinder Him fulfilling the role assigned to Him by His Heavenly Father. He had divine authority to do the things He did. As the Son of God, Jesus did not need the permission of the legal or religious authorities because He was acting on behalf of God Almighty. The will of God superseded that of all other human authorities and allowed Jesus to perform signs and wonders that appeared to contradict the laws of nature and violate the rules of men.

After His brief excursion into the northern region of Galilee, Jesus made a second trip to Jerusalem in order to attend yet another Jewish festival. There were three annual feasts that all Jewish males were required to attend: Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles. In recounting this particular story, John leaves the name of the festival out, evidently deeming it as irrelevant to the point he was trying to make.

But John was quite specific when describing the location for this event. The context was critical to understanding what is going on in the story. Jesus arrived at the Pool of Bethesda, just outside the walls of the temple compound. This was a well-known and well-trafficked spot in Jerusalem because the waters of the spring-fed pool were believed to have healing qualities. The setting is key to understanding what is about to take place. As John stated in verse 3, the pool was a magnet for the “blind, lame, and paralyzed.” They all made their way to the pool each day in the hopes that the miraculous powers of the water might make them whole.

While John pointed out that “a multitude of invalids” surrounded the pool, he focused his attention on one particular man whose paralytic condition had persisted for 38 years. It is not clear whether this man had been coming to the pool for nearly four decades or if this was his first time to seek help from its healing waters. But John’s emphasis on the length of time is meant to accentuate the hopelessness of the man’s plight. And Jesus, upon seeing the man, was immediately aware of the decades-long nature of his condition, which makes the question He asks sound so unnecessary and out-of-place.

“Do you want to be healed?” – John 5:6 ESV

Of course, he did. What kind of question is that to ask at a time like this? This poor man had somehow made it all the way to the pool, in spite of his paralysis. He would not have been lying beside the waters if he had not wanted to experience healing.

John does not explain why Jesus chose to single out this one man. There were obviously others at the pool that day, and each and every one of them was there hoping for the same thing: Healing. But Jesus chose to speak to this man. And in response to Jesus’ question, the man explained his plight.

“Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up, and while I am going another steps down before me.” – John 4:7 ESV

His problem was not a lack of desire, but it was a lack of opportunity and capacity. His paralysis made it physically impossible for him to pursuit healing. His very condition proved to be a barrier to ever seeing his greatest desire fulfilled. Evidently, the pool’s healing powers were only available when the water was “stirred up.” It was only at that particular moment that a miracle could be expected, but it was reserved for the one who entered the water first. And this man, completely incapacitated by his illness and without anyone to assist him, was left to watch and wait, helplessly and hopelessly.

The description of the man's plight is meant to stir the heart of the reader. But it is also meant to reveal the spiritual condition of each and every human being as they stand in need of healing but without the means by which to avail themselves of it. The healing waters were within this man's reach, but he lacked the power to enter them. In a sense, he couldn't heal himself. He needed help. And this is where Jesus stepped in.

Jesus said to him, "Get up, take up your bed, and walk." And at once the man was healed, and he took up his bed and walked. – John 5:8-9 ESV

With a word, Jesus provided what the man lacked: The power to change. In a split second, this hopeless, helpless, bed-ridden paralytic was transformed into a completely healthy and whole specimen of a man. And no waters were necessary. Jesus spoke and the man walked.

But right when the story should be taking a decidedly upbeat turn, John reveals an underlying tension. He rather abruptly states, "Now that day was the Sabbath" (John 5:9 ESV). Rather than mentioning the celebration that would have followed such a miraculous moment, John simply points out that this had all taken place on the Sabbath. It was a holy day and, as such, it was to have been a day of rest.

This significant detail is meant to point out the seeming problem with what Jesus said to the man and all that followed. Jesus specifically instructed the man to take up his bed and walk. He could have just told him to walk. Why was it necessary for him to gather up his bedroll? Because it was the Sabbath. Jesus knew exactly what day it was and His instructions to the man were given with that knowledge in mind. And His words produced the desired results. Yes, the man was healed, but not only that, the Pharisees were incensed. These religious rule-keepers witnessed the man carrying his bed and immediately confronted him for his blatant violation of the Sabbath law.

"It is the Sabbath, and it is not lawful for you to take up your bed." – John 5:10 ESV

It is not clear whether these men had witnessed the healing, but even if they had, they were more concerned with what they saw as a flagrant disregard for the Mosaic Law.

The man, unaware of who Jesus was, told the religious leaders that he was simply obeying the words of the one who had healed him. But they still demanded to know the identity of this Sabbath lawbreaker.

Jesus had specifically chosen the Sabbath day to perform this miracle. And His instructions to the lame man had been very precise. This entire scene was designed to set up a contrast between Jesus, the Son of God, and the religious leaders of Israel. He was their Messiah, sent from God to deliver the people from their bondage to sin and death. And as the Savior of the world, He had divine authority to accomplish the will of His Father. But for the religious leaders, their sacred rules and regulations were more important than the will of God. In their minds, adherence to the Sabbath blinded them to the presence of their Savior.

Yet, Jesus would later inform the Pharisees, “the Son of Man is Lord, even over the Sabbath!” (Matthew 12:8 NLT). This was all about authority and authenticity. Jesus was the Son of God and the long-awaited Messiah. And His audacious decision to heal on the Sabbath was proof of His deity and His divine authority.

Working on the Sabbath

¹³ Now the man who had been healed did not know who it was, for Jesus had withdrawn, as there was a crowd in the place. ¹⁴ Afterward Jesus found him in the temple and said to him, "See, you are well! Sin no more, that nothing worse may happen to you." ¹⁵ The man went away and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had healed him. ¹⁶ And this was why the Jews were persecuting Jesus, because he was doing these things on the Sabbath. ¹⁷ But Jesus answered them, "My Father is working until now, and I am working."

¹⁸ This was why the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God. – John 5:13-18 ESV

A man, who had been paralyzed for 38 years, suddenly found himself physically whole and able to walk. In a rather bizarre encounter by the Pool of Bethesda, a complete stranger had approached him and asked if he wished to be healed. This rather blunt question had only reminded the man of his complete inability to enter the pool when the waters were stirred. He was an invalid, with no one to assist him in his time of need. But to his complete surprise, the stranger demanded. "Get up, take up your bed, and walk" (John 5:8 ESV). And John records that "at once the man was healed, and he took up his bed and walked" (John 5:8 ESV).

One of the significant facts concerning this story is that the man who was restored to health was totally ignorant of the identity of the one who had healed him. He had no idea who Jesus was, and from John's description of the event, it would appear that the man didn't really care. His only concern was that he had once been lame but now he could walk.

And when the Pharisees confronted him for carrying his bedroll and breaking the prohibition against doing work on the Sabbath, he had blamed the stranger.

But he answered them, "The man who healed me, that man said to me, 'Take up your bed, and walk.'" – John 5:11 ESV

In a sense, the man was excusing his actions by saying, "I was just doing what I was told to do." And when the religious leaders demanded to know the name of the one who had told him to violate the Sabbath, the man pleaded ignorance. Jesus had simply disappeared into the crowd, having never identified Himself to the man.

This entire miracle appears to have been done in secret. No one seems to have witnessed what had taken place. The religious leaders make no reference to the healing. John mentions no reaction from the crowd. And the man who was healed had no idea that he had just met the Messiah.

While the miracle had been significant, John's real emphasis seems to be that it had occurred on the Sabbath. This entire encounter has less to do with belief or faith than it has to do with

Jesus' divine authority. By healing the man's long-term illness, Jesus displayed His authority over the physical world. But by performing this miracle on the Sabbath, Jesus proved His divine authority over even the law. Jesus was not in violation of the law because, as God, He was its author. He knew the true intent behind each commandment found in the law. And while the religious leaders were guilty of turning God's law into a legalistic and restrictive set of regulations based on their own interpretations, the Son of God was fully aware of its original meaning and purpose.

Jesus would later condemn the religious leaders of Israel for demanding strict adherence to the law while neglecting and ignoring the very heart behind the law.

"What sorrow awaits you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees. Hypocrites! For you are careful to tithe even the tiniest income from your herb gardens, but you ignore the more important aspects of the law—justice, mercy, and faith. You should tithe, yes, but do not neglect the more important things." – Matthew 23:23 NLT

The religious leaders had made the law all about earning favor with God through outward expressions of obedience. But, in doing so, they had missed the point. As the apostle Paul later pointed out, the law had been given not just to regulate man's behavior, but to expose his problem with sin.

Why then was the law given? It was added because of transgressions... – Galatians 3:19 BSB

Therefore no one will be justified in His sight by works of the law. For the law merely brings awareness of sin. – Romans 3:20 BSB

This entire encounter between Jesus and the paralyzed man had been intended as a lesson about sin and man's need of a Savior. Remember, when Jesus had first found the man, he had been lying by the pool, paralyzed and totally incapable of bringing about his own healing. His illness had left him incapacitated and unable to follow the rules required to experience the healing qualities found in the waters of the pool. He needed help. And Jesus had appeared on the scene, offering him the help he so desperately needed. But notice that Jesus did not help the man get into the pool. The water would not be the source of the man's healing. It would come from Jesus Himself.

And when Jesus later encountered the man in the temple, Jesus gave him some interesting instructions.

"Look, you have become well. Don't sin any more, lest anything worse happen to you." – John 5:14 NET

Jesus seems to link the man's illness to sin. But this doesn't necessarily mean that Jesus was inferring that the man had been paralyzed as a form of divine punishment for some past sin he

had committed. Jesus' point seems to be that a life of sin has consequences. The very existence of sickness, disease, and suffering in the world is due to the pervasive presence of sin. And by demanding that the man abstain from committing any further sins, Jesus was requiring the impossible. This unredeemed man could no more refrain from sinning than he could have helped himself enter the waters of the Pool of Bethesda. He was in need of a Savior.

While this man had been freed from his physical paralysis, he still remained spiritually paralyzed by the debilitating presence of sin. He could walk, but he still lacked the capacity to walk in newness of life. He remained condemned by sin, even though he had met "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29 ESV).

This man seems to have been completely satisfied with what He had received from Jesus: His physical healing. He shows no interest in who Jesus was or how He had pulled off his healing. Receiving the ability to walk had been his life-long dream. It had been the reason for his presence at the Pool of Bethesda that day. Yet, while he had received his heart's desire, he was still missing what he really needed: Salvation from sin and release from the condemnation of death.

Eventually, the man discovered Jesus' name and reported it to the religious authorities. And John makes it clear that these men had no interest in the miracle Jesus had performed. The man's healing meant nothing to them. They were only concerned with the fact that Jesus had violated the Sabbath prohibition against work. From their legalistic perspective, He was nothing more than a common lawbreaker.

But Jesus answered them, "My Father is working until now, and I am working." – John 5:17 ESV

This rather enigmatic statement from Jesus did nothing to pacify their anger with Him. It only infuriated them further. In their minds, by declaring Himself to be the Son of God, Jesus was claiming to be divine. And that was the unpardonable sin of blasphemy, a crime worthy of death.

Yet, Jesus was simply stating that His actions were in keeping with the will of God. He was only doing what He had been sent to do. To the Pharisees, the Sabbath was all about rest or cessation from work. But for Jesus, even the Sabbath was a day reserved for doing the will and the work of God. There was no rest when it came to accomplishing God's plan of redemption. The original intent of the Sabbath had been to remind the people of Israel of their complete dependence upon God. By taking one day out of seven and ceasing from any form of labor, they would recognize that God was their provider. He would meet all their needs, even when they were restricted from providing any assistance.

But the Jews had turned the day of rest into a day of duty and a form of works. Rather than resting in the providence and provision of God, they put their hope in their ability to "work" at resting. By fastidiously keeping God's command to cease from all labor on the Sabbath, they

were earning their way into His good graces. They were not looking to God to provide for their needs. They were depending upon their own acts of righteousness as demonstrated by their strict, over-the-top adherence to His law.

And sadly, John reveals that the religious leaders failed to recognize that the Lord of Sabbath was standing in their midst. They firmly and angrily rejected Jesus' claim to be on equal standing with God. And their frustration with Jesus turned into a firm resolve to see Him put to death.

The Son Gives Life

¹⁹ So Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise.

²⁰ For the Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing. And greater works than these will he show him, so that you may marvel. ²¹ For as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom he will. ²² For the Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son, ²³ that all may honor the Son, just as they honor the Father. Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him. ²⁴ Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.” – John 5:19-24 ESV

John made it quite clear that the Jewish leaders took a strong exception to Jesus healing on the Sabbath. And when Jesus had deemed His actions as acceptable because He was doing the work of God, His Father, they had become infuriated.

This was why the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God. – John 5:18 ESV

Now, John records Jesus’ bold response to these powerful and potentially dangerous adversaries. Jesus was fully aware of their desire to put Him to death, but He was undeterred in proclaiming His claim of divinity which gave Him full authority to do the things He did. Even when faced with the threat of death, Jesus refuses to back down. In fact, in the short span of 11 verses, Jesus mentions God as His Father eight times, and He refers to Himself as the Son of God 10 times. He ups the ante and heightens the tension by repeatedly declaring His unique relationship with God.

Throughout John’s gospel, he records Jesus explaining His co-equal, yet subordinate relationship with His Heavenly Father. At one point, Jesus declared, “The Father and I are one” (John 10:39 NLT). But, at the same time, He clarified that their unity was marked by a willing submission on His part to the Father’s will.

“My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work.” – John 4:34 ESV

“I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge, and my judgment is just, because I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me.” – John 5:30 ESV

So Jesus said to them, “When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own authority, but speak just as the Father taught me. And he who sent me is with me. He has not left me alone, for I always do the things that are pleasing to him.” – John 8:28-29 ESV

“For I have not spoken on my own authority, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment—what to say and what to speak. And I know that his commandment is eternal life. What I say, therefore, I say as the Father has told me.” – John 12:49-50 ESV

“If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love.” – John 15:10 ESV

Jesus had a role to play. He had been given a divine assignment from the Father and He was in complete agreement with it, willingly accepting His part in God’s redemptive plan for mankind. Jesus declared Himself to be one with God, acting and speaking in perfect union with His Father’s wishes. He was not being forced to do what He did. He was a son and not a slave.

Jesus boldly proclaimed that His miracles were nothing more than earthly expressions of His Heavenly Father’s will. He was simply manifesting on earth the very same things God did from His throne in heaven. God had been performing signs and wonders for centuries. He had been healing the lame and even raising the dead long before His Son took on human flesh. And, according to the apostle Paul, Jesus, in His pre-incarnate state, had been integral in the divine

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. – Colossians 1:15-16 ESV

And Paul went on to explain that Jesus not only took part in the creation of the world, but He became the fullness of God in human flesh so that He might reconcile and restore the sin-damaged world.

For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven... – Colossians 1:19-20 ESV

And because Jesus is doing only what He sees His Father doing, He cannot be in violation of God’s law. Every miracle Jesus performed was in keeping with the wishes of His Heavenly Father. And Jesus let the Jewish leaders know that there were far greater miracles to come.

“And greater works than these will he show him, so that you may marvel.” – John 5:20 ESV

In essence, Jesus was telling them that they hadn’t seen anything yet. A paralyzed man walking would be nothing when compared to the future signs and wonders God had in store. This is likely a reference to the resurrection. Remember, in verse 18, John made reference to the intentions of the religious leaders to kill Jesus. And eventually, they would succeed in accomplishing their goal, convincing the Romans to put Jesus to death for claiming to be the

Son of God. But the death of Jesus would be followed by the greatest and most important miracle of all: The resurrection of the Son by the Father.

And this seems to be the point Jesus is trying to make in verse 21.

“For as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom he will.” – John 5:21 ESV

It will be the death and resurrection of Jesus that makes possible the gift of eternal life. That is the point Jesus made to Nicodemus when He said, “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life” (John 3:14 ESV).

Jesus had been sent by the Father to restore to life the spiritually dead. But in order to do so, Jesus would have to die in their place. And the Father, who “raises the dead and gives them life,” would give His Son new life, declaring that the sacrifice of His life was fully acceptable and a worthy offering for the sins of men.

It is likely that none of this made any sense to the Pharisees and Sadducees in Jesus’ audience. Even His disciples would have found these words difficult to comprehend. And the next statement from the lips of Jesus would have further confused the disciples and infuriated the religious leaders.

“For the Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son, just as they honor the Father. Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him.” – John 5:22-23 ESV

Jesus was claiming to be the judge of all mankind, and this would not have sat well with His opponents. According to their Scriptures, God alone was the judge of the whole earth (Genesis 18:25). What they heard Jesus saying was that He was *their* judge. They would one day answer to Him. And they were right in their assessment of His claim. Every Jew believed in a final judgment day when they would stand before God. They fully expected their works to be judged one day by the Almighty, but it was totally unthinkable and unacceptable to consider that this Jew from Nazareth would be the one to whom they owed their entrance into the Kingdom of Heaven.

But Jesus tries to explain that their judgment has already taken place. They stood before God as condemned because as the apostle Paul declared, “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23 ESV). And to make matters worse, Paul informed the Jews that “by works of the law no human being will be justified in his [God’s] sight” (Romans 3:20 ESV).

Those self-righteous, self-assured Pharisees and Sadducees could not believe their ears. They were convinced that they were deserving of entrance into the eternal kingdom because of their good deeds. They prided themselves in their rule-keeping and zealous adherence to all the

commands, including those ordained by God and the ones they had made up themselves. Yet, Jesus is informing them that they have already been judged and stand justly condemned. But if they will listen to what He has to say and believe His claim to be the Son of God and their Savior from sin, they can pass from death to life. They can have the assurance of their future resurrection from the dead.

“Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.” – John 5:24 ESV

But all of this was more than they could handle. When they looked at Jesus they saw nothing more than a threat to the status quo. He was a thorn in their sides, a deranged individual who had delusions of grandeur and was proving to be a dangerous and divisive distraction. In their minds, He was a lunatic who was in league with the devil and in need of immediate elimination. But the truth is, they were blind to the truth. They loved the darkness rather than the light. And, as a result, they would continue in their quest to put to death the very one who could give them eternal life.

Do Not Marvel at This

²⁵ *“Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. ²⁶ For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself. ²⁷ And he has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man. ²⁸ Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice ²⁹ and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment. – John 5:25-29 ESV*

The Jewish leaders have deemed Jesus as worthy of death. His claim of equality with God has left them no other choice. According to the law, He has blasphemed and the prescribed penalty for that crime was death. But Jesus, fully aware of their plans for Him, has decided to address their concern by further emphasizing His claim to be the Son of God. Even when facing the threat of death, He refuses to deny His identity. In fact, Jesus only escalates the tension between He and His adversaries by establishing Himself as the judge of all mankind.

“For the Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son...” – John 4:22 ESV

To the Pharisees and Sadducees, this bold claim would have sounded not only blasphemous but highly offensive. Who was this uneducated Rabbi from Nazareth to think that He could stand in judgment over them? They represented the religious elite of Israel and considered themselves to be the epitome of righteousness and holiness. Yet, here was Jesus telling them that He, not God, would be their ultimate judge and the determiner of their eternal fate.

“Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.” – John 5:24 ESV

It seems quite apparent that the Pharisees and Sadducees failed to understand the nature of Jesus' claim. And all His talk about future judgment and eternal life would have caused a major rift within their ranks. These two religious sects, while united in their hatred of Jesus, were divided over several key doctrines, and one of them was the idea of the bodily resurrection of the dead. The Sadducees rejected this doctrine along with the concept of any kind of afterlife. They preferred to believe that, upon death, the soul simply perished. But the Pharisees fully embraced the idea of an afterlife that would be preceded by a physical resurrection of the body and include a judgment by God that would be followed by either reward or punishment according to the deeds done in this life.

So, you can imagine how the words of Jesus must have created an uncomfortable tension between these two disparate factions within His audience. For the Sadducees, just the mention of eternal life would have left them shaking their heads in disbelief and disgust. But the Pharisees, while fully on board with the idea of an afterlife and a future judgment, would have been appalled by Jesus' claim that He would be their judge.

And Jesus refuses to let up. He continues to expand on this controversial topic, throwing additional fuel on the fire of their anger.

“Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live.” – John 5:25 ESV=

With this statement, Jesus brings the timeline back into the present. With the minds of the Pharisees and Sadducees firmly fixed on the idea of the resurrection and the future judgment, Jesus adroitly shifts the focus to the here-and-now. He is letting them know that the key to securing a reward in the future judgment is to be found in the present. While the Pharisees were convinced that their acts of righteousness were enough to secure their eternal state in God’s kingdom, Jesus is debunking that myth.

He had come to bring new life to the spiritually dead. All who stood in His presence that day were dead in their trespasses and sins, including the Pharisees and Sadducees (Ephesians 2:5; Colossians 2:13). They were totally incapable of earning their way into God’s good graces because, according to the prophet Isaiah, all their works were no better than filthy rags in the eyes of God (Isaiah 64:6 ESV).

But Jesus is announcing that the spiritually dead can receive new life *in this life*, if they will only “hear the voice of the Son of God.” He promises that all who hear and believe will live. This claim would have been radical and heretical to the Pharisees. That Jesus would dare to hold the key to eternal life was one thing, but for Him to seemingly negate the need for doing works of righteousness to earn that reward was unthinkable and unacceptable.

But as difficult as it was for them to accept Jesus’ claim, He assures them that this was all part of the Father’s plan. God had granted His Son the divine authority to bestow the gift of eternal life.

“For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself.” – John 5:26 ESV

Later on, in his gospel, John records the words of Jesus, when He claims to be the door through which all must go if they want to find access to the Father and enjoy the promise of abundant life.

“I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.” – John 10:9-10 ESV

The key to eternal life is to be found in this life, but only through belief in the giver of life. John opened up his gospel with the bold claim concerning Jesus:

In him was life, and the life was the light of men. – John 1:4 ESV

And John went on to declare that “to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God” (John 1:12 ESV).

According to Jesus, the Father has not only given Him the authority to bestow eternal life but to also execute future judgment.

“And he has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man.” – John 5:27 ESV

Jesus has the right to execute judgment, not just because He is the Son of God, but because He is the Son of Man. Jesus was God incarnate, deity in the form of humanity. The Son of God had humbled Himself by becoming one of us and choosing to dwell among us. And He would live His earthly life in complete obedience to His Heavenly Father, without sin and in full compliance with every command given by God to Moses. And it would be His sinless perfection that made Him the acceptable sacrifice to pay for the sins of men. That is why John the Baptist had referred to Jesus as “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29 ESV).

Jesus would eventually “give his life as a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:28 ESV). He would pour out His blood “as a sacrifice to forgive the sins of many” (Matthew 26:28 NLT). And because He would willingly give His life as payment for the sins of man, He would become the ultimate judge of all mankind. And the future judgment that all mankind must face will be based on belief in Jesus’ death and resurrection. That is the point Jesus had tried to make with Nicodemus.

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.” – John 3:16-18 ESV

The key to eternal life is to believe in Jesus as the giver of life. It is to believe that His sacrificial death satisfied the just demands of a holy God and paid in full the debt owed by the sinner. But that belief must take place in this life. The guarantee of eternal life comes when we place our faith in Jesus in this life. And Jesus assures the confused and consternated religious leaders standing before Him that there will be a resurrection of the dead and a future judgment.

“Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment.” – John 5:28-29 ESV

But the key to earning entrance into the Kingdom of God will be based on belief in the Son of God. This final statement from Jesus could easily leave the impression that He is tying eternal life to good works. After all, He seems to state that eternal life is reserved for “those who have

done good.” But Jesus will later clarify the only “work” that will earn anyone entrance into God’s Kingdom.

“This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.” – John 6:29 ESV

Belief. It’s as simple as that. But for the Pharisees and Sadducees, the content of this message from Jesus was anything but simple and it would prove far from acceptable. And Jesus, aware of their stubborn refusal to believe in who He is and what He is claiming to offer, will go on to expose them for their disbelief and inform them of their future fate.

Proof Positive

³⁰ “I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge, and my judgment is just, because I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me. ³¹ If I alone bear witness about myself, my testimony is not true. ³² There is another who bears witness about me, and I know that the testimony that he bears about me is true. ³³ You sent to John, and he has borne witness to the truth. ³⁴ Not that the testimony that I receive is from man, but I say these things so that you may be saved. ³⁵ He was a burning and shining lamp, and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light. ³⁶ But the testimony that I have is greater than that of John. For the works that the Father has given me to accomplish, the very works that I am doing, bear witness about me that the Father has sent me.” – John 5:30-36 ESV

Despite what the religious leaders believed Jesus was not some independent agent acting on his own behalf. He was the Son of God and had been sent on a divinely-sanctioned mission by His Heavenly Father. All that He said and did was in keeping with and in full submission to the will of the Father. In fact, Jesus has already stated that, “the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing” (John 5:19 ESV).

Now, He repeats that same thought but ties it to His claim to have God-given authority to act as judge over mankind.

“I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge, and my judgment is just, because I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me.” (John 5:30 ESV).

As the Son of God, Jesus was operating under the authority of His Heavenly Father. Though a co-equal with God, Jesus had willingly submitted Himself to do His Father’s will. He had come to earth, taken on human flesh, and was doing and saying only what His Father had instructed Him to do. And part of the responsibility God had given His Son was to judge or discern between those who truly believed in Him and those who were standing in opposition to His ministry and mission. Because of His direct access to the Father, Jesus knew exactly what God knew and was able to pass judgment on the words and actions of others.

It was His relationship with the Father that gave Jesus the authority for all that He said and did. And Jesus made it clear that without His Father’s approval, His claims would be of no value. Anyone could say they had been sent by God, but only Jesus could back up His words with tangible proof.

“If I alone bear witness about myself, my testimony is not true. There is another who bears witness about me, and I know that the testimony that he bears about me is true.”
– John 5:31-32 ESV

The very fact that Jesus could cause a paralyzed man to walk was evidence of God’s power over His life. Every miraculous sign He performed was further proof that He had God’s divine seal of approval over His ministry. It is highly likely that the religious leaders had heard the rumors

concerning Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist. Some of them may have been there to witness what had happened. Matthew records in his gospel that when Jesus had come up out of the water "the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; and behold, a voice from heaven said, 'This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased'" (Matthew 3:16-17 ESV).

It is not clear whether anyone else heard the testimony of God that day, but Jesus did. He knew who He was and what He had been sent to do. And all that He did from that point forward was in keeping with the will of His Father.

Jesus reminds the religious leaders that they had sent a team of priests and Levites to interrogate John the Baptist in order to determine who he was and what he was up to in the wilderness. They had heard the rumors that he might be the long-awaited Messiah. And when these men had confronted John the Baptist and demanded to know who he was, he had been very blunt in his response.

He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ." And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" And he answered, "No." So they said to him, "Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said." – John 1:20-23 ESV

Even John had witnessed to the fact that he was only the forerunner for the one who was to come. His job had been to prepare the way for someone greater and more significant than himself. And he had told his interrogators: "I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know, even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie" (John 1:26-27 ESV).

And Jesus accuses the religious leaders of having been caught up in the fervor and excitement surrounding John the Baptist's ministry. His declaration that the kingdom of God was near at hand had gotten their attention. So much so, that some of them had shown up at the Jordan River to watch John baptize. They were curious and wanted to make sure they were not missing out on something important. But John had seen them in the crowd and called them out.

