

THE DAILY QUIET TIME REFLECTIONS SERIES

THE WORD BECAME FLESH

Reflections on the Gospel of John

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This introduction draws on the introductory notes of Dr. Thomas L. Constable, used with gratitude for his lay-accessible scholarship on the text of Scripture.

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How to Use This Book

Reading, Reflecting, Together

This book was not written to be read in a single sitting. It follows the same daily rhythm as every volume in this series: one reading, one reflection, one day at a time. Each chapter corresponds to a portion of Scripture from the Bible Reading Plan included as an appendix, so that this book can be read alongside your own Bible in the same unhurried pace in which it was first written — as a daily discipline of Quiet Time, not a book to be consumed in a weekend.

Each chapter grew out of years of daily reflections shared by fellow readers working through the same passage on the same day, together with notes drawn from Sunday School classes at First Baptist Church in Dallas. What you are holding, then, is not a technical commentary but a companion for your own reading — written by fellow travelers, not experts, who have simply tried to sit with the text long enough to let it speak.

We encourage you to read the day's passage first, in your own Bible, before turning to the corresponding chapter here. Let Scripture have the first word. Then let this book help you listen more closely to what God has already said.

At the end of each chapter you will find a handful of reflection and discussion questions, suitable for personal journaling or group study. Take your time. John's Gospel is not a book to be hurried through — its twenty-one chapters reward slow, attentive, patient reading, and its central purpose, stated plainly near the very end, is

one best absorbed a little at a time: "that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."

Introduction

Of the four Gospels, John's stands apart. Where Matthew, Mark, and Luke tell the story of Jesus largely as it happened on the ground — parable by parable, mile by mile through Galilee and Judea — John writes as a man looking back across six decades at a life he still cannot get to the bottom of. Early church tradition places him in Ephesus, an old man among a second and third generation of believers, setting down not a chronicle but a testimony. He tells us so himself, near the very end: he has written these things, out of everything he could have written, so that we would believe Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing, we would have life in his name (20:30-31).

That purpose shapes everything else about this Gospel. John leaves out most of what the other three include — no birth narrative, no parables, no Gethsemane agony, no Lord's Supper instituted before our eyes. What he includes instead are seven signs, chosen and arranged to build a case; long private conversations the other Gospel-writers never recorded, with a Samaritan woman at a well, a Pharisee in the night, a blind beggar cast out of the synagogue; and seven staggering claims that begin with the same two words the God of the burning bush once used of himself — I am. I am the bread of life. The light of the world. The good shepherd. The resurrection and the life. The way, the truth, and the life. The true vine. Each of these becomes a chapter heading in this volume,

because each is John's own argument for who Jesus is, offered up one image at a time.

If Matthew shows us Jesus as King, Mark as Servant, and Luke as the perfect Man, John shows us why any of that authority, that consecration, that uniqueness was even possible. The other Gospels leave that question hanging. John answers it in his opening line: in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. Then, twelve verses later, comes the sentence the whole Gospel exists to explain — that this Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we saw his glory. Whatever else is unfolding in these twenty-one chapters — a wedding, a funeral, a trial, a breakfast on a beach — it is all commentary on that one impossible claim: that God, whom no one has ever seen, has made himself known in a Person we can.

Two things stood out to us most as we studied our way through this Gospel. The first is how relentlessly John presses the question of belief — the word appears roughly a hundred times, more than in any other book in Scripture, and never as a settled fact but always as a summons. Nicodemus almost believes. The healed blind man believes completely and pays for it with his standing in the synagogue. Many "believe," John tells us, in ways that turn out not to be believing at all. The second is how much of this Gospel is written in the shadow of the cross before the cross ever arrives — Jesus speaking of his own glorification, his own hour, his own finished work, chapters before any nail is driven. John wants us to

see the crucifixion coming from a long way off, the way Jesus himself did.

We have organized this volume into nine chapters, following the same daily reading rhythm as the rest of this series — no divisions of "Part One" and "Part Two" here, since John's Gospel, unlike some of the longer historical books, reads best straight through, one continuous testimony from the Word made flesh to the empty tomb and the shore of Galilee beyond it. Our prayer is the same one John had for his first readers: not that you would finish this book knowing more facts about Jesus, but that you would close it believing in him, and in that believing, find the life he came to give.

CHAPTER ONE

The True Light

John 1–2

Every one of the Gospels has to start somewhere, and where a writer chooses to start tells you something about what he thinks the story actually is. Matthew starts with a genealogy, because he wants us to see Jesus as the rightful heir of David's throne. Mark starts in the middle of the action, with a voice crying in the wilderness, because for him the good news is something that erupts rather than unfolds. Luke starts with priests and angels and a barren old woman, because he is telling us this is, among other things, a story about ordinary, overlooked people. John starts before any of that — before Bethlehem, before Nazareth, before the foundation of the world. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Then, twelve verses later, the sentence the rest of the book exists to unpack: the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we saw his glory.

That claim is the reason this Gospel reads the way it does. John is not primarily interested in when things happened or in what order. He is interested in showing us who was doing them. The prologue tells us plainly: this is the One through whom everything was made, the light that keeps shining no matter how much darkness tries to put it out, the one true light who gives light to everyone. And then, remarkably, John tells us how that light was actually received. Some walked right past it — his own world did

not recognize him, his own people did not welcome him. But some did receive him. To everyone who did, John says, was given the right to become children of God — not by birth, not by human decision, but by being born of God himself. That distinction, planted so early, will turn out to matter more than almost anything else in this Gospel. Belief, in John's hands, is never simply intellectual agreement. It is new birth.

Before Jesus appears on stage himself, another man testifies to him. John the Baptist is careful, almost fierce, about what he is not — not the Messiah, not Elijah, not the Prophet, not worthy to untie the sandal of the one coming after him. But he is entirely clear about what he saw: the Spirit descending like a dove and remaining on Jesus, the Father's own confirmation that this was the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. It is worth noticing how small the beginning of the church actually was. John points; two of his own disciples leave him to follow Jesus. One of them, Andrew, does not keep the discovery to himself — he goes and finds his brother Simon first. Philip is called directly and then goes to find Nathanael, who arrives skeptical ("Can anything good come from Nazareth?") and leaves converted, astonished that a stranger could see straight into him. This is how the Gospel begins to spread even before Jesus performs a single miracle: one person telling another, come and see.

Come and see is exactly what happens next, at a wedding in Cana. It is easy to read the miracle of water turned to wine and miss what John is doing with it. He calls it the first of Jesus' signs — not simply a display of power, but a sign that points beyond itself to

something true about who Jesus is. The wine runs out; the wedding, and the honor of the family hosting it, is in danger of being ruined. Jesus quietly, without fanfare, provides not just enough wine but the best wine anyone at that wedding has ever tasted. John tells us plainly what this accomplished: Jesus revealed his glory, and his disciples believed in him. It is a small, human, almost domestic miracle — nobody outside that household even knows what happened — and yet it is where faith in Jesus begins for the men who will spend the next three years following him.

From a wedding, Jesus goes to the temple, and the tone changes entirely. He finds the outer court turned into a marketplace, sellers and money changers doing a brisk trade in the very space set aside for prayer, and he responds with a controlled but unmistakable fury — a whip of cords, overturned tables, coins scattered across the floor. "Take these things away! Do not turn my Father's house into a market!" When the religious leaders demand to know what right he has to do this, Jesus answers with a riddle that none of them will understand until much later: "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days." John tells us he was speaking of his own body — the first hint, remarkably early, of the death and resurrection toward which this entire Gospel is moving.

There is something worth sitting with in what actually provoked Jesus' anger. It was not dishonest business practices, exactly — nothing in the text suggests the merchants were cheating anyone. What provoked him was that the temple, God's own house, had become a place of commerce at all. Prayer and profit had traded

places. Reverence had given way to noise. It is not hard to see why this account still unsettles readers who care about the health of the church. Wherever the trappings of religious life — the programs, the products, the platforms — begin to crowd out the simple things prayer and the plain reading of God's Word were always meant to accomplish, something of what provoked Jesus at that temple is still present. The warning is not against ministry having any structure or cost. It is against letting the marketplace quietly become the point.

The chapter ends on a sobering note that will recur throughout this Gospel. Many people, John tells us, believed in Jesus' name because they saw the signs he was doing. But John adds something unexpected: Jesus did not entrust himself to them, because he knew what was in every person; he did not need anyone to testify about mankind. Belief prompted by miracles alone, John is warning us, is not yet the kind of belief that saves. It will take the rest of this Gospel — a nighttime conversation with a Pharisee, a well in Samaria, a blind man cast out of the synagogue, a tomb outside Bethany — before we understand what kind of believing Jesus was actually looking for.

