

# Devotional Meditations on the Gospel of John

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Note: this is a draft document still in need of final editing

## #1 - Devotional Meditations on John: Introduction

The Gospel of John stands out from Matthew, Mark, and Luke. The latter books have come to be known as the “Synoptic” Gospels. The title comes from the Greek word *synoptikos*, which means “seen together.” The idea is that the first three Gospels contain similar presentation of the life and ministry of Jesus. They contain many of the same stories in a similar style. Thus, many seminary and college classes will cover the Matthew, Mark, and Luke-Acts. The Gospel of John will be covered in a separate course.

But this approach can sometimes keep us from seeing the distinctive shape and message of each book. We must state clearly that the four Gospels are all God’s inspired word. They are fundamentally in agreement in their witness to Christ. At the same time, they do not tell the story of Jesus in the same way. Even in three synoptic Gospels have differences in presentation that meaningfully contribute to their distinctive emphases. Although Christ himself does not change, the challenges, needs, and problems that the church faces do change. They may differ as to location or time. The different emphases of each Gospel do not imply a contradiction in their joint-testimony to Christ. The same Holy Spirit stands behind each writer, carrying them along as they spoke from God (2 Peter 3:16). God does not change, but the particular needs, troubles, and circumstances of the church do change. In some eras the church grows complacent. These times require a “wake up call.” At other times the church faces great trial and persecution. An encouraging word of God abiding power and presence is what is needed. Some eras are confused regarding the divinity of Christ, while others struggle to articulate his humanity. The Lord is the Great Physician. The Bible is his spiritual medicine cabinet. It is filled with medications to meet every sickness and disease that may afflict us at different times.

At the same time, we must acknowledge that grouping the first three Gospels together has sometimes obscured the fact that each has a distinctive message with particular emphases in their testimony to Christ. While this has been a problem at times with the study of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, it has not typically been the case with a Gospel with John. It has a very different style, set of vocabulary, flow, and feel when compared to the other Gospels. It’s stylistic distinctiveness has always helped reinforce its particular message and emphasis. John also has the most developed and deep doctrine of the identity of Jesus Christ. Revelation is progressive and develops organically from seed, to bud, to stem, to its full flower. Although the NT as a whole represents the full blossoming of the revelation of God, we can also discern the progressive deepening and unfolding of revelation within the NT. In the earlier revelation of the NT era we begin to see the bud of the fulness of God’s revelation begin to open. In the middle we begin to see the distinctive shape of each pedal as it slowly unfolds. By the later NT revelation we behold the flower fully opened in all of its beauty and glory. The book of Hebrews is one such later piece of NT revelation and contains the most detailed and deep expositions of the fulness of Christ’s work. The Gospel and letters of John also share this characteristic. There is a depth and profundity to John’s presentation of Christ that is fuller than what we read in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. There is no contradiction between them, just as there is no contradiction between the flower in its bud form and the flower in full bloom. It is simply a matter of the fulness and clarity of their content.

John was almost certainly written by the "beloved apostle." There are several "Johns" in the Bible. This John is among the first disciples called by Jesus. After Peter and Andrew Jesus approached James and John and called them to follow him. This is the "John" of that select group. While technically anonymous, there are various details that point directly to him as the human agent of its composition. The fact that he nowhere explicitly signs his name is evidence of his growth as a Christian and his humility as a man. After all, he was one of the "sons of thunder" who demanded that they sit at Jesus' right and left hand in glory. Think carefully about Jesus' position relative to God the Father in his exaltation, and the absurdity of the self-centeredness that stands behind the request should become clear! The fact that this man now pens a Gospel to which he refuses to affix his earthly name shows how much he has changed by the grace of Jesus. Like the apostle says through John the Baptist in his composition: "[Christ] must increase, but I must decrease." John wishes to remain in the background so that the foreground can be filled with Christ alone.

At the same time, we know that John was chosen by God and inspired by the Holy Spirit to pen this book. When we remember that John was but an unlearned man of the sea, we are reinforced in our confidence in his Gospel's divine origin. We quickly condemn the Pharisees for their foolishness and blindness. Yet who can read the Gospel of John and not marvel as they did--that such words could come from the mouth of an ignorant, unlearned man? Truly their wisdom came only from the fact that they had been with Jesus and that he was still with them through his Spirit. The majesty of the Gospel's style is beyond the grasp of a simple fisherman, but not the infinite God.

This Gospel has a simple structure consisting of two parts. The first is the "book of signs" running from John 1-11. After the prologue, this section begins in John 2 with the wedding of Cana in Galilee. John refers to this as "the first of [Jesus's] signs." After a series of other miracles, this section culminates in the resurrection of Lazarus from the dead. Interpreters typically identify seven distinct "signs," which is an appropriate number given the eschatological significance John attributes to Jesus's person and work. The second part of the Gospel is the "book of sufferings." It records the events and sayings of Jesus leading up to his passion week of sufferings. The structure of the Gospel reflects the two phases of Jesus work: the revelation of his divine power and his ministry of sorrow and suffering. Jesus embraces both humiliation and exaltation. What Jesus accomplished for us is also to be manifested in us. We are not greater than our master. What happened to him will happen to us. Through this process we will die to sin and bear much fruit.

The purpose of the book is stated several times but appears most clearly and pointedly but towards the end: "These things are written that you may believe in the Son of God, and believing may have life and his name" (John 20:31). The word of God is the primary means of grace. To be sure, it doesn't remain alone. It is accompanied by the sacraments and prayer. But it retains a primacy among all other means of grace. This lies (in part) in the fact that the word alone is that which creates or produces faith. The sacraments signify and seal the word and support in our growth in faith. Prayer does the same and is a vital part of our life before God. But it is the word alone that produces faith by God's Spirit.

The simplicity of John's presentation and the language can easily fool us. First year seminary students who are learning Greek quickly grow frustrated with John's writings. On the one hand, John is probably

the easiest book to read in the original language. This is obviously an attractive prospect for students just introduced to an ancient foreign language. But upon closer analysis, his theology is far deeper and richer than the simplicity of the vocabulary would initially indicate.

For example, John speaks in very simple terms of life, light, glory, bread, food, water, etc. These are all obvious and everyday aspects of human life which can be grasped even by children. We do not need special knowledge of the distinctiveness of life in first century in Palestine to grasp his basic points. John draws on those aspects of human experience that are common to all people and ages. Yet there is always a deeper meaning to his use of these terms. There is life, but then there is life...that is, eternal life. There is water, but then there is water...that is, spiritual water. Like many other parts of the Bible, the visible world becomes a lens through which the spiritual world is understood and seen.

There is no contradiction between the way John does this and the other Gospels. Jesus often speaks in parables, which also appeals to the natural world to illustrate the spiritual. Whereas Jesus often speaks in the synoptic gospels of the "kingdom of God" or "kingdom of heaven," in John he usually speaks of life, light, and glory. These are the same concepts under different terms.

The Gospel of John is rightly a favorite of Christians who long to learn more about Christ and draw nearer to him. It combines two qualities that are not often found in combination with one another: profound depths of meaning in simple language that even a child can understand.

This aspect of the Gospel reflects Christ himself. He is both true God and true man. He is the eternal, infinite, unchangeable God. His greatness is unsearchable. No eye has seen him and no mind can exhaustively know him. But he is also a true man. The infinitely great and unsearchable "logos" takes to himself finite "flesh." The Eternal One reveals himself in the temporal. The "ideal" reveals itself in the "practical" experience of earthly human existence. And so throughout John's Gospel Jesus is constantly telling us that he is the true bread, true water, true Shepard, and true light that reveals itself in its earthly counterparts. The Gospel of John is not a philosophical treatise in which the "intellectual" analysis of being, knowledge, and ethics are abstracted from reality. Through he incarnate logos these things are integrated in a revelation that is profoundly deep in substance while simple and beautiful in its presentation. This is all rooted in the reality of the incarnation. The word becomes flesh. The heavenly enters into the earthy and the eternal in the temporal. Christ's touches real human life in the world cursed by sin.

And so this Gospel offers hope to us not just in one aspect of our fallen human experience, but all of it. From our birth to our death Jesus has shared in the misery and sufferings of our common human experience, bearing in his sinless body all the effects of sin on the cross. He absorbs in himself all the misery of his people in this fallen world that he might grant to us the simplest perfection of heaven.

Now we must hunger and thirst, grasping by faith but glimmers of that joy to come, but in the confidence that he who began this good work in us will complete it at the day of Christ.

## #2 - Devotional Meditations (John 1)

The prologue to John's Gospel is quite lovely in form and appearance. From its opening to its ending we are struck by both the simplicity of his style and the profundity of his subject matter. John 1 is quite poetic. But its eloquence does not negate its historical character. In fact, it does far more than tell of mere horizontal history. John 1 is all about how eternity and history have come to intersect each other in the word become flesh. Heaven and earth have met in him. Eternity and time have kissed one another. Light has met darkness, and darkness has not overcome it.

John 1 begins in eternity. It speaks of a "beginning" but does not immediately specify what that is. This is not the beginning of creation. That will come very soon. Instead, it speaks of the eternal beginning where God was all that existed. In fact, before we even speak of "God" we speak of a "word" ("logos" in the Greek). This order should strike you. Nothing is more foundational than God himself. Yet John chooses to put the "word" (logos) first. There's nothing inappropriate about this. After all, John tells us this word was himself God. To start with his "word" is to start with God.

But John's story is not just that of God generally. It's the story of the Logos. The Logos was both "with God" and "was God." In one sense he was distinct from God, but in another sense he shares the essence of God. These are indications of the Triune relationships within the one essence of the Godhead. Here John speaks of a God-Logos relationship. Later in the prologue it will speak of this as a Father-Son relationship. There is an eternal Father, and he eternally-begotten Son. It is the logos and the "Son" who is going to be central to the story. We learn also that there is another who proceeds from the Father and the Son within this eternal relationship: the Holy Spirit. He is the other "comforter" who will come after Jesus. In all these things we see more than just the seeds of the later doctrine of the Trinity as articulated by the Christian church in the subsequent centuries. This was not a new creation of philosophically-minded Christians. It was the simple pulling together of biblical statements describing the relationship between the three persons of the Trinity. It took the post-Apostolic church several years to answer the various heretical misunderstandings of the Trinity. But its basic shape was present in NT revelation itself and consistently present from the first century on. Some of the clearest and most sophisticated Biblical statements on the relationship of the persons of the Trinity are articulated in the Gospel of John. People who argue that the doctrine of the Trinity is an imposition on the biblical text or a later manufacturing either have not read the Gospel of John or are so blind they cannot see their own nose in the mirror.

To reinforce the point John then turns us to creation. The word is the one through whom the Father made everything. Everything was made through the Logos. Apart from him, nothing was made that was made. This statement may sound redundant and repetitive. It is so purposely to ensure that the point will not be missed. Jesus, the Logos, is the creator of everything. As such he is not a product of that creation but its originator.

This passage has parallels with Colossians 1:15-20 and Hebrews 1:1-4. We do not have the space here to develop the parallels, but many brighter lights in the church have done so. Perhaps if the reader has time they can simply print out these passages side-by-side to note the similarities. There's a consistent New

Testament testimony to the identity of Jesus as identical to God, as distinct from God, and performing the creative works of God. Again, those who argue that the Bible presents different and contradictory ideas about Jesus either have not read them or are so nearsighted they are blind.

This Logos is also described as the "light of men." Some argue that this passage refers to the redemptive light of special revelation. It is certainly true that Jesus is one who brings special revelation to his church through Scripture. But in context, it seems that Christ here is being identified as the light of natural revelation. The same Christ who came to save is the Christ who created. The light of redemption comes from the same source as the light of creation. He alone is the giver of light. True light and true sight is found in him and in the revelation that comes from him, whether you look at nature or Scripture.

This is one reason we should not overly separate natural and special revelation. Natural revelation is the way God reveals himself in creation, which emphasizes his eternal power and divine character. Special revelation is the way God reveals himself in the process of redemption, now finalized in the written Scriptures. We therefore rightly speak of "two books" in which we see God's revelation: the book of nature in the book of Scripture. But these books are but two volumes and one grand story of revelation. They mutually reinforce one another.

Even before the fall Adam needed God's special revelation to interpret natural revelation fully and rightly. God put the stamp of himself as the maker on everything for all to see, but he also gave Adam a special revelation regarding the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, marriage, the Sabbath day, and the tree of life. The two go together as part of one grand scheme of revelation.

In the work of apologetics (the defense of the Christian faith) we must always remember this point. Nature cannot be rightly interpreted by "reason alone" abstracted from Jesus. To be sure, God gave us reason. It is wrong to reject reason as many have done. It is a tool that God gave us to think clearly about both himself and the world. But ultimately it is the eternal "logos" that is the source of human reason. To use reason without first grounding it in him is to steal what is rightfully credited to God alone. To use reason to argue against the Logos is utter absurdity. Justice Satan would never cast out Satan, so logic itself would fail if it attacked its source.

It is from the word "Logos" that we get the word "logic" or reason. In him all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are found. Reason's foundation is in Christ. Logic shows us how everything is interconnected in an intelligible way. The Scriptures tell us that it is in Christ that all things "hold together" (Colossians 1).

How absurd, then, to use the results of "science" and logical inquiry to attack the one who is alone the source of our ability to reason, to know, and discover the truths of God's creation. The very act of using reason to reject God proves the very thing they are seeking to destroy.

### #3 - Devotional Meditations on John (Prologue)

In the previous devotional we reflected on the significance of the Logos as the light of men. Christ is the light of creation and redemption. In him alone can we find spiritual illumination to find a path to the Father.

But along with light also comes darkness. Even in creation darkness and light came together. Darkness preceded light, but light overcame darkness. Subsequent history followed a pattern of light to darkness and darkness to light. There was evening and morning each day.

This pattern looks back not simply to creation, but forward to the Gospel's story of Jesus. In other words, it anticipates a darkness that will come into conflict with the light. The darkness represents the world ruled by Satan and the forces of sin: the kingdom of this world, and the power of darkness. John elsewhere describes it in terms of an unholy Trinity of the power of evil: the world, our own flesh, and the devil. This darkness cannot understand the light. It is blinded through the power of the world, the flesh, and the devil. The darkness will assault the light, but the darkness will not overcome it. The conflict is inevitable, but the victory is certain.

Somewhat surprisingly, John's prologue quickly turns its attention to John the Baptist. For many of us, this is a jarring shift. We jump from eternity past and the beginning of creation, all the way to John the Baptist. The entire history of redemption between these two events seems completely bypassed. What is going on here?

Clearly, he has not completely forgotten the history between creation and the appearance of the Baptist. After all, he will later speak of the law given through Moses just a few verses after this.

But why skip Moses and run straight to John? To our minds, John the Baptist seems like a fairly minor figure. He appears in the first chapters, but then quickly disappears after his imprisonment and death. There are a few people today tempted to elevate John the Baptist above Jesus. This was not the case in Jesus' day. Jesus tells us that John was the greatest man born a woman and that in him the entire Old Testament revelation was summed up. He is the Elijah that was to come to prepare the way for the Lord. But Jesus also tells us that the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. In John's person and message, the Law and the Prophets are fulfilled. Their rite of baptism reduces the whole ceremonial order to its simplest form. It requires nothing man-made. The water is taken straight from a natural river formed by the hand of God. The baptizer is found not in the splendor of a garden-temple in Jerusalem, but in the desert of a wilderness. His message does not consist in the legalistic performance of a formal code of religion, but in simply repentance in preparation for a meeting with God himself. This is the core of the Old Testament religion which had been corrupted by the Jewish leaders. In their system the heart had been ripped from the body. Makeup and fine clothes had been put on the corpse that remained, but it had been emptied of its life-giving vitality.

John simply speaks of him as a "witness" to the light. But Jesus is the "true" light that is coming into the world. It's important to remember that in the gospel of John the word "true" is not always used in the

sense of something being “true” as opposed to being “false.” Instead, it’s used to connect something with the eternal, unchanging verity of the kingdom of God. Sometimes Jesus will be spoken of as the “true” bread that came down from heaven. This does not imply that there was something false about the manna. It was a sacramental type which was a sign and seal of the heavenly reality. But it was not the “final” or “ultimate” reality. The use of the word "true" in John's Gospel does not only stand over against what is false. It represents the permanent and heavenly over against the temporary and earthly.

The next section indicates that this true light has come into the world. Interestingly John has shifted to the use of the term “light” instead of “logos” as he did in the beginning. The two terms are used interchangeably. This light came into the world. Indeed, it was in the world. But while it was in the world the world did not recognize it. This is a striking phrase. Light came into darkness, but the darkness could not see it or understand it.

Perhaps we are so used to reading John's prologue that we miss the absurdity of this reality. When we walk into a dark room and switch on the light, a major shift happens. We go from seeing nothing to seeing everything. An entirely new world that was once hidden now is revealed.

Yet when Jesus came into the dark room that is the world, the world didn't even realize that the lights have been turned on. Sometimes when our eyes grow accustomed to darkness, the light becomes oppressive. We must close our eyes and create darkness within ourselves by closing our eyes to the brightness all around us. In fact, it can sometimes take some time for those stuck in dark places to recover their ability to see. Having come into the light, we flee back to the darkness.

So it is with us spiritually. The darkness is deceptive. It seems to offer a place of refuge for us in our sin. In the darkness we can hide from others: perhaps we can also hide from God! But how deceptive darkness is! It promises safety, but delivers bondage and oppression.

Christ is the light that shines in our darkness. The world fears the light because it will expose their evil works. But when we walk in the light we have both illumination and cleansing. For in it the blood of Jesus cleanses us from our sins.



#### #4 - Devotional Meditations on John 1 (Prologue)

In the last devotional we reflected at length on the ideas of light and darkness in John's Gospel. They represent the deeper spiritual realities of the world of sin and the world of heaven. Likewise, darkness and light correspond to internal, spiritual realities in our hearts as we are touched by either light or darkness. They are perhaps best summarized by the statement of the man healed by Jesus: "I was blind, but now I see" (John 9:25). Christians in the light of the Logos have had their lights turned on! What a blessing to be able to see again!

But what exactly is "seeing?" According to John, to "see" is to believe, and to believe is to receive. He writes: "to all those who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God" (John 1:12).

Right from the outset, John gives us a helpful and simple definition of faith. Faith is fundamental to John's Gospel even as it is fundamental to our approach to the Triune God. His goal in writing this book is the production of faith in God's people: "...these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:31).

In Greek, there is mainly one word to express this idea: "pistis." In English, we speak of "faith" or "belief" often using them interchangeably. Which one we choose depends mainly on the context. There is no fundamental difference in meaning between them.

But what is faith? Faith involves many things. Faith believes that everything God says is true. Faith eagerly listens to God. Faith will be active and show its vitality in good works. But most fundamentally faith means that we receive and rest upon Christ and his truth for our salvation. That is its core essence: receiving and resting upon Christ and the promise of the Gospel.

This is a good verse to put to memory in relation to faith. If you have trouble memorizing verses, perhaps you can summarize it in a simple aphorism: "to believe is to receive." That is the definition John gives us in 1:12.

But what is it that we receive through faith? In summary, we receive the whole totality of redemption that was obtained by Jesus in his death and resurrection. It includes the forgiveness of our sins, a new right-standing before God, as well as the Holy Spirit that plants a new seed of life in us. In Christ we are covered with the blood of the Passover Lamb. Our sins are forgiven and the angel of death cannot touch us. We are also vitally engrafted into Christ. He is the vine from which we as branches draw life-giving power to bear fruit.

In some of Paul's letters the emphasis is placed on faith as it receives the justifying grace and righteousness of Christ. This is especially appropriate given how Paul was engaged in a spiritual battle against those who destroyed the Gospel by mixing faith and works in justification. However, the blessings we receive in him are not limited to justification. This is why even in Paul's letter to the Galatians (where justification is so strongly emphasized) he also ties the blessing of forgiveness to that of

"sonship." To be forgiven is to be a son of God. The latter is a broader category that even more directly contains implications for how we are to live. It reminds us of our legal status of our persons before God, but also how we must walk appropriately as sons of God.

John also describes our redemption in this way in his Gospel. Through faith we become sons of God: "...to all who received him, he gave the right to become children of God." He goes on to make clear that this is not a natural sonship from human descent by human power, but a supernatural sonship by the Holy Spirit. Later Jesus will describe the way this comes about as a "New Birth" from above.

There is good reason for his using "sonship" to describe our redemption. His emphasis is that the Logos who created but has now become a fleshly creature is also the Son of God. You must believe in the eternally begotten son of God. Through the eternally begotten son of God, you will be born again and become a son of God. The son of God became man so that through faith in him we might become sons of God. This all takes place through Christ. He is the word of God. He is the light of God. He is the son of God. The word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.

In this simple phrase, we read the most profound truth heretofore revealed in history. There is an infinite distance between the temporal and the eternal, between God and man. He is infinite, and we are finite. That distance has an added dimension after the fall. We are sinners, but he is righteous. There is an unbridgeable chasm that has been fixed between us and God. We are separated from him. He is in the light, and we are in the darkness. How shall this gap be bridged? The greatest leap of man will fall far short of the distance and only leave him plummeting into the depths of an abyss.

What is impossible with man is possible with God. When the fullness of time had come, the word became flesh. Jesus, the divine, eternal son of God assumed to himself a human nature. He became like us in every way, except for sin. We were predestined to the adoption of sons. To produce the fruits of that decree in us, Jesus became flesh. Since the children share in flesh and blood, he likewise partook of the same things so that through death he might destroy him who has the power of death, that is the devil.

In this human flesh, we behold the glory of God. In his human nature, through its mighty works and sufferings, we behold the revelation of the glory of God. When we have seen the Son we have seen the Father.

This is the chief end for which Jesus came: to reveal the glory of God. In John's Gospel, the themes of life, light, and glory are intertwined. Jesus's works particularly reveal the glory that he shares with the Father. In the wedding at Cana John interprets Jesus' first miracle of turning the water into wine. He simply says that in this work: "Jesus revealed his glory and his disciples believed in him." So also at the raising of Lazarus from the dead, Jesus tells people: "did I not tell you that if you believe you would see the glory of God. "

John goes on to note that this word who became flesh is also "full of grace and truth." Those who lie in the darkness are worthy of death. They are willfully blind. They love the darkness rather than the light.

For this, they come under the condemnation of God. Jesus comes to freedom from that judgment. Grace is God's free, unmerited favor to sinners. It is not earned. It's a gift, freely given.

This was the problem of the Jewish church of Jesus' day. They had turned the law of Moses into a way of earning salvation. Instead, the law was a comprehensive testimony to the Messiah they just come. Jesus did not come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it. Throughout the Gospel, Jesus makes clear that the heart of God's commandment is that we love both God in our neighbor. This is the heart of the Old Testament law. But because the Jews had clung to the law and severed it from Christ, it became something opposite to his grace.

But this Grace has a focus that is beyond his present world. That's why he adds to "grace" the idea of "truth." We will see later that the word "true" has what we could refer to as an eschatological aspect in John. We've noticed this already. Coupled with "grace" it reminds us that there is a world above that Jesus is bringing us to. The word became flesh so that we who are flesh might be joined to the word. Jesus came down from heaven to the earth, so that we who are of the earth could go to heaven.

That's why John tells us that "...no one has ever seen God." God and the heavenly dwelling place that is hidden from us. We walk by faith, and not by sight. But one has come from that world and from our heavenly father to reveal it to us. The word becomes flesh. The Son of God, who was in the bosom of the Father has now revealed him.

What John reveals here is the secret things of God's plan. He had hidden his great love from the world, but he now reveals it in the coming of Christ. Christ is now also hidden from us, having returned to his heavenly glory. But he will one day bring us to where he is. He left us to prepare a place for us, so that where he is we may also be. For now, we commune with him through his written word. He is and was, after all, the "logos" of God. May this word of Christ dwell in you richly and fill you will all that you need to live in the light of his eternal glory.

## #5 - Devotional Meditations on John 1 (Prologue)

Here we conclude our meditations on John's prologue, offering some more directly practical meditations in light of what we have laid out previously.

Now, after having read through our meditations through John's prologue, you still might be left thinking: what connection does this have to my life? The answer is: everything! One of our big troubles is that the proximate, seen things of daily life quickly overwhelm us. Jesus points to this problem in the parable of the sower, when he describes the seed that is choked out because it is overwhelmed with the cares and concerns of this life.

If we have a young family, it's pretty obvious how this happens. You might wake up a little earlier than the rest of the family, or they may awaken you by crawling into your bed. But when you live with a family, there is an unceasing flood of needs and troubles that you must constantly attend to. It's hard to find time to think clearly for even a few moments, let alone to read the Bible and pray to give ourselves our daily spiritual food. Just the basic fundamental needs of life seem to flood us and overwhelm our lives.

In fact, our life quickly becomes defined by these things. We grow tired, weary, and have trouble seeing beyond the stress of the moment. By the way, you don't need to be a young family to feel this way. And you don't have to be married. Life at times is simply overwhelming. It's like a thick fog that clouds our vision of anything further on the horizon. All we see in front of us is trouble, and we begin to project that indefinitely into the future.

When we have trouble in our families, in our churches, or in our jobs we experience the same thing. The walls of trouble clothes in on us and we have trouble seeing beyond them. We grow depressed and discouraged. Perhaps the only option is to run away from the trouble and find another place with less trouble. But that is no solution. Very often when we flee our troubles simply follow us or new troubles come and take their place. Playing often makes it worse. We run away from one demon, but seven others come to take its place that are worse than the first (cf. Luke 11:26).

What's the solution to this problem? The answer is that we need to broaden our horizons and have a clear sight of God and his purpose in our lives. In this way we can put our current trouble in better context. John does this quite marvelously in his prologue. He helps us to see that our daily troubles are not worth mentioning or comparing to the glory of what Christ has brought. The grand story of our lives is not the daily grind of family, work, childcare, or troubles or sufferings. The grand story of our life is that before the world existed only God was there. He is the one who was, who is, and who is to come. Although the world is lost in sin, Jesus became flesh. he is the Logos of God and The son of God. But he took flesh to suffer as we did and with us endure all the troubles of life. His life ended in an earthly, inglorious defeat, but he rose again from the dead and returned to the glory of his father.

Our story is defined by this bigger picture. We who have believed in Jesus have become children of God. He cares for us, loves us, and will provide for us. John 1 beckons us to lift up our eyes beyond the

temporal to the eternal. We must see every day of our lives in the light of Christ and his work for us. That means every day of trouble is one step on the march to a certain victory and peace we will have in glory with Christ.

This shift of perspective is fundamental to the life of faith. If we are focused on earthly things, we will constantly be disappointed. Our spouses will not be what we want them to be. Our church leaders will not be what we wish they would be for us. Our church community on the visible, earthly level will disappoint us because it's filled with shortcomings, sins, and disappointments. It is very easy to become myopically focused on these things which leads to all kind of troubles. How often do we see people jump from relationship to relationship, even from spouse to spouse, hoping that the new person will bring true satisfaction. How often do we see people move from church to church, thinking that a new group of people and new surroundings will solve their problems. Quite often this movement is simply an attempt to avoid a big source of many of our own troubles: our blind and sinful hearts. We want to make everyone else the problem so that we don't actually have to take responsibility for our own actions. To be sure, there are times that the church may become so corrupt that we must depart, and unite ourselves to a true communion of saints. Likewise, there are times where our spouses may have so violated their marriage vows that a divorce may be lawful, according to the provisions of Jesus. I am clearly not talking about those situations.

When we're feeling this way, we must be reminded that our only hope for true satisfaction will be found in God. If you're looking for anything else that becomes an idol: whether it's in your family, your church, your work life, or anything else.

That's exactly the problem that beset the Jewish church in Jesus' day. They had turned the true, Old Testament religion into a system of earthly life. They had rules and regulations for everything. They had a clear social and cultural identity which was very powerful and made them feel at "home" on this earth. Even though the light of Old Testament revelation shown all around them, they were blinded by the darkness of this world.

Jesus comes to give us light and to help us see more clearly. He comes not so much to change our circumstances, but to change our perspective. To be sure, the Gospel should lead us to faith and repentance. There needs to be real change in the life of Christians. Before there can be a change in life there must be a change in perspective. Repentance is in many respects most fundamentally a change of mind. A change of the heart and the wheel goes along with it and must follow, but the change of perspective is where it begins.

if we are honest with ourselves, we live each day as if God was not real, heaven was not our final destination, that we weren't really sinners doomed to die, and that we had not been saved by God's grace. If we really, fully believe these things our lives would be radically different. If we really believe that this temporal life was but a blip compared to eternity in the unspeakable joy of fellowship with God, how different our disposition and hearts would be! What humility, patience, joy, self-sacrifice, and love with characterize our lives. When confronted with our sins and shortcomings, how far less stubborn and

intractable we would become and how much quicker we would be to confess and repent before our brothers.

We often fall into the trap of thinking that problems, sins, shortcomings, and conflicts can simply be solved by issuing commandments or criticisms. Both commandment and criticism have a place in the church, but they are only effective in the proper context. All too often are issuing commandments and criticisms to others is really a manifestation of trust in our own strength to produce the change that only God can work in us. If we find ourselves getting frustrated, angry, upset, or even feeling hurt we are often just manifesting the sinful pride of the world and our flesh. God's grace overcomes these things, even as it is greater than all our sin.

Jesus tells us that which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is Spirit. In order for us to change we must be born again. That means we are forced to trust only in God's power and not in ours at all. Our flesh will lead us only in one direction, but the spirit leads us upwards to Christ. May he fill our hearts this day to see our lives in the light of Christ and the glory we await in him.

## #6 - Devotional Meditations on John (1:19-51) [Part 1: John the Baptist]

A good introduction should introduce you to the basic points an author or speaker will develop in the rest of his work. John's prologue is quite masterful in that it concisely sets forth a great number of deep theological themes that will be unfolded at length in his Gospel. In fact, one might argue that the entire Gospel is contained in seed form in the prologue. That doesn't mean it contains every detail, but the broad outline certainly is certainly there. Every seed contains the essence of the full fruit and flower, just as the embryo contains all that the fully grown human will one day become. We are at the point where we are going to see the seed of God's revelation in Christ begin to grow through the Gospel.

One theme of the prologue was the testimony of John the Baptist. Like the rest of the Gospels, the significance of this figure is unpacked early on in the story. And so he opens this first major section with the simple words: "...and this is the testimony of John" (1:19).

The amount of space devoted to John the Baptist maybe puzzling for readers living 2000 years after the events of the Gospels. Today, John seems like an obviously less significant figure than Jesus. Ask someone randomly on the street about Jesus, and they will have at least heard of him. Ask the about John the Baptist and you will likely get blank stares.

But in Jesus' day John the Baptist was a major and well-known figure. He was so highly regarded that many sincerely thought that he might be the Christ. He was known to the Roman rulers, including Herod. He caused enough trouble for him that he was imprisoned, and then eventually beheaded. Clearly one would need to be pretty influential to be perceived as a political threat.

John was a major religious teacher and force during that era. But his significance lies far deeper than his effect on his surroundings. John the Baptist was the summation of Old Testament revelation. He was the Elijah prophesied at the end of the Old Testament, who would prepare the way for the Lord. In him the whole essence of the old order was summed up and embodied. Israel was still (theologically speaking) in exile, and so he lived in a kind of individual exile in the wilderness. Israel had many external ceremonies to observe, but had added to God's commandments and turned them into a system of works-righteousness. John preaches a simple ceremonial baptism which focuses on preparing for God's coming through repentance. That was the point of the whole OT order: to prepare God's people for the coming Messiah. The Law was their tutor to lead them to Christ. In John we see that purpose condensed and simplified.

As a practical point, it is very important for us to remember the distinction between those who come in the name of Jesus and Jesus himself. This has been a problem throughout the history of the church. Today the Roman church confuses these things when they elevate the Pope to being the head of the church on earth, and a tribute to him the attribute of infallibility when he sits in Peter's chair. Protestants, too, can sometimes elevate major leaders to a status that is too high and inappropriate for a mere human being. this is especially the case in the digital age where social media has shaped the way we engage with one another. The focus is all too often put on personalities and human names to get

clicks, views, and likes. Although ministers come in the name of Christ, they themselves are not the Christ. The focus should be on the Messiah, not on the messenger

In this way, we sometimes attribute too much power and ability to our ministers. We think that they have some kind of special power in their prayers and presence that will fix all our problems. If we are unhappy with our current minister, we long for a famously eloquent man to fill our pulpit, thinking that somehow, this will be the difference in our spiritual lives. To be sure, there are times where a minister is deficient in their gifts, and need to grow in their use of them. But it is all too easy to think of them as possessing the power of God. They are but weak instruments in the hand of an Almighty Savior.

On the other hand, the flip side of this is to grow disappointed and even angry when they do not meet our God-sized expectations. When we grow upset with him or discontent with how they are serving in their weakness or imperfections, we can go to the opposite extreme and begin to despise them in our hearts. Once that poison sets in nothing they do seems good to us. To the pure all things are pure, but to the jaundiced eye everything appears yellow. When we come to despise their persons, we rob ourselves of the grace God seeks to give us through them as they bring to us the word of life.

We need to strike the right balance between recognizing that while they are not Jesus, Jesus does work through them even in the midst of their weaknesses. We should not elevate them too high, or despise them and bring them too low. The church has several officers to bring the love and word of Christ to the people: elder, deacon, and pastor. Yet even their ability to minister directly to the individual needs of the people is not infinite. That is why the center of our religious lives is Sunday worship where all of God's people can be fed in a special and powerful way in the preaching of the word of God.

John had hoards of people coming to him. Many had special needs due to their particular circumstances. There is no way he could meet them all. But he proclaimed one who could. After John would come one mightier than him, on whom the Spirit would come down and abide. John baptized with water, but this Savior would baptize with the Spirit and fire. That Savior is Jesus. By his blood and Spirit he both forgives and cleanses us from our sin: both its guilt and corrupting power. Although every human minister of this Savior is insufficient, Christ is sufficient--to save, to heal, forgive, and to sustain.



## #7 - Devotional Meditations on John (1:19-51) [Part 1: John the Baptist and Jesus's First Disciples]

From a literary perspective, John's Gospel is arranged according to a careful structure. This is true in the big picture of the whole book, as well as the "smaller" picture of each individual section. The rest of this first chapter of John is structured around a series of days. Only one of them is specifically enumerated (i.e., given a specific number) when he describes it as "the third day." Some think that this recalls the days of creation in Genesis 1. That is an interesting suggestion. If this is the case, John would be connecting these first days of Jesus's ministry with the days of creation. Jesus is not just bringing a new Israel out of the remnant of Israel, but a new creation for all mankind. However, beyond the simple laying out of the narrative according to a series of days, the parallels don't seem to expand much beyond that.

I think that John's decision to lay out the narrative according to distinct days connects back to his purpose in the Gospel more broadly, and in this section more particularly. And what is that purpose? It is to give testimony regarding the identity of Jesus. For testimony to be strong and persuasive, we must take into account how many voices agree in its content, and how often this testimony appears. The testimony of multiple people over multiple days is the foundation of a pretty persuasive case.

That is likely why this section is also characterized by a series of duplications. For example, John the Baptist twice says: "behold, the Lamb of God." This is, perhaps, the most significant since it clearly identifies Jesus. That really is the main focus of John's testimony: who is Jesus Christ?

There are other things he says about him. Jesus is the one upon whom the Spirit came down and rested. Jesus is the one who ranks before John, who is mightier than him.

John's testimony to Jesus is clear and consistent: he is the Son of God.

The testimony of John bleeds over into the testimony of the disciples. They not only call him "Rabbi" but also "the Messiah," "The son of God," "the king of Israel," and he of whom Moses and the prophets wrote. On his part, Jesus clearly identifies himself as "the Son of Man" upon whom angels will ascend and descend.

These are titles that come with regal authority, and that from God! He also identifies his followers and gives them names/titles. He gives Peter the name "Cephas." He calls Nathaniel "an Israelite, indeed, in whom there is no deceit". He also issues a call to the disciples. He tells them to "follow me" as well as "come and see."

These calls are not only invitations to these first disciples, but also to us to follow Jesus. We are not just observers along the path of the narrative of the story, but we are also to follow him in our lives. He is the most important figure to ever arise on the scene of history. He's more important than any president, any church leader, any teacher, or human "guru." There's no one greater than him.

John's Gospel is a narrative. It lacks formal "imperatives" telling us what we are to do. But the narrative itself contains its own instruction. It communicates to us where we find the source of our lives and strength (namely, Jesus) and how we are to respond to him.

Following him means that we leave all and put it behind us. That does not mean we take ourselves out of the world. Nor does it mean that we no longer preoccupy ourselves with our earthly work and vocations. It does mean that all these things come in a very distant second place to the value of the kingdom of heaven.

Our Christian lives must start with his identity. Do we really believe and adequately know that he is the Son of God, the Son of Man, the king of Israel, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world? Judaism in the first century was works-based. It was always asking the question: "...what do I need to do?" That is not in itself a bad question, but it becomes destructive to our spiritual lives when we separate it from a more fundamental question: who is Jesus? If we wish to grow in our faith and life, this must be our starting point.

To be sure, the NT does ask it, but gives an answering that surprised many Jews: "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you shall be saved." Knowing Christ and trusting him is the only path to the Father and to eternal life.

Do we believe this as we ought? In this life we will never attain to perfect trust in Jesus. A close examination of even the best of us will reveal significant and shameful shortcomings. A simple, more practical test is simply to ask ourselves a question: what makes us the most upset and what makes us most excited? Is it when our favorite sports team wins or loses? When we increase or decrease our income? When our spouses satisfy or fail to satisfy our desires and needs?

If our answers to those questions don't center around our sinful nature and the glory and forgiveness of the kingdom of God, we are guilty of idolatry. There is no greater need we have than to have our sins forgiven. If that is the desire of your heart, hear again the words of God: "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world!" What joy this should bring to the troubled soul. Is there trouble or hardship in your life causing you grief and pain? The Son of Man has ascended from heaven and will bring us with him when we ascend to heaven. In his sympathy he will suffer the shame of the cross and afterwards bring us into glory.

Yes, that does mean we are all guilty of adultery! How stale our response to these things can become. One reason we have such reactions to the passages of scripture is that we just do not have a clear enough spiritual sight of what we truly have in Jesus Christ.

He is the Son of God, the king of Israel, the lamb of God, and our Savior.