But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" – Matthew 3:7 ESV

They had heard the testimony of John and seen the crowds of people seeking baptism for the repentance of their sins, but they had still refused to believe. And John had warned these self-righteous men that they would face certain judgment at the hands of the one who was to come.

"I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." – Matthew 3:11-12 ESV

John the Baptist had been painfully clear in his testimony regarding Jesus. He had held nothing back, declaring in no uncertain terms that the Messiah had come and the judgment had begun.

But Jesus admits that John's testimony, while true, was superseded by a greater and more compelling testimony: The evidence of His divinity as revealed by His miracles.

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

But there is more to Jesus' statement than His claim to perform supernatural signs and wonders. There had been others in Israel's history who had been given the divine ability to do miraculous signs, including Moses, Elijah, and Elisha. The miracles Jesus performed were just a portion of the "work" that He did. Every aspect of His earthly life was a witness to His divine calling and commission. His life of perfect obedience gave evidence of who He was. His powerful words, spoken with an authority the people had never heard before (John 7:46), were further proof of His identity.

This entire scene portrays the conflict between Jesus, the Son of God, and the religious leaders of His day. These men were experts in the law and avid students of the Hebrew scriptures. They were knowledgeable and well-informed. If anyone should have understood the identity of the coming Messiah, it should have been them. But here was the Messiah standing right in front of them, but they were blind to the reality of His identity and stubbornly resistant to any evidence that might support His claim to be the anointed one of God.

And Jesus is about to use His God-given authority as the judge of all mankind to condemn them for their willful refusal to accept the overwhelming evidence of His identity. They were without excuse and their fate was sealed. It was just as Jesus had told Nicodemus, another curious but unconvinced member of the Pharisees.

"God sent his Son into the world not to judge the world, but to save the world through him. There is no judgment against anyone who believes in him. But anyone who does not believe in him has already been judged for not believing in God's one and only Son." – John 3:17-18 NLT

How Can You Believe?

³⁷ And the Father who sent me has himself borne witness about me. His voice you have never heard, his form you have never seen, ³⁸ and you do not have his word abiding in you, for you do not believe the one whom he has sent. ³⁹ You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, ⁴⁰ yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life. ⁴¹ I do not receive glory from people. ⁴² But I know that you do not have the love of God within you. ⁴³ I have come in my Father's name, and you do not receive me. If another comes in his own name, you will receive him. ⁴⁴ How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the only God? ⁴⁵ Do not think that I will accuse you to the Father. There is one who accuses you: Moses, on whom you have set your hope. ⁴⁶ For if you believed Moses, you would believe me; for he wrote of me. ⁴⁷ But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words?" – John 5:37-47 ESV

As the Son of God, Jesus had every right to stand in judgment of the Pharisees and Sadducees. Their rejection of Him was baseless because they had been given more than enough evidence to prove His identity. And, one of the primary pieces of evidence was to be found in the Hebrew scriptures, where the prophecies concerning the coming Messiah clearly pointed to Jesus as their fulfillment.

The men whom Jesus addressed were avid students of the Old Testament Scriptures and their familiarity with the many Messianic passages found there should have given them special insight into all that was happening right in front of them. Of all people, they should have recognized that Jesus was the one for whom they had long been waiting. But these men, like every Jew before them, had misread and misinterpreted these prophecies and had created a narrative concerning the Messiah that focused solely on His role as a conquering king and their political savior. They tended to ignore all the passages that pointed to the Messiah's role as the suffering servant.

In his gospel, Luke records the moment when the recently resurrected Jesus appeared to His grieving disciples as they huddled together in a room somewhere in Jerusalem. Upon seeing Jesus, the disciples "stood there in disbelief, filled with joy and wonder" (Luke 24:41 NLT). But then Jesus spoke to them and what He had to say reveals a great deal about the blind ignorance and stubborn resistance of the Jewish religious leaders.

"When I was with you before, I told you that everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and in the Psalms must be fulfilled." Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures. And he said, "Yes, it was written long ago that the Messiah would suffer and die and rise from the dead on the third day. It was also written that this message would be proclaimed in the authority of his name to all the nations, beginning in Jerusalem: 'There is forgiveness of sins for all who repent.' You are witnesses of all these things." – Luke 24:44-48 NLT

The Pharisees and Sadducees had missed all of this. They were not expecting a Messiah who would suffer and die and rise from the dead on the third day. And they had no desire for such a Messiah. And, as far as repentance for the forgiveness of sins, they had no need for that either. They considered themselves to be fully righteous because of their faithful adherence to the Mosaic law so, they had no need to repent and required no one to save them from their sins.

But these men, while familiar with the written word of God, were oblivious to the testimony of God found there. God had spoken through the men who had penned the Old Testament books. He had revealed the truth regarding His Son's coming and yet, these religious leaders had failed to recognize the voice of God. And Jesus issues a stinging condemnation concerning them: "you do not have his message in your hearts, because you do not believe me—the one he sent to you" (John 5:38 NLT).

The Pharisees and Sadducees had a love affair with the Scriptures. They revered them and dedicated their lives to studying them. Jesus even admitted as much.

"You search the Scriptures because you think they give you eternal life. But the Scriptures point to me! Yet you refuse to come to me to receive this life." – John 5:39-40 NLT

They spent countless hours poring over the Scriptures, seeking to know the key to eternal life. They were desperate to know what God required of them so that they might keep God's law and earn their way into His eternal kingdom. Their incessant need to "search" the Scriptures was based on their fear that they might overlook a commandment and fail in their quest for righteousness. It's interesting to note that their obsession with the law caused them to seek the opinion of Jesus. On one occasion, they came to Him, asking, "Teacher, which is the most important commandment in the law of Moses?" (Matthew 22:36 NLT). They had prioritized the commands of God, giving some higher priority than others. This way, they could concentrate their efforts on keeping the more important laws.

And Jesus had responded to their question by saying, "You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment" (Matthew 22:37-38 NLT).

In a sense, Jesus was accusing these men of loving the Scriptures more than they loved God. They were more concerned about discovering the laws they needed to keep in order to be deemed righteous by God than they were in loving and listening to God.

As Jesus continued His indictment of these pious religious leaders, He told them that He had no need of their approval or official sanctioning of His ministry.

"Your approval means nothing to me, because I know you don't have God's love within you." – John 5:41-42 NLT

What a slap in the face this must have been to these prideful men. They considered themselves to be the spiritual elite of Israel, yet Jesus was accusing them of having no love for God. Even worse, He was inferring that God's love was not within them. In his first epistle, John would later pen the following words of warning:

Do not love this world nor the things it offers you, for when you love the world, you do not have the love of the Father in you. For the world offers only a craving for physical pleasure, a craving for everything we see, and pride in our achievements and possessions. These are not from the Father, but are from this world. And this world is fading away, along with everything that people crave. But anyone who does what pleases God will live forever. – 1 John 2:15-17 NLT

John had learned a great deal from observing Jesus' many encounters with the Pharisees and Sadducees. At one time, he would have revered these men as icons of virtue and examples of spiritual sophistication. But he had discovered the truth that they were nothing more than hypocrites who loved the praise of men more than they loved God. They put more value in their own achievements than they did in the words and works of God.

So, when Jesus appeared claiming to be the Son of God sent to do the will of God, they refused to hear what He had to say.

"For I have come to you in my Father's name, and you have rejected me." – John 5:43 NLT

Because they had no real understanding of who God was, they were incapable of recognizing His Son. Their concept of God was skewed. Their understanding of righteousness was flawed. Their thinking concerning salvation was totally works-based and, therefore, inaccurate. That is why John the Baptist came preaching a message of repentance. He had repeatedly proclaimed, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 3:2 ESV). And the Greek word that is translated "repent" literally means "to change one's mind for better." It carries the idea of a radical change of mindset. John the Baptist was calling the people to rethink everything they believed concerning God, the kingdom, salvation, and righteousness. These were not what they seemed to be. Their understanding of God's redemptive plan was inaccurate and insufficient.

With the arrival of Jesus, the truth of God concerning the salvation of mankind had become visible and knowable. But to believe in Jesus as the Savior of the world, the Jews were going to have to repent or radically change their way of thinking. They were going to have to listen to what Jesus had to say because He was the living Word of God. And even Moses had predicted that this day would come. He had foretold of a future prophet would come in the name of the Lord. And He would have a message for the people of God that came directly from the mouth of God.

"The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your fellow Israelites. You must listen to him." – Deuteronomy 18:15 NLT

“I will raise up a prophet like you from among their fellow Israelites. I will put my words in his mouth, and he will tell the people everything I command him. I will personally deal with anyone who will not listen to the messages the prophet proclaims on my behalf.” – Deuteronomy 18:18-19 NLT

The Pharisees and Sadducees would have been very familiar with the words of Moses. And Jesus infers that they would have placed their hopes in the promises expressed by Moses. But they refused to recognize Jesus as the very fulfillment of those promises.

“But since you don’t believe what he wrote, how will you believe what I say?” – John 5:47 NLT

It all boiled down to belief. They refused to believe the words of the prophets. Which means they failed to believe the testimony of God. And that resulted in their refusal to accept the words and the works of Jesus, the Son of God. They found it impossible to repent of their preconceived notions regarding God, sin, righteousness, and salvation. Their minds were set. Their belief system was firmly in place and nothing was going to change their way of thinking. Not even the Son of God.

Not Enough

¹ After this Jesus went away to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, which is the Sea of Tiberias. ² And a large crowd was following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing on the sick. ³ Jesus went up on the mountain, and there he sat down with his disciples. ⁴ Now the Passover, the feast of the Jews, was at hand. ⁵ Lifting up his eyes, then, and seeing that a large crowd was coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?" ⁶ He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he would do. ⁷ Philip answered him, "Two hundred denarii worth of bread would not be enough for each of them to get a little." ⁸ One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, ⁹ "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish, but what are they for so many?" ¹⁰ Jesus said, "Have the people sit down." Now there was much grass in the place. So the men sat down, about five thousand in number. ¹¹ Jesus then took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated. So also the fish, as much as they wanted. ¹² And when they had eaten their fill, he told his disciples, "Gather up the leftover fragments, that nothing may be lost." ¹³ So they gathered them up and filled twelve baskets with fragments from the five barley loaves left by those who had eaten. ¹⁴ When the people saw the sign that he had done, they said, "This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!"

¹⁵ Perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself. – John 6:1-15 ESV

After recording Jesus' less-than-flattering address to the religious leaders, John picks up the story with Jesus leaving Jerusalem and traveling back to the region of Galilee. As is clear from a reading of the other gospels, John chooses to skip a lot of other important events in Jesus' life and picks up his narrative with the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000. It was not that John was unaware of these other details of Jesus' life because he would have been an eyewitness to all of them. It is that he was purposefully piecing together key events that provided further evidence to support his theme of Jesus' deity. For John, the whole point of his gospel was to prove that Jesus was the Word of God made flesh.

...the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. – John 1:14 ESV

Throughout his gospel, John concentrates his attention on those events surrounding the life of Jesus that help support his thesis. He intentionally chooses the stories that he feels best illustrate the point he is trying to make. John is not so much interested in providing a day-by-day account of the life of Jesus as he is in demonstrating and proving the deity of Jesus.

So, he picks up the story with Jesus arriving at "the other side of the Sea of Galilee" (John 6:1 ESV). We know from Luke's gospel that the scene for this miracle was near a town called Bethsaida, located on the northeastern shore of the Sea of Galilee (Luke 9:10). According to Matthew's account, upon hearing the news of John the Baptist's beheading by Herod, Jesus "withdrew from there in a boat to a desolate place by himself" (Matthew 14:13 ESV). But when

He returned to shore, Jesus found a large crowd had gathered to see Him. Mark adds that Jesus viewed the crowd as “sheep without a shepherd” (Mark 6:34 ESV) and His compassion led Him to heal many of those who were sick among them. According to John, Jesus’ actions attracted an even larger crowd, filled with people from the neighboring towns who were anxious to see this miracle worker for themselves.

John describes Jesus gathering His 12 disciples and taking them to the crest of a local hillside. They had just returned from their first official missionary assignment (Mark 6:30-32; Luke 9:10) and Jesus knew they needed rest and a time to debrief from their experience.

The scene is set. John the Baptist is dead. The disciples of Jesus have returned from their assignment, tired and hungry, but anxious to share about all the miracles they had performed (Luke 9:6). A large crowd has gathered, drawn by news of the miracles of Jesus. And John adds the somewhat random note that the Feast of the Passover was just around the corner. That reference will become more important as his story unfolds.

John, in his recollection of the day’s events, describes Jesus as turning to Philip and asking, “Where are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?” (John 6:5 ESV). None of the other gospel accounts include this conversation between Jesus and Philip. It may be that John was the only one of the disciples who overheard this exchange. It is significant because Philip was the only disciple who was from Bethsaida (John 1:44). He would have had firsthand knowledge of the area and known where bread could be purchased. But John indicates that Jesus’ question was really just a test.

Philip and his companions had just returned from the assignment given to them by Jesus, and Luke provides the instructions they had received.

One day Jesus called together his twelve disciples and gave them power and authority to cast out all demons and to heal all diseases. Then he sent them out to tell everyone about the Kingdom of God and to heal the sick. “Take nothing for your journey,” he instructed them. “Don’t take a walking stick, a traveler’s bag, food, money, or even a change of clothes. Wherever you go, stay in the same house until you leave town. And if a town refuses to welcome you, shake its dust from your feet as you leave to show that you have abandoned those people to their fate.”— Luke 9:1-5 ESV

And Luke adds that they had followed Jesus’ instructions, traveling from village to village, “preaching the Good News and healing the sick” (Luke 9:6 ESV). These men had been given “power and authority” by Jesus so that they had been able to cast out demons and heal the sick, just as He did. And when they returned to Jesus, they told Him all that they had done.

Now, Jesus gave His disciples a test. He wanted to see how they were going to handle this particular moment in time. Had their faith been strengthened by their recent experience? Did they believe that the power and authority given to them by Jesus was enough to handle any circumstance they might encounter? Jesus wasn’t interested in knowing whether Philip had a

source for the purchase of bread. He wanted to know if His disciples were convinced that He was the source of all things. He had given them power and authority, and they had seen it in action. But now, when faced with what appeared to be an overwhelming physical problem, would their faith fail them?

Philip's response to Jesus' question provides the answer:

"Two hundred denarii worth of bread would not be enough for each of them to get a little." – John 6:7 ESV

From Philip's perspective, the problem was greater than their capacity to solve it. There were just too many people to feed. And Andrew reveals just how dire the situation really was: "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish, but what are they for so many?" (John 6:9 ESV). The other gospel writers indicate that the disciples concluded that the best solution was to let the people fend for themselves.

"...send the crowds away to go into the villages and buy food for themselves." – Matthew 14:15 ESV

"Send them away to go into the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat." – Mark 6:36 ESVC

"Send the crowd away to go into the surrounding villages and countryside to find lodging and get provisions, for we are here in a desolate place." – Luke 9:12 ESV

They failed the test. Their personal experience wielding the power and authority given to them by Jesus had been real, but its effect had been shortlived. They were unable to look at their current situation and see that the solution was well within their reach. But Jesus knew that nothing was impossible. So, He instructed the disciples to gather the crowd (the sheep without a shepherd) and seat them on the grassy hillside. Then John records that Jesus "took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated. So also the fish, as much as they wanted" (John 6:11 ESV).

Jesus, with the power and authority given to Him by God the Father, fed the sheep. He shepherded the flock of God, miraculously meeting their need in full. This amazing event should bring to mind the 23rd Psalm.

*The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures.
He leads me beside still waters.
He restores my soul.
He leads me in paths of righteousness
for his name's sake.* – Psalm 23:1-3 ESV

John points out that the people “ate their fill.” They were completely satisfied. No one went without and there was no one who failed to have their need fully met. The Shepherd fully satisfied the needs of His flock. In fact, there were 12 baskets of leftovers gathered by the disciples. Each of them held in his hands a basket full of tangible proof that with the Lord as their shepherd, they would never have a single unmet need.

But it is interesting to note that John describes the reaction of the people, but not of the disciples.

“This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!” – John 6:14 ESV

The people were amazed by what they had seen and experienced. But John portrays the disciples as strangely silent. Jesus had just displayed His divine power and authority yet again, yet the disciples had nothing to say. But the people were ready to crown Jesus as their king. And John concludes the story with a telling comment:

Perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself. – John 6:15 ESV

Jesus withdrew. He left the crowds and His disciples behind, choosing instead to seek time alone. And Mark tells us that Jesus “went up on the mountain to pray” (Mark 6:46 ESV). Escaping the craving crowds and His disconcerted disciples, Jesus sought the companionship of His Heavenly Father. The Son of God returned to the source of His power and authority, seeking to hear from the one who knew Him best.

Hardened Hearts

¹⁶ When evening came, his disciples went down to the sea, ¹⁷ got into a boat, and started across the sea to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. ¹⁸ The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing. ¹⁹ When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were frightened. ²⁰ But he said to them, "It is I; do not be afraid." ²¹ Then they were glad to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat was at the land to which they were going. – John 6:16-21 ESV

According to the gospel accounts of Matthew and Mark, after Jesus performed the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000, He told the disciples to travel by boat to the city of Bethsaida, located on the northeastern shore of the Sea of Galilee. He told Him He would join them there after he had dismissed the crowds. But Jesus delayed His departure until that evening because He went needed time alone with His Heavenly Father.

So, once again, the scene is set for yet another display of His divine glory. The disciples had just witnessed the power and authority of Jesus as He miraculously transformed five loaves of bread and two small fish into a feast that fed 5,000 men, plus their wives and children. Everyone ate as much as they liked and yet, the disciples collected 12 baskets full of uneaten leftovers.

This incredible demonstration of Jesus' power brings to mind the words of Paul, written to the church in Ephesus.

Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen. – Ephesians 3:20-21 ESV

God's power is unlimited, and He had displayed that power through the hands of His own Son. Jesus had taken the bread and fish, miraculously multiplying what had been deemed insufficient by the disciples and turning it into abundantly more than anyone in the crowd could have ever imagined. In doing so, Jesus demonstrated the kind of power at His disposal. But His actions were also meant to encourage the disciples and let them know that, as His followers, they would have access to that same divine power.

It seems that the disciples had followed Jesus' instructions and had sailed to Bethsaida. But when Jesus failed to show up, they decided to sail on the Capernaum, assuming that Jesus would meet them there. But Matthew indicates that things did not go well for them. By the time Jesus arrived in Bethsaida, it was somewhere between 3:00 and 6:00 o'clock in the morning, and the disciples were caught in a storm.

...but the boat by this time was a long way from the land, beaten by the waves, for the wind was against them. – Matthew 14:24 ESV

Due to the strong wind, the disciples had only made it about three miles, and they were struggling to make any further headway. There is no indication that they were in fear for their lives. Many of the disciples were seasoned fishermen and they would have been very familiar with these kinds of storms, which were a common occurrence on the Sea of Galilee. But they would have rarely traveled by boat after dark. It seems likely that they were tired, having just recently returned from the mission Jesus had sent them on, and from the long day of feeding the 5,000. They were probably a bit put out with Jesus for having delayed their departure by not showing up when He said He would.

So, in the midst of their difficulties on the lake, they were shocked to see what looked like a ghost, walking on the water towards them. Matthew indicates that “they were terrified, and said, ‘It is a ghost!’” (Matthew 14:26 ESV). And Mark adds that “they all saw him and were terrified” (Mark 6:50 ESV). Whether it was due to the darkness or the wind and the blowing mist, they were unable to recognize Jesus. This boat-full of grown men responded like a group of frightened adolescent girls.

But despite the roar of the wind and the cries of the disciples, Jesus spoke and they were able to hear Him.

“It is I; do not be afraid.” – John 6:20 ESV

Once again, this scene brings to mind the 23rd Psalm. The feeding of the 5,000 was a demonstration of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, caring for His helpless sheep.

*The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures.
He leads me beside still waters.
He restores my soul.
He leads me in paths of righteousness
for his name’s sake. – Psalm 23:1-3 ESV*

Jesus had demonstrated His compassion for the people by meeting their physical need for food. He had restored their physical stamina by feeding their bodies. But He had come to do so much more.

And now, we see His disciples, caught in a storm and struggling to make their way to safety. They were expending great amounts of energy but were making little progress. And there were probably a few of the disciples who wondered if they would make it Capernaum at all. And this is where David’s psalm comes in.

*Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil,
for you are with me;*

*your rod and your staff,
they comfort me. – Psalm 23:4 ESV*

Jesus spoke into the chaos of their situation, and He simply stated, “It is I.” But Jesus was doing so much more than announcing Himself to His disciples. In a sense, He was indicating to His disciples that the entire circumstance in which they found themselves was His doing. It was all part of His plan for further demonstrating to them His divine power and authority. In spite of what they saw and were experiencing, He was still Jesus, the Son of God, and the Savior of the world.

And Mark indicates that as soon as Jesus spoke to them, He got into the boat, and the wind immediately ceased. His very presence calmed the storm. And then Mark adds, “and they were utterly astounded” (Mark 6:51 ESV).

If you recall, the disciples had displayed no reaction to Jesus’ miraculous feeding of the 5,000. None of the gospels indicate any kind of response on the part of the disciples after having witnessed this incredible demonstration of Jesus’ power and authority. The crowd had reacted with awe and wonder, declaring their belief that Jesus must be the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy spoken by Moses (Deuteronomy 18:15 ESV).

“This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!” – John 6:14 ESV

But the disciples appeared to remain strangely silent. And Mark provides some insight into what was going on.

And they were utterly astounded, for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened. – Mark 6:51-52 ESV

These men were completely blown away by what they had just witnessed. They had just witnessed Jesus doing the impossible, by walking on water and defying the laws of nature. But Mark indicates that their astonishment was due to the fact that they had not understood what Jesus had done earlier that day. In His miracle of the loaves and fishes, Jesus had already demonstrated His power over nature. As the Son of God and the co-creator of the universe, Jesus held absolute authority over the entire creative order.

And what is amazing about this entire story is that the disciples had already been eyewitnesses to Jesus’ power over the wind and waves. Mark and Matthew both record an earlier occasion in which Jesus and the disciples were caught in a severe storm on the Sea of Galilee. As the storm raged, Jesus slept. But the disciples, in fear for their lives, had awakened Jesus, demanding that He do something to save them. And He had responded to their fear by rebuking the winds and waves and calming the storm. And the disciples, awed by what they had just witnessed, stated, “What sort of man is this, that even winds and sea obey him?” (Matthew 8:27 ESV).

And yet, here they were on the same sea, facing similar circumstances, and they still could not understand what sort of man Jesus truly was. Mark indicates that their hearts were hardened. They were not yet capable of seeing and understanding the true nature of Jesus' identity. Yes, they had seen Him turn water into wine. They had witnessed Him perform signs and wonders. They had watched Him feed more than 10,000 people with nothing more than five loaves of bread and two small fish. Now, they had just seen Him walk on water. But while they were shocked by all that they had seen their hearts were still hardened by disbelief. They just couldn't bring themselves to see Jesus for who He truly was.

John indicates that they were simply relieved to have Jesus back in the boat with them.

...they were glad to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat was at the land to which they were going. – John 6:21 ESV

With Jesus in the boat, things were back to normal. The wind had died down and they found themselves back in the safe and more familiar surroundings of Capernaum. But little did they know that their lessons were far from over. Jesus was far from done when it came to teaching His disciples about His identity and preparing them for their ultimate role as His apostles. They had much to learn and Jesus was going to continue softening their hearts and enlightening their minds so that they would be ready for the task that lie ahead.

Give Us That Bread!

²² On the next day the crowd that remained on the other side of the sea saw that there had been only one boat there, and that Jesus had not entered the boat with his disciples, but that his disciples had gone away alone. ²³ Other boats from Tiberias came near the place where they had eaten the bread after the Lord had given thanks. ²⁴ So when the crowd saw that Jesus was not there, nor his disciples, they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum, seeking Jesus.

²⁵ When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, “Rabbi, when did you come here?” ²⁶ Jesus answered them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. ²⁷ Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you. For on him God the Father has set his seal.” ²⁸ Then they said to him, “What must we do, to be doing the works of God?” ²⁹ Jesus answered them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.” ³⁰ So they said to him, “Then what sign do you do, that we may see and believe you? What work do you perform?” ³¹ Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’” ³² Jesus then said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. ³³ For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” ³⁴ They said to him, “Sir, give us this bread always.” – John 6:22-34 ESV

After having blown the minds of His disciples by walking on the water of the Sea of Galilee in the middle of a storm, Jesus returned with His astonished followers to Capernaum. What happened next is only recorded by John. Matthew and Mark both describe Jesus as traveling to a place called Gennesaret where He performed additional miracles. But only John provides the details concerning Jesus’ discourse on the bread of life. As has been stated before, John is less interested in providing an accurate moment-by-moment timeline than he is in linking together those key events in the life of Jesus that demonstrate His deity.

As we will see, John’s inclusion of this particular event provides a unifying link for all that John as described in the last five chapters. In chapter two, John recounted the story of Jesus turning ordinary water into extraordinary wine. He went on to describe Jesus cleansing the temple and referring to His own body as the temple that will be destroyed and raised up three days later. In chapter three, John provided a first-hand account of Jesus’ late-night conversation with the Pharisee, Nicodemus. The theme was the need for belief in the one “who descended from heaven, the Son of Man” (John 3:13, but who would also “be lifted up be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life” (John 3:14-15 ESV).

In that same chapter, John provided the testimony of John the Baptist concerning Jesus. He too described Jesus as “He who comes from heaven” and “is above all” (John 3:31 ESV). John the Baptist assured his disciples that Jesus was the one whom God and who “utters the words of God” (John 3:34 ESV).

In chapter four, John told the story of Jesus meeting the Samaritan woman at the well of Jacob. In that story, Jesus offered to give His unlikely conversation partner the gift of “living water,” assuring her that “whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again” (John 4:14 ESV). He went on to describe this water as the source of eternal life.

“The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life...” – John 4:14 ESV

John went on to record the exchange between Jesus and His disciples when they returned to the well with food and were surprised to see their teacher talking to a Samaritan woman. When she offered Jesus food, He responded, “I have food to eat that you do not know about” (John 4:32 ESV). And Jesus went on to clarify what He had said. “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work” (John 4:34 ESV).

In chapter five, Jesus continued to assert that He was working in conjunction with and under the full authority of His Heavenly Father.

“My Father is working until now, and I am working.” – John 5:17 ESV

Everything Jesus did was a demonstration of His divine mandate as the Son of God. But He wasn’t just a man sent by God, He was God in human flesh, and He shared the same power and authority over life and death as His Heavenly Father.

“For as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom he will.” – John 5:21 ESV

And Jesus boldly proclaimed to the religious leaders, “Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life” (John 5:24 ESV).

Of course, chapter six contains the story of Jesus feeding the multitude with nothing more than five loaves and two fish. And it had all begun with an innocent but revealing question from Philip: “Where are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?” (John 6:5 ESV). Like the other disciples, Philip saw a physical need that was beyond their capacity to meet. But Jesus saw an opportunity to demonstrate His power over the physical realm so that they might believe in His authority to offer spiritual sustenance to all those in need.

Which brings us to today’s passage. Jesus had returned to Capernaum, but before long, He found Himself surrounded by a crowd of people who have traveled all the way from Bethsaida just to find Him. These were the very same people who had benefited from His miracle the day before by having eaten their fill of the loaves and fishes He had multiplied in their sight. Now, they had come seeking to find the one who had met their needs so dramatically and completely.

