

**IN**  **NEXT**  
**LEVEL**

# IN NEXT LEVEL

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## **Lesson One Intro & Chapter 1**

### **Who Wrote John?**

None of the four Gospels is signed by its writer. Yet the early church had no uncertainty about who wrote them. Only the pseudo-Gospels, which began to appear in the middle of the second century, needed to claim authorship by some well known figure.

The Gospel of John does, however, give important clues about its author. These clues draw a tighter and tighter circle, finally centering on John, the son of Zebedee. First, the author is obviously a Jew. He is familiar with Jewish customs, Jewish holy days, and Jewish terms (“messiah,” “rabbi,” etc.). Second, the author appears to be a Palestinian Jew. He speaks of locations in Jerusalem and the Palestinian countryside with firsthand knowledge. Third, he is an eyewitness. He was present at the momentous events that he narrates (such as the crucifixion, John 19:35). Fourth, and most importantly, he calls himself “the disciple whom Jesus loved” (John 21:24).

By the process of elimination, this unnamed “disciple whom Jesus loved” can be singled out from the other apostles:

Peter—named in 1:40, etc.

Andrew—named in 1:40

Philip—named in 1:43

Nathaniel (also called Bartholemew)—named in 1:45

Judas Iscariot—named in 6:71

Thomas—named in 11:16

Judas, not Iscariot (also called Thaddeas)—named in 6:71

James—killed much earlier in Acts 12:2

Matthew—wrote his own Gospel in a much different style

Only Simon the Zealot, James the Less, and John remain. Since John is shown in the Synoptic Gospels to be one of the inner three, present at the Transfiguration and at Gethsemane, he is the obvious choice. The early Church Fathers (Theophilus, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian) confirm John as the author.

### **What Is Unique about the Gospel of John?**

John is surprising in its omissions. This story of Jesus does not include his birth, temptations, transfiguration, Last Supper, or Gethsemane. It does not include any of his parables, or the Sermon on the Mount, or most of his miracles. In fact, only 9% of John overlaps the material of the Synoptic Gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke. John appears to be familiar with the other Gospels and sees no need to duplicate the parts of Jesus’ life story that has already been recorded.

John has its own striking features.

- It is the Gospel of “signs” (a word used 17 times, especially in John 20:30).
- It is the Gospel of seven “I am” statements (bread of life, light of the world, gate of the sheep, good shepherd, the resurrection and life, the way—truth—life, vine).
- It is the Gospel that marks the Passovers (John 2, 5?, 6, 12). Counting the feast of chapter 5 as a Passover, the ministry of Jesus is three years long. John is our only reason for thinking this!
- It is the Gospel of the deity of Jesus. While the Synoptics show his deity in acts of supernatural power, John states it as categorical fact. (See 1:1, 18, 34, 49; 5:16-40; 10:30; 20:28.)
- It is the Gospel of the physical humanity of Jesus. He becomes flesh (1:14) gets weary (4:6), he weeps (11:35), he washes feet (13:5), he dies (19:30), he pours out blood and water (19:34), he rises in a body that can be touched (20:27). Note that John warned in 2 John 7 about those who deny that Jesus came in the flesh.)
- It is the Gospel of believing. The verb “believe” is found 11 times in Matthew, 14 times in Mark, 9 times in Luke, and a whopping 98 times in John. The noun “faith” is not used at all in John
- It is the Gospel with its own vocabulary. Words that are used far more in John than in the Synoptics include: life, truth, witness, light, darkness, sent.
- It is the Gospel with its own purpose statement: “That you may believe . . . and by believing you may have life in his name” (20:31).

## John 1

“In the beginning” deliberately connects the Word with the God of creation in Genesis 1:1. This Word was the *Logos*, a term that reminded Greeks of the principle of reason or order underlying the universe, and reminded Jews of “the word of the Lord” when God spoke to them in the O.T. Therefore, the *Logos* was the creative and governing force behind nature, but more, he was God speaking to them in person! To say that the *Logos* was with God and was God—separate in identity and yet the same in essence—is as close as we can get to explaining the relationship of God in the Father and God in the Son.

“The Word became flesh” (v. 14) is the shocking reality of the incarnation. Jesus laid aside the privileges of being God (as in Phil 2:6-8), yet in human form was still the same divine person. When he “made his dwelling among us,” he “pitched his *tent*,” an expression that points back to the “tabernacle” in the days of Moses. Jesus came as the new Moses (see John 6), not merely renewing the Mosaic covenant, but replacing it. Here is an essential distinction: the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ (v. 17). The climax of the incarnation is in 1:18, where Jesus is called (literally), “Unique God, the One being in the bosom of the Father.” The NIV interprets this as, “the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father.” He is the One who came to show us what God is really like.

John the Baptist was clear about his own identity (vv. 19-21). He was not the long-awaited Messiah, nor Elijah (expected from Malachi 4:5), nor the Prophet (expected from Deut 18:15). He was also clear about who Jesus was, since the descending Spirit at Jesus’ baptism

confirmed it (1:34-35). That is how John could introduce Jesus to the world, saying, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (1:29).

As Jesus is introduced in chapter one, it is striking to notice that this Gospel needs to explain Jewish terms to the reader: Rabbi is “teacher” (1:38), Messiah is “Christ” (1:41), and Cephas is “Peter” (1:42). This seems to identify the original readers as non-Jewish.

As Jesus gathers his first disciples, they add to a growing list of statements in this chapter about who Jesus is:

He is God (v. 1)

He is the maker of everything (2)

He is the true light (9)

He is the Son (14)

He is the Lamb of God (29)

He is God’s Chosen One (34)

He is Rabbi (Teacher) (38)

He is Messiah (41)

He is the one Moses wrote about (45)

He is Rabbi, the Son of God, the King of Israel! (49)

He is (by his own designation) the Son of Man (51)

## Lesson Two John 2 & 3

### John 2

Chapters 2 & 3 say, “The old has gone; the new has come!”

Old stale water of purification – New superb wine

Old temple needing cleansing – New temple as Christ’s own body

Old deadness in Nicodemus – New birth and new life

Jesus and his disciples travel to Cana in Galilee (a village nine miles north of Jesus’ hometown, Nazareth) to attend a wedding. Jesus’ mother is also present, perhaps assisting, and notices they have run out of wine. (This would have been a serious blow to the reputation of the groom’s family, who have the financial responsibility to provide for this banquet.) Mary expects Jesus to do something about this (v. 3, 5), but Jesus seems at first reluctant (v. 4) and brushes her aside (v. 4).

Robert Stein (*Christianity Today*, June 20, 1975) explains the wine situation back then: Natural wine peaks out at about 12% alcohol. Jews, Greeks, Romans—everyone but the barbarian Scythians—added water to dilute it to 1/3 or even 1/10<sup>th</sup> of the original strength. The water made the wine safe to drink (less intoxicating); the alcohol made the water safe to drink (less likely to produce sickness, as in 1 Tim 5:23). Typical was one part wine to three parts water. Thus, what they usually drank was 3% alcohol. The only way to become intoxicated was to linger “alongside wine” (1 Tim 3:3) and drink “much wine” (1 Tim 3:8).

