

PREACHERS' STUDY PAPERS

JOHN'S GOSPEL

BOOK 1

CHAPTERS 1 - 4:42

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These are the first Preachers' Study Papers that we have undertaken for one of the Gospels. The style and purpose of every book in the Bible is different. In the epistles, for example, each Study Paper has covered a self-contained passage that has not been too lengthy. In John's Gospel the studies cover much longer passages, often a full chapter. This is necessary in order to keep the unity of the theme that John is presenting to his readers.

We have followed the same format as in our previous Preachers' Study Papers. That is to study every phrase and verse so that we get a clear understanding of what the author is writing under the inspiration of God's Spirit. When the full meaning of the passage is grasped then we can begin to think about how to put a sermon together.

Some of the studies are long, covering many verses. Once the exegesis of the passage is completed then the material could be preached through using more than one sermon. However great care needs to be taken to ensure that the sermons do not wander off the overall theme of the passage.

The finished study book is of a different style. It is no longer wire bound but stitched. The reason for this is that we have to seek more economical ways of printing larger quantities. It is very pleasing to see how widely the Study Papers are being put to use. It has been a balancing act to produce a stitched book that can be easily kept opened for study; this then limits the number of pages. With the length of the material in John's Gospel we have only managed to fit in six studies that takes us halfway into chapter four.

We are grateful to John Peet who has provided us with the initial material that forms the basis of these studies. John was an elder in his church for more than 20 years before retiring and has travelled to many countries lecturing and teaching on biblical creation.

Our prayer is that the studies will help the reader to see and believe in a deeper way the reality and power of Jesus Christ, as the Son of God who has come as the rescuer of sinners.

Grace Baptist Mission
2012

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Abbreviations for Bible Books

Old Testament

Genesis	Gen.	Ecclesiastes	Eccl.
Exodus	Ex.	The Song of Solomon	Song
Leviticus	Lev.	Isaiah	Is.
Numbers	Num.	Jeremiah	Jer.
Deuteronomy	Deut.	Lamentations	Lam.
Joshua	Josh.	Ezekiel	Ezek.
Judges	Judg.	Daniel	Dan.
Ruth	Ruth	Hosea	Hos.
1 Samuel	1 Sam.	Joel	Joel
2 Samuel	2 Sam.	Amos	Amos
1 Kings	1 Kings	Obadiah	Obad.
2 Kings	2 Kings	Jonah	Jonah
1 Chronicles	1 Chr.	Micah	Mic.
2 Chronicles	2 Chr.	Nahum	Nah.
Ezra	Ezra	Habakkuk	Hab.
Nehemiah	Neh.	Zephaniah	Zeph.
Esther	Esth.	Haggai	Hag.
Job	Job	Zechariah	Zech.
Psalms	Ps.	Malachi	Mal.
Proverbs	Prov.		

New Testament

Matthew	Matt.	1 Timothy	1 Tim.
Mark	Mark	2 Timothy	2 Tim.
Luke	Luke	Titus	Titus
John	John	Philemon	Philm.
The Acts	Acts	Hebrews	Heb.
Romans	Rom.	James	James
1 Corinthians	1 Co.	1 Peter	1 Pet.
2 Corinthians	2 Co.	2 Peter	2 Pet.
Galatians	Gal.	1 John	1 John
Ephesians	Eph.	2 John	2 John
Philippians	Phil.	3 John	3 John
Colossians	Col.	Jude	Jude
1 Thessalonians	1 Thess.	Revelation	Rev.
2 Thessalonians	2 Thess.		

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Map showing places mentioned in John's Gospel chapters 1-4



Introduction to John's Gospel



The real Jesus

This Gospel was written by the apostle John. Though this is not stated explicitly, we can be fairly certain that this is the case. There are a number of clues to this. There is a long tradition in the church community that this is the case. In fact it goes right back to the time of John's own disciples. Irenaeus¹ says it was written by John at Ephesus. There is a close similarity between the style and content of the Gospel and that in the letters of John, where he also declines to name himself. But the first letter makes it clear that he was very close to the Lord. Further, he does not identify himself in any incident. However look at John 20:2-10; this partnership is typical of that in the book of the Acts, referring to "Peter and John".

Each of the Gospels was written to a particular group of people. Two things are clear from John's Gospel. In the first place he expects his readers to be aware of Old Testament teachings, since there are many allusions to incidents recorded there. But John also uses common Greek concepts (though not the religious errors). So it is possible that he had educated Jews in mind in introducing them to the *real Jesus*.

John makes his purpose plain towards the end of his record. He writes, "But these [miraculous signs] are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (20:31). Many important doctrines will be revealed during the pages of this Gospel, but they will all underline John's purpose of showing that this man, Jesus, is the Christ. Jesus is his human name and reminds us that he is God the Saviour (Matt. 1:21). "Christ" is

¹ Irenaeus was a Greek born into a Christian family in Asia Minor during the second century. As a boy Irenaeus was taught by the bishop of Smyrna, Polycarp. Polycarp as a young man had known the apostle John. In his older years Polycarp delighted in recounting the conversations he had with the apostle John. Through Polycarp the apostle and Irenaeus were closely linked. (2000 Years of Christ's Power, Part One: Grace Publications)

the English (Anglicised) form of *Christos*, the Greek form of the Hebrew word “Messiah”, which tells us that he is the one promised by God: he is the chosen one, the one anointed by God for this ministry. How do we know that this is he? That is why John is writing this Gospel.

The writing of this Gospel is not an academic exercise. The purpose is to bring about a change in its readers. They are to believe and so have eternal life. These are the themes that John develops in his Gospel. Any attempt to understand and explain this book must take this into account. The message of the whole book is Christ. The result is the key to life.

We can compare this book with a court case. The court prosecutor sets out to prove the case against someone on trial. So John sets out to prove his case. He will bring to our attention a number of witnesses. In the first chapter we will see some of them: John the Baptist (1:34), the Holy Spirit (1:33), the apostle John himself (1:37), Andrew (1:40), Philip (1:45) and Nathaniel (1:49). In the book he will produce the evidence to back up this testimony. Other witnesses to be produced include the Samaritan woman (4:39), the Lord's works (5:36), the Father (5:32), the Scriptures (5:39-40), Martha (11:27), the people (12:17) and the Holy Spirit (15:26-27). The climax is Thomas's confession, “My Lord and my God” (20:28).