But Jesus saw through their motives and accused them of having purely selfish and physical motives.

“Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves.” – John 6:26 ESV

They saw Jesus as little more than an unlimited source of food. They had traveled all the way from Bethsaida to Capernaum in hopes of finding Jesus and receiving a second free meal. But Jesus revealed that they had expended a lot of effort in search of the wrong thing.

“Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you.” – John 6:27 ESV

They were driven by temporal desires that were purely physical in nature. They were hoping to get a free meal but failed to understand that Jesus had come to provide freedom from sin. When Jesus had offered the Samaritan woman a source of water that would allow her to never thirst again, she had responded, “Sir, give me this water, so that I will not be thirsty or have to come here to draw water” (John 4:15 ESV). Like the crowd from Bethsaida, she had missed the point. Her mind was fixed on the physical world.

When Jesus told His eager audience, “Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life,” they misunderstood His meaning. He was speaking in spiritual terms, but their growling stomachs made it impossible for them focus. They wanted to know what they needed to do to get their hands on bread that never would never get stale or grow moldy.

“What must we do, to be doing the works of God?” – John 6:28 ESV

All they wanted to know was what they needed to do to get their needs met. What was God going to require of them? What rules or regulations would they have to keep in order to get what they wanted from Him? And Jesus took advantage of their eager desire to do something by outlining the only “work” God required of them.

“This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.” – John 6:29 ESV

And this is where John provides a less-than-flattering glimpse into their hearts. Jesus has told them that they must believe in Him. So, they demand that He provide Him with a sign worthy of their belief. And, just in case Jesus might not have something in mind, they give Him a suggestion.

“Show us a miraculous sign if you want us to believe in you. What can you do? After all, our ancestors ate manna while they journeyed through the wilderness! The Scriptures say, ‘Moses gave them bread from heaven to eat.’” – John 6:3-31 NLT

They had already seen Jesus perform a sign worthy of their belief. In fact, after Jesus had fed them the day before, they had exclaimed, “This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!” (John 6:14 ESV). But now, they were demanding more of the same. And they weren’t interested in a miracle to encourage their belief. They were looking for a miracle to fill their stomachs. Moses had provided the Israelites an endless supply of manna, so couldn’t Jesus do the same?

These people had seen Jesus feed more than 10,000 people with nothing more than a few loaves of bread and a couple of fishes. So, it should be no problem for Him to conjure up a daily supply of endless bread to meet their physical needs. And, should He be willing to do so, that will guarantee their belief in Him.

But Jesus pointed out the flaw in their thinking. First of all, Moses had not been the one to provide the Israelites with manna. It had been God. And now, God was offering them a completely different kind of bread that would result in eternal life.

“I tell you the truth, Moses didn’t give you bread from heaven. My Father did. And now he offers you the true bread from heaven.” – John 6:32 NLT

The manna, while divinely provided, was temporary in nature. It was meant to meet the needs of that day. They were forbidden to hoard it or to store it. If they did, it would rot (Exodus 16:19-20). And each day, when their hunger returned, they were required to gather more to meet their need. But Jesus reveals that He came to offer them something far more satisfying than earthly bread to meet physical needs.

“The true bread of God is the one who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” – John 6:33 NLT

These very same people had eaten their fill the day before. They had been fed by the hand of the Son of God, but the food they received was temporary in nature. It could only satisfy for the moment. When they woke the next morning, their hunger had returned. Their previously filled stomachs were once again empty. And they had gone in search of more. And when Jesus offered them true bread from heaven, they had quickly begged, “Sir...give us that bread every day” (John 6:34 NLT).

Believe on Me

³⁵ Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst. ³⁶ But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe. ³⁷ All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out. ³⁸ For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. ³⁹ And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. ⁴⁰ For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.” – John 6:35-40 ESV

When Jesus told the crowd gathered around Him that His Father could give them the true bread from heaven, their response was enthusiastic and somewhat expected:

“Sir,...give us that bread every day.” – John 6:34 NLT

When the people had asked Jesus to show them a sign so that they might believe in Him, they had something very specific in mind. They wanted to be fed. They were looking for another supernatural meal just like the one they had enjoyed the day before. The thought of Jesus providing them with bread from heaven was exactly what they had in mind, and it conjured up images of their ancestors waking up each morning to a seemingly endless supply of manna.

But Jesus was revealing a source of nourishment that was far far more significant and would feed their souls and not their stomachs. He told them, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry again. Whoever believes in me will never be thirsty” (John 6:35 NLT).

Jesus was echoing the words of the prophet Isaiah, who had declared God’s gracious invitation to His rebellious children, the nation of Israel.

*“Is anyone thirsty?
Come and drink—
even if you have no money!
Come, take your choice of wine or milk—
it’s all free!
Why spend your money on food that does not give you strength?
Why pay for food that does you no good?
Listen to me, and you will eat what is good.
You will enjoy the finest food.” – Isaiah 55:1-12 NLT*

Jesus had offered the woman at the well living water, a never-ending source of sustenance and refreshment.

“...those who drink the water I give will never be thirsty again. It becomes a fresh, bubbling spring within them, giving them eternal life.” – John 4:14 NLT

For this woman, who had to draw water from the well each and every day, His offer sounded too good to be true. Eager to have what He had to offer, she pleaded, “Sir, give me this water, so that I will not be thirsty or have to come here to draw water” (John 4:15 ESV). She greatly desired this miracle water that could slake her thirst, and the crowd couldn’t wait to taste the supernatural bread from heaven. But Jesus was offering them something far more valuable and life-transforming.

Yet, the people remained oblivious to what Jesus was saying. They were seeking a sign, a supernatural display of power from the hands of Jesus that would benefit them personally. But Jesus accused these people of unbelief. They had been in the crowd when He had multiplied the loaves and fishes. They had eaten their fill. But they remained unconvinced because they desired something more. That’s why Jesus flatly told them, “you haven’t believed in me even though you have seen me” (John 6:36 NLT).

It seems quite obvious that the people believed Jesus could perform miracles, or they would not have made the trip from Bethsaida to Capernaum looking for Him. They would not have asked for a sign and given the not-so-subtle hint about manna if they did not believe Jesus could pull it off. Their problem was not a lack of belief, it that they failed to believe *in Him*. They had no problem believing in miracles because they had seen them with their own eyes. It was believing that Jesus was the Son of God sent from heaven that proved difficult for them. This was the very same problem the religious leaders had, and it why Jesus had condemned them for their unbelief.

“...the Father who sent me has testified about me himself. You have never heard his voice or seen him face to face, and you do not have his message in your hearts, because you do not believe me—the one he sent to you.” – John 5:37-38 NLT

Over and over again in his gospel, John has declared that Jesus was sent to earth by His Father in heaven. He was the Son of God and the Savior of the world.

...the Word became human and made his home among us. He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness. And we have seen his glory, the glory of the Father’s one and only Son.
– John 1:14 NLT

*“No one has ever gone to heaven and returned. But **the Son of Man has come down from heaven.**” – John 3:13 NLT*

*“**God sent his Son into the world** not to judge the world, but to save the world through him.” – John 3:17 NLT*

“God’s light came into the world, but people loved the darkness more than the light, for their actions were evil.” – John 3:19 NLT

“He has come from above and is greater than anyone else. We are of the earth, and we speak of earthly things, but he has come from heaven and is greater than anyone else.” – John 3:31 NLT

“For he is sent by God. He speaks God’s words, for God gives him the Spirit without limit.” – John 3:34 NLT

Jesus said to them, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work.” – John 4:34 NLT

“The Father gave me these works to accomplish, and they prove that he sent me. And the Father who sent me has testified about me himself.” – John 5:36-37 NLT

“For I have come to you in my Father’s name, and you have rejected me. Yet...you don’t care about the honor that comes from the one who alone is God.” – John 5:43, 44 NLT

“...you do not believe me—the one he sent to you.” – John 5:38 NLT

Jesus told them, “This is the only work God wants from you: Believe in the one he has sent.” – John 6:29 NLT

“The true bread of God is the one who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” – John 6:33 NLT

But this message had been missed by the people. They were enamored with His miracles but failed to fully accept His claim to be the Son of God. It was the idea of Jesus’ deity that escaped them. They could almost imagine Him to be the Messiah, an ordinary man sent by God, but they were having a difficult time accepting that Jesus was God in human flesh. Yet, Jesus had declared that belief in Him was the key to having their hunger and thirst satisfied.

But the satisfaction Jesus offered was not temporal and physical. It was eternal. That’s why He had told Nicodemus, “...**everyone who believes in him** [God’s one and only Son] will not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16 NLT), and “**anyone who does not believe in him** [God’s one and only Son] has already been judged for not believing in God’s one and only Son” (John 3:18 NLT).

But Jesus revealed that there would be some who believed in Him. And their belief would be the result of the sovereign will of God.

“All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out.” – John 6:37 ESV

Jesus is clearly stating that salvation is the work of God, not men. Yes, men must play their part and willingly express their faith in Jesus, but even the capacity to do so comes from the Father. Jesus states that His Father's will is that there will be those who look on "the Son" and believe. They will have their spiritually blind eyes opened so that they can see Jesus for who He really is, the Son of God, and believe in Him.

"...this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day." – John 6:40 ESV

It is belief in the Son that brings eternal life. Yet, many of the people in the crowd that day suffered from hardened hearts and spiritual blindness. They couldn't see Jesus for who He truly was. Even the disciples of Jesus were having difficulty seeing Him as the Son of God. Even after having watched Him feed the 5,000, they remained unconvinced as to His identity. Mark records, "they still didn't understand the significance of the miracle of the loaves. Their hearts were too hard to take it in" (Mark 6:52 NLT). They had no trouble believing in the miracle because they had watched it happen. But they were not yet able to believe in Jesus as the Son of God.

Man, due to the presence of indwelling sin, is spiritually dead and incapable of doing anything that God would consider righteous. Even belief in the Son of God is impossible apart from the regenerating work of the Spirit of God. Dead men cannot revive themselves. It is only by the grace of God that the spiritually dead can have their eyes opened and their hardened hearts restored so that they can see the Son of God and believe. And Jesus will make this point even more clear a few verses later.

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

God draws. Man believes. Jesus raises up. It is the miracle of salvation. And it is the work of God from beginning to end. Lest any man should boast.

"John 6:37-40 contains Jesus' explanation of the process of personal salvation. These are among the most profound words He ever spoke, and we cannot hope to plumb their depths completely. He explained that salvation involves both divine sovereignty and human responsibility." – Warren Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*

Whoever Believes

⁴¹ So the Jews grumbled about him, because he said, “I am the bread that came down from heaven.” ⁴² They said, “Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How does he now say, ‘I have come down from heaven’?” ⁴³ Jesus answered them, “Do not grumble among yourselves. ⁴⁴ No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day. ⁴⁵ It is written in the Prophets, ‘And they will all be taught by God.’ Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me— ⁴⁶ not that anyone has seen the Father except he who is from God; he has seen the Father. ⁴⁷ Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life. ⁴⁸ I am the bread of life. ⁴⁹ Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. ⁵⁰ This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. ⁵¹ I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.” — John 6:41-51 ESV

Many of the things Jesus did left His audiences amazed and in awe. They were legitimately dumbfounded by His miracles, whether it was making a paralyzed man walk or restoring to health a young girl who had been near death. They had been blown away by His miracle of the loaves and fishes and had sought Him out in the hopes that He might use His supernatural powers to feed them again. But when Jesus spoke, His words tended to have a dramatically different effect. Luke records that when Jesus spoke “the people were amazed at his teaching, for he spoke with authority” (Luke 4:32 NLT). In the very next chapter, John recounts the occasion when the Jewish religious leaders sent guards to arrest Jesus, only to have them return empty-handed and reporting, “No one ever spoke like this man!” (John 7:46 ESV).

Jesus had a way with words, but not everyone understood what He had to say. And nowhere is that point illustrated more clearly than in His discourse concerning the “bread of life” recorded in John 6.

The people found Jesus’ miracles difficult to dispute because they could witness them with their own eyes. The evidence was right in front of them. The formerly blind could see. Those who had been lame could walk. The sick had been made whole. The demon-possessed had been set free and restored to their right minds. But Jesus’ words weren’t always so clear and easy to understand. He seemed to talk in riddles and make claims that were difficult to substantiate. And nothing seemed to confuse His fellow Jews more than His claim to be the Son of God. John records that Jesus’ claim to be “the bread that came down from heaven” (John 6:41 ESV) caused them to “murmur in disagreement” (John 6:41 NLT).

This rather obtuse statement by Jesus left them arguing among themselves, debating the absurdity of His claim. How could He have come down from heaven if He had been born to human parents? After all, they reasoned, “Isn’t this Jesus, the son of Joseph? We know his father and mother. How can he say, ‘I came down from heaven’?” (John 6:42 NLT).

Their confusion is reminiscent of Nicodemus' response to Jesus' statement, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3 ESV). This learned Pharisee had quizzically responded, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" (John 3:4 ESV). The words of Jesus made no sense to Nicodemus. And when Jesus claimed to have come down from heaven, the Jews who heard Him were just as perplexed. It made no sense to them. It contradicted human reason and failed to support their preconceived perceptions about life.

The people had shown up hoping to see Jesus perform another miracle or sign, and they had even used Moses providing manna to the Israelites as an example of what they were expecting. But they failed to recall that even that heaven-sent bread had left the Israelites dissatisfied and disgruntled.

Then the foreign rabble who were traveling with the Israelites began to crave the good things of Egypt. And the people of Israel also began to complain. "Oh, for some meat!" they exclaimed. "We remember the fish we used to eat for free in Egypt. And we had all the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions, and garlic we wanted. But now our appetites are gone. All we ever see is this manna!" – Numbers 11:4-6 NLT

Even the manna sent from heaven had failed to satisfy the people of God. So, why would the Jews of Jesus' day be satisfied with "the bread of God...that gives life to the world" (John 6:33 ESV)?

But Jesus interrupted their debate by declaring, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day" (John 6:44 ESV). As will be made clear, this was not exactly a point of clarification. In fact, it only muddled the waters and left the disbelieving Jews even more confused. But while they were busy arguing over Jesus' place of origin, He was revealing the way men can be assured of their eternal destination. They could argue and debate the merits of Jesus' claim to be divine. They could wrestle with the pros and cons of it all and come to their own conclusions, but all their efforts would be in vain. Unless God drew them, they would never receive Jesus as who He was. The Greek word *helkō* literally means "to drag" or to "to draw by inward power."

There is a sense in which God must facilitate man's acceptance of Jesus because, left to his own devices, man would reject Him. King David stressed that sad reality in his psalm.

*God looks down from heaven
on the entire human race;
he looks to see if anyone is truly wise,
if anyone seeks God.
But no, all have turned away;
all have become corrupt.
No one does good,
not a single one!* – Psalm 53:2-3 NLT

And the apostle Paul would paraphrase the words of David when stressing to the believers in Rome “that all people, whether Jews or Gentiles, are under the power of sin” (Romans 3:10 NLT).

*“No one is righteous—
not even one.
No one is truly wise;
no one is seeking God.
All have turned away;
all have become useless.
No one does good,
not a single one.”* – Romans 3:10-11 NLT

Jesus is simply supporting this idea that sinful men have no capacity to seek God. And even the miracles of Jesus would prove insufficient to convince the unbelieving to accept the truth of His claim of equality with God. Unless God dragged them out of their sin-darkened stupor into the light, they would never recognize Jesus as who He really was: The Son of God and the Savior of the world.

Jesus quotes the Old Testament prophets, declaring that the ability to believe in Him requires instruction by God.

“‘They will all be taught by God.’ Everyone who listens to the Father and learns from him comes to me.” – John 6:45 (NLT)

God will speak to them, revealing to them the true nature of His Son. And when they hear what He has to say, they will come to Jesus willingly and gladly.

When Peter, James, and John witnessed the transfiguration of Jesus, God had spoken from heaven, declaring, “This is my Son, my Chosen One. Listen to him” (Luke 9:35 NLT). God clearly revealed to them the identity of Jesus and then commanded that they listen to what His Son had to say. And one of the first things Jesus had to say to them after this incredible experience was a command to tell no one what they had seen.

As they went back down the mountain, he told them not to tell anyone what they had seen until the Son of Man had risen from the dead. – Mark 9:9 NLT

Jesus was the revelation of God. He came to earth in the form of a human being so that He might make God known. John opened up his gospel with the bold claim: “No one has ever seen God. But the unique One, who is himself God, is near to the Father’s heart. He has revealed God to us” (John 1:18 NLT). And Jesus supported that assertion when He claimed, “Not that anyone has ever seen the Father; only I, who was sent from God, have seen him” (John 6:46 NLT).

Paul declared Jesus to be “the visible image of the invisible God” (Colossians 1:15 NLT). And later on in his gospel, John records Jesus’ exclusive claim that “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father!” (John 14:9 NLT). But there is more required than the mere physical sight of Jesus. There were many who saw Jesus and failed to believe. That is why Jesus clarifies by adding, “Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life” (John 6:47-48 ESV). In other words, eternal life is reserved for those who believe that Jesus is the bread of life, sent down from heaven by God. It is to believe in His deity and His God-given role as man’s sole source of salvation.

Unlike manna that provided temporary relief from the physical need for food, Jesus provides a permanent solution to man’s hunger and thirst for righteousness. He alone can provide man with the one thing he needs to have eternal life.

“This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.” – John 6:50-51 ESV

But even this fantastic truth will fall on deaf ears as the people continue to wrestle with unbelief and an inability to recognize Jesus as the Son of God.

He Will Live Because of Me

⁵² *The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?”* ⁵³ *So Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.* ⁵⁴ *Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.* ⁵⁵ *For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink.* ⁵⁶ *Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him.* ⁵⁷ *As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever feeds on me, he also will live because of me.* ⁵⁸ *This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like the bread the fathers ate, and died. Whoever feeds on this bread will live forever.”* ⁵⁹ *Jesus said these things in the synagogue, as he taught at Capernaum. – John 6:52-59 ESV*

As strange as this whole conversation has been, what makes it even more bizarre is the realization that it all took place in the local synagogue in Capernaum. For some unexplained reason, John chose to withhold this bit of information until now. That Jesus made this important announcement about the bread of life in the synagogue is significant because it was the place where the Jews gathered to listen to God’s Word. As the Son of God and the living Word of God, He was expounding on the written Word of God, conveying new truth regarding His Father’s plan of redemption for mankind.

Yet His choice of location for revealing this information did not make the news any easier to understand or accept. The Jews in His audience were confused and, most likely, a little turned off by the thought of what He was saying. And they made their distaste and disbelief known.

“How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” – John 6:52 ESV

What Jesus was saying was implausible and totally unappealing. Everything about His claim sounded ridiculous and unacceptable to His audience. Notice their emphasis on Jesus’ humanity. They refer to Him as “this man.” They were still wrestling with the fact that Jesus was “the son of Joseph” (John 6:42 ESV). They knew who His parents were and so His claim to have “come down from heaven” made no sense to them. He was nothing more than a man. Even those who had been part of Jesus’ feeding of the 5,000 and had expressed awe at what they had witnessed, had wondered aloud whether Jesus was “the Prophet we have been expecting” (John 6:14 NLT). To them, Jesus was just a man and nothing more. And because He was a mere man, they could not fathom what Jesus meant by eating His flesh.

But rather than providing much-needed clarification, Jesus simply expands on His thoughts and adds to their confusion.

“I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you cannot have eternal life within you. But anyone who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise that person at the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Anyone who eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him.” – John 6:53-56 NLT

It is easy to imagine the looks of consternation on the faces of His audience as Jesus paints this rather unpleasant visual image. What they heard Jesus describing was cannibalism, plain and simple, and the fact that Jesus had added the aspect of drinking His blood made it all the more repulsive. In His law, God had strictly forbidden the consumption of blood.

“And if any native Israelite or foreigner living among you eats or drinks blood in any form, I will turn against that person and cut him off from the community of your people, for the life of the body is in its blood. I have given you the blood on the altar to purify you, making you right with the Lord. It is the blood, given in exchange for a life, that makes purification possible. That is why I have said to the people of Israel, ‘You must never eat or drink blood—neither you nor the foreigners living among you.’” – Leviticus 17:10-12 NLT

Yet, here was Jesus making the audacious claim that eating His flesh and drinking His blood was the key to eternal life. God had warned that the drinking of blood would bring permanent banishment from community, but Jesus was claiming that drinking His blood would result in permanent communion with God. For the Jews in the synagogue that day, it was all contradictory and confusing.

What they failed to understand was that Jesus was speaking about belief. He had told them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life” (John 6:47 ESV). They believed Jesus could do miracles. Some believed He might be the prophet Moses had spoken about. Others were beginning to believe that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah. But none were accepting the fact that He was the Son of God who had come down from heaven. When they looked at Jesus, they saw a man. And the idea that He could also be a co-equal with God was unfathomable and unacceptable.

Yet, Jesus was informing them that it was His deity and humanity that would make salvation possible. He was the bread of life that had come down from heaven. He was God incarnate – God in human flesh. And all the imagery concerning His flesh and blood had to do with His coming death. He was going to lay down His life as payment for the sins of mankind. He would allow His body to be broken and His blood to be shed so that sinful men and women might have receive permanent cleansing and release from their condemnation of death.

Luke provides a description of the night on which Jesus shared a final Passover meal with His disciples. At one point, He repurposed the unleavened bread and the wine served with the meal in order to make a point about His death, which was just hours away.

And he took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” And likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying, “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.” – Luke 22:19-20 ESV

Jesus was letting His disciples know that it was His body that was going to be sacrificed on their behalf. As the Son of God, He had taken on human flesh so that He might become the acceptable sacrifice for the sins of mankind. The author of the book of Hebrews provides further insight into this substitutionary aspect of Jesus' death.

For it is not possible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. That is why, when Christ came into the world, he said to God,

*"You did not want animal sacrifices or sin offerings.
But you have given me a body to offer.
You were not pleased with burnt offerings
or other offerings for sin.
Then I said, 'Look, I have come to do your will, O God—
as is written about me in the Scriptures.'"*

First, Christ said, "You did not want animal sacrifices or sin offerings or burnt offerings or other offerings for sin, nor were you pleased with them" (though they are required by the law of Moses). Then he said, "Look, I have come to do your will." He cancels the first covenant in order to put the second into effect. For God's will was for us to be made holy by the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ, once for all time. – Hebrews 10:4-10 ESV

What Jesus was trying to convey to His audience in the synagogue was the necessity of His deity and humanity. He had to be divine so that He could live in perfect obedience to the will of God. He had to be human so that He could serve as an acceptable sacrifice for the sins of humanity. Animal sacrifices were not enough. The blood of bulls and goats could not offer permanent cleansing from sin. Only Jesus, the God-man, could be an acceptable sacrifice, fully satisfying the just and holy judgment of God against the sinfulness of humanity.

The author of Hebrews adds: "But our High Priest offered himself to God as a single sacrifice for sins, good for all time. Then he sat down in the place of honor at God's right hand" (Hebrews 10:12 NLT). Jesus eventually accomplished His mission. He fulfilled the will of His Father and offered Himself up as the unblemished Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world (John 1:29). He gave His life so that sin-enslaved humanity might be restored to a right relationship with God.

The crowds had come looking for another free meal that might satiate their physical appetites for another day. But Jesus was offering so much more. He was letting them know that He came to offer a permanent solution to their very real problem of sin and death. They all stood before Him condemned and worthy of death. They were guilty of rebellion against a holy God. But Jesus, the Son of God, had come to earth to serve as the sole solution to their pressing sin problem.

But they were going to have to believe in Him. They would have to accept His claim to be the Son of God and the Savior of the world. It was just as Jesus had told Nicodemus.

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.” – John 3:16-18 ESV

Fairweather Followers

⁶⁰ *When many of his disciples heard it, they said, "This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?"*

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

After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him. – John 6:60-66 ESV

The message Jesus delivered in the synagogue regarding "the bread that came down from heaven" (John 6:57 ESV) had made an impression on His audience. His bizarre comments about eating His flesh and drinking His blood had not gone unnoticed. His offer of eternal life definitely piqued their interest. But there appears to be no one who heard Jesus speak who grasped the meaning behind all that He said.

When Jesus had attempted to tell Nicodemus about the need for a new birth "from above" in order to enter the kingdom of heaven, the well-educated Pharisee had responded, "How can these things be?" (John 3:9 ESV). And Jesus answered with a question of His own: "If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?" (John 3:12 ESV).

Nicodemus had been unable to grasp the spiritual nature of Jesus' words. His mind was stuck on an earthly plane, limiting his ability to hear the wonderful news that Jesus was conveying in His message. And he had walked away confused, but not converted.

The same was true for those who heard Jesus speak in the synagogue in Capernaum. John has made it clear that a good portion of the audience "grumbled about him, because he said, 'I am the bread that came down from heaven'" (John 6:41 ESV). They saw Jesus as a man from Nazareth, not some divine being who had descended from the sky. And when they heard Jesus claim that eating His flesh would result in eternal life, they had "disputed among themselves, saying, 'How can this man give us his flesh to eat?'" (John 6:52 ESV).

If one were to judge the effectiveness of Jesus' communication skills based on the peoples' response, the conclusion would have to be that He failed miserably. His sermon appears to have produced no converts. No one asked to receive the bread that He offered. No one came forward eager to drink His blood. Instead, they disputed, grumbled, and struggled to understand what Jesus was talking about. John even indicates that even those who considered themselves followers of Jesus were having a difficult time taking in all that He had said.

These “disciples” as John describes them were made up of those who had traveled all the way from Bethsaida, eager to see Jesus perform another miracle. They had eaten the bread and fish He had multiplied and had shown up in Capernaum hoping to receive more of the same. Others had heard the rumors about His miracles and were anxious to see Him perform a sign with their own eyes. In the gospels, the term “disciple” is used to refer to all those who followed Jesus. It does not necessarily mean that these people were believers. In fact, John will make it clear that many of these disciples or followers of Jesus ended up abandoning Him as a result of His message in the synagogue.

“...many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him.” – John 6:66 ESV

They had been attracted by His miraculous *works* but repulsed by His *words*. They proved to be fairweather followers who chose to walk away from Jesus when they didn’t get what they wanted from Him.

When Jesus overheard the grumbling among His followers, He responded, “Does this offend you? Then what will you think if you see the Son of Man ascend to heaven again?” (John 6:61-62 NLT). Here Jesus reveals the true nature of their contention. It was not so much that He had offered His body and blood as food, but that He had claimed to be the Son of God sent from heaven.

*“This is the work of God, that you believe in **him whom he has sent.**” – John 6:29 ESV*

*“the bread of God is **he who comes down from heaven...**” –John 6:33 ESV*

*“For **I have come down from heaven**, not to do my own will but the will of **him who sent me.**” – John 6:38 ESV*

*“I am the bread **that came down from heaven.**” – John 6:41 ESV*

*“This is **the bread that comes down from heaven**, so that one may eat of it and not die. **I am the living bread that came down from heaven.**” – John 6:50-51 ESV*

Jesus reveals that this was the crux of the matter. They just couldn’t bring themselves to believe that He was divine. They could possibly accept the fact that He was a prophet sent from God or even the Messiah. But in either case, He would have been a mere man, and not God in human flesh.