Mary persists, so Jesus tells the servants to fill six stone pots with water. (Significantly, these are pots normally intended for Jewish ceremonial washing). Since each pot holds 20 to 30 gallons, the total miracle will be 120 to 180 gallons of wine—astonishingly abundant! It is not to be assumed that the guests will drink all this. Instead, the host family who had too little will now have reserves for months to come. The wine is abundant in quantity, and superb in quality.

Sometime later, Jesus goes to Jerusalem for Passover (see Exod 12). In the outer Court of the Gentiles at the temple, approved animals and coins are sold to worshippers, creating a noisy marketplace. Jesus drives them out, full of zeal for “my Father’s house” (v. 16). (Not surprisingly, Jesus will need to cleanse the temple again at the end of his ministry, as related in all three Synoptic Gospels.)

The “Jews” (John’s shorthand for antagonistic Jewish authorities) demand a sign from Jesus to prove his right to do all this. His response: “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.” They are dumbfounded. Herod’s project to upgrade the temple has been going on for 46 years (and will not be finished until A.D. 63—just in time to be destroyed A.D. 70). How can Jesus rebuild it in three days? But Jesus is talking about the temple of his body. (It is worth noting that the overall temple area is called *hieron*, but Jesus speaks of his body as the *naos*, the temple sanctuary itself.)

A recurring theme is introduced in this chapter: many believe (v. 11, 23), but others do not believe. Much more of this to come.

### John 3

Nicodemus is a Pharisee, a group of some 6,000 zealous followers of the Law who have influence out of proportion to their numbers. He is also a member of the Sanhedrin, the ruling council of the Jews. He comes to Jesus by night, apparently for privacy. Jesus replies to his polite remarks in what will become his typical manner: he ignores what the man says and tells him the truth he needs to hear (v. 2-3).

That truth is that a man must be born again (v. 3), born of the water and the Spirit (v. 5). (Although it is sometimes said that this “water” is the amniotic fluid of the womb, no reputable commentary will say this. Nowhere in Greek literature is “water” ever used for amniotic fluid; instead the word *prophoros* is used for that.) “Born of water” is a reference to baptism, about which much is said later in this chapter. Born of the Spirit is descriptive of the Holy Spirit’s role in conversion (see Jn 16:8-9). It should be noted that when Jesus goes on to elaborate about this experience, it is the Spirit part that Jesus emphasizes (v. 6-8). (See also 1 Cor 12:13 and Titus 3:5.)

At what point in chapter 3 does Jesus stop speaking, and John begin? It could be v. 11 or v. 16, but the traditional spot is v. 22. Whatever the case, verse 14 is an important preview of Jesus on the cross. Just as the serpent—a symbol of rebellion—was lifted up on a pole (Num 21:5-9), likewise the Son of Man—becoming the focus of sin—will be lifted up on a cross (see 2 Cor 5:21 and 1 Pet 2:24). Then verse 16 encapsulates the entire gospel: God’s love, God’s gift, man’s response, heaven’s reward. When the believer puts his trust in Christ on the cross, God is pleased to give him eternal life.

And as Jesus carries his ministry into the Judean countryside (v. 22), more and more people are believing and being baptized. At this point the baptism of Jesus is the same as the baptism of John: repentance, remission of sins, preparation for the coming Messianic kingdom. In fact, a turning point is soon reached where Jesus is making and baptizing more disciples than John (v. 26, also 4:1). But John the Baptist is not concerned. His whole purpose in life has been to prepare for Christ’s coming, and he rejoices to see it happening. John’s noble motto is, “He must become greater; I must become less.”

The closing paragraph of this chapter exalts Jesus as the One who has come from above. To him—and not to everyone—God gives the Spirit without limit (v. 34). The Father loves the Son and has placed everything in his hands. Those who believe in the Son will have life; those who do not believe will be condemned.

## **Lesson Three** **John 4 & 5**

### **John 4**

Jesus' growing popularity caused him to leave Judea for Galilee, apparently to avoid premature confrontation with the Pharisees. Although Jews often crossed the Jordan and went up the east side to get to Galilee, Jesus "had to" go straight north through Samaria. This word of necessity implies that a divine appointment was awaiting him. He would meet a woman who was the opposite of Nicodemus in the previous chapter: female, unschooled, without respect or influence, an amateur student of folk religion.

His conversation with the Samaritan woman is a classic example of meeting a person on common ground and leading her step by step to believe. At first, the woman is surprised to be asked for a drink. Jews typically avoided Samaritans, considering them unclean half-breeds and heretics. Then she doubted he could get her water from such a deep well (over 100 feet deep, even today). When invited to go get her husband, she quickly changed the subject to the issue of which mountain (Gerizim or Jerusalem) is the proper place to worship. But neither site really mattered, since God is spirit and is to be worshipped in spirit and truth in the human heart. When she finally learned that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah, she ran back to town to spread the news.

Meanwhile, the disciples returned and were surprised to find Jesus talking to a woman. This bothered them even more than that he was talking to a Samaritan! (The Mishnah records the teaching of certain rabbis that for a man to talk with a woman was a waste of time, and that it was as indecent as fornication to teach a woman the Torah. See Carson, 227.) Even her own townspeople were not eager to base their faith on her report, but believed in Jesus as Savior when they heard him for themselves.

Two days later Jesus went on to Galilee, revisiting the town of Cana. Hearing that Jesus was back in Galilee, a royal official went to ask him to heal his dying son. "Go, Jesus said, "your son will live." This posed a considerable challenge: should the official leave Jesus and go all the way back to Capernaum (15 to 20 miles away), not knowing what he would find?

The man "took Jesus at his word" (NIV), literally "believed the word Jesus said." (Just as with Abraham in Gen 15:6, faith involves accepting whatever God says.) When he neared home, the official's servants rushed to meet him with the good news, "Your son lives!" Finding out the exact hour of the previous day when the son was healed, he realized that was the very time Jesus spoke to him. This was the second sign ("a miracle with a message") that Jesus performed in Galilee. (There were also other miracles already performed in Judea; see 2:23; 3:2; 4:45.) In every instance, the miracles led people to believe.



## John 5

Jesus went back to Jerusalem for “a feast” (some mss. have “the feast”) of the Jews. If this feast was Passover, then John records a total of four (ch. 2, 5, 6, 12) and this makes the ministry of Jesus three years long. If this is not a Passover, then the ministry was only two years long.

Archaeology has found a double pool with four colonnades around them, with a fifth colonnade between them. Afflicted people used to gather at this pool area, believing an angel sometimes stirred the water and the first person in the pool would be healed. (A statement to this effect is in verse four in the KJV, but no ancient mss. include it.) At this pool Jesus found a man who had been an invalid for 38 years. The man assumed he needed someone to put him in the pool, but Jesus healed him with a single command and sent him on his way.