For Reflection

1. John begins his Gospel further back than any other writer — before creation itself. How does starting there change the way you read everything that follows?

2. Andrew and Philip both respond to meeting Jesus by going to find someone else. Who in your life has never been invited to come and see?
3. What has quietly become the "marketplace" crowding out prayer and the plain reading of Scripture in your own life, or in your church?

CHAPTER TWO

Born from Above

John 3–4

Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night. John does not tell us why, but it is hard not to notice the detail, especially because John is a writer who uses light and darkness as more than scenery. Nicodemus is a Pharisee, a ruler of the Jews, a man with a great deal to lose by being seen too closely with a controversial rabbi from Galilee. He opens carefully, almost diplomatically: "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him." It is a generous opening, and also, in its way, a hedge — he speaks of Jesus as a teacher sent by God, not yet as anything more.

Jesus does not accept the compliment on its own terms. He answers a question Nicodemus has not quite asked: "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again." The Greek behind "born again" can also mean "born from above," and Jesus seems to intend both senses at once — a birth that happens a second time, and a birth that comes down from heaven rather than up from human effort. Nicodemus, a man who has spent his life mastering the finer points of the Law, is genuinely stumped. "How can someone be born when they are old? Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb!" Jesus presses further: what is born of flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. The wind blows where it pleases; you hear its sound but cannot tell

where it comes from or where it is going. So it is, Jesus says, with everyone born of the Spirit — real, verifiable in its effects, and utterly outside human control or comprehension.

It would have been humbling for a man of Nicodemus's standing to be told, in effect, that all his religious credentials counted for nothing here. If Israel's own teacher cannot grasp an earthly illustration like birth and wind, Jesus asks, how will he ever believe if Jesus speaks of heavenly things? Then Jesus reaches back into Nicodemus's own Scriptures for a picture he would have known well — Moses lifting up a bronze snake in the wilderness so that anyone bitten by the poisonous serpents God had sent among the people could look at it and live (Numbers 21:4-9). "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life." It is the first of several places in this Gospel where Jesus predicts his own crucifixion in the language of being "lifted up" — the same act that condemned him publicly, John insists, is the very act that saves.

And then, in words so familiar they can be hard to actually hear anymore, John gives us the hinge on which the whole Gospel turns: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." Everything that follows in this book — every sign, every "I am," every conversation, every confrontation — is an unfolding of that one sentence. God's love was not abstract. It had a cost, and the cost was his Son, given for a world that, as John has already told us, did not receive him.

The scene shifts, and so does the company Jesus keeps. From a respected Pharisee who comes by night, John moves us to a Samaritan woman who comes to a well at noon — likely alone, likely at that hour precisely because she wanted to avoid the other women of the town. Jews did not associate with Samaritans; men, especially rabbis, did not speak to unaccompanied women in public. Jesus does both without apparent hesitation. He asks her for a drink, and turns the conversation, with real deftness, from the water in the well to a very different kind of water: "whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

The woman does not fully grasp what is being offered, and Jesus does something that forces the issue: he names, plainly and without shaming her, the fact of her five husbands and the man she is currently living with who is not her husband. Exposed, she tries what people often try when a conversation gets too close — she changes the subject to a safe theological dispute, this one about where God is properly worshiped, on this mountain or in Jerusalem. Jesus does not dodge the question, but he relativizes it: a time is coming, and has now come, when true worshipers will worship the Father in Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. The place matters less than John seems to expect us to assume; the posture matters more.

It is when she raises her own hope of a coming Messiah that Jesus says something he says almost nowhere else in this Gospel with such directness: "I, the one speaking to you — I am he." A woman

who came to draw water leaves her jar behind and runs to tell the whole town. Many Samaritans believe because of her testimony; many more believe after hearing Jesus for themselves, and they call him, remarkably, "the Savior of the world" — a title no Jewish crowd in this Gospel will ever quite manage to speak. It is worth sitting with the shape of that contrast. The Jews, John has told us, wanted signs before they would believe (2:23-25), and even then their faith proved unreliable. A Samaritan woman with a complicated past believes on the strength of a single conversation, and an entire town follows her.

The chapter closes back in Galilee, where a nobleman begs Jesus to come and heal his dying son. Jesus does not go. He simply speaks: "Go, your son will live." The man believes the word Jesus spoke and starts for home; along the way his servants meet him with the news that the fever broke at the very hour Jesus spoke. Whether by an unmistakable sign at Cana, by a long conversation at a well, or by a single spoken word received at a distance, John keeps showing us the same truth from different angles: faith does not require a particular kind of evidence. It requires a particular kind of trust.

For Reflection

4. Nicodemus, a respected religious leader, could not manufacture the new birth Jesus described. What does it look like to trust that your own spiritual life began — and continues — as a gift rather than an achievement?

5. Jesus named the Samaritan woman's history plainly, without either excusing it or shaming her out of the conversation. Where do you need that same combination of honesty and welcome in your own life?
6. The nobleman believed a word spoken at a distance, with no visible confirmation until later. What would it look like for you to trust God's word before you see the outcome, rather than after?

CHAPTER THREE

The Bread of Life

John 5–6

Near the Sheep Gate in Jerusalem was a pool called Bethesda, ringed by five covered colonnades, and in those colonnades lay a great number of disabled people — blind, lame, paralyzed — waiting for the water to stir. Among them was a man who had been sick for thirty-eight years, longer than most people of that era lived at all. Jesus asks him a question that sounds almost strange on the surface: "Do you want to get well?" The man's answer is not really an answer — he explains why he has never made it into the water in time, as if the question had been about logistics rather than desire. Jesus does not wait for him to work out what he actually wants. "Get up! Pick up your mat and walk." And he does.

It should have been a moment of unqualified joy. Instead, it becomes the occasion for the first open hostility toward Jesus in this Gospel, because it happened on the Sabbath. When the religious leaders confront the healed man for carrying his mat, he points to Jesus; when they confront Jesus, he does not apologize or explain the healing away. He answers with something far more provocative: "My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I too am working." The Jewish leaders understood exactly what he meant — not merely that he had broken a Sabbath regulation, but that he was calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God. From

this point forward in John's Gospel, the opposition to Jesus is no longer merely about his teaching. It is about his identity.

Jesus does not retreat from the claim; he presses it further. The Son can do nothing by himself, he says, but only what he sees his Father doing — and whatever the Father does, the Son does also. The Father judges no one but has entrusted all judgment to the Son, so that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father. Whoever hears Jesus' word and believes has already crossed over from death to life. It is a staggering claim to make in a culture that had spent centuries guarding the uniqueness of the one true God, and Jesus knows it will not be accepted on his word alone. So he offers a fourfold witness in his defense: the testimony of John the Baptist, the testimony of his own miraculous works, the testimony of the Father himself, and the testimony of the very Scriptures his accusers claimed to trust. "You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life."

It is worth pausing over a strange pattern in the Gospels that becomes especially visible in John: Jesus does not merely happen to heal on the Sabbath from time to time. He seems, if anything, to seek out the confrontation. The paralytic at Bethesda, the man born blind, the man with the withered hand, the woman bent double for eighteen years — case after case, the Sabbath is where Jesus draws the line most sharply. He was not accommodating his message to avoid conflict; if anything, he walked toward it. There is a lesson here for anyone tempted to soften the truth of the gospel to keep the

peace. The confrontational edge in Jesus' ministry, and in the ministries of John the Baptist, Peter, and Paul after him, was not an unfortunate byproduct of the message. It was frequently the point.

Chapter six shifts from confrontation to compassion, and to one of the best-known scenes in all four Gospels — a crowd of thousands who have followed Jesus for days, and nothing to feed them but a boy's five barley loaves and two small fish. Jesus already knows what he intends to do; he asks Philip where they might buy bread only, John tells us, to test him. Philip does the math and concludes it is hopeless — eight months' wages would not buy enough. Andrew brings the boy forward almost apologetically, as if to say this can't possibly be enough. Jesus takes what is offered, gives thanks, and there is more than enough for everyone, with twelve baskets left over. The crowd's response is telling: they want to make him king by force. They have grasped that a miracle has occurred; they have not yet grasped what kind of King he actually is.