But as difficult as it was to accept that Jesus had come down from heaven, He prophetically reveals that the day will come when He returns. Once again, Jesus was speaking rather cryptically, using language that left His audience scratching their heads in confusion. But there was a small contingent within the crowd who would one day understand the full import of His words. The men who would later become His apostles and the emissaries of His message would be eyewitnesses to His future ascension.

So then the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God. And they went out and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by accompanying signs. – Mark 16:19-20 ESV

But Jesus' mention of His ascension most likely included a veiled reference to His crucifixion. He had told Nicodemus, "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man **be lifted up**, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life" (John 3:14-15 ESV). John also records Jesus restating this claim and adds an important note of clarification.

"And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." He said this to show by what kind of death he was going to die. – John 12:32-33 ESV

Jesus' return to heaven would be preceded by His sacrificial death. He had come to die so that others might live. His death had been the sole purpose behind His coming. He had been sent from heaven to offer His life as a ransom for many so that they might be restored to a right relationship with God. His body would be broken, and His blood would be poured out for the sins of many. And one day, His true followers would fully comprehend the meaning of His words. Luke records that when His disciples saw Him ascend into heaven, "they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple blessing God" (Luke 24:52-53 ESV).

But that day in the synagogue in Capernaum, there was no one who comprehended the meaning behind Jesus' words. And there were none who rejoiced at what they heard. And Jesus revealed that their inability to understand His words was because they lacked insight from the Spirit of God.

"It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life." – John 6:63 ESV

Not only were they unable to comprehend His words, but they were also incapable of achieving eternal life. Without the Spirit's help, they would remain blind to the reality of what Jesus was saying. It was just as Jesus had told Nicodemus:

"That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit." – John 3:6 ESV

There were some in Jesus' audience who would eventually end up understanding the words of Jesus and believing His claim to be the Son of God. But as Jesus revealed, there were others who would not and could not believe. And John adds further proof of Jesus' deity by stating that He "knew from the beginning who those were who did not believe, and who it was who would betray him" (John 6:64 ESV).

The crowd that followed Jesus was about to grow smaller. And Jesus revealed that following after Him was not the same as coming to Him. Anyone could join the crowds that lined up to

see Him work miracles. But only those called by God and empowered by the Spirit of God could become true disciples of the Son of God. And Jesus reiterated His earlier claim.

“no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father.” – John 6:65 ESV

Many would follow, but not all would believe. Miracles may attract a crowd, but they don't transform a sinner into a saint. Only the Spirit of God can do that. he opens the eyes of those blinded by sin so they can see the truth of Gospel:

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” – John 3:16 ESV

The Holy One of God

⁶⁷ So Jesus said to the twelve, “Do you want to go away as well?” ⁶⁸ Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, ⁶⁹ and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God.” ⁷⁰ Jesus answered them, “Did I not choose you, the twelve? And yet one of you is a devil.” ⁷¹ He spoke of Judas the son of Simon Iscariot, for he, one of the twelve, was going to betray him. – John 6:67-71 ESV

Jesus’ discourse in the synagogue at Capernaum had left His listeners confused, disturbed, and even angry. And John indicates that when Jesus had finished “many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him” (John 6:59 ESV). This comment by John regarding Jesus’ disciples is not a reference to the 12 men Jesus had chosen to follow Him. This was how John differentiated between the people who followed Jesus because of His miracles and “the Jews” who refused to believe that Jesus was anyone special.

The first group believed Jesus had supernatural powers, just as the Old Testament prophets had. Which is why some thought he might be a prophet sent from God. Others strongly considered the possibility that He might be the long-awaited Messiah. But none of them would have believed that He was God in human flesh. Yet, throughout His brief, but impactful, speech in the synagogue, Jesus had repeatedly claimed to have been sent to earth by God, His Father.

“For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me.” – John 6:38 ESV

While Jesus’ invitation to eat His flesh and drink His blood had left the people scratching their heads in confusion, it was His claim to have God as His Father that turned many of them from followers into scoffers.

“As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever feeds on me, he also will live because of me.” – John 6:57 ESV

He was boldly claiming to be divine, having been sent by God, and in possession of the key to eternal life. This was too much for some of His followers to handle. So, they walked away. But none of this surprised Him. Before they made their decision to leave, Jesus informed them that He already knew their state of unbelief.

“But there are some of you who do not believe.” – John 6:64 ESV

And John adds the note: “For Jesus knew from the beginning who those were who did not believe, and who it was who would betray him” (John 6:64 ESV). Jesus knew who His true disciples were. And as John indicates, Jesus even knew that there was one among the 12 disciples who would prove to be a betrayer and not a believer.

Anyone could follow Jesus, but only those who were called by God and empowered by the Spirit of God would see Jesus for who He truly was. That is why Jesus had said, “The Spirit alone gives eternal life. Human effort accomplishes nothing. And the very words I have spoken to you are spirit and life” (John 6:63 ESV). Without the regenerating work of the Spirit, no one could understand and accept the words coming from the lips of Jesus.

Jesus had come to offer Himself as the bread of life, destined to provide spiritual nourishment to those with a hunger for righteousness. He came to pour out His blood so that those who thirsted for righteousness might be satisfied. Many in the crowd that day had come to see a miracle. They had hoped Jesus would provide them with another free meal. Their minds were stuck on material things. Their hopes were focused on worldly matters. If they believed Jesus to be the Messiah, it was only because they were longing that He might set them free from Roman oppression. They were looking for a human savior who would provide them with temporal relief from their physical suffering, whether that meant subjugation to Rome, hunger, disease, illness, or poverty.

But Jesus had come to offer them eternal life. He had made that point perfectly clear.

*“Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to **eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you.**” – John 6:27 ESV*

*“For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and **gives life to the world.**” – John 6:33 ESV*

*“For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him **should have eternal life...**” – John 6:40 ESV*

*“Truly, truly, I say to you, **whoever believes has eternal life.**” – John 6:47 ESV*

*“I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, **he will live forever.**” – John 6:51 ESV*

But the crowds could not understand what Jesus was saying. His offer of eternal life made no sense to them because they refused to believe that He was the Son of God. It was His divinity that made His offer of eternity possible. It was because He was the Son of God that He could make the offer of eternal life because He was the author of life.

He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. – John 1:2-4 ESV

John began his gospel with the presentation of Jesus as the Son of God and the co-creator of the world. As part of the Godhead, Jesus had played an integral role in the creation of all life on earth. So now, Jesus was claiming to be God and in full possession of the divine power to not

only bestow temporal life but eternal life on all those whom God gives Him. In the preceding chapter, Jesus made the bold claim:

“For as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom he will.” – John 6:21 ESV

The Jews believed that God had the power to raise the dead. But *only* God possessed that kind of supernatural power. And yet, here was Jesus claiming to have the very same capacity to bestow life, not just on the physically dead, but on the spiritually dead. And this claim was more than some of His followers could handle, so they walked away.

But as the crowds dispersed, Jesus turned to His 12 disciples and asked them a probing question: “Do you want to go away as well?” (John 6:67 ESV). The structure of the sentence in the Greek reveals that Jesus was not in doubt about their commitment, but that He was seeking their confirmation of that commitment. He wanted to hear from their own lips what He knew to be true in their hearts. And Peter spoke for the group when he said, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God” (John 6:68-69 ESV).

With these words, Peter was acknowledging that he and his fellow disciples believed all that Jesus had said concerning Himself. They had heard what He had said concerning eternal life and believed His words to be true. He was the Holy One of God, having been sent from heaven with the words of eternal life. But there was still much that Peter and his companions did not understand concerning Jesus. In fact, it would be some time before Peter made a second confession regarding Jesus. On that occasion, Jesus asked His disciples who the people considered Him to be, and they had responded, “Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets” (Matthew 16:14 ESV). But when Jesus had asked them “But who do you say that I am?”, Peter had spoken up and said, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:16 ESV).

At that moment, Peter had expressed his belief that Jesus was the Messiah and, not only that, the Son of God. And Jesus revealed that this epiphany on Peter’s part had been made possible by God.

“For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.” – Matthew 16:17 ESV

The truth is, the disciples were on a journey of discovery. Their understanding of who Jesus was would continue to expand with each passing day. But they would tend to view Jesus through their own particular lens of understanding. They couldn’t help but bring their own personal perspectives and longings to bear. While they recognized and believed that Jesus had “words of eternal life,” they were still longing for Him to set up His kingdom in *this* life. They were hanging their hopes on Him being the Messiah and that He would one day reveal Himself to the world

and restore Israel to its former glory. That is what would later prompt James and John to approach Jesus and ask Him to do them a favor.

“When you sit on your glorious throne, we want to sit in places of honor next to you, one on your right and the other on your left.” – Mark 10:37 NLT

They were looking for places of honor in what they believed would be His earthly kingdom. But Jesus warned them that He would have to drink the “bitter cup of suffering” before His kingdom could be established. He would have to die before He could reign. He would need to suffer before He could be glorified. And Jesus foreshadowed their own suffering, which would take place after His ascension and they began their ministry on His behalf.

“You will indeed drink from my bitter cup and be baptized with my baptism of suffering” – Mark 10:39 NLT

There was much that would have to happen before the Kingdom would come in all its glory. And Jesus warned that even among the 12, there was one who did not share Peter’s belief that He was the Holy One of God.

“Did I not choose you, the twelve? And yet one of you is a devil.” He spoke of Judas the son of Simon Iscariot, for he, one of the twelve, was going to betray him. – John 6:70-71 ESV

Little did Peter know that Jesus would have to be betrayed. The Holy One of God would have to be brutally crucified. In order for the Son of God to be the Savior of the world, He would have to allow His body to be broken and His blood to be spilled, so that some may have eternal life.

The Disbelief of Family and Foes

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

¹⁰ But after his brothers had gone up to the feast, then he also went up, not publicly but in private. – John 7:1-10 ESV

In John's gospel, Jerusalem appears to be ground-zero. While he dedicates a good portion of his narrative to events that took place outside of Judea, he repeatedly refocuses the reader's attention back to the capital city. Jerusalem was the home of God's house, the temple that had been reconstructed by Herod. It was where the annual feasts and festivals, prescribed by God to Moses, were celebrated. This celebrated city, while just a shadow of its former glory under the reigns of David and his son, Solomon, was still the epicenter of the Hebrew nation. It was home to the revered and feared Jewish religious council, the Sanhedrin. And it had become the focal point of the conflict between these well-established religious leaders and Jesus, whom they viewed as nothing more than a charlatan and a troublesome threat to their power and authority.

With the opening of chapter seven, John establishes the inherent danger the city of Jerusalem posed for Jesus. This was the very place where, in the early days of His ministry, Jesus had caused an uproar in the temple courtyard.

In the temple he found those who were selling oxen and sheep and pigeons, and the money-changers sitting there. And making a whip of cords, he drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and oxen. And he poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. – John 2:14-15 ESV

This emotional display had won Jesus no friends among the religious elite of Israel. They questioned His authority to do what He had done, and they began to view Him as nothing more than a showboating, attention-grabbing troublemaker from Galilee. This unknown Rabbi from Galilee had been drawing larger and larger crowds with His so-called miracles and ridiculous claims to be the Son of God. To the Pharisees and Sadducees, Jesus was a lunatic and possibly even demon-possessed. And He had clearly committed the sin of blasphemy by claiming equality with God.

This was why the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God. – John 5:18 ESV

As John continues to chronicle the life and ministry of Jesus, he purposely builds the sense of tension between the Messiah of Israel and those who had set themselves up as the religious gatekeepers of the nation. And Jerusalem becomes center stage for what will be the ultimate showdown between Jesus and these men. But as will be revealed, this conflict will prove to be a spiritual battle between Almighty God and Satan, the prince of this world.

As chapter seven opens, John reveals just how dangerous things had become for Jesus. Due to the growing animosity of the Sanhedrin, Jesus had determined to spend most of His time in Galilee, rather than in Judea because He knew they were out to kill Him. Jesus did not fear death, but He was simply sticking to the divine timeline given to Him by His Heavenly Father. It was just as He had told His mother at the wedding in Cana, “My hour has not yet come” (John 2:4 ESV).

John reveals that the “Feast of Booths was at hand” (John 7:2 ESV). This was one of three annual feasts that required the mandatory attendance of all Jewish males.

“Three times a year all your males shall appear before the Lord your God at the place that he will choose: at the Feast of Unleavened Bread, at the Feast of Weeks, and at the Feast of Booths. They shall not appear before the Lord empty-handed.” – Deuteronomy 16:16 ESV

But these festivals became annual pilgrimages for the Jews, drawing large crowds to Jerusalem. The Feast of Booths was to be a commemoration of God’s deliverance of the people of Israel from their captivity in Egypt and a joyous celebration of His provision and protection of them during their 40 years in the wilderness. And when they gathered in Jerusalem, they were not to come “empty-handed,” but they were to bring tithes and offerings to present to God.

The key theme of these opening verses is that of disbelief. It seems quite clear that the Jewish religious leaders did not believe in Jesus. They had even discounted His miracles by describing them as the work of Satan, not God (Matthew 12:24). But John adds another interesting group to the list of the unbelieving: The half-brothers of Jesus. These were men who had grown up in the same household with Jesus. They were intimately familiar with Him. And yet, they were not quite convinced that Jesus was who He claimed to be. In fact, at one point, they described His actions as those of a madman (Mark 3:21). Yet, in this case, they seem to be goading Jesus to use the Feast of Tabernacles as the opportunity to make a name for Himself.

“Leave here and go to Judea, where your followers can see your miracles! You can’t become famous if you hide like this! If you can do such wonderful things, show yourself to the world!” – John 7:3-4 ESV

It's impossible to know the motivation behind their words. Were they sincere or merely being sarcastic? John doesn't tell us. But he does make it clear that "not even his brothers believed in him" (John 7:5 ESV). It would appear that they were prompting Jesus to use the Feast of Booths as a platform for displaying His miraculous powers. He was wasting His time doing miracles in Galilee. If He wanted to be famous, He was going to have to go prime-time, and what better venue than Jerusalem during one of the most popular feasts of the year?

But Jesus responded to their goading by saying, "My time has not yet come..." (John 7:6 ESV). There is probably a double meaning to His response. First of all, it was not yet time for Jesus to be "glorified." They were wanting Him to put on a display of His glory by performing miracles in Jerusalem. But that time had not yet come. Jesus was on God's schedule, not man's. Their counsel was eerily similar to that of Satan when he had tempted Jesus in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1-10) He had attempted to get Jesus to display His glory ahead of schedule and out of keeping with God's will.

But the second meaning behind His response was that it was not yet time for Him to attend the feast. Jesus told His brothers, "your time is always here. The world cannot hate you, but it hates me because I testify about it that its works are evil. You go up to the feast..." (John 7:6-8 ESV). They had nothing to fear. Because they did not believe Jesus to be the Messiah, they were not at risk. They could walk into Jerusalem unafraid and unmolested. But Jesus knew that He would receive a dramatically different welcome. So, He delayed His entry into Jerusalem. John makes that point clear in verse 10.

But after his brothers had gone up to the feast, then he also went up, not publicly but in private. – John 7:10 ESV

Jesus would be obedient and obey the law requiring all Jewish males to attend the feast. But He would not do so in a way that might jeopardize His mission. His half-brothers were wanting Jesus to make a "triumphal entry" into Jerusalem, to show up in a blaze of attention-getting miracles. But it was not yet time. Everything Jesus did was in keeping with His Father's will and in fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. And it all had to be done according to plan.

But central to these opening verses is the theme of disbelief. The Jewish leadership refused to believe in Jesus. But so did His own family members. And jealousy and pride were probably determining factors for both groups. The Pharisees and Sadducees were envious of Jesus' popularity. They felt threatened by His growing fame and frustrated by their inability to discredit His claims. But there was likely a bit of jealousy and pride motivating Jesus' own family members. Here was their older brother becoming a celebrity and they were left in the background, wondering just how famous their sibling would become and whether they would benefit from His meteoric rise to fame and fortune. But they did not believe in Him. They refused to accept Him as the Son of God and the Messiah of Israel. To both groups, Jesus was just a man. To the religious leaders, He was a man who posed a threat to their power and authority. To His half-brothers, Jesus was a man who offered them an opportunity to enjoy

fame and possible fortune. But both groups failed to recognize who He was and what He had come to do.

Misplaced Judgment

¹¹ The Jews were looking for him at the feast, and saying, “Where is he?” ¹² And there was much muttering about him among the people. While some said, “He is a good man,” others said, “No, he is leading the people astray.” ¹³ Yet for fear of the Jews no one spoke openly of him.

¹⁴ About the middle of the feast Jesus went up into the temple and began teaching. ¹⁵ The Jews therefore marveled, saying, “How is it that this man has learning, when he has never studied?”

¹⁶ So Jesus answered them, “My teaching is not mine, but his who sent me. ¹⁷ If anyone’s will is to do God’s will, he will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own authority. ¹⁸ The one who speaks on his own authority seeks his own glory; but the one who seeks the glory of him who sent him is true, and in him there is no falsehood. ¹⁹ Has not Moses given you the law? Yet none of you keeps the law. Why do you seek to kill me?” ²⁰ The crowd answered, “You have a demon! Who is seeking to kill you?” ²¹ Jesus answered them, “I did one work, and you all marvel at it. ²² Moses gave you circumcision (not that it is from Moses, but from the fathers), and you circumcise a man on the Sabbath. ²³ If on the Sabbath a man receives circumcision, so that the law of Moses may not be broken, are you angry with me because on the Sabbath I made a man’s whole body well? ²⁴ Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgment.” – John 7:11-24 ESV

Jesus had delayed His journey to Jerusalem, refusing to travel alongside His half-brothers because they were only interested in seeing Him make a grand entrance into the city. They had tried to goad Him into putting on a display of His miracle-working power in Jerusalem and so that He might garner an even greater following.

“You can’t become famous if you hide like this! If you can do such wonderful things, show yourself to the world!” – John 7:4 NLT

But Jesus was only interested in being faithful, not famous. He was committed to doing the will of His Father and all that He said and did was in keeping with that will. Jesus was not out to make a name for Himself. Rather than seeking glory for Himself, He sought to bring glory to His Heavenly Father by doing His will.

“For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me.” – John 6:38 ESV

And Jesus knew that His Father’s will include not only His incarnation but His crucifixion. He had taken on human flesh so that He might give His life as a ransom for humanity. His miracles were not intended to make Him famous but to prove His identity as the Son of God. That is why He had no interest in the applause and accolades of men.

“I do not accept glory from men.” – John 5:41 BSB

He wasn't out to build His own reputation or bolster His image among the people. Jesus knew that obedience to His Father's will would bring Him far greater glory than this world had to offer.

"And though I have no wish to glorify myself, God is going to glorify me. He is the true judge." – John 8:50 NLT

"If I want glory for myself, it doesn't count. But it is my Father who will glorify me." – John 8:54 NLT

But Jesus knew that His glorification would not happen until He had faithfully completed His God-ordained assignment. He was well aware that His days were numbered and that the growing animosity of the religious leaders would ultimately result in His death. That is why He said, "the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve others and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:28 NLT).

None of this was known to the Jewish religious leaders. They had no idea who Jesus was and so they were completely oblivious to the redemptive nature of His ministry. Yet, they had been waiting and watching for His arrival. Why? So they could put Him to death.

...the Jewish leaders tried all the harder to find a way to kill him. For he not only broke the Sabbath, he called God his Father, thereby making himself equal with God. – John 5:18 NLT

John reveals that the rumors concerning Jesus were all over the map. Some were willing to admit that He was a "good man," while others labeled Him as "a fraud who deceives the people" (John 7:12 NLT). And anyone who might have held a high opinion of Jesus knew it was best to keep it to themselves or they could face the wrath of the Sanhedrin.

You would think that Jesus would have kept a low profile, remaining hidden from view and avoiding any unnecessary notoriety. But John states that Jesus made His way to the temple where He began to teach. Jesus was not fearful or timid. He didn't let the hatred of the Jewish religious leaders prevent Him from speaking on behalf of His Heavenly Father. And as these men listened to Jesus speak, they were surprised and shocked by the depth of His understanding.

"How does he know so much when he hasn't been trained?" – John 7:15 NLT

They perceived Jesus to be an uneducated rural Rabbi from Galilee. He had not trained with the prominent and well-respected teachers of the law such as Gamaliel. And yet, here He was speaking with a degree of wisdom and insight that was difficult to comprehend. What these men failed to understand was that Jesus was the Son of God and, as a result, all He said came directly from the lips of God Himself. Jesus would later state: "I don't speak on my own

authority. The Father who sent me has commanded me what to say and how to say it” (John 12:49 NLT).

And Jesus, knowing that the religious leaders were puzzled by His eloquence and depth of understanding, told them, “My message is not my own; it comes from God who sent me” (John 7:16 NLT). This statement would have added fuel to the fire, further inciting the Sanhedrin’s hatred for Him. Every time He claimed to have been sent by God, their desire to see Him eliminated increased exponentially.

But Jesus was far from done. Turning His attention to these prideful, arrogant men, Jesus boldly proclaimed, “Anyone who wants to do the will of God will know whether my teaching is from God or is merely my own” (John 7:17 NLT). These men prided themselves in doing God’s will. They considered themselves to be the consummate keepers of God’s law and therefore, icons of righteousness. But Jesus knew their hearts. He was fully aware that these men were glory-seeking self-promoters whose only interest was their own reputations.

Jesus was making a not-so-subtle comparison between Himself and these men when He stated, “Those who speak for themselves want glory only for themselves, but a person who seeks to honor the one who sent him speaks truth, not lies” (John 7:18 NLT). In the very next chapter, John records Jesus’ stinging indictment against these men, where He declares them to be the children of Satan.

“For you are the children of your father the devil, and you love to do the evil things he does. He was a murderer from the beginning. He has always hated the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, it is consistent with his character; for he is a liar and the father of lies.” – John 8:44 NLT

Their desire for self-glorification was evidence of their relationship with Satan. From the very beginning, Satan’s plan has been to entice humanity to worship themselves rather than submit themselves to the worship of God. All the way back in the garden, He had convinced Eve to disobey God and eat of the fruit of the forbidden tree, telling her, “God knows that your eyes will be opened as soon as you eat it, and you will be like God, knowing both good and evil” (Genesis 3:5 NLT). Her desire to be *like* God led her to glorify herself *rather* than God. And the rest, as they say, is history.

And Jesus reveals that these men were following in the footsteps of Eve, choosing to glorify themselves rather than God. Jesus would later expose these well-respected leaders for their hypocrisy and deception.

“Everything they do is for show. On their arms they wear extra wide prayer boxes with Scripture verses inside, and they wear robes with extra long tassels. And they love to sit at the head table at banquets and in the seats of honor in the synagogues. They love to receive respectful greetings as they walk in the marketplaces, and to be called ‘Rabbi.’” – Matthew 23:5-7 NLT

And Jesus would admit that they while they were “the official interpreters of the law of Moses,” they were lousy at living up to its standards. This is why He warned the people, “So practice and obey whatever they tell you, but don’t follow their example” (Matthew 23:2-3 NLT).

John even records Jesus blasting these men for their refusal to obey the very law they prided themselves in keeping.

“Moses gave you the law, but none of you obeys it! In fact, you are trying to kill me.” – John 7:19 NLT

The crowds were confused by Jesus’ words because they had no idea that the Sanhedrin was planning His death. So, they simply thought Jesus had lost His mind or was possessed of a demon. But ignoring their comments, Jesus went to the heart of the matter: His supposed violation of the law. His healing of the paralyzed man had taken place on the Sabbath and had led the religious leaders to label Him as a lawbreaker. But Jesus turns the tables on them, revealing the well-known fact that the Jews always circumcised male infants on the eighth day, even if that day fell on the Sabbath. So, if they were free to “break” one of God’s laws in order to keep another, why were they upset with Jesus?

He logically concludes, “For if the correct time for circumcising your son falls on the Sabbath, you go ahead and do it so as not to break the law of Moses. So why should you be angry with me for healing a man on the Sabbath?” (John 7:23 NLT).

They didn’t understand what Jesus was doing because they didn’t understand who Jesus was. Their perception was clouded by ignorance and jealousy. Because they refused to accept Jesus as the Son of God, they could not understand that He was doing the will of God, which gave Him the authority to supersede the law of God. But their judgment of Jesus was misplaced because their understanding of Jesus was mistaken.

You Have No Idea!

²⁵ Some of the people of Jerusalem therefore said, “Is not this the man whom they seek to kill?
²⁶ And here he is, speaking openly, and they say nothing to him! Can it be that the authorities really know that this is the Christ? ²⁷ But we know where this man comes from, and when the Christ appears, no one will know where he comes from.” ²⁸ So Jesus proclaimed, as he taught in the temple, “You know me, and you know where I come from. But I have not come of my own accord. He who sent me is true, and him you do not know. ²⁹ I know him, for I come from him, and he sent me.” ³⁰ So they were seeking to arrest him, but no one laid a hand on him, because his hour had not yet come. ³¹ Yet many of the people believed in him. They said, “When the Christ appears, will he do more signs than this man has done?”— John 7:25-31 ESV

The confusion and consternation over Jesus continues. This itinerant Rabbi from Galilee was walking enigma. Because of His reputation for performing miraculous signs and wonders, He attracted large crowds wherever He went. But no one was quite sure who He was or what to make of Him. There had been ongoing debates regarding His identity, with some speculating that He was the prophet Moses had spoken about. Others questioned whether He might be the Messiah. And while many considered Him to be a good man, there were others who had concluded that He was a deceiver who was not to be trusted. And then there were the religious leaders who viewed Him as a deadly threat to the social fabric of the nation and so, they had implemented plans to have Him put to death.

The high priest and the other members of the Sanhedrin had intended for their plot against Jesus to remain a secret, but the news of their clandestine plan had leaked out. Yet, not everyone was aware of the growing conspiracy against Jesus. In fact, when He had announced that there was a plot to murder Him, the crowd had rejected His accusation, writing off His paranoia to demon possession.

The crowd replied, “You’re demon possessed! Who’s trying to kill you?”— John 7:20 NLT

Yet, for those who were aware of the Sanhedrin’s sinister plan to have Jesus killed, they couldn’t understand why these powerful men had taken no action. It was not as if they lacked the opportunity. Jesus had spent the day teaching in the temple courtyard and the Jewish religious leaders had done nothing to silence Him. He had even reiterated His blasphemous claim of having been sent by God.

“My message is not my own; it comes from God who sent me. Anyone who wants to do the will of God will know whether my teaching is from God or is merely my own.” – John 7:16-17 NLT

Confused by the inaction of the religious leaders, some in the crowd began to speculate whether they had changed their minds.

“Could our leaders possibly believe that he is the Messiah?” – John 7:26 NLT

But they quickly discounted this idea because, in their minds, Jesus did not fit the criteria for being the Messiah. According to their understanding, the Messiah would simply show up on the scene, unannounced and with no indication as to His point of origin.

“When the Messiah comes, he will simply appear; no one will know where he comes from.” – John 7:27 NLT

This belief was common among the Jews but was ill-founded and in contradiction to the Scriptures. The prophet, Micah, had clearly indicated that the Messiah would hail from Bethlehem (Micah 5:2). In fact, just a few verses later, John records a debate that took place among the people concerning the birthplace of the Messiah. Some were arguing that Jesus could not be the Messiah because He was from the city of Nazareth in Galilee. Yet, the Scriptures had indicated that the Messiah would hail from Bethlehem, the birthplace of King David.