This book has been described as a magnificent symphony² on the work of Christ. In a musical symphony we hear a variety of instruments and a variety of musical themes blending together to tell a musical story. So it is with the Gospel of John. The blend of teaching and miracles together with the witnesses gives us a rich presentation of the nature of our Lord Jesus.

The book has the following structure:

Prologue 1:1-18

The “book of signs” 1:19-11:57

The “book of glory” 12:1-20:31

Epilogue 21:1-25

² Sinclair Ferguson (Faithful God: Bryntirion Press, p.11).

Study 1

Christ and the power of his Word



Prologue

John 1:1-18

Introduction to the passage

In the first chapter we are introduced to a number of themes that will be developed during the book: life, light, glory and truth, for example. We have already mentioned in the introduction to the book that John desires to see his readers *believe* in our Lord Jesus. *Believe* is another key word in this Gospel. John mentions various titles and names of the Lord Jesus: Christ, the Word, Rabbi, Master, Lamb, Son of God, Son of Man, King of Israel. Whatever people thought of him, this is who he really is.

What these verses mean

Verses 1 and 2

In the beginning was the Word,

John begins his prologue by showing us who Jesus is. Christ is introduced as the *Word of God*. This name sums up his ministry. In Hebrews 1:1 we are told that God spoke through the prophets in earlier times, “but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe” (Heb. 1:2). Jesus Christ is the ultimate means by whom God speaks to us. If we do not listen to him, then there is no other message that God has for us. This means that our preaching must not be about our own ideas, but must be about Christ Jesus. The Old Testament prophets spoke the Word of God beginning their discourse with words like “This is what God says ...”. John declares that Christ is the Word. Christ came, not to speak the message of God, but he was the message.

and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.¹ ² He was with God in the beginning.

Christ’s relationship with the Father is underlined in verses 1

¹ See page 4 for footnote

and 2. Christ (the Word) was *with God*. This expression indicates an intimate personal relationship. He and the Father are distinct persons and have had a deep and real relationship through eternity. But then John adds, “The Word was God.” Christ is distinct from the Father but he is God, just as the Father is. This, of course, is why he could reveal the Father to the world. He is the very expression of God. This is fundamental to the teaching of the Gospel of John. We will see the divine nature of the Holy Spirit later on in John’s Gospel and so the teaching concerning the Trinity. This is a subject that is developed in the Gospel and many readers have been struck by this aspect of John’s message.

So in what ways is Christ the Word of God?

1. He is the Word of God in creation (1:3)

Verse 3

Through him all things were made;

Christ is the source of life. By his Word the earth and heavens were made. The Psalmist says, “By the word of the LORD were the heavens made” (Ps. 33:6). In his epistle John describes Jesus Christ as the “Word of life” (1 John 1:1). Life on this earth came into being at his command. Eternal life is also only through his word (6:68-69). We see that life came into being, not by accident, but at the command of Christ. Like Genesis the Gospel opens with “In the beginning”. Aside from reminding us that Christ was before all things and everything depends on him, this too is a name of our Lord. In Revelation 1:8 we read of him saying, “I am the Alpha and the Omega, who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.” Alpha and Omega are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet and mean that he is the beginning and the end. “First” is a divine name which was also revealed in the Old Testament prophecy of Isaiah (44:6). This also identifies Christ as God. As he is the source of life, we are totally dependent on him. Christ is sovereign and we cannot live without him

¹ Some sects claim that this phrase “The Word was God” should be translated “He was a god”, so denying our Lord’s deity. This is an incorrect translation, which is neither a correct translation of the Greek nor is it consistent with the message of John’s Gospel itself. (See the *Further detailed note* at the end of the Study 2 on page 25 for more information on this point). It has been pointed out that the Greek is the most concise way in which the evangelist, John, could have stated that the Word was God and yet was distinct from the Father.

without him nothing was made that has been made.

In Genesis 1 we read that the creation came into being when “God said ...” John tells us that that Word was our Lord Jesus. He is the Word of God and by that word creation came into being. There was no other source of life. Nothing came about by chance. This will be reflected in later verses (1:12-13) concerning our spiritual creation too.

2. He is the Word of God in his teaching (1:4)

Verse 4

In him was life, and that life was the light of men.

Christ is the source of “light”. We receive the light in the preaching of the gospel. As we need life because we are spiritually dead (Eph. 2:1), so we need his light because we are blind. His Word brings light (Ps. 119:105; Rom. 10:14). We walk in darkness (3:19). Darkness is more than the absence of light, it is evil. So light speaks of purity, holiness. It also means truth. To people in the darkness of sin Christ, the true Light, came. We are reminded of the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy (Is. 9:2; 60:1-2). Christ made the light that shines on this world (2 Co. 4:6). He is the light that shines into our hearts to show us the truth by revealing the truths in the Scriptures. This is the work of the teacher, the *rabbi* (Hebrew word for teacher). He is our teacher; he opens up the Scriptures to us. (See also verses 38 and 49.)

Verse 5

The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.

Creation began with the coming of the light (Gen. 1:3); so it is with the new creation. Natural man does not understand. It is a simple fact that we all observe: if we enter a dark room and then turn on a light, the darkness is dispelled. The light overcomes the darkness. Darkness cannot put out the light.

Notice that the writer links the gospel message to the creation record (the creation of light). This is a common New Testament theme. We cannot deny that he is the Creator (1:3) and then believe he is our Saviour (1:12). The two themes are linked together. This is apparent in Colossians 1:15-20 and Hebrews 1:1-2 too.

Verse 6

There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John.

John the Baptist was sent by God to prepare the way for Christ. John's ministry was prophesied.² He was a great man. His ministry was the type described by the apostle Paul as spoken by men of sincerity, as commissioned by God (2 Co. 2:17).

Verses 7 and 8

He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe. ⁸ He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.

John was not the one who would bring them light. His ministry was that of a witness.³ We must listen to John the Baptist: he is part of the testimony as to who Christ is.

Verse 9

The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world.

Christ is described as the "true light" both here and in John's letter (1 John 2:8). This word "true" is a common one in this Gospel and means "genuine". Other people may claim to bring light, but Christ alone is the genuine light. Only he can bring us to God the Father (John 14:6). We have seen (1:5) that light dispels darkness. That is true as a physical reality, but the "true light" also banishes the darkness of evil. This leads to a statement that in the incarnation the true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world. False religions in John's day (as in ours) often claimed to be the source of light. Christ, in contrast, is "the true light". The description of Christ as the true light, the true bread (6:32) and the true vine (15:1) indicates that he is the fulfilment of the Old Testament promises.