When the Jewish authorities saw him carrying his mat, they were incensed. They cared little for the man’s wonderful healing; they only cared that he was breaking the Sabbath. The Rabbis had extended God’s simple 4<sup>th</sup> Commandment into 39 categories of forbidden work, and the 39<sup>th</sup> was “carrying a load from one domain to another.” When the man encountered Jesus later at the temple (v. 14) he promptly went to the Jews and told them it was Jesus who had healed him and told him to carry his mat. (What gratitude!) While there was occasional opposition in Galilee recorded earlier in the Synoptics, this event marked the beginning of systematic persecution by the Jews.

Jesus defended himself by saying that his Father worked until now (sustaining the universe every single day) and he himself also worked. The Jews correctly understood that by calling God his own Father, Jesus was making himself equal to God (v. 18). Jesus did not say they had misunderstood; instead he delivered what is known as the Sermon on Deity. Three times he will assert that his Father has given him the right to raise the dead and to pronounce judgment on them. He will demand that all must honor the Son just as they honor the Father (v. 23). He will also explain that God gave him the authority to judge “because he is the Son of Man” (v. 27). (A guilty sinner might complain that God does not know how hard it is to resist sin, but he cannot say that about the Son who “became flesh and lived among us”; see John 1:14 and Heb 4:15.)

Jesus knew it was unconvincing to make this claim, so he backed it up with the testimony of John (v. 33) and the testimony of the Father (v. 37). Not only so, but the O.T. Scriptures themselves testified to him (v. 39). The Jews had spent their lives studying those texts, but their pride kept them from seeing that Jesus was their long-awaited Messiah (v. 43-44).

## Lesson Four John 6, 7 & 8

### John 6

Another Passover has come. On the far shore of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus is about to perform the only miracle recorded in all four Gospels (Mt 14, Mk 6, Lk 9). Five thousand men have hurried (see Mk 6:33) to be there, and now they have no food. Even bread costing 200 denarii, (a denarius is a day's wage) will not feed them. Accepting a boy's small lunch, Jesus turns it into enough to feed everyone, with twelve small basketfuls left over. As with the wine at Cana, the abundance is astonishing.

That night the people are wanting to force Jesus to be their king. So he sends his disciples across the lake and goes up the mountainside (the modern Golan Heights) to talk things over with his Father. For hours the disciples row against a headwind out of the east, when suddenly Jesus catches up with them, walking on the water.

The next morning the crowd awakes to find Jesus gone. Puzzled, they get into boats that have been blown across the lake by the eastern wind of the previous night and go searching for Jesus in Capernaum, where his family now lives. When they find him at the local synagogue (see v. 59), Jesus speaks about the Bread of Life.

God through Moses had given their fathers manna in the desert; now God is giving them the true bread from heaven—Jesus himself. To their shock and dismay, Jesus insists that they must eat his flesh and drink his blood to have life. He repeatedly uses a word for “eat” (*trogo*) that means to “crunch noisily like an animal.” Unacceptable! At this point nearly all his disciples leave him. Peter bravely speaks for the Twelve, however; they cannot leave the only One who has “the words of life.”

But how can a follower of Jesus eat his flesh and drink his blood? It cannot be actual cannibalism. Could it be done by eating the Lord's Supper (Mt 26:26), or by ingesting the words of Jesus (Jn 6:63), or by believing in Jesus (Jn 6:40)? It seems likely that all these are involved. To eat Jesus' flesh and drink his blood is to participate in his sacrificial death. That is what the Lord's Supper is about (1 Cor 11:26—and baptism as well, Rom 6:4 and Col 2:12); that is what faith in Jesus and his message is about (1 Cor 2:2; 15:2-4). Participating in Jesus' death is what it means to enter and belong to the New Covenant.

On a separate note, this is the first of the seven “I am” statements in John (6:48; 8:12; 10:7; 10:11; 11:25; 14:6; 15:1). They seem to be a deliberate echo of the statement of God in Exodus 3:14, “I am that I am.” In addition, there is the remarkable claim of Jesus in John 8:58, “Before Abraham was, I am.”

## John 7

Six months after the Passover of John 6 comes the Feast of Tabernacles (October). This was the greatest feast in the Jewish calendar, like a 4<sup>th</sup> of July and Thanksgiving rolled into one. It was a patriotic event, when people camped out in booths of branches and leaves to commemorate their deliverance from bondage in Egypt. It was also a time to thank God for the fall harvest.

Jesus' brothers urged him to go to Judea and put his miracles on display. Since (or more literally, "if") he was doing these things, he ought to be a more public figure. But whatever his brothers thought about the miracles, they did not believe in Jesus himself. Jesus said he would not go, since his time was not fully come. When the feast was half way over, however, Jesus did go to Jerusalem. (Some ancient mss. resolve this apparent problem with the reading, "not yet going" instead of "not going" in verse 8.) A more likely solution is that Jesus really didn't go to the feast: he did not set up a booth or do the observances; he just showed up at the temple and taught.

At this point, midway through the third year of Jesus' ministry, the diverse reactions of people are more and more pronounced. He's good; no, he's a deceiver (v. 12). He's not the Messiah (v. 27); yes, he is (v. 31). He's the Prophet (v. 40, see Deut 18:15); he's the Messiah (v. 41). The temple guards are very impressed (v. 46); the Pharisees are not (v. 47). These mixed reactions will proliferate in the next few chapters.

### Other special notes:

1. The "one miracle" done by Jesus (v. 21) refers back to the lame man of Chapter 5. If the Jews could circumcise on the Sabbath, why couldn't Jesus take care of a man's entire body?
2. The people had two wrong ideas that they think prevent Jesus from being the Messiah: (a) the Messiah has to come from an unknown place, v. 27; (b) the Messiah has to come from Bethlehem, v. 42. In fact, Jesus did appear suddenly among men and he did come from Bethlehem.
3. On the final great day of the feast, Jesus promised "rivers of living water," by which he meant the indwelling of the Holy Spirit (v. 39). Significantly, "the Spirit had not yet been given" (not until Pentecost), "since Jesus had not yet been glorified" (meaning his death on the cross, as in 3:15 and 12:32).
4. After Nicodemus tried to give Jesus a fair hearing, the other Pharisees derided him. No one good comes out of Galilee, certainly none of the prophets. (And except for Elijah and Jonah, they were almost right.)

## John 8

The story of the woman taken in adultery (7:53-8:11) presents a problem. It is one of the best known stories of Jesus' life, but it is absent in virtually all of the oldest manuscripts. When it did begin to show up, it was inserted at five different places (John 7:36, 44, 52; 21:25; Luke 21:38) and was marked with asterisks or obeli to separate it from the firm text. No church father writing in Greek commented on this passage until the 12<sup>th</sup> century. It also has a bit of bad theology: only a totally sinless person can condemn anyone else's behavior. In my judgment this passage is not Scripture.

And yet. Some scholars consider it an authentic event in Jesus' life, even if it was not written by John as Scripture. It correctly shows Jesus' forgiveness and his insistence that people must leave their sin. It correctly reminds us that none of us is perfect. But these truths are probably better taught from other places in the Gospels.