“For the Scriptures clearly state that the Messiah will be born of the royal line of David, in Bethlehem, the village where King David was born.” – John 7:42 NLT

They were unaware of Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem and simply assumed that He had been born in the same place where He had been raised: Nazareth in Galilee. As a result, they ruled out the possibility that He might be the Messiah.

But while the people were busy debating the birthplace of the Messiah, Jesus took the opportunity to reveal that they had a much greater problem. He accused them of not knowing God.

“Yes, you know me, and you know where I come from. But I’m not here on my own. The one who sent me is true, and you don’t know him. But I know him because I come from him, and he sent me to you.” – John 7:28-29 NLT

This bold statement by Jesus was meant to have an impact. He was standing in the temple courtyard, surrounded by faithful Jews, and accusing them of lacking knowledge of Yahweh, their God. They thought they knew who Jesus was and where He came from, but they were sorely mistaken. And it was all because they had a less-than-vibrant relationship with their Heavenly Father. Because they were ignorant of God, they were unable to recognize the Son of God.

Jesus knew that the people were the byproduct of their religious leaders. These men had failed to instill in the people a love for God and His Word. As a result, the common Jew suffered from a lack of biblical knowledge that made intimacy with God virtually impossible. That is why Jesus had been so harsh in His assessment of the Pharisees and teachers of religious law.

“You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you, for he wrote, ‘These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship is a farce, for they teach man-made ideas as commands from God.’” – Matthew 15:7-9 NLT

This had been a long-standing problem among the people of God, as is evidenced by Jesus quoting the words of His own Father, recorded by the prophet Isaiah hundreds of years earlier. Over the centuries, the people of Israel had made a habit of going through the motions when it came to their relationship with Yahweh. They put a lot of effort into keeping His laws but their hearts weren't in it. Their obedience was motivated by fear rather than love.

And in time, they failed to recognize that the Scriptures, the sacrificial system, and the Mosaic law had all been meant to develop their knowledge of and love for God. But Jesus revealed that they had missed the point altogether and, as a result, had missed out on knowing Him.

“...the Father who sent Me has Himself testified about Me. You have never heard His voice nor seen His form, nor does His word abide in you, because you do not believe the One He sent.

You pore over the Scriptures because you presume that by them you possess eternal life. These are the very words that testify about Me, yet you refuse to come to Me to have life.” – John 5:37-40 BSB

The failure of the people to recognize Jesus as their Messiah was due to their lack of a vibrant relationship with God. They revered His written Word. They placed a high priority on trying to keep His commandments. They viewed the temple as a sign of God's abiding presence but lived as if God was nowhere to be found. So, when the Messiah showed up, they had a difficult time seeing the resemblance between the Father and the Son.

One of the things that John has stressed throughout his gospel is the role Jesus played in manifesting or revealing His Heavenly Father. John the Baptist had testified, “No one has ever seen God. But the unique One, who is himself God, is near to the Father's heart. He has revealed God to us” (John 1:18 NLT).

Later on, in his gospel, John records the words that Jesus spoke the crowds who followed Him:

“...when you see me, you are seeing the one who sent me.” – John 12:45 NLT

And Jesus would announce to Phillip, “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father!” (John 14:9 NLT). The apostle Paul explained how this could be true when he wrote, “Christ is the visible image of the invisible God” (Colossians 1:15 NLT). Jesus came to make God known and knowable. That is why He later declared, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me. If you had really known me, you would know who my Father is. From now on, you do know him and have seen him!” (John 14:6-7 NLT).

The people were in a bind. They didn't know God, so they lacked an understanding of the written word of God. And because they failed to comprehend God's word, they were unable to recognize the Living Word when He showed up. It was their inability to recognize Jesus as the Messiah that prevented them from seeing the Father in all His glory. That is prompted Jesus to declare, "Since you don't know who I am, you don't know who my Father is. If you knew me, you would also know my Father" (John 8:19 NLT).

The results of this conversation were somewhat predictable. The religious leaders were incensed and increased their efforts to kill Jesus. And the people continued to debate the identity of Jesus, with some reaching the conclusion that He must be the Messiah because of the miracles He performed.

Many among the crowds at the Temple believed in him. "After all," they said, "would you expect the Messiah to do more miraculous signs than this man has done?" – John 7:31 NLT

It wasn't the testimony of God as revealed in the Scriptures that convinced them. It was the supernatural nature of Jesus' miracles that led them to believe. But this would prove to be an inadequate basis for believing faith. In time, the miracles would stop. The outward signs of power that so appealed to them would be replaced by an outward display of weakness, as Jesus hung on the cross as a common criminal. His crucifixion would be the deal-breaker for his former followers. They never expected their Messiah to die. So, with His death, Jesus had proven His claims to be nothing but a lie. Or so they thought.

Return to Sender

³² The Pharisees heard the crowd muttering these things about him, and the chief priests and Pharisees sent officers to arrest him. ³³ Jesus then said, “I will be with you a little longer, and then I am going to him who sent me. ³⁴ You will seek me and you will not find me. Where I am you cannot come.” ³⁵ The Jews said to one another, “Where does this man intend to go that we will not find him? Does he intend to go to the Dispersion among the Greeks and teach the Greeks? ³⁶ What does he mean by saying, ‘You will seek me and you will not find me,’ and, ‘Where I am you cannot come’?” – John 7:32-36 ESV

The Pharisees were among the growing number who found Jesus’ claims to be preposterous and potentially dangerous. As members of the religious leadership of Israel, they had convinced themselves that Jesus posed a serious threat to the nation. His words and actions were stirring up the people and giving them the hope that their Messiah had finally come. The Pharisees saw this as a problem because the people expected the Messiah to be a military leader who would free them from Roman oppression and reestablish Israel’s prominence as a nation. If enough people were swayed into believing that Jesus was the Messiah, His followers could insight a rebellion against the Roman authorities and bring down the wrath of Caesar.

Their fear was well-founded. Even John alluded to the fact that there was a movement among some of Jesus’ followers to make Him their king. Immediately after His miraculous feeding of the 5,000, the awe-struck crowd came up with a way to use His supernatural powers to even greater advantage.

When the people saw him do this miraculous sign, they exclaimed, “Surely, he is the Prophet we have been expecting!” When Jesus saw that they were ready to force him to be their king, he slipped away into the hills by himself. – John 6:14-15 NLT

So, it’s easy to see why the Pharisees were anxious about Jesus’ growing fame. And whenever they heard the people says things like, “When the Christ appears, will he do more signs than this man has done?” (John 7:31 ESV), their fears increased exponentially. Any reference to Jesus as the Christ or Messiah was considered to be a red flag to these men that signaled danger ahead. That’s why they immediately responded by sending officers to arrest Jesus. They wanted Him off the streets and under lock and key. In their less-than-humble opinion, Jesus was a menace to society, not the long-awaited Messiah of Israel.

The entire scene described in chapter seven takes place on the temple grounds. This was the home turf of the Pharisees and the other members of the Sanhedrin and they viewed Jesus as a dangerous interloper who was trying to incite rebellion among the people. They had already tried to get their hands on Him, but John indicates that their efforts had been unsuccessful “because his hour had not yet come” (John 7:30 ESV).

There was a divine timeline associated with Jesus’ earthly ministry. No one was going to crown Him king prematurely or have Him arrested ahead of schedule. God had ordained a specific

sequence for the events that were to mark the last days of Jesus' life. They could not be rushed, prevented, or altered in any way. And Jesus continued to speak with a complete sense of calm, informing His audience of what was about to happen.

"I will be with you only a little longer. Then I will return to the one who sent me. You will search for me but not find me. And you cannot go where I am going." – John 7:33-34 NLT

As usual, Jesus spoke in rather cryptic terms that left His listeners more confused than comforted. In a sense, Jesus was simply articulating that His hour had not yet come. He would be leaving them, but now was not the time. The religious leaders would eventually get their hands on Him, but it would be according to God's timing, not their own. And Jesus informs His audience that His next destination would not be a throne or a jail cell. He would be returning to His Father's side in heaven.

Jesus was fully aware that death awaited Him. His whole purpose in coming to earth had been to die on behalf of sinful mankind. He had come to offer His life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45). But His death would not signal the end of His ministry. It would be just the beginning. The Pharisees and their peers believed that if they could put Jesus to death they would eliminate His influence over the people. But they were wrong. And the people believed that if they could force Jesus to be their king, they could eliminate the oppressive rule of the Romans. But they too were wrong.

In a sense, everyone was seeking Jesus. The crowds were seeking to make Him their king. The Pharisees were seeking to make Him a martyr. But God had other plans for Jesus. The Father was preparing to offer His Son as Lamb who takes away the sins of the world (John 1:29). And once Jesus accomplished that objective, He would be restored to His Father's side. And no matter how hard the crowds or the Pharisees searched for Him, their efforts would prove fruitless.

And as expected, the words Jesus spoke made no sense to those who heard them. They wracked their brains trying to figure out where Jesus intended to go so that they could not find Him. Was He thinking of leaving Judea permanently? Did He have plans to go beyond the borders of Palestine and join other Jews who had been dispersed among the Gentile nations? In their minds, none of this made any sense. Why would the Messiah of Israel leave the borders of Israel? Why would He go where they could not find Him?

Even the Pharisees in the crowd must have been stunned by Jesus' announcement. Was He really leaving? Was their problem about to go away for good? Was their worst nightmare about to turn into a dream come true?

Everyone was left asking the same question: "What does he mean when he says, 'You will search for me but not find me,' and 'You cannot go where I am going'?" (John 7:36 NLT). With this final question, John drives home the point that the Jews had no clue as to Jesus' true identity. They had no idea where He had come from and they had no idea where He was going

because they had no clue that He was the Son of God. Over and over again, Jesus had explained that He had been sent by God. Now, He was declaring that the plan was for Him to return to His Father's side.

When Jesus stated, "I will return to the one who sent me," He was declaring once again His divinity. He was not really from Nazareth in Galilee. And while He had been born in Bethlehem in Judea, He was actually the Son of God sent from heaven. He was the true light that had come into the world (John 1:9). He was the true bread from heaven (John 6:32). He was the living bread that had come down from heaven (John 6:51). He had been sent by God and He would one day return to His rightful place at His Father's side. The deity of Jesus is central to John's gospel. He was the Son of God who had been sent by His Heavenly Father with a task to perform that no mere man could accomplish. If Jesus was just a man, His death would have proved Him to be nothing more than a martyr but not the Messiah. If Jesus was just a man, crowing Him king would have made Him a sovereign, but not a Savior. Jesus had come to offer His sinless life as a ransom for many. And the apostle Paul reminds us of the staggering significance of what Jesus accomplished by taking on human flesh and dying on behalf of sinful men and women.

When we were utterly helpless, Christ came at just the right time and died for us sinners. Now, most people would not be willing to die for an upright person, though someone might perhaps be willing to die for a person who is especially good. But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners. – Romans 5:6-8 NLT

The Spirit Who Gives Life

³⁷ *On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. ³⁸ Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.'"* ³⁹ *Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.* – John 7:37-39 ESV

All of the events covered in chapter seven have occurred during the Feast of Booths in Jerusalem. Now, after having informed His audience about His coming departure, Jesus returns to the temple grounds in order to make a statement regarding the coming of the Holy Spirit. John describes this scene as taking place on the last day of the feast, "the great day." According to Deuteronomy 16:13, the Feast of Booths lasted seven days. But the day following the feast, which always fell on the Sabbath, was to be a special day as well.

On the eighth day you shall hold a holy convocation and present a food offering to the Lord. It is a solemn assembly; you shall not do any ordinary work. – Leviticus 23:36 ESV

It is impossible to know whether Jesus made His announcement about the coming Holy Spirit on the seventh or eighth day. By designating it as "the great day," John could have been referencing the final day of the feast itself, the seventh day. Or he could have been referring to the eighth day, which was considered by most Jews to be just as much a part of the feast as the previous seven days. It was on that day, a Sabbath day, that a final holy convocation was held to celebrate God's gracious provision for the needs of His chosen people during the 40 years they had spent in the wilderness.

During the 1st-Century AD, the Jews celebrated the Feast of Booths with a series of man-made rites or rituals that were not outlined in the Mosaic law. One of these was the daily water libation. The details surrounding this daily ritual are essential to understanding the nature of Jesus' comments.

The third daily ceremony was the rite of the water libation. On the first morning of Sukkot a procession of priests went down to the pool of Siloam to bring up to the Temple a golden container of water sufficient to last throughout the seven days of the feast. The water was brought up with great ceremony. The shofar was blown and the pilgrims who had come to Jerusalem for the feast waved their lulavs as the priests carried the water around the altar. The great Hallel (Psalms 113-118) were recited. Then the priest on duty poured out the contents of two silver bowls: one held water and the other held wine. This was an act of prayer and an expression of dependence upon God to pour out his blessing of rain upon the earth.

On the last or "great" day of the feast, the water libation rite reached its climax. The priests circled the altar seven times and then poured out the water with great pomp and ceremony. This was Hoshana Rabbah, the great "HOSHIANA," (which translated is "save now"). – © Jews for Jesus USA. All rights reserved. Used by permission.

The water from the Pool of Siloam was poured out along with the daily drink offering of wine. The pouring out of the water was intended to represent God's gracious provision of life-sustaining water for His people during their days in the wilderness. The water was representative of His saving grace, as described in the book of Isaiah.

*"Behold, God is my salvation;
I will trust, and will not be afraid;
for the Lord God is my strength and my song,
and he has become my salvation."*

With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.— Isaiah 12:2-3 ESV

The pouring out of the wine was meant to represent God's promise to pour out His Spirit upon His people.

"For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour my Spirit upon your offspring, and my blessing on your descendants." — Isaiah 44:3 ESV

It is believed that as the water and wine were poured out, the people would chant Isaiah 12:3 as well as Isaiah 55:1: "Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price."

With all this as background, the words of Jesus take on a whole new significance. And whether He spoke those words on the seventh or eighth day becomes immaterial. The point is that Jesus used the context of the daily pouring out of the water and the wine to offer His promise of the coming Spirit of God. John describes Jesus as standing up and crying out. There is an intensity to the scene. Jesus is shouting at the top of His lungs, passionately inviting the people to receive what God is about to offer.

"If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink." — John 7:37 ESV

With that statement, Jesus made Himself the focal point of the entire festival. He purposely took the Isaiah 55:1 passage and made it about Himself. None of this would have escaped His Jewish audience. And the religious leaders would have been appalled at His audacity and apparent blasphemy. But Jesus was far from done. He quickly added:

"Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.'" — John 7:38 ESV

This statement presents a problem. There is no Old Testament passage that seems to correspond with Jesus' words. So, it would seem that Jesus was summarizing and interpreting a variety of Old Testament passages that were intended to point toward the future advent of the Holy Spirit. These would have included the following:

“And I will not hide my face anymore from them, when I pour out my Spirit upon the house of Israel, declares the Lord God.” – Ezekiel 39:29 ESV

*“For I will pour water on the thirsty land,
and streams on the dry ground;
I will pour my Spirit upon your offspring,
and my blessing on your descendants.” – Isaiah 44:3 ESV*

Jesus was linking these promises to Himself. The pouring out of the Spirit of God was tied directly to belief in Him as the Son of God. In a sense, Jesus was making belief in Him a mandatory condition for experiencing the outpouring of the Spirit. And this bold claim would have been highly offensive to His audience, especially to the Jewish religious leaders.

But everything Jesus said mirrored the words He had spoken to the Samaritan woman He had encountered at Jacob’s well. He had told her, “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water” (John 4:10 ESV). And then He had added, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (John 4:13-14 ESV).

He had offered this woman a source of living water that would result in eternal life. But He was the key to receiving this incredible resource. It would be through faith in Jesus that the promise of the outpouring of God’s Spirit would come.

When Jesus had described Himself as the bread that came down from heaven, He had disclosed that “unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you” (John 6:53 ESV). In doing so, He had presented Himself as the sole source of eternal life. Through belief in Him as the Son of God, sin-stained men and women could find cleansing and complete purification. They would be able to enter into God’s presence unashamed and fully accepted as righteous in His eyes. But Jesus had added an important factor that would make this promise possible.

“Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.” – John 6:62-63 ESV

Jesus had been revealing all along that He was going to have to die so that eternal life could be made available. He would have to offer His life as a ransom for sinful mankind. And His death would be followed by His resurrection and ascension. But when He had ascended, the Holy Spirit would come, providing all those who placed their faith in Him with abundant life now and eternal life to come.

And John provides an important point of clarification when he adds: “Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified” (John 7:39 ESV).

John includes this point of explanation for the benefit of his readers. He realized that they would have found the words of Jesus just as difficult to understand as the Jews who heard them on “the great day” of the feast. As John will make clear, Jesus’ invitation was met with mixed reviews. They didn’t know what to make of His words. They were perplexed by His offer of rivers of living water. And it was because they had no idea that Jesus was about to lay down His life for their sins. He was going to offer Himself as a substitute, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29). The Bread of Life would be broken. His blood would be poured out. His life would be given as an atonement for the sins of men. And His death, resurrection, and ascension would make possible the pouring out of “the Spirit who gives life” (John 6:63 ESV).

Divinely Divisive

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

⁴⁵ The officers then came to the chief priests and Pharisees, who said to them, “Why did you not bring him?” ⁴⁶ The officers answered, “No one ever spoke like this man!” ⁴⁷ The Pharisees answered them, “Have you also been deceived? ⁴⁸ Have any of the authorities or the Pharisees believed in him? ⁴⁹ But this crowd that does not know the law is accursed.” ⁵⁰ Nicodemus, who had gone to him before, and who was one of them, said to them, ⁵¹ “Does our law judge a man without first giving him a hearing and learning what he does?” ⁵² They replied, “Are you from Galilee too? Search and see that no prophet arises from Galilee.” – John 7:40-52 ESV

When Jesus spoke, people listened. That doesn't mean they always understood or liked what He had to say. In fact, His messages often left His audiences intrigued and incensed at the same time. And when Jesus taught in the temple courtyard, on the last day of the Feast of Booths, He made His usual impact on those who had gathered to hear Him. He had chosen His words carefully, taking advantage of the circumstances surrounding the water rite that was practiced each morning of the festival.

For six days, the people had watched the daily processional as the priests brought a golden bowl filled with water from the Pool of Siloam up to the temple courtyard. Once there, they would pour out the water, along with another bowl filled with wine, on the brazen altar, as the people recited Isaiah 55:1 and Isaiah 12:3: “Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters...With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.”

But on the seventh day of the feast, or what John refers to as “the great day,” this ritual required the priests to circle the brazen altar seven times before they poured out the water and wine. This ceremony was known as the Hoshana Rabbah, the great “HOSHIANA” (which translated is “save now”).

So, on that final day, when Jesus stood in the temple courtyard and proclaimed, “Anyone who is thirsty may come to me! Anyone who believes in me may come and drink! For the Scriptures declare, ‘Rivers of living water will flow from his heart’” (John 7:37-38 NLT), His words did not go unnoticed. John records:

When they heard these words, some of the people said, “This really is the Prophet.” Others said, “This is the Christ.” – John 7:40-41 ESV

They didn't know what to make of Jesus. His miracles and messages intrigued them, causing them to wonder if He might be someone special. Of course, their natural tendency was to equate Him with one of the Old Testament prophecies concerning the Messiah or "the prophet" promised by Moses (Deuteronomy 18:15). They knew Jesus was special, but they weren't exactly sure what to make of Him. So much of what He did and said seemed to contradict their preconceived ideas regarding the coming Messiah. He didn't seem to fit the image of the one they were expecting. Jesus didn't look like a conquering king or a powerful military figure who was going to lead the people of Israel in a victorious rebellion against the Roman. Some had a difficult time believing this itinerant Rabbi was actually their Messiah. After all, the prophets had made it clear that the Messiah would be a descendant of King David, even sharing his birthplace of Bethlehem. But, as far as they could tell, Jesus was from Galilee.

There was much about Jesus they didn't know or understand. They were unaware of the details concerning His birth in Bethlehem. They knew nothing of His lineage as outlined in the other gospels, where He is listed as "the son of David" (Matthew 1:1; Luke 3:31). So, they ended up debating about who He was and what they were to do with Him.

...there was a division among the people over him. Some of them wanted to arrest him, but no one laid hands on him. – John 7:43-44 ESV

John continues to stress the divine nature of the timeline surrounding Jesus' last days on earth. While John makes it clear that the circumstances surrounding Jesus are intensifying, he gives no indication that Jesus was worried or concerned. The religious leaders are growing increasingly more desperate to eliminate Jesus as a threat, but they are powerless to do anything. John even describes the frustration of the Sanhedrin when their guards return empty-handed, having failed to arrest Jesus as they had been ordered.

When the Temple guards returned without having arrested Jesus, the leading priests and Pharisees demanded, "Why didn't you bring him in?" – John 7:45 NLT

And even the response of these men reveals the powerful impact Jesus had on all those who were exposed to His teaching.

"We have never heard anyone speak like this!" the guards responded. – John 7:46 NLT

They had been blown away by what they heard. But the religious leaders were appalled at their gullibility and failure to do their jobs. They ridicule these guards for being so easily deceived while bragging about their own refusal to be taken in by His lies. It was their superior knowledge of the law that kept them from falling prey to this blasphemous pretender. And they pronounce a curse on the people for their ignorance of and disregard for God's law.

But it is at that point that John reintroduces Nicodemus. This Pharisee and member of the ruling council of Israel shows up a second time in John's narrative. He first appeared in the middle of the night, seeking an impromptu and secret meeting with Jesus. His encounter with

Jesus had left him confused and asking, “How can these things be?” (John 3:3:9 ESV). All Jesus’ talk about being born again and the Son of Man being lifted up had left Nicodemus perplexed. But it had given him plenty to think about. So, when his colleagues reacted so vehemently against Jesus, Nicodemus spoke up.

“Is it legal to convict a man before he is given a hearing?” – John 7:51 NLT

It seems clear that Nicodemus was more than curious about Jesus, and he couldn’t understand why his associates were so unwilling to give this man a proper hearing. What harm could it do to investigate Jesus’ claims more fully? But Nicodemus’ question was met with scorn and ridicule. His fellow members of the Sanhedrin, driven by blind hate for Jesus, turned their anger against him, demeaning him as no better than a lowly and ignorant Galilean.

“Are you from Galilee, too? Search the Scriptures and see for yourself—no prophet ever comes from Galilee!” – John 7:52 NLT

For all their supposed knowledge of the Scriptures, they were incredibly misinformed. Their pride in their own Judean heritage and their hatred for Galileans blinded them to the truth of God’s Word. Both Jonah and Nahum had been prophets who hailed from Galilee. And now, they were faced with yet another messenger sent from God who was not what they were expecting. Jesus did not fit their preconceived notions regarding the Messiah, so they deemed Him a liar and a lunatic. They allowed their pride to get in the way. Their egos prevented them from recognizing the very one for whom they had been waiting. It was just as Jesus had said:

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

A Sinner Condemned, Unclean

⁵³ But They went each to his own house, ¹ but Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. ² Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him, and he sat down and taught them. ³ The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery, and placing her in the midst ⁴ they said to him, "Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. ⁵ Now in the Law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?" ⁶ This they said to test him, that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. ⁷ And as they continued to ask him, he stood up and said to them, "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her." ⁸ And once more he bent down and wrote on the ground. ⁹ But when they heard it, they went away one by one, beginning with the older ones, and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. ¹⁰ Jesus stood up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" ¹¹ She said, "No one, Lord." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more." —John 7:53-8:11 ESV

This section of John's gospel is a bit controversial because it is not found in the oldest of the extant Greek manuscripts. While there are more than 900 ancient manuscripts that include the story of the woman caught in adultery, it is significant that none of the early church fathers referred to this encounter in their commentaries on the Gospel of John. It is the belief of most modern commentators that this story was a later addition to the Gospel, which raises the question of whether it should be considered as inspired by the Holy Spirit.

While the evidence seems to indicate that the story was edited into John's Gospel by some unknown source, it does not necessarily invalidate its authenticity. And there is no reason to assume that its inclusion by someone other than the apostle John means that it was uninspired and, therefore, unworthy to be considered a part of the Canon of Scripture. Perhaps it was part of the oral tradition of the early church and later placed within the text of John's Gospel to further support the theme of Jesus' power and authority as the Son of God.

There are those who consider this an apocryphal story, spurious in its authenticity and therefore, unworthy to be considered as the inspired Word of God. But the story does provide insight into the growing hostility between Jesus and the religious leaders, a theme that John is gradually unfolding.

Chapter seven ended with a tense exchange between Nicodemus and his fellow members of the Sanhedrin. They were frustrated that their guards had failed to arrest Jesus while He was on the temple grounds. Instead, they had let Him go because they had been mesmerized by His teaching. When Nicodemus had suggested that Jesus be given a fair hearing, his colleagues mocked him for being as uneducated and lawless as the Galileans who mindlessly followed after this huckster from Nazareth.

John has made it clear that Jesus' hour had not yet come. The Sanhedrin, while determined to have Jesus arrested, were powerless to thwart God's divine timeline for His Son's mission. So,

Jesus left the temple grounds and headed east to Mount of Olives, just opposite Jerusalem across the Kidron Valley. Evidently, He and His disciples spent the night there, rising early the next morning to return to the temple grounds, where He resumed His teaching.

One can only imagine the frustration of the Sanhedrin as they woke that next morning only to find Jesus sitting in the middle of the temple courtyard, surrounded by a large and attentive audience. His persistent presence and uncanny ability to attract a crowd wherever He went caused these religious leaders great angst. So, as was quickly becoming their habit, they devised a plan by which they might trap Jesus into saying or doing something that might give them grounds for having Him arrested. Because of His growing popularity, it was necessary that they devise a plan that would expose Jesus as a fraud and cause the people to turn against Him.

On this occasion, they chose the controversial topic of adultery to “test” Jesus. This was a hot-button issue among the Jews. The people knew what the Mosaic law had to say about the matter, but there was a lot of debate concerning how to interpret and enforce this particular law. Leviticus 20:10 reads: “If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbor, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death.”

But in this case, the religious leaders drag a woman into the temple courtyard and throw her down in front of Jesus. There is no mention of her male companion in crime. This might be because this woman was guilty of violating another aspect of the law concerning adultery. In the book of Deuteronomy, there is another scenario described in which a man marries a woman only to discover on their wedding night that she was not a virgin. In that case, the law prescribed the following punishment:

The woman must be taken to the door of her father's home, and there the men of the town must stone her to death, for she has committed a disgraceful crime in Israel by being promiscuous while living in her parents' home. In this way, you will purge this evil from among you. – Deuteronomy 22:21 NLT

It is impossible to know the true nature of this woman's crime. But she is publicly shamed, dragged by the religious leaders into the temple courtyard, and thrown at Jesus' feet. To them, she was nothing more than a prop, a nameless tool in their effort to discredit and destroy Jesus. They were not interested in seeing that justice was done. They simply wanted to create a no-win situation in which Jesus would be doomed no matter how He responded. So, using the woman as bait, they set their trap and waited for Jesus to condemn Himself.

“Teacher,” they said to Jesus, “this woman was caught in the act of adultery. The law of Moses says to stone her. What do you say?” – John 8:4-5 NLT

These men were experts in the law. They were not interested in Jesus' views on legal matters but were hoping that He would say something that violated the law or infuriated the people. And John makes their intentions quite clear.