That night, walking on the water to reach his disciples in their storm-tossed boat, and the next day, when the crowd finally catches up to him in Capernaum, Jesus redirects their attention entirely. "You are looking for me... because you ate the loaves and had your fill. Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life." When they ask what work God requires, Jesus gives an answer that upends the whole premise of their question: "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent." They are looking for something to do; Jesus is offering something to receive.

It is here that Jesus makes the first of his seven great "I am" statements in this Gospel: "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." He goes further still, in language so provocative that many who had followed him for days simply leave: "unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you." He is not, of course, describing cannibalism; he is describing the kind of total, internalized dependence a person has on food and drink, applied now to himself. But he does nothing to soften the offense for those who cannot see past the literal image, and many disciples turn back and no longer follow him.

Jesus turns to the Twelve with a question that has an edge of real risk in it: "You do not want to leave too, do you?" Peter's answer is one of the great confessions in Scripture: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God." It is not, on the surface, a triumphant statement. It sounds almost like a man who has run out of alternatives. And perhaps that is closer to the truth of real faith than the more confident-sounding professions elsewhere in this Gospel — not the conviction that everything makes sense, but the recognition that there is nowhere else worth going.

For Reflection

7. Jesus asked the man at Bethesda, "Do you want to get well?" Is there an area of your life where you have grown so used to your condition that you would answer that question the way he did — with an excuse rather than a yes?

8. Jesus tested Philip's faith by asking a question he already knew the answer to. Where has God tested your faith in a similar way — by letting the need feel impossible before providing?
9. Peter's confession was not triumphant so much as it was honest: there was nowhere else to go. Does your own faith in Christ rest more on having everything figured out, or on recognizing that he alone has the words of eternal life?

CHAPTER FOUR

The Light of the World

John 7–8

Jesus stays away from Judea because the authorities there want to kill him, and even his own brothers, who do not yet believe in him, taunt him for hiding: if he really wants to be a public figure, why not go to the Festival of Tabernacles and show himself off? Jesus refuses to go on their timetable — "my time has not yet come" — and then goes anyway, quietly, after the festival is already underway. It is worth noticing that Jesus is not reckless here. He goes in secret at first, and only teaches openly once there are enough people around him for some measure of cover. He is not avoiding his mission, but he is not courting an unnecessary and premature death either. There is real wisdom in that combination — a willingness to walk toward conflict when it serves the mission, paired with the good sense not to walk into danger for danger's own sake.

Once he does teach in the temple courts, the crowd is amazed that a man with no formal rabbinic training could speak with such authority. Jesus tells them plainly where the authority comes from: "My teaching is not my own. It comes from the one who sent me." He also exposes a piece of hypocrisy that must have stung: the same leaders who prided themselves on keeping the Law of Moses were, at that very moment, plotting to kill him — a flat violation of the commandment against murder. When he goes on to defend healing

on the Sabbath by pointing out that they themselves perform circumcision on the Sabbath without a second thought, he is not simply winning a debate. He is asking them to judge with right judgment rather than by appearances, because a religious system that will overlook one kind of Sabbath activity while condemning an act of mercy has lost track of what the Sabbath was ever for.

The crowd itself is divided — some think he is a good man, others call him a deceiver, still others wonder aloud whether the authorities' own hesitation to arrest him means they secretly suspect he might be the Christ after all. There is a strange, almost comic irony running underneath these chapters: temple guards sent specifically to arrest Jesus return empty-handed, and when asked why, they can only say, "No one ever spoke the way this man does." The very people responsible for silencing him find themselves unable to do it, because — as John keeps reminding us — his hour had not yet come. Nothing in these chapters happens by accident or by anyone's initiative but God's own timing.

It is on the last and greatest day of the festival that Jesus makes an invitation that would have startled anyone who heard the water-pouring ceremony that marked that particular feast: "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them." John explains what he means — the Spirit, who would be given once Jesus had been glorified. The gift being offered was not simply relief from Jesus' physical presence with them for a few more years. It was an entirely new kind of indwelling that had not yet been possible.

Chapter eight opens with the well-known account of the woman caught in adultery — a passage many careful readers of the manuscript evidence believe was not part of John's original Gospel, since it is missing from the earliest and best manuscripts and appears in different locations in different copies. Whatever its precise textual history, the story has been treasured by the church for centuries, and it captures something entirely consistent with how Jesus treats sinners throughout this Gospel. The religious leaders drag a woman before him, citing the Law's penalty of stoning, plainly using her as a trap rather than out of any real concern for justice — her partner in the act is conspicuously absent from the accusation. Jesus stoops and writes in the dust, saying nothing, until finally: "Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." One by one, beginning with the oldest, the accusers leave. Jesus is left alone with the woman. "Then neither do I condemn you," he tells her. "Go now and leave your life of sin." He does not minimize what she has done, and he does not condemn her either — grace and honesty, held together without either one crowding out the other.

The chapter's central drama, though, is a running argument over Jesus' identity that grows sharper with almost every exchange. "I am the light of the world," Jesus declares. "Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." He tells his listeners that unless they believe he is who he claims to be, they will die in their sins. When some of the Jews who had believed him press further, Jesus tells them that real discipleship means continuing in his word — a distinction that turns out to matter enormously, because these same "believing" Jews go on, within a few

verses, to claim Abraham as their father while planning to kill Jesus, and finally to pick up stones against him. Their belief, whatever it was, had not yet become the kind of belief that holds fast.

The confrontation builds to its highest pitch when Jesus tells them, "Before Abraham was born, I am!" It is not a grammatical slip. He is reaching for the divine name God gave Moses at the burning bush — I AM WHO I AM — and applying it to himself, in the present tense, standing in front of men who knew exactly what he was claiming. Their response removes any doubt that they understood him correctly: they pick up stones to kill him on the spot for blasphemy. Nowhere else in this Gospel is the claim to deity made more plainly, and nowhere else is it met with a more immediate, visceral rejection.

What stands out across these two chapters is the gap between belief and true discipleship. Many in the crowd are drawn to Jesus; some even use the word "believe" about their own response to him. And yet John will not let us rest easy with the word alone. The real test, Jesus says, is not whether someone is impressed or intrigued or even initially persuaded, but whether they continue in his word once the cost of that word becomes clear.

For Reflection

10. Jesus went toward Jerusalem carefully — neither avoiding danger out of fear nor courting it recklessly. Where in your own life do you need that same combination of courage and wisdom?

11. Jesus refused to condemn the woman caught in adultery, and refused to excuse her sin either. Which of those two — honesty or grace — comes harder for you, and why?
12. Some of the Jews who "believed" in Jesus later tried to stone him. What is the difference between believing something about Jesus and continuing in his word, and which one better describes your own walk with him right now?

CHAPTER FIVE

The Good Shepherd

John 9–10

Jesus and his disciples pass a man blind from birth, and the disciples ask the kind of question that made sense within their world's assumptions about suffering: "Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" It is worth noticing that Jesus does not simply correct their theology and move on. He gives them a third option they had not considered — that this man's blindness existed neither as a punishment for his sin nor his parents', but so that the works of God might be displayed in him. Suffering, in other words, is not always a ledger entry for some prior wrong. Sometimes it is simply the raw material God intends to use for his own glory, in his own time.

Jesus makes mud with his own saliva, applies it to the man's eyes, and sends him to wash in the Pool of Siloam. He obeys, and comes back seeing. What follows is one of the most carefully drawn character studies anywhere in the Gospels — the healed man is questioned, re-questioned, badgered, and finally excommunicated by religious leaders who cannot deny that a genuine miracle occurred but refuse, on principle, to consider its source. Notice the man's own growth across the interrogation. At first he can only report the bare facts: "the man they call Jesus made mud and put it on my eyes." Pressed further, he calls Jesus a prophet. Pressed further still, exasperated by leaders trying to put words in his mouth, he

turns the tables on them: "Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples too?" By the end of the chapter, when Jesus finds him after the synagogue has cast him out, the man's confession is complete: "Lord, I believe," and he worships him. It is one of the clearest pictures in this Gospel of what real faith looks like when it is tested rather than simply given — it does not arrive all at once, fully formed, but grows verse by verse as the evidence and the pressure mount together.

The Pharisees, meanwhile, represent the opposite trajectory. They have more evidence than almost anyone else in the story — the testimony of neighbors, of the man's own parents, of the man himself, told and retold with total consistency — and they use all of it to dig in more deeply rather than to reconsider. Their objection is not really about facts; it is that the healing happened on the Sabbath, and if they were to accept it, everything else they had built their authority on would come under threat. Jesus draws out the real diagnosis at the very end of the chapter: "If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains." The most dangerous kind of blindness, in other words, is the kind that insists it can see perfectly well.