Resuming the text at 8:12, we encounter Jesus' second "I am" statement: he is the light of the world. The Pharisees, as always, object. But Jesus makes one of his boldest claims: "If you do not believe that I am, you will die in your sins" (v. 24). Then he predicts, "When you have lifted up (crucified, as in 3:15 and 12:32) the Son of Man, then you will know that I am" (v. 28). Not all would believe, of course, but the death and resurrection did make believers of some of the priests and the Pharisees (see Acts 6:7 and 15:5).

To the Jews who have believed in him up to this point (v. 31) Jesus makes a famous pronouncement: "You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." But somewhat surprisingly, this turns them against Jesus. Abraham is their father and they claim that they have never been enslaved to anyone. (Except for Egypt, Philistia, Midia, Assyria, Babylonia, Greece, Syria and Rome!) Pride is such a barrier to truth.

Then they say God is their father. But in fact their real father is the devil. He inspired murder from the beginning and now they are attempting murder. He was always a liar and now they are rejecting the truth. Their only response? They call Jesus a Samaritan (as a heretic) and demon-possessed (as one who talks crazy). After all, he says that people who believe in him will never die!

Then comes the climax. Their much vaunted ancestor Abraham was actually a believer in the coming Messiah, Jesus says, and rejoiced to see Jesus' day. What? Jesus—well under 50 years old—has seen Abraham? Jesus' majestic response: "Before Abraham was born, I am!" To claim to have lived before Abraham—even using the divine "I am"—well, that is too much. The Jews who had believed in him (v. 31) are ready to stone him.

## **Lesson Five John 9 & 10**

### **John 9**

Two beliefs led up to the odd question, “Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” First, there was the widespread assumption that when bad things happen, they are a punishment for sin. Second, the rabbis taught that there was such a thing as prenatal sin (based on Jacob and Esau fighting in the womb). Encountering a blind man, Jesus’ disciples wondered whose sin had produced this blindness.

But neither this man nor his parents sinned. The blindness happened with the result that the works of God would be displayed. (A key to proper interpretation is the context of the word “that” in v. 2 and v. 3. It obviously means “with the result that” and not “in order that,” as showing an intended purpose in v. 2. The same Greek word for “that” likely means the same thing in v. 3—result, not purpose. Otherwise, we have God blinding a baby just so that he can un-blind him many years later.)

Jesus made mud out of dirt and spit, and smeared it on the man’s eyes. (He had also used spit on a deaf mute in Mk 7:33 and another blind man in Mk 8:23). Obeying Jesus’ instructions, the man found his way to the Pool of Siloam and washed his eyes. To the amazement of neighbors and bystanders, he came back seeing.

Since this happened on a Sabbath, the Pharisees objected. They investigated the matter in every possible way: How did this happen? What do you say about the man who healed you? Then to the fearful parents: Is this your son? Was he born blind? How can he now see? Getting no answer they liked, they again called for the man. He restated the inescapable truth: “I was blind, but now I see.” Pressed yet again to tell how Jesus did it, the blind man got spunky: “Do you want to become his disciples, too?”

Just as the event began with unwise assumptions (v. 2-3), it ended with another one: “We know that God does not listen to sinners” (v. 31). It is true that God may turn a deaf ear when his people have turned against him (Ps 34:15-16; 66:18; 109:7; Prov 15:29; Isa 1:15; Micah 3:4). But it is also true that God will always listen to repentant sinner (as in 2 Chron 7:14). The blind man’s point though was valid: if Jesus were not in God’s favor, he could not work such miracles. Finally, since the Pharisees could not disprove the miracle, they attacked the person, and threw him out.

Similar to the healed lame man in John 5:14, Jesus later found the healed blind man in 9:35. Unlike the formerly lame man, who turned Jesus in, the formerly blind man became a believer and worshiped Jesus. In chapter 8 sin and pride resulted in spiritual blindness; in chapter 9 physical blindness resulted in showing the glory of God.

## John 10

Background: David was a shepherd and God is a shepherd (Ps 23 & Ezek 34), but the rabbis said, “No position in the world is so despised as that of a shepherd!” Shepherds were assumed to be liars and thieves; they were not permitted to testify in court. Jesus is going to show now the true value of a true shepherd.

Sheep pens in the open country were rough rock walls topped with thorns. Entry was through a single gateway; sometimes the shepherd himself slept in that opening, becoming a human gate. Often several flocks would come into the same pen and were called out in the morning by recognizing their own shepherd’s voice.

So Jesus describes first a man who tries to sneak in by another route: he is a thief and a robber (v. 1). Such man represents both earlier false messiahs and the current leaders in Jerusalem. Jesus prolongs this “figure of speech,” but the people do not catch on to what he means.

At verse seven Jesus says plainly, “I am the door for the sheep.” Like the human gate of a pen, he represents the sole entrance into the safety of God’s fold (see 14:6) and the access to the green pastures. Jesus has come so that people can have life “to the full” (v. 10). This abundant life must not be misunderstood as a life of health and wealth, for that is not Jesus himself and his disciples had.

At verse eleven Jesus says, “I am the good shepherd.” He will not only risk his life; he will lay down his life for his sheep. His sheep are not only Israel; he has “other sheep”—the Gentiles! (v. 16) Jesus clearly knows that he will die—and be raised back to life—for his sheep.

Three months later (in winter) comes the Feast of Dedication. Known today as Hanukkah, it commemorates the victory of the Maccabees over Antiochus Epiphanes. As the Syrian ruler over the whole territory, he had profaned the Temple with pig blood, burned the Torah, and killed the priests. Jesus is in the Temple area, walking along an open porch (1500 ft long, 60 ft deep, 37 ft high) called Solomon’s Colonnade.

Jesus returns to the imagery of shepherd and sheep (v. 28-30). True believers listen to him and follow him. Jesus pledges to give them eternal life and “no one can snatch them” out of his hand. Likewise, no one can snatch them out of God’s hand. To be in Jesus’ hand (v. 28) is the same as being in God’s hand (v. 29) because he and the Father are one (v. 30).

The Jews object that Jesus is claiming to be God. So Jesus tries to help them understand. If Scripture could call human magistrates “gods” in Ps 82:6, how much more appropriate is it to call his own Son “God”? (The “how much more” logic is common in the N.T.) And as Jesus himself said, “Scripture cannot be broken.”

## **Lesson Six John 11 & 12**

### **John 11**

In Bethany, a small village two miles east of Jerusalem, Lazarus lay sick and was dying. His sisters Mary and Martha sent for their friend Jesus. (By the time John wrote this, Mary was already famous for anointing Jesus, as will be told in the next chapter. See also Mk 14:9.)

When Jesus got their call for help he did two puzzling things: he announced that this sickness would not end in death and he stayed put for two days. (Notice that if Jesus had left immediately, Lazarus would still have been dead two days when Jesus got there.) After the two days he abruptly said Lazarus was asleep (a word used both for sleep and for death) and he would go wake him. Misunderstanding, the disciples said that if he was sleeping, that was an indication he was getting better. But no. Lazarus was dead, and Jesus would return to dangerous Judea. Then Thomas (being courageous? or fatalistic? or sarcastic?) said they would all go with him.