² In the Old Testament John the Baptist is referred to as the prophet Elijah. Malachi closes his book declaring as part of God's warning to the people of Israel that God will send the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes (Mal. 4:5; Matt. 17:11-13). Jesus stated that John was the Elijah whom

³ We will see further in this Gospel that it is the apostle John's intention to produce a number of witnesses throughout his Gospel record.

3. He is the Word of God in his incarnation (10-18)

Christ is “love” is the theme of this section. Though the word “love” is not actually used here, it is developed later and is implied here by the word “grace” (1:16). The apostle John explains why Christ came to this world.

Verse 10

He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognise him.

We see his rejection. We have been shown that Christ is the light. But darkness flees in the presence of light (1:11). Not only does the world not believe him, it actively rejects him. The “world” is another term that occurs frequently throughout this Gospel. It refers to the whole society of mankind that rejects Christ, that is, those who do not belong to the kingdom of heaven and rebel against him. Because they have rejected God and his laws, they do not even recognise him when he comes to live amongst them. This seems incredible, yet we know it is true.

Verse 11

He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.

Furthermore, says the Gospel writer, even his own rejected him. God had blessed the Jewish nation with a special revelation of himself. He had given them his law. He had sent them prophets and provided priests. He corrected them as a father disciplines his children. But they still refused his promised one (Heb. 1:2). The Lord described this in his parable (Matt. 21:33-46) and the religious leaders realised he was speaking about them. This also was prophesied by the Lord through Jeremiah (Jer. 7:25-26). Our Lord even wept for them (Luke 19:41-42). Together the Jews and Gentiles (see Mark 3:6) sought to destroy the Lord’s anointed one. Together they declared they did not want to have this man ruling over them (Luke 19:14; John 19:14-15).

Verse 12

Yet to all who received him,

In this and the next verse we read of his salvation. We see what a Christian is. Firstly, he is a person who *receives Christ*. As will be shown later in the Gospel, this happens by the Holy Spirit’s entering our lives. He makes us into new people, members of Christ’s family. He calls us friends (15:15) and brothers (20:17).

to those who believed in his name,

Further, a Christian is one who *believes* in Christ's name. The purpose of the gospel message is to awaken faith (20:31; Rom. 10:13-14). Christ's name is Saviour (Matt. 1:21). Human faith is generated by the Holy Spirit who reveals to the believer that Jesus is Saviour. That is the confidence a believer has. To call him Saviour is to recognise what he says about our sin and the adequacy of his sacrifice for it. "Belief" and "faith" are key words in this Gospel. A correct understanding of the meaning of "believe" is essential to a genuine experience of salvation. To believe is not to recognise Christ as a good man. To believe is to take God at his Word and so commit oneself unreservedly to him. The deep meaning of belief that will be unfolded later in the Gospel will help us to distinguish it from a shallow one, so prevalent in our world today. The question Christ would ask us is, "Do you really believe in me?"

he gave the right to become children of God—

Those who believe then "become children of God". Originally God called Israel "my firstborn" (Ex. 4:22). Now non-Jews are to be admitted into God's family. They are sons of God by adoption (Gal. 3:26). John expands on this theme in his letter describing God as lavishing his love upon those who have believed in his Son, calling them children of God (1 John 3:1). John distinguishes between our Lord Jesus as "Son" and us as "children". The apostle Paul makes the same distinction between the "Son" and "adopted sons" (Gal. 4:5). The power to change men that we have described in this verse will be demonstrated through the preaching of the gospel (1:41). The word "right" would have had a special meaning to the people of the first century. Many were slaves without any rights. The Christian, whatever his background, has become a member of God's family with all the rights that go with that privilege. Without Christ nobody has the right to be God's children.

Verse 13

children born not of natural descent,

The description of a Christian is developed further. At first John sets out a series of negatives to show how a person does not become Christian. This is to contrast with the positive with which he concludes the verse, being "born of God". How does this happen? The nature of true conversion is plain. The writer

contrasts spiritual birth with human generation. Human birth is by sexual relationship, desire and initiative. Spiritual birth is different and is not by natural generation. A person is saved regardless of his race or heritage; it is not a blood relationship. In the Scriptures we often read that a certain man had a son (for example, Gen. 4; Matt. 1). But that is not true in the spiritual realm. We do not become Christians because we have Christian parents or live in a country whose culture is predominantly Christian. If we are blessed with Christian parents, we should thank God for that, but they cannot believe for us. Christ said that not all Jews were children of Abraham (8:39); they did not believe as Abraham did. So it is the same for us. It is good news to those who are children of unbelieving parents; they are not excluded from this gospel of grace. If this were not the case, many who are Christians today would not have been saved. The Lord will make it plain (3:6) that flesh gives birth to flesh; it is the work of the Spirit to give the spiritual.

nor of human decision

A person cannot become a Christian by human determination or by human desire. It is not that we decide to become Christians. Becoming a Christian involves something deeper; making a “decision” does not deal with sin. Nor do we have that ability. Our natural inclinations are not towards faith. Spiritually we are impotent. We cannot become Christians by keeping laws or by being moral beings (even though that is required of us).

or a husband’s will,

The Greek phrase used means that a person cannot become a Christian by the will of another human being. A husband and father has a clear spiritual responsibility to teach and lead his family. But, however much he might wish that all his family be Christians, he cannot make it happen. All Christian believers have the desire to see people they know saved but they cannot change them themselves by some act of their wills.

but born of God.

A person becomes a Christian by being “born of God”. It is the only way to be saved. This fact is introduced by John here but is developed and explained in chapter 3 as regeneration by the Holy Spirit.

Verse 14

The Word became flesh

So, as the means of salvation, we are introduced to his incarnation. John's Gospel does not record the birth of Christ in the same way as Matthew and Luke. John goes behind the scenes and shows the even deeper wonder. Christ became flesh. The writer to the Hebrews explains this. "Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity..." (Heb. 2:14). Christ became one of us, not simply like us, but one of us. We can speak of our unity with some other groups of humans by saying "We farmers ...", "We Christians ..." or whatever unites us. Our Lord became one of us so that he can say, "We humans ...". That means that there is no conflict in being spiritual and being human.

and made his dwelling among us.