It is fitting, then, that chapter ten follows immediately with Jesus describing himself as the Good Shepherd, drawing a sharp contrast with the very leaders who had just cast a healed man out of the synagogue for telling the truth. A thief comes only to steal, kill, and destroy; a hired hand runs at the first sign of danger because the sheep were never really his. The Good Shepherd, by contrast, knows

his sheep by name, and they know his voice — and he lays down his life for them, not because anyone takes it from him, but because he lays it down of his own accord, with authority to take it up again. Everything the Pharisees had just demonstrated toward the blind man — indifference to his welfare, willingness to sacrifice him to protect their own position — Jesus now holds up against his own character, and the contrast could not be sharper.

Later, at the Feast of Dedication, walking in the temple's Colonnade of Solomon, Jesus is confronted directly: "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly." His answer includes one of the most secure promises anywhere in Scripture: "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. I and the Father are one." Two Greek negatives are stacked together in that promise — "never perish" is, more literally, "never, never perish" — an emphatic double negative that Greek grammar allows and English does not quite capture in ordinary translation. There is no ambiguity in what Jesus is claiming: those who are truly his are held by both the Son's hand and the Father's, and no power, human or otherwise, is capable of prying them loose.

It is worth pausing on the security of that promise, because it is easy to read the Christian life mainly in terms of our own effort — our own faithfulness, our own perseverance, our own ability to hold on. Jesus does not frame it that way here. The emphasis falls entirely

on his own grip and the Father's, not on the sheep's grip on the shepherd. That does not make holiness or perseverance optional; it means the ultimate guarantee of a believer's final salvation rests on someone stronger and more faithful than the believer's own will.

The claim provokes exactly the response you would expect. "I and the Father are one" leads immediately to stones being picked up again. When Jesus asks which of his many good works from the Father deserves stoning, the Jews clarify that it is not the works — it is the claim to be God while being merely a man. Jesus' reply is a small masterpiece of scriptural argument: he quotes Psalm 82, where God himself calls corrupt human judges "gods," and reasons from the lesser to the greater — if Scripture can apply that word to unjust rulers without being broken, how can it be blasphemy for the one the Father sanctified and sent into the world to call himself the Son of God? He does not back away from the claim. He roots it more deeply in the very Scriptures his accusers claimed to revere.

The chapter ends quietly, almost as a breath before the storm to come — Jesus withdraws across the Jordan, to the place where John had first baptized, and many there believe, not because of any miracle, but because everything John had said about Jesus turned out to be true. It is a small, understated confirmation, tucked between two chapters full of conflict: sometimes the most durable faith takes root not in a moment of spectacle, but in the slow discovery that a trustworthy witness was telling the truth all along.

For Reflection

13. The healed blind man's understanding of Jesus grew step by step under real pressure, while the Pharisees' certainty hardened against growing evidence. Which pattern more closely describes how your own faith tends to respond to hard questions?
14. Jesus said no one could snatch his sheep out of his hand or the Father's. How much of your own confidence before God currently rests on your grip on him rather than his grip on you?
15. The people who believed near the Jordan did so because a trustworthy witness had told them the truth, without any accompanying miracle. Who has been that kind of steady, truthful witness in your own life?

CHAPTER SIX

The Resurrection and the Life

John 11–12

Word reaches Jesus that his friend Lazarus is sick, sent by Mary and Martha in the kind of message that assumes urgency will be obvious: "Lord, the one you love is sick." John tells us plainly that Jesus loved Martha, her sister, and Lazarus — and then, in the very next breath, tells us that when he heard Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days. It is one of the more startling transitions in this Gospel. Love, here, does not look like what we would expect love to look like. Jesus was not indifferent and he was not too late by accident; he stayed away on purpose, because, as he tells his disciples, this sickness would not end in death but would result in God's glory, so that the Son of God might be glorified through it.

By the time Jesus arrives in Bethany, Lazarus has already been dead four days. Martha comes out to meet him first, and what she says is a remarkable mixture of faith and its limits in the very same breath: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask." She believes Jesus could have prevented this. She does not yet believe he can reverse it. Jesus answers her with one of the seven great "I am" statements of this Gospel: "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

Martha's answer is a genuine, deeply held confession — "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God" — and yet, when Jesus asks a few minutes later for the stone to be rolled away from the tomb, this same woman objects on purely practical grounds: by now there will be a bad smell. It is worth sitting with how quickly a confident confession of faith can be followed by a very human hesitation once faith is actually asked to act. Martha is not a hypocrite so much as she is ordinary — capable of believing something is true in one breath and doubting it will hold in the next.

John tells us, famously, that Jesus wept (11:35) — the shortest verse in most English Bibles, and one of the most quoted. It is worth asking what, exactly, moved him to tears, since he already knew he was about to raise Lazarus within minutes. The text gives us a clue in the word John uses just before it: Jesus was "deeply moved in spirit and troubled" when he saw Mary and the Jews with her weeping — language that elsewhere in Scripture carries a note of indignation as much as sorrow. Whatever the precise mixture of grief and something sharper in that moment, what surrounded Jesus at that tomb was not merely mourning. It was mourning shot through with unbelief — people who had seen him open the eyes of a man born blind and still asked, "Could not he have kept this man from dying?" — as though preventing death were the outer limit of what they could imagine him doing. Even Martha and Mary, who loved him and trusted him, had not yet grasped that the one standing in front of them was not simply a healer arriving too late, but the resurrection and the life itself, standing at the edge of a grave he was about to empty.

"Lazarus, come out!" And he does — bound hand and foot in strips of linen, his face wrapped in a cloth, walking. Jesus' instruction to those standing by is almost comically practical after such a display of power: "Take off the grave clothes and let him go." Many who see this believe. Others go straight to the Pharisees, and from that meeting comes one of the strangest prophecies in Scripture. The chief priests and Pharisees, afraid that a growing following for Jesus will provoke Rome to crush their nation, are told by the high priest Caiaphas that it would be better for one man to die for the people than for the whole nation to perish. John adds a striking editorial note: Caiaphas did not say this on his own, but prophesied — without knowing it — that Jesus would die for the nation, and not only for that nation, but to bring together the scattered children of God. A man plotting a murder becomes, without intending it, the mouthpiece of God's own redemptive plan. From that day, the leaders begin planning in earnest to kill him.

Six days before the Passover, Jesus returns to Bethany, to a dinner given in his honor, and Mary — the same woman who once sat at his feet listening while her sister served — does something almost extravagant to the point of scandal. She takes about a pint of pure nard, worth roughly a year's wages, breaks it open, and pours the entire thing over Jesus, wiping his feet with her hair, filling the house with its fragrance. Judas objects, framing his complaint as concern for the poor, though John tells us plainly this was cover for a thief helping himself from the disciples' money box. Jesus defends her without qualification: "Leave her alone... She bought it so that

she might save it for the day of my burial." Of everyone in this Gospel who has heard Jesus predict his own death, Mary may be the only one who actually believed him enough to act on it. She had, perhaps without fully understanding what she was doing, prepared his body for burial while he was still very much alive to receive her gift.

The very next day, Jesus enters Jerusalem the way Zechariah's prophecy said its King would come — not on a warhorse, but on a young donkey — and the crowds greet him with palm branches and shouts of "Hosanna," a word that means, quite literally, "save now." It is worth noticing the layered irony here. The crowd is right that a King is entering the city; they are almost entirely wrong about what kind of salvation he has come to bring, and within days many of these same voices, or voices very much like them, will be shouting for his crucifixion instead. Even his own disciples, John tells us candidly, did not understand these things at the time — only after Jesus had been glorified did they remember that these very things had been written about him and had been done to him.

Among the pilgrims in Jerusalem for the feast are some Greeks — Gentiles drawn, however imperfectly, toward the God of Israel — who come to Philip with a request that could not be simpler: "Sir, we would like to see Jesus." Their arrival seems to signal something to Jesus, a widening of the circle that had until now been focused almost entirely on his own people. "The hour has come," he says, "for the Son of Man to be glorified" — the first time in this Gospel he uses that language of his own hour without qualification, as

though the presence of these Gentile seekers were itself a sign that the moment for his death had finally arrived. He describes what that death will accomplish in an image any farmer in his audience would have understood instantly: "unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds." His own death, far from ending his mission, is the very means by which it will multiply.