Days later, as Jesus neared Bethany, Martha (the practical one in Luke 10:40) came out to meet him. Jesus said Lazarus would rise again. Martha (and most Jews) believed in a final resurrection of the dead, but Jesus meant right then. He proclaimed, “I am the resurrection and the life” (v. 25, the 5<sup>th</sup> of the “I ams”).

When Mary came out and repeated Martha’s words (v. 32 = v. 21), she and her friends were weeping. Jesus was “deeply moved in spirit and troubled,” showing his fully human emotions. Then “deeply moved” again in v. 38, he went to the tomb. The tomb was a cave with a stone placed into the entrance (like a cork in a bottle), and Jesus asked for it to be removed. Then, in answer to Jesus’ loud command Lazarus came out, wrapped in strips of cloth and a cloth around his face (the same as Jesus himself in 20:6-7).

When the Pharisees and the rest of the Sanhedrin heard, they cared nothing about Lazarus (see 12:10), only that Jesus was causing much commotion. They feared that many would believe in him as the Messiah, resulting in an uprising and subsequent Roman retribution. So the chief priest Caiaphas decreed that Jesus must die, instead of the whole nation dying. He did not realize that his words were inspired prophecy, that Jesus would indeed die as a substitute for the Jewish nation—and for all the Gentiles as well! So the Sanhedrin plotted (for the first time, officially) to kill Jesus.

To avoid premature confrontation, Jesus withdrew to Ephraim, a small out-of-the-way village 14 miles northeast of Jerusalem. There he stayed (for a few weeks) until time for his last Passover. In Jerusalem the people kept looking for Jesus, asking, “What do you think? Will he come?”

## John 12

Six days before Passover (counting back from Thursday as day 1, this would be a Saturday), Jesus arrived at Bethany. At a dinner honoring Jesus, Mary poured a pint of very expensive perfume on his feet and wiped them with her hair. Judas Iscariot, the dishonest keeper of group's money bag, protested this "waste" of what could have been sold for 300 denarii. (A denarius is a day's wage; 300 is approximately the number of working days in a year.) Even allowing for some exaggeration by Judas, Mary had made a lavish gift to Jesus. Jesus knew, however, that it was appropriate as a pre-burial preparation. (As a stunning side note, the chief priests now made plans to kill Lazarus as well, since he was a living testimony to Jesus.)

At the Triumphal Entry the next day, people brought palm branches (a national symbol at the time of the Maccabees and again at the uprisings of A.D. 70 and 135). They cried out, "Hosanna!" ("deliverance") to the One they called, "the King of Israel." But Jesus, riding on a young donkey looked nothing like a king. Only later did his disciples know that this fulfilled the prophecy of Zech 9:9.

In addition to the excited Jews, there were Greeks seeking Jesus. When Philip and Andrew brought them to him, Jesus knew that his hour had finally come. He also knew that to be "glorified" (v. 23) was connected with his death (v. 24) by crucifixion (v. 32). By his own admission Jesus was "troubled" at the thought. He cannot look ahead to the cross with calm indifference.

Jesus also knew that when he was "lifted up" (referring to the cross, v. 33) he would "draw" all men to him. The Calvinist understanding is that pre-selected men are "dragged" without their own choice to accept Jesus. The non-Calvinist view is that all men are "drawn" by a spiritual magnetism, but they can still say no. Either way, we must not overlook the fact that salvation begins with a divine initiative, not a human choice.

The chapter closes with a bit of a negative tone. Even after so many miracles, the crowd still would not believe in him. (What more could he do? Heal more lame or blind? Raise more dead? Walk on water—again?) The refusal to believe was predicted long ago by Isaiah. He also preached to people when God knew in advance they would not respond (Isa 6:10). The Calvinist view of v. 40 ("He has blinded their eyes") is that God chooses to make most men non-believers. The non-Calvinist view is that men who prefer darkness are blinded (unavoidably) by the light of God.

Most did not believe. Some—even among the leaders—believed but were afraid to say so. They loved the praise of men more than praise from God (see 5:44). With this chapter John closes the public ministry of Jesus.



## Lesson Seven John 13 & 14

### John 13

Jesus and his disciples are about to eat the *seder*, the evening meal on the first day of Passover. Jesus knows his time has now come, and events are rushing to their conclusion. The devil has already “put it in the heart” that Judas should betray Jesus.

The Synoptics record that they are in the Upper Room and that the disciples have been arguing about who among them is the greatest. In that atmosphere Jesus humbles himself as a servant and begins to wash feet. He teaches Peter a lesson in submissive obedience (v. 8). He knows that he is washing the feet of even the one who will betray him (v. 11). He does all this to set an example for his followers. (It is fine to reenact this as a ritual, even though few people today actually need their feet washed. It is better to reenact the principle: complete humility in meeting peoples’ needs, even when they are disgusting.)

Then Jesus, troubled in spirit, returns to the awful truth that one of his own disciples will betray him (v. 18-20). Peter signals to John to ask Jesus which one. Jesus tells John—though no one else—that it is the one to whom he hands a piece of bread to dip in the dish (likely the one of bitter herbs). When Judas takes the bread, Satan takes complete control of his heart, and Jesus says, “Go do it quickly.”

(Scholars propose that there were three low tables in a U configuration. There were pallets where the disciples reclined on one elbow in banquet position at the tables. At the center table John reclined in front of Jesus, on his “chest” side, v. 23-25. Judas reclined on the other side of Jesus, where Jesus could easily hand him the piece of bread, v. 26. At each side table five disciples reclined, with Peter far enough away he had to signal his message to John, v. 24. Had Peter competed for a chief seat, only to end up down at the end of a side table?)

When Judas leaves, the other disciples suppose that perhaps he has been sent to buy more supplies or to go give money to the poor. (On the first night of Passover, the temple stayed open from midnight on, for beggars to come to receive alms.) Now that Judas has gone, now that the final chapter is in motion, Jesus knows that it is the time for him to be glorified (v. 31). It is in this context that Jesus gives a great command: to love one another. This, more than anything else, will identify his disciples.

At the close of the chapter, Peter claims he will go anywhere, risk anything, for Jesus. But in fact, before the rooster crows (3 to 4 a.m.) that very night, Peter will deny Jesus three times.

## John 14

Following the Passover meal in the Upper Room, Jesus prepares his disciples for his departure. As they try to see beyond death into the life to come, they need to trust Jesus just as they trust the Father. He promises many “rooms” (same word as “home” in v. 23) in the place that he is preparing for them. Best of all, he himself will be there with them.

But the disciples are not satisfied. Thomas wants to know the way (and Jesus *is* the way, truth, and life; he provides the only way to get to God). Philip wants to see the Father (and Jesus *is* the very same as the Father; if they have seen him, they have seen the Father, as also 1:18).

Many promises are made in this chapter, and it is not always easy to decide which are for the disciples only, and which are for all believers. Verse 13 (“I will do whatever you ask”), verse 18 (“I will come to you”) and verse 26 (“he will teach you all things and remind you of everything”) seem to apply only to the disciples. Other verses, promising heaven (v. 3), empowerment (v. 12), the Advocate (v. 16, 23), and the Father’s love (v. 21, 23) seem to be for all believers.