They were trying to trap him into saying something they could use against him... – John 8:6 NLT

They already viewed Jesus as a lawbreaker, because He had already violated the prohibition against working on the Sabbath by healing a man and then instructing him to carry his bedroll. So, they must have been convinced that Jesus would choose to violate the law once again and hoped that He would recommend releasing the woman. If He did, they could accuse Him of being in violation of the Mosaic Law and have Him arrested on the spot. But if Jesus surprised them and announced that the woman should be stoned for her crime, the crowd would probably turn on Him. Adultery had become commonplace among the Jews and the laws concerning its punishment were rarely enforced. And if Jesus had condoned the stoning of this woman, He would have been suggesting that they violate the Roman law which prohibited the Jews from enacting any form of capital punishment.

The religious leaders believed they had Jesus in a conundrum. In their minds, they had Him caught between a rock and a hard place. No matter what He said, He would end up condemning Himself. But rather than speak, Jesus knelt down and began to write in the dirt with His finger. As he did so, the religious leaders demanded that He give them an answer to their question. So, He stood up and said, “All right, but let the one who has never sinned throw the first stone!” (John 8:7 NLT). Then, He knelt back down and continued to write something in the dirt.

There has been a great deal of speculation concerning what Jesus wrote in the dirt that day. But the text provides absolutely no insight into the content of Jesus’ message. We are simply told that when Jesus said, “let the one who has never sinned throw the first stone,” the crowd began to disperse, including the men who had instigated the whole affair. Perhaps Jesus had written the Ten Commandments in the dust. We will never know. But whatever Jesus scrawled in the dirt that day had caused the woman’s self-righteous accusers to slink away one by one, starting with the oldest among them.

Some have speculated that Jesus had shamed these men by writing down a list of specific sins each of them had committed. Embarrassed at having their personal sins exposed, they quickly vacated the premises. While this is an interesting proposal, there is nothing in the text that supports it. All that is clear is that no one was able to pick up a stone because no one was without sin.

This seems to be the main point behind the entire story. Jesus had come to earth in order to provide forgiveness for sin. And, according to Scripture, all men are guilty of sin. Solomon wrote in Ecclesiastes, “Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins” (Ecclesiastes 7:20 ESV). And the apostle Paul reiterated that truth when he wrote, “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23 ESV).

The religious leaders considered themselves to be pure and holy, fully righteous before God because they painstakingly and pridefully kept the law of Moses. But Jesus exposed the truth about their spiritual condition, revealing their sinfulness and their need for a Savior. These men

had arrogantly set themselves up as judges over the people, looking down their noses at the irreligious rabble who were incapable of living up to God's holy standards like they did. They saw Jesus as no better than the woman they had dragged before Him. He was a lawbreaker and worthy of condemnation and death just as she was. But they failed to recognize their own guilt and their need for cleansing. The sad reality is that they chose to leave rather than face the truth about their own sinfulness. Only the woman remained. She stood before Jesus and the crowd, accused and condemned, her sin openly acknowledged for everyone to know.

But rather than judging her, Jesus asked her where her accusers had gone. He points out that no one stood before her, stone in hand, ready to condemn her for her crime. They had all disappeared, meaning there were no witnesses left to verify her guilt. So, Jesus, acknowledging that her accusers were nowhere to be found, announced to her, "Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more" (John 8:11 ESV). There were no witnesses left to condemn her, so there was no evidence to convict her. And on that basis, Jesus encouraged her to go and to sin no more. She had been given a reprieve. While evidently guilty of the crime and worthy of death, she had been graciously given a second chance to change the way she lived. Her sin, while real, was forgivable. Her guilt, though undeniable, was survivable. All thanks to Jesus.

The Light of the World

¹² Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” ¹³ So the Pharisees said to him, “You are bearing witness about yourself; your testimony is not true.” ¹⁴ Jesus answered, “Even if I do bear witness about myself, my testimony is true, for I know where I came from and where I am going, but you do not know where I come from or where I am going. ¹⁵ You judge according to the flesh; I judge no one. ¹⁶ Yet even if I do judge, my judgment is true, for it is not I alone who judge, but I and the Father who sent me. ¹⁷ In your Law it is written that the testimony of two people is true. ¹⁸ I am the one who bears witness about myself, and the Father who sent me bears witness about me.” ¹⁹ They said to him therefore, “Where is your Father?” Jesus answered, “You know neither me nor my Father. If you knew me, you would know my Father also.” ²⁰ These words he spoke in the treasury, as he taught in the temple; but no one arrested him, because his hour had not yet come. —John 8:12-20 ESV

In this passage, Jesus issues the second of seven “I am” statements recorded in the book of John. Standing in the treasury of the temple, He states, “I am the light of the world” (John 8:12 ESV). These declarations by Jesus are intended to clarify His unique relationship with mankind as the Savior of the world. In the course of time, Jesus will portray His identity as the Messiah sent from God using these seven descriptive and declarative statements:

“I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.” — John 6:35 ESV

“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” — John 8:12 ESV

“I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture.” — John 10:9 ESV

“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” — John 10:11 ESV

“I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.” — John 11:25-26 ESV

“I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” — John 14:6 ESV

“I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.” — John 15:5 ESV

Each of these statements reveals a relational aspect of Jesus' ministry. He presents Himself as a source of sustenance, illumination, access, care, life, and fruitfulness. With each one of them, He clarifies His unique role as the Father's personal emissary who had come to offer sinful mankind a means of being restored to a right relationship with a holy God. It is only through Him that sinners can discover all they need to be made right with God.

Chapter six records Jesus' offering His body and blood as the sole source of spiritual nourishment that, when consumed, produces everlasting life. But this gift of eternal life is predicated on belief. Jesus clearly stated, "whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever **believes** in me shall never thirst" (John 6:35 ESV). Yet, sadly, Jesus revealed the truth about those who had witnessed His power but had failed to accept His claim to be from God: "you have seen me and yet do not believe" (John 6:36 ESV).

Now, Jesus announces Himself as "the light of the world" (John 8:12 ESV). In doing so, He reinforces the theme that John used to begin his Gospel.

In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. – John 1:4-5 ESV

Jesus has compared Himself to water and bread, two non-negotiable staples necessary for sustaining life. Without bread and water, human life is unsustainable. Jesus, the author of life, came to earth so that He might offer Himself as the sole source of eternal life. His body, which He would willingly sacrifice on behalf of sinful mankind, would become the means by which all those deprived of righteousness might "be filled."

Now, Jesus uses the metaphor of light to describe the illuminating nature of His incarnation. He was God in human flesh. And, as John wrote in his first letter, "God is light, and in him is no darkness at all" (1 John 1:5 ESV). As the Son of God, Jesus manifested the sinless perfection of His Heavenly Father. With His appearance in human form, Jesus brought the light of God's presence to earth, making the full glory of God visible and accessible. The author of Hebrews describes put it this way:

The Son radiates God's own glory and expresses the very character of God. – Hebrews 1:3 NLT

That is why Jesus was able to say, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9 ESV). He made the light of God's glory visible. But one of the unique qualities of light is its ability to both illuminate and expose. With His incarnation, Jesus brought the glory of God to earth and, in doing so, His very presence exposed the darkness that had enveloped the world. Darkness is the absence of light. And when the light of life appeared, the pitch-blackness of man's spiritual condition was dramatically exposed.

The prophet Isaiah had written about the day in which the darkness would be penetrated by a great light.

*The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness,
on them has light shone. – Isaiah 9:2 ESV*

It would be Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist who, upon hearing of his wife's pregnancy, would testify regarding his son's ministry.

*"And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
to give knowledge of salvation to his people
in the forgiveness of their sins,
because of the tender mercy of our God,
whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high
to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace." – Luke 1:76-79 ESV*

Jesus brought the light of God's glory to bear on the darkness of man's condition. His sinless, fully obedient life stood in stark contrast to the sinful and disobedient character of fallen humanity. As a man, Jesus provided the perfect example of godliness lived out in daily life. He was the model man, accomplishing what no other man had ever been able to do: Live in sinless, perfect obedience to the will of God.

The apostle Paul provides a stark contrast between the life of Adam and Jesus.

For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous. – Romans 5:19 ESV

But the righteousness Jesus offered was going to require sinful men and women to place their hope and trust in Him, rather than relying on their own ability to live up to God's holy standards. Jesus required complete dependence upon Him. "Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (John 8:12 ESV). Those who would reject Him as the light and the source of eternal life would condemn themselves to a life of eternal darkness, separated from God and doomed to suffer the consequences for their rebellions against Him.

But the Pharisees rejected Jesus' words. As far as they were concerned, His testimony was worthless because it was based on His own opinion. They did not believe He had corroborating testimony to support His claims. In essence, they called Him a liar.

"You are bearing witness about yourself; your testimony is not true." – John 8:13 ESV

But Jesus rejects their assessment, defending His claims as true because they are fully supported by His Father in heaven. This line of defense must have infuriated the Pharisees because it was further proof that Jesus was a heretic and a blasphemer. By declaring Himself to

be the Son of God, Jesus was claiming to be on equal standing with God. For them, this was proof of Jesus' guilt. But for Jesus, it was evidence of His deity and divine calling.

Jesus accused them of judging according to the flesh. In other words, they were limited in their perspective. They couldn't see the truth of who He was because their eyes were blinded by sin. When they looked at Jesus, all they could see was a man standing in front of them. But Jesus was declaring Himself to be the very light of God's glory, shining in the darkness that permeated the nation of Israel and the lives of those who claimed to be children of God.

As far as Jesus was concerned, He knew His claims were true because He had the full support of His Heavenly Father. And, according to their own laws, two witnesses were all that was required to support the veracity of a claim.

"Your own law says that if two people agree about something, their witness is accepted as fact. I am one witness, and my Father who sent me is the other." – John 8:17-18 NLT

But the Pharisees subtly reject His claim to be the Son of God by asking, "Where is your father?" (John 8:19 ESV). They may have intended this as a slap in the face to Jesus, raising the rumors concerning Jesus' "illegitimate" birth. It had probably become known that Joseph had not been Jesus' birth father, which had led to rampant speculation that His birth was the result of an adulterous affair. But this question further illustrates their ignorance of who Jesus really was. A fact that Jesus makes perfectly clear.

"You know neither me nor my Father. If you knew me, you would know my Father also."
– John 8:18 ESV

These were strong words coming from the lips of Jesus. He accused these self-righteous religious leaders of having no knowledge of Yahweh. Because they were ignorant of God, they were clueless as to the identity of the Son of God. The light of God's glory was standing right in front of them, but they remained blinded by sin and doomed to walk in darkness.

Who Are You?

²¹ So he said to them again, "I am going away, and you will seek me, and you will die in your sin. Where I am going, you cannot come." ²² So the Jews said, "Will he kill himself, since he says, 'Where I am going, you cannot come'?" ²³ He said to them, "You are from below; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world. ²⁴ I told you that you would die in your sins, for unless you believe that I am he you will die in your sins." ²⁵ So they said to him, "Who are you?" Jesus said to them, "Just what I have been telling you from the beginning. ²⁶ I have much to say about you and much to judge, but he who sent me is true, and I declare to the world what I have heard from him." ²⁷ They did not understand that he had been speaking to them about the Father. ²⁸ So Jesus said to them, "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own authority, but speak just as the Father taught me. ²⁹ And he who sent me is with me. He has not left me alone, for I always do the things that are pleasing to him." ³⁰ As he was saying these things, many believed in him. —John 8:21-30 ESV

Jesus has performed miracles. He has healed the sick. And He has repeatedly and unapologetically declared His identity as the Son of God. In spite of all the instances in which He has referred to God as His Father, alluded to His having come down from heaven, and of possessing authority over death and life, the people still can't seem to figure out who He is. And as Jesus continued to reveal His identity to the Jewish crowd that had gathered to hear him in the treasury of the temple, all they could say to Him was, "Who are you?"

Jesus had just declared Himself to be "the light of the world" who came to offer "the light of life" (John 8:12 ESV). And He backed up His statement by claiming God Almighty as His witness. Not only that, He declared God to be His Father.

"I am the one who bears witness about myself, and the Father who sent me bears witness about me." — John 8:18 ESV

The meaning behind His words escaped them. They couldn't figure out what it was He was trying to say. When He referred to His Father, they could only think in earthly, human terms. Which is what had led them to ask, "Where is your Father?" (John 8:12 ESV). And Jesus had responded to this question by stating, "You know neither me nor my Father. If you knew me, you would know my Father also" (John 8:19 ESV).

Their inability to recognize Jesus as the Son of God was because they lacked a relationship with His Heavenly Father. They were blinded by their own ignorance. They knew the Scriptures but had no true knowledge of the God whom the Scriptures revealed. Even the Mosaic law, provided by God to reveal His own holiness, had become little more than a list of burdensome regulations and rules to keep. Yet David had described the commands of God as intensely valuable and desirable because they came from God.

*The instructions of the Lord are perfect,
 reviving the soul.
 The decrees of the Lord are trustworthy,
 making wise the simple.
 The commandments of the Lord are right,
 bringing joy to the heart.
 The commands of the Lord are clear,
 giving insight for living.
 Reverence for the Lord is pure,
 lasting forever.
 The laws of the Lord are true;
 each one is fair.
 They are more desirable than gold,
 even the finest gold.
 They are sweeter than honey,
 even honey dripping from the comb.
 They are a warning to your servant,
 a great reward for those who obey them. – Psalm 19:7-11 NLT*

But because the people had no real understanding of God, they were incapable of comprehending the identity of His Son. Unlike David, the people of Israel had no love for God's written Word. They found its content to be restrictive and overly demanding. So, how would they ever learn to love His Living Word?

God had graciously given the people of Israel His law in order to set them apart as His own prized possession. By living according to His holy commands, they would experience His blessings in the form of His ongoing presence and provision. Now, the Living Word of God was standing right in front of them, revealing the key to the ultimate blessing of God: eternal life.

During their years in the wilderness, God had provided the people of Israel manna, a miraculous source of nourishment that required no sowing, reaping, or baking on their part. It was a gracious gift, freely given, that was designed to meet their daily need for physical sustenance. Now, the Bread of Life was standing right in front of them, offering His body as the key to their spiritual nourishment – “the food that endures to eternal life” (John 6:27 ESV).

And the Creator God who had said, “Let there be light” (Genesis 1:3 ESV) and had “separated the light from the darkness” (Genesis 1:4 ESV), and declared it good, had sent His Son to bring light into a world darkened by sin. But the people failed to see Jesus for who He was. Their spiritual blindness kept them from even recognizing the brightness of God's Light shining right in front of them. And John opened up his Gospel with the sobering reality of their rejection.

The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came

to his own, and his own people did not receive him. – John 1:9-11 ESV

And as Jesus stood in the treasury that day, He proclaimed to His sin-blinded audience, “I am going away, and you will seek me, and you will die in your sin. Where I am going, you cannot come” (John 8:21 ESV). Jesus was announcing that God’s “light of life” was not going to shine forever. He had come to earth to illuminate the darkness with His perfectly sinless life. With His incarnation, He had made the invisible God visible. As John stated in the opening chapter of his Gospel, Jesus made God known.

No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is Himself God and is at the Father’s side, has made Him known. – John 1:18 BSB

But Jesus was letting the people know that His light was going to be extinguished. He had come to die. It was all part of God’s divine plan of redemption. His incarnation would be followed by His crucifixion and, ultimately, His resurrection and ascension. Jesus had not come to take up permanent residence on earth. He even told them, “I am not of this world” (John 8:23 ESV). He was the Son of God, who had been sent on a mission by His Heavenly Father, and once His task was complete, He would be returning to His rightful place at His Father’s side in heaven.

And Jesus made a sobering pronouncement to His audience that day: “you will die in your sin. Where I am going, you cannot come” (John 8:21 ESV). The “Light” would be leaving and they would remain in the darkness of their sin, incapable of finding Jesus or a way to have eternal life. He was the key to gaining access to God the Father and the only hope they had of experiencing everlasting life. That is why He will later declare:

“My light will shine for you just a little longer. Walk in the light while you can, so the darkness will not overtake you. Those who walk in the darkness cannot see where they are going. Put your trust in the light while there is still time; then you will become children of the light.” – John 12:35-36 NLT

Jesus had been very clear about who He was and what He had come to do.

“I told you that you would die in your sins, for unless you believe that I am he you will die in your sins.” – John 8:23 ESV

He had been brutally honest about His identity and had openly declared their need to believe in who He was and to accept His offer of eternal life. But all they had to say was, “Who are you?” And Jesus patiently responded, “The one I have always claimed to be” (John 8:25 NLT). There were no secrets. Jesus hadn’t been hiding the ball or disguising His mission. Their failure to recognize Him was due to their own spiritual blindness.

They did not understand that he had been speaking to them about the Father. – John 8:27 ESV

What they failed to understand was that Jesus had come from God. They could not bring themselves to believe that He was divine. All that He said and did was due to His identity as the Son of God. He had authority and power because He was God in human flesh. He could offer life because He was the author of life. He had power over the natural realm because He had created it. He had the ability to heal because He had all the power of heaven at His disposal.

But Jesus informed them that the true proof of His deity would come in an unexpected and spectacular form.

“When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own authority, but speak just as the Father taught me.” – John 8:28 ESV

His pending death, of which they were clueless, would become the greatest evidence of His deity because it would result in His resurrection. By rising from the dead, God would deem His Son’s sacrifice for the sins of mankind as worthy and acceptable. Jesus’ offering of His body and blood in the place of condemned sinners would satisfy the just demands of a holy God. And by raising His Son back to life, God would declare His righteous wrath as fully satisfied. And all those who believed in His Son’s death on their behalf would enjoy eternal life. Rather than facing condemnation for their sin and rebellion, they will enjoy complete forgiveness and a restored relationship with God. All because of Jesus, “who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification” (Romans 4:25 ESV).

Jesus was on a mission. He had a job to complete. And the ability of the people to fully understand His identity would not come about until He had finished the task He had been assigned. It would not be until He had been “lifted up” and risen again that the full scope of His ministry would be revealed. And as Jesus will reveal to His disciples, it will only be through the coming of the Holy Spirit that sinful men and women will be able to see the glory of God’s gift of salvation through the death of His Son.

The True Offspring of Abraham

³¹ So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, ³² and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” ³³ They answered him, “We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, ‘You will become free’?”

³⁴ Jesus answered them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin. ³⁵ The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. ³⁶ So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed. ³⁷ I know that you are offspring of Abraham; yet you seek to kill me because my word finds no place in you. ³⁸ I speak of what I have seen with my Father, and you do what you have heard from your father.”

³⁹ They answered him, “Abraham is our father.” Jesus said to them, “If you were Abraham's children, you would be doing the works Abraham did, ⁴⁰ but now you seek to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. This is not what Abraham did. ⁴¹ You are doing the works your father did.” They said to him, “We were not born of sexual immorality. We have one Father—even God.” —John 8:31-41 ESV

This entire encounter between Jesus and His adversaries has taken place in the treasury of the temple, the area located in the Court of the Women. Between the colonnades of the courtyard were placed 13 boxes that were used for the collection of voluntary monetary contributions to the care and maintenance of the temple. Two of the boxes were dedicated to the collection of the half-shekel tax, which was required of every male Israelite of age, including proselytes and slaves. Mark describes the use of these offering boxes in his Gospel.

And he sat down opposite the treasury and watched the people putting money into the offering box. Many rich people put in large sums. And a poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which make a penny. — Mark 12:41-42 ESV

It was in this environment, the only area on the temple mount where women were allowed to enter, and where vast sums of money were collected and stored, that Jesus chose to address the crowd about His role as the “light of the world” (John 8:12 ESV). He had come to shed the light of God’s glory through His sinless life but, ultimately, through His sacrificial death. As the Son of God, He would become the offering that would pay the debt owed by sinful mankind and satisfy the just demands of His holy Father in heaven.

Jesus had come to earth in order to accomplish the will of His Father, which required that He give His life as a ransom or payment for a sinful and condemned humanity. He even alluded to His death and the role the religious leaders of the Jews would play in bringing it about.

*“When **you** have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he...” — John 8:28 ESV*

And John indicates that, as a result of Jesus' message, "many believed in him" (John 8:30 ESV). John doesn't elaborate on what he means by this statement. But it seems clear that the belief of these people was limited in nature. They were becoming increasingly more convinced that Jesus was someone special, perhaps even the Messiah. But so much of what Jesus was saying still made no sense to them. They knew there was something special about Jesus but His claim to be the Son of God was outside their capacity to grasp. And Jesus was well aware that their belief in Him had its limitations. Which is why He addressed them directly.

"If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." – John 8:31-32 ESV

It is almost as if Jesus is expecting their belief to be short-lived. After all, He has already seen what happens when the content of His message becomes too difficult to understand or accept. Earlier in chapter six, John recorded the reaction of Jesus' followers then they heard Him speak about eating His body and drinking His blood.

"This is very hard to understand. How can anyone accept it?" – John 6:60 ESV

At this point many of his disciples turned away and deserted him. – John 6:66 ESV

So, knowing that His message was going to become increasingly difficult to accept, Jesus warned His so-called followers that the proof of true discipleship would be to remain committed to hearing and keeping His word. It wasn't enough to accept the parts they found attractive. When Jesus had spoken of a bread from heaven that gives life, the people had been eager to get their hands on it. But when He had elaborated on His meaning by saying He was that bread and they would have to eat His flesh and drink His blood, they found His words distasteful and too difficult to accept. So, they had walked away.

The freedom Jesus offered would not be available until He had completed the task assigned to Him by His Heavenly Father. He was going to have to finish His mission by sacrificing His life on the cross. And all those who believed His death to be a satisfactory payment for their sins would find true freedom. Jesus states that they "will be free indeed" (John 8:36 ESV).

But even this message of freedom becomes difficult for His audience to hear and accept. They immediately begin to reject His assessment of their condition, saying, "We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, 'You will become free'?" (John 8:33 ESV). They found His words to be offensive, not attractive. As Jews, they were extremely proud of their heritage as descendants of Abraham. They viewed themselves as the recipients of all the promises made by God to Abraham. In their minds, they were the chosen people of God and the rightful heirs to all the blessings God had guaranteed to shower on His children.

They even viewed their current occupation by the Romans as a temporary setback. They refused to view their condition as that of slaves and found Jesus' offer of freedom offensive.

But Jesus didn't have the Romans in view either. The freedom He was offering them was spiritual in nature. And He clearly points out the difference.

"Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin." – John 8:34 ESV

Remember what Jesus said: "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples." He had told them that a true disciple would continue to accept what He had to say, regardless of how difficult it might be to hear. Now, He accuses them of being slaves to sin. As Jews, they would have recognized the reality of their sinfulness, but they would have also taken great comfort in the forgiveness made possible by the sacrificial system. They counted on receiving atonement for their sins by dutifully presenting their offerings to God. But what they failed to understand was "impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins" (Hebrews 10:4 ESV).

The author of Hebrews goes on to say, "every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins" (Hebrews 10:11 ESV). The sacrificial system could only offer temporary absolution for sin. It could not provide a permanent release or freedom from the pervasive presence and power of sin. The very fact that the Jews had to continually offer their sacrifices was evidence that they were actually slaves to sin. But Jesus was offering them a different kind of sacrifice, that would provide a permanent solution to their sin problem – something the author of Hebrews points out.

But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified. – Hebrews 10:12-14 ESV

What the people believed about Jesus was incomplete and insufficient. Even if they believed Him to be their Messiah, they failed to understand that He had come to set them free from slavery to sin, not to offer them release from Roman oppression. They viewed themselves as children of God, but Jesus makes it clear that they are simply the descendants of Abraham.

"I know that you are offspring of Abraham; yet you seek to kill me because my word finds no place in you." – John 8:37 ESV

They were Jews by birth and right, but that did not mean that they were children of God. And this is where Jesus began to address their real problem. Because they refused to accept Him as the Son of God, they were proving their lack of relationship with His Father in heaven. And Jesus is about to blow away all their preconceived notions regarding their identity as God's chosen people. He makes a somewhat cryptic comment that is going to leave them furious when they finally understand what He implies by it.

"I speak of what I have seen with my Father, and you do what you have heard from your father." – John 8:38 ESV

Their immediate response was to claim Abraham as their father. But Jesus counters that if this was true, they would be reacting to Him in a far different fashion.

“If you were Abraham’s children, you would be doing the works Abraham did, but now you seek to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. This is not what Abraham did.” – John 8:39-40 ESV

They wanted to claim descendency from Abraham, but Jesus was revealing that they lacked the faith of Abraham. They failed to understand and believe in the promises of God as Abraham had. And the apostle Paul later explains what Abraham came to know and believe about the promises of God.

Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, “And to offsprings,” referring to many, but referring to one, “And to your offspring,” who is Christ. This is what I mean: the law, which came 430 years afterward, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to make the promise void. For if the inheritance comes by the law, it no longer comes by promise; but God gave it to Abraham by a promise.

Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made...” – Galatians 3:16-19 ESV

The promises made to Abraham were to be fulfilled in Christ – the Messiah of Israel. While Abraham did not understand the full import of God’s words, he chose to believe and trust all that God had to say. And the book of Genesis records that Abraham “believed the LORD, and the LORD counted him as righteous because of his faith” (Genesis 15:6 NLT).

Yet the people listening to Jesus in the Court of the Women were having a difficult time receiving and accepting what He had to say. And while they would vehemently defend themselves, claiming to be the children of God, Jesus was about to drop another bombshell on them that would turn their belief in Him to anger and resentment.

Children of the Devil

⁴² Jesus said to them, “If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and I am here. I came not of my own accord, but he sent me. ⁴³ Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word. ⁴⁴ You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father’s desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies. ⁴⁵ But because I tell the truth, you do not believe me. ⁴⁶ Which one of you convicts me of sin? If I tell the truth, why do you not believe me? ⁴⁷ Whoever is of God hears the words of God. The reason why you do not hear them is that you are not of God.”

⁴⁸ The Jews answered him, “Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon?” ⁴⁹ Jesus answered, “I do not have a demon, but I honor my Father, and you dishonor me. ⁵⁰ Yet I do not seek my own glory; there is One who seeks it, and he is the judge.” – John 8:42-50 ESV

Jesus has proclaimed Himself to be “the light of the world” (John 8:12) and, as we see in this section of John’s Gospel, His very presence is exposing the darkness around Him. His words have the same impact as a bright light being turned on in a darkened room, revealing what has always been present but hidden from view. The true nature of His critics is being put on display for everyone to see. And Jesus, functioning as the bright light of God’s truth, is contrasting His claim to godly Sonship with theirs. He has repeatedly professed to be the Son of God. He has boldly proclaimed God to be His Father. And now, He is blaming the Jewish leader’s hatred for Him on the fact that God is not their Father.

“If God were your Father, you would love me, because I have come to you from God. I am not here on my own, but he sent me. Why can’t you understand what I am saying? It’s because you can’t even hear me!” – John 8:42-43 NLT

It seems fairly obvious that Jesus wasn’t out to win over His critics. He wasn’t using persuasive words and flattering rhetoric in the hopes of defusing their anger and bringing them over to His side. The Light of the World is exposing the darkness of their hearts and revealing the true nature of their problem. They lack a relationship with God. And their unwillingness to accept Jesus as the Son of God is because they don’t know the one who sent Him.