Think of it in these terms: when a child is troubled, do they really just need their problem fixed? Most of the time with my kids what they really need is the comforting presence of mom or dad (usually mostly just mom, but dad will work as an acceptable substitute in a pinch).

What we need is not so much the "fixing" of our earthly problems, or even a practical formula for how to live our lives. But we need the realization that we always have God the Father (our Spiritual Dad) and his Son the Lord Jesus with us and abiding upon us forever. That comes by faith in God's word in the message of salvation. On that foundation we can begin to walk and live our lives loving the one who loved us and gave himself for us.

## #8 - Devotional Meditations on John (2:1-13): The Wedding at Cana

The next passage is the wedding of Cana. In John 1: 14 we were told that in the incarnation of the Logos ("word") "we have seen his glory, glory as of the only son from the Father, full of grace and truth." In other words, in Jesus we behold the glory of God. This theme is developed throughout John's Gospel and appears several times. Just run a search through your Bible software and look at how many times the word "glory" and its cognates appear in his Gospel.

In this miracle, we see Jesus begin to reveal that glory. The glory of God has always been there in Christ. He is the eternal Son of God. Even though we divide up his life into an initial phase of suffering followed by a triumphant state of "glory," even in his humiliation we see his greatness and glory shine through.

That's the main point of the passage. We read it at the conclusion of this section in 2:11: "This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory. And his disciples believed in him."

The first half of John has been called the "book of signs" because it contains a series of miracles that reveal Jesus glory and that of the kingdom that he brings. We start with his turning water into wine, and then proceed to the healing of the man at the pool in Bethesda, the feeding of the 5000, the walking on the water, etc.

Miracles are revelatory acts. God reveals himself in both words and actions. The words help interpret the actions, and the actions help demonstrate the words. In this passage, John allows the actions to speak for themselves, although we need wisdom to rightly see the full significance of what Jesus did.

There's a lot here to unpack, but to keep things simple let us consider how Jesus reveal his glory in three distinct ways.

First, we see the glory of Jesus in the transition from the ceremonial age of the OT to the celebratory age of the NT age. Note especially the kind of water is used in a miracle. It's not ordinary water. It's water that's been set aside for "Jewish rites of purification" (John 2:6). These washings served to remind Israel of their sinfulness and filthiness. They simultaneously reminded Israel that the Messiah and the Spirit had not yet come, but that his future arrival was certain. By faith believing Jews would access and anticipate this future reality in these ceremonies ahead of time.

Now, it is true in the New Testament that we have baptism which has a similar function. But there is a difference in emphasis. Jesus had not yet come and the Holy Spirit had not yet arrived in his fullness. The washings of the OT were repeated while baptism is only done once. Although he was already present under the Old Testament, there was a heavier emphasis on Israel's sinfulness and the incomplete character of the accomplishment of redemption. Jesus was the lamb slain from before the foundation of the world, and the benefits of it were available to God's people in all ages. But Jesus still had to come and fulfill that plan. We see this same principle not only in the washings, but also in the blood sacrifices.

Notice how these ceremonial water jugs are replaced with the wine of celebration. Before you enjoy the meal, you mother likely made you wash your hands. You must be cleansed of filth before you enjoy fellowship with your family. So it is with Christ. He has come and washed us, and now welcomes us to fellowship at his table. We celebrate the feast in Christ, in whom our sins are forgiven.

Secondly, note also the way Jesus reveals his glory as the one greater than Moses. John 1 told us that "the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." Moses' first miracle was turning water into blood. That was a sign of the impending judgment upon the Egyptians. Jesus' first miracle is turning water into wine. Again, there's a movement from judgement to celebration.

To be sure, the Gospel proclaims judgment upon the world. But this is not a new message. That is why John later says that "God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him" (3:17). The world is already under the sentence of condemnation. Jesus comes to free his people from prison, and welcome them to the table of celebration.

Thirdly, we see Jesus reveal his glory as the final, eschatological bridegroom of his church. The term "eschatological" refers to the things that are final, eternal, and ultimate. The OT prophets at times portrayed God as a bridegroom preparing Israel, his bride, for his wedding. In fact, the whole story of Israel's exodus, exile, and return is at times portrayed as a love story between God and his people. It consists first of betrothal in the Exodus, and then betrayal in the exile. In the coming of the Messiah there will be remarriage and restoration. See Ezekiel 16, Jeremiah 31, and similar passages.

In choosing to perform this miracle at a wedding, Jesus is revealing something about himself as this final bridegroom for the church. Our sins are a betrayal of our covenant Creator God. We have violated the marriage covenant between God and man. We are worthy only to be put away and divorced by him. Yet in grace he restores us to himself through Christ, the final bridegroom.

What is the result of this? Through his miraculous power Jesus demonstrates that the fullness of God dwells in him. This is a miracle only God could perform with his power, and Jesus reveals that he has this glorious power of God in him. Obviously, he did not come to ensure that there is enough to drink at a wedding. Jesus came to cleanse us from our sins, and to be the full, final sacrifice for us. By beholding this work Jesus's disciples are moved to trust him. All of God's mighty acts help us see more clearly the glory of Jesus and to put our trust fully and only in him.

Now, that sounds very simple--almost too simple. Most folks committed enough to Christ enter Christianity to read a devotional might think: "Check that, got it. I am trusting in Jesus so I don't need to worry about that." Why don't you tell me some more specifics about how I can make my life better?

But the reality is our faith in Christ in this life is far from perfect. In fact, even the best of the disciples during the days of Jesus are said only to have "a little faith." Living the Christian life more faithfully does not occur by our moving away from the idea of faith in God's work and focusing more on "what we do." It occurs when we constantly feed and fan into flame our faith that we may from the heart do everything with greater trust, peace, and hope in him. Our problem is not so much that we do not know what we

are to do, but that we lack the desire and focus to do it. That comes only by coming to a richer, fuller, and stronger faith through the power of his word and Spirit in us as it is strengthened in prayer.

If we had the kind of faith that the Bible calls us to, our lives would be radically different. Our eyes will be fixed on the kingdom of heaven, the trials of this life would not discourage us nearest much as they do, and the earthly blessings of this life would not make us as excited as they often do. Instead, we would be far more joyful and content in the fact that we are born from the above and married to Christ our Savior who will provide for all that we need in this life, and more importantly in the life to come.

There are few more joyful events than a wedding. If that's how we feel at an earthly wedding, how much more should we feel that joy as participants in heavenly one.

#### #9 - Devotional Meditations on John (2:14-25)

The next passage is the story of Jesus cleansing the temple. It is interesting that chapter 2 is structured around these two stories, which prove to be complementary.

At first sight it might be difficult to see what a wedding at Cana in a cleansing of the temple have in common. But if we remember that the water in Cana was used for Jewish rights of purification, we can perhaps see the connection more clearly. The temple was the place of ceremonial cleansing and atonement. It was a place of blood and water for redemption and approach to God. John is telling us something theologically significant by putting these two passages side-by-side.

In the story of the wedding at Cana, the "displacement" of the Jewish ceremonies was a fairly subtle point and easy to miss. It was contained in the little detail about the water jars: they were used for ceremonial washings. In this next story though theme is more direct: Jesus literally clears out the money changers and directly indicates verbally the impending destruction of the temple and with it the old ceremonial order.

Interestingly, Jesus draws a sharp contrast between the temple as God intended it and the temple as the Jewish church corrupted it: a house of trade vs the house of his father. Elsewhere in the gospel Jesus refers to heaven as "my Father's house" (John 14:2). The temple, of course, is a type of heaven. The message is pretty clear: heavenly treasures cannot be bought with money, and neither should concerns about money be brought into God's heavenly house. Insofar as money is involved, it is a place for giving, not buying and selling. It is a place for praise, not profit.

How shameful it is when the church is run or looked at as a business, the Gospel as a product to be marketed, and the sheep of the church as customers to be satisfied. The tendency can be seen not only among the leaders of the church, but also the members. The Biblical marks of the true church consist primarily in the true preaching of the word of God, supplemented by the faithful worship of God (administration of the sacraments) and church discipline. Yet how often people look for ten thousand other things to find the church they "like," or leave the church they don't. They will speak of the church musical style, building quality, special programming tailored to different ages and interests, and even

such trivialities of the quality of the coffee. While these things are not in themselves sinful and can be a blessing in the riches of church life as a community, we can quickly view these tangential things as central to our needs as Christians. When we do that we are falling into the idea that the church is there to satisfy our earthly needs instead of directing us to our heavenly ones. The church is first and foremost the place we go to meet with God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Only secondarily is it a social community of men. Insofar as it is the latter, it must be deeply grounded on the former to have lasting significance.

In addition to the Temple itself and its purpose, the animals being sold were obviously those offered in sacrifice for sin. What a contrast to the Lamb of God who quite literally is the fulfillment of all that is pictured in the temple! It's not without reason that he was identified with that title twice in John 1. Jesus comes as the Lamb of God to offer himself as the sacrifice for sins. He does so freely without requiring payment. Yet his blood is valuable: sufficient to atone for all of our sins. Yet redemption is seen as a means of profit for the church leaders, and the people freely pay to have their sins forgiven. Thus, John vividly pictures the false doctrine of justification by works-merit and justification by faith through grace.

Jesus is also the new, final temple. John 1 told us that Jesus is the word become flesh who "dwelt among us." Quite literally the Greek reads that the word became flesh and "tabernacled among us." The temple/tabernacle itself is fulfilled in Jesus's incarnation. He is "God with us." The true Temple of God comes to the typological temple to declare that the fulness of God's presence has arrived.

The chapter ends with a note regarding the divided response to Jesus. It tells us that many believed in his name when they saw the signs. At the same time, Jesus did not entrust himself to any man, for he knows what is in a man. This somewhat cryptic statement is a reference to the sinful, unreliable nature of mankind. The connection to the previous passage is pretty obvious: if man can turn something as important as God's place of grace into a place of works (a house of prayer into a den of thieves), there must be serious levels of blindness and corruption in his heart.

Although Jesus does come to call mankind out of that corruption through the power of his Holy Spirit, it remains the case that the sinful nature remains within us. This is true even his disciples: both those in the text and us today. This becomes very clear in the subsequent narrative. Even his disciples prove unreliable as they abandon him at his trial and crucifixion.

We are unreliable, but Jesus is reliable! His words are true, his commitments are sure, and he will never leave us or forsake us. He knows the sin that lies deep within us, but has nevertheless set his love on us. Nothing will snatch us out of his or his Father's hands.

He knows the evil that still lurks in our hearts, but has set his love on us. He came as God's Temple and the final sacrifice to cleanse us from these things that we may be welcomed into his Father's house in heaven. The temple of his body was destroyed, but in three days it rose again. And so Jesus will always remain God and man in one person forever.

The Bible tells us that through union with Christ we also are temples of God's Holy Spirit. Let us then ask God to clean out the filth of our hearts, even as he cleaned the filth from the earthy Temple. Let us die to earthly lusts like greed and live the sacrificial life of prayer and love.

#### #10 - Devotional Meditations on John 3:1-21

This chapter consists of two parts. The first is Jesus' dialogue with Nicodemus a ruler of the Jews. The second is more testimony from John the Baptist about Jesus.

In this meditation we will deal with the first part, but it is worth noting that the passages do complement one another. Although the chapter divisions are not inspired, there are good reasons to take them together. Both deal with the idea that Jesus and the kingdom of God are "from above." Both deal with the themes of water and Spirit. Just as the last chapter contained two different passages with complimentary themes, so also here.

The verses here are so theologically important that an entire book could be written on them. In this devotional, we will not be able to discuss everything, but focus on the heart and core of its teaching.

The first section contains perhaps the most famous verse in the Bible: John 3:16. "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." Ironically, the verse has often been misinterpreted to imply that natural man has some power within him to have faith. The deciding factor in whether one goes to heaven or hell, therefore, lies in the freedom of our will to choose or reject Christ.

Ironically, this false conclusion flies in the face of that which is said in the surrounding context. We begin with Nicodemus. Nicodemus appears three times in the Gospel of John (see John 7:50 and 19:39 for the other appearances). When he first appears he challenges and questions Jesus. Later we see a change. In his second appearance, he challenges the Jews for their unlawful handling of matters related to Jesus. Finally, he appears with Joseph of Arimathea during the burial of Jesus. Although here in chapter 1 he is still shrouded in blindness, his story is one of growth and development. Tracing that growth and development is worthy of a sermon or book on its own.

The story of Nicodemus is the story of a man who was once blind, but now he sees. It's a story of a man who at one time mocked the idea of a new birth but eventually undergoes this transformation. It is a story that is a mirror of our own story in Christ. The need for growth, development, and clearer sight of the kingdom of God.

He needed a new birth from above to believe in Jesus. Even having been born from above, he still stands in need of God's grace. Jesus does not come to Nicodemus with a message that ratifies and reinforces his natural powers. Instead, Jesus reveals to him a power that can only come from God. One must be born again from above to see the kingdom of God. One must be born of water and the spirit. That which born of the flesh is flesh, that which is born of the Spirit is Spirit.



These two spheres operate with different powers and principles. One cannot cross over to the Spirit by the power of the flesh. We cannot climb a ladder from below to above through our natural strength. That which is above must come down and use its almighty power to draw us out of the world below. Only the Son of Man who has descended from heaven can ascend to heaven and take us with him.

Theologically we have referred to this teaching as "regeneration." That word literally means "re-birth." It is the work of the Holy Spirit whereby he plants in us a new principle of heavenly, spiritual life. Although it does not completely remove the presence of sin in our lives, it initiates a process whereby God's grace is infused in us and we begin more and more to crucify the flesh and come alive by the Holy Spirit to righteousness.

But we should not think of it simply as a conversion experience. That is certainly an important part of it, to be sure. But lots of religions have "conversion experiences." You will hear nice-sounding testimonies to this effect from religions that are actually cults such as Mormonism. Similarly, Buddhists, Muslims, and adherents can sometimes give moving testimonies to how their lives have changed through their religious beliefs.

Interestingly, we are seeing more and more expressions of radical changes in people that have the same elements we commonly see in Christian conversion experiences. With the increase of "alternative" (i.e. aberrant) sexual identities and orientations among the youth of our current age, many of their "coming out" stories have parallels to conversion experiences. Yet they are but a perversion of the true experience of converting from sin to God.

A sudden experience that produces a change in our lives is not necessarily the same as being born from above. Christians often speak of their conversion as something that "changes their life." This is certainly true, but a simple change in your life is not sufficient to constitute regeneration. We can change in lots of ways, both for good or ill. We can change our diets, exercise habits, etc., but the fact that we have changed it's not itself the reality of regeneration.

Being born from above means that the life and power of heaven now lives in us. We are thereby enabled to die to ourselves and live to eternal things. All of our goals, desires, and abilities become re-oriented towards the eternal kingdom of heaven. The only way to get there is through Christ and his Holy Spirit.

Regeneration is absolutely necessary to enter the kingdom of God. Sometimes that comes upon people suddenly and they see a dramatic transition from darkness to light. Sometimes there are people who grow up in the church and never know a day when the light of God did not illuminate their minds and hearts.

The way regeneration comes about is not what matters, when sudden or slowly. The fact that it occurs is what is important. John is clear: without a new birth from water and the Spirit we are of the flesh and of the earth. Without a new birth, we are condemned already and are doomed to death.

If we are born again, we have the seed of eternal life in us. Although there is much work for God to do to bring it to its full fruition, we can be certain that as we abide in Christ, we will bear much fruit.

The text sets before us life and death. Let us then plead with God for the life of his Spirit that we may escape the corruption of the world and enter into the heavenly kingdom of light, life, and glory.

#### #10 - Devotional Meditations on John (John 3:22-36)

In John 3:22–36 we have a new section which contains more testimony of John the Baptist to Jesus. You may recall that this was a theme introduced in the prologue. In fact, he devoted a relatively significant amount of space to comparing and contrasting Jesus and John. All the Gospels do this to some degree, the gospel of Luke takes up several chapters in this regard.

instead of hearing indirectly from the apostle regarding the relationship between John the Baptist and Jesus, in this passage we hear from the lips of the Baptist himself.

At first it might be difficult to understand why John and the other Gospel writers devote this much time to John the Baptist. Compared to Jesus, he is not a figure that Christians think about much in their day-to-day life. Based on what we read in the passage, I think John would be happy with this reality. I am sad to say that many famous, celebrity Christian teachers today seem more enamored with how well-known their name is than with the glory of Jesus.

The key phrase summarizing the main point of the passage is found in 3:30. There John utters some simple and beautiful words: “he must increase, but I must decrease.” The phrase refers primarily to the redemptive-historical transition from the Old Testament to the New Testament represented in the displacement of John’s ministry by Jesus. The old must give way to the new, the types to the anti-type, the shadows to the reality, and earth to heaven.

John was a major leader in the Jewish world of the first century. Yet everything about him eschewed the glory and earthly prerogatives that often come connected with being a major leader, even a religious one. Compare John to the Pharisees, who loved money, the best seats of honor in the synagogues, and were eager to maintain their place at the political table. John was out in the wilderness dressed in rough, earthy clothing. He was dressed in camels hair with a leather belt around his waist.

Both personally and redemptive-historically, he knew that his ministry was “of the earth” in the sense that in itself it only pointed to something and someone greater.

To make this point he compares himself to a “friend of the bridegroom” and Jesus to the “bridegroom.” The bride does not look for the best man, but for her future husband. The language recalls the scene in chapter 2 where Jesus was present at the wedding of Cana in Galilee. Again, John does not forget the narrative threads he introduces, but ties them together as the story progresses.

But John likewise compares his ministry and that of Jesus to the difference between earth and heaven. Jesus is from above and therefore is above all. John's ministry reflects the focus of the entire Old Testament. It is "earthly" in the sense that it is only a copy in shadow of heavenly things. To be sure, the OT saints had real contact with the heavenly things by faith looking at the earthly types. Through them they saw and grasped Christ ahead of time. But in themselves they were but shadows and copies. The real thing has arrived.

Whether it is John the Baptist, the temple, ceremonial washings, or any other OT rites, it has been displaced and replaced by the fullness of Christ and his kingdom.

How backwards, then, it is to fall into a sacrament-centered Christianity in which the apex of worship is seen in our participation in those external forms. Even in the OT where the external forms were more numerous and given greater emphasis, the ceremonies pointed to a heavenly reality and were intended to teach Israel of the inner, invisible work of God in their hearts. Ancient times the visual forms were subordinated to the word of God. How foolish then for Christians in the NT to elevate the sacraments above the word. The sacraments are important and have their place, but they are signs and seals of Christ and his word.

The pattern characteristic of the transition from the old to New Testament should be characteristic of our lives as well. Just as the earthly Old Testament rites and figures were subordinate to Christ, so must we in our personal lives. When John the Baptist declares "he must increase and I must decrease," he is also speaking of his appropriation of the kingdom of God by faith. Self-effacing humility is one of its chief characteristics. As Jesus said in the previous passage, we must be born again. That means, by implication, that we must be willing to become like infants and little children to be re-taught the basic principles of our lives.

Are we really willing to be taken by the hand again as if we were a child and be taught what it means to live in this world for Christ and his kingdom? Our natural inclination is to live for self. We watch out for our interests first and if we have time we give some "leftovers" and help others a little. Furthermore, serving in God's kingdom is not to be confused with simply working hard in our families or in the church. The Pharisees were very hard, meticulous workers, but were out for their own glory and not for Christ.

The self-effacing humility of John is a reflection of the self-humiliating humility of Christ. Although Jesus was "above all" he became the servant of all, dying on the cross that his bride might live. If we are to be members of his kingdom that pattern must characterize our lives as well. As the apostle Paul says, we must be crucified with Christ such that it is no longer "I who live, but Christ who lives in me."

Or as John the Baptist put it: "He must increase, and I must decrease."

#12 - Devotional Meditations on John 4 (The Woman at the Well: Part 1)

John 4 contains the famous story of Jesus with the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well. It also continues a "water theme" that was introduced back in chapter 1. John baptizes with water, but Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit (1:26, 33). At the wedding at Cana Jesus turns ceremonial water into celebratory wine (2:6-7). Entrance into the kingdom of God requires a new birth from both water and the Spirit (3:5). This water-Spirit theme will appear later in John.

For John there is earthly water, and then there is water—true, eternal water that comes down from heaven. Likewise, there is earthly bread, but also the true bread from heaven. A core part of John (and Jesus's!) teaching method is to use earthly realities to point God's people to heavenly things. The Old Testament rites functioned in the same way, giving the people an earthly copy and shadow of heavenly things.

The setting of the story is packed with meaning. They are in Samaria, which is the region of the northern kingdom (considered compromised and apostate by the "purer" Jews of Judea). This was not without reason. The northern kingdom had committed great evil, and even corrupted the worship of God with idolatry. Thus, the Samaritan setting is a reminder of Israel's current state of sinfulness and rebellion. At the same time, the scene takes place by Jacob's well, which reminds us of a relatively better time in the Patriarchal era. But the figure of Jacob himself was far from perfect in his walk with God. In a word, these redemptive-historical references remind us that at our "best" and "worst" we are all sinners in need of God's gracious redemption.

This is particularly true of the woman with whom Jesus speaks. Being a Samaritan by birth, she would be considered as part of a "false church" that was no better than paganism. In modern terms, it is similar to the way conservative Protestants might view a liberal mainline church that has rejected the authority of Scripture and is now promoting the very evils of the world it exists to resist.

Yet Jesus comes to this sinful Samaritan woman. He comes to draw her out of idolatry and sin into the kingdom of God. The woman is surprised that Jesus would speak to her: "how is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink for me, a woman of Samaria?"

I can remember one time I went to a pastors meeting at a Christian school and greeted another minister from a different denomination. Historically there had been some conflict between our churches. My church believes that their churches had begun compromising the word of God and had attempted to communicate this to them through official meetings and statements. That was a generation ago, although the tension still existed. This older gentleman looked at me and said: how is it that you from your denomination would shake hands with me from my denomination? The reality, of course, is that the fact that we may have theological concerns with another church does not mean that we do not seek to love them, or pursue what fraternal connection we have with them to continue to encourage them to walk faithfully.

But back to the narrative with Jesus and the Samaritan woman. Jesus immediately pivots from the earthly water from Jacob's well to a different kind of water. Jesus mentions "living water." The woman wonders what he could be talking about. This is, after all, the will of the great patriarch Jacob. Is Jesus

saying that he is greater than Jacob? Actually, he is! The water that he will give is such that if you drink of it you'll never be thirsty again and it will become in you a spring of water welling up to eternal life.

Hearing of these things the woman is intrigued and asked Jesus to receive this water.

While Jesus introduced the discussion by presenting to her the reality of the eternal kingdom of God, he immediately pivots to the fundamental problem that all of us have: our sin. The issue is not ethnic, that she is a Samaritan and Jesus is a Jew. The problem is not socio-cultural. It is not a matter of figuring out which earthly manifestation of the kingdom is the perfect one. The problem has to do with our relationship to God which has been breached by our sinfulness.

Yet Jesus gently raises this subject in an indirect fashion. He says to her: "go, call your husband, and come here." Of course, he knows that she is not currently married, and that she has been married and remarried several times. She also currently lives with a man who is not her husband. According to God's law, she would be living in adultery. Such a person would be considered by both Old Testament and New Testament standards unfit for membership in the church. Yet Jesus goes to her in her sin--not to leave her there but to call her out of darkness and into light.

The woman quickly pivots away from herself and back to Jesus, and this should not be a surprise. Our natural human tendency is to deflect away from our sinfulness and shortcomings to other things. In this case, she turns her attention to a theological subject: the office of a prophet And the proper location for the worship of the true God.

These are clearly legitimate topics, but when used as a tactic to avoid a more central or fundamental problem, the shifting of focus is not so good. I find this happens often among Christians. An intellectual discussion about theology can be a convenient way to make us feel like we're doing something pious and God-honoring when, in fact, we are just doing something to convince us we are near to God when there is something sinful in our lives driving us away from him.

I have also found that this can be the case when someone has a pattern of being unduly critical, and even when a fairly non-critical person brings the occasional criticism. We can quickly convince ourselves that we are doing something godly, holy, and spiritual because we are evaluating another person morally. But moral evaluation is a perilous task. That is why Jesus tells us so sharply to take the log out of our own eye before we take the speck out of our brothers. Paul also warns us that simply judging others will only lead to our greater condemnation: "you who teach others, do you not teach yourself?" This is all the more dangerous when we critically evaluate our church leaders. They are the very ones God gave us to help us examine our own hearts before God and receive the grace of Christ. The heart is deceitful and desperately wicked. It is by no means beyond Satan's shrewdness to use even well-intentioned means to bring about evil ends.

This is also a temptation of the teacher. Because they speak often and quite effectively about the Lord in spiritual things, they deceive themselves into thinking that this alone gives them a vital connection to the one they proclaim. The teacher must first teach himself. He must practice what he preaches.

Yet Jesus will not allow her to wander in this way from the kingdom of God. She attempts to steer the conversation away from her sin, but Jesus redirects her to the only path in which she will find forgiveness: himself.

Jesus takes her attempted misdirection of his queries about her married life and redirects her back to the only place where she can find the forgiveness of her sins: in Jesus, the savior of sinners. Jesus will restore sinners to the true worship of God in heaven. In neither Jerusalem, Samaria, or any of the great metropolises of the earth can an earthly temple of God be found. It is only in heaven through Christ and his Spirit that we can come to God.

In conclusion, Jesus fully reveals his identity to this husbandless woman: "I who speak to you am he." Quite literally it reads: "I am, who speaks to you." Jesus is the great "I Am," and as such he is the bridegroom who has finally arrived for his bride. This woman is enveloped by his grace into his betrothed church, sanctified, purified, and saved.

We who believe are among that number. He pursues us with his grace, however often we may evade or resist. Let us lift up our hearts to heaven, clinging to him in faith and repentance as we worship in Spirit and in truth.

#### #13 - Devotional Meditations on John 4 (The Woman at the Well: Part 2)

Yesterday we saw how Jesus does not avoid the uncomfortable topic of our sinfulness. He is a savior and a shepherd. But he does not avoid the difficult subjects--even those that might make us initially uncomfortable.

Yet Jesus is wise in how he does this. Sometimes he takes a direct approach, especially when there is extreme hard-heartedness. But note how gently he raises this subject in an indirect fashion with this woman. He says to her: "go, call your husband, and come here." Of course, he knows that she is not currently married, and that she has been married and remarried several times. She also currently lives with a man who is not her husband. According to God's law, she would be living in adultery. Such a person would be considered by both Old Testament and New Testament standards unfit for membership in the church. Yet Jesus goes to her in her sin--not to leave her there but to call her out of darkness and into the light.

The woman quickly pivots away from herself and back to Jesus, and this should not be a surprise. Our natural human tendency is to deflect away from our sinfulness and shortcomings to other things. In this case, she turns her attention to a theological subject: the office of a prophet and the proper location for the worship of the true God.

These are clearly legitimate topics, but when used as a tactic to avoid a more central or fundamental problem, the shifting of focus is not so good. I find this happens often among Christians. An intellectual discussion about theology can be a convenient way to make us feel like we're doing something pious and

God-honoring when, in fact, we are just doing something to convince us we are near to God when there is something sinful in our lives driving us away from him.

I have also found that this can be the case when someone has a pattern of being unduly critical, and even when a fairly non-critical person brings the occasional criticism. We can quickly convince ourselves that we are doing something godly, holy, and spiritual because we are evaluating another person morally. But moral evaluation is a perilous task. That is why Jesus tells us so sharply to take the log out of our own eye before we take the speck out of our brothers. Paul also warns us that simply judging others will only lead to our greater condemnation: "you who teach others, do you not teach yourself?" This is all the more dangerous when we critically evaluate our church leaders. They are the very ones God gave us to help us examine our own hearts before God and receive the grace of Christ. If we unduly evaluate them, the danger is that we are no longer in a position of listening to God, but evaluating his messengers. While no leader is above complaint or accountability, we enter into a perilous situation for ourselves and our spiritual well-being. The heart is deceitful and desperately wicked. It is by no means beyond Satan's shrewdness to use even well-intentioned means to bring about evil ends.

This is also a temptation of the teacher. Because they speak often and quite effectively about the Lord in spiritual things, they deceive themselves into thinking that this alone gives them a vital connection to the one they proclaim. Likewise, the leader must listen even to undue or overblown criticism, patiently bearing with it in God's providence. The devil is very shrewd. He can sometimes attack a humble man in his willingness to be subject to the evaluation of others. The teacher must first teach himself. He must practice what he preaches.

There is no avoiding the devil's snares whether on the giving or receiving end of such things!

Yet Jesus will not allow her to wander in this way from the kingdom of God. She attempts to steer the conversation away from her sin, but Jesus redirects her to the only path in which she will find forgiveness: himself.

Jesus takes her attempted misdirection of his queries about her married life and redirects her back to the only place where she can find the forgiveness of her sins: in Jesus, the savior of sinners. He will restore sinners to the true worship of God in heaven. In neither Jerusalem, Samaria, or any of the great metropolises of the earth can an earthly temple of God be found. It is only in heaven through Christ and his Spirit that we can come to God.

In conclusion, Jesus fully reveals his identity to this husbandless woman: "I who speak to you am he." Quite literally it reads: "I am, who speaks to you." Jesus is the great "I Am," and as such he is the bridegroom who has finally arrived for his bride. This woman is enveloped by his grace into his betrothed church, sanctified, purified, and saved.

We who believe are among that number. He pursues us with his grace, however often we may evade or resist. Let us lift up our hearts to heaven, clinging to him in faith and repentance as we worship in Spirit and in truth. Let us not flee the exposure of our evil by running from him, nor deceive ourselves that we

are engaged in spiritually good things when we are simply judging others. Let us instead humble ourselves before Christ, knowing that if we confess our sins before him he will cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

#### #14 - Devotional Meditations on John 4:27-45

Two basic necessities for every human being are food and water. In the first part of this chapter, Jesus appealed to the metaphor of water to describe the benefits of God's kingdom. Our sin leaves us thirsty and parched. Jesus brings us water that satisfies our thirst and gives us eternal life.

In this section the metaphor shifts to that of food. Just as we need earthly food and drink to feed us in our earthly life, so we need spiritual food and drink unto eternal life.

The woman at the well who had previously dodged and weaved Jesus's inquiries regarding her sinful past now comes rejoicing in the forgiveness that Jesus brought to her: "Come and see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ" (John 4:29). Although the disciples earlier clearly revealed their knowledge that Jesus is the Messiah, they clearly do not yet fully understand the significance of what he brings. After all, they are more focused on the fact that Jesus was talking to a woman than that he brought eternal life to her.

Interestingly, in both scenes both food and drink are things that Jesus receives and offers to others. When he sits down at the well, he wants a drink because he is thirsty. Later he holds out spiritual water to her as the gift of eternal life. Here he declares that "his food" is to "do the will of him who sent me." Later he speaks of a fruit for eternal life that they are to go forth to reap. Jesus both receives and gives this food and drink.

What is the significance of this? I think it puts us to the vicarious nature of Christ's work. The word "vicarious" refers to the fact that Christ is something in our place and for our sakes. He took our sins, sufferings, misery, and death upon himself. In its place he gives us the righteousness and life that is in him as the perfect son of God. The one who gives food first became hungry. The one who gives water declared on the cross: "I thirst."

But there is also an emphasis in this passage on the fact that Christ's work came to benefit men and women from all nations and languages. The text tells us that many Samaritan people came to believe in Christ based on the testimony of the woman at the well. Note the breadth and the extent of Christ's grace. It goes not to Jews only, but also to Samaritans.

The disciples marveled that Jesus would speak with a woman. The fact that she is an "impure" Gentile Samaritan only adds to their puzzlement.

Jesus came not only as a savior of the Jews and a son of Abraham. He came as a son of Adam to save his people among all the children of man. That is what is meant when people confess and believe that Jesus is the "savior of the world." This does not mean that Jesus intended to save each and every individual in



the world. Nor does it mean that every individual person in the world will be saved. Later in this Gospel Jesus will pray for his people and clearly specify that he is not praying for the world, but only for his people whom the father has given to him (John 17). In this context, saying that Jesus is the "Savior of the world" stands over against the more restrictive idea that Jesus is only the Savior of the Jews.

This means that Jesus did not come only to bring a possibility of salvation for every individual if they would exercise their free will and choose him. Instead, he came to procure a certain and efficacious salvation for the sheep whom the father had given him.

Ironically, the text concludes with a note that Jesus did not meet with honor in his hometown of Galilee. The prophet is despised in his familiar surroundings.

Indeed, this is a Christ that will be excepted by some, but rejected by others. Some will believe the others will stumble over the riches of his grace to sinners. Some will grow so familiar with him they will not honor him as they should. Although he is the Lord of glory, they will not see beyond the veil of his humble flesh.

This text reminds us today as Christians each day we are faced with the call to trust in the fact that Jesus is the son of God and the only one who can bring us true life, help, and salvation. We will either trust in him and through the outflow of his life be equipped to endure every trial and give ourselves in faithful obedience to his will. Or we will trust in our own power, pursuing the latest ideas of the world to fix our earthly problems even as we fail to benefit from the riches of the heavenly solutions offered in him.

It also reminds us that when Christ desires to make us his own, there is nothing that can frustrate and overcome his sovereign grace. Our status is no obstacle: the Gospel goes to Jews and Samaritans, men and women, as well as all languages and nations. Our past sins can also be no obstacle. Jesus came to save sinners. The main "obstacles" are the one's we create by refusing to acknowledge our sin, dodging the Scripture's clear teaching and avoiding the honest confession of our own sins. Our sinful wills are powerfully stubborn, but Christ's gracious will is yet more powerful. His grace is greater than all our sin.

#### #15 - Devotional Meditations on John 4:46-54

The first part of this devotional makes some comments on the structure of this section.

The second part has some more direct practical reflections on this passage.

#### Structure

The Gospels are carefully written narratives with a clear structure.

Early in our study of John, we noted that the Gospel has two major sections. The first is called the "Book of Signs," containing several major miracles by the Lord Jesus. The next section is the "Book of Glory," culminating in his crucifixion and resurrection.

This means we are in the "Book of Signs." John 4:46-54 is a clear reminder of this. In this passage, we are explicitly told that here Jesus's performed "the second sign" and that in the same location as the first sign: "Cana of Galilee."

In fact, careful analysis reveals that chapters 2-4 have their own chiastic structure. If you map it out, it would look something like this:

A - First Sign: Cana in Galilee  
B - Temple Cleansing in Place of Worship  
C - Nicodemus - New Birth from Above Eternal life  
C - John the Baptist - Eternal life from Above  
B - Temple Worship and Water Cleansing (Woman at the Well)  
A - Second Sign: Cana in Galilee

Here you see some broad parallels in content as you move through the narrative. We don't have space to dig deeper into this in our devotional, but it is a reminder that there is a larger message of which each section is an integral part. Clearly the central sections emphasize the central message of the Gospel: Jesus comes from heaven to bring eternal life. He comes to change his people, chosen from every nation under heaven. Nicodemus, a Jewish man, comes into contact with the kingdom of God and sees the need for a new birth. So also does a Samaritan woman, receiving in Jesus the forgiveness of her sins.

As we read the Gospel, this same message of transformation, forgiveness, and life comes to us. By faith we are participants in the reality of what Jesus brings.

This passage directly returns to the theme of "signs" as performed by Jesus. In the synoptic Gospels, Jesus's mighty works are called "miracles." The Greek word is "dunamis," which emphasizes how miracles demonstrate the unique power of the kingdom of God. In John, they are called "semion" or signs, which emphasize how they point to a greater, heavenly reality found in Jesus and the kingdom of God.

Jesus chooses to return to the place of his first miracle in order to perform the second: Cana of Galilee. The parallel location reinforces the significance and meaning of the miracle. In the first miracle at Cana, we read that in it Jesus revealed his glory. That same glory is revealed here, but in a different way and with a different emphasis.

#### Direct Reflections on the Passage

In this passage, John shows us the following three things about Jesus's glory.

First, we see that the glory and kingdom of Jesus brings life. In the first sign (turning the water to wine) the emphasis was on the celebratory character of God's kingdom. It marks the coming of the bridegroom

and the end of the incomplete age of the OT. But these things were somewhat "hidden" in the little detail regarding the water being used for ceremonial washings.

In this second sign, the nature of these blessings is more directly revealed. The official's son is sick and is close to death. Jesus's heals him and saves him from death. The Gospel is about the deepest things of human life and existence. It truly is a matter of life and death, and that eternally!

Second, he shows that this blessing of life comes to us through the word of Christ. Notice how the miracle is performed. Jesus is at a distance from the official's son when he heals him. The official traveled some distance to reach Jesus. It took him roughly a day to get back to his son (4:52). Even though physically he is distant, through his word and Spirit he draws near to bring life.

This aspect of the miracle was self-consciously emphasized by Christ himself. The official asks Jesus to come down to his son, believing that he will be able to heal him if he were in his presence. Jesus does not come but instead tells him to return with the verbal promise that his son will be healed.

What a blessing and comfort for us who live today! Jesus is farther away from us than he was from the official's son. Today he is in heaven and we are on earth. Yet Jesus draws near to us through another comforter: the Holy Spirit. The Spirit dwells in our hearts by faith and comes to us through the written word especially as it is preached. Christ's word is powerful to bring us life, and that eternally!

Third, it shows us that Jesus's kingdom comes to us out of his love, grace, and compassion to the miserable. In our sin we are lost and in a pitiable state. Although we deserve death and misery, Jesus is filled with love and compassion for his people. Later in the Gospel, we will see this compassion vividly revealed when Jesus raises his friend Lazarus from the dead. He will weep with the mourning in the face of death. Here he is filled with compassion for this man who was no doubt filled with sorrow over the imminent death of his son.

What a great comfort and encouragement to our faith. How easily we fall into thinking that God no longer loves us because of our spiritual sluggishness and shortcomings. Jesus sometimes feels so distant from us, and we might be tempted to think that he is uncaring. Yet Christ is still working the spiritual reality of his kingdom in our midst through his word and Spirit.

Let us then not grow weary or discouraged in trials. If Christ can save this man's son from a sickness leading to death, surely he can save us when we walk through the valley of the shadow of death. He will rescue us from every trial and bring us safely to his heavenly kingdom.

#### #16 - Devotional Meditations on John 5:1-17

John 5 begins a new section of the Gospel. This first part of the "book of signs" started and ended in Cana of Galilee. It began in Cana turning the water into wine. It ended in Cana healing the official's son from near death. The signs are clear. God's kingdom has arrived.