The most striking promise is that the Advocate will come to them. This title for the Holy Spirit (*paracletos* in the original Greek) is also translated Comforter, Counselor, or Helper. It was originally someone who was “called to one’s side” to assist with a legal matter in court. The Advocate is “the Spirit of truth” who will live inside believers. The Holy Spirit inside the believer is also described by Jesus as, “I will come to you” (v. 18) and “we (Father and Son) will come . . . make our home” in those who obey Jesus’ teaching (v. 23).

Important additional truths about the Holy Spirit will be made as Jesus continues in chapters 15 and 16. Some of our best understanding of the relationship of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit comes from these chapters. To see Jesus is to see the Father (v. 9). The Father is in Jesus and Jesus is in the Father, saying his words and doing his work (v. 10-11). Jesus is returning to the Father (v. 12, 28) and seeks to glorify the Father (v. 13). At Jesus’ request the Father will send the Advocate (v. 16, 26), who is Jesus returning to the disciples (v. 18). The Advocate is explained as Father and Son living in the believer (v. 23). Jesus repeatedly says he must do his Father’s will, but also says that the Father will do whatever Jesus asks him!

One final note: the primary basis for the inspiration of the New Testament is found in verse 26 (and 16:13). The apostles (and by laying on their hands, their immediate associates) will have complete knowledge and flawless memory. This enables them to write the inerrant text.

## Lesson Eight John 15, 16 & 17

### John 15

The seventh and final “I am” of John’s Gospel is “I am the vine.” In the Old Testament the vine was often a symbol of Israel, especially when Israel was a disappointment to God (Ps 80, Isa 5). Now at long last, acting as the representative of the whole nation, Jesus is the “vine” that will completely fulfill the will of God (see Heb 10:5-10). In fact, the previous verse in John has just said, “I do exactly what my Father has commanded me” (Jn 14:31).

A giant golden vine adorned the front of the Temple in Jesus’ day. It is possible that Jesus and the disciples are walking past the Temple as he speaks these words, since he has just said, “Come now, let us leave” (Jn 14:31). That vine would be a great visual aid for this lesson. At the same time, it is also possible that the teaching and prayer of John 15-17 are still in the Upper Room, and that they do not actually leave until 18:1.

Here are the major lessons of the Vine and the branches:

1. Jesus—and no one else—is the true vine.
2. Believers are the branches through which the vine bears fruit.
3. Branches must remain connected to the vine to be fruitful.
4. Branches that do not bear fruit are cut off and thrown into the fire.
5. Branches that do bear fruit are pruned by God to be even more fruitful.

Jesus calls his disciples friends. Like the Good Shepherd (10:15) Jesus is prepared to lay down his life for them. Furthermore, since they are his friends and not his slaves (v. 15), Jesus lets them know his business. (Side note: Whenever someone does not let others know what is going on, he is not treating them like friends . . . and he should not be surprised if they feel untrusted and excluded.)

Another important lesson for Jesus to teach before he leaves is about the upcoming persecution that the apostles will face. Since the world of darkness hates Jesus (the Light), the world will hate his followers also. By having this hatred, it proves that they also hate the Father (v. 23).

To help them face this kind of opposition, Jesus promises to send the Advocate as their helper and source of truth (v. 26). The Advocate “goes out from the Father,” and this statement will become the basis of a great controversy in church history. The Nicene Creed of the 4<sup>th</sup> century said the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father, but as amended in the 6<sup>th</sup> century it said the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father *and the Son* (*filioque* in Latin). This addition has been vigorously rejected by the Eastern Orthodox church, especially since a Catholic pope officially endorsed it in 1014. The East/West schism of the church since 1054 holds the *filioque* clause as a major issue. (See articles on “Nicene Creed” and “Filioque” in Wikipedia or other sources.)

## John 16

Hard times are coming, and Jesus wants his disciples to be prepared. Peter will stumble this very night, but all will have to face continuing opposition. The Jews who do not become believers will throw them out of the synagogues. (This was likely a very real problem for Jewish believers A.D. 95, as John writes his Gospel.) Jesus did not give this warning earlier in his ministry because he was still with them to protect them. Now, however, he is leaving.

In his absence, the Advocate will come. The Spirit's job as to the world is to bring it under conviction (in legal terms, to put on the stand and bring out the whole truth) in three areas: sin, righteousness, and judgment. Each area represents both a problem and a solution. The world needs to be convicted about sin, and belief in Jesus is the only solution for sin; about righteousness, and Jesus is going to the Father to secure their righteousness in his sight; about judgment, and Satan—the prince enthroned by this world—is condemned.

The Spirit's job as to the disciples is to guide them into all truth. Like 14:26, this affirms the apostles' right to pen the New Testament and to be the standard of correct doctrine for the church. The Spirit of truth will speak what he hears from Jesus and will glorify Jesus. In Scripture the Spirit never wants the spotlight for himself.

Then Jesus addresses the fear and sorrow in his disciples' hearts. Yes, he will leave, but he will also come back. (Three times! He will see them in person after the resurrection; he will come to them as the Holy Spirit on Pentecost; he will come in glory at the end of the ages.) Just as a woman giving birth has pain and anguish followed by joy, so will the disciples have a time of grief followed by the triumphant joy of the resurrection.

And the disciples are moving into a new relationship with God. In Jesus' name they themselves can go directly to God. God loves them (instead of *agapao* this is a rare use of *phileo* with God, saying he not only chooses to love them—he actually *likes* them). The reason God likes/loves them is that they have loved and believed in Jesus.

The disciples are excited that Jesus is speaking plainly and they express their faith in him. He responds with words that can be punctuated three ways: (1) Do you now believe? (Don't be so sure . . .) (2) You believe at last! (Finally!) (3) You believe at last. (OK, true. However . . .).

In spite of their present enthusiasm, they will be scattered soon. In that dark hour they must remember these words: "Take heart! I have overcome the world." (See other uses of the Greek work for "take heart" in Ex 14:13; Zeph 3:16-17; Hag 2:4-5; Mt 9:2, 22; Mt 14:27; Mk 10:49). At every point of crisis the rally cry is, "Take heart!"

## John 17

A bit of background: The activities of the Day of Atonement are described in Leviticus 16. The high priest would first sacrifice a young bull for his own forgiveness, and then sacrifice a goat for the sins of the people. Add to this the fact that Jesus is called our great high priest in the book of Hebrews. This helps to explain the significance of his “high priestly” prayer in John 17, where he prays first for himself and then for his disciples and all who will believe in the future.

In the typical Jewish posture of prayer, Jesus lifts his eyes (and likely his hands, as well) toward heaven. He speaks to his Father about glory (v. 1 & 5), authority (v. 2), and completing the work that had been given to him (v. 4 & 6-8). Ironically, his request, “Glorify me,” will be fulfilled at the cross.

One special note should be made in regard to verse three. There Jesus provides a description/definition of eternal life. “This is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.” (The word “know” means to have personal, intimate involvement with someone. It was even used in the O.T. account where Adam “knew” Eve and thus she conceived a child.)