The writer describes the incarnation in another way. Literally he pitched his tent among us. This would be very meaningful to the readers who would remember how God did just that in the Old Testament days. When the children of Israel were wandering in the wilderness, on their way to the land God had promised, God dwelt among them in a tent (Ex. 40:34-35). The Hebrew for the words "dwell" and "tent" are related to *shekinah*, which is often used to describe God's revealed glory. That glory of the "one and only" Son is now in this tent of flesh.

We have seen his glory,

This glory is another theme of this Gospel because it is a part of Christ's nature. There is a parallel between 1:14-18 and Exodus 33:7-34:35. God came to reveal himself, to speak to the people, to display his glory and to show mercy. But now it is in a more apparent way. Christ reveals his glory. John makes it plain that this was done (amongst other ways) through his miracles (2:11). He, John, could testify to seeing this (1:14; 1 John 1:2). Jesus Christ came from the Father (compare 3:16) to reveal the Father. The "glory" of a man is measured in terms of his greatness in society, often due to wealth, family and influence, but is affected by sin. But for our God glory is an unspoilt richness (there is none richer), greatness (none is greater), power (none is more powerful), beauty, grace and so on. These attributes were displayed in Christ in his incarnation. His glory and that of the Father are one (17:5).

the glory of the one and only [Son], who came from the Father, God as “the Father” was a new concept even to the Jews. This becomes amplified in 20:17. It relates to our being “children of God” (1:12). The promised one (Christ) is declared to be the “one and only” Son of the Father. This expression is used in the Old Testament to refer to an “only child” who, therefore, held a very special place in the family. Isaac is described in this way (Gen. 22:2, 12, 16; Heb. 11:17), which is significant when we read later of our Lord Jesus (1:29) as the “Lamb of God”. To emphasise the significance of the phrase, it would be well translated as “one of a kind”. The Christ is referred to in this way prophetically (Ps. 89:27). The expression arises again in 3:16, 18.

full of grace and truth.

These are descriptions of Christ’s nature. The corresponding words in Hebrew (and so the Old Testament) are his “unfailing love and faithfulness” (e.g. Ex. 34:6; Prov. 16:6). Those words referred to God in the Old Testament – now they are used of our Lord: he is God. Grace is referred to in this introduction, but does not occur in the rest of the Gospel, though the corresponding word “love” is very common. It is described here in the verses that follow. “Truth” is a very common word in the book and, of course, expresses the character of our Lord (14:6).

Verse 15

John testifies concerning him. He cries out, saying, “This was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.’”

John the Baptist is mentioned again as a witness and says that the Word is pre-eminent. Though John was born before Jesus (Luke 1:24-27), Christ was pre-existent. Jesus Christ was before John in an absolute sense: he is God.

Verse 16

From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another.

So we read of “his grace”. This word is used of God’s undeserved blessing towards sinners. It was when we were sinners that Christ died for us (Rom. 5:8). The word includes the thought of both the magnitude of God’s love and the quality of it (3:16). “Fullness of his grace” means it is a rich supply. God does not hold back in his generosity. He pours his love out

on us (Ps. 23:5). It is a rich supply, which does not dry up in days of drought. It leads to one blessing after another (1:16). Romans 8:32 tells us that our God freely gives us all things and our guarantee of this is that he has already given us his Son.

Verse 17

For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

The grace brought through Christ is contrasted with the law given through Moses. The law was a gift of God's grace (see Exodus 34:6 in the context of the giving of the law), but it was superseded by the grace of Christ; he fulfilled the law (Matt. 5:17). Under the law benefits were earned (and lost). If the people kept the law, they received God's blessing. If they broke it, they received his judgment. Not so with the grace brought through Christ. The benefits (eternal life) are unearned and so cannot be lost (10:28-29). The law revealed sin but could not remove it; Christ came with the fullness of grace to remove sin. Moses brought the Word of God to the people (Ex. 32:15; 34:29); Christ is the incarnate Word of God.

Verse 18

No-one has ever seen God, but God the only [Son], who is at the Father's side, has made him known.

The ultimate act of grace is that the Son reveals the Father to us. We have not seen and cannot see God (Ex. 33:20), but through the Son we can know him. There is nothing to be known of the Father beyond what we can know through Christ. The expression "made him known" is related to the technical word *exegetis* (Greek) used of the preacher's teaching ministry, so reminding us of what preaching is about. John has one further point, it is very important. The deity of Christ is declared. Christ is at the Father's side. Christ is distinct from the Father, but Christ is God, the one and only. The Old Testament law makes it plain that the description refers to God himself (Deut. 6:4). The Hebrew concept of the term "at the Father's side" is literally "in the Father's lap", underlining the intimacy between Father and Son. It is obvious that from such a unique position, Christ has made God known to us.

PP Summary

John introduces Jesus Christ to his readers. Christ is described as “the Word” who has come from God. Jesus Christ is the message and is God. He is distinct from God his Father with whom he has a deep, personal eternal relationship. With the Father he is God. In the beginning God spoke for the creation to take place. This is part of Christ’s description as the Word. Without him nothing was made. Christ is the source of light to man. There was one called John the Baptist who pointed to Christ as that light. That light was the understanding of all things of the created order. The darkness of man’s heart and mind could not take in this light and understand it, therefore Christ was rejected. Not all people would cast off the light, for some would belong to Christ. To identify and rescue them Christ had to leave his Father in heaven and come to earth and become a man. Those to be saved would experience a spiritual new birth. They would be adopted into God’s family and be called his children. The coming of Jesus Christ from heaven enabled human beings to witness God’s glory for the first time. All this was undeserved, which magnified the love of God, through his Son, now being poured out on those being rescued. The intimacy between God and the Son is demonstrated by the constant presence of the Son at his Father’s side. The introduction to John’s Gospel is so rich and bewildering to the human mind until the Spirit opens our eyes.

PP A suggestion of what to preach about from these verses

Theme: the shocking glory of the Word (John 1:1-18)

Introduction

“A religious symbol”, “A great teacher”, “The Son of God?” All responses from a survey, asking, “Who is Jesus?” Ask the question today and you get many responses. But is it possible to know the truth? Is there an answer?