John 5 begins with yet another miracle-sign: the healing of the man at the pool of Bethesda. John tells us that this took place during a feast of the Jews in Jerusalem. Near a well-known pool in Bethesda, Jesus chooses one upon whom he will reveal his healing power. In the midst of a multitude of invalids, he sets his mercy upon one man. For thirty-eight years he had lain as an invalid, hoping that somehow the water would do him some good.

Without water and by his mere word, Jesus brings healing to his lame body. Immediately he takes up his bed and walks.

His forced, cursed "rest" is gone. The effect of sin has been removed. He returns to his original, created state with the ability to walk, move, and live to please God.

True grace has come upon him because the kingdom of God has come. He now has freedom and rest from the miseries of sin.

The point is further underscored by the miracle taking place on the Sabbath day. This day was a regular reminder to Israel of the freedom and rest he gave them when he brought them out of the land of Egypt and the house of slavery.

But how differently the Jews came to see it! The law was given by God to be a law of liberty, showing them how they could avoid bondage to their sin and the devil. It was a guide for how they could walk in true freedom in God's grace.

Yet for the scribes and the Pharisees, the law became something quite different. Completely blind to God's intention, they turned it into a set of rules which they could keep to earn their salvation. The Sabbath day was especially twisted. Not realizing that the prohibition against work was to help them enjoy a holy rest, they added layers of extra rules to it until they became such a burden they turned the day of rest into a day of misery.

And so when the Jews see the man healed and walking around, they are concerned only about one thing: are the rules being followed? Without a single word rejoicing or celebrating this man's miraculous recovery, they come as the Sabbath police and rebuke him for walking with his mat. The fourth commandment never forbade such activity, and actually foreshadowed the coming day of joyful rest in the fullness of God's kingdom. The very reality that the Sabbath prefigured was before their very eyes.

As the other Gospels tell us, the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath. He has the authority to declare what is lawful on the day of the Lord. What better demonstration of his authority that to bring life and rest to this lame man? Yet these Jews are blind and still cannot see.

In his subsequent conversation, Jesus makes clear to the lame man the true reality that has come to him. He declares to him: "Sin no more, that nothing worse may happen to you." In the other Gospels, the healing of the lame man clearly demonstrates his authority on earth to forgive sins. His real problem was not his inability to walk, but the guilt and corrupting power of sin.

God the Father and God the Son continue this work for us today. Through the Spirit, they bring the word of the Gospel to our ears. When we believe and are forgiven, we enter into the beginning of God's eternal rest. We are freed from the Bondage of this world, our flesh, and the devil.

What does Jesus call us to do in response: "Sin no more...". To be sure, no Christian can live a perfect life. We know that and God knows that. But with joy in our hearts we strive each day to no longer live in the filth of sin, but in the purity of righteousness. For the same power that freed us from bondage to sin can also keep us from returning again to it.

#### #17 - Devotional Meditations on John 5:18-29

This section of John 5 contains an extended portion of Jesus's direct speech to the Jews and his disciples. The Gospel contains both the acts and the words of Jesus. There is a sense in which the acts do some speaking on their own, and also that his words are so powerful that they immediately have an effect in action. But ultimately the acts and the words go together. In this speech, Jesus's words explain the significance of his healing the lame man on the Sabbath.

The point is clear: Jesus is equal with God and shares authority with him.

John tells us this directly as the narrator: "...he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God" (5:18).

How exactly is this true? On the one hand, you might think that Jesus's identity as the Son of God makes him lesser than the Father. After all, isn't a father greater than his son? Which young son will come up to his father in the household and boldly say: "I am equal to you!"

In the economy of redemption, we can certainly see how Christ as the incarnate God-man and mediator is subordinate to the Father. After all, he prays "not my will but thine be done."

But here John and Jesus are not speaking of his mediatorial office. Instead, it speaks of the power and glory he shares as an equal member of the Godhead.

This equality begins with the inter-Trinitarian relations between the Father and the Son. John describes Jesus as the "only-begotten" Son" of the Father. In fact, in John 1:18 he goes so far as to call him the "only-begotten God."

These verses refer to what we call the eternal generation of the Son. From all eternity, the Father begets the Son and the Son is begotten of the Father. There is no beginning to this act: it is eternal. But it is a real, eternal relationship between the members of the Trinity. In it, we understand that there is an eternal communication of the divine essence from the Father to the Son.

Perhaps an analogy to human father-son relationships will help us understand this better. When a father begets a son, he shares his nature/essence with him. The mother also plays a key role. In human reproduction both the father and mother's DNA are combined. But they are essentially sharing their essence with their son when they are born.

The difference with the Father and the Son is that there is only one essence shared (no divine mother involved!). Likewise, there is no beginning point to the process since they dwell together eternally. It is a single, undivided, eternal essence that is shared in the eternal generation of the Son from the Father.

This guarantees their ultimate equality as God. They eternally share the same nature. Like Father, like Son. If the Father is eternal, the Son also is eternal. If the Father is God, the Son is also God.

This means that as God they can perform the same mighty works. In the passage the mighty work we behold is his raising the lame man from his paralysis that he might stand and walk again. As amazing as this work is, it is only the beginning of his mighty deeds. It is but a preview of the culmination of the power of God manifested in resurrection from the dead.

That power is previewed here in the miracle performed by the pool in Bethesda, but it is still manifested in our midst by God's word. Jesus makes clear that God's power of resurrection is already present among his people who believe. The one who believes and honors the Son and the Father has already passed through the judgment and come from death into life (5:24). The hour of full bodily resurrection is certainly still coming in the future, but the reality of spiritual resurrection is already here (5:25).

The fact that Jesus is equal with God is that he has the power to do the works of God. Through his sovereign word those works are already happening and still happening today. No, the temporary, external miracle signs do not continue after the passing of the apostolic age. But the reality of resurrection is still occurring and has occurred in you who believe.

Christians have been given a new birth from above. The life of heaven and power of God is in us. We who believe have had our sins forgiven by Jesus who is God: who can forgive sins but God alone. His sentence for us is definitive. The adversary (the devil) has no case to bring against us to bring us into condemnation.

No longer doomed to the second death, we have already in us the beginning of resurrection life.

What then are the troubles of the present day compared to the joy and glory of the day of resurrection? John gently beats a simply drum in his Gospel from start to finish: the Son of God has come. Believing we have eternal life in him.

This may seem redundant and unnecessary to us. We may even be tempted to think that John is the "simple" Gospel for the uninitiated. How foolish we are when we think we have mastered the basics of "faith" and can move on to other things.

The source of our life is Christ. We draw that life through faith in him. Without faith it is impossible to please God. We must first have our faith purified and strengthened before we can bear fruit to him.

How thankful we ought to be for this simple message of John's Gospel. Although we have no power in ourselves to accomplish anything, Christ has freely given us the power of God even to bring life to the dead. We hear it every day when we come to his word. The life in him comes into us when we hear it and believe. The voice of the Son of Man rings now in our ears, even as it will ring at the day of judgment when we lie in our tombs, saying: "Rise and live!"

#### #18 - Devotional Meditations on John 5:30-47

All of us depend upon testimony to function and live in the world. No one knows everything through direct, exhaustive experience or study. We depend upon reliable sources to give us the information we need to live our lives.

This is especially true in a courtroom. If you are a judge or a jury, you depend a great deal on the testimony of others or the testimony of evidence to make your decision.

So it is with Jesus Christ. None of us were alive when Jesus walked the earth. We depend upon the testimony of the Spirit speaking in and through the Scriptures to enlighten us in Christ.

In the first section of this chapter, the emphasis was on the identity of Jesus. He is one with the Father and therefore equal with God. He can therefore do the works of God, especially resurrection from the dead. The miracle of Christ in healing the lame man testified to this very thing.

In this section Jesus directs the Jews (with his disciples) to other aspects of this testimony to his identity. Testimony or "witness" is also a major theme of John's Gospel, introduced in the prologue (1:7-8, 15). At that time the emphasis was on the testimony of John the Baptist. But the prologue indirectly teaches that not just John, but many other things testify to Christ. This includes the revelation of creation itself as well as all of OT revelation preeminently expressed in Moses (1:1-3, 9-10).

What other things testify to Christ?

First, there is testimony of John the Baptist. The Jews to whom Jesus is speaking had heard his words, and many of them regarded him as a prophet (

We all depend on testimony to one degree or another in our lives. If we cook a new meal, we depend on the testimony of others (or the cookbook!) as to whether it is a good meal. When we buy a vehicle, we research reports and testimony to see if it is a good value and reliable vehicle.

John's Gospel is filled with testimony to Jesus. In his prologue, this theme was introduced in connection to John the Baptist, who bore witness about Jesus (John 1:7-8, 15). But the testimony also included creation (1:1-3) and God's OT revelation through Moses (1:9-10).

We are surrounded by God's testimony to his Son, Jesus Christ. We need this testimony to buttress our faith. We also need it to maintain our spiritual focus. God has commissioned his church to have its eyes fixed on the kingdom of heaven to come. Our chief aim is to glorify him in bringing the Gospel to others and walking faithfully in it ourselves. Trials, temptations, and even earthly successes can distract us from these things. How good to be reminded of the variegated testimony of everything to Jesus?

What aspects of this testimony are contained in this passage?

Let us note four of them:

First, there is the testimony of the Father himself. At Jesus' baptism the Father declared: "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased!" (cf. Matthew 3:17). God the Father has directly declared that Jesus is his Son. There is no greater testimony we can receive than that of God the Father! While we were not there at his baptism, we do have God's Holy Spirit testifying with our spirit that we are children of God, by whom we cry "Abba, Father!" (Romans 8:15). Through the Scripture we do behold the baptism of Jesus, and through the written word the Spirit assures us of the truthfulness of its testimony.

Second, there is the testimony of John. Jesus is strategic in his appeal to the Baptist in this section. The Jews to whom he speaks acknowledged that he was a prophet. At the very least, they feared the people who regarded him as such. For them to reject the testimony of John would be to put them in an awkward position. This foreshadows the contradictory stance of the Jews in Jesus's trial, simultaneously accusing Jesus of insurrection while demanding that an insurrectionist be released in his place. John clearly stated that Jesus was the Christ, yet they reject his testimony.

Third, there is the testimony of the miracles. Jesus refers to these simply as his "works" that the Father has given him to accomplish (5:36). These testify to his power and authority as God. Only God can make the lame walk and give life to the dead. Jesus shows his authority on earth to forgive sins, which God alone can do. The actions of Jesus speak clearly! He is God and can save us from our sins.

Fourth, there is the testimony of Moses and the OT Scriptures (5:45-47). Although the Jews set their hopes on Moses and the Law, those things actually testify of Christ to come.

We thus have a grand portrait of testimony to God and to Jesus, all of which is available to us today in both nature and in Scripture. As Christians, God's Spirit opens our eyes to behold in nature the glory of the eternal Logos, the life and light of man. The Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments reveal this same Christ for the salvation of sinners. Whether in prophecy or in fulfillment, it contains a reliable and ample testimony to Jesus, the Son of God, our Savior.



How desperately we need to be reminded over and over again of the testimony of God to Jesus. The world and our sin seek to suppress this testimony to enslave us once again. In these reminders we can have our faith both encouraged and refocused. The Son of God has come. In him we have the forgiveness of sins and eternal life. How easily we lose sight of the glory of what God has given us, making far too much of our trials and successes in this earthly life.

As this chapter makes clear, human existence is meaningless without an answer to the basic question of life and death. We have ample testimony in Jesus that he is the answer! Although some reject it, one day they will know the truth.

"...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" (5:28-28)

#### #19 - Devotional Meditations on the Gospel of John 6:1-15

John 6 contains the story of the feeding of the 5,000. The chapter itself is structured as a kind of literary "sandwich." A sandwich typically has "parallel" pieces of bread on the outside and some kind of "meat" in the middle. If we were to illustrate this structure, it would look like this:

Bread  
    Meat  
Bread

John 6 is similar. We can illustrate the literary arrangement like this:

Feeding of the 5,000 Performed  
    Jesus Walks on the Water  
Feeding of the 5,000 Explained

This puts the central focus on Jesus's walking on the water as a manifestation of his power and identity. But it also coordinates it with the Feeding of the 5,000. Broadly speaking, this means that the whole scene paints a general portrait that should get us thinking: "What is the significance of connecting a bread miracle and a water miracle like this?" As we work through this chapter, hopefully the answer becomes clear.

Today we focus on the first 15 verses where Jesus performs the feeding.

The entire chapter recalls the Exodus of Israel out of Egypt under Moses. Indeed, in the prologue John told us that "...the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." Through Moses God did a water miracle when he led them through the Red Sea on the dry ground. He also did a bread miracle when he fed them with manna from heaven.

The people also questioned, grumbled and complained against Moses even as they beheld these mighty works. So also the disciples question Jesus (6:5) and later the Jews grumble and complain against him (6:41, 52).

Let us pause and consider this fact: grumbling and complaining in the context of God's work is addressed many times in the Bible. Paul tells us to do everything without grumbling or complaining (Philippians 2:14), and explicitly references the Israelite Exodus when he warns the Corinthian church not to grumble (1 Cor. 10:10).

Why did they grumble? The people felt that God was not adequately meeting their earthly needs of food, drink, and safety. They did not like the way God was providing for those earthly needs.

And why was this such a great sin? Because God was doing an amazing work in their midst: granting them a word that through faith would give them eternal life.

God said through Moses: "Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Deuteronomy 8:3).

Christ now gives them bread from heaven and does an even greater water miracle. Yet the Jews again grumble and complain. Even the disciples question and grumble regarding Jesus's methods of ministering eternal life: "This is a hard saying, who can listen to it?" (John 6:60).

What mercy Jesus has for us even when we fall into an earth-centered mentality, grumbling and complaining about our circumstances. He has mercy on the large crowd who is thronging to him apparently only to get a miracle to relieve their earthly misery. Even though the disciples question him about food, he mercifully allows them to be the distributors of the miracle bread to the people. In contrast to the grumbling and complaining surrounding Jesus, he begins the meal by doing the opposite: giving thanks to the Father for the simple provision of bread and meat (John 6).

Does this not strike you in your heart as you behold the contrast between Jesus and his disciples? If there was any on earth that had the right to complain, it was Jesus! Even here he could be complaining about the complainers. Yet he replaces complaint with joyful thanksgiving to God.

And what an abundant provision he gives, with 12 baskets leftover for the 12 tribes of the new Israel. Moses fed them with bread and meat, and now Jesus feeds them with bread and meat. The great Prophet has come. The kingdom of heaven is at hand.

Jesus feeds us with the same rich food. Not the bread that can only be eaten for one meal and give us energy for the day, but bread that will feed us unto eternal life.

God is doing a great work in our midst that is easy to miss. Like the daily bread that God's provides, we can quickly take it for granted and put our focus on other tangential things--even in our church lives. We

grumble and complain about what is incomplete in our lives, even while God is filling us to full with the food of eternal life.

That eternal life comes to us in his word. He did not come to be a king to make our earthly lives all that we wish them to be (5:15). He came to bring a heavenly, spiritual kingdom. That kingdom begins now. We participate in it by faith. A clear sight of that power that is already in us will fill us with hope and joy. Grumbling can be replaced with humble thanksgiving. The weight of our trials lightens with the spiritual strength God provides through his word. Fear turns to faith (see 5:20) as we see that the great "I Am" leads us through the storms of life.

Jesus is the true bread that came down from heaven. It is offered freely to the hungry in God's word. Let us joyfully give ourselves to that word daily, and especially as it comes to us week by week from the mouth of Christ when we gather the feast of worship each Lord's day.

#### #20 - Devotional Meditations on the Gospel of John 6:16-21

In our last meditation, we noted that John 6 has many parallels with the story of the Exodus. Moses fed Israel with bread and meat in the wilderness. Jesus feeds the 5,000 with bread and meat. Along with this food miracle, Jesus also does a water miracle by walking on the sea. One greater than Moses is here. As the old Israel rejects Jesus, a new Israel is born again into a new people that will live by the words that come from the mouth of Jesus.

John made this point in seed form at the beginning of the Gospel: "For the Law was given through Moses, grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (John 1:17). It's not that the law was devoid of all grace. Indeed, Moses spoke about Jesus! (John 5:46). Instead, the point is that Moses contained Jesus in the shell of the old forms of worship given in the law and its ceremonies. The Jews are trying to hand onto the shell while rejecting the "kernel" that is Jesus himself.

In this brief section, we come to the heart of the literary "Sandwich" we mentioned earlier. The story of Jesus walking on the water is the "meat" of this section! Interestingly enough, a similar pattern happens in other Gospels (such as Mark) in which similar water miracles have a central place in their literary structures. The Gospels tell the same story!

By putting this section in the literary center of the passage, he is signaling that there is something here that is theologically central to his message. A close examination of the text reveals how this is the case.

First, note the time of the miracle. It is dark. The disciples are in the boat in the middle of the night. This is not just a random detail. It happens by God's providence to indicate something important about Jesus. Without him, there is only darkness. It is either Christ or darkness and chaos. Jesus is the Logos. In him is life, and the light is the light of men, shining in the darkness! This darkness recalls God bringing light into creation. Darkness was over the surface of the watery deep, but God spoke his word (logos!) and brought forth light. Clearly, this reminds us of creation. But it also recalls the Exodus. The second to last plague was God's turning the sun black. It was an ironic judgment of Egypt's god Ra (the god of the sun).

So much for his light and life-giving power! The true light of men has arrived! The world will pretend to bring enlightenment and a new birth which is only darkness masquerading as the light.

Do you sometimes feel like you are shrouded in darkness as you live in this world? Perhaps you feel alone at work, where there seems to be no one else who calls upon the name of the Lord. Perhaps at school, your friends don't seem to be mindful of God. In your extended family, maybe you are one of the only believers. Know that Jesus is your light in the darkness! Darkness is as light to him. There is nowhere you can go to flee from his presence (cf. Psalm 139).

Second, notice the storm. In the Bible, storms have several references. Literally, it recalls the salvation and judgment that came through Moses in the Exodus. Israel was saved through the parting of the waters, and Egypt was judged through the same waters. The waters were parted for Israel and they walked through safely on the dry ground. The waters were unleashed upon the Egyptians, and they perished in the water-storm of God.

But storms also stand figuratively in the Bible for the nations in rebellion against God. They also stand for chaos more generally. Do we not often feel that we dwell in the midst of chaos and rebellion against God? Like Israel before the Red Sea and the disciples in the boat, we are often filled with fear and anxiety at the uncertain prospects of the. Know that Jesus is with us in the storm. He even walks above it, unaffected by its great power, for it is the winds and the seas that obey him!

Finally, note the words that Jesus speaks. Typical English translations are not wrong but can obscure an important point. The ESV translates verse 20 in this way: "It is I; do not be afraid."

A more direct translation would be: "I AM! Do not be afraid!"

John's message is clear: Jesus is God. He is the great "I AM" who revealed his name to Moses. The eternal I AM is incarnated in human flesh in the person of Jesus. He controls by his hands the storms of nature, nations, and all "chaos" in our lives.

When he is present with the disciples, note the change: fear becomes faith. Terror becomes joy (6:21). No matter how rough the seas or turbulent the chaos, the God of all troubles is with us to bring peace.

How easily we are unsettled by the circumstances we can see. Yet we are so often blind to the greater circumstances we cannot see: the presence of Jesus through his Holy Spirit.

The storms of life will ebb and flow, ultimately fading as we pass from this world to the next.

But the presence of the great I AM is eternal. He will be with us always, even to the end of the age.

#21 - Devotional Meditations on the Gospel of John 6:22-40

There is a beautiful simplicity to the apostle John's portrait of Jesus. In this Gospel, he is presented in simple terms that even a child can understand. He brings light and life. He feeds us with water and bread. He is a door, a shepherd, a door, and the Son of the Father. On the surface, these realities are basic and fundamental to our experience as humans. They are an essential part of our everyday life.

Yet through these simple phrases, Jesus and John are teaching us something deep and profound that goes way beyond our lived, visible experience. Beyond this visible world is an unseen world of spiritual, heavenly realities.

In this section, John speaks of these things using the image of bread. There is earthly bread that feeds us for a time. But there is also a "true," heavenly bread that feeds us unto eternal life.

The basic dilemma for Jesus's contemporaries focused on their failure to see the connection between these two things: through the earthly, they were to have a window into the heavenly. But in their blindness, they could not grasp the higher, greater reality.

While the people seek him only to get their fill of more earthly bread, Jesus says: "Do not work for the food that perishes, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you" (John 6:27).

"Food" here is representative for everything needed for sustenance in this earthly life. Hence when we pray "give us this day our daily bread" we are asking God to provide for all our earthly needs. This includes not only food, but also finances, friendships, emotional support, work, rest, clothing, and shelter.

Let us not make the mistake of thinking that this only applies to our "secular" life and not our life in the church. I think sometimes we as Christians look at the church as a separate "sphere" that operates by different rules. It is distinct, to be sure, but the church itself has both an earthly and heavenly aspect to it. Thus the sad reality is that sometimes in the church we get preoccupied with its earthly-social aspects. At its worst, the church simply becomes a social club rather than the place where the words of eternal life are heard and received with joy. Often times people will "shop" for churches mainly concerned that these earthly social needs are met with programs and activities. The Jews themselves were in the visible church in Jesus's day, and very "religious" in their lifestyle and culture. Yet they were blind to the spiritual kingdom of God and closed their mouths from the heavenly food that was in their midst.

Indeed, it is striking that Jesus himself often withdraws from the people as their concerns are preoccupied with the earthly (see John 5:22-25). At the same time, he draws near to those who long for the heavenly.

That is not to say that the church should not tend to the earthly needs of the people. Christ gave the church a distinct set of officers (deacons) to ensure that those who lack these basic needs may be sustained. It is to say that these needs are ultimately secondary to the spiritual food he gives us in his word.

Each day we often pour out our time and energy to pursue our earthly needs. In this fallen world our work is associated with labor and toil, often bearing thorns and thistles. Yet in his grace, the sweat of our brows and the pain of our backs still bring forth these needed necessities.

But what is our true need? All these earthly things will one day perish. What we have earned for ourselves will either be destroyed by moth or rust or passed on to others.

We need true food--food that will endure to eternal life.

That is the food that Jesus gives us in his word. We have access to it daily when we read it by ourselves or as families. Each week on the Lord's Day we are given a great feast as we assemble for morning and evening worship. Jesus is the heavenly chef, and he prepares exactly the food we need.

To be sure, that doesn't mean we will always enjoy the taste of it. Children have all their meals prepared for them by their parents. They are out for their good to give them the needed nutrition. Yet it seems that the healthiest meals garner the loudest complaints. Perhaps you are familiar with this chorus of moaning over food at your table: "I don't like how this tastes!" "Can I have pancakes instead?"

Like our children, we often want to give Jesus advice on what we would he should feed us: give us something sweeter and tastier! And so God's word may come to us in a manner that may make us initially taste earthly bitterness, even as we know it possesses heavenly sweetness.

[See John's statement with Revelation 10:9: "So I went to the angel and told him to give me the little scroll. And he said to me, "Take and eat it; it will make your stomach bitter, but in your mouth it will be sweet as honey."]

So also with Jesus. He gives them the word of eternal life. Yet instead of humbly trusting that Jesus gives them exactly what they need, like the children of Israel they grumble and complain. Tired of the heavenly manna and its "same old, same old" flavor, they long for the flesh pots, onions, and leeks of Egyptian slavery. Like Esau, they wish to trade the heavenly promise for a pot of earthly porridge.

But Jesus gives us eternal food. He calls us to work and strive for it. How do we do this? Only by faith: "This is the word of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent" (6:29). What a contrast between our vain works to earn earthly things and the free reception of heavenly things by grace through faith!

Each day we start out hungry, looking for food to jumpstart our physical day. Let us in Christ seek earnestly to fill our souls with the bread that will feed us unto eternal life. Without grumbling or complaining, let us with meekness receive his word even when the taste is bitter and bland to our earthly pallets. May he increase the measure of our spiritual tastebuds, and make both himself and his word (both read and taught) sweeter to us than honey from the honeycomb. For in his word is the taste of resurrection and eternal life.

## #22 - Devotional Meditations on the Gospel of John 6:41-71

This section of John 6 focuses on reactions. We see not only the various reactions to Jesus but also the different ways he reacts to them.

Let us begin by looking at Jesus. Frankly, if Jesus were a pastor in a church acting in this way, a lot of people would find him very strange. He first seems to ignore their earthly needs in an uncaring way by leaving them. They have taken the time to follow him great distances to get his help. But Jesus first withdraws to the mountain to be by himself (6:15). Then later he leaves the crowd by walking on the water to the other side of the sea. The crowd has to get in boats of their own and cross the sea to find him again (6:24). If Jesus is the "Good Shepherd," why is he keeping his distance from some of the sheep?

There are lots of reasons for this. One is that their expectations for their Pastor-Shepherd were a little off. We cannot say absolutely that their expectations were too "high" in an absolute sense. Indeed, he is God and can do all things. But insofar as their expectations were misplaced they were not thinking rightly about his purpose for them. Jesus did not come to be an earthly king or bring an earthly paradise-kingdom in a transformed world. When that option is presented to him, he flees and withdraws from them (6:15). To be sure, Jesus at times did provide compassionate miraculous healing and feeding for their earthly needs. But these served his greater purpose: to testify to his identity as the Son of God and the greater resurrection life he will bring.

Jesus has not come to fix all the problems in our earthly lives. He does extend to us mercy and relief in our trials. But his promise has never been to remove them from us. He instead promises to work through "evil" for our ultimate good by purifying our faith and drawing our hearts to eternal things. This affects how we should view our lives in the church. To be sure, the church has a calling to care for its people in its earthly needs. A distinct office has been appointed by his providence to see to that very thing (Acts 6). But even there the focus is not exhaustive or comprehensive. The focus is on the especially needy and helpless. Likewise, its purpose is to free the pastor and elders to focus on the public ministry of the word of God and prayer.

Jesus has come to bring the words of eternal life. That is why the chief mark of the church is the faithful preaching of the word of God. Where this is present, the church will be found. To be sure, this word must bear fruit in faith and love among the people. The leaders must also work diligently to fulfill their roles as God would have them. But this fruitfulness will differ based on the maturity and faith of the congregation. We will never find a church where everything is done well all the time. The church that satisfies all our personal preferences will be a lonely one: we will be the only members! The relative faithfulness of each church will differ and change with time.

What does not change is the truth of God's word. If the seed is there, it will find good soil and bear fruit in God's time and intention. His word will not return to him void but will accomplish the purpose of salvation for which it was sent.

So much for the reaction of Jesus to the people. What of the people to Jesus? One group stumbles over the message, while the others see in it the gift of eternal life.

The "stumpers" trip over a saying of Jesus that even his disciples admit is "hard": "And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh" (6:51). Later he says that they must eat his flesh and drink his blood to have this life (6:51).

This isn't the only "hard saying" in the Bible. God tells Abraham to sacrifice his one and only Son: surely that is no smooth and easy saying! Entrance into the old covenant people of God required circumcision. Not exactly a smooth way to get people to join the church, and certainly a bad philosophy for church growth! Jesus also says that if we are to follow him we must die to ourselves and take up the cross. The cross was an instrument of public execution. Who would join the church if the pastor said they had to take up an electric chair?

There are countless other Bible teachings that similarly cause us and our culture to stumble:

- Its clear condemnation of both same-sex attraction and activity strikes many as bigoted and hateful (Romans 1).

- Its insistence on God's created design of man as male and female is the foundation of systemic evil and oppression (Genesis 1).

- Its declaration that God has foreordained some to eternal life and others to eternal death for their sin before the foundation of the world (Romans 9; Ephesians 1).

- Its call to Christians to love others (even their enemies) when they are not loving them--even their enemies and their brothers when they sin against them.

These sayings were not easy to accept. So it was then and so it is today.

But amid the opposition of those who stumble over Christ is another group: those who believe.

When many disciples depart, Jesus turns to his disciples and says: "Do you want to go away as well?" Peter answers: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. And we believed and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God."

Let us then be among this number of trustful disciples. When division and strife surround us on earth, let us find unity in the words of the heavenly Christ. When troubles assail us in our pilgrimage below, let us find peace in the words that proceed from the mouth of Christ.

There is nowhere else for us to go. He alone has the words of eternal life.

#23 - Devotional Meditations on the Gospel of John 7:1-24



In John 7 we leave behind the story of the feeding of the 5,000 and its aftermath. This new scene takes place during the "Feast of Booths." We also see the Hebrew phrase translated as "Feast of Tabernacles."

We can't say everything in every one of these studies. In this devotional, we will consider how the background of this feast informs what Jesus says and does.

What did this feast symbolize? How does this inform John's story of Jesus in chapter 7?

First, the feast gets its name from the fact that God called his people to dwell in temporary tent shelters during the course of its celebration. It recalled the Exodus from Egypt when God made the Israelites dwell in tents when he brought them out of Egypt (Lev. 23:43).

The feast was a yearly reminder that their entire lives on earth were but a pilgrimage to a greater, heavenly country. Even so, when we consider the feast we are reminded that we, too, are strangers and wanderers on the earth. Everything here is temporary. But the unseen, heavenly things are eternal.

Amazingly, here at this celebration of the feast, we behold God himself come in the flesh. Even as God was present with Israel in their tents, now his presence has come in fulness in the person of the incarnate Christ. That is why John says that in Jesus "the word became flesh and pitched his tent among us" (John 1:14). This is a more literal translation of the Greek "eskenosen." Jesus is the presence of God in the tent of human flesh!

Perhaps you can see the ironic, redemptive-historical depth of John's presentation. It takes place during the time of the feast of tabernacles, and the true tabernacle is visible in their midst!

Second, the feast also involved offerings. The emphasis seems to be on the food offerings, which were non-bloody offerings of the produce of the land. They symbolized the devotion of one's life in consecration to God's service and worship. But the feast also involved blood sacrifices (see Lev. 23:37). These symbolized the substitution and atonement they needed from the Savior to come. He would undergo a bloody death for their sakes to bring us to God.

In Jesus, we see the fulness of God's sacrifice for us. Note that during the feast the Jews seek to kill him-- a fact that is mentioned multiple times (7:1, 19, 20). The irony is rich. Even while they perform ceremonial sacrifices pointing to Jesus in the celebration of the feast of booths, they plot to kill God's true sacrifice in Jesus.

Jesus even points to his own innocence as the spotless lamb of God (7:18-19). He is perfect and sinless. Even while they offer food offerings consecrating themselves to a life of purity, holiness, and devotion to God they also plot to commit murder! Hypocrisy has rarely reached such great heights.

As the fulness of the ceremonies of the Feast of Booths, Jesus points them away from the types and shadows to the permanent substance contained in them. Notice how he initially avoids going up to the feast and only later arrives at the Temple precincts.

And what is he doing? He is teaching the people (7:14). Jesus sets aside the old forms and their focus on the external actions of the body. He refocuses their attention on what had always been the true focus of their spiritual lives: hearing God's word, believing it, and following it.

As Jesus reminds us, those who seek to do the will of God will know whether the teaching is from God. This teaching declares that although Moses gave the law, none of us can keep it perfectly (7:19). Received by faith, we obtain in Jesus the permanent presence of God in our human nature. He will dwell incarnate forever, although now glorified in heaven. His temporary tabernacle has become a permanent temple.

By faith, we are in him. Through his sacrifice, we obtain the forgiveness of our sins. Through him, we also are consecrated to God by his Holy Spirit.

Let us then on this day of God celebrate the fulness of this feast with joy as we worship him together (see Lev. 23:40: "...You shall rejoice before the Lord your God seven days"). This Sabbath is a day of true rest and true life. On it, we hear the voice of the Son of Man through the word of God. This word brings resurrection.

Indeed, in this passage, Jesus brings men life even while men plot Jesus's death. He has the power to make not only our souls, but our whole bodies well in the resurrection (7:23). Let us in Jesus seek God's glory, even as we await its fulness in the world to come.

#### #24 - Devotional Meditations on the Gospel of John 7:25-52

Today we consider the division that arises over Jesus among the people. Verses 37-39 are worthy of separate treatment, so we will take that section up on its own in the next devotional.

This section contains a series of doubts and questions about the identity of Jesus. The same thing is true today. This can be the source of great confusion among Christians.

Jesus himself told us:

"Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division...They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law" (Luke 12:51, 53).

Living in this reality can prove to be challenging!

Indeed, these passages are a helpful to remember that Jesus did not induce a united response among the people of his day. We may at times feel a lot of pressure from the "crowd" to think a certain way about the Christian faith. That was true then and is true today. In this respect, Jesus has proven to be a divisive figure. Ironically, he came from God--the only source of true, eternal unity.

In this passage, the division over Jesus is expressed in a series of doubts and disputes about his identity. Let us consider a few of them together.

First, the people wonder whether the authorities' hesitancy to stop Jesus indicates that they believe he is the Christ (John 7:25). In other words, they are looking to the religious leaders to give them a united answer. Jesus is speaking openly and the authorities do not stop him. Perhaps this means they believe he is the Christ?

Many want to lean on expert authority to make decisions for them. To be sure, God has given us pastors and elders to help us in understand the Scriptures. Christ calls us to look to them for guidance as they lead us according to God's word. But accepting Christ as the Savior is something we must do out of the conviction of our hearts. But the church is not a rule of faith and practice but is to be used as a help in both. The people are afraid of making a decision about Jesus, so they "pass the buck" on to the Jewish leaders. But each of them (and us!) must make this commitment for ourselves from the heart.

Secondly, the people also question his identity based on his origin. They are familiar with his origins and know where he grew up. They believe that the Messiah's origins will be unknown. Early in John 6:42, this was spelled out more clearly. They knew his family: his father and mother were known to them. Their familiarity with Jesus became a stumbling block. How can he be from God if he came from such humble origins?

So today Christians experience the same things. How many of you have tried to share the Gospel with your relatives? Perhaps some of you are thinking about this very thing as you prepare for Thanksgiving gatherings. It can be a challenging thing! This is especially the case if you earlier lived with them as a non-Christian. They may think of you as a religious nutcase and all the immoral things you used to do and thus discredit your testimony. More generally, the more familiar we become with one another, the more we see each other's weaknesses and flaws. These prove to be a stumbling block to receiving God's word in whatever way it may come to us through them.

Let us remember that this was also true of Jesus. His own family rejected him, at one point claiming that he was insane (Mark 3:21). What matters is not what people think of us in their misguided opinions. What matters is whether we are trusting and believing in God's word.

Third, others dispute the specifics of these points. Some question whether Galilee is the proper place of origin for the Messiah. Here they are missing the message of Isaiah 9:15, which explicitly speaks of the great light of the Messiah coming upon the area. Others insist that since the Messiah comes from David he will arise from Bethlehem. Again, this also is true and was fulfilled by Jesus in his birth at God's

providential direction (Matthew 2:1, Luke 2:1-7). They wrongly pit these Scriptures against one another and create a contradiction that isn't really there in the prophetic testimony.

Clearly, there is division and confusion over the identity of Jesus. But this arose from man's blindness and sinfulness. The main issue is not Jesus' earthly origins according to the flesh. Instead, what matters is Jesus' divine origin as the Son of God sent by the Father.

To this, he has clearly testified in his miraculous works and mighty words of truth and power. For a man to accept him requires a new birth from above that they may receive the word he has given.

That means accepting a life filled with division and conflict over Christ and his testimony. The people do not want this, and so they hesitate to accept Jesus.

But notice who appears at the end of the story: Nicodemus! He first appeared in John 3, questioning and doubting the kingdom of God. Yet Nicodemus' transformation has begun. Before he questioned Jesus, doubting the kingdom of God. But now he questions the authorities in their unjust plot to kill Jesus (7:51-52). Nicodemus will appear one more time in the Gospel, helping Joseph of Arimathea bury the body of Jesus (John 19:39). He believed and came to know that Jesus was the Son of God.

What about you? Have you believed and come to know that Jesus is the Christ? Doing that has huge implications. It means accepting a life that sometimes is filled with disputes, challenges, and even threats. Elsewhere Jesus summarizes all these things as "taking up a cross" to follow him.

If Jesus is from God, he is the source of eternal light, life, and salvation. He does indeed call us to face trials. But there is no pain he cannot heal, no loss he cannot restore, no storm he cannot calm, and no sin he cannot forgive.

Trusting him means living and dying in him. That can be a painful process. We will be filled with doubts and uncertainties. Yet we can calmly trust that as Jesus is God, come in the flesh, he is sufficient and faithful to sustain us in the storms of life and bring us safely to our heavenly home. Jesus came down from heaven to dwell in human flesh, so that those who are but human flesh may dwell eternally in heaven with him.

#### #25 - Devotional Meditations on the Gospel of John 7:37-39

Two of the most fundamental necessities for human beings are bread and water. Without food or drink, we cannot survive.

John has shown us that in Jesus Christ we will find a limitless supply of both. The water and bread he speaks of are spiritual. The food is Jesus and his word. We do not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. To whom else shall we go to eat? He alone has the words of eternal life.

As Jesus said previously, he also brings life-giving waters. In John 3, he speaks of these waters bringing a new birth from above. In John 4 he directs the woman at the well to the living waters that he alone can give her.

These waters are God's Holy Spirit which he has poured into our hearts from heaven.

On the last and greatest day of the Feast of Tabernacles Jesus declares: "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water" (7:37-38).

The scene for this statement is significant, although not explicitly drawn out in the text. The last day of the Feast of Tabernacles contained a libation ceremony, in which water would be poured out on the altar in an elaborate procession. It was a quite popular moment and well-loved by the people. You can think of it as being like the popular moments of modern Holidays similar to the public lighting of a great Christmas tree in the city.

At that very time, Jesus declares that through faith the people can receive God's Holy Spirit, which will cause rivers of living water to flow from his heart.

John adds his interpretive statement about the Spirit in 7:39. He connects it to Jesus' glorification. The meaning is not that the Spirit was not present in any sense before the resurrection. God was clearly working his saving power to bring forth children born according to the Spirit back in the days of Abraham (Galatians 4:29). Even David plead with God the Spirit of salvation would not depart from him in his sin and rebellion (Psalm 51).

What Jesus speaks of is the fullness of God's Spirit in Jesus's exaltation.

When he rose from the dead, he did so by the power of God's Holy Spirit. Jesus's flesh was given over to death, but he was raised through the Spirit (Romans 1:4, 8:11).