What follows is a moment of visible, human dread — "Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour." He does not pretend the cost is nothing. He simply refuses to let the cost turn him back. And then, remarkably, a voice comes from heaven confirming what he has just said — "I have glorified it, and will glorify it again" — a voice the crowd hears but largely dismisses as thunder. Jesus tells them the voice was for their benefit, not his own; he already knew what the Father would say.

John closes this stretch of the Gospel with a hard and sobering observation. Even after all these signs, most of the people still would not believe in him — and John explains this, remarkably, by quoting the prophet Isaiah, who had written centuries earlier that the Lord had blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts so that they would not turn and be healed. It is one of the more difficult passages in this Gospel to sit with, because it suggests that unbelief here was not merely a human failure but, in some sense, part of a sovereign purpose — one that Scripture had anticipated long before it happened. And yet in the very next breath, John tells us that many,

even among the leaders, did believe in him, but would not confess it openly for fear of being expelled from the synagogue, "for they loved human praise more than praise from God." Belief and unbelief, in these final verses of Jesus' public ministry, sit side by side — some hardened beyond their own choosing, others genuinely persuaded and still too afraid to say so out loud. Jesus' own summary of his mission, given as a kind of closing statement to the crowds, could hardly be more direct: "I have come into the world as a light, so that no one who believes in me should stay in darkness... I did not come to judge the world, but to save it." The invitation, right up to the final page of his public ministry, remains exactly what it was at the very beginning of this Gospel — to come out of the darkness and believe in the light while there is still time to do so.

For Reflection

16. Jesus stayed away from Lazarus for two more days precisely because he loved his friends. Where in your own life might God be withholding an immediate answer not because he does not love you, but because he does?
17. Martha confessed Jesus as the Christ and, minutes later, doubted whether he could really do what she had just confessed. Where does your own faith tend to hold up well in words but waver when it is asked to act?
18. Mary's extravagant gift and Judas's calculated objection came from the same room, aimed at the same moment.

What would it look like for you to give Christ something that costs more than seems reasonable?

CHAPTER SEVEN

Love One Another

John 13–15

Before he explains anything, Jesus does something. He gets up from supper, takes off his outer clothing, wraps a towel around his waist, and washes his disciples' feet — the task normally reserved for the lowest household servant, performed here by the one man in the room with the standing to refuse it. John tells us exactly why he was free to do this: Jesus knew that the Father had put everything under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God. That knowledge — not uncertainty about his own worth, not a need to prove anything — is what made this kind of humility possible. He did not wash their feet out of desperation to be liked or out of insecurity about his own status. He washed their feet because his security in the Father freed him to give himself away without keeping score.

That principle is worth pausing on, because most of us find humble service difficult for the opposite reason. We serve grudgingly, or resentfully, or with one eye on whether anyone noticed, precisely because some part of us is trying to establish or defend our own worth through the service itself. Jesus shows us a different pattern entirely — a man so settled in who he was before the Father that he had nothing left to protect. When Peter objects to having his feet washed by his own Lord, Jesus tells him plainly that unless he is washed, he has no part with him; when Peter

overcorrects and asks for a full bath, Jesus gently redirects him. The point was never really about clean feet. It was about a Lord willing to kneel before his own disciples, one of whom — as John reminds us almost in the same breath — was about to betray him for money.

Judas leaves to do exactly that, and once he is gone, Jesus turns to the eleven who remain and gives them something new: "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." It is not a new idea in the abstract — the command to love one's neighbor goes back to Leviticus — but the standard attached to it is entirely new: not love as you love yourself, but love as Christ has loved you, which means love willing to kneel, love willing to be betrayed, love willing, within hours, to be nailed to a cross. Peter, characteristically, responds with more confidence than self-knowledge: "Lord, why can't I follow you now? I will lay down my life for you." Jesus' answer must have landed like cold water: "Will you really lay down your life for me? Very truly I tell you, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times."

It is against that unsettling prediction that Jesus speaks the words that have comforted more grieving and frightened believers than perhaps any other passage in Scripture: "Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. My Father's house has many rooms... I am going there to prepare a place for you." When Thomas, honest as always, admits he does not know where Jesus is going or how to find the way, Jesus answers with the

fifth of his great "I am" statements: "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." It is one of the most exclusive claims in all of religious literature, and John does not soften it or qualify it. There is, in Jesus' own words, no other road to the Father. Whatever discomfort that claim causes a modern reader accustomed to treating all spiritual paths as more or less equivalent, it is precisely the claim this entire Gospel has been building toward from its opening line — that the Word who was with God and was God has now made the Father known, and that knowing him is not one way among many to know the Father, but the way.

Jesus promises something else before he leaves — a Helper, the Holy Spirit, who will not simply visit them the way Jesus himself had, but will actually dwell within them. "I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you." And then a promise that has steadied believers through every kind of loss since: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid." This is not the peace of circumstances working out. Jesus says this only hours before his own arrest and death — the peace he offers is not the absence of trouble but a settledness that does not depend on trouble's absence.

Chapter fifteen shifts the imagery from a house with many rooms to a vineyard: "I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener... Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear

fruit unless you remain in me." The dependence Jesus describes is not casual or occasional. A branch does not visit the vine now and then for encouragement; it draws its very life from the vine continuously, and apart from that connection it can do nothing at all — not "little," but nothing. This ought to reframe how a Christian thinks about spiritual fruitfulness. Good works done in Christ's name but disconnected from real, ongoing dependence on him are not simply less impressive versions of the real thing. Jesus is plain that they cannot happen at all; whatever looks like fruit apart from abiding in him is not fruit he recognizes as his own.

There is also, in this image, an honest account of pain that belongs to a fruitful life. The Father, Jesus says, prunes every branch that does bear fruit, so that it will be even more fruitful — a picture of God's discipline that does not wait for failure before it cuts, but actively shapes even a healthy, productive life toward greater fruitfulness still. Scripture elsewhere confirms that this pruning, however painful in the moment, is never punitive for the believer; it is the ordinary means by which God conforms his children to the likeness of his Son. A Christian who expects growth without any cutting has misunderstood the vineyard.

Jesus closes this section of teaching with both a promise and a warning held in the same breath. "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love... I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you." And yet in almost the next sentence: "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first... they will treat you this way

because of my name, for they do not know the one who sent me." Love from Christ and hostility from the world are not, in Jesus' telling, two separate possibilities a disciple might or might not encounter. They come together, almost as a package — the deeper a person's friendship with Christ, the more likely that same person is to feel, at some point, the world's discomfort with what that friendship exposes about itself.

For Reflection

19. Jesus was free to wash his disciples' feet because he was secure in the Father's love, not because he had anything to prove. What would change in how you serve others if you served from that same settledness rather than from a need to be noticed or approved?
20. "I am the way and the truth and the life" is one of the most exclusive claims Jesus ever made. Does your own faith in him rest easily with that exclusivity, or is it something you find yourself quietly softening?
21. Jesus described pruning as something the Father does even to branches that are already bearing fruit. What painful cutting has God done, or is God doing, in your life right now — and can you see it as the Gardener's care rather than his displeasure?

CHAPTER EIGHT

I Have Overcome the World

John 16–18

Jesus continues the conversation he began in the upper room, preparing eleven frightened men for a departure they do not yet understand. "It is for your good that I am going away," he tells them — a claim that must have sounded almost unbelievable in the moment. How could his leaving possibly be good news? Because, he explains, unless he goes, the Advocate will not come; but if he goes, he will send him. The Spirit's arrival is not a consolation prize for Jesus' absence. It is an upgrade in kind — a Helper who will not merely accompany the disciples the way Jesus had, but who will actually indwell them, convicting the world of sin and righteousness and judgment, guiding them into all truth, and taking what belongs to Jesus and making it known to them.

Jesus is careful, in this same conversation, to name exactly what his disciples are about to feel: "You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy." He reaches for an image every person in that room would have understood instinctively — a woman in labor, in real anguish, who forgets the pain entirely once her child is born, because joy at new life has replaced it so completely. The disciples' sorrow at his crucifixion would be genuine and searing. It would also be temporary, swallowed up by a joy no one would be able to take from them once the resurrection made itself known.

The disciples, hearing him speak so plainly now instead of in figures of speech, respond with real confidence: "Now we can see that you know all things... this makes us believe that you came from God." Jesus' answer is almost gently ironic: "Do you now believe? A time is coming, and in fact has come, when you will be scattered, each to your own home." Their sincerity is not in question. Their self-knowledge is. It is worth noticing how often, across these final chapters, bold declarations of loyalty are followed almost immediately by failure — not because the disciples were dishonest, but because none of them yet understood how little their own resolve could be trusted to hold under real pressure. And yet Jesus does not leave them with that sobering diagnosis as his final word. "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." Whatever comes — betrayal, scattering, a cross — Jesus has already won the war the world is still fighting.