God has good news for you; a man named John met Jesus, spent 3½ years with him, then wrote a book, which is now called, “The Gospel according to John”. Gospel means “Good News”. John wrote his Gospel to show us who Jesus is:

- He is the Christ – he is the King of the world sent by God
- He is the Son of God – he is truly divine, fully God

But that is not enough. John wrote so we would believe. It is only those who believe who receive life (20:31).

1. He is God (1:1-4)

John takes us back in time to before the universe began. The first words of the Bible are, “*In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth...*” There we are told about the beginning of all material things. And it was done by God. John takes us back in time to before time.

There waiting for us, says John, is the Word.

v.1: “*the Word was (literally, face to face) with God.*” Christ was in intimate relationship with God his Father. He has always known God. The Word is himself God, divine. John does not say, “God was the Word,” because God is more than the Word, but the Word is God.

v.2: “*He was with God in the beginning.*” He is eternal, before our world was created. He was not himself created for he has always been with God, before time began.

v.3: “*Through him all things were made; ...*” He is the Creator of all things. He is the source of our physical existence.

v.4: “*In him was life... the light of men.*” Light is a powerful image that John uses in his Gospel. It refers to spiritual knowledge and life. The Word is the source of all our spiritual life. John’s Gospel is all about this Word. The Word is God, the Word has always existed with God, the Word created all things. The Word gives us our life. Jesus is the Word.

2. He walked the earth (1:14-18)

v.14: The second stunning truth of this passage is that : God himself walked on the earth. “*The Word became flesh,*” means that in history and geography God walked on the earth as a man. John says that they saw the glory of God in the life, teachings and miracles of Jesus Christ. God was in the flesh. This is a mystery that defies our minds, but it is true. And he came for a reason – to show us God. In verses 16-18 John mentions *grace, fulness, law, Moses, truth and seeing God*. Here John is referring to an incident in the life of Moses, one of the great men of the Old Testament.

- At one key moment in the life of Moses, Moses prays to God, “*Now show me your glory*” (Ex. 33:18).
- God replied that first Moses must be hidden behind a rock, for “*No-one may see me and live.*” Moses heard of God’s grace and truth. Moses heard God’s glory.
- But John says, “*We saw the glory of God in Jesus Christ!*” What Moses had only in part, we have fully in Christ.

3. He was rejected (1:5-13)

John explains in more detail why the Word came:

- vs.5-11: Revelation. God wanted people to know the truth.
- vs.12-13: Re-birth. God wanted people to be born again; to become children of God.

v.5: *“The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.”* The Word was like a lighthouse, or a shining star, to guide people to the truth. Light shows us the way. God wants people to know the truth. Surely this is one reason why John calls Jesus “The Word”. Words represent the truth that we want to express to somebody else. Words communicate our mind and wishes to others. If we want to know God’s mind, we need to look at Jesus.

vs.6-9 seem strange at first because they take our eyes off the Word to a man called John the Baptist. God wanted people to know the truth, so he sent John to get people ready for the truth. John was like a witness in court (v7), giving evidence to persuade people that when Jesus came, he was the Christ. John came as a prophet preaching to the people, *“Get ready – for God’s King is coming soon!”*

But here comes the shock!

vs.10-11: *“He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognise him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.”*

The Word was rejected by the people he had created. Even his own people, the Jews, rejected him. Does that shock you? Perhaps it does. But more shocking is this question – why have I not yet accepted Jesus Christ as the Son of God, my Saviour?

But there is hope, for some people did receive the Word and they found life. They found God, they found truth.

v.12: *“Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.”*

To receive is like welcoming a person into our home, or here the meaning is into our hearts and lives. To receive the Word is to believe who Jesus Christ is and to welcome him as God’s Son, our King. If a person does that they become a child of God. Here John begins to explain what it means to have real life, to know light – it is to belong to God’s family.

v.13: *“... children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God.”*

Left to our own devices we cannot accept the true light. We will not receive the Word into our lives. We refuse to accept Jesus Christ as the Son of God. We are spiritually dead. Here John explains:

- “not of natural descent”. Salvation is not dependent upon family or race
- “nor of human decision”. We can’t be saved by our own will power or choices!
- “or a husband’s will”. We will not find eternal life or God just because our father or wife or husband is a Christian.
- “but born of God”. Only God can open your eyes to who Jesus really is.

Conclusion

Are you shocked? Well, be shocked one more time, this time be wonderfully shocked! Christ came down to us in his incarnation that he might lift us up to the Father. Actually once you discover Jesus Christ it is not shocking at all but amazing. Knowing Christ is only possible for ourselves personally. We cannot know Christ second-hand. You cannot know Christ for me and I cannot know Christ for you. Until you personally fall down on your knees and pray to Christ to open your eyes and save you this whole book will be shocking to you.

But if you reach out and ask Christ to save you, if you repent of your rebellion and seek him in prayer, if you trust him — you will discover the wonder of knowing him.

This is an edited version of a sermon preached by Adam Laughton on 16th October 2005.



Over to you

How would you describe God’s glory? In what ways did the Lord Jesus display these attributes of the Father in his earthly life? How best would you put this over to your congregation?

How would you challenge your people as to what a true Christian is according to this first chapter?

What is the purpose of your preaching? (See 1:18).

Study 2

Christ and the power of his Word



He is the Word of God in redemption

John 1:19-34

Introduction to the passage

In the passage for this study we are shown that this man, Jesus, is *the Lamb of God*. The section begins by introducing the *first witness*, John the Baptist (1:15, 19-28). The mission of John had already been introduced in verse 7; we are now told that he fulfilled this task (1:15). John describes the superiority of Christ (1:15 and 30). Normally the person of greater age takes precedence in society. John the Baptist was born before Christ, but he recognises his own inferiority because Jesus was, in fact, pre-existent. So Christ is more than man. We have seen that he is the Word of God in creation, in his teaching and in his incarnation. We now see another area in which he is God's Word to this world.

What these verses mean

1. John the Baptist's testimony (1:19-29)

Verse 19

Now this was John's testimony when the Jews of Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was.

This section begins with a challenge to John the Baptist by the religious leaders. The historical records of this period indicate that it was a time of eagerness amongst the Jews, when there was speculation as to when the Messiah would come and what he would be like. They were expecting the Messiah but there was no agreement as to his nature or purpose. This confusion is demonstrated later (7:25-44).

Verse 20

He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, "I am not the Christ."