On the cross, Jesus cried out, "I thirst!" In his resurrection, God quenched this thirst of death through the Spirit of life.

Each of us has that Holy Spirit in us. The same power at work in Christ to raise us from the dead dwells in our hearts. He will one day give life to our mortal bodies. But even now he begins the transformation of our souls in the inner man.

As you begin your day, what do you think you need? God has given us richly of the Spirit, the Lord and giver of life. Whether we lack or abound in earthly water and bread, we have the Lord and giver of life in our hearts.

This Spirit joins us to Jesus, such that we are bone of his bones and flesh of his flesh. Although he is in heaven and we are on earth, we are one with him--in body and soul, in life and death.

May that Spirit complete his work this day by bringing forth in our lives on earth more of the power of heaven to come.

The water from our faucets will give us life for a few hours. The water of God's Spirit will give us life for eternity.

#### #26 - Devotional Meditations on the Gospel of John 8:12-30

These sections of John's gospel take place during the Feast of Tabernacles. As we noted previously, this piece commemorated Israel's wilderness wanderings in their exodus from Egypt. Just as they dwelt in tents for 40 years, so for the week of this feast they reenact their journey and live in temporary shelters.

It was a favorite feast of the Jewish people and had a number of traditions associated with it. We mentioned one in a previous devotional, where the feast culminated in a water-libation ceremony. Water was poured out on the altar after a great procession of the priests.

Another aspect of this feast was how well-lit the temple facility was. Keep in mind that this was in the era before electricity. The Mishnah indicates that there were several huge menorahs that would be lit up when evening came. This would light up the temple area. Additionally, people involved in the ceremony would carry lighted torches to add to the festive celebration.

Again, think of it as being analogous to all the Christmas lights people put on their houses, outdoor trees, and other areas during the winter months. Just as most families like to drive around and behold the beautiful spectacle, so also the people loved this aspect of the feast of tabernacles.

It is against this backdrop that Jesus declares these beautiful words: "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but have the light of life" (John 8:12).

Again, we see the beautiful simplicity of John's presentation of the Gospel of Christ. In our sin we are blind, shrouded in darkness by the cloak of the devil. In our flesh, we suppress the light of God's revelation in unrighteousness. Like Adam and Eve in the garden, we hide our sins because of our sense of shame and nakedness before the Lord.

But Jesus brings the light of heaven. We are from below and he is from above. We are of this world, but he is not of this world (8:23).

Light illuminates and also purifies. It removes the spiritual veil over our hearts and allows us to see ourselves in God's presence. But it also disinfects. Our sin is like wet mold on our hearts, growing and festering in the dark places. When it is brought out into the light it dries and the mold can be removed.

Jesus is our light. His light comes to us in his word. Let us then walk in the light, as he is in the light, that the blood of Jesus may cleanse us from all sin (cf. 1 John 1:7).

## #27 - Devotional Meditations on the Gospel of John 8:31-38

The truth shall set you free.

Along with John 3:16, these words from John 8:32 are among the most widely used in the Bible. Typically, they are extracted from the context and take on a meaning very different from what Jesus intended.

What does Jesus mean by the truth? How exactly does it set us free? Let us think about these questions in light of this passage.

First, according to Jesus, the "truth" is known through abiding in his word. For him, something is "true" if it corresponds with his words, now recorded for us in the Bible. Even more deeply, we are in the truth not simply when we formally align our thoughts and words with Christ's words. Jesus tells us that we must "abide" in his word. In other words, through the word and Spirit, we come into a vital, life-giving union with Christ. When we abide in the word, we abide in Christ. When we abide in Christ we are abiding in the vine and will bear much fruit.

Some people wish to make themselves the judge of the Christian faith. They will say to themselves: "first prove to me everything to my satisfaction, and then I will become a Christian". But Christianity requires that we surrender our entire selves to God. This is the first step in our ability to see its truthfulness. Instead of making our minds the measure of truth, we must acknowledge that truth finds its only source in him. Once we submit our hearts and minds to Christ, the master, the truth of all that he says becomes clear to us.

Still other times we can accept the "truth" only in a formal, intellectual way without it transforming our hearts through vital union with Christ. Mark well of Jews in this passage. In one respect they had the "truth." they followed the OT Scriptures scrupulously, tithing even the smallest portions of their produce from the land. They honored God with their lips, but their hearts were far from him. They were not abiding in the word of truth. Instead, their knowledge of the law had "puffed them up" such that they refused to bow the knee even to one who gave them the law, and the one about whom the law testified.

It is easy for us as Christians to use God's word for purposes that he did not intend. The Jews used the law simply to judge others, even to the point of judging Jesus himself. How quickly and how often we fall into such folly ourselves! To be sure, we must make righteous judgments according to God's word. But we are first to take the log out of our own eye before we take the speck out of our brother's. Our focus must be on how God can improve us before we can see clearly to help others improve before God.

Secondly, "truth" here has a deeper meaning than just correspondence to the words of Jesus or vitally abiding in him. The whole concept of "truth" John has a deeper meaning in that it connects us to heavenly, eternal realities.

That's why in the previous chapters Jesus spoke of the "true" bread that came down from heaven. Here the meaning is not simply that the old bread was "false" and the new bread is "true." The idea is that the bread of Jesus is the heavenly reality that comes down to us in his person and work.

This helps us understand how truth can lead to freedom. God's word was given to us that we might be free from our bondage to sin. When we hear it Christ himself comes to us. He sets us free from our slavery to our sinful natures. Our first inclination must be to judge ourselves by that word and therefore humble ourselves before God. In this process of repentance coupled with sincere faith, sin's tyrannical hold over us is broken and we are enabled from the heart to submit our lives to Christ.

Although the Jews of Jesus' day could appeal to formal, external sonship from Abraham, spiritually they were sons of the devil. They were still slaves of sin--children born according to the flesh. When we practice sin, we are a slave to sin. But if we are free in Christ we are also sons of God. Sonship and freedom go together.

The spiritual sons of God are not restricted to the line of the Jews, or any particular tribe, tongue, or nation. All nations and languages can become sons of Abraham by faith.

Israel was saved from slavery in Egypt. But this was a type and shadow of a greater slavery to sin and the kingdom of darkness.

By his word God saved the people in ancient times, and by his word he saves us today.

On this day of rest and worship, we gather before Christ, the one who can set us free. By his word of truth, he brings his heavenly, life-giving power to us. Receiving this by faith we are more and more freed from the dominion of the flesh and the tyranny of the devil. By his truth, he will set us free.

Let us then eagerly give ourselves to the food that Christ feeds us receiving in him all that we need for this life and for the life to come.

#### #28 - Devotional Meditations on the Gospel of John 8:39-59

In our last meditation, we focused on Jesus' statement that the truth will set you free. This freedom comes through God's son who reveals to us light and truth.

There is therefore a spiritual contrast between slavery and freedom. The former comes through the power of the devil harnessing our flesh. Under his tyranny, we are chained to sin. We only do evil all the time (Gen. 6:5). But freedom comes through the truth, which is found in God's Son. Through the power of his cross, he breaks the enslaving bonds of sin. Through the power of his resurrection, he enables us to live for God's glory. In his death we die to sin, and in his life we live to God.

Jesus' Jewish hearers did not like this message. They appealed to their descent from Abraham: "Abraham is our father," they loudly boasted. And unlike the pagan nations, they believed in the one true God, who



alone was the Divine father of his people. Their confession of faith was correct. They honored God with their lips, but their hearts were far from his Son.

How easy and tempting it is for us to rest on the laurels of our various ways of participation in the visible church. Perhaps we descend from a long line of Christian parents and grandparents. Or perhaps we have participated in Christian institutions our whole lives, attending Christian Schools, colleges, and supporting other important causes. All these things are good and many of them necessary. But they are no substitute for the humble heart of faith that personally receives Christ as the Son of God. The Jews had all these kinds of institutions and more. They participated in all of them with punctilious exactitude. Yet how hard the sinful heart is! They had around them all signs pointing in one direction: Jesus! They polished all the road signs, but never went to the directed destination. Refusing Christ and his word they manifested themselves as slaves of the devil. Morally they were right about many things and loudly condemned the unrighteous. Yet the unrighteous who repented and believed went into the kingdom of heaven before them. Gentile sinners became sons of Abraham. The Son has set them free, and they are free indeed.

Ironically, in response, the Jews accused Jesus of being in league with the devil. Behold the shrewdness of Satan! He accuses his enemies of the very thing of which he is guilty. Jesus will have nothing of this nonsense. He asks for proof: "...which of you can convict me of sin?" Instead of offering evidence, they simply repeat the charge more loudly.

Jesus boldly and openly declares them to be sons of their father, the devil. And is this not the same tactic used by the evil one to this day? More and more Christianity is seen as the source of nearly all the misery, oppression, and injustice in world history. The truth is that it is the only source of light for the world. Yet the world speaks of it as if it is darkness. If the light is dark to them, how much greater is their darkness! This is simply a page out of the devil's old playbook. He masquerades as an angel of light, even as he casts the angels and even God's son in his own devilish role.

Jesus is no devil. Instead, he is greater than all. This includes their great father, Abraham. There were few figures greater in the Jewish mind than Abraham. But Jesus is greater than Abraham. Abraham rejoiced to see the day of Jesus. He saw it and was glad. The Scripture tells us that Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness (Gen. 15:6). What was the object of his faith? It was Jesus! God had promised that Abraham's Son would not only be his Savior but also a blessing to the entire world.

Jesus was not only after Abraham as the fulfillment of God's promise, he was also eternally before Abraham. Jesus declares: "before Abraham was, I am!" With these words Jesus self-identifies as the eternal, self-existent I AM. He is therefore not only Abraham's son but Abraham's God.

In him, we come face-to-face with God himself. He is the source of all being, life, and light. He is the one who not only calls into existence the things that do not exist, but also gives life to the dead.

Even as you read his word this day, this Jesus draws near to you. He frees you from your bondage to yourself and to your sin, he sets you free and makes you a son of God. He gives you faith to trust him that you may endure every trial and every opposition. We come to him dead, but he makes us alive.

Let us then not harden our hearts, but with sincere faith receive this Jesus anew. And may he strengthen us to do his will through the power of the Holy Spirit sent from heaven.

#### #29 - Devotional Meditations on the Gospel of John 9:1-41

Jesus is the light! As the eternal word, he was the life that is the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness does not comprehend it.

The world loves the darkness. It conceals the evil of its heart and ways. Just as the burglar lurks in the darkness to escape notice, so also sin lies hidden in darkness. But God sees all.

Darkness arises for one of two reasons. Either the light is hidden, or our eyes are blind. The sun may not have risen in the morning, or we may not have opened our eyes.

Jesus comes to open the eyes of the blind. The sun of righteousness has arisen in Jesus, but some are still slumbering in their beds of sin.

In John 9 Jesus passes by a man blind from birth. His blindness was not a punishment for a particular sin, although it had clearly meant life-long suffering for him. God had afflicted him for a distinct purpose. At this very moment, the purpose comes to fulfillment: that the glory of God might be displayed through him.

What an encouragement for us when we fall into trials and even sins! God's purposes are greater than our shortcomings. He allows us to hurt so that he may display his healing power. He allows us to sin so that in us he might display his saving grace. We can trust that he will bring his good purpose to fulfillment even in the darkest of times.

To display his light he makes mud and puts it in the man's eyes. Just as in the beginning the I AM created the first man's eyes from the dust, so he makes new "eyes" of sight for this man from the muddy dirt. The Creator's power is manifested in his making this man see the world anew. The light of the world has illuminated his eyes. In Jesus's light, he sees light.

The true light is shining. His eyes have been opened. But darkness still lies close at hand. Some doubt whether he really was the blind man who begged at the pool. Some here don't see clearly in the fog of twilight or the blur of the morning. They doubt that a miracle has occurred. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness does not comprehend it.

But the Pharisees see that this is the man who once was blind. Ultimately, they cannot deny that a miracle has occurred. After questioning his parents, they cannot deny that this man born blind has been

made to see. Although the Pharisees "see" they still remain blind. With clear evidence right before their eyes, they refuse to acknowledge the obvious conclusion: Jesus is the light of the world, sent from God. He is the great prophet--the Messiah sent from God! Instead, without evidence, they charge him with being a sinner. What utter folly! Yet the stubbornness of blind unbelief leaves us in such contradictory affirmations.

The simple blind man knows the implication of what has happened. This new disciple of Jesus instructs the teachers of "Moses" law: "Whether he is a sinner I do not know. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see" (9:25).

In Jesus's light, he now sees light. Yet the teachers of the law (the "lamp" of God to guide them to Christ) are blind. So they seek to destroy and hide the evidence by casting him out of the synagogue.

As with Jesus, so with the blind man. Note the parallels between him and Jesus:

1. Jesus is accused of being a sinner, and so is the blind man (9:34).
2. A division arises over Jesus (9:16) and also over the blind man (9:9).
3. Jesus is ultimately cast out in crucifixion and death. The blind man also is cast out for confessing Jesus as the Christ (John 9:22, 34).

The blind man has been united to Jesus. Jesus's life is now his life. Suffering with Christ, he also is glorified with him.

Indeed, the most startling parallel between Jesus and the blind man appears in 9:9. The phrase is translated in the ESV as "I am the man."

In the Greek it is the phrase "EGO EIME." Literally this phrase means "I am." It is the same Greek phrase that Jesus uses to describe himself at the end of the previous chapter: "Before Abraham was, I AM" (John 8:58).

United to the eternal "I AM," the blind man confesses his union by saying "I am." Suffering with Jesus he participates in the life of Jesus--and that eternally.

The time will come when the hour of darkness triumphs. The light of the world will be hung on a cross, and darkness will fall over the land (Mark 15:33). But in the resurrection the light will triumph!

The question for us today is: do we see ourselves in this blind man? Or are we reflected in the blindness of the Pharisees? The blind man patiently endures suffering, false accusation, and hardship for the sake of Christ. The Pharisees judge, condemn, and speak evil of Christ's servants. They oppose the spread of Christ's light. They refuse to listen to revelation or reason, even when the light of reason and revelation speak clearly before their waking eyes.

Those who believe are in Jesus and have his light. Though once we were blind, now we see. Seeing clearly the glory of God in Christ, we rejoice in him through every dark trial, knowing that he will bring us safely to his heavenly kingdom.

### #30 - Devotional Meditations on the Gospel of John 10:1-21

The OT Scriptures often use the image of a shepherd and sheep to describe the relationship between God and Israel. King David famously likened himself to a sheep under God in Psalm 23:1: "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want." Ezekiel excoriated the corrupt Jewish leaders who were false shepherds, abandoning the true word of God and using the visible church as a means to advance their own gain. But God will one day come and shepherd his people himself. Isaiah prophesied of the Messiah's suffering in terms of a lamb's being led to the slaughter (Isaiah 53:7). Interestingly, in the same context he describes God's people as sheep that are going astray (53:6). The coming Messiah-Shepherd will also be a suffering sheep.

Jesus's "parable" in John 10 comes to us against this prophetic backdrop in its broader redemptive-historical context. In its immediate context, it has reference to the Jewish leaders in their treatment of the man born blind in John 9. These "shepherds" of Israel do not even rejoice at the physical restoration of God's sheep. Instead, they perceive Christ and his followers as a threat to their status quo, and so they cast him out of the synagogue. They are thus thieves and robbers--hired hands who have no true love for the sheep.

But Jesus is the Good Shepherd. He loves the sheep, feeds them, and cares for them. Jesus is also the door of the sheep. The only way to the good pastures of heaven is through him.

A book could be written tracing all the connections of this theme throughout the Scriptures. We do not have space for this in our devotional. Instead, let us ask the question: What exactly does this mean for us? How does Jesus shepherd us in our lives?

First, Jesus is the Good Shepherd primarily through his voice. The sheep hear the shepherd's voice and follow him. The sheep recognize his voice. They know to not follow the voice of the stranger. This indicates that Jesus's voice has self-authenticating power. This means that it carries within it the proof of its own veracity. Through the voice of the Son of Man, we will rise from death to life. What greater proof do we need that this is the true voice of the true shepherd? So also we believe that the Scriptures are self-authenticating. They carry within themselves the proof that they are from God.

Jesus, of course, is speaking in a parabolic metaphor. Ultimately, he is speaking of how he works through his word. Christ has chosen to tie his voice to the written word of God in the Scriptures. When we place ourselves under it, we are receiving the care of Christ, our great Shepherd. When we read it personally on a daily basis, we have access to the encouragement, correction, and guidance we need as sheep. When we attend to it Lord's Day by Lord's Day, he promises to work in an even more powerful way to build us up in our most holy faith. The first sign that we are going astray as Christian sheep is when we are not humbly submitting ourselves to the voice of Christ.

Keep in mind that there are many self-deceptive ways to do this without truly submitting ourselves to Christ. For example, we may simply read the word to increase our knowledge and neglect its work on our hearts. We might also read the word simply to find flaws in others, using it as a club to beat others around us as we puff ourselves up in our own righteousness. These have an appearance of godliness but deny the power. Remember, the Pharisees and Scribes made a show of devoting themselves to God's word, even memorizing large portions of it. If we are reading and hearing the word to follow the voice of the Shepherd, our hearts and attitudes will be much different. We will attend to it eagerly, recognizing our daily hunger for spiritual food. Our desire will be first to glorify God by being filled with his grace to forgive our sins, not to find ways to point out and condemn the sins of others. Our focus will be on how it applies to us personally in union with Christ. We will attend to it joyfully, knowing that through the voice of the Good Shepherd we are led to the pastures that feed us for eternal life. We will also learn to distinguish the voice of the true shepherd from the false shepherds. Like the Bereans in the book of Acts, we will examine any teaching we receive and measure it by the staff of God's word.

Secondly, Jesus is a Good Shepherd in his actions. The words of God are always accompanied by deeds. In this case, the Good Shepherd is recognized in that he is willing to lay down his life for the sheep. The thieves come to kill and destroy. The Good Shepherd comes willing to be killed and destroyed that he might save the lives of his sheep. He was willing to be devoured by the wolves on the cross that his sheep might have life.

Thus Jesus is our Good Shepherd. He is also the lamb that was slain. We hear his voice and follow him. Sometimes we do not like what we hear from him, but we trust him knowing that he is the one who loves us so much that he laid down his life to save us. He who went to such great lengths to save us will most certainly keep us in his care.

This day his voice comes to you. Be sure to listen, receive, and follow the Shepherd wherever he may lead. The journey may be treacherous and frightening at times, but the final destination is eternal life in the green pastures of heaven.

### #31 - Devotional Meditations on the Gospel of John 10:22-42

This passage continues the "Good Shepherd" theme introduced in the last section. As the Good Shepherd, Jesus loves the sheep. He lays down his life for them. He protects them from the wolves that would devour them. Through his voice, he guides, directs, comforts, and encourages them. His sheep hear his voice and know him.

These sayings are, of course, an extended parable describing Christ's spiritual love and care for his people. Through his death on the cross, he defeats Satan and pays for our sins. By his word (now recorded for us in the Bible) he tends and cares for us. The word of God is therefore the chief means of grace. We come to him not in pictures or images, but through an audible voice. God's word must therefore be the center of our lives, for in it we hear the voice of our shepherd.

Yet some doubt that Jesus is truly the Good Shepherd. The Jewish leaders were also shepherds of Israel, and Jesus was a threat to them. God had long ago promised that one day he would judge the false shepherds and free his sheep from their oppression. Ezekiel 34 promised that God would send one shepherd for one united flock of God. This Shepherd would not only be a Son of David (Ez 34:23-24) but also God himself (Ez. 34:11. 15-16).

Against this backdrop, we can understand Jesus' statement to the Jews that "I and the Father are one" (10:30). Still later he says "the Father is in me and I am in the Father" (John 10:38). This is rightly understood by the Jews as a reference to his equality with God and accuses him of blasphemy. Jesus can be our Good Shepherd and Savior because he is God. As the Old Testament indicated throughout, the Lord alone is our Savior (Isaiah 40:11). As Ezekiel prophesied, so Jesus comes as God in the flesh to shepherd his people.

It is not without significance that these sayings occur near the Temple, which was the type of God's dwelling with his people in the incarnation of the Son of God. The physical location serves as a visible reminder of the theological point he is making!

Jesus's equality with the Father and his equal possession of the divine nature are also indicated through the work they share. Jesus declares that of both himself and the father that no one can snatch his people out of their hands. Even as the Father preserves us from Satan's desire to snatch and destroy his elect people, so also the Son shares in this work.

Think of what comfort and assurance this should be to us! How easily we doubt God's love for us when afflicted by our sins. How quickly we are filled with fear when the storms of life toss us to and fro. How often we tremble with fright before the evil one when he unleashes his assaults on God's word and on his loved ones. He is the prince of darkness and the ruler of this present age. But even he is subject to Christ. No one can snatch us from his or his Father's hand.

We who believe in Jesus believe in one who is God. He is one with the Father. The Father is in him, and he is in the Father. When we believe in him, we too participate in this divine fellowship. Later Jesus will pray for us to this very effect (John 17:20-24).

Let us then take hold of this divine assurance by faith, trusting Christ to preserve us from every trial and suffering. In Christ, we are united to God himself even now by the Holy Spirit. He is our rock, our refuge, our shelter in the time of storm. In his protection, the evil one cannot touch us. Although death itself may overtake us, the Good Shepherd will guide us through it into resurrection and eternal life.

#### #32 - Devotional Meditations on the Gospel of John 11:1-16

John 11 is among the most powerful chapters in the Bible. It marks the end of the "book of signs" (the first half of the Gospel), bringing it to a climactic culmination. He who turned water into wine, made the lame walk, and gave sight to the blind can also do something more powerful: give life to that which is dead.

But there is more to the story. Jesus clearly shows his power to give resurrection. But what do the Pharisees give to him? Verse 53 tells us: "So from that day on they made plans to kill him."

The overall point of the passage is clear: Jesus gives men life, but men give Jesus death.

John is pointing us to the "vicarious" nature of Jesus's work. This term refers to the fact Jesus both gives and takes away in his work of redemption. He takes our sin upon himself but clothes us in his righteousness. He dies our death that he might give us his life.

And what a powerful manifestation of Jesus's vicarious work in this passage! What Jesus does for Lazarus he also does for us. While we may be physically alive, we are spiritually dead. The Creator-Word who spoke into nothing and caused things to exist also now speaks to give life to the dead. When we read this chapter we must begin by identifying with dead Lazarus. We cannot simply stand in awe at Christ's power manifested to others. We must personally know and experience the life-giving power of grace through faith and the Holy Spirit.

The chapter is too packed to take as a single unit. In addition to these introductory thoughts, we are struck by these emphases in the text.

First, there is the personal love of Jesus for the people involved. John tells us that Jesus loved Martha, Mary, and Lazarus (11:5). When the sisters go to Jesus they refer to Lazarus simply as "he whom you love" (11:3).

Jesus's life-giving actions are motivated by this deep, personal love he has for them as his people. All too often people (including Christians) are felt feeling alone, abused, uncared for, and unloved. What a comfort to know that although we may feel this way at times, the opposite is actually true. God loves us. Christ loves us.

Loving someone is an amazing thing. Love is from God. It covers a multitude of sins. We see this even in romantic love, especially among young people. Those newly fallen in love see almost no flaws in their beloved. Time and sin eventually reveal otherwise, and our love is forced to grow and mature.

It also motivates us as nothing else can. Those whom we love are always on our minds and their concerns are paramount to us. When we reflect in this way on the true nature of love, most of us will feel quite convicted as to how little true love is in our hearts. We are lovers of self, not lovers of others or of God.

Imperfection and sin fill our hearts. But Jesus's heart is filled with love toward his people. His heart is filled with love for you and for me. Because he loves us, we can be assured he will preserve, protect, and purify us unto our eternal dwelling with him.

But secondly, we also see a delay on Jesus's part. Jesus loves Lazarus, but even after hearing of his sickness, he stays two days longer before going to Bethany to heal him. Why would he wait two days for him to pass from sickness to death if he loved him so much?

This is a worthwhile question for all of us. How many times do we pray for God's help, only to have to wait long and hard for it? Sometimes these prayers are not just for deliverance from miserable circumstances, but also for growth in grace and overcoming temptation? Why does God leave us in such a sinful and miserable condition when he has the power to fix things sooner? Are not these things he desires and even promises to work in us when we ask him? Why then the delay between my asking and his giving?

Perhaps you may feel that way about your personal life. Perhaps you may feel that way about the church. Broadly speaking, there are so many problems in the church today from unfaithfulness to the Bible's teaching to infidelity in Christian morality. Why doesn't God bring change and reform? More particularly, why doesn't God help us here more quickly to fix the problems we are facing?

At these times we must remember that God's love for us is tied to his working glory for himself. In the case of Lazarus, Jesus allowed him to go all the way to death so that his power and glory might be most fully manifested. In fact, Jesus says that he was "glad" that he was not present prior to Lazarus's death so that he might be able to work his greatest miracle and so produce faith among his disciples (11:15).

The point is simply this: sometimes God delays. He allows things to get worse before he makes them better. He does this for a clear purpose: to put our weakness in the strongest possible contrast to his divine power. In this way, all the glory goes to Christ and the Father, and none of it goes to man.

What a helpful thing to remember when times are difficult—especially when we are personally brought low, humiliated, and allowed to go through tough times. This process of discipline and training is so painful, but in the end, allows us to be the vessels in which God manifests his all-powerful glory in us.

We are then left with a double blessing: not just his precious love, but his infinite power and glory resting upon us. When God's love and infinite power are so wedded together, there is nothing (not even death itself) that can separate us from him.

Let us take hold of these comforts by faith, and hold fast to Christ. May he fill us with the same love he had for his people, seeking above all his glory and his kingdom.

#33 - Devotional Meditations on the Gospel of John 11:17-27

John 11 began with a strange mixture. On the one hand, Christ's love for his hurting people was clearly displayed. John tells us directly that Jesus loved Mary and her sister, Martha. Lazarus is also referred to simply as "he whom [Christ] loved." The Jews also later behold the compassionate heart of Christ towards Lazarus and the sorrow of his loved ones: "See how he loved him!" (11:36). What a blessing to



have the title "those whom Christ loves." Not just Lazarus's friends, but every believer can relish the comfort of that love to sustain them in every trial--even death itself.

Yet mixed with this love is an apparent delay. He who made the lame walk and gave sight to the blind surely could have kept Lazarus from dying (see 11:37). This section of the passage opens by reminding us of this fact: "...when Jesus came, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days" (17).

On top of this, many others had preceded Jesus to console Mary and Martha regarding their brother. This may not, at first, appear to be a flattering picture. How is it that the Good Shepherd could be so late to tend to his hurting sheep?

It is easy to understand how this might give someone cause to doubt Christ's expressions of love. The Apostle Paul was sometimes accused of not caring about some of the churches he planted because of his failure to come to them. Paul's life makes it clear that his delay was by no means due to a lack of care for the churches. It is striking how frequently Paul has to make this point in his letters (2 Cor. 1:15-17, 2:1; Rom. 1:13; 1 Thess. 2:18). It was instead due to the overwhelming circumstance flowing from the "...daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches" (2 Cor. 11:28).

Yet the delay of Paul and Jesus might give some cause to doubt their love. On the human level, it would be understandable if Mary and Martha began to doubt Christ's love for them.

But note how when Jesus arrives, Martha goes out to meet him (20). Instead of words of doubt, we hear words of faith: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you" (11:21-22).

Note how her faith is indicated so clearly in her words to Christ. She calls him "Lord," expressing her trust in his sovereign power and will as the king. This includes the timing with which he will work his grace and compassion in us. The delay does not bring doubt in her heart, although it may test the tenacity of her trust. It is up to God, not us, to determine where, when, and how he will work his wondrous grace. It is ours simply to acknowledge the wisdom of the timing of his providence.

She also confesses Christ's continued ability to express that love to them. While Jesus could have kept him from dying, she also believes that he retains the power to give him life. Again, the delay does not deliver doubt, but through testing refines and fortifies her faith. So God allows us to experience trial and at times endure miserable circumstances. Why? Not because his love has left us. Instead, he is purifying our faith in his love so that we might better profit from it.

But in what way and at what time will this grace come? Martha is a faithful Jew. She believes in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. Unlike the Sadducees and the Gentile philosophers, she does not scoff at the reality of the resurrection. When Jesus declares this hope to her, she confesses her faith in his future resurrection: "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day" (24).

And what comfort the future resurrection is! Those of us who have lost very close loved ones feel deeply the pain of their absence. What a wondrous day it will be when our lost friends, mentors, spouses, parents, children, and fellow Christians rise again with glorious bodies made like the glorious body of Christ!

Yet Jesus is revealing more than a future hope. Resurrection is also through him a present reality. Let these words sink into your weak and doubting hearts: "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."

I can think of few other verses in the Bible more powerful or comforting than these. Resurrection is indeed a future hope. These corrupt bodies will one day rise again free from all sin! But through Christ's Spirit resurrection is also a present reality for every believer.

As Jesus elsewhere states, the hour is already here when those who hear the voice of the son of man will rise from spiritual death and be reborn from above (cf. John 3:1ff & 5:25).

We will shortly see a sign confirming this reality in the raising of Lazarus from the tomb. But we who believe have evidence in our own regeneration that this power is here already and dwells in our hearts.

There is more to say about the passage and Jesus's words to Martha. We will unpack it further in the days to come.

Rest assured that you who believe are beloved of Christ. Nothing can remove that love from you. He may at times delay the timing of his mercy but let us not doubt his care for us. Although he may bring a stormy season, he will soon say to the winds and the waves: "Peace, be still." Though death and destruction may overtake us, he will bring us forth into life and light. The timing gap between Christ's deep love for us and its manifestation in our lives is for a greater ultimate purpose: the strengthening of our faith and the increase of his glory.

Or as the Psalmist said of old: "For his anger is but for a moment, and his favor is for a lifetime. Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes in the morning" (Psalm 30:5).

Let us hold fast to Christ's love in the storms of trial, trusting his sovereign will. He will faithfully bring us through the valley of the shadow of death into the green pastures of heavenly life.

#### #34 - Devotional Meditations on the Gospel of John 11:28-44

This chapter reveals so many wonderful things about the heart of our Savior to the suffering. These things can be summarized in two words: love and power. True faith grasps both as it looks to Christ for salvation. We trust both in Christ's willingness and ability to Save. Thus the dialogue between the leper and Jesus in the other Gospels. The leper says: "'Lord if you are willing you can (i.e. have the ability to) make me clean.' Jesus replies: "I am willing. Be clean!" (see Matt. 8:3; Luke 5:13; Mark 1:41).

The willingness of Jesus to save flows out of his heart of compassion and love for his people. His ability to save is manifested in his ministry through his mighty, miraculous acts.

This passage is a powerful and dramatic presentation of both aspects of the disposition of Christ's heart towards his people.

First, note again his love and compassion expressing his willingness to save. Previously, we have seen how his delay might have been the occasion for doubt among his people regarding his love towards them. But Jesus's reaction to the grieving and mourning provides ample proof of the constancy of his compassion towards them.

When he arrives at Lazarus's tomb, we are not surprised to see a group weeping and mourning with the bereaved. Those of us who have been to many funerals and memorials need little imagination to identify with the scene. Nothing stings so much as the death of a loved one.

And so Jesus identifies with their pain. When he sees the crowd of Jews weeping with Mary, he too is deeply moved in spirit and troubled. The phrase is repeated in 11:38 when Jesus finally arrives at the tomb of his friend. In verse 35 we read the shortest but most profound verse in the Bible: "Jesus wept."

Do we not clearly see the gracious heart and compassion of Jesus towards his people? Lazarus was a sinner. Like the rest of fallen mankind, he deserved the death he died. Sin justly leads to God's condemnation and the punishment of misery and death. Yet when Christ beholds this sad lot, he does not rejoice in the triumph of sin, but mercifully grieves the miserable.

In his true human nature freely assumed in the incarnation, he experiences the full range of negative emotions that so afflict us in the darkest moments of our lives. What mercy there is here for us in our moments of suffering! The Psalmist of old cried out to God lamenting that "My tears have been my food day and night." Behold now the eternal Son of God in the flesh weeping temporal tears to identify with his people in their sin and misery. In our days of such trial, we know we can come to a savior who has experienced these sufferings just as we have and yet was without sin. The suffering often search for a comforter. But there is no better and more compassionate comforter than Jesus!

Remember this the next time you are at a Christian funeral or memorial. Where the faithful gather to comfort the mourning, Christ also is present by his Spirit to assuage the anguish of your grief.

Compassion is not without value. It expresses an inclination and willingness to help. But without power compassion is fairly limited among men.

But in Christ, we have the glorious combination of infinite compassion and unlimited power.

When Christ finally arrives with his friend Lazarus, he has already been in the tomb for four days. In fact, Martha objects to his command to roll away the stone because after four days the stench of death will

fill the area. Indeed, is not the thought of the departed enough to grieve the mourning? Why exacerbate the pain by viewing and smelling his decomposing corpse?

Yet this only sets the stage for a glorious demonstration of the power of Christ to save.

Deeply moved in spirit with the stone rolled away, the compassionate Jesus takes action. With prayer to the Father and his eyes lifted up to heaven (the source of his power and life) Jesus loudly proclaims to the dead in his grave: "Lazarus, Come forth!"

The Word of life speaks. And just as this word brought light out of the darkness in the beginning, so now through the same word he brings life out of death.

At his mere word, Lazarus comes out of the tomb, still wrapped in grave cloths.

He who lies in his grave has heard the voice of the Son of Man. He has risen and lives!

Jesus now also has died and risen. But by his Spirit, this power is still with us. The word we read daily in the Scriptures brings it to us personally as we embrace it by faith. More powerfully still it comes to us publicly preached Lord's Day by Lord's Day.

Do you realize the power of Christ's word to you? By his word, he brings about change. Where there is guilt, his word brings forgiveness in justifying us by faith. Where there is bondage to sin he brings bondage by unbinding us from its chains. When sin bears its ugly fruit at the end of our lives in death, we have hope that its victory is not final. Indeed, death itself will be swallowed up in victory at the final resurrection.

Beloved people, do not doubt Christ's love for you. He is willing and able to save! While he may tarry in the time of his acts of deliverance, his heart of compassion and mercy is always present.

In times of trial let us then flee for refuge to the compassion of Christ, trusting only in his life-giving power to save us from the evil one and deliver us from death.

#35 - Devotional Meditations on the Gospel of John 11:45-57

Jesus loves his people. In the first part of this chapter, we were given a window into the heart of Christ toward his church. When his loved ones faced death, he wept with the grieving.

Jesus gives men life. His infinite compassion is joined to an almighty ability to act with power to save. By his mere word, he brings new life to Lazarus's dead body.

Jesus gives men life, but men give Jesus death. Jesus pours out his love to men, but men pour out their hatred to him.

John 11:45-57 reveals to us the response of the Jews to Jesus's miracles. While many of the Jews believe (having been born again to new life), the leaders begin to plot his death.

Here we note two things about the Jewish leaders and their plans.

First, note that this conspiracy to kill Jesus is not due to any wrongdoing on his part. They acknowledge that he has done real miracles, and cannot deny that these are good deeds that helped others.

Second, their sole concern is how they can retain the earthly aspects of their power. The first thing on their mind is how Jesus will draw Jews to himself, weaken their influence, and make them vulnerable to the Romans. Israel was fundamentally a nation with a spiritual purpose. The kingship, temple, land, priesthood, and other OT institutions were always designed to be temporary and give way to a new order of things when the Messiah came. How easy it is for the church to think of itself primarily as an institution to bring social and political effects. While there are extraordinary occasions where the church may speak to such matters that substantially affect them, their focus is on calling sinners to repentance and faith in Christ. We can do the same thing in our individual lives thinking that the church exists solely to serve earthly needs instead of feeding us the word of God. This does not mean that the church has no "deed" ministry--far from it! Only that its spiritual focus must remain primary. We exist not to transform institutions of the world, but to be the means to give new hearts to sinners in the forgiveness of their sins and repentance unto life.

In the midst of this earthly-minded conspiracy to kill Jesus, Caiaphas makes an ironic statement --one that John declares to be objectively prophetic (in spite of his subjective ignorance of this fact): "It is better that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish."

Here in a nutshell Caiaphas describes the work of Christ: Jesus gives men life, but men give Jesus death. And this is a gift to be extended to all nations, languages, and peoples. As John notes, Jesus would not just die for his people among the Jews, but also for the children of God who will be scattered abroad. The ministry of the word must extend among all peoples and languages of the church. Here we see among the Jews how strong the temptation may be to keep it only among those "like us" in language, culture, and class.

To add another layer to the irony of this statement, John notes that the Passover was at hand. In this once-a-year festival, they had a vivid prophecy of the work of the spotless lamb of God now come in their midst. The Jews were traveling to the Temple to ritually purify themselves for this feast. But the real purification they needed was faith in him and the cleansing of his Holy Spirit.

In both the Passover and the plot of the Jews we see the work of Jesus for us. He takes our death and gives us his life. He bears our sins, and we receive his righteousness. He takes our shame, he gives us his honor. When afflicted by our sins and shortcomings, we must take hold by faith of God's only declaration of us. Although we have violated all of God's commandments and are still inclined to all evil, by his grace he regards us as having never sinned nor been a sinner. He sees us as having been as perfectly obedient

as Christ was obedience for us. In this respect, we do not judge ourselves or others by the measure of the law, but by the justifying judgment of a gracious God.

John 11 marks the end of part one of the Gospel of John. In it we see a preview of part two. In Lazarus's death, we see a preview of Jesus's death. In the plot of the Jews, we see a seed of sin that will grow to full fruition in the trial and crucifixion of Christ.

But this is not just the life of Christ. It is also the life of God's people in Christ. We should expect that as we seek to proclaim his prophecies, work his will, and bring life to the lost we will receive the same treatment. There is nothing more frustrating and discouraging than to be earnestly seeking God's will for your life, only to be accused of the opposite. Jesus, too, was accused of evil while doing good. False witnesses rose up at his trial to provide a faulty basis for his destruction. While Jesus was giving men life, men gave Jesus death.

Yet he bore it all patiently. When reviled, he did not revile in return. When he suffered he did not threaten. Instead, he bore these things with long-suffering, knowing that through it he would give men life even as men gave him death.

Let us then with Jesus continue to commit ourselves to him who judges justly. Let us persevere in the path that Christ has set out for us. The life of self-denial and patience is at times a path of pain, but he who gave life out of death will also bring joy out of misery.