Chapter seventeen slows everything down. Having finished instructing his disciples, Jesus turns to prayer, and John gives us the fullest, most personal prayer of Jesus recorded anywhere in Scripture. It moves in three clear movements. First, Jesus prays for himself — not for comfort or rescue, but that the Father would glorify him, so that he in turn might glorify the Father, completing the work he had been given to do. Second, he prays for the eleven who remain — and it is striking how often, in just a few verses, Jesus describes these men as belonging to the Father first, given to him: "the men you gave me out of the world... I have revealed you to those you gave me... they were yours; you gave them to me." The

relationship runs, at every point, back to the Father's own initiative. These men did not simply choose to follow a compelling teacher; in Jesus' own account of it, they were given. Third, Jesus widens his prayer further still, to everyone who would ever come to believe through the disciples' witness — praying not primarily for their comfort or success, but for their unity, "that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you... that the world may believe that you have sent me."

It is worth sitting with what Jesus prays for, and what he does not. He does not ask the Father to remove his followers from a hostile world; he asks the Father to protect them within it, and to sanctify them by the truth of his word. He does not pray primarily for their ease. He prays for their holiness, their unity, and their witness — three things a comfortable life does not automatically produce, and that a difficult one does not automatically prevent. It is a prayer that reorders what we might instinctively ask for on behalf of the people we love. We tend to pray first for their protection from hardship. Jesus prayed first for their faithfulness within it.

Then comes the garden. Jesus crosses the Kidron Valley with his disciples to a place he had often gone with them — a detail John includes almost in passing, but one that carries real weight: Judas knew exactly where to find him, because Jesus had made no attempt to hide. Judas arrives with soldiers and officials carrying torches, lanterns, and weapons, prepared, it seems, for a manhunt. What they find instead is a man who steps forward and identifies himself before anyone can even ask: "Who is it you want?" "Jesus of

Nazareth." "I am he." At that answer — again, the divine name pressed into a simple sentence — the whole detachment draws back and falls to the ground. Even at the moment of his arrest, Jesus is not the one being overpowered. He is the one in command of the scene, and he uses that command not to escape but to protect his disciples: "If you are looking for me, then let these men go."

Peter, true to form, draws a sword and strikes the high priest's servant, cutting off his ear. Jesus rebukes him immediately: "Put your sword away! Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?" It is a small window into what actually restrained Jesus from resisting his own arrest. It was not weakness, and it was not resignation. It was a settled willingness to receive from his Father's hand precisely what the Father had appointed for him — the same posture he had shown hours earlier in this same garden, praying that the Father's will, not his own, would be done. A man secure enough in his Father's plan does not need to fight his way out of it.

Jesus is bound and taken first to Annas, the former high priest and father-in-law of the sitting high priest Caiaphas — a detour that seems designed more to intimidate than to establish any legal case. Annas questions him about his disciples and his teaching, and Jesus, refusing to be cornered into self-incrimination, points out that he has always taught openly, in synagogues and in the temple, where anyone could have listened; let those who heard him testify to what he said. An official standing nearby strikes him for the perceived disrespect of the answer — a small, ugly detail that captures how

quickly official process gives way to raw hostility once a room has already decided on its verdict.

Meanwhile, in the courtyard below, Peter's own trial is unfolding in miniature. Warming himself by a charcoal fire, he is asked three times whether he is one of this man's disciples, and three times he denies it — the last time to a relative of the very man whose ear he had cut off in the garden. John does not editorialize; he simply lets the rooster crow, exactly as Jesus had said it would. It is one of the most quietly devastating moments in this Gospel, precisely because it needs no commentary. The disciple who had promised, hours earlier, to lay down his life for Jesus could not even admit, to a servant girl by a fire, that he knew him.

From Annas, Jesus is sent on to Pilate, and the chapter closes with the opening moves of a trial that will occupy the next several pages of this Gospel — Jewish leaders unwilling even to enter the Roman governor's residence for fear of ceremonial defilement on the eve of Passover, while they press for the execution of an innocent man. The irony is almost too pointed to miss: men careful enough about ritual purity to avoid a Gentile's doorstep, and unconcerned enough about actual justice to demand an innocent man's death. Whatever else these final chapters will show us, they have already begun to show us this — that religious scruple and genuine righteousness are not always, in fact, the same thing.

For Reflection

22. Jesus told his disciples their grief would turn to joy, using the image of a woman forgetting her labor pains once her child is born. What grief are you currently carrying that you are struggling to trust will one day give way to joy?
23. In his longest recorded prayer, Jesus asked first for his disciples' holiness and unity, not primarily for their comfort. When you pray for the people you love, which do you tend to ask for first?
24. Peter could not admit, to a servant girl by a fire, that he knew Jesus — hours after promising to die for him. Where has your own courage failed to match your convictions, and how does Jesus' later restoration of Peter give you hope for that same failure?

CHAPTER NINE

It Is Finished

John 19–21

Pilate finds no basis for a charge against Jesus and still has him flogged — perhaps hoping that a bloodied, humiliated man might satisfy the crowd's hostility without requiring an execution. It does not work. When the Jewish leaders finally play their strongest card — "If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar" — Pilate's political calculation wins out over whatever justice he might have preferred. Before that, though, comes a strange, almost private exchange inside the governor's residence. Pilate, unsettled by the crowd's claim that Jesus called himself the Son of God, asks him directly where he is from. Jesus says nothing. Pressed further — "Do you refuse to speak to me? Don't you realize I have power either to free you or crucify you?" — Jesus finally answers, and his answer reframes the entire scene: "You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above. Therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin."

That single sentence carries more theology than its brevity suggests. Jesus does not deny Pilate's authority; he relocates its source. Whatever power Rome holds over him in this moment has been permitted from above, not seized in spite of God. And Jesus' comment about "a greater sin" quietly overturns a notion that circulates among Christians even now — the idea that all sins are somehow equal in God's sight. Scripture nowhere teaches this. The

Law itself graded penalties by severity; Jesus told the religious leaders elsewhere that they had neglected the "weightier matters" of justice, mercy, and faithfulness, implying that some matters carry more weight than others; and here, at the foot of his own cross, he tells the Roman governor plainly that the ones who handed him over bear the greater guilt. This does not make Pilate innocent — no one leaves this scene innocent — but it does tell us something about how God himself weighs human wrongdoing: not on a single flat scale, but according to knowledge, intent, and office. The chief priests, who knew the Scriptures and had every reason to recognize their own Messiah, bore a heavier judgment than a Roman official caught in a political bind he barely understood.

Jesus is led away and crucified between two criminals, with a sign above his head, written in three languages so that no one passing by could miss it: Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews. The soldiers cast lots for his clothing, unknowingly fulfilling a psalm written a thousand years earlier (Psalm 22:18). From the cross, in the middle of his own execution, Jesus notices his mother standing nearby and entrusts her care to the disciple he loved — even in his dying hours, tending to the people in front of him rather than being consumed entirely by his own suffering.

Then, having received a little wine vinegar, Jesus says one word that carries the weight of the entire Gospel behind it: "It is finished." In Greek, it is a single term, *tetelestai* — the word used on a completed bill to mark a debt as paid in full. It was not the exhausted sigh of a dying man relieved that his suffering was ending. It was a

declaration, spoken with intention, that everything the Father had sent him to accomplish had, in fact, been accomplished. The prophecies stretching back to Genesis had found their fulfillment. The suffering appointed for him had been endured to its very last measure. The atonement his people needed — the debt no sinner could pay — had been paid in full, by the only one capable of paying it. Nothing remained to be added, by him or by anyone else. Having said this, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

It is worth pausing over what that word does not leave room for. If the work of atonement was finished on the cross, then no ritual, no effort, no accumulated goodness on our part is needed to complete what Christ already completed. The invitation to every reader of this Gospel, from its opening verses to this one, has never been to add something to Christ's finished work. It has only ever been to receive, by faith, what has already been done.