John's reply was to declare clearly that he was not the Christ

(Messiah). This then opens the way for John himself to reveal to his readers who this person was. Compare John the Baptist's statement that he was "not the Christ" and the earlier comment that he was "not the light" (1:8). Christ is, of course, "the light" (1:9; 8:12).

Verse 21

They asked him, "Then who are you? Are you Elijah?"

John made a great impact on the society of his day, so naturally the people wanted to know his credentials. Many thought he was more than just a prophet. Was he the Christ? This he denied very plainly. What about Elijah? After all, Elijah did not die (2 Kings 2:1-16). Also, Malachi 4:5 had prophesied the coming of Elijah before the day of judgment. Luke 1:17 makes it plain that John did indeed come in the "spirit and power of Elijah" (as had Elisha, Elijah's immediate successor). In this sense the Lord said that John was indeed an Elijah (Matt. 11:14, 17:10-13).

He said, "I am not."

However, John testified that he was not Elijah, returned to this earth.

"Are you the Prophet?"

Perhaps, said others, John was the Prophet of whom Moses had spoken (Deut. 18:15, 18).

He answered, "No."

Moses was referring to the Christ and therefore John repeated his denial.

Verse 22

Finally they said, "Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?"

So who was he? The ones who had sent the delegation to interrogate John were from the Sanhedrin (the Jewish ruling council). They consisted of priests, scribes and elders. Reports had reached them of the new preacher who had caused a lot of excitement.

Verse 23

John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, "I am the voice of one calling in the desert, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'"

John made his mission plain: he had been sent to prepare the

way for the Lord's anointed One, that is, the Christ. He quoted from the prophet Isaiah (40:3) and showed, by implication, who this Jesus was, since Isaiah was foretelling the coming of the Messiah.

Note for preachers

The declaration of the Messiah is, in a sense, the nature of the ministry of every preacher of the gospel. We cannot save man, but we can and must prepare the way. John was just a voice. He was not important himself, but what a ministry! Those involved in ministry today can have a similar rôle to that of John. In Romans 10:15 Paul says, "And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!'"

Verses 24-25

Now some Pharisees who had been sent²⁵ questioned him, "Why then do you baptise if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?"

This was not good enough for the religious authorities and they challenged him as to his authority to baptise.

Verse 26

"I baptise with water," John replied, "but among you stands one you do not know.

To those who knew the Scriptures, it should have been plain. John's purpose in his baptisms was to challenge people to prepare for the coming of Christ (1:31). Baptism was a practice that was already used. It was used for proselytes, that is, non-Jews who came to belief in God and so sought to practise the Jewish religion. It was practised by the Jews for ceremonial washing of those who had come into contact with ceremonially unclean objects. Here, it was a call to repentance for sin, the ultimate uncleanness. Flowing water was used. The English word *baptism* comes from the Greek word which means total immersion.

Baptism in the Old Testament:

In Exodus 19 the people are instructed to make themselves ceremonially clean before receiving God's law at Sinai. This gift of the law was remembered in the Pentecost celebrations. So, as the people approached this feast, they would prepare

themselves by a practice of baptism such as John the Baptist used. There is a further significance to this in Ezekiel 36:25-27, where a connection is made between the ritual washing with water and receiving the Holy Spirit who would write the law on their hearts. John announces that the Lord Jesus will be the one who baptises with the Holy Spirit (1:33), as predicted in a number of places, for example Isaiah 44:3.

Verse 27

He is the one who comes after me, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.

Even in this John shows the superiority of Christ. A rabbi's disciple would serve his master in many ways, but even he would not untie the thongs of the rabbi's sandals. That is more than could be expected of the disciple. But, John says, it would be a privilege and he was unworthy of doing even this for the Lord.

Verse 28

This all happened at Bethany on the other side of the Jordan, where John was baptising.

The location of the baptismal site, Bethany, is uncertain but a probable site has recently been located. It was east of the river Jordan and so is not the village mentioned later in the Gospel (for example, 12:1). But it is perhaps significant that Jesus' ministry begins at this Bethany, where he is declared to be the Lamb of God, and ends at the southern Bethany from where he goes to his crucifixion as the Lamb of God (John 12).

2. John the Baptist's identification of the Christ (1:29-34)

Verse 29

The next day John saw Jesus coming towards him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"

John then fulfils his ultimate purpose. He announces the coming of God's Lamb. To the listeners the significance of this statement will have been immediately apparent. To the Jew the lamb was for sacrifice. This man, Jesus, was to be a sacrifice chosen by, and provided by, God. The Old Testament sacrificial lamb was brought by man to God; this one was provided from God to man. This Lamb is to take away the sin of the world, not simply of Israel. This truth is developed again in the Gospel (for example, 3:16-17; 4:42) and in John's letter (1 John 2:2). Perhaps

the listeners would have remembered the incident of Abraham in which God provided a lamb for a sacrifice in place of Isaac (Gen. 22:8, 13-14). They may have also thought back to the prophet Isaiah. In 52:13 the Lord God spoke of his servant who would come. He went on to speak of the Promised One as a sheep (53:7). In the Aramaic language used by our Lord the words “servant” and “lamb” are the same.

Notice that John declares Christ to be *the* Lamb, not *a* lamb. The Old Testament system required the sacrifice of many lambs over the centuries. This revelation was significant to his hearers as it indicated the displacement of the past sacrifices, as the writer to the Hebrews demonstrated (Heb. 10:1-18).

Verse 30

This is the one I meant when I said, ‘A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.’

The focus on the true identity of the Lord sharpens. John acknowledged Christ’s superiority, reminding his hearers of his previous comments (1:15). In age John was born before Christ, but Christ having come from heaven had pre-existed. Christ’s ministry was also far greater than that of John. Christ came to reconcile man to God. There is nothing we can do to make peace between ourselves and God. God did it himself. He provided the sacrificial lamb. In particular, Christ would be compared to the lamb killed at the Passover (1 Co. 5:7) for the deliverance of his people. Like the Passover lamb none of his bones would be broken (19:26; Ex. 12:46). He came that “through death he might destroy death” (Heb. 2:14). He came and suffered to bring us to God (1 Pet. 3:18).

Verse 31

I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel.”

Previously John the Baptist did not know who the Messiah was, but God revealed Christ through his baptism. This baptism led to the Christ’s identification.

Verse 32

Then John gave this testimony: “I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him.

The Holy Spirit descended on Christ in appearance as a dove (1:32). This again fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah (Is. 11:2; 61:1).