This entire conversation has been focused on the topic of sonship. Back in verse 16, John records Jesus’ claim to have been sent by the Father. To this, the Jews asked, “Where is your father?” And Jesus responded, “Since you don’t know who I am, you don’t know who my Father is. If you knew me, you would also know my Father” (John 8:19 NLT).

Jesus continued to proclaim His divine pedigree and to defend His authority to speak on behalf of God.

“For I say only what I have heard from the one who sent me, and he is completely truthful.” – John 8:26 NLT

But John made it clear that the Jews “still didn’t understand that he was talking about his Father” (John 8:27 NLT). Now, Jesus makes the bold accusation that His critics don’t know the Son because they don’t know the Father. And, as if that was not harsh enough, Jesus adds another politically incorrect point to His argument.

“For you are the children of your father the devil, and you love to do the evil things he does. He was a murderer from the beginning. He has always hated the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, it is consistent with his character; for he is a liar and the father of lies.” – John 8:44 NLT

One can only imagine the look on the disciples’ faces as they listened to what Jesus said. They would have been shocked by the divisive nature of His words and questioned the wisdom of making such an offensive statement to the religious leaders of Israel. What was He thinking? How could He possibly hope to win over His enemies if He was going to publicly humiliate them?

But Jesus wasn’t out to win friends and influence enemies. He was only interested in exposing lies and revealing the truth. With this bold accusation, Jesus clearly and succinctly described the nature of mankind’s dilemma. The entire world was under the influence and power of the enemy. Even the Jews, the chosen people of God, were guilty of living in rebellion to God and in league with Satan. While the people of Israel could claim to be the descendants of Abraham and the children of God, their behavior revealed a different reality. Their actions toward Jesus reflected a disregard for the truth as revealed in God’s Word. The prophets had declared the coming of the Messiah but, when He showed up, the people had rejected Him.

Jesus describes Satan as a murderer and a liar, who stood opposed to the truth of God. There was a source for the intense hatred of Jesus that the religious leaders harbored in their hearts. There was a reason they could not bring themselves to accept the truth of what He said. And it was Satan himself.

Jesus came to bring life, but Satan had a long track record of destroying life. In fact, Jesus will later state that “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly” (John 10:10 ESV). And because Satan’s only desire is to steal, kill, and destroy, his “children” will follow his example, eventually demanding the death of the Son of God. Their shouts of “crucify Him, crucify Him!” will echo through the streets of Jerusalem as they demand the extinguishing of the Light of the World.

Because Satan is the father of lies, his children inherit his love for deception and falsehood. Their ears are tuned to hear and accept lies rather than the truth, which is why the words of Jesus make no sense to them. It is the true nature of their paternity that explains their glaring

obstinacy. And it led Jesus to say of them, “when I tell the truth, you just naturally don’t believe me!” (John 8:45 NLT).

Their actions are a reflection of their paternity. Jesus is saying that they behave just like their father, Satan. Like him, they prefer death to life, darkness to light, and lies to truth. Jesus came to shine the light of God’s glory into the darkness of the world, “but people loved the darkness more than the light, for their actions were evil” (John 3:19 NLT). Jesus came to give life to the spiritually dead, but many would choose to remain in slavery to sin rather than accept the freedom offered by the Son of God. Jesus proclaimed Himself to be the way, the truth, and the life – the only means of access to the Father, but the majority of His listeners would reject His offer and listen to the lies of the enemy.

John opened up his Gospel with the radical pronouncement regarding the invasion of the darkness of this world by the light of life.

The one who is the true light, who gives light to everyone, was coming into the world.

He came into the very world he created, but the world didn’t recognize him. He came to his own people, and even they rejected him. But to all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God. They are reborn—not with a physical birth resulting from human passion or plan, but a birth that comes from God. – John 1:9-13 NLT

Jesus came to offer life to the spiritually dead, to illuminate the darkness of a sin-cloaked world, and to declare the truth of God’s grace and mercy that would be made available through His own death and resurrection. But, as John makes painfully clear, the Jews who heard Jesus speak that day in the temple treasury couldn’t accept what He had to say. Rather than embracing the truth, walking into the light, and rejoicing in His offer of life, the Jews angrily proclaimed, “You Samaritan devil! Didn’t we say all along that you were possessed by a demon?” (John 8:48 NLT).

They declared “the truth” to be a liar. They accused the holy one, sent from God, to be a half-breed and an outcast from the family of Israel. And they labeled Jesus, who was filled with the glory of God, to be possessed of a demon. But Jesus was willing to leave the results up to God. He would be the final judge as to who was right. Jesus didn’t need their acceptance or require that they agree with Him. He simply wanted to accomplish His Father’s will by faithfully completing the assignment He had been given. Jesus would continue to be the light, the life, and the truth – all the way to the end. And all to the glory of God the Father.

I Am!

⁵¹ Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death.” ⁵² The Jews said to him, “Now we know that you have a demon! Abraham died, as did the prophets, yet you say, ‘If anyone keeps my word, he will never taste death.’” ⁵³ Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died? And the prophets died! Who do you make yourself out to be?” ⁵⁴ Jesus answered, “If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing. It is my Father who glorifies me, of whom you say, ‘He is our God.’” ⁵⁵ But you have not known him. I know him. If I were to say that I do not know him, I would be a liar like you, but I do know him and I keep his word. ⁵⁶ Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad.” ⁵⁷ So the Jews said to him, “You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?” ⁵⁸ Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.” ⁵⁹ So they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple. – John 8:51-59 ESV

The longer Jesus spoke, it seems that the frustration of the religious only intensified. And their growing anger with Him seems to support His accusations against Him. He has claimed to be the light of the glory of God, but they prefer to remain covered by the darkness of their own pre-established notions of righteousness and holiness. He has offered Himself as the only solution to mankind’s sin problem and the key to eternal life. But they have refused His offer, choosing instead to label Him as a blasphemer and sinner, operating in league with Satan himself. He has declared Himself to be the Son of God, yet they accused Him of being illegitimate, and not even knowing the name of His own earthly father. Jesus had described them as being the children of Satan, and now they return the favor by declaring Him of being demon-possessed.

This entire section of John’s gospel is intended to support Jesus’ claim to be the light of the world. He has been standing in the courtyard of the temple of God, speaking to the people of God, and allowing the glory of God to illuminate what has become one of the darkest places within the nation of Israel: God’s own dwelling place.

The location for this latest conversation between Jesus and the religious leaders is extremely important. He is standing in the temple treasury, where all the voluntary and obligatory financial gifts given to the temple were kept. Earlier, in chapter two of his gospel, John described Jesus cleansing the temple of “those who were selling oxen and sheep and pigeons, and the money-changers sitting there” (John 2:14 ESV). The Son of God had been appalled to find His Father’s house turned into a marketplace. In His anger, He literally cleaned house.

And making a whip of cords, he drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and oxen. And he poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. And he told those who sold the pigeons, “Take these things away; do not make my Father’s house a house of trade.” – John 2:15-16 ESV

The temple was to have been the place where God's glory dwelled. All the way back at the dedication of the original temple, the glory of God had descended upon the magnificent structure built by King Solomon.

*As soon as Solomon finished his prayer, fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices, and **the glory of the Lord filled the temple**. And the priests could not enter the house of the Lord, because **the glory of the Lord filled the Lord's house**. When all the people of Israel saw the fire come down and the glory of the Lord on the temple, they bowed down with their faces to the ground on the pavement and worshiped and gave thanks to the Lord, saying, "For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever." – 2 Chronicles 7:1-3 ESV*

In response to Solomon's prayer of dedication over the newly constructed temple, God had told him:

"I have heard your prayer and have chosen this place for myself as a house of sacrifice. When I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or command the locust to devour the land, or send pestilence among my people, if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land. Now my eyes will be open and my ears attentive to the prayer that is made in this place. For now I have chosen and consecrated this house that my name may be there forever." – 2 Chronicles 7:12-16 ESV

But God's people had proved to be unfaithful. They failed to remain obedient to His commands and chose to worship false gods, even erecting idols to them within the temple Solomon had dedicated to God. And Solomon had been one of the chief instigators behind the nation's rebellion against God. In time, God destroyed the temple that bore His name. He used the Babylonian Empire as His agent of judgment against His chosen people, turning the capital city of Jerusalem and the glorious temple into a heap of ruins.

The temple where Jesus spoke was the same one that had been rebuilt by the Jews who had returned to Judah after 70 years of captivity in Babylon. That much smaller and less ornate temple was greatly expanded by King Herod during the 1st-Century AD. And it was on the grounds of this temple where Jesus had His confrontation with the Jewish religious leaders.

In a sense, Jesus was presenting Himself as the replacement for the temple. With His coming, the primary purpose of the temple was being eliminated. It was no longer the dwelling place of God. Jesus had made the invisible God visible. He was God in human flesh, manifesting the glory of God through His miracles and messages. And, in time, He would offer His life as the ultimate and final sacrifice for the sins of mankind. The earthly temple would be replaced by the bodily temple of God's own Son. That is why Jesus had said, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up" (John 2:19 ESV). His death would accomplish what the temple and

the sacrificial system could have never done. And the author of Hebrews makes this point perfectly clear.

...those sacrifices actually reminded them of their sins year after year. For it is not possible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. That is why, when Christ came into the world, he said to God, "You did not want animal sacrifices or sin offerings. But you have given me a body to offer. You were not pleased with burnt offerings or other offerings for sin. Then I said, 'Look, I have come to do your will, O God—as is written about me in the Scriptures.'"

*First, Christ said, "You did not want animal sacrifices or sin offerings or burnt offerings or other offerings for sin, nor were you pleased with them" (though they are required by the law of Moses). Then he said, "Look, I have come to do your will." He cancels the first covenant in order to put the second into effect. For God's will was for us to be made holy by the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ, **once for all time**. – Hebrews 10:3-10 NLT*

One of the things that infuriated the religious leaders was Jesus' claim that He could offer eternal life. They had been shocked by Jesus' audacious and ridiculous claim: "if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death" (John 8:51 ESV). His statement was illogical and, therefore, unacceptable. Abraham and all the prophets had died, they reasoned. So, who was He to think that He could offer a life free from death? They even ask Him, "Who do you make yourself out to be?" (John 8:53 ESV). Their question reveals that they know exactly what Jesus was saying. He was claiming to be God. And, almost as if to support their suspicions, Jesus responded, "If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing. It is my Father who glorifies me, of whom you say, 'He is our God'" (John 8:54 ESV).

Jesus brings the conversation back to the issue of His relationship with God. He was not just another son of God, as they believed themselves to be. He was the actual Son of God, the second member of the Holy Trinity. He was claiming divinity and authority, provided to Him by His Heavenly Father. But, as Jesus pointed out, their failure to recognize and accept Him was due to their ignorance of God. They didn't know God as their Father, so how would they ever recognize His Son when He showed up?

But Jesus emphasized that Abraham, their great patriarch, had looked forward to the day when the promise of God was finally fulfilled through Jesus. God had told Abraham, "All the families of the earth will be blessed through you and your offspring" (Genesis 12:3 BSB). And the apostle Paul had clarified the meaning of this promise when he wrote, "Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, 'And to offsprings,' referring to many, but referring to one, 'And to your offspring,' who is Christ" (Galatians 3:16 ESV).

Jesus was the ultimate fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham, and He claims, "Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad" (John 8:56 ESV). In a sense, Jesus is saying, "If Abraham could 'see' and rejoice in my coming, why can't you?"

And when His detractors scoff at Jesus' words, He adds fuel to the fire by boldly asserting, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am" (John 8:58 ESV). And the magnitude of this statement did not escape them. They knew exactly what He was saying. Jesus was claiming to be God, which is why John states that "they picked up stones to throw at him" (John 8:59 ESV). They distinctly heard Jesus using the self-designation used by Yahweh when He had spoken to Moses at the burning bush.

*Then Moses said to God, "If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" God said to Moses, "**I am who I am.**" And he said, "Say this to the people of Israel: '**I am has sent me to you.**'" – Exodus 3:13-14 ESV*

At this point in the story, John has presented a turning point in the life and ministry of Jesus. The confrontation between Jesus and His adversaries has entered a new and darker phase. Jesus has clearly stated His identity. No more cryptic answers. No more veiled references to deity. He is the great "I am." And John ends this scene with a simple sentence that is pregnant with meaning: "but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple" (John 8:59 ESV).

The glory of God, in the form of the Son of God, departed the temple. He vacated the premises, leaving the religious leaders still holding the stones in their hands with which they had intended to kill Him. The Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, had walked away from the very place where tens of thousands of sacrifices had been offered for hundreds of years. But this Lamb would be offered on a hillside outside the city, providing atonement for the sins of mankind – once for all.

A Man Born Blind

¹ As he passed by, he saw a man blind from birth. ² And his disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” ³ Jesus answered, “It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him. ⁴ We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work. ⁵ As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” ⁶ Having said these things, he spit on the ground and made mud with the saliva. Then he anointed the man’s eyes with the mud ⁷ and said to him, “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam” (which means Sent). So he went and washed and came back seeing. – John 9:1-7 ESV

As has been noted before, John does not attempt to adhere to a strict chronologically accurate timeline. He has chosen to arrange his Gospel according to a theme, selecting those stories that best illustrate and prove the point he is trying to make. Since John is most interested in establishing the deity of Jesus, the stories he has included are those that best support his premise. As a result, there are many events recorded in the Synoptic Gospels that do not appear in John’s record of Jesus’ life. And, in today’s passage, John provides the details surrounding a miracle that none of the other Gospel writers include.

But John’s placement of this particular miracle at this precise point in his narrative was not without purpose. For several chapters, he has chronicled the ongoing and quickly intensifying conflict between Jesus and the Jewish religious authorities. As the light of the world, He has entered the sin-darkened land of Israel, revealing the glory of God with words of truth concerning His ministry, mission, and identity as the Son of God. But the religious leaders have repeatedly rejected His claim to have been sent from God. They have scoffed at His offers of living water, true bread, and eternal life. And they had found his most recent statement particularly off-putting.

“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” – John 8:12 ESV

Who did this man think He was? What right did He have to question the spiritual integrity of the nation’s preeminent religious scholars? They were incensed by His offer to set them free because they were slaves to no one. And, of course, they weren’t exactly flattered when He had called them sons of the devil. He had accused them of being murderers and liars, completely out of touch with God, and incapable of hearing or accepting His claim to be the Son of God. And John closed chapter eight closes with a not-so-subtle summary of their reaction to Jesus’ words.

So they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple. – John 8:59 ESV

Jesus simply walked away. The light of the world departed the temple grounds, symbolically leaving the area bathed in darkness. But the story does not end there. John records that “As he

passed by, he saw a man blind from birth” (John 9:1 ESV). It just so happened that as Jesus left the temple and the company of the belligerent religious leaders, He came across a man who suffered from physical blindness. But don’t miss the fact that this man had been *born* blind. This detail is what will set this particular miracle apart. While there are other accounts of Jesus restoring people’s sight, this is the only instance in which we are told that the man had been blind since birth. In a sense, he had been born into darkness. He had never seen the light of the sun. He had never experienced the joy of seeing his parents’ faces. This man had been born into a world marked by an all-pervasive darkness and he was completely incapable of doing anything about his condition.

This man was about to become a visible symbol for the plight of all humanity. He had been born with his debilitating condition. It was not as if he had once had sight and then lost it. He had never had the capacity to see. And he would have remained in darkness had he not encountered Jesus, the light of the world.

For the Jews, physical blindness was closely associated with sin. Because of the egregious nature of this particular disorder, most Jews assumed that it was a form of divine punishment for sin. That is why the disciples asked Jesus, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” (John 9:2 ESV). In their minds, it wasn’t a matter of whether sin had been involved, it was a case of who was the guilty party. Since the man was born blind, the logical conclusion would be that his parents were responsible for his pitiable condition.

It seems quite evident that the disciples made no connection between this man’s condition and the spiritual state of the religious leaders who had just tried to stone their master. To them, this was just another blind man, one of many anonymous sufferers that filled the streets and alleys of Jerusalem. Their only interest in this man was as a point of theological discussion. But Jesus reveals that this man’s condition and his appearance at that moment in time was all God-ordained.

“It was not because of his sins or his parents’ sins,” Jesus answered. “This happened so the power of God could be seen in him.” – John 9:3 NLT

This simple statement carries a powerful punch, revealing the sovereign hand of God over every detail of human existence. This man’s very existence had been orchestrated by the will of God Almighty. And his encounter with the Son of God had been providentially prearranged. He had been placed in the path of Jesus, not so that his sight could be *restored*, but so that the power of God could be *revealed*. Jesus was about to give this man something he had never possessed: The ability to see. He had been born into darkness, but he was about to have his eyes opened for the very first time in his life.

Jesus took the opportunity to address His disciples, reminding them that time was of the essence. His days on earth were quickly drawing to a close. And in the time remaining, they would need to keep their attention focused on “the light of the world.” While so many of Jesus’

conversations had been with the religious leaders, His words had been directed at His disciples. They had been His primary audience, and everything He had said had been for their benefit.

“We must quickly carry out the tasks assigned us by the one who sent us. The night is coming, and then no one can work. But while I am here in the world, I am the light of the world.” – John 9:4-5 NLT

They didn’t yet realize it, but Jesus’ days on earth were quickly drawing to a close. They would not always have the luxury of His company. And He wanted them to take advantage of every single moment they had in “the light” of His presence because the night was coming.

As usual, Jesus did not explain His words. He left the disciples to wrestle with the meaning of His comments and turned His attention to the blind man. And every single action taken by Jesus is filled with powerful symbolism and meaning. John describes Him as spitting on the ground and making mud from the dirt and His own saliva. Then Jesus took the mud and spread it over the blind man’s eyes. When finished, He instructed the blind man to somehow make his way to the Pool of Siloam, where he was supposed to wash away the mud.

This entire scene was meant to instruct the disciples. Jesus had just told them, “We must quickly carry out the tasks assigned us by the one who sent us.” Now, He has shown them an example of the task they had been assigned by God. They didn’t understand it yet, but they had been chosen by God and been given the responsibility of opening the eyes of the blind. And Jesus was giving them a physical demonstration of the spiritual transformation that He had come to bring to those born into the darkness of sin.

John provides no explanation regarding Jesus’ actions. We are not told why He chose to mix His saliva with dirt and apply it to the man’s eyes. His instructions for the man to wash in the Pool of Siloam come with no commentary. But all of it had to have left the disciples scratching their heads in confusion. Yet, the blind man never utters a word. He simply stands there, blindly oblivious to what Jesus is doing, but faithfully willing to do whatever this unidentified and unseen man told him to do. When Jesus told him to wash in the pool, the man obeyed. And John describes what happened next.

So the man went and washed and came back seeing! – John 9:7 NLT

This man’s life had just been radically transformed by an encounter with the Son of God. Born into darkness, he was suddenly able to see for the very first time in his life. As amazed as this man must have been at the transformation he experienced, it was the disciples whom Jesus intended to impress with His actions. His healing of the man born blind was meant to be a powerful demonstration of the Father’s power and a sign of their future ministry and mission.

At one point the disciples of John the Baptist had approached Jesus with a question from their master. “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?” (Matthew 11:3 NLT). And Jesus had responded, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight

and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me” (Matthew 11:4-6 NLT). Jesus was informing John that everything He did was in keeping with His Father’s will. The evidence for His identity was clearly visible in the things that He did. Jesus was fulfilling the words of the prophets.

*In that day the deaf shall hear
the words of a book,
and out of their gloom and darkness
the eyes of the blind shall see.
The meek shall obtain fresh joy in the Lord,
and the poor among mankind shall exult in the Holy One of Israel.* – Isaiah 29:18-19
ESV

In a real sense, Jesus’ healing of the blind man was designed to open the eyes of His own disciples. The light of the world was illuminating the darkness of their own understanding, helping them to grasp the reality of who He was and what He had come to do. But their lesson was far from over.

Light and Darkness

⁸ The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar were saying, “Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?” ⁹ Some said, “It is he.” Others said, “No, but he is like him.” He kept saying, “I am the man.” ¹⁰ So they said to him, “Then how were your eyes opened?” ¹¹ He answered, “The man called Jesus made mud and anointed my eyes and said to me, ‘Go to Siloam and wash.’ So I went and washed and received my sight.” ¹² They said to him, “Where is he?” He said, “I do not know.”

¹³ They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. ¹⁴ Now it was a Sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. ¹⁵ So the Pharisees again asked him how he had received his sight. And he said to them, “He put mud on my eyes, and I washed, and I see.” ¹⁶ Some of the Pharisees said, “This man is not from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath.” But others said, “How can a man who is a sinner do such signs?” And there was a division among them. ¹⁷ So they said again to the blind man, “What do you say about him, since he has opened your eyes?” He said, “He is a prophet.”

¹⁸ The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight, until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight ¹⁹ and asked them, “Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?” ²⁰ His parents answered, “We know that this is our son and that he was born blind. ²¹ But how he now sees we do not know, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself.” ²² (His parents said these things because they feared the Jews, for the Jews had already agreed that if anyone should confess Jesus to be Christ, he was to be put out of the synagogue.) ²³ Therefore his parents said, “He is of age; ask him.” – John 9:8-23 ESV

A man who lived his life as a beggar, due to having been born blind, happened to have a “chance” encounter with Jesus. Having lived his entire life trapped in a world of perpetual darkness, he had never seen the light of day or the face of another human being. But when the light of the world walked into his life, everything changed. Jesus, the Son of God, took plight on his condition, mercifully and miraculously providing him with sight. But according to Jesus, this man’s blindness, rather than a curse, had been intended as an opportunity to display God’s power and glory. He had been born blind so “that the works of God might be displayed in him” (John 9:3 ESV).

And when the man had returned from the Pool of Siloam, having washed away the mud Jesus had placed on his eyes, he was no longer blind. And this amazing transformation was readily apparent to all who saw him. But, somewhat ironically, not everyone could believe what they were seeing. Some questioned whether it was really the same man or simply someone who looked like him. In other words, they couldn’t believe their own eyes. It was just too much to take in. It seems the only one who could see clearly was the formerly blind man. And he was relegated to standing among the scoffers insisting, “I am the man” (John 9:9 ESV).

It was difficult for his neighbors to deny that this was the same man they had seen begging on the streets for years. Now, they were left trying to explain how he had suddenly received his sight. So they asked him the obvious question: “Then how were your eyes opened?” (John 9:10 ESV). And the man responded by telling them about all that Jesus had said and done to him. When they asked the man where Jesus was, he had to admit that he had no idea. The “light” had vacated the premises and everyone was left in a state of darkness or ignorance, including the man who had just received his sight.

Unable to locate the one who had performed the miracle, the people took the beggar to the Pharisees. And this is where Jesus’ use of the metaphors of light and darkness, blindness and sight, comes into clearer focus. The Pharisees immediately demand to know what has happened, and the man tells his story yet again. But it becomes quickly apparent that these men are less interested in the miracle that has taken place than in what they believe to be a violation of the law. It is at this point in the story that John adds a vital piece of information.

Now it was a Sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. – John 9:14 ESV

And this seemingly minor detail begins to explain some of the rather bizarre steps Jesus took to heal the man’s eyes. Why had He spit in the dirt and made mud? Why had He bothered to apply the mud to the man’s eyes and then instructed him to go to the Pool of Siloam and wash? It seems clear that none of this was necessary or required for Jesus to heal the man. But now, His actions take on a whole new light. Jesus had been fully aware that it was the Sabbath and yet, He had purposefully taken steps that appear in violation of the law against doing work on the Sabbath. And His enemies are quick to pick up on this point.

Some of the Pharisees said, “This man is not from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath.” – John 9:16 ESV

They knew who Jesus was and they weren’t surprised by His actions. This was not the first time that Jesus had violated their Sabbath-keeping traditions. But some among them argued, “How can a man who is a sinner do such signs?” (John 9:16 ESV). Jesus was an enigma to them. They couldn’t argue with the miraculous nature of His works, but they couldn’t bring themselves to believe He was who He claimed to be. That is why they ended up attributing His miraculous powers to Satan. In their minds, Jesus was nothing more than a law-breaker, a violator of their code of conduct, and a menace to their way of life. But their continued inability to recognize Jesus as their Messiah is further proof of their spiritual blindness. They could not see the Son of God standing right in front of them. The light was shining in their sin-darkened world, but they were too blind to see it. It was just as Jesus had told Nicodemus, one of their own.

“And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil.” – John 3:19 ESV

Interestingly enough, these spiritual leaders of Israel ended up turning to the formerly blind man for insight. They asked him, “What do you say about him, since he has opened your eyes?” (John 9:17 ESV). And the man, able to see but still blind to the reality of who Jesus was, simply responded, “He is a prophet.” He had progressed in his view of Jesus, having earlier referred to Him as “the man” and now declaring Him to be “a prophet.” All he knew was that Jesus was someone special. But the Pharisees rejected the man’s assessment Jesus and even denied the veracity of his story and the legitimacy of his claim to have been born blind. They were looking for proof to invalidate the whole affair. So, they sent for the man’s parents.

The Pharisees’ hatred for Jesus had grown so intense that they had threatened to excommunicate from the synagogue anyone who claimed Jesus to be the Messiah. The beggar’s parents, aware of this edict, were extremely cautious in their response to the Pharisees, choosing to verify that their son had indeed been born blind. They had no information regarding his healing and recommended that the Pharisees take that matter up with him. In a sense, they were throwing their son to the dogs. Rather than face removal from the fellowship of the synagogue, they handed over their own son to the ire of the Pharisees. They fully realized that their son, who had spent his life as a beggar and an outcast, was running the risk of becoming a social pariah yet again.

The contrast between the light and the dark is readily apparent in this story. If you recall, the disciples had originally asked Jesus whose sins had resulted in the man’s condition of blindness.

“Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” – John 9:2 ESV

While Jesus absolved the man and his parents of responsibility, He did not deny that sin was involved. The very fact that blindness exists is a result of sin entering the world through the fall of Adam and Eve. Disease and disabilities are evidence of the curse that came upon the earth as a result of our first parents’ rebellion against God. With the fall, the entire creative order was plunged into the darkness of sin and relegated to wait for a future day when relief would come. The apostle Paul explains it this way:

...all creation was subjected to God’s curse. But with eager hope, the creation looks forward to the day when it will join God’s children in glorious freedom from death and decay. For we know that all creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. – Romans 8:20-22 NLT

Jesus had come to earth. God had taken on human flesh and entered into the world He had created and which He had been forced to curse. But the Son of God came to redeem and restore. The light came into the world in order to illuminate the darkness and eliminate the curse of sin and death. But in this story, we see that there were still those whose eyes were blind to the truth. There were those who preferred the darkness over the light. Jesus had performed a miracle, yet the Pharisees called Him a sinner. The parents were amazed that their son could suddenly see, but rather than give Jesus credit for what He had done, they chose the

comfort and community of the synagogue. In this story, light and sight face off against darkness and blindness. And we begin to see what Jesus meant when He told His disciples:

"We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." – John 9:4-5 ESV

The light does not eliminate darkness. It simply illuminates it. But the words and works of Jesus reveal the pervasive nature of the darkness and the hopeless condition of mankind's spiritual blindness. But He came to change all that. And He would – on the cross.

Are We Also Blind?