Because it is the eve of the Sabbath, the Jewish leaders ask for the bodies to be removed quickly, and the soldiers break the legs of the two criminals to hasten their deaths — but finding Jesus already dead, they do not break his, and instead pierce his side with a spear, so that blood and water flow out. John insists on the eyewitness reliability of this detail with unusual emphasis, because it fulfills two more ancient prophecies at once — not one of his bones would be broken (Psalm 34:20), and they would look on the one they had pierced (Zechariah 12:10). Two secret disciples, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus — the same Nicodemus who once came to Jesus by night — step forward publicly now, at real personal risk,

to give him a burial worthy of a king, wrapping his body with seventy-five pounds of spices in the Jewish custom, and laying him in a new tomb that had never been used.

It should have ended there. It does not. Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb while it is still dark and finds the stone rolled away; her first assumption, understandably, is theft rather than resurrection — "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!" Peter and John run to see for themselves; John, arriving first but waiting for Peter, sees the linen cloths lying there, undisturbed, the burial cloth for Jesus' head folded separately — not the scene a grave robber leaves behind. John believed, though even he, as the text admits, did not yet fully understand the Scriptures that said Jesus must rise from the dead. Mary, remaining at the tomb after the others leave, becomes the first person in history to see the risen Christ, though at first she mistakes him for the gardener. It takes only one word — her own name, spoken by the voice she knew — for recognition to break through: "Mary." "Rabboni!"

That evening, Jesus appears to the disciples behind locked doors, showing them his hands and his side, breathing on them, and commissioning them with peace. Thomas, absent that night, refuses to believe secondhand testimony, however many people report it: unless he sees the nail marks himself and touches them, he will not believe. A week later, Jesus obliges him precisely, without rebuke for the demand, only a gentle redirection afterward: "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and

yet have believed." That last phrase reaches directly across the centuries to every reader of this Gospel who was never going to have the chance Thomas had. John then tells us, in words that could serve as a summary of everything he has been doing since chapter one, exactly why he wrote this account at all: Jesus performed many other signs not recorded here, "but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." Every wedding, every confrontation, every "I am," every sign in this book has been building toward that one sentence. This Gospel was never meant to leave a reader simply better informed about a remarkable historical figure. It was written to produce belief, and through belief, life.

The final chapter takes us to the shore of Galilee, where seven disciples, restless and unsure what comes next, go fishing and catch nothing all night. A stranger on the shore tells them to cast their net on the other side of the boat; they do, and cannot haul in the catch for the sheer weight of fish — a scene close enough to an earlier miracle (Luke 5) that John recognizes him first: "It is the Lord!" Peter, characteristically, does not wait for the boat. He jumps into the water. After breakfast on the beach, Jesus turns to Peter with a question that must have landed like a scalpel: "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" Three times he asks, echoing — surely not by accident — the three times Peter had denied him by a charcoal fire only days before. Each time Peter answers yes, and each time Jesus responds not with reassurance alone but with a commission: "Feed my lambs. Take care of my sheep. Feed my sheep." Restoration, in Jesus' hands, does not look like a private

word of comfort whispered to a guilty man. It looks like being handed responsibility again — trusted with exactly the kind of work Peter's failure might have seemed to disqualify him from.

Peter, still human, cannot resist asking about someone else's future — "Lord, what about him?" — pointing to John. Jesus' answer is almost brusque: "If I want him to remain until I come, what is that to you? You must follow me." It is a small, sharp correction against a temptation every believer knows well — comparing our calling, our burdens, our fruitfulness to someone else's, as though God owed us an explanation for why another disciple's path looks different from our own. The only question that ever really belongs to us is the one Jesus puts to Peter here: not what will happen to them, but will you follow me.

John closes his Gospel with a confession of his own limitations, one that feels entirely fitting for a book that never claimed to say everything: "Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written." He has told us enough. Not everything there was to tell — enough. Enough for a Pharisee to be born again, enough for a woman at a well to become a missionary to her whole town, enough for a blind man to worship, enough for Thomas to stop doubting, enough, John hopes, for every reader who reaches this final page to close the book not simply informed, but believing — and, in that believing, alive.

For Reflection

25. Jesus told Pilate that his authority had been given "from above," even while it was being used to condemn an innocent man. Where in your own life is it hardest to trust that God remains sovereign, even over circumstances that feel unjust?
26. "It is finished" means there is nothing left for you to add to what Christ accomplished on the cross. Is there some part of your life where you are still quietly trying to finish what he already completed?
27. Jesus restored Peter not with private comfort alone but by recommissioning him to feed his sheep. Where has God restored you after failure by giving you renewed responsibility rather than simply reassurance — and how did that change the way you understood your own forgiveness?

Conclusion

John wrote his Gospel from the far side of a long life, decades removed from the events he describes, and he tells us plainly what he was after in writing it down: not a complete record — he says himself that the world could not hold all the books it would take to tell everything Jesus did — but enough. Enough for a reader who never touched his wounds or heard his voice to believe anyway, and in that believing, to have the same life his first disciples found in following him.

We titled this volume *The Word Became Flesh* because that is where John begins and, in a sense, never really leaves. Every sign, every "I am," every conversation in these twenty-one chapters is commentary on that single claim from the prologue — that God, whom no one has ever seen, has made himself known in a Person who could be touched, questioned, wept over, and finally, on the strength of an empty tomb, worshiped as Lord and God. Thomas said it best, and last, among the disciples: "My Lord and my God!" It took him longer than the others to get there, and Jesus did not shame him for the delay. He simply gave him what he needed to believe, and then, for every reader since who would never get that same chance, pronounced a blessing wider than the one he gave Thomas: blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.

That blessing is where this book has to end, because it is where John himself ends — not with a summary of doctrine, but with an invitation still open. Whatever else these pages have tried to explain

about signs and discourses and the shape of belief, the Gospel of John was never trying to make its readers better informed. It was trying to make them alive. We hope, if nothing else in this volume has done its work, that this much has: that you have met, in these twenty-one chapters, more than a historical figure worth admiring, and have come instead to the same place the fisherman, the Samaritan woman, the blind beggar, and the doubting disciple all eventually came to — believing, and, in that believing, alive in his name.

Appendix

One-Year Bible Reading Plan

Starred entries mark the daily readings covered in this volume.

1/10	Gen 1-3	1/11	Gen 4-7	1/12	Gen 8-11	1/13	Gen 12-15
1/14	Gen 16-18	1/15	Gen 19-21	1/16	Gen 22-24	1/17	Gen 25-26
1/18	Gen 27-29	1/19	Gen 30-31	1/20	Gen 32-34	1/21	Gen 35-37
1/22	Gen 38-40	1/23	Gen 41-42	1/24	Gen 43-45	1/25	Gen 46-47
1/26	Gen 48-50	1/27	Ex 1-3	1/28	Ex 4-6	1/29	Ex 7-9
1/30	Ex 10-12	1/31	Ex 13-15	2/1	Ex 16-18	2/2	Ex 19-21
2/3	Ex 22-24	2/4	Ex 25-27	2/5	Ex 28-29	2/6	Ex 30-32
2/7	Ex 33-35	2/8	Ex 36-38	2/9	Ex 39-40	2/10	Lev 1-4
2/11	Lev 5-7	2/12	Lev 8-10	2/13	Lev 11-13	2/14	Lev 14-15
2/15	Lev 16-18	2/16	Lev 19-21	2/17	Lev 22-23	2/18	Lev 24-25
2/19	Lev 26-27	2/20	Nu 1-2	2/21	Nu 3-4	2/22	Nu 5-6
2/23	Nu 7	2/24	Nu 8-10	2/25	Nu 11-13	2/26	Nu 14-15
2/27	Nu 16-17	2/28	Nu 18-20	3/1	Nu 21-22	3/2	Nu 23-25
3/3	Nu 26-27	3/4	Nu 28-30	3/5	Nu 31-32	3/6	Nu 33-34
3/7	Nu 35-36	3/8	Dt 1-2	3/9	Dt 3-4	3/10	Dt 5-7
3/11	Dt 8-10	3/12	Dt 11-13	3/13	Dt 14-16	3/14	Dt 17-20
3/15	Dt 21-23	3/16	Dt 24-27	3/17	Dt 28-29	3/18	Dt 30-31
3/19	Dt 32-34	3/20	Jos 1-4	3/21	Jos 5-8	3/22	Jos 9-11
3/23	Jos 12-15	3/24	Jos 16-18	3/25	Jos 19-21	3/26	Jos 22-24
3/27	Jdg 1-2	3/28	Jdg 3-5	3/29	Jdg 6-7	3/30	Jdg 8-9
3/31	Jdg 10-12	4/1	Jdg 13-15	4/2	Jdg 16-18	4/3	Jdg 19-21
4/4	Ruth	4/5	1 Sa 1-3	4/6	1 Sa 4-8	4/7	1 Sa 9-12
4/8	1 Sa 13-14	4/9	1 Sa 15-17	4/10	1 Sa 18-20	4/11	1 Sa 21-24
4/12	1 Sa 25-27	4/13	1 Sa 28-31	4/14	2 Sa 1-3	4/15	2 Sa 4-7
4/16	2 Sa 8-12	4/17	2 Sa 13-15	4/18	2 Sa 16-18	4/19	2 Sa 19-21
4/20	2 Sa 22-24	4/21	1 Ki 1-2	4/22	1 Ki 3-5	4/23	1 Ki 6-7
4/24	1 Ki 8-9	4/25	1 Ki 10-11	4/26	1 Ki 12-14	4/27	1 Ki 15-17