He who called us is filled with both love and power, mercy and majesty, grace and glory. Even if death overtakes us, he will restore us with life, and that eternally.

#### #36 - Devotional Meditations on the Gospel of John 12:1-11

John 11 marked the culmination of part one of John's Gospel, often called the "Book of Signs." This chapter begins part two, known as the "Book of Glory."

Jesus's "glory" will indeed be revealed by the end with his exaltation. But he will have to get there in a strange way. Exaltation will be preceded by humiliation. Suffering precedes glory. What is true for Christ is also true for the Christian.

That is why the book of glory begins with a preview of Christ's suffering. Building off the plot of the Jews to kill Jesus in chapter 11, this section opens with the anointing of Jesus for his burial. Death will come to him who gave life to Lazarus.

Consider how the meal-scene anticipates the end of all things. Indeed, Lazarus himself is present at the scene, reclining at table with Jesus. The life-giver and life-receiver commune in table fellowship. Tears have been wiped away. Death is no more. Mourning, crying, sorrow, and pain are gone. A preview of the end intrudes into the present. The first order of things for a moment passes away. The dwelling place of God is with man.

But this sweet prelude to heaven is not permanent. Lazarus, Martha, and Mary will all die again awaiting a more permanent resurrection on the last day. Jesus himself--the word of life--will undergo both death and burial for his people.

This burial is anticipated in the anointing of Jesus with pure nard by Mary. Much is made of both its value and its scent.

The aroma of the perfume stands in contrast to the stench of Lazarus's rotting corpse (highlighted in John 11:39). What a dramatic narrative contrast between the "stench of death and the fragrance of life!" (2 Cor. 2:16). It reminds us of the vicarious exchange between the believer and Jesus. He takes our sin and all its consequences upon himself in our suffering. By faith, we receive his life, glory, and blessedness freely as a gift of grace!

Moneywise, the perfume is worth at least 300 denari. A denarius was a day's wage for a worker. Not counting weekends that is roughly a year's salary for the ordinary person.

Enter Judas Iscariot. He was the "deacon" of the Apostles, overseeing the money entrusted to the group. Judas objects to this action, ostensibly concerned about how the money may have been put to better use in gifts to the poor. But the only "poor" he had in view was himself. He was a thief and would even steal from the moneybag to enrich himself.

The presence of Judas is a preview of the end of the story. This Judas will betray Jesus to the authorities and give him over to death, resulting in the very burial anticipated here.

And what will Judas get in exchange for this betrayal? Money! His focus on finances anticipates his future betrayal of Christ. Ironically, the thirty pieces of silver he receives for his betrayal is far less than the 400 denari at stake in Jesus's anointing.

But the real comparison is not between nard and denari. The real disparity is between the precious of Christ and all other earthly things. Even the mercy ministry to the poor (as important as it is) is secondary to the value of the work of Christ. Hence how sad it is when churches abandon the primacy of the teaching of God's word and the Gospel and put their entire focus on the alleviation of the miserable conditions of our earthly lives. To be sure, word and deed ministries are both important when properly prioritized. But remember the words of the Apostles in their ministry: "Silver and gold have I none, but what I have I give you" (cf. Acts 3:6).

Christ's blood is infinite in value, sufficient to atone for all our sins--indeed, the sins of the world! What are 400 denarii compared to eternal life?

Jesus will die to shed this blood. We have just beheld the Jews discuss the prelude of their plot to kill him. Ironically, this opening section ends with a parallel plot: those who plot to kill Jesus also plot to kill Lazarus! The life of Jesus (suffering and resurrection) is mirrored in Lazarus (resurrection and suffering).

As with Jesus so with his disciples. We receive in Jesus both life and death--glory and suffering. The two cannot be separated. As Jesus later says in this Gospel: "A servant is not greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours" (15:20).

Let us then take courage in the face of the attacks of the evil one. He can work from within to betray and destroy (like Judas), or from without to attack and intimidate (like the Jewish leaders).

Let us take courage that even as we suffer with Christ, we will also be glorified with him. Let us with the people in this text believe in Christ, trusting in him for eternal life. Let us count all things in this world as nothing for the sake of him who loved us and gave himself for us.

### #37 - Devotional Meditations on the Gospel of John 12:12-19

This section contains Jesus's "Triumphal Entry" into Jerusalem. Interestingly, the importance of this scene is underscored by the fact that it appears in all four Gospels. As unique as John is in his style, content, and presentation, this scene is significant for all of them in understanding Jesus's true identity.

The basic point of the Triumphal Entry in all the Gospels is very simple: Jesus is the king. Every detail of the narrative reinforces this point. Its setting is Jerusalem, the city of the king. The palm branches are traditionally part of a royal procession for kings. The people audibly proclaim him to be the king who comes in the name of the Lord. Jesus's sitting on the young donkey is in direct fulfillment of royal Messianic prophecy, which John actually cites (Zech. 9:9).

But why the need to reveal and reinforce this point? It is not the first time Jesus has been shown to be the king. Nathaniel confessed this already in 1:49. After performing miracles the people tried to forcibly make him king, after which Jesus withdrew to the mountain alone (6:15).

The reason lies in the previous previews John has given of his crucifixion and death. Now the Jews have begun their plot and openly seek to arrest and kill him. Judas also is revealed to be the traitor, and the beginning of his betrayal comes forth in his complaint about the anointing perfume from Mary. Jesus also openly declares that he has been anointed for the day of his burial. All of these things point not to exaltation and royal glory, but to death, defeat, and demise.

These things do not seem consistent with royal, messianic exaltation. But they are central to his identity.

Indeed, the Triumphal Entry serves to reinforce the doubting hearts of the disciples that Jesus truly is the king. On the heels of the declaration of his death, they are reminded of the royal reality still somewhat hidden from their eyes. Jesus is simultaneously revealed to be a king that will undergo both humiliation and exaltation.



Zechariah's prophecy wraps these two disparate realities in one prophetic picture. The coming Messiah will clearly be an exalted royal figure. He will be characterized by righteousness and salvation. He will rule with power, defeat his enemies, and his kingdom will stretch to the ends of the earth (Zech 9:9-10).

At one and the same time, he will also be characterized by lowliness and humility. Indeed, what a strange prophetic image: a powerful warrior riding on a young donkey! But what a perfect picture of our Savior. His enemies will fall, defeated in his defeat. At his death a sign will be set above him declaring him "King of the Jews," but his throne will be a cross.

Why do the disciples--why do we--need this reminder? Because Christ's life is our life. He is in us even as we are in him. Even as we share in Christ's sufferings, we will also share in his glory. We will always carry around in us the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus can also be revealed in our mortal bodies.

Exaltation is exciting! Death is depressing. We want the one, but without the other. Hardship, trial, and suffering for and in our Christian faith can be discouraging. It can cause us at times to doubt how real God's grace is for us.

In those times, we must remember the dual identity of our humiliated and exalted Savior. There is no glory except through the cross. In a sinful world, there is no life without death. As we will see in the next parable of Jesus, even nature itself reveals this in the grains of wheat that must first die before they can live again to bear much fruit.

In the face of trial, hardship, and even the attacks of those that may go so far as to seek our lives (as they did Christ), let us hold fast in faith in this Savior. Let us not be surprised at the fiery trial that comes upon us to test us. The flames will not hurt us. They will only purify our sinful hearts so that our faith may shine like gold. This Gospel is written to produce and reinforce that faith: These things are written so that you may believe in the Son of God, and believing have life in his name. The Savior who suffered is with us in our trials and will bring us safely to his heavenly kingdom.

#### #38 - Devotional Meditations on the Gospel of John 12:20-26

The Gospel of Jesus is a story of death and life. The previous scenes have set this reality before us in dramatic ways. In John 11, we saw the resurrection of Lazarus. He who was dead four days stinking in the tomb came forth to new life through the word of Christ. Jesus gave men life, but men gave Jesus death. In response, the Jews plot to kill Jesus and later even Lazarus! After this Jesus is anointed for his burial by Mary, and Judas's words presage his eventual betrayal. The figure of Caiaphas also figures prominently, who will reappear later at his trial before the Sanhedrin (18:14).

These details (and more like them) clearly set before us the essence of Christ's work as it hinges on death and life, humiliation and exaltation, crucifixion, and resurrection.

Christ's life is our life, even as his death is our death. In the narrative of Christ, we see a mirror of our own.

This passage continues the theme in a few interesting ways.

First, it describes death and resurrection with regard to the Gentile nations. So far in the Gospel, the focus has been on Jesus's ministry to the Jews. Here we see some Greeks begin to seek Jesus. Coming to Philip they declare: "Sir, we wish to see Jesus" (12:21).

The scene is described quickly and can easily be missed. But the idea that the Greeks would seek to see the Jewish Messiah is nothing less than a movement from life to death. In Jewish terms, there was nothing more "dead" (spiritually speaking) than the Gentile nations. They were lost in darkness, worshipping false gods, and given over to all forms of uncleanness and gross corruption. Yet the Son of God comes as the Savior not only of the Jews but also the whole world. The fallen children of mankind--dead in Adam--are brought into new life through the word of the Son of God.

Second, we see death and resurrection reflected in Jesus's brief parable of the grain seed (12:24). Even in nature we see the basic principles at work on the natural level. A grain of wheat must first fall to the earth and die. Only then it can bear much fruit. So also Jesus must die and be planted in his burial. When he sprouts forth to new life in resurrection, he and his kingdom will bear fruit among all the nations. In many ways, this recalls the parable of the growing seed and the mustard seed in the synoptic Gospels (cf. Mark 4:26-32). Life comes through death, and that is for all peoples of the earth!

Thirdly, this is also true in our personal lives as the death and resurrection of Christ are applied to us personally by faith. What is true of Christ must be true of us: "Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life" (12:25). By faith we embrace the cross of Christ, dying to self and dying to our sin. Our sanctification is thus described in terms of union with Christ in his death and resurrection: the crucifixion of the old man and the coming to life of the new.

This is a difficult path. It requires us to deny ourselves, put the concerns of others before our own, forgive others their transgression against us, and embrace suffering for righteousness' sake.

This is our path, even as it was the path of Christ before us: serving Christ, following him, and bearing his reproach. But it comes with the blessed promise that if anyone thus serves Christ, the Father will honor him.

Let us then commit ourselves this day to sincerely walking on this path. It will at times lead us through the valley of the shadow of death but will end in the green pastures of eternal life.

#### #39- Devotional Meditations on the Gospel of John 12:27-36

In the previous passage, we saw how Jesus's life is at its heart and core a matter of life and death. Just as a seed must die and only then bear fruit, so also Jesus must die and bear much fruit. Our lives in Christ reflect the same pattern. Losing and hating our lives in this world so that we might keep them for eternal life.

What was cryptically revealed in parabolic form is now openly disclosed. In John 12:27-35, Jesus openly declares the main purpose of his coming into the world. His soul is deeply troubled over it, even as his soul was deeply troubled at the face of Lazarus's death and the mourning of his friends.

Is this not interesting? For what is our reaction to the thought that we must die with Christ and embrace self-denial and suffering? Is it not that our souls are deeply troubled and distressed? See how the incarnate Jesus is made to suffer in all things just as we are, and yet is without sin! He experiences the same grief and apprehensiveness we have in the human nature that he has assumed. As such he can become a merciful and faithful high priest, having sympathy with us in our sufferings and temptations (cf. Hebrews 2:17-18)

This is not just incidental to his life. It is his very purpose. He comes to suffer and die: both to atone for our sins and help us in our weakness.

It is always a great blessing in times of emotional distress to talk to people who have felt what we feel and have walked in our shoes. We can identify with them and feel less alone. Think about how much greater this is with Jesus. He is not just a man but God. He not only has sympathy for us but an almighty power to assuage our suffering spirits. What a blessing to be able to go to this Jesus in prayer to find help in our times of weakness and doubt!

When we suffer and face defeat, it can be a real challenge. It will cause doubts to arise regarding the path we are taking. If you start a business and have a down year, you may start to doubt its viability. If you start a relationship and begin to face a rocky time, you may wonder if this is the right person for you to be with. If you join a church and then hard times come, you may wonder if this is the right place for you.

In this passage, God is making clear that suffering and hardship are not things at which we should be surprised. It happened to Jesus. It will happen to us.

At the announcement of Jesus's impending sufferings, many people do begin to doubt him. They even appeal to the Scriptures (which they misinterpret) which speak of the Christ remaining forever. How can Jesus abide forever if he is to be defeated? How can he be a victor if he comes to defeat?

To these doubts come an amazing thing: the divine confirmation in the voice of the Father. In response to Jesus's prayer, the audible voice of the Father is heard: "I have glorified it, and will glorify it again." The crowd clearly heard the thundering voice. No one can deny that a voice has come from heaven, at least an angel if not God himself.

Jesus says that this voice came for our sake, not his. He had a perfect faith even in the midst of his travail of soul. And is this not what we need in times of doubt and trouble? The devil is the accuser. He will afflict our souls and sow doubt in our consciences. Although a liar, he is shrewd and effective.

Jesus must go to death. We too must follow him on that path. But death and suffering is not the end. It is but the beginning.

God's way is to bring victory but often only in the face of defeat. He kills, but then makes alive. He tears down, and then builds up. He humbles, but then exalts. He brings life, but only on the precipice of death. He brings peace, but only after allowing us to go through the storm. He brings glory and exaltation, but only after crucifixion and humiliation.

And although many reject him during the earthly days of his flesh, what will happen in his resurrection: "...when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself" (John 12:32). An assembly of adversaries will be replaced with a company of Christians who praise his name.

God's people will surely face times of turmoil and days of distress. Sometimes we will feel rejected by the world and the darkness will overwhelm us. Let us then by faith grasp the light of Christ in our midst, and lift up our eyes to him with full assurance of faith. His promises are true and certain. He who leads us through the valley will also guide us to the peaks. He who suffered will help us in our sufferings. He who was lifted up will gather all his people to himself, and there is nothing that can snatch us out of his hands.

#### #40- Devotional Meditations on the Gospel of John 12:36-43

The first part of John's Gospel is a marvelous revelation of the glory of Jesus Christ. In the incarnate word we have beheld the glory of the only-begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth (1:14). In his first miracle turning the water into wine we are told that Jesus "...revealed his glory, and his disciples believed in him" (2:11). Likewise in his final miracle in the raising of Lazarus from the dead, Jesus told his loved ones: "Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?" (11:40)

Jesus is a glorious Savior! He is filled with both power and love, working to comfort and save. This glory flows from God himself, who is the all-glorious one.

The disciples have seen his glory and believe. You have beheld it and now walk in its light. But there are many that don't. Isn't that a puzzling thing? Why is it that so many who are so near to Jesus do not see in him the glory of God?

John 12:36-43 sets two groups of people in contrast. One group is physically and temporally near Jesus. The other is much farther away. Typically the farther away one is from a thing the harder it is for one to see it. This is especially true if you wear glasses and are near-sighted (as I am). Yet in this passage, those who are near to Christ reveal themselves to be blind--unable to see the details. Those far off have a spiritual telescope that helps them see Jesus clearly, even though they are centuries away.

The first group is in the crowd to which Jesus speaks (12:29, 34). The crowd was obviously a historical group of real people. But it represents the opinion or response of the masses to Christ. Crowds are

powerful forces. One of the most difficult things for a human being to do is go against a crowd. It is not in our instincts to stand against everyone else. But they are quite unreliable in their opinions.

The crowd seems to include a group of both common people and authorities (42). Among this group, there are clearly people who do not believe in him.

Isn't this an amazing thing? These people have Jesus right in front of their eyes. They are as near to him as he could possibly be. They do not have to wrestle with the objections of unbelievers we hear so often nowadays regarding whether Jesus is a real, historical figure. He is right there in front of their eyes! They have even seen him do irrefutable miracles. But they still do not believe.

God's glory is an amazing thing. So is man's unbelief. Like Israel of old, who saw God's glory visibly manifested on the mountain at Sinai, they still do not believe. The pattern of Israel's unbelief comes to its culmination here in the coming of Christ.

Let us then not be surprised if the world remains blind to Jesus. If many who saw his works in the flesh would not believe, how much more for us today?

In contrast to this group, John sets before us another. This group consists of the believing OT saints and prophets who lived before the coming of Christ. They are represented in the figure of Isaiah the prophet, who is cited directly in 12:38-40.

John tells us directly in 12:41 that "Isaiah said these things because he saw [Jesus] glory and spoke of him." The entire Scriptures of the OT are written to point us to Jesus! Every prophecy, promise, and prescription finds its terminus in him. The law, the prophets, and the writings all reveal the Christ to come. This includes both his work for us and our life in him.

Isn't this an amazing thing? Isaiah not only spoke of Jesus ahead of time but also clearly saw him. Elsewhere Jesus tells us that father Abraham also rejoiced and saw ahead of time the day of Jesus and was glad (8:56).

When our eyes are spiritually blind, we cannot see Jesus even if he is right in front of us. When they are opened by the Holy Spirit, we are able to see Jesus even at great distances.

What a comfort to us who are now physically at a great distance from Jesus. Historically speaking, we are separated by two millennia. To the world's eyes, the "historical Jesus" is at best obscured by layers of tradition, or dismissed as a myth or fairy tale.

Spatially speaking, we are separated from Christ even as heaven is separated from the earth. His body is above in glory, far off from us in heaven.

Yet in his word, he draws near to us who believe. We are united to him by faith. He is so close to us that he has become bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh. Through his Spirit, he draws nearer to us than he was to those who saw him in the days of his flesh.

Like the prophets of old who looked forward to Christ, we too can see him and that even more clearly.

This certainty is important to possess and cultivate. As this text indicates, it will be vital in the face of trial and persecution (12:42). Fear of hardship can make even the most obvious things seem doubtful. But what is the loss of earthly things compared to the gain of heavenly things? What is the glory of man compared with the glory that comes from God?

Let us then heed John's call to renew our faith in this glorious Savior, setting our minds on the things above and the glory of Christ in heaven. Let us be far less affected by our earthly plights, and more comforted by our present and future heavenly joys.

For although we do not now see Jesus and he seems far from us, we love him. Although we do not now see him, we believe in him and rejoice with joy unspeakable and filled with glory, receiving the end of our faith: the salvation of our souls (cf. 1 Peter 1:8).

#### #41 - Devotional Meditations on the Gospel of John 12:44-50

The key verse in this passage is 12:47: "For I did not come to judge the world but to save the world." Jesus says many things in this passage, but we will focus on the theme of this verse. There are some things we need to clarify in this teaching, as it has been the source of some confusion. It has even been used to attack Christians when standing boldly for the essence of their faith.

First, when Jesus says that he did not come to judge the world, he does not mean that Christians cannot make righteous, sound judgments about things. Jesus himself made such judgments. In this very Gospel, he declared the Pharisees to be in sin through their unbelief (John 9:41). Likewise, Jesus will appear a second time. In this coming he will judge the world in righteousness (Acts 17:31). Likewise he tells Christians that they must "...not judge by appearances, but make a righteous judgment."

Jesus's intent is not that we should avoid judgment altogether, otherwise our perfect Lord would be guilty of gross contradiction. What then does he mean? What does the Bible teach us regarding this matter of passing judgment?

First, concerning Jesus himself, he is declaring that the purpose of his first coming was not to judge sin. On the one hand, sin had already come under God's judgment. The purpose of the Gospel is not to bring some new condemnation to sinners. They already stand condemned. Hence Jesus teaches in John 3:17 that God didn't send Christ to condemn the world but to save it. Why? Verse 18 gives the answer: "...whoever does not believe is condemned already." As Paul states in Romans 1, Jesus entered into a world that was pre-condemned. God had revealed himself in all creation, but man turned himself headlong into idolatry. The new work that Jesus is doing is not judgment but salvation!

As God, Jesus participates in the revelation of the righteous judgment of God over all creation. But as the Messiah and God-man, he comes with a distinct purpose in his first coming: to reveal salvation and the kingdom of heaven. That is his core purpose: to save, not to judge.

Secondly, the fact that Jesus has not come primarily to judge does not mean that judgment is not coming. As Jesus declares, on the last day will be judged by his word through the authority of the Father (12:48). In the present, Jesus is bringing the message of salvation. But even as it is preceded by the judgment of natural revelation in the past, it will be followed by the judgment of special revelation on the last day.

Jesus's point is not that there is no judgment at all. It is that there is a timing to this judgment. Jesus comes today to save. We are already condemned but have been given a way of escape from the wrath to come. Therefore we must not neglect this infinite kindness of God, but repent and believe. This way is narrow and hard, but it leads to eternal life. Ignoring Christ's word and living for ourselves is wide and easy, but its end is destruction.

Practically speaking, what does this mean for ourselves in our judgments?

First, he means that we should not judge others without first examining ourselves. It is a strong temptation to judge others to feel better about ourselves. If we do this and do not first examine our own hearts and lives, we have fallen into hypocrisy. Judgment done in pride solely to condemn others is sinful and quite deceptive. That fact that we see wrong in others does nothing in itself to help us spiritually. If all we are doing is condemning others, we are also condemning ourselves (cf. Romans 2).

Second, it means that if we have to make a judgment, our purpose is not to destroy the person but to save them in love. As Christians, our primary purpose is to assist and help others on the path of salvation. We do not wag our fingers at others to humiliate or retaliate in our judgments against them. Instead, in love, we mourn their lost or wayward condition and plead with them to turn from the error of their ways.

Third, it means that our judgments must be tempered with grace and understanding. Jesus's main purpose in redeeming us is to save us. Love covers a multitude of sins. Mercy triumphs over judgments. When we see our brothers in their weaknesses and shortcomings, we must seek to cover them with love. This is how God deals with us. He does not treat us as our sins deserve, nor repay us for our iniquities. We are called by God to live with one another as Christ has lived with us. Sins that seriously disturb the purity, peace, and unity of the church must be dealt with as Christ commands (Matt. 18). But sin taints absolutely everything we do. If we were to spend our time passing judgment on the failings of others, we would not have enough time in the day to investigate their shortcomings. Love triumphs over sin.

Fourth, as Jesus says earlier we must judge not based on appearances, but with a righteous judgment. This means that our judgments must be thoroughly Scriptural. We don't judge others because they are different than us. We must use Scripture alone as the standard.

There are twin dangers that we need to avoid. One is to abstain from judging anything at all. There is a lot of pressure from the culture to bully Christians in this direction. For example, advocates of a twisted sexual morality accuse Christians of hypocritically "judging" others. But the Bible clearly teaches that these lifestyles are not only sinful but the evidence of severe hardness of heart and idolatry (Romans 1). Those ensnared in them are on the path to hell, not heaven. There is nothing loving about telling such a person that everything is okay. If a man were standing in the road and about to get hit by a semi, you would yell to warn them. If you did not, you would sin by omission. Love must be defined by God, not man. We must not simply take a short-term approach, as if the loving thing is simply to do what makes others feel comfortable in the moment. It must take a long-term approach: what must be said to bring this person to heaven? It may wound them for a brief time but will heal them for eternity. The surgeon's knife brings short-term pain. It can also bring life-saving treatment.

The other error is a prideful and judgmental spirit that tends to only see errors in others. This attitude is often motivated by things like anger, resentment, and jealousy. Other times we simply feel "hurt" and want payback for those who we feel have done wrong. These are all powerful temptations that grab hold of powerful emotions. But they are not in keeping with the Gospel of Christ.

Jesus came to save, not condemn. The world was already condemned, and he came to bring salvation. Although he was brutally crucified, he prayed for those who abused him. While they were filled with hate and spite, Jesus's heart overflowed with love for sinners.

Mercy triumphs over judgment. May God then fill our hearts with mercy and love so that we and others may find grace on the day of judgment and live forever in the light of God.

#### #42 - Devotional Meditations on the Gospel of John 13:1-20

Jesus Christ came to us to be our servant. This idea is so familiar to us that it is easy for us to overlook its wonder. Jesus is the Lord. He is God in the flesh. There is no higher authority than God himself. He eternally reigns over the whole universe. Even the glorious angels bow their knees to him. As the God-man, he now reigns in heaven and has been given an authority that is above every name. He is the Lord, we are his servants.

But in order to save us, he became our servant. He who was the great king became lower than a serf. He who was the master became a slave. He who was rich became poor so that through his poverty we might become rich.

In this passage, the servant-character of Jesus is on full display. Every detail points us to it and reinforces it.



First, note the setting of the foot-washing. It takes place after the Lord's Supper at the time of the Passover. Jesus is the Passover lamb, who substitutes his blood for that of his people. This death is commemorated in the Supper he instituted, in which his broken body and shed blood are symbolized. Jesus became our servant by going all the way to death to procure our redemption. The foot-washing is but an additional expression of his work as a servant-sacrifice.

Second, we see it also in the hint of the vicarious character of his work. Jesus's foot-washing has the effect of making his disciples "clean." This is a ritual term from the OT that symbolized how God's Spirit would cleanse us from the guilt and corrupting power of sin. But where did it come from? Where did our sin go? The answer is that is Jesus! He took our uncleanness and bore it on himself. He was an outcast and considered unclean on the cross. The righteous Son of God was condemned as a sinner. He gave us his purity and holiness. A great exchange occurs through Jesus the servant of sinners.

Third, we also see it in the preview of his betrayal. The text tells us that the devil had put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot to betray him. What bitterness betrayal can bring! With what suffering it can afflict us in the heart! Those who have been betrayed by a spouse or loved one know the lifetime of lingering hurt betrayal can cause. But behold Christ, the servant of his sinful people! He knows that Judas will betray him, even as he knows that the disciples will abandon him, yet he becomes and remains their servant to save.

Fourth, we see it more obviously in the foot-washing itself. Jesus is the master of this table. Everyone assembled calls him "Lord." Yet he stoops down with a servant's garment to wash the disciple's dirty feet. Although it obviously has a symbolic character (as noted above) it is perhaps the most menial and ordinary task one can imagine.

All these things reveal the character of Christ as our servant-Savior. He who was in the form of God did not consider equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself and took the form of a servant. The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

But even as this reveals the work of Christ for us, it also reveals the pattern of Christ that should be in us. Jesus tells us that no servant is greater than his master, or the messenger than the one who sent him. In this act, he is leaving all Christians an example, that we may do just as he did (13:15).

In Christ we must become servants, taking on his heart and attitude in our own lives. We do not first ask what others can do for us, but what we can do to serve others and the church. We do not demand love before we extend love to others. Instead, from the fullness of God's love we love others even when mistreated by them. We do not bear grudges against others for their sins and shortcomings but filled with mercy and grace we forgive and bear with them. Just think of it: if Christ did not deal this way with us, no one would be saved. He does not treat us as our sins deserve, nor repay us according to our iniquities. So also we must live with one another as fellow servants of the Master. In this way, we serve our brothers to grow in Christ. Just as Jesus bore our sins in his body on the tree, so we bear in love and patience with the sins and shortcomings of others. And we do not shy away from the most menial tasks to help our brothers in need.

Let us this day pray that the Lord would work the servant pattern of Christ in us. May he fill us with heaven's love even as we receive the hatred of the world. Christ has chosen us. Although we fail every day, he will complete the work he has begun in us. Being a servant means being willing to undergo humiliation. But those who walk that path have this precious promise: he who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted.

#### #43 - Devotional Meditations on the Gospel of John 13:21-30

As God, Jesus knows all things. Just as he is infinite, eternal, and unchangeable in his Deity, so also he is omniscient (all-knowing).

But as a man, he was capable of learning and growth. How to resolve these two things is a bit of a mystery, as are many other aspects of the union of Christ's two natures in his single person. The Scriptures tell us that he grew in wisdom, stature, and in favor with God and man (Luke 2:52). At no point was his knowledge sinful or inadequate. Even at 12 years old his sinless mind surpassed the greatest Temple-teachers of the Jews (Luke 2:41-52).

Jesus read the Scriptures. When he did so he was learning in a unique way. The Jews read the Old Testament Scriptures and learned about the work of their Messiah which was to come. When Jesus read the Scriptures, he learned in them the things concerning himself. In particular, he saw the path of suffering the Father had set before him to procure the redemption of his people. This included Judas' own bitter betrayal.

Think of how such knowledge would affect you. Ignorance is bliss for a reason. When we don't know the particulars of our future, we can fall into a naive happiness. But imagine if your future life--especially the hardest, most difficult episodes--were laid out for you in a book that revealed them ahead of time.

That is what Jesus experienced when he read the Scriptures. In John 13:18 Jesus told his disciples that the "Scriptures must be fulfilled" concerning his betrayal by one of his own disciples. He knew ahead of time from the Scriptures themselves that a key part of his suffering will be a betrayal by his own friend. One who sat with him in table fellowship, who spoke highly of him, who followed him, would reveal himself to be an agent of the devil. In fact, the text contains a haunting description of Judas. Having received the prophetic morsel of bread, the text says that "Satan entered into [Judas]."

For this reason, it is no surprise that the text tells us that Jesus was "troubled in his spirit" about these things. What he had previously learned about his necessary sufferings, betrayal, and death is now about to come to pass.

What a dark hour for Jesus! The section concludes with a matter-of-fact historical detail that is obviously intended to communicate a deeper theological truth. He simply says: "And it was night." John was speaking not simply of temporal darkness. The hour of spiritual darkness and death was coming quickly upon our Savior.

But behold here the creation of the sympathetic, suffering heart of Christ. Although he was perfect and knew these things ahead of time, John tells us that he was still "troubled" in his Spirit. Jesus had a perfect faith, but this was not inconsistent with trouble of soul. To be sure, anxiety and fear can manifest a weak faith (Mark 4:40). But simple unrest of spirit is also in part the natural reaction of the soul to suffering.

What a blessing that Jesus knows this feeling! The Psalms are filled with expressions of turmoil of soul over the onslaught of the enemy. By bringing these burdens to the Lord, they receive comfort in times of trouble.

Jesus took upon himself the trouble of soul. His soul is troubled when his betrayal draws close at hand (13:21). He is troubled when he predicts the hour of his death (12:27). He was greatly troubled when he saw the people mourning the death of his friend Lazarus (11:33). He was, as Isaiah said, a man of sorrows and acquainted with griefs.

Why does he experience this? He takes our turmoil of spirit so that he might replace it with his comfort. He bore our burdens in his body and spirit so that he might have a heart of sympathy with us in our experience of trial.

Although Jesus is now troubled, later he will offer words of comfort to his disciples in their trouble: "Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me" (John 14:1).

He who let his heart be troubled now tells his disciples to not be troubled. He took their trouble, grief, and turmoil of Spirit.

What a joy and comfort to serve this savior! If we are to serve him, we must follow him. That means we must take up a cross and embrace a life of suffering. But along with every trial, he will bring comfort to sustain us.

#### #44 - Devotional Meditations on the Gospel of John 13:31-38

At some point in church history, a helpful saying was coined. Its purpose was to help distinguish the main themes of the apostles' writings. So it was said that Paul is the apostle of faith, Peter is the apostle of hope, and John is the apostle of love.

To be sure, this is an oversimplification. All three apostles affirm the value of faith, hope, and love together. Paul himself identifies them as the three main virtues, with the greatest being love (1 Cor. 13). They are fundamentally in agreement although the overall emphasis may differ.

But we can see why this saying came to be so widely accepted and utilized. Paul's letters to the Romans and Galatians are all about faith which receives Christ's righteousness as a gift of grace. Peter's first letter

has hope as its distinguishing mark. John's Gospel and his letters speak beautifully of love--both God's love for us and our love for one another.

In John 12:31-36 Jesus gives his disciples a "new" commandment. Not that it is "brand" new--for it was contained throughout the Law of Moses. Instead, it is new in the fullness and finality of its manifestation in Christ. This commandment is simple: love one another. This is the source of all good works: love for God and love for neighbor. Good works do not save us, but they do adorn our profession of the Gospel. This is how the world will see the Gospel in our lives: by our love for one another. John is not replacing the word of God as the chief mark of the church. Instead, he is drawing our attention to how we manifest our vital embrace of that saving truth in the eyes of the world.

The first thing we must note about this commandment is that it is not something in our natural power to accomplish. This is made clear in three ways. First, before this, we read of the betrayal of Judas. Judas had no love for Christ or his brothers. Satan had entered into him and harnessed the sinful power of his flesh to do evil. Apart from God's restraining hand, we would be no different. Instead of labors of love, we would give in to a bitter betrayal of Christ and his people.

Second, after this saying, we also read of a lesser "betrayal" on the part of Peter. Judas was the son of perdition, not chosen by God. But Peter was among the true disciples. Greater love has no man than this, than that he lay down his life for his friends. And Peter insists that when the time comes he will love his Savior in the way, declaring: "I will lay down my life for you" (37). Yet when the moment arrives he chooses to love himself rather than God. If the great apostle is weak in love, how much more are we?

Finally, our sinful weakness is also indicated in the way he addresses his disciples as "little children" (13:33). Children can be very cute and adorable. But they do not come into the world with love in their heart. They are sinners, just as we are. They need to be taught and guided in how to love, which can be a slow and painful process.

It is striking to me that most of the times I have referenced this passage in my mind it is usually to condemn others (and other churches) for not living up to Christ's expectations. "They preach the truth, but don't have much love!" Yet when I do this, I am actually failing to see the real point that Jesus is making in the context. Jesus does not tell me to love others so that I can use this to condemn my brother when he fails. If I do that, I am also condemning myself.

There is a reason Jesus reminds us to love. As sinners, we have no love in us. Love is from God. He is its only source. The greatest leaders of the church (Peter and the apostles) failed to love at the very moment when it was most needed--at the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

Although he received no love from his disciples, he continued to love him. Is it not interesting that John himself is referred to in this Gospel as "the disciple whom Jesus loved?" Indeed, it is not "the disciple that loved Jesus." Why? John explains in his first letter:

In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins (1 John 4:10).

Following the pattern of Christ, this love finds its chief manifestation in acts of grace to others. While love shown to our friends is not a bad thing, it is also something that even pagans do (Matt. 5:47). Christian love consists in acts of mercy and grace in thought, word, and deed--particularly when we believe they don't deserve it. That is why acts of spite and jealousy are so contrary to Christ.

The love that Jesus speaks of is therefore a living embodiment and manifestation of the Gospel. When we love those who don't deserve it, we are doing exactly what God did for us.

That is why the world will know through these things that we are his disciples. They will see Christ in us--who was gracious to sinners, patient with the weak, and a forgiver of his enemies.

Let us this day take to heed Christ's word. Let us not use the command to love to condemn others when they fail. Instead, let us be brought to our knees that God may fill our hearts with his love, so that from the heart we may love one another. In this way, the world will see the love and grace of Christ. He loved us not when we were his friends, but when we were his enemies. Christ calls us to live in the same kind of love.

#### #45 - Devotional Meditations on the Gospel of John 14:1-14

Yesterday we reminded ourselves of the old saying that helpfully summarizes three of the greatest apostles: Paul, John, and Peter. They correspond to the three great Christian virtues: faith, hope, and love. We can easily see how Paul is so aligned with faith in his emphasis on justification by grace. Peter's first letter is filled with glorious encouragement in Christian hope. And John is quite famous for his beautiful exhortations on love.

But as this passage reminds us, these things are a matter of emphasis. All Scripture commends all three virtues at all times. In fact, faith, hope, and love go together and are never found by themselves without one another.

While John is the apostle of love, his Gospel is actually written with the distinctive purpose of creating and encouraging faith in its readers (see his explicitly declared purpose in 20:30-31).

Love is the outflow of the Christian faith. It is the aim and fruit that it seeks to produce. But the root of love is found in faith.

John 14 contains an explicit encouragement on the part of Jesus to put our faith in him. Ultimately, the point is that we can and should trust in him because he is God, one with the Father.

Consider the following ways this appears in the passage.

First, he draws an explicit parallel between himself and the Father. He tells them: "you believe in God, believe also in me" (14:1). The OT Scriptures make clear that God's people are to put their trust in God alone. He alone is God. They cannot put their confidence in princes, or in the son of man in whom is no salvation. We can trust Jesus because he is God.

That is why Jesus tells us that if we know him we know the Father. A Father is imaged and reflected in his Son. Jesus is the eternally-begotten Son of the Father. The Father is in Him and He is in the Father. This is not only true as he is the incarnate Messiah, but also as he is the eternal Son from the Father.

John thus takes us back to the mystery of the eternal relationships within the Godhead which he had introduced in the prologue. He is telling us that our life and faith are caught up in the relationships within the Deity. Truly, in him we live and move and have our being. As Paul reminds us, our lives are hidden with Christ in God.

What great motivation to put our trust in Jesus! He is not a man, but God. He is the eternal son, the only way to the Father. It is only through faith in him that we can have access to God and eternal life.

Secondly, we also are motivated to trust Christ because of his words. In 14:10 Jesus references the words that he speaks--not on his own authority, but that of the Father. Jesus's words reveal his power and Deity. They are "self-authenticating." This means that they carry within themselves the proof and power of their own authority.

Jesus is the eternal Logos, through whom God made the universe. By the word of his power, he created everything out of nothing. We do not need to have been present in creation to behold the power of his word. We who are Christians have experienced it in our own lives. Through this creative word, he has given us new birth from above. He has turned our sinful flesh into the soil of life, from which he brings good fruit by the power of the Spirit. We only need to look back at the way he has worked in our lives in the past to see how he can work in the future. We can trust him. He has told us: "He who began a good work in you will complete it at the day of Christ."

Finally, Jesus motivates us to trust him by appealing to the miracles he has performed: "Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, or else believe on account of the works themselves" (14:11).

It is important to note that the miracles themselves do not produce faith. Indeed, to those whom God has not chosen, the miracles only confirm and reveal a hardness of heart. Thus the Jewish leaders saw Jesus's greatest miracles (including resurrection from the dead!), but they still did not believe.

Miracles are thus not the main support of faith. But they are a subordinate help. But how helpful they can be! How easy it is when confronted with the prospect of death to fall into sinful doubts. What a helpful reminder of the confirmed power of Jesus, who not only raised others (like Lazarus) from the dead but who himself was raised from the dead.

Our lives and hearts can often be troubled. Instead of faith, we are filled with fear. To our troubled souls Jesus speaks his word of power: "Let not your hearts be troubled. You believe in God, believe also in me."

This Savior of ours is God. He is filled with infinite power and deep recesses of love for us his people. In our sin, the path to God was closed. In his grace, it is reopened to all who believe. For he is the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through him.