Verse 33

I would not have known him, except that the one who sent me to baptise with water told me, ‘The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptise with the Holy Spirit.’

Christ’s baptism is stated here (1:33) but described in the other Gospels. In submitting to the baptism of John, Christ identified himself with us, an act that was completed at the cross when he identified himself finally and completely with sinners (1 Pet. 3:18). Indeed, when talking to the disciples, Christ compared his death to baptism (Mark 10:39), by which he would fulfil all righteousness (compare Matthew 3:15). Through baptism Christ marked the beginning of a new age. He himself submits to the requirements of the law. Later, he will indeed baptise with the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, following his fulfilling of the law at Calvary.

Verse 34

I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God.”

From Christ’s baptism John was able to testify that this was indeed the “Son of God”. This means that Jesus Christ was divine in origin and nature, just as elsewhere he identifies himself with man by taking the title Son of Man. Some early copies of John’s Gospel call him the “Chosen One of God” (in place of “Son of God”). This is in keeping with the context of this passage and again is an indication of the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy (Is. 42:1). He is the Chosen One coming to the Lord’s chosen people (for example, 15:16; 1 Pet. 2:9). As Christ will show later, he is the only way to God (14:6). We cannot have him as simply a “nice man”. The “Lamb of God” implies much more. John’s own disciples became inquisitive and wanted to know more.



Summary

In the first part of this chapter (Study 1) the apostle John set out the deep truths about Christ’s divine nature and incarnation. Now the apostle begins to set out the plain story of Christ’s earthly ministry. He introduces Christ through the testimony of John the Baptist. The apostle does this in two

Summary continued on page 23

Summary continued from page 22

ways. Firstly, through a dialogue that took place between a delegation from the temple and John the Baptist. They were sent by the religious leaders to find out the true identity of John the Baptist. John shunned all honour that the delegation of priests were ready to pay him. He declined all flattering titles and described himself as nothing more than a voice crying in the wilderness and one who baptised with water. John proclaimed loudly that his task was to point to one who was far greater than himself, whose sandal straps he was not worthy to untie. The second way the apostle introduces his readers to Christ is through John the Baptist's testimony, when he saw Christ the next day after speaking with the delegation. John the Baptist calls Christ "the Lamb of God". This title identified Jesus Christ as the great sacrifice for sin, who came to make atonement for sin by his own death on the cross. No wonder John did not want to attract any attention to himself, but to point people to Christ. John the Baptist had baptised Jesus with water and saw the Spirit of God descend upon Christ. This confirmed to John that Christ was the chosen one, who would baptise with the Holy Spirit.



A suggestion of what to preach about from these verses

Theme: Christ, the Lamb of God (John 1:29)

Introduction

John the Baptist tells his hearers to "Look!" This is a strong word in the Bible and means that something important is to follow and the listener should pay careful attention. That means us as well. Notice the person to whom he is referring: he was a man just like us, but without sin; his listeners knew something of this person's background: he was the carpenter's son and Mary was his mother. But now they would learn something new.

What do you know about him? This text tells you something you may not know, so listen carefully.

1. He is "the Lamb"

Explain the sacrificial system of the Old Testament and its purpose. Of special significance too is the Passover Lamb (remember Christ would be sacrificed at the Passover Feast).

What does this tell us about his character?

The lamb had to be "without blemish", perfect in every way. So was our Lord Jesus.

Evidence of this.

- It reminds us of the purpose of his coming as Saviour (Matt. 1:21).
- The lambs were sacrificed because of the sins of the people. So with our Lord.
- The Passover Lamb symbolised this too: the blood of the sheep protected the people of Israel from death (Ex. 12:13) but also led to their freedom from the oppressor. So Christ's death frees us from the powers of the Evil One.

2. He is God's Lamb

We are told that Christ is the Lamb of God.

The sacrificial lambs were chosen by the head of the family and presented to the priest, but God chose the Lamb for us – the only one acceptable to him.

Christ came to redeem Israel (Luke 1:68), but his own people (the Jews) rejected him (John 1:11).

He came to save those who did receive him; they were not “of the world”.

Christ is the only one acceptable to God. The only other alternative is that we receive the punishment ourselves.

Conclusion

Will you be saved from the punishment that you deserve because of your sin? John in his Gospel shows us that all we have to do is repent and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.

**Focus point**Some background notes to the passage**Bethany-across-the-Jordan** (see map on page iii at the front)

Since 1996 there have been remarkable archaeological discoveries between the Jordan River and Tell al-Kharrar. This area is identified as the biblical *Bethany-beyond-the-Jordan*, where John was living when he baptised Jesus. The site is about a 45 minutes' drive from Amman, and about 50 km. to the west of Amman and 10 km. north of the Dead Sea. Wadi Gharrar is a small tributary of the Jordan River that is fed by about five springs. Tradition holds that these springs provided the water that was used by John the Baptist for baptising. Tell al-Kharrar is also known as Tell Mar Elias (St. Elijah's Hill) reminiscent of the prophet Elijah, who according to tradition ascended from here to heaven.

The chronology of these events

From Luke 3:1 we can date the start of Christ's ministry to AD29. The emperor was Tiberius Caesar and Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea.

PP Over to you

John's objective was to show who the real Jesus was, in contrast to the popular views. What do we learn about our Lord from this chapter? What is your objective when you preach and teach?

John the Baptist was anxious to show that it was not he but Christ who was the more important person. How does he do this? What lessons can we learn in terms of our "position" as leaders in the church?

What is the significance of Christ's being described as the Lamb of God?

Further detailed note on John 1:1 (the Word was God)

This is the note referred to in the footnote on page 4. There was insufficient space to include it at the end of Study 1.

Some sects claim that John 1 verse 1 should be translated as "The Word was a god" rather than "The Word was [the] God." The word "a" or "the" is not present in the Greek and it is the normal practice in that language to omit "the" in the second position. In the rest of this chapter (verses 6, 12, 13 and 18), the word "the" is omitted before "God" and yet it is clear that "the" and not "a" is implied. In fact, in 20:28 23 we read the confession of Thomas. In the Greek it says, "The Lord mine and the God mine". We omit the word "the" because it is not good English, even though it is perfect theology.