²⁴ So for the second time they called the man who had been blind and said to him, "Give glory to God. We know that this man is a sinner." ²⁵ He answered, "Whether he is a sinner I do not know. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." ²⁶ They said to him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?" ²⁷ He answered them, "I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?" ²⁸ And they reviled him, saying, "You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. ²⁹ We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from." ³⁰ The man answered, "Why, this is an amazing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. ³¹ We know that God does not listen to sinners, but if anyone is a worshiper of God and does his will, God listens to him. ³² Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a man born blind. ³³ If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." ³⁴ They answered him, "You were born in utter sin, and would you teach us?" And they cast him out.

³⁵ Jesus heard that they had cast him out, and having found him he said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" ³⁶ He answered, "And who is he, sir, that I may believe in him?" ³⁷ Jesus said to him, "You have seen him, and it is he who is speaking to you." ³⁸ He said, "Lord, I believe," and he worshiped him. ³⁹ Jesus said, "For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind." ⁴⁰ Some of the Pharisees near him heard these things, and said to him, "Are we also blind?" ⁴¹ Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would have no guilt; but now that you say, 'We see,' your guilt remains. – John 9:24-41 ESV

The Pharisees were beside themselves in frustration and anger. Standing before them was a common street beggar, claiming to have had his congenital blindness miraculously healed by Jesus, their arch-nemesis. They had already threatened to excommunicate from the synagogue anyone who claimed Jesus to be the Messiah. And while this man had only proclaimed Jesus to be a prophet, they essentially accused him of blasphemy for having given glory to Jesus rather than God. They seriously doubted the veracity of this man's story, but they still found him guilty of attributing to Jesus what only God could have done.

The formerly blind man was perplexed by their reasoning and their declaration that Jesus was nothing more than a sinner. Their logic made no sense to him. But in his simple way of thinking, it didn't even matter. He responded, "Whether he is a sinner I do not know. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see" (John 9:25 ESV). All he knew for certain was that he used to be blind, but now he could see. And it was all because of this man named Jesus.

Unable to coerce a confession out of the man, they resorted to further questioning, hoping to expose a hole in his story. But the man responded with a hint of exasperation mixed with sarcasm, "Look!...I told you once. Didn't you listen? Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples, too?" (John 9:27 NLT). The content of his statement and the tone with which he said it produced an immediate and intense reaction from the Pharisees.

Then they cursed him and said, "You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses! We know God spoke to Moses, but we don't even know where this man comes from." – John 9:28-29 NLT

Their response revealed their complete disdain for Jesus and His followers. In their estimation, Jesus was a rogue Rabbi whose teachings contradicted those of Moses. In their minds, Jesus was nothing more than a Sabbath-breaker who associated with sinners. His miracles were the work of Satan, not Yahweh. And all His talk of being the Son of God was nothing less than blasphemy, a crime punishable by death.

But once again, this passage juxtaposes the light with the darkness. It contrasts those who are blind with those who have eyes to see. The Pharisees, so proud of their discipleship to Moses, had failed to understand that Moses wrote of Jesus' coming. The great emancipator and law-giver had received a promise directly from God.

"I will raise up a prophet like you from among their fellow Israelites. I will put my words in his mouth, and he will tell the people everything I command him. I will personally deal with anyone who will not listen to the messages the prophet proclaims on my behalf." – Deuteronomy 18:18-19 NLT

And Jesus was the fulfillment of that prophecy. But the Pharisees were too blind to see. They "loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil" (John 3:19 ESV). But the lowly beggar, who had received his sight from Jesus, saw the absurdity of their position.

"Why, that's very strange!" the man replied. "He healed my eyes, and yet you don't know where he comes from? We know that God doesn't listen to sinners, but he is ready to hear those who worship him and do his will. Ever since the world began, no one has been able to open the eyes of someone born blind. If this man were not from God, he couldn't have done it." – John 9:30-33 NLT

It was as clear as day to him. There was no way that Jesus was a sinner. And it was idiotic to think that Jesus was able to do what He did without the full support and authority of God. You didn't have to be a religious scholar to know that the giving of sight was an act of God. And because this man could now see, he knew that Jesus had the ear of God. But sadly, his message fell on the deaf ears and sin-darkened hearts of the Pharisees, who angrily responded, "You were born in utter sin, and would you teach us?" (John 9:34 ESV). Who was he to lecture them? He was nothing more than a man who had been cursed to blindness because of sin. And with that, they banned him from the synagogue.

This was to become a common occurrence among those Jews who aligned themselves with Jesus. In fact, Jesus would later warn His disciples, "They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God. And they will do these things because they have not known the Father, nor me. But I have said these things to you, that when their hour comes you may remember that I told them to you" (John

16:2-4 ESV). The Jews, in their religious zeal, would end up persecuting all those who became followers of Jesus. The Book of Acts reveals that the apostle Paul, prior to his conversion, had been a Pharisee whose job it was to hunt down Christians.

Meanwhile, Saul was uttering threats with every breath and was eager to kill the Lord's followers. So he went to the high priest. He requested letters addressed to the synagogues in Damascus, asking for their cooperation in the arrest of any followers of the Way he found there. He wanted to bring them—both men and women—back to Jerusalem in chains. – Acts 9:1-2 NLT

It was going to become increasingly more dangerous to be a follower of Jesus. And His death and resurrection would not make it any easier. But this lowly beggar was about to have a second “chance” encounter with Jesus. The one who had healed him sought him out and asked, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” (John 9:35 ESV).

From the overall context of the passage, it seems that this was the first time the man had actually seen Jesus with his own, newly restored, eyes. So, when Jesus spoke to him, he had no way of knowing that this was the same man who had healed him. He also had no idea that Jesus was referring to Himself as the Son of Man. Which is what led him to ask, “And who is he, sir, that I may believe in him?” Even with his restored sight, he was still spiritually blind to the reality of who Jesus was. He most likely understood that this stranger was referring to the man who had healed him, and he desired to know more about him. “You have seen him, and it is he who is speaking to you.”

And John states that, with this revelation from Jesus, the man expressed his belief and worshiped Him. It is at this point that Jesus reintroduces the metaphor of darkness and light.

“For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind.” – John 9:39 ESV

As the light of the world, Jesus judged the world by His very presence. He illuminated the darkness, but there were those who chose to remain in the darkness. They rejected the light and, in doing so, they judged themselves. They already stood condemned for their sins, and God had graciously sent His Son to provide them with atonement. But because they refused to “see” Jesus as the Son of God, they remained in their darkness. But those who “saw” and believed received forgiveness and freedom from condemnation.

The Pharisees, overhearing Jesus’ words, were offended by what He said, and objected to His inference that they were blind. But Jesus said their real problem was their belief that they had spiritual insight. They believed themselves to be enlightened and informed. But Jesus informed them, “If you were blind, you would have no guilt” (John 9:41 ESV). In other words, if they would only see and confess their blindness, they would receive sight. Jesus would later accuse these very same men of viewing themselves as in need of nothing He had to offer. They did not believe they were sinners, so they had no need for a Savior.

“Healthy people don’t need a doctor—sick people do.” – Matthew 9:12 NLT

The Good Shepherd

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

⁷ So Jesus again said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. ⁸ All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. ⁹ I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture. ¹⁰ The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. ¹¹ I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹² He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. ¹³ He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. ¹⁴ I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, ¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶ And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. ¹⁷ For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. ¹⁸ No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father.”

¹⁹ There was again a division among the Jews because of these words. ²⁰ Many of them said, “He has a demon, and is insane; why listen to him?” ²¹ Others said, “These are not the words of one who is oppressed by a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?” – John 10:1-21 ESV

In this teaching, Jesus continues His use of contrasts, using His own mission and ministry to distinguish Himself from the religious leaders of Israel. John has arranged his gospel account in such a way that the religious elite’s growing antipathy for Jesus is clearly evident. Their hatred for Him is clear. But their disdain for the people under their care is also hard to miss. They showed no signs of empathy for the blind man who was given the gift of sight. Angered by his glowing praise of Jesus, they callously cast him out of the synagogue. These were the same men who had publicly humiliated a woman by dragging her before Jesus and accusing her of adultery. To them, she had been nothing more than another tool used to construct their case against Jesus. They despised her for her sinfulness and would have had no problem seeing her stoned for her blatant disregard for God’s laws.

Yet, sadly enough, the people looked up to these men. They revered and even feared them. In the eyes of the average Israelite, these men were the enforcers of the Mosaic law, policing the behavior of the people and punishing all those who disobeyed. But what made it worse was

that these men appeared to be icons of virtue, constantly promoting their own spiritual superiority and religious zeal. They proudly presented themselves as models of righteousness who had earned special favor with God for their faithful adherence to His laws.

But in these verses, John records the words of Jesus that paint a starkly different image of these men. Jesus never addresses them directly, but it is easy to see that He has them in mind. Immediately after they had callously cast the formerly blind beggar out of the synagogue, Jesus had taken the effort to find him and reveal Himself to him. And the result was that the man believed and worshiped Jesus as the Son of Man. This man received far more than his physical sight. He was given the opportunity to see the one who had healed him and who could also deliver him from a life of spiritual darkness due to sin.

In this passage, Jesus uses the metaphor of a shepherd to distinguish Himself from the religious leaders of Israel. This imagery would have resonated with His audience because of its familiarity. Everyone would have understood the nature of the shepherd's role. And they would have been well aware of the differences between a good and a bad shepherd.

So, when Jesus began to outline these differences, everyone would have understood exactly what He was talking about. The real question would have been who He had in mind when He talked about the thief, robber, and stranger. It was quite obvious that Jesus was presenting Himself as the alternative, even referring to Himself as "the good shepherd" (John 10:11 ESV). So, who were these bad shepherds Jesus seemed to be comparing Himself to? And who did He have in mind when He referred to the "hired hand" who "cares nothing for the sheep" (John 10:13 ESV)?

It's not clear whether anyone in the crowd connected Jesus' words with the religious leaders. All John tells us is that "there was again a division among the Jews because of these words" (John 10:19 ESV). Even these well-educated and intelligent men seemed to miss the point of what Jesus was saying. They weren't able to see that Jesus was exposing their failure to shepherd well the sheep whom God had placed under their care. Jesus had exposed them as thieves, robbers, and hired hands, who cared more for themselves than they did for the sheep. And Jesus was simply echoing the words of His Heavenly Father, recorded hundreds of years earlier by the prophet Ezekiel.

"What sorrow awaits you shepherds who feed yourselves instead of your flocks. Shouldn't shepherds feed their sheep? You drink the milk, wear the wool, and butcher the best animals, but you let your flocks starve. You have not taken care of the weak. You have not tended the sick or bound up the injured. You have not gone looking for those who have wandered away and are lost. Instead, you have ruled them with harshness and cruelty. So my sheep have been scattered without a shepherd, and they are easy prey for any wild animal. They have wandered through all the mountains and all the hills, across the face of the earth, yet no one has gone to search for them." – Ezekiel 34:2-2-6 NLT

Because of their knowledge of the Scriptures, the scribes and Pharisees should have made the connection but, once again, they reveal their spiritual blindness by failing to comprehend the truth found in the Word of God.

Yet, Jesus fully understood what Ezekiel had written and presented Himself as the true shepherd who knows His sheep and calls them by name. He was the fulfillment of the promise made by God centuries earlier.

“For this is what the Sovereign Lord says: I myself will search and find my sheep. I will be like a shepherd looking for his scattered flock. I will find my sheep and rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on that dark and cloudy day.” – Ezekiel 34:11-12 NLT

“I will search for my lost ones who strayed away, and I will bring them safely home again. I will bandage the injured and strengthen the weak. But I will destroy those who are fat and powerful. I will feed them, yes—feed them justice!” – Ezekiel 34:16 NLT

Jesus had come to redeem and restore the lost sheep of God’s flock. He presents Himself as “the door” through which the sheep of God must come. There is no other way into the abundant pastureland God has prepared for His sheep than through His chosen Shepherd: His Son.

In this passage, Jesus deftly weaves together a series of metaphors concerning Himself that present a vivid portrait of His divine mission. He portrays Himself as the Good Shepherd who leads and feeds the flock of God with tender compassion, calling them by name and guiding them to safety. But He is also the door of the sheepfold, the very means by which they find access into the abundance of God’s presence. Jesus was the ultimate fulfillment of David’s portrait of the faithful shepherd.

*The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures.
He leads me beside still waters.
He restores my soul.
He leads me in paths of righteousness
for his name’s sake. – Psalm 23:1-3 ESV*

But Jesus would do more than simply lead and feed. He would provide protection against the enemy, who seeks to steal, kill, and destroy (John 10:10). As the Good Shepherd, Jesus would lay down His life on behalf of His Father’s sheep. It would be just as John the Baptist had declared. Jesus would become the sacrificial Lamb of God who sacrifices His life so that the sheep of God might have access to His heavenly sheepfold.

Jesus makes it quite clear. “I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture” (John 10:9 ESV). He is the exclusive access point to the Father. He will later reiterate this bold claim to Thomas.

“I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” – John 14:6 ESV

But Jesus doesn’t sugarcoat the manner in which the sheep find access to the Father. It will be through His death.

“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” – John 10:11 ESV

The religious leaders were not about to sacrifice their lives for anyone. They weren’t even willing to bow the knee before the Son of God. They refused to submit their wills to that of the Father. And when the Good Shepherd appeared in their midst, they were unable to hear His voice. But there would those who, like the formerly blind beggar, would hear Jesus ask, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” and would respond, “Lord, I believe” (John 9:35, 38 ESV). Jesus reveals that there will be others.

“I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.” – John 10:16 ESV

This is His veiled reference to the Gentiles, who will also become part of God’s flock. Like the Samaritan woman, they too will hear the voice of the Good Shepherd and respond in belief. They will recognize the call of God, coming from the lips of the Son of God, offering them living water, the bread of life, and the promise of an eternity marked by peace, contentment, joy, and righteousness.

But it would only come one way. The Good Shepherd would have to lay down His life for the sheep.

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

A Case of Contrasts

²² At that time the Feast of Dedication took place at Jerusalem. It was winter, ²³ and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the colonnade of Solomon. ²⁴ So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly." ²⁵ Jesus answered them, "I told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name bear witness about me, ²⁶ but you do not believe because you are not among my sheep. ²⁷ My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸ I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. ²⁹ My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. ³⁰ I and the Father are one."

³¹ The Jews picked up stones again to stone him. – John 10:22-31 ESV

Sometime after His lesson on the Good Shepherd, during the annual celebration of the Feast of Dedication, Jesus returned to the temple complex. But this time He made His way to Solomon's Colonnade, an area located on the east side of the Court of the Gentiles. This roofed, but open-sided "porch" was reserved for the Gentiles, who were prohibited from entering the temple proper.

Jesus' decision to mingle with the Gentiles is significant. Earlier, when He had described Himself to the Jews as the Good Shepherd, He had told them, "I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd" (John 10:16 ESV). Jesus was informing them that His offer of eternal life was not reserved for the Jews alone. There were those outside the flock of Israel who would hear His voice and willingly received the gift of salvation He had come to make available. This was the same message He had conveyed to the Samaritan woman.

"the hour is coming when neither on 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 the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him." – John 4:21-23 ESV

The Samaritan woman, a non-Jew, but a believer in Yahweh, had raised the issue of whether the Samaritans or the Jews worshiped God in the right place. The Samaritans worshiped Him at Mount Gerizim, while the Jews viewed the temple in Jerusalem as the proper place of worship. But Jesus informed her that this argument was about to become irrelevant. With His coming, the means and the method of worship would change. It would have little to do with the *right place*, and everything to do with worshiping God in the *right way*. And He was that way.

"I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." – John 14:6 ESV

Whether you were a Jew or a Samaritan, the only way you could truly worship God would be through faith in His Son. And Jesus' offer of salvation would be available to all, regardless of their ethnic or religious background.

So, in Solomon's Colonnade, surrounded by Gentiles, Jesus finds Himself accosted by the Jewish leaders once again. They somewhat sarcastically ask Him: "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly" (John 10:24 ESV). They want to hear Jesus openly declare Himself to be the Messiah. But they chose an interesting place to have Him do it. They are standing within the Court of the Gentiles and it has not escaped them that Jesus has chosen to associate Himself with non-Jews. Perhaps they were goading Him to announce Himself as the Jewish Messiah in this particular setting because it would make Him look like a fool.

It's impossible for us to know the motivation behind their actions, but it seems clear that Jesus was fully aware of what they were up to. He responds to their question by returning to His discussion of the sheep and the shepherd.

"I told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name bear witness about me, but you do not believe because you are not among my sheep." – John 10:25-26 ESV

Jesus had not hidden anything from them. He had repeatedly declared Himself to be the Son of God, sent from heaven to offer the gift of eternal life to all who would believe in Him. But these men had refused to believe. Why? Because they were not among His sheep. They were Jews but they were not included in His flock. When He spoke, they did not recognize His voice.

"My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand." – John 10:27-28 ESV

Again, don't miss the context. Jesus has willingly placed Himself in the company of Gentiles, on the one day of the year when the Jews celebrated the Feast of Dedication or what is now known as Hanukkah. This was a feast that was begun in the intertestamental period in order to celebrate the Maccabean revolt that drove the Syrians (the Gentiles) out of Israel. The temple had to be cleansed and rededicated because Antiochus Epiphanes, the Syrian King, had desecrated it by sacrificing swine on the temple altar as a tribute to the god Zeus. This pagan king further humiliated the Jews by forcing them to offer sacrifices to the Syrian gods and to eat the flesh of pigs. It was a spiritual low point for the people of Israel, and the Jewish historian Josephus describes the joy the people experienced by celebrating their release from Syrian oppression.

And from that time to the present we observe this festival, which we call the festival of Lights, giving this name to it, I think, from the fact that the right to worship appeared to us at a time when we hardly dared hope for it. – Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*

At the festival of Lights, the light of the world stood among the Gentiles and declared Himself to be the Jewish Messiah. What an amazing moment, filled with seeming contradictions and contrasts. On the day when the Jews celebrated their deliverance from pagan oppression, Jesus, the Jewish Messiah, stood among the Gentiles and offered the gift of eternal life – freedom from the condemnation of sin and death. He stood among the unclean, offering Himself as a way for all men, both Jew and Gentile, to be made pure before God. And Jesus described this gift of eternal life as irrevocable.

“My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand. I and the Father are one.” – John 10:29-30 ESV

Those who placed their faith in Him would never experience a loss of their salvation. Their gift of freedom from sin could never be revoked. Their promise of life eternal could never be lost. But for the Jews, their temple would be desecrated and destroyed yet again. In 70 A.D., the Romans would lay siege to Jerusalem and completely demolish the temple, burning it to the ground.

Jesus would later foretell of this coming day.

As Jesus was leaving the Temple grounds, his disciples pointed out to him the various Temple buildings. But he responded, “Do you see all these buildings? I tell you the truth, they will be completely demolished. Not one stone will be left on top of another!” – Matthew 24:1-2 NLT

The Jews put a high priority on the temple. It was there that they offered sacrifices to God. It was in the Holy of Holies that the glory of God was said to dwell above the Mercy Seat on top of the Ark of the Covenant. The temple was their key to their continued access to God. It was through the sacrificial system, which was relegated to the temple grounds, that they could receive atonement for their sins. But the day was coming when the temple would be destroyed and, with it, the means of offering sacrifices for sin and receiving atonement from God.

And yet, here was the Messiah, the Son of God, offering Himself as the sole source of salvation from sin and death. It was as He had told Nicodemus.

“Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.” – John 3:18 ESV

And the reaction of the Jewish leaders speaks volumes. John says they “picked up stones again to stone him” (John 10:31 ESV). He was not their Christ or Messiah. They refused to believe His claim to be the Son of God. He was the Good Shepherd, but they were not His sheep. And they stood condemned. The Light of the world had come, but they “loved the darkness rather than

the light because their works were evil” (John 3:19 ESV). During the celebration of the Festival of Lights, these men remained trapped in the darkness of their own sin.

Believe the Works

³² Jesus answered them, “I have shown you many good works from the Father; for which of them are you going to stone me?” ³³ The Jews answered him, “It is not for a good work that we are going to stone you but for blasphemy, because you, being a man, make yourself God.” ³⁴ Jesus answered them, “Is it not written in your Law, ‘I said, you are gods’? ³⁵ If he called them gods to whom the word of God came—and Scripture cannot be broken— ³⁶ do you say of him whom the Father consecrated and sent into the world, ‘You are blaspheming,’ because I said, ‘I am the Son of God’? ³⁷ If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me; ³⁸ but if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father.” ³⁹ Again they sought to arrest him, but he escaped from their hands.

⁴⁰ He went away again across the Jordan to the place where John had been baptizing at first, and there he remained. ⁴¹ And many came to him. And they said, “John did no sign, but everything that John said about this man was true.” ⁴² And many believed in him there. – John 10:32-42 ESV

Darkness and light, life and death, truth and lies. John’s gospel is a book of contrasts, and at the heart of it all is the disparity between Jesus and the religious leaders of Israel. He is the Good Shepherd who feeds and cares for the sheep, while they are the hireling, who have proven themselves to be nothing more than thieves and robbers who steal, kill, and destroy. And while these men were supposed to be the experts in the Mosaic Law and students of the Hebrew Scriptures, they were incapable of recognizing the very Messiah spoken of by Moses and the prophets. Yes, they were religious, but they had no relationship with God the Father. Jesus accused them of being the offspring of the devil because they bore a greater resemblance to Satan than they did to God. They were liars and murderers, and the proof is clearly seen in their latest reaction to Jesus’ teaching.

The Jews picked up stones again to stone him. – John 10:31 ESV

This was not the first time their anger with Jesus had turned to thoughts of murder. Back in chapter eight, John records another encounter between Jesus and the religious leaders where His words had left them confused and frustrated. Angered by His cryptic claims to be greater than their revered patriarch, Abraham, they had shouted, “Who do you make yourself out to be?” (John 8:53 ESV). And when Jesus had responded, “before Abraham was, I am” (John 8:58 ESV), they had picked up stones to kill Him.

The very fact that these men were so ready to kill Jesus with their own hands is evidence of their intense hatred for Him. Had they done so, they would have been in violation of Roman law which prohibited the Jews from enacting any form of capital punishment. Driven by uncontrollable anger, they were willing to throw caution to the wind and suffer the consequences.

But on this latest occasion, Jesus looked calmly at His antagonists, holding the stones in their hands, and calmly asked them, “I have shown you many good works from the Father; for which of them are you going to stone me?” (John 10:32 ESV). With this question, Jesus exposed the hypocrisy of their response to Him. All that He had done, from His many miracles to His messages concerning living water, the bread of heaven, and eternal life, gave clear evidence of His claim to be the Son of God.

Even the blind beggar who had been given the gift of sight from the hands of Jesus had been able to recognize that there was something special about this man.

“We know that God doesn’t listen to sinners, but he is ready to hear those who worship him and do his will. Ever since the world began, no one has been able to open the eyes of someone born blind. If this man were not from God, he couldn’t have done it.” – John 9:31-33 NLT

But the religious leaders were more concerned about the *words* of Jesus than they were with His *works*. It wasn’t what He did that bothered them, it was what He said.

“It is not for a good work that we are going to stone you but for blasphemy, because you, being a man, make yourself God.” – John 10:33 ESV

It didn’t help that Jesus had done many of His “works” on the Sabbath. According to their very strict interpretation of the Mosaic Law, He was a Sabbath-breaker and therefore, worthy of condemnation. But when Jesus excused His behavior by claiming to be the Son of God, that was more than they could stand. He was a blasphemer. And the evidence was clear. Jesus had been arrogant enough to describe Himself as “I am,” the very words God had used to describe Himself to Moses.

But rather than refuting their accusation, Jesus calmly responded by using their own Scriptures as validation for His claim. He was fully in His rights to call Himself the Son of God, and He used Psalm 82:6 as proof. Quoting that verse, Jesus reminded His enemies, “Is it not written in your Law, ‘I said, you are gods’?” (John 10:35 ESV). These men would have been intimately aware of this passage and known that it read, “You are gods, sons of the Most High, all of you.” In fact, they would have taken great pride in including themselves among the “sons of the Most High.”

What is fascinating about the verse which Jesus chose to quote is its surrounding context. Asaph, the author of Psalm 82, is addressing the judges of Israel, those men who were responsible for the spiritual care and physical well-being of the flock of God. But the psalmist reveals that these men were not doing their job.

*“How long will you hand down unjust decisions
by favoring the wicked?”*

*“Give justice to the poor and the orphan;
uphold the rights of the oppressed and the destitute.
Rescue the poor and helpless;
deliver them from the grasp of evil people.
But these oppressors know nothing;
they are so ignorant!
They wander about in darkness,
while the whole world is shaken to the core.” – Psalm 82:2-5 NLT*

And what follows is the part Jesus quoted. But consider closely what He chose to leave out.

*I said, “You are gods,
sons of the Most High, all of you;
nevertheless, like men you shall die,
and fall like any prince.” – Psalm 82:6-7 ESV*

Once again, Jesus reveals the contrast between Himself and His antagonists. They are sons of God, but they are merely men. And like all men, they will die. But Jesus was a different kind of man. He was the God-man, fully human, and yet fully divine. He had every right to refer to Himself as the Son of God, just as they did. But what set Him apart was that He was “the one and only Son, who is Himself God” (John 1:18 BSB).

Jesus had repeatedly declared Himself to be God’s “one and only Son” (John 3:16, 18 ESV). He was not just another Israelite who could claim to be the offspring of Abraham and, therefore, membership in God’s family. He “was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1 ESV).

But Jesus knew they were incapable of recognizing His identity as the Messiah, the Son of God. They refused to accept His words, so He challenged them to consider His works.

“If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me; but if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father.” – John 10:37-38 ESV

Which brings us back to Psalm 82. The works Jesus did were in keeping with the will and the works of God the Father. Jesus was showing justice to the poor and the orphan. He was upholding the rights of the oppressed and the destitute. He was rescuing the poor and the helpless. In fact, when John the Baptist, confined to prison, had sent His disciples to ask Jesus if He was actually the Messiah, Jesus had responded, “Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me” (Luke 7:22-23 ESV).

On another occasion, Jesus had stood in the synagogue in Nazareth and read from the scroll of Isaiah:

*“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives
and recovering of sight to the blind,
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”* – Luke 4:18-19 ESV

And then He had proclaimed to those in the synagogue, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21 ESV).

Jesus had come to do the works of His Father. And He challenged the religious leaders to consider carefully all that He had done. It was evidence enough to prove that He was the Son of God. If they would compare His works with the words expressed in their own Scriptures, they might come to believe and to “know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father” (John 10:38 ESV).

But rather than believe Him, they sought to arrest Him. Their minds were made up. So, Jesus departed once again. John closes this first half of His gospel account by describing Jesus leaving Jerusalem and returning to where His ministry had begun, the wilderness of Judea. And yet, despite His remote location, the people continued to seek Him. And they recognized that all John the Baptist had said about Him had proven true. And the result was that many believed. Unlike the religious leaders, the people saw Jesus’ works and believed.

The second half of John’s gospel will chronicle the final phase of Jesus’ earthly ministry. It will begin with Jesus’ raising of Lazarus from the dead and culminate with His own death and resurrection in Jerusalem. His “hour” was quickly coming. The purpose of His incarnation was imminent. The Son of God was preparing to do the will of God, and His final work would be the definitive proof of His identity.