The second major part of the prayer is an intercession for his disciples (v. 9-19). He is leaving this world, but the disciples are staying—and they need help! They need to be protected, not so much from the world as from the Evil One (see v. 15). So far, eleven of them are still safe, but “the one doomed to destruction” has already fallen prey to Satan (v. 12). (The NIV “doomed to destruction” is slanted a bit toward predestination. The text does not say whether it was God’s choice or Judas’s choice that has now put him in a “doomed” situation. It is translated more literally, “No one has been lost, except the son of ‘lostness’.”)

Jesus has given these disciples God’s word (v. 14) and God’s word is truth (v. 17). It is by this truth that they are sanctified (“made holy” or “set apart”), and with this truth they are sent into the world. Both Jesus and the disciples are sanctified (with the same word used of consecrating priests in Exod 28:41).

The third major part of the prayer is for all who will believe the apostolic message (v. 20). Jesus’ prayer—if effect, his dying wish—is for the unity of all believers. This unity with one another is also in the Father and the Son, and by the testimony of this combined unity the world will believe (v. 21, 23). Tied to this unity is glory: the glory that the Father has given the Son and that the Son has given to his disciples (v. 22).

## Lesson Nine John 18 & 19

### John 18

The Kidron Valley lies on the east side of Jerusalem, 200 feet below the level of the Temple courtyards. At the bottom is a dry streambed, with water only in the winter. As Jesus and the disciples climbed up the other side, they were on the Mount of Olives. (The Synoptics call the olive grove “Gethsemane.”)

Knowing this place, Judas brought the Roman soldiers and Jewish officials who were going to arrest Jesus. The “detachment” of soldiers was literally a “cohort,” which at full strength was 760 infantry and 240 cavalry, totaling 1000 in all. (The “captain” in v. 12 is literally “ruler of 1000.”) Even if only a third of that number was on duty during a given shift, there were still enough soldiers to be absolutely sure no rebellion could get out of hand.

Jesus was *not* taken by surprise. He went forward to meet his captors, but they stepped back and fell all over each other when he said, “It is I.” When they found the courage to arrest him on the second try, Simon Peter drew his sword and cut off the ear of the high priest’s servant. (Peter likely swung sideways at the head; the man tried to dodge; all Peter got was the ear.)

The cohort bound Jesus and took him to Annas. (He had been high priest A.D. 6-15; his son-in-law Caiaphas was high priest A.D. 18-36.) Peter and another disciple (likely John himself) followed. Peter survived two easy challenges (“You’re not a disciple, are you?”), but failed the third (“You are, aren’t you?”). The 1<sup>st</sup> denial was at the gate; the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> denials were at a charcoal fire (as in 21:9).

First Annas, then Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin, conducted trials. This was illegal because:

- a. They were conducted at night
- b. The judge (Caiaphas) had already announced Jesus should die
- c. No witness lodged any initial accusation
- d. A court official struck Jesus
- e. Jesus was tried, condemned, and executed all in the same day.

At early morning Jesus was sent to the palace of the Roman governor. (The governor had no permanent dwelling in Jerusalem; wherever he happened to stay was called his “palace.”) The Jews themselves would not enter, for they would become unclean and therefore unable “to eat the Passover.” (While it is possible that Friday was the day for the *seder* and Jesus went to the cross while lambs were being slaughtered, the Synoptics insist that the previous night was that meal. So it is more likely that the priests were concerned about all the rest of Passover week, also called the Feast of Unleavened Bread.)

More concerned with legal correctness than the Jews were, Pilate began by asking for the charge. Unsatisfied, he next tried to remand the case back to the Jews. Then he interrogated the prisoner: “Are you the king of the Jews?” Jesus asked what kind of “king” Pilate meant—Roman or Jewish. (If Roman, then no; if in fulfillment of the Jewish covenant promises, yes.) Jesus did say he had a kingdom, but not of this world (v. 36). When Jesus said everyone on the side of

truth would listen to him, Pilate said, “What is truth?” and walked out. Outside, he tried again to escape responsibility by asking, “I find no basis for a charge in him. . . . Do you want me to release ‘the king of the Jews’?” But no. They wanted the rebel Barabbas.

## John 19

The Jews had a rule about flogging: no more than 39 lashes. The Romans had no such limit. Before crucifying a man they typically flogged him, using leather straps interwoven with bits of bone or metal. In many cases flogging was fatal. After Jesus was mercilessly flogged, the soldiers mocked him with a “crown” of thorns and a “royal” purple robe.

Putting all the Gospels together, one can count nine times Pilate tried to release Jesus. John 19:4 & 6, “I find no basis for a charge,” is number seven. Then, perhaps to try to evoke sympathy from the crowd, Pilate brings out the pathetic, bleeding captive and says, “Behold the man!” But they are not satisfied; they demand a crucifixion. After all, this man committed blasphemy by claiming to be the Son of God!

Frightened, Pilate went back inside with Jesus and asked, “Where do you come from?” (He surely did not mean a mere hometown; he was asking if Jesus was somehow divine.) Jesus said nothing—he had already told him the truth and Pilate had refused to listen (18:36-38). When Pilate tried to intimidate Jesus with his Roman authority, Jesus countered that his Father was the source of all authority. Still, Jesus blamed Caiaphas—“the one who handed me over to you”—more than Pilate.

Again (attempt number eight) Pilate tried to set Jesus free (v. 12), but the Jews threatened to report Pilate’s disloyalty to Caesar. So finally, Pilate took the official judge’s seat and condemned Jesus to death. It was the sixth hour, somewhere near midday. (This seems at first to disagree with Mark 15:25, which says Jesus was crucified at the third hour, somewhere around mid morning. However, if sentencing and beginning the process of taking him to be crucified occurred somewhere between 10:30 and 11:30, this would satisfy both Gospels.)

Carrying his own cross (likely the *patibulum*, or cross-bar) Jesus went out of the city to the place of the Skull (in Aramaic, *Golgotha*; in Latin, *Calvarius*=Calvary). To add to the humiliation, victims of crucifixion were usually stripped naked, but in Jewish areas the victims were allowed to keep a loin cloth. Victims were nailed at the base of the hand and sometimes also through the feet (See Ps 22:16; Lk 24:39). Above Jesus’ head was a sign: Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews (in many paintings, abbreviated in Latin as INRI). In spite of the Jews’ objections, Pilate (bravely?) insisted the sign remain as written.

Three of the “seven sayings from the cross” are recorded in John. (1) “Woman, here is your son, etc.” as he commits her care to John, (2) “I am thirsty” as he prepares his throat for a final victory cry, and (3) “It is finished!” This final cry, *tetelestai*, is found in everyday Greek with meanings such as, “Paid in full,” and “Mission accomplished.” Then Jesus died.

Since it was late on Friday, the day of preparation for the Sabbath, the Jews wanted to hasten the deaths and take the men down before the Sabbath began that night.