#### #46 - Devotional Meditations on the Gospel of John 14:15-24

In the first part of this passage, Jesus gave his disciples several encouragements to believe in him. Jesus is God. He does the works of God, has the names of God, and brings us to the place of God (heaven). Even as we trust in God, we can trust in Jesus, his only-begotten Son. Jesus's encouragement was therefore Christ-centered. He is the proper object of our faith and comfort.

In this passage, Jesus adds another member of the Trinity to this pattern of encouragement: the Holy Spirit. This is not the first time the Spirit is mentioned in the Gospel. He did receive several mentions previously. In John 1:33, we read that the Holy Spirit came upon Jesus in his baptism. In John 3 he spoke of the "water and the Spirit" by which we must be born to enter the kingdom. In 4:23-24 Jesus told the woman at the well of the time when God's worshippers will do so in "Spirit and truth" from all nations of the earth. In 6:63 Jesus told us that God's Spirit was the revealer of the kingdom of God. In 7:39 Jesus spoke more directly of the "river of living water" that will flow from our hearts through the fullness of God's Spirit yet to come.

Much has been said already of God's Holy Spirit. But these mentions were fairly incidental and did not go into much detail.

In John 14 the subject of the Spirit (anticipated in the earlier chapters) now receives direct attention--and that for good reason! Together with the Father and the Son the Spirit is a member of the eternal Trinity and a cooperative in the work of salvation. What does Jesus tell us about the Spirit's particular role in our redemption? A book could be written (and many have been written!) on this subject. Jesus will have more to say about the Spirit in the next chapters. Let us consider some of the highlights as they appear in this passage.

First, the Spirit serves as the "paraclete" of his people. This is a Greek word that is difficult to translate into English because of its wide range of meanings. It has been translated as "helper," "advocate," "comforter," or "counselor." All of these words get at different aspects of a paraclete. One Bible dictionary notes that ancient writers used this word to describe "a legal advisor, pleader, proxy, or advocate, one who comes forward [on] behalf of and as the representative of another." Clearly, it has a legal side in terms of providing representation and "advocacy." But there is also a personal side. Those who have been in legal trouble know how comforting it is to have an effective advocate to represent their claims.

With God's Holy Spirit in our hearts, Jesus tells us that we have another paraclete. Our sins afflict us in our conscience. The devil pounces on those weak points in our hearts. He can sometimes fill our minds with voices of accusation and condemnation. We can be left feeling hopelessly lost with a certain verdict of doom haunting our hearts. What a legal team we have for comfort, counsel, encouragement, and help. Jesus pleads our case before the Father (1 John 2:1). The Holy Spirit is at our side assuring us of victory in our trial. The accusations of the devil are no match for the Son and the Spirit when they are our advocates before the Father!

Secondly, the Spirit also comes to help us as a revealer of God's truth. Thus he is called "the Spirit of truth," and also the one who will "teach" his people and remind the disciples of all the words of Jesus. This revealing role of the Spirit took place in a special way for the Apostles, inspiring them to write the God-breathed, infallible Scriptures. To this work of "inspiration," the Spirit adds the work of "illumination" to help us savingly understand the words of Scripture.

And what a teacher we have in God's Holy Spirit! He instructs not only our minds and ears but has the power to write them on the memory of our hearts. He not only gives knowledge but also the desire to draw near to God through his word of life. Even now as you read his word and meditate on its teaching, he is present with you to help you take to heart its encouragements and comforts.

This brings us to the third aspect of the Spirit's work as revealed in the passage. The Spirit has the power to bring forth the fruit of God's saving work in our lives. The Father is the planner of redemption. The Son executes that plan by accomplishing redemption. The Spirit applies that work to our hearts and lives.

As the Apostle Paul indicates, the Spirit is the heavenly soil from which the fruit of righteousness will come (Galatians 5:22, 6:8). The Spirit not only reveals to us the commandments of love but gives us the ability to begin to keep them. Our activities of love cannot be produced by our own strength. That which is born of the flesh is flesh. It is only when God's love fills our hearts that we are enabled from the heart to love him and love others.

But with the Spirit's help, this process can begin. And Jesus gives us a beautiful promise in this respect: "If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him" (14:23). There truly is "no place like home." As followers of Christ on earth, we become sojourners with no permanent dwelling place. But in Christ and his Spirit, we have a home with God. Grace upon grace, he has also deigned to make his home with us.

The Spirit is with us to help, comfort, and encourage. He brings to us now the power, peace, and joy of our heavenly home. We walk each day not by our own natural power, but by the power of heaven in God's Spirit.

Let us then walk with the Spirit and no longer gratify the desires of the flesh. For the lusts of the flesh reap corruption, but the fruit of the Spirit is eternal life.

#47 - Devotional Meditations on the Gospel of John 15:1-17



The Gospel of John differs from Matthew, Mark, and Luke in many ways. One significant difference is the overall style of speech and flow of language. He also has the most material that is unique to his narrative while the others share a lot of overlap. Another difference is the way they utilize parables. Jesus often taught in parables, using earthly images to convey the realities of the kingdom of heaven. In John, these parables take a unique shape. Like the other Gospels, the parables in John use vivid earthly imagery to illustrate the spiritual reality of the kingdom of heaven. One difference in John is that these parabolic images are connected to various "I am" statements I've heard by Jesus to explain his identity as the Messiah. Jesus has previously made such statements. He has declared: "I am the living bread," "I am the light of the world," "I am the Good Shepherd," "I am the door," "I am the way," and "I am the resurrection and the life." These are parabolic forms of speech, where Jesus is comparing himself to different earthly things to explain how he works to bring them to heaven. John's Gospel has a special Christ-centered focus, and the form of the parables reflects this in his various "I am" declarations.

Today we read a similar parabolic saying in which Jesus declares: "I am the vine and you are the branches." The image is used to describe the believer's union and communion with Christ. He wants us to understand how we grow in the fruits of this union, particularly, self-sacrificial love.

Entire books can be and have been written on this subject. When examined closely, the entire history and work of redemption can be found in this passage! It draws from imagery that takes us all the way back to creation and it's also found in the old testament prophets. We cannot explore the full riches of these redemptive-historical connections. Let us instead consider these points by way of summary, highlighting a few key things.

First, this image shows us that the union we have with Jesus is both real and vital. A branch is distinct from the vine itself, but the two are vitally connected. The vine brings life-giving nourishment to the branch, which then extends it to the fruit. So we are in a real, life-giving union with Christ. The Holy Spirit (just mentioned in the previous passage) brings us the nourishing water and nutrients of Christ himself. We are in him as members (i.e., arms, legs, hands, feet) are in a body. We are not simply formally united to Christ by profession or church membership. He is in us by the Spirit and we are in him. Our Christian faith can never, therefore, be a matter of external profession. To have only this is to not be in vital union with Christ: it is like being a dead branch duct taped to an apple tree. Such a branch will bear no fruit and is essentially an imposter. As Jesus indicates here, it is good for nothing except to be thrown into the fire! What a sober warning for us when we grow cold and seem dead. What a warning for those who have no true faith but only appear to be in Christ!

Second, to bear fruit in this vital union of vine and branches, we must abide in the vine. This is an interesting choice of words. To "abide" is an active decision of the will. It doesn't happen automatically. But it does not put an emphasis on the business or quantity of the activity. We can often fool ourselves into thinking that if we are doing a lot of things, we are bearing fruit for God. This was the mistake of the Pharisees, who also often looked down on others for not doing as much as them. They found their righteousness in works, not faith.

To "abide" simply means to "stay there." In other words, Jesus is telling us that once we believe in him, our main job is to stay there. We do this by faith. Faith is a living and active thing, but its core essence is to passively receive. That is why Jesus says that we will bear fruit if we "abide in me and I in him" (15:5). Note the mutuality of the "abiding." It is not as if this abiding is the fruit of our own strength or striving. It is not a matter of doing enough good work. It is a matter of abiding in him. The fruits of good works are thus the indirect result of nurturing our faith in Christ. In this way, the glory remains God's alone for his grace alone, and none comes to us.

Third, Jesus also makes clear that any increase in fruitfulness requires pruning. This seems counterintuitive, but those who have grown fruit trees know it well. Apple trees in particular require pruning. The branches must be directed by the grower so that the energy of the tree is channeled in the right direction. If it is not, you will end up with many small apples. Other times if the tree is not pruned properly, the apples will overload the tree and cause it to break. The latter image might be good for us who tend to do "too much." The branch can sometimes be overloaded!

To bear the best fruit, the branch must be pruned. That can be a painful process. Sharp pruning shears are used to violently cut unwanted branches. It usually also makes a large mess that can take some time to clean up. Sound familiar? Pruning is usually done before the growth begins. That means that we will not always see the immediate benefit. But if we are in Christ, we will expect that Christ will prune us. That process will be painful, but the end of it is good fruit. That is why the Scriptures compare this process of training and discipline to farming. Hebrews tells us that God's training and discipline can be painful for the moment, but afterward, it produces the harvest of righteousness.

Finally, note the fruit itself: love. If we are united with Christ, we will bear his image in our lives. The Son bears the image of the Father. Just as the Father is filled with love, so is his Son. Those who have God's love in them will love God and love others. And they will do so not simply as the world loves. They will love as God loves. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.

This self-sacrificial love is therefore the chief fruit of good works. Paul tells us that the aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith (1 Tim. 1:5). By this we will prove that we are Christ's disciples. Note well. The Jewish professors who only claimed to know God tried to prove it in the exactitude and quantity of legal obedience. In this, they often looked down on and condemned others who did not match their religious expectations. Jesus, on the other hand, loved his enemies, prayed for those who persecuted him, and with his love covered a multitude of sins.

The vitality and reality of our Christian faith are best measured by how we love. When we are cursed, do we bless? When others sin against us, do we from the heart forgive? This is the love to which God calls us. We are to overcome evil with good. Grace is to win the victory over sin. Mercy must triumph over judgment.

This is the love that is in Jesus. He has chosen us to be in him. The life of self-sacrificial love is a life full of joy as it is a life filled with Christ and God. This is how he loved us, and how he calls us to love one

another. We cannot do it in our natural strength. We can only do it through him. Let us then heed the call of Jesus to "abide in the vine."

#### #48 - Devotional Meditations on the Gospel of John 15:18-25

Throughout church history, John has been known as the "apostle of love." Looking back on the last several chapters, we can understand why. Love is a heavy emphasis in his teaching. God the Father loves his Son, and the Son loves the Father. They both love their chosen people. God the Father gave them to the Son from all eternity, and he came to die for them. Greater love has no man than this and that he lay down his life for his friends. God showed the greatness of his love by assuming a human nature to die for us--not when we were his friends, but when we were his enemies!

As the incarnate Savior, Jesus's love is manifested more fully to his people. He is moved and troubled by their sorrows and miseries. He cares for and loves his people. Out of the outflow of this uncontainable love, God's people will love others. In this, they will glorify God and prove that they are Christ's disciples.

What we have outlined above is really a summary of Jesus's teaching on love as it is sprinkled throughout John 11–14. Clearly, this has been a strong emphasis in John's Gospel.

But there is a flip side to this point. In contrast to the love of God, the believer will experience the hatred of the world. If we were comforted by Jesus's reassurances with regard to God's love, we may now be sobered and shocked at the thought of the hatred of the world. After all, the wisdom of the world tells us that if we love others, they will love us in return. While there is some truth to that, it is not the whole story. When we love as God desires in accordance with his truth, there will be times when we are not loved in return. Instead, we will experience the hatred of the world. At times when we love the way God calls us the world will actually accuse us of hatred.

What a contrast! Love is perhaps the most intense positive emotion. But hatred is the most intense negative emotion. Love is not just a "feeling," but in so far as it is connected to our affections you can understand the point.

How are we to make sense of this strange combination of love and hate? Believers will simultaneously experience a kind of schizophrenic reality in their lives. They will be intensely loved by God but deeply hated by the world. This can create confusion within our hearts, especially when those extremes become very intense in times of trial. And even when our heads are clear our hearts can be confused.

First, Jesus tells us that the hatred of the world for the believer flows out of their ignorance of God and spiritual things. Jesus tells us that they will do this because "they do not know him who sent me" (15:18). The hatred of the world for Christ flows out of a blindness and ignorance of who he truly is and the spiritual reality that he represents. This ignorance is part of the reason we are to have compassion for our enemies when they show this hatred toward us. What Paul said about himself is also true of them, that they act "ignorantly, and in unbelief" (1 Tim. 1:13). All of us at one time or another are blinded by our ignorance of God. We often hate that which we don't fully understand, projecting and

intensifying our negative emotions towards them. So it is with the unbelievers with God. Satan has blinded his heart. He has succeeded in deceiving them. They now look at the one who is the source of all purity and righteousness and see him as the root of many evils. Such is the attitude of many in our culture towards Christianity.

Secondly, this does not mean that the hatred of the world can be excused away. Jesus makes clear that he has given sufficient evidence to demonstrate his identity as the Son of God. He has come and spoken his word to them. His self-attesting word has powerfully demonstrated his divine origins. Likewise, his powerful works show that he is from God. Even natural revelation itself really reveals that God exists, is all powerful, good, righteous, and to be worshiped impurity by his creatures. The special revelation of God in the gospel has now spread far and wide throughout the world for many centuries. There is ample testimony to Jesus available to all. There is no excuse for their sin. Ironically, one of the main objections of the unbeliever to Christianity and religion more generally is that there is not enough evidence. The reality is that God has stamped his creative ownership Upon even the tiniest particles of the universe. Both the tiny cells of our living body and the atoms of inanimate objects bear the mark of their designer. If a scientific researcher is blind, no amount of empirical evidence will persuade him to change his theory.

Third, let us remember that when we experienced the hatred of the world, we do so in the Lord Jesus Christ. If the world hates us, Jesus tells us that we need to remember that it hated him before us. And why did they hate Jesus? It's because in his coming he brought the light of God which expose the works of darkness. As John tells us elsewhere: "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. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed" (3:19-20).

The devil is a deceiver. He is shrewd and crafty. In our modern day, he has succeeded in an unprecedented way in twisting and distorting the concepts of love and hate. Consider how the world has begun to discuss various sexually perverse lifestyles. We are told that the loving thing to do is simply accept people as they are--whatever the object of their sexual desire might be. That is the loving thing to do. If you do anything other than give them full, unqualified acceptance and affirmation you are considered a bigoted "hater." And this way the concepts of love and hate or co-opted and actually made the opposite of what they actually are. Good becomes evil and evil becomes good!

What should we do in such situations? Since this is something that has been happening more often (and will continue to do so), let me conclude by offering some practical advice. How should we address a loved one, friend, or family member that embraces a sexually perverse identity (especially if they are professing Christians)? First, we need to be clear to them in love that the path they are on is not a path to God. It is the path to hell. This needs to be communicated very clearly, although in a loving and gentle manner. At the same time, we need to make clear why we are compelled to tell them this. It's not because we hate them. It is because we love them. We don't want them to burn in judgment. We desire that they would be in fellowship with our gracious God and live with him. It is not because we are wagging our finger of judgment at them, thinking that we are somehow holier than them. We need to

make clear that we are all sinners and subject to perversion and lust. Our redemption is not found in our own personal purity, but in God.

Secondly, we need to make clear to them that if they persist in this path, that will change the dynamic of our relationship--whether interpersonally or within our families. If the person is a family member, we will need to exercise care with how our young children interact with them. Recognizing that what our children see can set an example for them for good or ill. At the same time, while we may have to make painfully clear the ways in which our relationship changes, we make equally clear the ways in which we want to love them, be there for them, and help them in time of need. While certain doors of our relationship must need close due to their sinful lifestyle, we need to clearly communicate what doors are open.

But we must recognize that even when we exercise the greatest care in what we say and how we say it, we will still often experience the hatred of the world. It is in these moments that we will be driven to trust in the Lord and go to our knees in prayer.

This passage calls for sobriety. The Christian life is filled with many joys and blessings. God is often pleased to give us times of peace and refreshment. But we must also expect trouble and difficulty, including seasons where we will experience the onslaught of an intense hatred of the world. In these moments we will be accused of all kinds of evil things falsely and no one will listen to our explanations. Jesus told us this ahead of time. Thankfully, along with this warning he also gives us the power of the Holy Spirit. Greater is he who is in us than he who is in the world. Greater is the love of God than the hatred of the world. Therefore, let our hearts not be troubled as both Christ and the Spirit are comforters sent to help us.

#### #49 - Devotional Meditations on the Gospel of John 15:26-16:15

In this passage, Jesus returns to the subject of the Holy Spirit. Jesus made various statements about the Spirit earlier in the Gospel. But it is not until chapter 14 that he is discussed in a focused and developed way.

In this section, Jesus returns to the subject of the Spirit as our Helper sent from God. He does so for good reason! While Christians will rejoice in the fullness of the love of God, they will also have an onslaught of hatred from the world (John 15). They will quickly find themselves weak and inadequate for the fierceness of the fight. Jesus wants them to remember that along with the battle God will give them help. The disciples will be put out of the synagogues (i.e. considered outcasts from society). Some will be killed on account of the name of Christ. The people who do these things will at times be part of the visible church believing that they are doing a service to God (16:1-2). Simply stated, a high degree of unjust treatment awaits them in their walk with Christ.

It is true that the apostles experienced a particularly intense form of suffering for Christ's sake. It is not wrong to point out that there is a unique intensity to these Apostolic sufferings. One only needs to read the list of Paul's troubles to get a taste of the unbelievable amount of persecution he faced. It would be

wrong to expect that each individual Christian will face the same intensity of suffering. The church can go through times of intense trouble, but also have seasons of peace and refreshment (cf. Acts 9:31). Sometimes they will experience these things simultaneously in different respects!

Although the Apostolic age was unique in the intensity of their sufferings, the experience is not unique to them. All who seek to follow Christ will face these things: ostracization, threats, false accusation, and even physical harm. Again, as Jesus points out, sometimes this will come from those who sincerely believe they are doing a service to God. One only needs to look at the corruption of the liberal churches that have bowed the knee to the modern Baal and attack Bible-believing as evil. We must awaken from our peaceful slumbers and where necessary adjust our expectations for our Christian life. To face these things when they are unexpected can lead to disillusionment, and (in a worst-case scenario) to people falling away.

In this context, Jesus promises help from heaven! Another Helper (i.e. paraclete) will be sent from heaven.

In our earlier devotion on John 14, we outlined several aspects of the Spirit's work for believers. Here we add a few more that are prominent in the context.

First, note that the Spirit is said to come from both the Father and the Son. Jesus says that he will "send" the Spirit, but also that he "proceeds" from the Father (15:26). Here we have in view the relations of the three persons of the Trinity. On the one hand, these relations manifest themselves in what we call their "economic" activity. But these phrases also reflect their "ontological" interconnectedness.

In theology, we distinguish between the "economic" and "ontological" Trinity. There is only one Trinity. In using this distinction, we are not dividing him up into two gods. Instead, we are describing two aspects of the single Trinity. The "ontological" Trinity refers to the three persons in their eternal relationships with one another. Scripture teaches us that the Father is of none, the Son is eternally begotten of the Father, and the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son. This is one, true, eternal, unchanging ontological Trinity. They share together a single, self-same essence and are equal in power, glory, and blessedness.

John indicates that these ontological relationships are manifested in the economic Trinity. This refers to the historical activity of the three persons in the work of our redemption. In this passage, we read about the historical work (i.e. economy) of the Holy Spirit. He will be sent by the Son even as he proceeds from the Father. The Spirit is sent into history for a purpose: to bring us who live in history into a relationship with eternity. This eternity is found in God Himself.

Think of this fact! Your redemption is not just the forgiveness of your sins. Nor is it the removal of your misery. It consists fundamentally in coming into a restored relationship with the infinite, eternal, and unchangeable Triune God. All three persons work with a unified purpose and activity to bring about the gracious end. What enemy can win a battle when not only the Father but also the Son and the Spirit wage war against them?

The text tells us that "sorrow has filled" the disciples' hearts at the words of Jesus (15:6). Jesus has said that he will have to leave them. While he is gone, they will face great trouble. But Jesus tells them that his going away will be an advantage for them. He is leaving them physically to get them another to help. He is leaving the battle for a season only so he can go get a soldier to provide reinforcements who will never leave them.

This Spirit who will be in them is greater than he who is in the world. He will convict the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment. The world will twist things, making evil appear good and good appear evil. In this way, he will deceive many. On this dark spiritual battlefield, the Spirit will shine the light of heaven with truth and clarity. He will demonstrate to all who have eyes to see that Christ's followers are from God.

This Spirit dwells in each one of us. When God seems far from you, remember this. The Spirit is your helper. When sorrows overwhelm, the joy of the Triune God is even closer at hand. Even as he proceeds from the Father and was sent by the Son, so he comes to guide us in our journey back to the Father and the Son. On that day your sorrow will turn to joy. You will have full fellowship not only with the Spirit but also with the Father and the Son.

#### #50 - Devotional Meditations on the Gospel of John 16:16-24

The Gospel of John is a book of contrasts: love and hate, light and darkness, sin and righteousness, the world and God, death and resurrection. Jesus's coming into the world produces a sharp, spiritual division. In the last chapters, we have seen this division as it manifests itself in love and hatred. God loves his people, but the world hates them. As the world's hatred intensifies with the coming of Jesus, so also does the manifestation of his love in the sending of the Holy Spirit. He is our comforter and helper to sustain us in our spiritual conflict.

In John 16:16-24 Jesus further applies these realities to the sorrow and joy felt by the disciples. These are the two keywords that define the passage and will thus organize our thoughts in this meditation.

First, let us consider the sorrow of the disciples. It is clear that they will experience sorrow. Jesus himself in the days of his earthly flesh offered up prayers with loud cries and tears (Hebrews 5:7). Paul also dealt with anguish of heart and many tears in his ministry to the churches (2 Cor. 2:4). Every church leader (and member) who has been a Christian for any length of time knows that our lives are often filled with overwhelming sorrow. When we experience these things, we often think it to be a strange abnormality. On the one hand, there is truth in this thought. The world is not what it should be. It is filled with sin. But insofar as we are in Christ we should not be surprised by grief, sorrow, and tears. Although they are not "normal" in terms of God's design for creation, they are an inevitable and inescapable part of our lives in Christ.

Secondly, note also the specific source of the sorrow of the disciples. There are certainly many reasons for it. Just prior to this Jesus told them of the hatred of the world and the intense persecution they will face. Clearly this is a reason for distress!

But in this passage, the reason for their sorrow is found in something else: the impending absence of Jesus. For years they had been near to Jesus. They had walked with him, eaten with him, and listened to his teaching. When someone we love is physically near to us, we are filled with joy. When they are absent, we become sad.

In his death, resurrection, and ascension, Jesus would be leaving the disciples. Their friend and Savior would no longer be with them.

Note well how this is the chief source of their sorrow. The Christian wants nothing more than to be near the Lord Jesus Christ. Although he is present with us by his Holy Spirit, there is still a sense in which to be "at home in the body" is to be "away from the Lord" (2 Cor. 5:6-8). While we are in this life, we remain separated from the incarnate Christ, awaiting the time his presence with us will be completed.

But to this note of sorrow, Jesus adds the hope of joy. The Christian is grieved to remain in a world of sin, misery, hatred, and persecution. He is saddened to feel far from Christ in this evil world. But he journeys with the hope of joy that will come in the inevitable reunion of Christ and his people in his second coming.

Jesus likens this process to a woman in the pains of childbirth. There are few pains as intense and difficult as those experienced by a woman in labor. But when the process is completed, tears of pain give way to tears of joy as a new life is brought into the world.

So also is the process of the believer. A seed of life is within us. The Spirit has caused us to be born anew. We are infants in Christ. We are in the process of childbirth. That can involve pain and sorrow. But sorrow gives way to joy. This is true not only in the birthing process. It is also true of the maturation process. The labor of child-bearing does not end when the baby exits the womb. They continue through their infancy with late nights of constant care and attention and continue through childhood in the entire process of growth and development. When the children finally arrive at mature adulthood, embracing the promises of Christ for themselves a transition occurs. The wise son makes his father glad. He has no greater joy than that his children are walking in the faith (3 John 1:4).

Such are our personal lives in Christ. So also is the entire flow of redemptive history. Even as Jesus compares the emotional life of the believer to a woman in labor, so also the Scriptures speak of the movement of redemptive history. Jesus tells us that the upheavals of the earth in wars, famines, and earthquakes are "the beginning of birth pangs" as we await the end (Mark 13:8). Paul tells us that the non-believer will face sudden destruction in the end as "labor pains come upon a pregnant woman" (1 Thess. 5:3).



But one day all this sorrow (personal and historical) will turn to joy. Tears will be wiped away. Sorrow will be no more. The difficult process of growth and maturation will be completed. We will be perfect in Christ.

The process has begun. Once the labor begins, nothing will stop it. God will bring us forth as children, the first-fruits of his creation. When it is completed we will no longer be absent from Christ in any sense. Both his flesh and ours will be in heaven with the fullness of the Spirit of glory within and around us. May this hope sustain us in our sorrows even as he mixed them with the heavenly joy of Christ.

#### #51 - Devotional Meditations on the Gospel of John 16:25-33

The previous sections of this Gospel have been filled with sobering predictions. The disciples will be hated by the world. Persecution and trial will come. They will be outcasts and orphans (at least for a time). Those who mistreat them will not be easily identifiable as enemies. Even as the devil masquerades as an angel of light, so those who do these things will believe they are doing a service to God.

In many respects, it seems as if their lives (and ours with them) will simply be one of constant defeat. No one enjoys defeat. A crowd may respectfully applaud a team that nobly competed in a contest. But he remains a loser. There can only be one winner. To the victor goes the glory and the spoils!

But the Christian life is not just one of defeat. Jesus here promises an ultimate victory. That is why the ancient Church coined the Latin phrase "Christus Victor" to describe Jesus in his exaltation and glory.

This victory is described here in one of Jesus's most memorable phrases: "In this world, you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world." The battle will be "lost" when Jesus is crucified, but the war will be won in his exaltation.

How does this victory manifest itself in the passage? There are many things to consider in the surrounding context. Consider the following brief points.

First, there is victory in the Father's love for Christ and his people. These two go together. The Father loves the Son. He has given a chosen people to the Son whom he has promised to redeem. Just as the Father loves the Son, so he loves those in the Son. The love of God for us is not dependent first and foremost on our love for God. Nor is it immediately based on anything in the relationship between God and man. It is founded on the Father's eternal, unchangeable love for the Son. Those whom God loves can be confident that in him they will have ultimate victory. The Father cannot stop loving those in Christ anymore than he can stop loving Christ himself.

Second, there is victory in the fact that Christ will be leaving the disciples. This seems paradoxical at first. How is there victory for the students through the absence of their teacher? Jesus tells us that he is leaving the world and going to the Father. But what is his purpose in the journey back to heaven? It is to procure the Holy Spirit and send us another comforter and advocate. Earlier Christ told them that if he did not leave them it would be of no advantage to them. The Holy Spirit will clothe them with power

from on high. This came in a special way on the apostles to make them conduits of special revelation to the church through mighty miracles and direct inspirations. He comes also to us to illuminate our minds and give us the ability to have victory over our sins in our sanctification. He begins the life of heaven today in our hearts and he purifies us and prepares us for God's heavenly presence. This is victory, indeed!

Thirdly, by his departure, he also gives us victory through an increased measure of access to God. To be sure, God's people have always had access to God through faith. But with Jesus's resurrection and ascension, he now appears in human flesh before the Father, always living to intercede for us. Thus Jesus tells us that "in that day you will ask in my name" (16:26). In this we are enabled to approach the throne of grace with greater boldness and confidence than the OT saints (see Heb. 4:16, 10:19-22). Indeed, in the next chapter, Jesus will give us an earthly preview of his priestly prayers, revealing the desires of his heart for his people before the Father. Just as God the Father will certainly hear Jesus, so he will hear us!

What an encouragement to pray to the Lord. We bear so many burdens and problems, yet the Lord is the one who can carry them. In prayer, we have access to Christ's victory even now while still on earth.

We need to be reminded of this victory. Our lives will be filled with sorrow and tribulation. We need to soberly consider these realities so that we are not surprised when they come. But neither should we be overwhelmed and forlorn.

Being a Christian means days of defeat and moments of failure. The fullness of God's work is not yet. He keeps us weak for a time that we might remain dependent in grace upon him.

But an end will come. Sorrow will turn to joy. The conquest will finish with a crown. Defeat will give way to total victory.

In the world we will have tribulation. But take heart! Christ has overcome the world!

#### #52 - Devotional Meditations on the Gospel of John 17:1-5

In the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus teaches his disciples how to pray in the "Lord's Prayer." In contrast to the Pharisees and the Gentiles, the prayer Jesus gives them is. The pretentious Pharisees offer long prayers as a show before the people (Matt. 23:4). The Gentiles also think that they will be heard by their gods due to their many words (Matt. 6:7). In Jesus's parable, the publican makes a brief petition in a plea for mercy, whereas the Pharisee goes on at length about himself and his comparatively greater righteousness (Luke 18:11-13).

The Wisdom literature reminds us that the wise will let their words be few before both men and God (Ecc. 5:2).

It may then come as a bit of a surprise to read in John 17 a relatively long prayer from the lips of Jesus. Longer times of prayer are certainly not sinful. Jesus often spent extended times in prayer privately

before God. At these times he not only prayed for others, but also for himself. He was a real human--like us in every way, except for sin. In his human nature, he drew upon heavenly resources with the same tools that we have. including prayer (cf. Hebrews 5:7).

In one respect, Jesus's prayers are a model for ours. But in another sense, Jesus's prayers are utterly unique. There are elements in them that we simply cannot repeat with our own lips. He is our example, living a life he calls us to emulate. But he also is our substitute, performing for us what we are unable to do.

This distinction is important when we come to John 17. This chapter is known as Jesus's "High Priestly Prayer." The word "Priest" is not used here to describe Jesus. But his intercession is clearly a priestly function. The priest not only pays for sin but also prays for sinners. The content of this prayer highlights Jesus's substitutionary work for us. While it also implicitly carries with it an example for us in a derivative fashion, in its essence it is unique to Jesus. Only he can fully pray this prayer before the Father.

Note the following elements in just the first five verses that draw attention to this fact. First, Jesus's prayer focuses on his fully manifesting and maintaining the glory of God in his life and work. All of us are to glorify God and enjoy him forever. But none of us fully possess this glory and none of us manifest it perfectly.

But Jesus does! In his human nature, he prays that the Father might "glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you" (17:1). God the Father answered this perfect prayer when the Son offered up a perfect, God-glorifying obedience to the Father. Jesus can say with unqualified confidence that "I have glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do" (John 17:4).

None of us can say this the way Jesus says it. Surely, with Paul, we could say that we have been generally faithful to God at the end of our lives (2 Tim. 4:7). But this is not a confession of perfection (see Paul's comments about his struggle with indwelling sin in Romans 7!). God accepts our imperfect pursuit of God's glory only because we are in the one who perfectly glorified God: Jesus, his Son.

But beyond this Jesus possesses God's glory in a way that is infinitely above a mere human. We glorify God by reflecting his nature in our created constitution as image bearers and also in our self-conscious activity. But Jesus shares in God's essential glory as the eternally-begotten Son of God: "And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed" (17:5). In the word become flesh, we have beheld the glory of the only-begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth (John 1:14). While we will one day be perfectly glorified as human beings, we will never possess the essential glory that is unique to the Godhead and the persons within it. Clearly, this prayer has unique content that only God's Son can take upon his lips.

Secondly, note also the Son's unique power to give eternal life to his people. He states that the Father "has given him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all you have given him" (17:2). The Jews knew from the OT Scriptures that God alone can forgive sins, and challenging Jesus for his claim of authority to do so (Mark 2:7). Even in this Gospel, the main charge against Jesus is that he is committing

blasphemy: "...you, being a man, make yourself God" (John 10:30). The charge of blasphemy is repeated at his trial and becomes the basis for his condemnation (Matt. 26:65).

The power to forgive sins and grant eternal life is a decision reserved for God alone. He has eternally chosen a distinct group of people from all eternity to be the recipients of these gifts. In fact, the particularity of redemption is an emphasis of the prayer. Jesus gives eternal life "to all whom you have given him" (17:2). He does not pray "for the world but for those whom you have given me" (17:9).

These acts of eternal election, the forgiveness of sin, and the granting of the gift of eternal life belong to God alone.

But Jesus claims these rights because he is God, and as the incarnate Son of God he has appropriately been granted this power when God bestowed upon him the name that is above every name, and all power and authority is entrusted to him.

As you pray to God this morning, remember that you do not pray on your own accord. You pray in and through the power and authority of Christ, our high priest in heaven. Just as the Father will undoubtedly and without question answer the prayers of Jesus, so he will hear and answer you. The Father's love can no more be taken away from you than it can be taken away from his Beloved son. Although our prayers are weak, the prayers of Jesus are strong. Although we bring nothing but sin and shame, Jesus brought us God's righteousness and glory for the forgiveness of our sins.

#### #53 - Devotional Meditations on the Gospel of John 17:6-19

The first part of Jesus's High Priestly Prayer focused on the direct relationship between God the Father and God the Son. Eternally they have shared an essential glory as members of the self-same Godhead. As we confess, there is one God in three persons, who are the same in substance and equal in power and glory. As the incarnate God-man and Messiah, Jesus has revealed God's glory to man. Light has come into the world. We have seen his glory, the glory of the only-begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth (John 1:14).

In this second part of Jesus's prayer, the content shifts to God's people. As with our prayers, Jesus begins with God. The "Lord's Prayer" also starts with "Our Father, who art in heaven." We pray, above all, that his name might be "hallowed" and that his kingdom and will would be done by his earthly creation. God is greater than any earthly thing. The creation is temporary, but God is eternal. He is our highest and greatest end.

But God also loves his people. Although they are infinitely lower than God, by grace he has deigned to elevate them to the highest place. Just as he loves his Son, so also he loves them. Our chief end is to glorify God. God has graciously made it his chief end to glorify us in our salvation as sinners.

How central is this aim and purpose?

Let us note from the passage that this purpose is not something that found its origin in history, but has its roots in eternity. Jesus tells us that God the Father chose a people out of the world, and then gave them to his Son (17:6). This number is fixed and complete. The total number chosen by the Father has been given to the Son: "All mine are yours and yours are mine" (17:10). Not one among this chosen group can be lost (17:12). Although Satan has asked to sift them like wheat, Jesus has prayed that their faith may not fail (Luke 22:31).

Even those whom God has not chosen are part of God's plan. There is not only election to life but also reprobation to death. Judas was a son of destruction, previously appointed by God as revealed in the OT Scriptures (which must be fulfilled). As Peter says, the unbeliever stumbles because he disobeys the word, which is what he was "destined" to do (1 Pet. 2:8),

Jesus's prayer, therefore, is not for every individual in the world, but only for those among his eternally chosen followers: "I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours" (John 17:9). Jesus prays only for the elect, just as he paid only for the elect. There is one Mediator and priest between God and man. He has a single, undivided purpose: to save his chosen people.

This means that whatever God's people face in this world, he will sustain them through it. He will give them all that they need.

He has given them revelation, manifesting God's name and glory to them. He has shared with them the words of God to guide them along the way. He has given them faith, that they might receive the Son of God. He has given them the promise of his protecting grace, which will cause them to infallibly persevered through every trial and maintain their faith to the end (17:12). In all these things he enables us to have access to the heavenly joy that is eternally shared by the persons of the Trinity which will be fulfilled in them (17:13). Although the world hates them and they must remain in it, he will protect them from the evil one. Although this world is corrupt, he will maintain their purity in the sanctification of the truth (17:17).

And how can we be certain of these things? How can we know that they can never be taken from us?

Note how they appear in this passage. They come as a prayer from the lips of Jesus. We may doubt that God will hear our prayers. There are reasons that might sound persuasive. We are sinners. There is nothing in our words that can add to God's glory or tell him anything that he doesn't already know.

But we cannot doubt that God will hear the prayers of his Son. His words are true and pure. His will is one with the Father. The unified purpose of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit cannot fail—even though the world, our flesh, and the devil war against it. With confidence and hope we can face every trial as he brings us safely to his heavenly kingdom.

#54 - Devotional Meditations on the Gospel of John 17:20-26

In this last section of Jesus's High Priestly Prayer, the main emphasis is on the unity of the church. One way to describe the ultimate goal of redemption is that we would reach the consummation of our union with Christ and the Triune God. At different times he repeats this emphasizing, praying that we may "all be one," "may become perfectly one," etc. (17:21, 22, 23).

Clearly, the unity of the church is important to Jesus. There is one Lord, one Faith, one baptism, and one God and Father of all. After all, he makes it the chief subject of the conclusion of the prayer he offers to God before he is betrayed and begins his final journey to the cross.

While it is one of the most important aspects of his prayer, the unity of the church is also one of the most commonly misunderstood and misused aspects of Scriptural teaching.

Whenever a serious doctrinal controversy arises you can predict that there will be those who will oppose the entire matter simply on the grounds that it disrupts the unity of the church. Certainly, we are admonished by the Scriptures not to quarrel over mere opinions. To be sure, there are lesser matters of doctrine that can easily be elevated in importance and become the cause of sinful controversy. While not insignificant in themselves, they are not matters that the church has made a test of fidelity.

But there are many times when good men have stood up for sound doctrine. They have opposed inconsistent, confusing, or muddled teaching only to be met with the charge of disrupting the unity of the church. Like Ahab to Elijah, they will be falsely charged with being "troublers of Israel." God calls us to a true peace and unity in the truth. The devil also loves unity, but of a very different kind: unified rebellion against God.

Here is the point: we cannot sacrifice God's truth on the altar of unity. Purity and unity must go together and inform one another. It informs both the matter of our faith (i.e. what we believe and defend) and also the manner of our conduct. Being right in doctrine does not give us the right to be unduly odious and harsh in our manner (see 2 Tim. 2:24-26). This does not mean that times may call for sharp words over serious errors (Gal. 1:6-9, 3:1, 5:12).

Jesus certainly prays that we may be unified. But how will this occur? They will be unified as they are gathered out from the world and planted in Christ. This separation takes place through a process of sanctification. And what did Jesus tell us about this? His prayer was this: "Sanctify them by the Truth. Thy word is truth" (17:17, cf. verse 19).