4/28	1 Ki 18-20	4/29	1 Ki 21-22	4/30	2 Ki 1-3	5/1	2 Ki 4-5
5/2	2 Ki 6-8	5/3	2 Ki 9-11	5/4	2 Ki 12-14	5/5	2 Ki 15-17
5/6	2 Ki 18-19	5/7	2 Ki 20-22	5/8	2 Ki 23-25	5/9	1 Ch 1-2
5/10	1 Ch 3-5	5/11	1 Ch 6	5/12	1 Ch 7-8	5/13	1 Ch 9-11
5/14	1 Ch 12-14	5/15	1 Ch 15-17	5/16	1 Ch 18-21	5/17	1 Ch 22-24
5/18	1 Ch 25-27	5/19	1 Ch 28-2 Ch 1	5/20	2 Ch 2-5	5/21	2 Ch 6-8
5/22	2 Ch 9-12	5/23	2 Ch 13-17	5/24	2 Ch 18-20	5/25	2 Ch 21-24
5/26	2 Ch 25-27	5/27	2 Ch 28-31	5/28	2 Ch 32-34	5/29	2 Ch 35-36
5/30	Ezr 1-3	5/31	Ezr 4-7	6/1	Ezr 8-10	6/2	Neh 1-3
6/3	Neh 4-6	6/4	Neh 7	6/5	Neh 8-9	6/6	Neh 10-11
6/7	Neh 12-13	6/8	Esth 1-5	6/9	Esth 6-10	6/10	Job 1-4
6/11	Job 5-7	6/12	Job 8-10	6/13	Job 11-13	6/14	Job 14-16
6/15	Job 17-20	6/16	Job 21-23	6/17	Job 24-28	6/18	Job 29-31
6/19	Job 32-34	6/20	Job 35-37	6/21	Job 38-39	6/22	Job 40-42
6/23	Ps 1-8	6/24	Ps 9-16	6/25	Ps 17-20	6/26	Ps 21-25
6/27	Ps 26-31	6/28	Ps 32-35	6/29	Ps 36-39	6/30	Ps 40-45
7/1	Ps 46-50	7/2	Ps 51-57	7/3	Ps 58-65	7/4	Ps 66-69
7/5	Ps 70-73	7/6	Ps 74-77	7/7	Ps 78-79	7/8	Ps 80-85
7/9	Ps 86-89	7/10	Ps 90-95	7/11	Ps 96-102	7/12	Ps 103-105
7/13	Ps 106-107	7/14	Ps 108-114	7/15	Ps 115-118	7/16	Ps 119:1-88
7/17	Ps 119:89-176	7/18	Ps 120-132	7/19	Ps 133-139	7/20	Ps 140-145
7/21	Ps 146-150	7/22	Prov 1-3	7/23	Prov 4-6	7/24	Prov 7-9
7/25	Prov 10-12	7/26	Prov 13-15	7/27	Prov 16-18	7/28	Prov 19-21
7/29	Prov 22-23	7/30	Prov 24-26	7/31	Prov 27-29	8/1	Prov 30-31
8/2	Ecc 1-4	8/3	Ecc 5-8	8/4	Ecc 9-12	8/5	Ss 1-8
8/6	Isa 1-4	8/7	Isa 5-8	8/8	Isa 9-12	8/9	Isa 13-17

8/10	Isa 18-22	8/11	Isa 23-27	8/12	Isa 28-30	8/13	Isa 31-35
8/14	Isa 36-41	8/15	Isa 42-44	8/16	Isa 45-48	8/17	Isa 49-53
8/18	Isa 54-58	8/19	Isa 59-63	8/20	Isa 64-66	8/21	Jer 1-3
8/22	Jer 4-6	8/23	Jer 7-9	8/24	Jer 10-13	8/25	Jer 14-17
8/26	Jer 18-22	8/27	Jer 23-25	8/28	Jer 26-29	8/29	Jer 30-31
8/30	Jer 32-34	8/31	Jer 35-37	9/1	Jer 38-41	9/2	Jer 42-45
9/3	Jer 46-48	9/4	Jer 49-50	9/5	Jer 51-52	9/6	Lam 1:1-3:36
9/7	Lam 3:37-5:22	9/8	Eze 1-4	9/9	Eze 5-8	9/10	Eze 9-12
9/11	Eze 13-15	9/12	Eze 16-17	9/13	Eze 18-20	9/14	Eze 21-22
9/15	Eze 23-24	9/16	Eze 25-27	9/17	Eze 28-30	9/18	Eze 31-33
9/19	Eze 34-36	9/20	Eze 37-39	9/21	Eze 40-42	9/22	Eze 43-45
9/23	Eze 46-48	9/24	Dan 1-3	9/25	Dan 4-6	9/26	Dan 7-9
9/27	Dan 10-12	9/28	Hos 1-7	9/29	Hos 8-14	9/30	Joel
10/1	Amos 1-5	10/2	Amos 6-9	10/3	Ob-Jonah	10/4	Micah
10/5	Nahum	10/6	Hab-Zeph	10/7	Haggai 1-2	10/8	Zech 1-7
10/9	Zech 8-14	10/10	Mal 1-4	10/11	Mat 1-4	10/12	Mat 5-6
10/13	Mat 7-8	10/14	Mat 9-10	10/15	Mat 11-12	10/16	Mat 13-14
10/17	Mat 15-17	10/18	Mat 18-19	10/19	Mat 20-21	10/20	Mat 22-23
10/21	Mat 24-25	10/22	Mat 26	10/23	Mat 27-28	10/24	Mark 1-3
10/25	Mark 4-5	10/26	Mark 6-7	10/27	Mark 8-9	10/28	Mark 10-11
10/29	Mark 12-13	10/30	Mark 14	10/31	Mark 15-16	11/1	Luke 1
11/2	Luke 2-3	11/3	Luke 4-5	11/4	Luke 6-7	11/5	Luke 8-9
11/6	Luke 10-11	11/7	Luke 12-13	11/8	Luke 14-16	11/9	Luke 17-18
11/10	Luke 19-20	11/11	Luke 21-22	11/12	Luke 23-24	11/13	John 1-2
11/14	John 3-4	11/15	John 5-6	11/16	John 7-8	11/17	John 9-10
11/18	John 11-12	11/19	John 13-15	11/20	John 16-18	11/21	John 19-21
11/22	Acts 1-3	11/23	Acts 4-6	11/24	Acts 7-8	11/25	Acts 9-10

11/26	Acts 11-13	11/27	Acts 14-15	11/28	Acts 16-17	11/29	Acts 18-20
11/30	Acts 21-23	12/1	Acts 24-26	12/2	Acts 27-28	12/3	Rom 1-3
12/4	Rom 4-7	12/5	Rom 8-10	12/6	Rom 11-13	12/7	Rom 14-16
12/8	1 Cor 1-4	12/9	1 Cor 5-8	12/10	1 Cor 9-11	12/11	1 Cor 12-14
12/12	1 Cor 15-16	12/13	2 Cor 1-4	12/14	2 Cor 5-9	12/15	2 Cor 10-13
12/16	Gal 1-3	12/17	Gal 4-6	12/18	Eph 1-3	12/19	Eph 4-6
12/20	Phi 1-4	12/21	Col 1-4	12/22	1 Thess 1-5	12/23	2 Thess 1-3
12/24	1 Tim 1-6	12/25	2 Tim 1-4	12/26	Titus-Phm	12/27	Heb 1-6
12/28	Heb 7-10	12/29	Heb 11-13	12/30	James	12/31	1 Pe
1/1	2 Pe	1/2	1 John	1/3	2 John-Jude	1/4	Rev 1-3
1/5	Rev 4-8	1/6	Rev 9-12	1/7	Rev 13-16	1/8	Rev 17-19
1/9	Rev 20-22						