So Pilate agreed to have the soldiers break the legs. (Death usually came by ultimate suffocation, when exhaustion no longer allowed the victim to pull up, relax the diaphragm, and breathe. With legs busted out from under them, this would happen quickly.) To verify that Jesus was already dead, a soldier rammed a spear into his side, releasing a flow of blood and water. (He who “became flesh” was fully man, indeed! See also 2 John 7.) When they did not need to break Jesus’ bones, this fulfilled Ps 34:19-20, and possibly also Exod 12:46.

At some personal risk, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, two members of the Sanhedrin (Lk 23:51; Jn 3:1) secured the body for burial. They wrapped Jesus in strips of cloth and seventy-five pounds of spices, then laid him in a new tomb that belonged to Joseph (Mt 27:60). (Ancient tombs were often re-used many times. Six to twelve months after burial only the bones remained. These were stacked to the side and then another corpse could be interred.) The two men did not have the option of seeking a more distant tomb; as soon as it was too dark to tell a white hair from a dark hair, the Sabbath would officially begin.



## **Lesson Ten John 20 & 21**

### **John 20**

John 19 has ended with Joseph and Nicodemus burying Jesus. From the Synoptics we also know:

1. Mary Magdalene & Jesus' mother see where he is laid (Mt/Mk/Lk)
2. Saturday morning the tomb is sealed (Mt)
3. Saturday evening (after Sabbath ends) the women buy spices (Mk)
4. Sunday dawn Mary Magdalene, other Mary, Salome go to tomb (Mt/Mk/Lk)
5. Sunday dawn angel rolls away stone (Mt)

John 20 resumes the narrative before dawn as Mary Magdalene leaves for the tomb. When she (and the other women) arrive and see the stone moved away, she runs to tell Peter and John. Even though John's Gospel has not mentioned the other women, Mary exclaims, "We don't know where they have put him."

Running to the tomb, John arrives first and looks cautiously inside. Peter goes right on inside. They see the "strips of linen" (see Jn 11:44) lying there, with the head cloth folded up by itself. (The "strips of linen" argue against the famed Shroud of Turin as the authentic burial cloth of Jesus.) They believe, but do not understand, that Jesus has risen and fulfilled Scripture (such as Ps 16:8-11).

By the time Mary gets back to the tomb the others have already left. She speaks to two angels, assuming them to be men, and speaks to Jesus, assuming he is the gardener. When he calls her by name she recognizes him. His words, "Do not hold on to me" imply that she has embraced him (as the other women will soon clasp his feet in Mt 28:9). The KJV has "Touch me not," which mistakenly implies that Jesus cannot or must not yet be touched. This has given rise to an odd theory that Jesus had to make a quick trip to heaven and back before the other women touch him.

Mary Magdalene reports that she has seen the Lord (v. 18). Sometime during the day Jesus also appears to Peter (see Lk 24:34) and two men on the road to Emmaus (Lk 24:25). Now it is evening and the disciples are hiding in a locked room (traditionally assumed to be the Upper Room). Jesus suddenly appears, and shows them his pierced hands and side. He is not a ghost or apparition; he is the same man that was crucified!

The apostles are (1) sent, (2) told to receive the Holy Spirit (in some way preparatory for Pentecost), and (3) promised authority to be able to forgive sins. For an unknown reason, Thomas is not present that evening. He stubbornly insists that he will not believe unless he sees and touches for himself.

On Sunday a week later, Jesus appears again and offers Thomas the opportunity to do just what he had demanded. Thoroughly convinced, Thomas concludes what every reader of John should conclude: Jesus is "my Lord and my God." Jesus commends him for his faith, but has a better word for those who cannot see, but still believe. In fact, at this point John states this as the

purpose of his book: He has written this Gospel so that readers may believe that Jesus is the Messiah and Son of God, and by believing have eternal life.

## John 21

To conclude, John records another appearance, one not mentioned in the Synoptics. Seven of the disciples were together in Galilee when Peter announced, “I’m going fishing.” Oddly, several commentators have understood this as abandoning Jesus and returning to the old life of fishing. (Then the question of verse 15 becomes, “Do you love me more than these boats & nets & fish?”) However, the other disciples saw nothing negative in Peter’s statement and said, “We’ll go with you.” Then, just as in Luke 5:5 at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, they fished all night and caught nothing.

In the morning mist Jesus stood on the shore and called to them. “Throw your net on the other side of the boat,” he called. This probably sounded silly, but they obeyed and caught so many big fish they could not haul them into the boat. Perhaps remembering the similar results from Luke 5:6, John exclaimed, “It is the Lord!”

Simon Peter—always the impulsive one—threw on his outer garment and jumped (literally, “threw himself”) into the sea. The other disciples followed in the boat, dragging the net of fish behind them. On shore Jesus stood by a charcoal fire, with fish and toast ready for their breakfast.

When asked to bring more fish, Simon single-handedly dragged the bulging net ashore. (This is our sole reason for picturing Simon as a big, strong guy.) Surprisingly, the net was not torn, even though it held 153 big fish (300 or 400 pounds?). Through the centuries this number has intrigued interpreters. Jerome said there were 153 different kinds of fish in the world. Some said there were 153 nations. Some played with the numeric equivalents of letters: “Simon” (76) + *ichthys* “fish” (77), *ichth* in reverse numerics, “the church of love” or “the children of God” in Hebrew, “Pisgah,” or “Cana G.” Another early effort recognized that 153 was the total of  $1 + 2 + 3 + \dots + 17$ , or a triangle with 17 on each side. Then 17 could be 10 commandments + 7 spirits of God, 10 commandments + 3 (trinity) + 4 (foursquare city). And then  $12 \times 12$  (apostles) +  $3 \times 3$  (trinity) would also add up just right! Or . . . maybe that was simply how many fish they caught, and since they were experienced fishermen, that number mattered.

More importantly, after the meal Jesus asked Simon, “Do you love me more than these?” This likely referred back to Simon’s bold claim in the Upper Room that he would be loyal to Jesus, even if the rest of the disciples were not. Back then, beside the other charcoal fire he denied him. Three times the question is asked; three times Simon says, “You know I love you!” This threefold question undoubtedly reopened the wound on Simon’s soul, so Jesus could forgive, heal, and commission Simon for the work ahead.

It has often been noted that Jesus said *agapao*, *agapao*, *phileo* and Peter said *phileo*, *phileo*, *phileo*. This may have been just for variety (as in switching sheep & lambs, or switching feed & take care of). It is *not* likely that Jesus said, “really love, really love, sort of love” and then Peter stuck with merely “sort of love.” It is more likely that Peter thought (as most people did) that *phileo*, the kind of love based on the object’s lovability, was more complimentary.

Finally, Jesus warned Peter that his discipleship would end in his own death. Still, the call to Peter was, “Follow me!” Then, yet one more time, Peter spoke impulsively: “Lord, what about him?” But what Jesus had in mind for “the disciple whom Jesus loved”—even if that disciple were to live until the Second Coming!—was not Peter’s concern.

That disciple, the one who had leaned back against Jesus at the table, now announces that he is the writer of this Gospel and that his testimony is true. Much more could have been written, but could all the books in the world do justice to the greatest life ever lived?

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