The unity of the church has many aspects. The one we "see" and experience is a personal unity among members of the church in their interactions and decisions. But there is a deeper unity of truth and confession which is the focus of Jesus's prayer. After all, Jesus has told us that the world hates us. We will be divided from them! We also know that men like Judas and other opponents will arise from within the church: there will be division here! There is a necessary division that will arise as we pursue God's will and hold fast to his truth. The light will shine in the darkness. The darkness will sometimes oppose it. Our job is to shine the light as brightly as possible and to bring it wherever God opens a door.

Unity and truth, therefore, go together. Pursuing unity by sacrificing truth is not true unity at all.

But what more does Jesus teach us about this unity in a more positive fashion? Note the following points.

First, this unity comes from God and not from man. While we can certainly walk faithfully in it and are called to promote it, it is not the end product of human efforts. It is a spiritual reality that Christians possess already now in Christ. Our task is to believe and trust in Christ. He has already unified all believers in the Holy Spirit. We are called to reflect that spiritual reality in our lives with other members and other like-minded churches.

Secondly, this unity is not only a product of God's power but consists of a direct connection to the unity within God himself. Note the parallel: we are one even as the Father and the Son are one. Jesus prays that we may be one "just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they may also be in us" (17:21). Later he adds: "...I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one" (17:23).

These words are deep and mysterious. God the Father and God the Son share a unique union within the eternal relationships of the Godhead. They are one in essence. The person of the Father has eternally shared his essence with his Son. The eternally begotten Son is the image of his Father. No human being can enter into this essential and personal union in the exact same way. We remain creatures and they remain the self-same God.

But through Christ, we do become adopted Sons of God. This intra-Divine fellowship occurs in a heavenly home. Through Christ, the door is opened for us to come alongside the Father and the Son and taste the joy of this unity. There remains a special table reserved for the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But the believer has fellowship with him in the seat of the guests, basking in the afterglow of the eternal blessedness of these relationships.

Thirdly, that is why this unity manifests itself in love. To be united to God and Christ is to be united to his love. And so he prays: "...that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them" (17:26). Jesus earlier told his disciples that the world will know that they are Christians by their love for one another. Too often we read this verse in a moralistic way. If we can just stop having troubles and love one another then we would be better witnesses to the world. While there is truth in this, when we think of love as something we can do better simply by trying harder, we have turned this into a life of salvation through works.

Love is from God. It can only be received through faith in Christ and restored fellowship from God. There is no love in the heart of the sinner. There is only judgment, guilt, condemnation, and death. If we are to love and manifest God's glory to the world, we must first access the overflow of God's love in union with him.

This is a prayer, after all. We don't pray for what is within our power but for that which is beyond our power. Jesus, who had all power, nevertheless prays for the help of his Father to bring this about. We too

need to pray that we might possess this unity and manifest the love that flows from it. In that act we will manifest our union with Christ, praying in him and with him for the true unity of his people: we in him and he in us, sanctified by the truth, manifesting his love, and awaiting the fulness of his glory.

#### #55 - Devotional Meditations on the Gospel of John 18:1-11

Jesus's life was a mixture of both suffering and glory. He died in weakness but reigns in power. He suffered humiliation but was raised in exaltation. From an earthly perspective, this is a strange mixture. One might as well attempt to combine fire and water. The two seem to be contradictory and incompatible.

Our lives in Christ follow the same pattern as we wrestle with both our sins and our sufferings. Both cause us to experience humiliation. Repentance requires us to humble ourselves before the Lord in confession and contrition. Even unjust suffering for the sake of Christ causes us to be humbled. Even when we are innocent, suffering in Christ forces us to depend less on ourselves and more on God.

But how do we make sense of these things in Jesus? He was, after all, not only Almighty God but also a wholly innocent man. He had power at all times to defeat his enemies and make a fully meritorious case before his accusers. This passage reminds us that one of the keys to understanding Jesus's sufferings and exaltation is his free willingness to undergo both of them. Although he had power to avoid his suffering, he did not use it. He trusted not in himself but in his Father to deliver him.

This last point may at first sound heretical. What do you mean that Jesus did not trust in himself? If he is God, with all power and authority, can he not trust in his divine power? If he is a perfect man, can he not claim the merits of his obedience?

Yes, he can! But what Scripture reveals to us is that although he can make such claims and appeal to them to save himself, he chooses not to do that. He willingly embraces humiliation and trusts his Father for his future exaltation (see 1 Pet. 2:23b, Heb. 5:7). He did this not out of absolute necessity: he could have easily saved himself. He did it freely for our sakes, that he might become our redeemer.

This principle is nowhere illustrated more powerfully than in John's description of the betrayal and arrest of Jesus. It is clear that Jesus endured these sufferings willingly. After all, he knew from the prophetic Scriptures that this had to take place. In a previous chapter, he even revealed which disciples (Judas) would betray him.

His disciples are also ready to defend him. Peter even drew his sword to protect his innocent Master, cutting off the right ear of the high priest's servant in defense of Jesus. As Luke 22:51 tells us, Jesus even touched Malkus's ear and heals him. While Jesus had even greater power than Peter to defend himself, he instead uses his power to save and heal his enemies. Clearly, he is freely embracing his suffering and crucifixion.



Note also the contrast between the power of Christ and the power of his enemies. Judas has inside knowledge of Jesus's location, a strategic power to ensure his arrest. He is also accompanied by a band of soldiers. A small band of ordinary men is no match for an army of the earth. Yet Jesus had an invisible army at his beck and call. He could have summoned twelve legions of angels so powerful their mere presence would have struck these men with terror (Matt. 26:53). But there is no angel deliverer for Jesus at his cross. Their presence would only come after his resurrection and exaltation (John 20:12, cf. 1:51). Although they ministered to him in his temptation at the start of his earthly sufferings and even up to the garden of Gethsemane (Matt. 4:11; Luke 22:43), there would none to help him at their climax in his crucifixion.

They come equipped with lamps, torches, and weapons in the night of spiritual darkness. But Jesus is the light of the world. Although he has no earthly weapon, his power far surpasses theirs.

Jesus's power is in his word. Did you note the subtle way this power is manifested in this passage? Note how Jesus questions them as to the purpose of their presence: "Whom do you seek?" Jesus initiates the process of his self-identification. In this way he actually helps them execute their plan. Willingly to suffering he goes.

But this is not because he lacks the power. Note his responses in verses 5 and 6. The ESV translates this phrase as "I am he." Literally the Greek is simply "I am." Does that remind you of anything? Jesus takes upon his lips the same phrase which God himself used when he revealed himself at Mt. Sinai to Moses. Jesus is the great "I AM." He is the self-existent, all-powerful God.

And notice what happens when he simply utters these words: "When Jesus said to them, 'I am,' they drew back and fell to the ground" (18:6). By his mere word, he shows the greatness of his power over his betrayer and his attackers. Although he could have easily used it to save himself, he embraces his sufferings so that he might save his people. As the text tells us, through these actions he fulfills his word: "Of those whom you gave me I have lost not one" (John 18:9).

Jesus's life is a mixture of suffering and glory, humiliation and exaltation, weakness and power. And are we not thankful that he freely embraced this life? He was under no compulsion, but in love endured the bitterness of betrayal and the darkness of death. Jesus earlier declared his great love for his disciples. How clearly he proves his love by becoming obedient to the point of death. How can we doubt the love of one who died for us? Selflessness can give no greater evidence.

But do we not also see here the pattern of our lives in Christ? We live in a world of sin. We sin against others and they sin against us. The temptation to anger, bitterness, and vengeance lie close at hand. Yet Jesus shows us that the way of God is to resist these things. Through Christ mercy triumphs over judgment. Enemies become friends through God's reconciling grace. Grace is greater than all our sins.

These things have greater power than all the forces of darkness. It is required that we obediently embrace them by faith, trusting not in our power but in God's. In them, we share in Christ's sufferings

and follow the pattern of his humiliation. But we can be assured that even as we share in his sufferings, we shall also share in his glory.

#### #56 - Devotional Meditations on the Gospel of John 18:12-27

Judas was a traitor. He was a son of destruction. While his disciples were among his chosen children, he was a son of destruction appointed to dishonor. Jesus's sufferings begin with a betrayal from among his own disciples. The sufferings that sting the most are not from the world but from those closest to us. After all, who really cares what a stranger thinks of us? The bitterness of betrayal is deep, as a former friend becomes a foe. Such was the pain and suffering of our Savior.

But Jesus's suffering does not stop there. Judas's betrayal was total and final. Peter, too, would similarly abandon and deny him. In fact, none of his disciples would stay at his side. He would go to the cross alone.

John 18:12-27 is this apostle's record of Peter's threefold denial of Jesus. It is interwoven with a series of scenes portraying Jesus's appearance before Annas and Caiaphas (the High Priest). It is clearly an eyewitness account, with John providing formally "anonymous" details about the event. I say "anonymous" because he refers to himself as "another disciple" even though there is absolutely zero doubt that it is John. We read descriptions of the different minor figures like a servant girl, officers, the location of doors, the temperature of the night, the warmth of the fire, and the posture of the people. These are details only an eyewitness would care to include.

Why the vivid detail? Clearly it is an important event that made a deep impression on their memories and their hearts. I am sure it was a source of great shame and agony for them. Few greater sins have been recorded in the pages of Scripture than the denial of Jesus by Peter and his disciples. Yet here it is recorded in vivid detail by a disciple himself.

What a clear contrast this passage draws between the Savior and sinners. Jesus speaks openly, freely acknowledging his identity and calling the entire public as witnesses to his words (18:20). His words and conduct were out in the open, available for all to see. It is only at this late hour that charges come against him from those with dubious motives. The testimony offered contradicts itself and carries within itself its own refutation. Yet Jesus does not shrink back but makes the good confession. Jesus is forthright and bold. He does not fail to acknowledge who he truly is.

Note especially his previous self-confession in the narrative of his betrayal. Two times Jesus declares to Judas and his band of soldiers: "I Am." For that is who he truly is! He does not deny his identity as the self-existent God of Israel now come in the flesh.

What a contrast to Peter. Peter, too, is asked to self-identify. He is known to those around him as one who has been with Jesus. They even bring forth evidence to solidify the case. A relative of Malkus-- whose ear Peter had cut off--remembered him as well (18:26). Who would forget such an event as the

cutting off of one's ear, especially when it involved a relative? There is no doubt either for the other characters in the narrative: Peter belongs to Jesus.

But Peter denies it. Just as Judas had predicted Judas's betrayal, so also he foretold Peter's denial (13:36-38). The rooster will not crow until you have denied me three times.

But note the language of the text. In English, it is translated as "I am not." The significance of this is easy to miss as this is a simple and straightforward phrase. By itself, it is one of the most common statements one can utter. But in narrative-context, it is packed with significance.

For what did Jesus say when the betrayer and a band of soldiers came seeking him? He did not deny but openly confessed: "I am." Two times he declared this, even though he could have denied it and fled.

By contrast, when Peter is asked whether he belongs to Jesus, two times he says: "I am not." Interestingly the phrase only explicitly appears twice, even though a third denial is tangentially referenced in summary by the narrator. Why? John wants to strengthen your sense of the parallel-contrast: Jesus affirms his identity (twofold "I am") while Peter denies it (twofold "I am not").

The denial of Peter reminds us that there is little substantial difference between Judas and Peter. It is not that one is better than the other. Both deny him, albeit in different ways. Both are the objects of Satan's desire. He enters directly into Judas and asks to sift Peter like wheat. Both are part of God's plan in terms of the suffering of Christ, that he should be the one man who dies for all his people (18:14).

What is the difference? It is not because one is more righteous than the other. They are both equally sinful.

The difference lies solely in the electing grace and powerful prayers of Jesus. Ironically, Jesus stands before the earthly high priest who will unjustly condemn him. In the previous chapter, he revealed himself to be the gracious High Priest who prays for the salvation of the very disciples who will soon sin against them.

As for Peter, Luke tells us the specific prayer Jesus offers for him: "Simon, Simon, behold, Satan has asked to sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers" (Luke 22:31-32).

We, brothers, are like Simon. Satan will afflict us. Temptation will come. We will often fail and fall short of God's will for us. Sometimes we will suffer shame and sorrow unjustly for the sake of Christ. Sometimes it will be so painful we will be filled with shame and weep bitterly.

What hope and comfort can we find in these moments? We must know that Jesus has prayed for us. Each chosen saint has not just the blessing of knowing that he is secure in God's unchangeable will, but also that Jesus is praying for them by name. Although the evil one may afflict them, he will not overcome them. He will lead them not into temptation and an ultimate fall but will deliver them from the evil one.

Are you afflicted with great sin or great suffering? There is a Savior revealed here who has borne them both. He has overcome condemnation with forgiveness, sin with grace, and judgment with mercy. As with Peter, so with us. With a threefold denial, Peter abandoned him before the High Priest. But with a threefold restoration, Jesus restored him as a shepherd of the sheep (John 21:15-19). With these words, he gave him grace and strength to faithfully follow him. What he did for Peter he will also do for us, who love the Savior who loved us and gave himself for us.

#### #57 - Devotional Meditations on the Gospel of John 18:28-32

Having stood trial before Annas and Caiphas, Jesus is now handed over to Pilate. The false priests condemned the true High Priest. Now God the judge stands before a human court in the figure of Pilate. The Jews appeal to the Gentiles to execute their judgment and finish their work.

This overall setting is quite revealing. The Jews prided themselves in the fact that they were God's "pure" people. The Gentiles were their sworn enemies. Their main "charge" against Jesus is that he would destroy their identity, nation, and way of worship. Yet in their move to Pilate, they show their true allegiance--to this world and the powers of the present age.

The scene with Pilate will extend into the next chapter. We here limit ourselves to the details of John 18:28-32. One key theme of this section of the narrative is the contrast between the innocence of Jesus and the hypocrisy of the Jews. Paul warns Titus about the divisive man who carelessly flings accusations. He tells him to warn him twice, but after that have nothing to do with him because he is "warped and sinful; [he is] self-condemned." He previously identified such a person as among those who "claim to know God, but by their actions deny him" (Tit. 1:15). To the pure all things are pure, but to those who are corrupted and do not believe, nothing is pure, both their minds and consciences are defiled.

Paul might as well have been describing the Jewish leaders who brought Jesus to Pilate. Although he is completely pure and innocent, their corrupt minds twist his words and actions to that which is impure. By their hypocrisy, they carry within themselves the very evidence to refute their wildly inaccurate claims about Jesus. Even Pilate (a pagan Gentile) can see through their charade.

We have already noted the hypocrisy of the Jews appealing to a Gentile court to do their bidding. Note the other ways the Jewish leader's hypocrisy appears in this section.

First, note how they refuse to enter the governor's headquarters so that they would not become ceremonially unclean (18:28). Pilate had to go outside the building to meet with them. Their concern followed the pattern of Jewish tradition which added extra layers of rules to preserve their ceremonial purity. But what rank hypocrisy! They take extra steps to maintain their external purity while engaged in the most heinous act of impurity: condemning the sinless Son of God.

Secondly, we also see their hypocrisy in their desire to maintain this ritual purity: that they might participate in the Passover (18:28). Behold, before them is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of

the world. The true, spotless Passover lamb is right before them, and yet they condemn him as evil. The reality is right before them, but they run to the shadow (cf. Col. 2:17). How fitting! Their kingdom is one of darkness. So run from the light that they might hide in the night. Yet they cannot conceal their misdeeds.

Thirdly, they also openly acknowledge their lack of authority to put him to death. Pilate at first rightly refuses to be a judge in Jesus's case. They have no sound accusation against Jesus that would be worthy of death. In the course of their discussion, the Jews acknowledge that "It is not lawful for us to put anyone to death" (18:31). Yet a short time later, the Jews will crucify him (19:16). Their earlier words condemn their later actions. As Paul said of such men, they are warped and sinful--self-condemned.

Fourthly, the Jews' hypocrisy is also seen in their attempt to condemn Jesus by mere accusation. Charges alone even when false can do great damage to another's reputation. That is why they should not be done flippantly or carelessly. The world knows this and uses accusation as a weapon to destroy. This is what the Jews did to Jesus.

Notice how Pilate asks the Jews to state their charge against Jesus: "What accusation do you bring against him" (18:29)? And what is their answer? Their only charge against Jesus is that they have a charge against Jesus. And it is a serious charge: he is doing evil and worthy of death.

What utter absurdity! One cannot justly condemn a man simply because he has been charged with a crime even if the charge is clearly stated and serious. Evidence must be brought forth that establishes the charge. Much less can we condemn a man due to an unknown charge the plaintiff refuses to disclose! The Jewish leaders violate due process in a way that would make even the Pagans blush with embarrassment. Indeed, Pilate sees right through their charade.

The Jews' hypocrisy leads to injustice, even as the embryo of their envy gives birth to murder.

Yet Jesus willingly submits himself to these things. The just judge submits to a Kangaroo court that the Scriptures might be fulfilled.

And these things were all necessary for him to be our Savior. For what did he do on the cross except to give himself--the just for the unjust--that he might bring us to God? It was our sin, hypocrisy, and evil that led him to the cross (not just that of the Jews). Indeed, if we do not see the reflection of our sinful selves in them, we are missing part of the point of the passage.

The forgiveness of our sins flows from the very thing Jesus suffers here. He is innocent and pure, we are insolently impure. He suffered these things to take our sin, guilt, and shame and become the spotless Passover Lamb.

Even as we may mourn the injustices he suffered, let us rejoice that he freely endured them for our sakes. Let us embrace this Savior by faith who loved us and gave himself for us. And may we patiently

endure any unjust suffering we experience in him. Even as we suffer with Jesus, we know that we will reign with him.

#### #58 - Devotional Meditations on the Gospel of John 18:33-40

So far in John 18, Jesus has been betrayed by a disciple, denied by another, and unjustly arrested and tried before a wicked tribunal. As great as these trials are, they are but the beginnings of birth pangs. Now he stands before Pilate to be interrogated.

At this point, Pilate is puzzled. He clearly sees Jesus's innocence and the Jew's hypocrisy. There is great irony in the Gentile ruler honoring justice and due process in a way that surpasses God's own people. Pilate is obviously not without his failures, but at least these misdeeds are committed reluctantly. It is a shame for the church to have to go to court before unbelievers to settle their disputes. How much more when the courts of the world honor justice better than the courts of the church!

Pilate also formally honors the Creator in acknowledging the different spheres of authority established by God. As a civil leader, he has no authority over the Jews as it relates to their religious customs: "Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law" (John 18:31). Pagan Pilate is a more righteous judge than the Jews!

Pilate at least gives Jesus a hearing. He asks him directly, "what have you done?" He questions him: "Are you the king of the Jews?" The questions seek to probe the only possible crime that may be in the works: insurrection against Rome. The claim to Messianic kingship did carry with it the possibility of an attempted Roman overthrow. There were religious zealots among the Jews who essentially viewed the coming Messiah as a political revolutionary, who would take up arms in rebellion and destroy the Roman forces. So Pilate explores the possibility.

But Jesus's answer clearly negates the possibility: "My kingdom is not of this world." The weapons of his servants are not swords and clubs. They are the spiritual weapons of the word of God and truth. Jesus himself states that his servants have not been fighting. Even when one of them did (i.e. Peter cutting off Malkus's ear) he reversed their efforts by healing the wounded.

Pilate recognizes immediately that Jesus's ambitions are not for earthly power. His claim to kingship is clearly a "religious" and "spiritual" one. Pilate knows enough about Jewish culture and tradition to recognize that Jesus is not among the political zealots. While I don't think it is right to identify Jesus among a particular Jewish sect, Pilate clearly sees that he does not belong to the political-revolutionary strand of their cultural traditions.

He comes to speak about the "truth"--the heavenly revelation of God's eternal kingdom.

While he plainly discerns Jesus's non-revolutionary position, he also mocks it with a question: "What is truth?" Pilate is a politician who knows only one reality: "power." At this point, he believes he is shrewd enough to manipulate the politics of the situation and outmaneuver the Jews.

So he comes up with an ingenious proposal. He offers the Jews a prisoner release. To keep the Jews placated, the Romans had a custom to release one prisoner at the time of the Passover. This was a shrewd maneuver. Releasing a prisoner meant allowing a Roman threat to go free. But it also meant that the people would look at them as more benevolent and be less inclined to rebel. The Romans were masters of balancing their tyrannical ambitions with the realities of man's rebellious spirit.

So he offers them a choice. They can have Jesus or Barabbas. "Barabbas" means "Son of the father" (Bar-Abbas). He was a convicted insurrectionist who was found guilty of murder. Why was this a shrewd move? This was the very charge the Jews implicitly brought against Jesus. While Barabbas was obviously guilty, Jesus was obviously innocent. For the Jews to accept Barabbas would be the height of hypocrisy and expose their inconsistencies. Surely no earthly-minded rulers would freely allow themselves to look so inconsistent and have such a blatant double standard!

Yet the Jews take Barabbas. They accept the false son of the father that they might kill the true Son of the Father. As the old hymn memorably states: "...a murderer they save, the Prince of Life they slay."

But do you see the life pattern of Jesus? He lives not for this world, but for the world to come. That means that he embraces unjust suffering from the rulers of this age that he might reign in the age to come. This is not a grand exception to our lives in Christ. This is the regular pattern that we should expect. We live not to transform this world, although we pray for just rulers, laws, and courts in our nation and others. Our hope is not for improved earthly conditions--although we thank God when they come. Instead, we look for a heavenly kingdom.

This is the key to finding strength through the trials of our Christian life. The path of Christ is narrow and hard. But it leads to a glorious end: eternal life. When we live our Christian lives with the expectation we will have earthly peace and joy with no troubles, we are bound to be disappointed. This kind of mindset is easier to fall in than you might think. Many have the expectation that while their lives in relationship to the world may face trouble that their spiritual relationships will be a place free from such things. The world will be a place of trouble, but their spiritual relationships will only be a refuge. When troubles arise in their Christian lives they are not prepared and may become discouraged or disillusioned.

Let us remember that the most bitter sufferings Christ experienced were from his own people (the Jews) and from his own disciples (i.e. the betrayal of Judas and the denial of Peter). While our Christian relationships can and should be the source of great encouragement, there will be times when even this blessing and support is taken from us. At such times we must, like Jesus, put our trust solely in God. Earthly kingdoms and friendships will fail us. But the friendship and kingdom we have in Christ will never fail.

#59 - Devotional Meditations on the Gospel of John 19:1-16

John has taken pains to highlight the contrast between the innocence of Jesus and the rank hypocrisy of the Jews. This was so blatant that even Pilate--a Gentile ruler--saw through their shenanigans. He only

attempted to release Jesus but concocted a plan that seemed foolproof. The choice between Barabbas and Jesus put them on the horns of a dilemma. If they accepted Barabbas they would expose their inconsistency and also potentially open themselves to the charge of supporting insurrection--the very charge they were leveling against Jesus. Jesus, on the other hand, remains relatively silent. Like a lamb led to the slaughter, so he opens not his mouth. These themes are developed further in the passage. The Jews actually turn the tables on Pilate, manipulating his political instincts to force him to hand Jesus over for crucifixion.

The passion narratives are deep wells of revelation. Volumes of books and countless sermons have been preached dissecting them line by line. Here we share but a few thoughts on parallel phrases uttered by Pilate in 19:5 and 14: "Behold, the man!" and "Behold, your king."

The phrases seem pretty straightforward on the surface. But we know from John's comments on the words of Caiaphas that sometimes they carry a deeper (even prophetic meaning) beyond what the speaker intends (John 11:50, 18:14). I think that is quite true here.

First, note the significance of the phrase "Behold, the man!" The English translation transparently reflects the underlying Greek. The "behold" is clearly for emphasis. You may recall when John the Baptist introduced Jesus, he also used this word: "Behold, the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (1:29, 36). This is obviously a significant revelation regarding the identity of Jesus. As it was then, so it is now.

The phrase "Behold, the man!" as ascribed to Jesus points to his identity as the second Adam. Throughout John's Gospel, he makes statements that directly connect us back to the beginning of creation. Through Jesus, as the logos all things were made (John 1:1-4). In the miracles, we see the reflections of his supernatural creative power intruding again into the course of ordinary providential history. In the healing of the blind man, we see a direct reference to the details of the creation narrative. Just as God formed man from the dust of the ground, so Jesus uses mud to reopen the eyes of the blind man (John 9:6). John wants us to view Jesus through the lens of the creation narrative.

When we do that with the passage, what do we see? We see Jesus as the second Adam. Adam in the garden was a king who had dominion over the creatures. The second Adam is also a king, but no one acknowledges his authority. When the first Adam sinned, he was cursed with futile labor that would bring painful thorns. His body would suffer until it gave in to death. Behold the second man now bearing this curse with a painful crown of cursed thorns on his head! The first Adam would be joined by a suitable helper--a bride to carry his burden with him. Behold, the second Adam abandoned and betrayed by his bride in the denial of Peter and betrayal of Judas. The first man had a Sabbath rest held out to him as the end of his days of labor under God. The only rest for the last man will be found in the tomb after he succumbs to death.

Indeed, here we behold the man: the second Adam come to redeem fallen mankind. At this moment, the serpent has arisen again to strike his heel and bring him to defeat. Yet Jesus will crush his head when his sufferings transform into exaltation and glory.



Indeed, Pilate is right! When we see Jesus in his sufferings we behold the man--the second Adam in whom we have salvation.

But there is a second phrase uttered by Pilate to describe Jesus: "Behold, your king!" (19:14).

As noted above, the first Adam was a royal figure, so there is clearly a connection between these general ideas in the strands of Scriptural teaching. But in the immediate context of John the statement that Jesus is the King of the Jews stands in more proximate contrast to the statements of the Jewish leaders.

At this time in history, Jewish identity was shaped to a huge degree by their Messianic expectations. While they may strategically pursue peaceful relations with Rome, this was but a temporary arrangement. There were some sects that did have a more "spiritual" view of God's reign in the lives of Israelites, many looked to the coming Messiah as a political revolutionary who would remove the dominance of Rome and restore Israel's nation to its earthly, Davidic glory.

Yet Jesus has made clear that his kingdom is not of this world. Even before Pilate (who wishes to set him free) he restates this principle in acknowledging God's higher authority (19:11).

But the Jewish leaders fully reveal their earthly-minded approach. If God does not give them the earthly Messiah they desire, they will turn to another. In fact, if heaven's Savior takes away their earthly privileges, they will embrace their enemy. And so the Jews declare: "We have no king but Caesar!" (19:16).

In one sense these words are false. God is the king of his people. But in another sense, they are quite true. Israel was to put no confidence in princes and trust in God alone (Psalm 146:3-5). Indeed, even their first desire for an earthly king springs from earth-centered motives which God corrects (1 Samuel 8). So now these things come to their culmination in the rejection of the Son of God and second Adam. The Jews crucify their own king!

But we who believe see our true Savior. He is the true and second man who will bear our curse and crush the serpent. He is our true and glorious king. He first became a suffering servant, and only later began his resurrected reign. Although we suffer with him, we also have redemption in him. His cross puts to death the old Adam of our flesh and his Spirit enlivens the new man within us. Although the world rejects his reign, we bow our knees before the name that is above every name. Christ is our man. We embrace him, sufferings and all, that we might reign with him in a kingdom not of this world which will never fade away.

#60 - Devotional Meditations on the Gospel of John 19:17-27

The second half of John's Gospel has been intensely focused on preparing the disciples a single impending event: the crucifixion of Christ. In this passage, we finally arrive at the climactic moment.

What initially strikes us is how little John tells us about the emotional impact of this event on Christ or on those around him. The entire narrative is described in a fairly "matter of fact" fashion. Although crucifixion was an excruciatingly painful manner of execution, the actual event is described in a mere four words (only three in Greek): "There they crucified him."

Remember that John has not been shy in revealing to his readers the emotional and inner life of our Lord. In this narrative, we have been told when Jesus was tired, when he was deeply troubled when he was filled with compassion, and when he was moved to tears. The other Gospels also make similar points, including Jesus's statement that he "was sorrowful to the point of death" (Matt. 26:38). Yet in this passage, there is almost no reflection on this aspect of the events.

Why is this? Surely the suffering was very great. The physical pain itself is hard to imagine. The nails are hammered into his hands and feet. His body has already been beaten by the soldiers. The crown of thorns on his head added internal insults to his outward injuries. There is no doubt that the injustice of the trial left him feeling deeply wounded, as did the later mockery of his true claim to be king of the Jews (only exacerbated here by Pilate's sign). The casting of lots for his clothes (among many other things) added to his sufferings in that it revealed the cold indifference of the participants to his deep pain and agony.

Yet John tells us nothing of these matters. The pain and sufferings were no doubt swirling within the soul of Jesus. But we are provided no window into them in this passage.

Why is this? It is hard to confidently know the reason why something is not included. But I think when we compare it to what is included, we are in a better position to understand what John is communicating in the way he crafts his narrative.

Note how after the crucifixion, John describes the presence of his mother and other women at the scene. Note especially the description John gives of himself: "the disciple whom he loved" (19:26).

While this is the typical way John refers to himself throughout the Gospel, its presence in the narrative at this point is special. Although John certainly had much to say about the depth of Jesus's sufferings, he has only one thing to say about the heart and soul of Jesus: it is one of love towards his disciples. That love is concretely expressed in the immediate context by his entrusting the care of his own mother to John.

Here is the point John is making: as great as Jesus's sufferings were, his love for his people was even greater. It was a gracious love that moved God to send Christ into the world to save us: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son" (John 3:16). Christ's purpose was to bring his chosen people in the fulness of fellowship in God's eternal love as expressed between the Triune persons: "I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, I and in them" (John 17:26).

As John later says in his letter, "Love is from God." Here on the cross, we see God's selfless and perfect love manifested. Although Christ experienced great pain, agony, and sorrow his love for us overcame it all. For love's sake he endured the cross to bring us to the Father.

The atonement is not merely an example of love. It is a real and proper substitution: the righteous for the unrighteous. It is heresy to deny this. But it is at the same time truly an expression of God's love. In fact, its substitutionary character is the only true foundation for its character as an act of love. His love for us was so great he willingly endured hell in our place, suffering unspeakable agonies.

At times, our sufferings in Christ will also be great. Indeed, as Paul says, if it were only for this life that we have hope in Christ we are of all men the most to be pitied. When we are overwhelmed by our sufferings, let us remember Christ's love. Greater is he who is in us than he who is in the world. His grace is greater than our sins, and his love is deeper than our agonies.

#### #61 - Devotional Meditations on the Gospel of John 19:28-30

Jesus has been crucified. But his work is not yet complete. He must hang until he can truly declare "it is finished."

But what exactly is finished? Perhaps he is referring to the sum total of his sufferings. In this sense, "it is finished" means that his entire humiliation is complete. It is true in the "active" sense that he is no longer consciously enduring suffering and has succumbed to death. But his estate of "humiliation" still has some outstanding elements, such as the piercing of his side and his three-day burial.

But I think the phrase is to be taken in a more narrow sense. This is indicated by 19:28. In this verse we hear John (in the narrator's voice) tell us that Jesus "knew that all now was finished" and made a final declaration "to fulfill Scripture." Thus, the "finishing" Jesus speaks of refers to all the elements of suffering and humiliation that would lead up to his death.

Jesus had a human nature that was capable of learning--and in fact, did grow in learning (see Luke 2:52). In his divine nature he knew everything and obviously could not learn anything. In his human nature, there were things he openly said he did not know (i.e., the day and hour of his return--Matt. 24:36). His knowledge was absolutely perfect for every stage of his human development. Growth in knowledge does not necessarily imply sin in the early phases of the process. Adam was created perfect but still learned about the creation as he lived in it and observed God's handiwork. As for Jesus, there was never any sinful ignorance or errors in him. But his human nature was finite, including his mind. If it was not he did not have a human nature like us in all respects except for sin.

This means that Jesus knew from reading the prophetic Scriptures all the things that were written about him. He had perfect insight into what they revealed about him--including his sufferings. Jesus knew each excruciating step in the process but freely gave himself to them knowing that the Scriptures and his Father's will had to be fulfilled.

We don't know the specifics of our future. In many ways, I think that is a blessing. Looking back on the last twenty years of my Christian life, if I had known some of the things I would have had to endure it would have made it a lot more difficult to leave a life of ease and embrace the call of Christ. It is, after all, a call to pick up a cross and follow him. We know generally that there are sufferings in store for us (the Scripture reveals that to us), but we do not know how they will manifest themselves.

But Jesus knew all the details!

But there is something special and specific that is connected to the finishing of Christ's suffering that is worth a few more moments to consider. Notice how he must first receive a drink of sour wine before he can utter a final statement. This is in direct fulfillment of Psalm 69:21. It is pretty clear that the wine did not give Jesus's body any actual nourishment. Its purpose was solely to allow Jesus to have a voice to speak his final word. Crucifixion often leads to dehydration as well as asphyxiation. It was a grueling and cruel death. In Psalm 69:21 the "sour wine" mentioned by the Psalmist stands in poetic parallelism to "poison" food. Its purpose was simply to allow Jesus to speak.

But note the profound irony of the statement he utters. He who is the water of life now declares "I thirst!" Earlier in this Gospel Jesus also "cried out" (note the parallel to John 20) regarding thirst and water: "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink...and out of his heart will flow rivers of living water" (John 7:37).

Jesus empties himself of this life-water that he might give it to us. Jesus thirsts while he bears our sins, that those who hunger and thirst for righteousness might be filled (Matt. 5:6).

But note this final detail. After he thirsts on the cross, look at what happens when his side is pierced. When the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, "at once there came out blood and water" (19:34). He was emptied of water that it might flow from his crucified flesh to fill us with life. He shed his blood to cover our sins. On the cross, there was a great exchange: our death for his life, our sin for his righteousness, his purity for our uncleanness, his water for our thirst.

On the cross, this exchange was truly finished. Now he lives in heaven, never to thirst again. From his throne, he declares: "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment" (Revelation 21:6).

#### #62 - Devotional Meditations on the Gospel of John 19:31-37

The Bible records both the acts and words of God for our redemption. These two go together. The acts accomplish something for us that we cannot do for ourselves. The words interpret the acts and apply their significance to us. The two go together and are interwoven. The words come to us through the active work of God. The word is the sword of the Spirit by which he accomplishes his plan. In this sense, the words of God are part of his actions. Likewise, the actions are not mute or void. As the saying goes, sometimes actions speak louder than words!

John 19:31-37 largely records the acts that follow the crucifixion of Jesus. Even that which refers to the "words" of the characters only appears indirectly through the voice of the narrator. Rather than letting us hear the direct voices of the people involved, he simply summarizes the import of their dialogue. This stands in direct contrast to the earlier part of the passion narrative where the words of Jesus and other characters are directly quoted. The previous text is literally saturated with direct quotations and is largely driven by this dialogue.

Why the shift in emphasis? As a narrator, John has silenced our ears from hearing the direct voices of the characters. He has done so for a reason. There is a different voice he desires to make the focus of our attention: the prophetic Scriptures.

These Scriptures both predicted the details of Christ's sufferings, but also provide an interpretation of the significance of his work for us. In what way does this particular passage help us understand the significance of Christ's death?

First, there is the idea that in Christ's death, he brings us to our final Sabbath rest. Jesus's burial and three-day "rest" in the grave took place largely during the weekly Sabbath. What is more, this particular Sabbath was a "high day," in that the weekly Sabbath coincided with the special Sabbath of one of the major feast days (more on this latter point in a moment). Jesus's death, therefore, brings us to the consummation of God's plan for Adam in the garden. The Sabbath was to be a day of life in which man would enter into God's rest after the completion of his heavenly labors. Sin transformed this principle of rest. Instead of reaching consummation in Sabbath-life, man would find his bitter end by resting in the dust of death (Gen. 3:19). In his Sabbath-burial Jesus absorbs this curse and opens anew the path to God's consummate Sabbath rest.

Secondly, various details also point us to Christ's fulfillment of the prophesied Passover Lamb. The whole scene temporally transpires during the Passover week, a fact about which John has given us frequent reminders. Likewise, the unbroken legs of Jesus are given a significant amount of attention, including the fact that it failed to occur despite the intentional planning of the soldiers. They broke the legs of the other two, but not Jesus (who has already died). This is a direct fulfillment of a passage of Scripture (Ex. 12:14, Num. 9:12). It should be no surprise that these passages are both describing the typical Passover lamb. The Scripture must be fulfilled! In this, we see not only a general confirmation of God's predictive prophecy in general, but we also learn of the character of Jesus's work. The Passover Lamb was a substitute, protecting Israel from the angel of death. Although they deserved execution, God provided a lamb in their place. It is not the blood of bulls and goats, but only the flesh of Jesus that can cleanse us from our sins.

Finally, we also read of the fulfillment of Scripture in the piercing of Jesus's side. In our last devotional, we noted the ironic contrast between Christ's thirst on the cross and the outflow of water from his pierced side. Jesus thirsts for water on the cross so that our thirst for grace might be quenched with his water.

But we also read that this event took place to fulfill Scripture. Zechariah 12:10 is directly referenced. The context of that prophecy tells us even more about its significance. It describes a time when God will pour out a "spirit of grace and pleas for mercy" when they mourn for "him whom they have pierced." Later it describes this as a time when "there shall be a fountain opened for the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, to cleanse them from sin and uncleanness" (13:1).

Here on the cross, we see the fulfillment of this Scriptural prophecy. Although they do not mourn now, a day will come when the Spirit of grace and mercy will flow to them. Christ's Spirit and blood will be savingly applied to them, and they will be cut to the heart and repent for their sins (the whole scene is described in Acts 2 on the Day of Pentecost).

And so the Spirit comes to us through his word this day, even as he did in days of old. He holds out to us Christ crucified to be received by faith. We must embrace him in his shame and suffering, following in his path. But we can also be certain that the Scriptural promises that were fulfilled in him will also be true and certain for us.

In Christ, we have our Sabbath rest. We are freed from condemnation and living by the "works of the law" and a futile attempt to obtain righteousness thereby. In Christ we have our substitute, who perfectly obeys the law in our place, absorbing our death in his vicarious death. In him, we have cleansing through his blood and a Spirit of grace and pleas for mercy.

And we know that God will hear those pleas, even as he heard the pleas of Jesus. For even as Scripture foretold his cruel death, it also certainly revealed his glorious resurrection.

#### #63 - Devotional Meditations on the Gospel of John 19:38-42

The burial of Jesus is one of the most overlooked aspects of his humiliation. But it has been a distinct article of faith in our Christian confession from Apostolic times. While the death and resurrection of Jesus are obviously of paramount importance, the burial is also highly important. When the Apostle Paul summarizes those matters which are of first importance, he includes the fact of his burial: "...that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on third day..." (1 Cor. 15:3-4). Its inclusion in the early ecumenical creeds is therefore more than justified.

But what is its significance? Most basically, the burial of Jesus testifies that he truly died. The burial involves not simply the laying to rest of Jesus inside a tomb, but also the whole process by which the body was prepared for its final rest. Hence we read in this passage (and the other Gospels) of the various steps in that process and the material used to prepare the body. The body is bound in a linen burial cloth, and roughly seventy-five pounds of spices (myrrh and aloes) are used. John explicitly notes that they followed the traditional burial customs of the Jews.

This evidence ensures that Jesus's death was no hoax. Nor was the assessment of the soldiers on the cross (who did not break his legs) or the crowds a mistake. Jesus really died. His body was carefully handled and prepared for burial in a way that left absolutely no doubt that Jesus had truly died.

Without Jesus's true death, there is no forgiveness of our sins. With his death, there is a flow of blood and water to cleanse us from our sins. There is a fountain of grace and pleas for mercy open to all who would come to him in faith. Jesus's burial helps us overcome our doubts and lack of assurance: Jesus really died for us, and hence our sins are really forgiven.

Elsewhere the Bible brings Jesus's burial into view to bring confirmation of these facts regarding the application of Christ's death and resurrection to us in our salvation. For example, in Romans 6 Paul discusses our sanctification through union with Christ. He appeals to the external sign of this union in our baptism. Note how he connects this to Christ's burial: "We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life" (Rom. 6:4). Note how the burial is brought into view as an implication of our union with Christ in his death. Just as the burial confirms the fact of Christ's true death, so our union with him confirms that our old man has been crucified and our body of sin brought to nothing. The old man is truly dead. So also the new man is really coming to life. The objective burial of Christ is the foundation for our assurance of its subjective application.

Interestingly, we see a personalized application of this fact in John's narrative in the figure of Nicodemus. We conclude with a few thoughts on his presence at Jesus's burial.

Nicodemus appears three times in the Gospel. Each appearance shows a gradual transition from darkness to light. In John 3 he comes to Jesus "at night" to question him, failing to understand how to enter God's kingdom through a new birth from above. At this point, he is still shrouded in darkness. In John 7:50, he stands before the Jewish leaders to defend Jesus. He prophetically objects to the fact that they seek to judge Jesus before giving him a hearing. Their unjust process would find its consummation at the death of Jesus. Nicodemus is moving from darkness to light! His old man is being buried with Christ, even as the new man is coming to life in him.

Finally, Nicodemus appears here at the burial of Jesus. The hour of darkness has just had its victory. But Nicodemus is now in the light. Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus were both "secret" disciples for fear of the Jews (19:38). Both were men of means and wealth. We are directly told elsewhere that Joseph was a rich man (Matt. 27:57). Hence he gave Jesus an expensive tomb for his burial. Nicodemus's procurement of the expensive load of burial spices indicates that the same is true of him.

Both now see that their earthly riches are nothing. Nor are their gifts anything compared to what they have just beheld. Their generosity is nothing compared to the one who has just died. Jesus is the one who was truly rich but became poor, that through his poverty they might become rich. Jesus exchanged his eternal life for their eternal death, their sin for his righteousness, his glory for their shame. The first man was formed in the garden of God with gold, precious stones, and various riches. The last man was crucified near a garden (John 19:41), fulfilling the words of God's curse on the first man: "...dust you are and to dust you shall return" (Gen. 3:19). Adam had flowers and riches in his garden. Christ had thorns and poverty in his.

But even as the burial confirms his death, it also anticipates his resurrection. Spring follows winter. Sunrise comes after sunset. After darkness there is light. Jesus is buried at night, but he will be raised in the light of dawn (20:1). Then the riches of his precious blood will be proclaimed to the nations, and all who believe will be washed in the water and blood that flows from his riven side.

Today we enter into a preview of this Sabbath rest of Christ's glory. We receive riches that surpass anything this world has to offer. Payment for sin has been made. His precious blood has been shed. It is confirmed, signed, sealed, and delivered by his burial. Its power is at work in us. Our flesh is crucified, dead, and buried. We now must walk in the newness of his resurrection life.

#### #64 - Devotional Meditations on the Gospel of John 20:1-10

John 20 marks a key transition in the Gospel of John. One phase of Jesus's life is giving way to another. His humiliation ends and his exaltation begins. The darkness is fading away, and the dawn of new light is shining. Death gives way to life.

Another key element in this narrative is the shift from the very public execution of Jesus to some more private scenes involving only a few key disciples. Mary Magdalene arrives first (more on her in the next devotional), but Peter and John quickly follow. Part of John's purpose is to emphasize the need for a personal faith in Christ apart from the affirmation of "the crowd." Even as these disciples stumbled over the pressure of public shame and suffering, so now they receive a private affirmation of Christ's true identity and exalted glory. Peter personally and individually denied Jesus. John, too, abandoned his Savior. Both receive access to personal and direct eyewitness evidence to restore their faith and help them overcome their blindness.

Indeed, this first "resurrection" scene provides ample evidence to undergird the real resurrection of Jesus Christ. Obviously, the actual resurrection appearances of Jesus (seen later) are the strongest pieces of evidence to support this claim. But this initial passage detailing the empty tomb lays the groundwork to dismiss other theories some might advance to explain this fact away. The previous passage already served this function in that it detailed the highly involved preparation and burial process which confirmed that Jesus had truly died. If one cannot dismiss the evidence that Jesus is alive after his crucifixion, one may resort to claiming that he never really died. Clearly, that is not the case.

Note first John's note about the timing of the scene. Mary Magdalene arrives first and Peter and John arrive later. This occurred just before dawn. Collating the other statements of the synoptic Gospels, it appears that Mary arrived just before daybreak, but enough time had passed that it was clear daylight when Peter and John arrived. Not only does this provide three witnesses to the same event (sufficient in a court of law to establish a legal fact), it also ensures that the lack of light could not be used as an objection to the validity of Mary's testimony. Peter and John had sufficient daylight to see clearly how the tomb had been left. This matched Mary Magdalene's description.

Still further, the fact that John lists Mary as the first witness also strikes against the idea that the narrative of Christ's resurrection appearances is simply a made-up story. During this age, the testimony



of a woman was not admissible in court according to Roman tradition. Listing Mary as the first witness would not have been a wise choice for someone crafting a lie to persuade their neighbors. The very first statement would have created a large hurdle to overcome. The fact that John records this fact shows, therefore, that his paramount concern is the actual historical events that occurred--even if this was to his hurt as an evangelist.

The fact that John and Peter had a footrace to get to the tomb also reinforces the accuracy of the narrative. There was not a long period of time between Mary's arrival at the tomb and the follow-up visit by Peter and John. The details of the apostolic sprint bear the marks of an eyewitness account. John got there first, but didn't go in until Peter got there. Then both go into the tomb together to confirm the facts as joint witnesses.

Special note is taken of the fact that the linen burial cloths of Christ are not scattered or strewn about. They are neatly folded. Had the body of Jesus been stolen by grave robbers in an attempt to fool the people, they would not have taken the time to remove the cloths, let alone leave them so neatly arranged. Given the attention, his disciples were still giving to the tomb and the burial place of Christ (again, Mary arrived quite early in the morning), a grave robbing would have needed to be done quickly.

Finally, there is also the acknowledgment that even the disciples did not yet fully understand that Christ was going to rise from the dead. John tells us this explicitly in 20:9. The next scene confirms this fact for Mary, who bemoans the fact that they have taken away the body of the Lord, and she does not know where they have laid him. At this point, she thinks someone may have taken the dead body. She is not yet convinced of resurrection!

At times we too may struggle with similar doubts, even when faced with the wall of Biblical evidence for Christ's resurrection. But the fact has been established. Christ has risen from the dead. Sufferings will give way to glory, shame to honor, and death to life.

We who walk in Christ need the assurance of his glorious resurrection. Our sufferings in Christ are no myth. A merely symbolic exaltation is little comfort for the real miseries of God's people. As Paul reminds us, if it is only for this life that we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most to be pitied.

But resurrection is a reality. We do not need to await the last day to see its power at work in us. Already we have experienced a spiritual resurrection, having been born anew to a living hope by his Spirit sent from above. He is the down payment of the fulness of resurrection which Christ, the first-fruits, will surely bring us. We can live now in the power of this resurrection reality. Just as day follows night, we can be assured that the darkness of our sufferings will give way to the joy of light and life.

#### #65 - Devotional Meditations on the Gospel of John 20:11-18

This passage in John's Gospel takes us to a strange place. Its familiarity may have dulled our senses to this fact, but it is strange nonetheless. It takes us, after all, to a graveyard. This is clearly not the most enticing destination! What is more, it takes us to a woman so distraught over a lost loved one that she is

weeping because she cannot find their corpse. Mary is deeply affected by her loss and struggling with how to cope. Although these things may seem strange at first, Mary's words and actions reveal to us something that ought to be very normal for every true Christian: a deep-seated, personal, and affectionate longing to be near the risen Christ. As we look at Mary, we see a mirror that should reflect the desire of our hearts as well.

How do we see this in the passage? First, we must remember that this Mary is Mary Magdalene. There were many "Marys" in the story of Jesus, and it can be difficult to keep them all straight. Mary Magdalene is the one from whom Jesus had cast out no less than seven demons (Luke 8:2). Her agony over Christ's death flows out of her love and appreciation for him in response to this marvelous deliverance. Her deep-seated longing for her Lord illustrates the saying of Jesus: [she] who has been forgiven much, loves much. The greatness of her deliverance is thus answered by the greatness of her love for Christ.

Second, we also see the intensity of this longing in the circumstances of her presence at the tomb. Note John's description of the area: she came to the tomb "while it was still dark" (20:1). This is no perfunctory detail in a Gospel which has regularly compared the contrast between darkness and light with the kingdoms of Satan and God. Mary feels the power of that darkness: it has taken away her Lord in crucifixion and death.

But the darkness has not overcome her.

Peter and John come for a brief moment to inspect the premises, but Mary lingers as she longs to see her Lord once again. This highlights the intensity of her desire to be with her Savior. While they abandon the scene, she tarries throughout the morning.

Third, note also the almost complete absence of any emotional reaction to the presence of the angels. The text tells us that there were two angels in white (20:12). They even speak to her and ask her why she is weeping (20:13). Remember that angels carry with them the visible manifestation and reflection of the heavenly glory of God. Because of this, they strike those who see them with utter terror. Matthew records how the guards reacted in this very way when the angels appeared to them at Jesus's tomb they became like "dead men" (Matt. 28:4).

Yet Mary hardly notices the angels. Their presence does almost nothing to change her mental and emotional state. She utters essentially the same words to the angels that she earlier spoke to Peter and John: "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." She has one single-minded focus: she wants to find her Savior, Jesus. She has found him to be as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is greater than theirs (cf. Heb. 1:1-4).

Fourth, we cannot miss the emphasis of the passage on her outpouring of emotion with reference to Jesus. This clearly demonstrates the depth of her desire to be with Christ. No less than four times the narrative makes explicit reference to her weeping at our Lord's tomb.

But as we examine these tears carefully, we realize that Mary is not crying simply over the fact that Jesus has died. Instead, her tears are flowing due to the fact that Jesus' physical body can no longer be found. Even though he was dead, Mary knew that his body would still be in the tomb. Being near someone's lifeless body is no substitute for their living presence. But Mary's longing was so great she would seek even a shell of that former fellowship she shared with her Lord during his earthly life. Here we see the depth of her faith in his life-giving power. While he was alive, people were healed even when they touched his garments. Even when dead she believes he has some power to save (recall the life-giving character of Elisha's dead body in 2 Kings 13:21).

Fifth, we most clearly see her desire to be with Christ in the words she utters by his tomb. In verses 2 and 13, we read Mary's nearly identical words to two disciples (Peter and John), as well as two angels. In both, Mary directs her hearers to the absence of Christ's body in the tomb. But there is a difference between the two answers. In 20:2 Mary uses a direct object and the first person plural: "They have taken away the Lord...and we do not know where they have laid him."

Notice how the second answer is more deeply personal. Now she uses a possessive and a first-person singular: "They have taken away my Lord...and I do not know where they have laid him." Do you see how this second statement is more revealing and more poignant than the first?

Rather than simply reflecting the corporate, more objective facts of the matter, Mary reveals that Jesus' absence is the source of her deep-seated, personal grief. The problem is not simply that "the Lord" is gone, but that my Lord is nowhere to be found. My heart's grief is not just that we do not know where he is, but that I do not know where to find him.

And what is the ultimate source of Mary's deep-seated longing to be with the risen Christ? It is not her great deliverance from seven demons, although grasping the greatness of our deliverance is no small motive to help us grow in our love for Christ.

Her longing does not ultimately stem from anything within her. The ultimate source of Mary's deep-seated longing to be with Christ is none other than Christ's deep-seated longing to be with her. Note how the words of Mary to Jesus are mirrored in the words of Jesus to Mary: "Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God'" (20:17). First Mary said "the Lord," and afterward she personalized it with "my Lord" (20:2, 13). Look at how Jesus does the same. First, he says "the Father," and afterward he personalizes it with "my Father and your Father...my God and your God" (20:17).

Do you see what this reveals? It reveals to us the heart of Christ. In the depths of Christ's heart is a love and a longing not only to be with his brothers [and sisters!] as he was in his earthly life, but also to be with them in the presence of God the Father. This was a love and a longing so deep that it took him to crucifixion and death but now flows forever by his Spirit in his ascended glory. This is a love known not only by Mary but also by all who long to be with Christ. It is a love and a longing that has no origin in man but comes solely by the grace of God in Christ. Or as he would later say in his first epistle: "We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19). This is a love that carries the Christian through every sorrow,

every trial, and every loss because it is love that finds its origin in the heart of the resurrected and ascended Savior. Though he once was dead, he is now alive forevermore, as is his never-ceasing longing that we might be with him and share in his glory (John 17:24). Our desire to be with Christ is weak. It will wax and wane through trial, temptation, and the coldness of our love for God. But Christ's desire for us means that our weakness will be overcome by his strength and that nothing will ever snatch us out of his or his Father's hands.

#### #66 - Devotional Meditations on the Gospel of John 20:19-23

This passage contains the second major resurrection appearance of Jesus as recorded by the Gospel of John. Its purpose, in part, is evidentiary. It provides proof of Jesus's bodily resurrection. When we explain our faith to others we add the word "bodily" to the word "resurrection." This is to clarify that our faith in the resurrection is not a mere wish for a better future symbolically represented in the (fictional) idea of resurrection. It is the firm confidence that one day (in the words of Job) "although worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh I shall see God" (Job 19:26).

In this sense, John has been piling evidence upon evidence as we have moved through the chapter. First Mary, Peter, and John behold an empty tomb. The carefully rolled away stone and neatly arranged burial site belies the notion that his body was hastily stolen by grave robbers. The record of Mary Magdalene not only seeing Jesus but hearing his distinct voice and touching his real body provides positive evidence for his physical revival. The fact that Mary was a woman also ironically underscores the veracity of John's claims. A woman's testimony was often not even admitted in Roman courts. If John were writing a carefully crafted fable to trick others he started very poorly. His concern is clearly for the truth and facts of what was seen and heard on that day.

This passage adds further fuel to the fire of his resurrection testimony. Morning has given way to evening. This means that the evidence is not intermittent over a long period, but consistent within the day. Like Mary, the disciples not only see the body of Jesus, but they also hear his voice and see the distinctive marks in his hands and side. This is not a look-alike or doppelgänger. Multiple levels of empirical evidence (sight, sound, and touch) all converge to confirm the clear fact: Jesus has risen from the dead! Finding someone with a similar appearance would be hard enough. But also matching his voice and physical characteristics so closely is simply impossible.

The passage also implies a miraculous entrance on the part of Jesus. The text informs us that although the "doors were locked" Jesus came and stood among them. This has led many to speculate as to the precise nature of the resurrection body. Is it actually a physical body? Is it capable of shapeshifting? I don't think the point is to indicate any such strange quality to the resurrection body. Every indication is that it is a physical body like the one we have now, only glorified and transformed. It has been made free from all sin and prepared to dwell with God in heaven. As Jesus later shows, it is not a spirit-body in the sense of being immaterial, and it is capable of eating and drinking. Instead, I think the point is the reaffirm that this is truly Jesus. He had worked miracles before, and he works another when he enters the locked building. This scene does not demonstrate a substantial physical alteration of the nature of

the body in the resurrection. Instead, it confirms that the same miracle-working Jesus who was crucified is alive again.

But along with the fact of the resurrection, this passage also demonstrates its effect on the disciples and the church. While the former point was established largely by what we see in the narrative, the latter point is established by the words uttered by Jesus.

Two times he declares to them "Peace be with you." Through his death and resurrection, he has obtained peace for his people. That is why most NT letters begin with an apostolic greeting of blessing and peace: "Grace to you and Peace from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." This is also why the minister begins a worship service by pronouncing this greeting upon the congregation. Christ's first words to his assembled disciples was a greeting of peace. Through his death, we have been forgiven. His righteousness has justified us. We are no longer enemies of God, but reconciled friends. Jesus's declaration of "peace" is a reminder of this fact. As Paul states: "Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. 5:1).

This means that the evidence assembled for the fact of the resurrection also serves as proof and assurance of the benefits of resurrection. In this instance, that means peace with God and the forgiveness of our sins. The two things are connected. We saw this earlier in Jesus's ministry when he provided a preview of his resurrection power in the healing of the lame man. The effectual declaration of Jesus that he "rise, take up [his] bed, and walk" was proof that the Son of Man had authority on earth to forgive sins (Mark 2:8-10).

This is what we have obtained in Christ's resurrection. In his death, he bore our sins, canceled their debt, and satisfied their punishment. In his resurrection, he comes forth vindicated and freed. Resurrection serves as part of the foundation of our forgiveness. That is why Paul says that if Christ has not been raised we are still in our sins. But Christ has been raised. Our sins have been canceled, indeed, they have been hurled into the depths of the sea.

But the passage does even more than remind us that as his church we enjoy the blessing of forgiveness. He also empowers his church by the Holy Spirit to declare that message to others on his behalf.

Some have described this passage as a "mini-Pentecost" because in it Jesus breaths on his disciples and they receive the Holy Spirit. Although the two events are obviously connected, they serve different purposes. This is already indicated by the fact that while Pentecost was marked by the sign of speaking in tongues, this scene lacks such a visible sign. Also, it is noteworthy that the sending of the Spirit here is limited to the Apostles as the leaders of the church.

In this they are receiving a commission from Jesus that parallels that which he received from the Father: "As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you" (20:21). Jesus's mission was to accomplish and declare the message of forgiveness. He now delegates this authority to his apostles and through them the entire church in all ages.

This passage is no proof of the Roman church's claims to have the authority to absolve sins through priestly confession. The church is fallible, is capable of error, and often does err. But there is a real ministry of forgiveness done in and through the church for his people. The church is not God, but God does use his church to bring this blessing to us. God himself remains the primary, fundamental, and foundational means to work this in our hearts. His Spirit works as an internal means in ways mere humans cannot. But he does appoint the church as an external means to bring this blessing to his people.

The risen Christ is therefore present in his church today just as he was in days of old. In fact, his presence is more powerful now than it was in this scene in John 20. Now he has ascended into heaven and sent his Spirit among the nations. It is in the church that we experience the blessed presence of Jesus. When his word is preached, we hear his voice. When the sacraments are administered, he himself brings them to us to confirm our faith. When a greeting or blessing is pronounced, it is his voice that we receive. When discipline is rightly administered, we hear the voice of Jesus speaks to the spiritual condition of those involved.

These things all work together to bring to us and preserve us in the most fundamental blessing earned for us by his death and resurrection: the forgiveness of our sins.

There is no gift more precious. There is no blessing more difficult to obtain. But Jesus has earned it for us and given it freely to his church.

#### #67 - Devotional Meditations on the Gospel of John 20:24-31

This passage contains the famous scene of "doubting Thomas," the disciple who refused to believe the report of the resurrection of Jesus.

Thomas does not figure prominently in this or the other Gospels. In the Synoptics, he only appears when the Gospel writers list the names of the twelve. John does give him a little more space in the narrative. But what we hear is not all that flattering. In 11:16 he speaks of going with Jesus to Lazarus's tomb so that "we may die with him." The meaning of this saying is not entirely clear. It does reveal that Thomas doesn't quite understand the words of Jesus. His purpose was to bring Lazarus resurrection life, not join him in the sleep of death! Thomas evidences similar confusion in 14:5, where he completely misses the heavenly substance of Jesus's promise regarding his Father's house and the way to get there.

It is noteworthy that when the biblical text records the actions and words of the disciples to Jesus, a less-than-flattering picture emerges. God's people are fallible followers. This includes great leaders of the church. Put yourself in Thomas's shoes: how would you feel if you were known to posterity only by your foolish misunderstandings and doubts regarding God's promises?

The reality is, God's people are often filled with doubts and blindness to his truth. An honest recognition of this fact for ourselves (not just for Thomas) is a key to Christian humility and our growth in true faith. As the Heidelberg Catechism states, even the holiest in this life have only a small beginning of the faith

and obedience God requires of us. Before we chuckle at the blockheadedness of the twelve, we should look carefully at ourselves.

This passage in John 20 brings this unflattering portrait of Thomas to its climax. When Jesus first appeared to the disciples, Thomas was absent. In this way, he is representative of all Christians after the ascension of Christ. The other apostles could always recall the firsthand eyewitness testimony they received when they saw, heard, and touched the body of the risen Jesus. They had direct access not only to God's word of resurrection, but touched, gazed upon, and handled. Not so later believers. We are left simply to trust the report of others.

Thomas, therefore, serves as a mirror for the struggles of every believer. When we give into skepticism and fear, we too become "doubting Thomases."

Initially, Thomas only heard the report of Jesus from the eleven. To be sure, resurrection is far from an ordinary event. If a single, random person were to come up to us and tell us that they saw someone rise from the dead, we would be right to be skeptical.

But this is no random, single individual. It is a set of eleven people, all testifying to the same thing. They were in close proximity to Jesus and all verified with corroborated testimony that Jesus truly rose from the grave. Likewise, Jesus was no random individual. He had already provided ample direct testimony to the divine power in him through numerous mighty miracles that Thomas had directly witnessed. With these facts in view, it is clear that Thomas's doubts are not an expression of a healthy skepticism. What he had seen and heard from his Savior should indicate that resurrection for Jesus would be directly in keeping with the pattern of supernatural power he had seen at work in and through him.

Moreover, note that the moniker "doubting Thomas" really isn't strong enough. The name "denying Thomas" is probably more accurate. Note how emphatic he is in refusing to believe the report of the disciples. He confidently declares that unless he sees and touches the body of Christ for himself he will "never believe." Thomas's problem is not simply a doubt, but a direct denial of the possibility of Christ's resurrection. A report is not sufficient. He must see with his own eyes.

In mercy, Christ gives Thomas what he desires. Eight days later he appears again to the disciples, this time with Thomas present. He replicates the previous encounter, even uttering the same declaration of peace to his people. This time he speaks directly to "denying Thomas," inviting him to place his hands and fingers in his wound marks.

Thomas is overcome. He sees in Christ not only a risen human body but comes to the full realization that he is God in the flesh: "My Lord and My God!" John began his Gospel with a similar direct declaration of his Deity (John 1:1, 18). Interestingly, in that chapter, Jesus was described as the "Word" of God which externally preexisted the universe and is, in fact, the source of the physical creation.

What is the point that John is making for us? God's word is deeper than reality. It is the necessary precondition not only for our certain knowledge of the truth but also being itself. The veracity of God's

word is more certain than the empirical data available to our senses. While we no longer have access to the visible, Risen body of Christ, we do have ample evidence in his word. God's written word testified to it in predictive prophecy thousands of years before its occurrence. The rest of the NT provides a comprehensive written record of the eyewitness testimony of the disciples. While we cannot see the risen Jesus, we can hear this testimony to him.

What is more, we can see the work of resurrection in our own lives and that of others. In our families, churches, and the broader Christian community we see clear evidence of transformed lives through the power of the Gospel. This shared experience of regeneration can also be seen across all the cultures of the earth over a long period of time. While the shared experience of regeneration is not the foundation of our hope, it provides a subordinate support to our faith in the reality of the bodily resurrection. He who renews the dead heart can also resurrect our lifeless bodies.

We can no longer see the risen Jesus. We walk by faith and not by sight. In this Jesus says that we are "blessed." Peter adds that in this condition we also have joy:

"Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls. (1 Peter 1:8-9)

Like Thomas, we are often filled with foolish doubts. But by God's help through his word and Spirit, we shall know the blessing of confident hope in the resurrection life of Jesus Christ.

#### #68 - Devotional Meditations on the Gospel of John 21:1-14

John 20 recorded a number of Jesus's resurrection appearances. The first was to Mary Magdalene by herself. Two more followed with the twelve disciples. As John notes in this chapter, Jesus again appeared a third time to all his disciples, this time while they were fishing at the Sea of Tiberius.

John is not saying that Jesus only appeared to his disciples three times. The book of Acts states that Jesus appeared to them over a period of forty days with many proofs of his resurrection and continued to teach them about the kingdom of God (Acts 1:3).

Why then does John limit himself to three and take pains to enumerate them as he does? You may recall how John did a similar thing in the beginning of his Gospel when Jesus first publicly appeared to his disciples. Each scene is enumerated according to the successive days on which it occurs (John 1:29, 35, 43). Likewise, the wedding of Cana begins with John's note that it occurred on the "third day" (2:1).

This pattern suggests that John wants us to read the introduction and conclusion of the Gospel in light of one another. The appearances that inaugurated his public ministry parallel the appearances that consummate his resurrection ministry.



In particular, the third resurrection appearance of Jesus may correspond to the miracle performed on "the third day" in Cana. Some of the details reinforce this point. Both involve the disciples. Both are public events. Both involve water. Both occur in connection with a meal and eating/drinking. Both deal with a lavish abundance of food/drink for this meal.

Although John does not record the words of Jesus to Peter, Andrew, James, and John that he will "make them fishers of men" at their first call, the other Gospels memorably record this fact. Just as Jesus called them to be fishers of men at the beginning of his earthly ministry, so he demonstrates this in his miracle at its end.

Things seem to be coming full circle. But these narrative connections serve a practical and spiritual purpose--both for the disciples and for us. They reinforce the fact that our Christian lives and service must begin and end with Jesus. It illustrates the principle uttered by Jesus in his earlier discourses: "Apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5).

In this scene, the disciples are doing some fishing. Although called and set apart to a sacred task, they remain ordinary men who still engage in ordinary tasks. This was their family business. It was also something they did to feed themselves and others. While in one sense they were called to leave it behind to follow Jesus, this did not mean they abandoned ordinary earthly activities. Instead, they subordinated them to the call of Christ in his kingdom. While not a fisherman, Paul also did a similar thing, continuing to work as a literal tentmaker to provide supplemental support himself in his ministry even while he enjoyed the patronage of others like Priscilla and Aquila. The necessities of life must still be attended to. While they are commissioned as servants of heaven, they remain resident aliens on earth. Similarly, although we are not of the world we are not able to leave it (cf. 1 Cor. 5:10).

But this fishing expedition did not turn out well. They did a lot of "fishing" but no "catching." Interestingly, this took place at night. Darkness is the time of sin and weakness. But Jesus appears at daybreak and addresses them. Note how he describes them as "children." On the one hand, this is a term of affection. God loves them the way a father loves his children. Jesus also loves them and has both declared and demonstrated this fact fully. But it's not just a term of endearment. It also brings into view the weakness and smallness of their faith. It is a reminder that by themselves and apart from Christ they can do nothing. When he was absent, their nets were empty.

Note how dramatically the situation changes when Jesus appears! He offers a simple piece of fishing advice. If it were offered by anyone else, it would seem utterly ridiculous. They are to move their nets from the left to the right side of the boat. This summer you should try going to the river when the fishermen flood the streams (there are usually more fishers than fish). Tell them they will catch more fish by casting off the left as opposed to the right side of the boat. I doubt you will get many to take your advice.

But these disciples both hear and do the words of Jesus. The result is an unimaginably large catch of 153 fish. The disciples immediately realize that it is the Lord. The one who changed the water into wine, who

fed thousands with a few loaves, now grants a miraculous catch of fish. The wind, the seas, and even the fish obey him.

Apart from Christ, they catch nothing. With him present, they catch a haul that would make a fishing story for the ages.

Ultimately this passage is not about fish, but about the ministry of the word through the disciples. After all, they were told that they would become fishers of men. Their catch would not come through their own ingenuity, techniques, or wisdom of the world. Their catch would come from their trust in God's word and the simple proclamation of the words of Jesus. The words that Ezekiel prophesied about the coming kingdom come to fulfillment in the ministry of the Gospel to the nations. In Ezekiel 47:9-10 he describes this coming kingdom in the imagery of the OT temple. In his vision he sees a great river flowing from this future temple. It will be filled with many fish like the fish of the Great Sea, with fishermen along its banks casting their nets. This imagery is directly fulfilled in this miracle of Jesus. A great catch awaits the church in the ministry of the Gospel to the nations!

Our task is to trust Christ's strength and to use the net that he gave us. That net is the proclamation of the word of God by which he will catch men to follow Christ. There may be seasons where he allows us to realize our weaknesses. There will be dark nights where the catch is few or nothing. Perhaps some fish will jump out of the boat or break the line before we can land them. But God will bring a great catch through his resurrection power as we trust in his sovereign grace. Apart from Christ, we can do nothing. With his presence, we can confidently say: "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Phil. 4:13).

#### #69 - Devotional Meditations on the Gospel of John 21:15-19

John's resurrection narrative includes both that which is public and that which is personal. It began with a personal, private appearance of Christ to Mary Magdalene. The emphasis of that passage with the personal, deep-seated longing that every believer has to be with the risen Christ. This was followed by more public appearances to all the disciples, first without Thomas and then with him. We conclude in John 21 where we began. The Gospel concludes with two stories of a more intimate and private nature. This reinforces the point made during Jesus's appearance to Mary. Although our Christian life does not exist in isolation from the corporate body of Christ, it does have a real personal-individual dimension. He has specific things to say to each one of us. Having gone into heaven, he no longer speaks to us audibly in the same fashion as when he was on earth. But in his providence, he works by his written word and Holy Spirit to bring us exactly what we need to hear at the right moments.

Also, consider the fact that Peter and John were the first disciples called by Jesus (1:35-42). How fitting that they are the last ones addressed at the conclusion of the Gospel. John concludes his Gospel returning the same themes and characters with which he began it.

This morning our meditation will look at our Lord's words to Peter. Interestingly, the conversation at first seems quite repetitive, with Jesus three times restating essentially the same question: "Simon, son of

John, do you love?" The first time he adds a comparative phrase, asking if his love is "more than these." The reference of the pronoun is a little ambiguous, but the context indicates that Jesus is referring to the other disciples. In other words, he seems to be asking Peter if he loves Christ more than his fellow disciples. It's also possible that Christ is asking Peter whether he loves him more than some other object in the narrative, such as the fish, the nets, the fishing boat, etc. But this is less likely.

Whatever the precise reference, the major point is still clear. Jesus is questioning whether Peter loves him as his highest joy, delight, aim, and treasure. This is not just an important question for Peter, but for every believer. While we will never execute or feel this love perfectly in this life, each believer has within them a deep-seated desire to love Christ above all other people and things. Without this love, all of our obedience and efforts are like the lifeless creation: they are formless and void, covered with darkness. Paul tells us that without love we are nothing (1 Cor. 13). Great acts of charity, service, and proclamation ring hollow if they are not motivated by a sincere love for Christ.

But notice how this question is repeated three times. Peter is wounded by the line of questioning, wondering if Christ is doubting the sincerity of his life. He even appeals to Christ's supernatural power to know the thoughts of others as proof of his sincerity. Clearly, Jesus knew Peter sincerely loved him. Why the threefold repetition of the question?

Recall that when Peter denied Jesus, we also saw a pattern of three. Jesus even predicted this, declaring that "before the rooster crows you will deny me three times" (John 13:38). Like his other predictions, Jesus's words came to pass (18:15-18, 25-27), and afterward Peter wept bitterly. Perhaps the threefold line of questioning stung Peter because it served as a reminder of his threefold denial.

Peter's failure to love his Lord clearly left a lasting impression on him. So our sins and failures often do not remain in the past, but follow us like haunting shadows accusing us of our sinfulness long into the future.

A threefold denial is thus matched with a threefold question from Jesus. But it also includes a threefold restoration.

Do you recall the reason Peter stumbled and denied his Savior? It goes back to his confession of Jesus at Caesarea Philippi. After boldly confessing that Jesus is the Christ, he quickly corrected the Lord when he began to predict his sufferings and death. Jesus then turned to the disciples and told them that if anyone would come after him, they also had to deny themselves, pick up their crosses, and follow him. Peter stumbled over the idea that the Messiah would be a suffering savior. This meant that his servants would not be victorious conquerors in this world, but that they would suffer with their savior. And so Jesus repeats his earlier call. Peter hears an echo of the words he utters to every disciple: deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me.

Peter stumbled over this prospect. We should not judge him too harshly. Many of us sometimes think boldly of how we will serve and love Jesus through even the worst the devil could throw at us. When we are strong and stable, it seems that nothing could rock our faith. But when we are in the middle of the

storm and all earthly supports are removed, we are suddenly filled with fear that betrays our small faith. In the Parable of the Sower, Jesus warned us against the power of persecution and suffering on account of the word. When the seed is sown on rocky ground it has no root. When trouble and persecution come they can quickly fall away.

Although Peter was temporarily and partially uprooted, Jesus here plants him again firmly in his grace. More than that he appoints him again as a shepherd of his sheep. And what a faithful shepherd he then proves himself to be (although not without flaws).

For what is the main subject of Peter's first letter? It is all about experiencing spiritual joy in Christian suffering. The Peter who stumbled over suffering later exhorts the sheep of Christ as to how they can find God's glory in the midst of earthly shame. He who denied our Lord in his suffering and death now joyfully embraces whatever trials God brings his way.

Every Christian can find in Peter one with whom they can easily identify. Since he was a great leader, he may seem distant to us. But this passage reveals that he was also a fallible follower. His shortcomings are seen not only in his life before Christ's resurrection but also after (see Galatians 1-2). Each of us daily finds ourselves denying Christ in our own ways. What grace Jesus has for his beloved sheep to lovingly restore them even after we sin against him. Jesus cares for and tends to his sheep when they wander. He feeds us with his life-giving word which gives us strength and encouragement in all our sufferings.

The same Peter who stumbled over these things powerfully strengthened the church when he concluded his first letter speaking to these very things:

"And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. To him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen" (1 Peter 5:10).

May these words also strengthen you in your love for Christ no matter what trial or tribulation comes your way.

#### #70 - Devotional Meditations on the Gospel of John 21:20-25

With this passage, we reach the conclusion of the Gospel of John. Although formally anonymous, the author gives clear hints of his identity throughout the narrative. In 21:24 he comes close to directly identifying himself. Although he does not directly say "I am John who wrote this Gospel," there is no mistaking that he is the self-identified author.

Like the previous episode, this scene records a personal exchange between Jesus and Peter. However, this time the subject concerns John's fate. Interestingly the Gospel thus concludes with a future discussion of how the lives of two key disciples (Peter and John) will end.

The end of the Gospel thus confronts us with the personal end each one of us will face at the conclusion of our time on earth. All servants of Christ will one day face death (save those alive at his coming). This fact is of such paramount importance for our spiritual lives that we must be on guard against those things which may distract us from it. Jesus especially redirects Peter's attention away from speculative conversations regarding the details of John's future fate. Jesus's response to Peter's question redirects his attention away from others and back to himself: "If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you. You follow me!" (21:22).

How easy it is for us to place our focus in places that are not directly fruitful for our Spiritual lives. Just as we can sometimes unhelpfully speculate about the details of the timing and details of Jesus's future coming, we can do a similar thing in our personal lives. We get easily distracted by questions related to the manner, timing, and order of the final events revealed in Scripture. When will the Man of Lawlessness appear? Is he different than Satan? Will there be a falling away before the end? Is the "millenium" of Revelation 20 literal or figurative? While not unimportant, we can easily get distracted by these questions. The key thing is thing: the world will one day come to an end. We must always be ready for it!

We can similarly speculate about the end of our personal lives. How will I die? Will I get cancer? Maybe I will lose my mental capacity? The key thing that both we and Peter and John must reckon with is the fact that they will one day perish from this earthly life. Interestingly, it seems that there was a pattern of this kind of unhelpful discussion among the twelve. At times it was so ridiculous it revealed not only a distracted but also a proud and arrogant heart. Recall when they disputed as to which of them would be the greatest in the kingdom. And remember how they did this while Jesus was teaching them about his impending sufferings and death for their sake?

The Gospel of John has set before us the ultimate things that affect the world, indeed, the entire cosmos! But in John's conclusion, he reminds us that these ultimate things are replicating in our personal lives. The ultimate reality each of us must personally reckon with is the fact that we will die. It is only in Christ that we have deliverance from this final destiny. All other intermediate concerns between then and the time we start our Christian journey are nothing in comparison.

This Gospel tells us that through Christ and faith in him, we can pass from death into life. In him, the great and final enemy has been conquered. Also physically alive, all mankind already walks in the darkness of this death. When we believe we receive within us the down payment and foretaste of the resurrection life to come.

The key to perseverance is not knowing all the details of our lives between now and then. In fact, I think the Lord is gracious to keep us in blissful ignorance of all the trials we shall face. The troubles of the day are sufficient to overwhelm us. Imagine if the trials of a lifetime were set before us all at once! I think I would probably crumble with anxiety.

But Jesus reveals what is needful for us to know. Our Christian lives must begin with this simple fact: my time on earth will one day come to an end. All the days ordained for me are written in God's book. They are numbered in his plan. I will have to face a final end and rest in the grave.

But Jesus has won victory over death. When the last enemy comes, I can face him with boldness. Jesus has turned our earthly defeat into a heavenly victory. When we embrace these realities by faith, we are enabled to assuage our fears and run the Christian race with zeal and boldness. Let us not be concerned with our placing relative to the other runners, but fix our eyes on Jesus. We must remain focused on the finish line and the glorious completion that awaits us when we receive the victor's crown. Though fatigue and pain may overwhelm us, God's strength in Christ will sustain us to the end.