Study 3

Christ and the power of his Word



He is the Word of God in his call to discipleship

John 1:35-51

Introduction to the passage

The apostle John has introduced Jesus the Messiah and shown that he is God who has come to this world as true man. Having announced his identity in the prologue to the Gospel (1:1-18), John then produces his first witness to demonstrate the truth of his claim: John the Baptist (1:19-34). He moves on to present a further cluster of witnesses (1:35-51). Think of this as a court of law. The apostle is calling in a series of witnesses – and later on material evidence – to demonstrate the truth of his claim. Jesus is the Lord and this is demonstrated by his voice of authority which causes men to leave all and follow him.

What these verses mean

1. The first disciples (1:35-42)

Verse 35

The next day John was there again with two of his disciples.

This is the third successive day of the four days that are covered by the section 1:19 to 1:51. The location is given in 1:28, Bethany on the other side of the Jordan, where John was baptising because we read that John was there again. On the second day (1:29-34) John the Baptist was addressing a group of people, the size of which we are not told. On this third day John the Baptist was standing with two of his disciples, Andrew and the apostle John.

Verse 36

When he saw Jesus passing by, he said, “Look, the Lamb of God!”

The previous day Jesus walked towards John; today Jesus was walking by, towards the place where he was staying. John the Baptist repeated the words of the previous day, “the Lamb of God”, to describe Jesus.

Verse 37

When the two disciples heard him say this, they followed Jesus.

John the Baptist's own disciples heard his testimony as to the true nature of Jesus. They wanted to know more. The two of them followed Jesus to see where he would go and what he would do.

Verse 38

Turning around, Jesus saw them following and asked, "What do you want?"

The Lord showed that he was conscious of their interest. We can only speculate on their reaction when Jesus challenged them. The question Jesus asked was not *whom* they were seeking but *what*. Whatever it was he would be able to supply.

They said, "Rabbi" (which means Teacher), "where are you staying?"

They addressed Jesus as "Rabbi", which is a term for a teacher. Interestingly, his teaching ministry was about to begin. It seems that the Baptist's testimony was sufficient for them to see Jesus as such a person. They told Jesus they wanted to see where he lived.

Verse 39

"Come," he replied, "and you will see."

So Jesus invited them to come and see. In this one word "come" we have the essence of the gospel invitation (7:23; 21:12). Clearly, as the chapter shows, there is much more to the gospel than this, but this word demonstrates the gracious invitation. What would they see? What would be the impact on their lives?

So they went and saw where he was staying, and spent that day with him.

The apostle John gives no information about where Jesus was staying or the type of accommodation he was in. The emphasis is upon the length of time the two men spent with Jesus. The impact of this time in the presence of Jesus was life-changing.

It was about the tenth hour.¹

There continues to be quite a debate amongst scholars about the meaning of "the tenth hour". The author mentions the time of the day because this was the day Jesus changed his whole life

¹ See page 28 for the footnote

and the apostle John never forgot the precise hour when the invitation was made, or his decision to accept it.

Verse 40

Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, was one of the two who heard what John had said and who had followed Jesus.

One of the two men is identified as Andrew but the other one is not named. It has generally been supposed that this other one was John the apostle, the writer of this Gospel. He never named himself in the recorded incidents.

Verse 41

The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, "We have found the Messiah" (that is, the Christ).

It is apparent from Andrew's reaction that a lot happened in the next few hours. They spent the day with the Lord. From what they heard, Andrew became the *second witness* and went and found his brother, Simon.

Verse 42

And he brought him to Jesus.

Jesus looked at him and said, "You are Simon son of John. You will be called Cephas" (which, when translated, is Peter).

Andrew brought Simon to Jesus. Witness begins at home. Andrew was always bringing people to the Lord Jesus (6:8-9; 12:20-21). The Lord recognised Simon for who he was (Simon son of John) and who he would be. (Elsewhere, he is described as the "son of Jonas" e.g. Matthew 16:17; this name is an Aramaic equivalent of John). We do not know whether the Lord knew about Simon through comments by Andrew, but certainly the prophecy following demonstrates that Jesus knew him

¹ There were different ways in which the time of the day was expressed. Jewish tradition took six o'clock in the morning (sunrise) as the starting time. The tenth hour would therefore be 4 o'clock in the afternoon using this method. The Roman method was to start counting from either midnight or noon. The tenth hour would have either been 10 o'clock in the morning or 10 o'clock in the evening. John wrote his Gospel towards the end of the first century when the Roman system was in common use. Elsewhere in the Gospel the apostle John appeared to use the Roman method. For example, in 19:14 John records that Jesus was brought out before Pilate at the sixth hour. Mark tells us that they crucified Jesus when it was the third hour. From these two passages we conclude that John was using the Roman method of time (i.e. Jesus appeared before Pilate at six in the morning) whilst Mark applied the Jewish way of time recording (i.e. Jesus was crucified at nine in the morning). If John used the Roman method in one part of his Gospel, it is fair to assume that he would have been consistent and used that way of time keeping throughout the whole of his Gospel.

anyway because of his divine knowledge. Jesus told Simon that his new name was Peter. This demonstrates that the work of grace had begun in Peter's heart. The significance of the name ("rock") would become apparent later on (Matt. 16:18) and would be made even more plain in the last chapter of this Gospel. Cephas is the Greek equivalent of Peter. Andrew could not have guessed at the impact for the church of this single action of bringing Simon to the Lord.

2. The next day: more disciples (1:43-51)

Verse 43

The next day Jesus decided to leave for Galilee. Finding Philip, he said to him, "Follow me."

The next day is the fourth consecutive one in this section and the Lord now departed from Bethany (where John the Baptist had been ministering) for Galilee. He called Philip to follow him. This call to follow was an order which required obedience. It involved a sense of commitment, of self-denial and sacrifice.

Verse 44

Philip, like Andrew and Peter, was from the town of Bethsaida. Philip, Andrew and Peter were from Bethsaida in this region of Galilee. They would probably have travelled from Bethany up the east side of the Jordan river to Bethsaida, then crossed over into the Galilee region. Technically Bethsaida was in the Roman district of Gaulanitis, but it was popularly known as being part of the Galilee region. Though Peter lived in Capernaum, he and Andrew were apparently from this town, just as the Lord was from Nazareth, but was based throughout his ministry in Capernaum.

Verse 45

Philip found Nathanael and told him, "We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph."

Before Jesus moved off, Philip became the *third witness*. He found a friend, Nathanael, and told him that this man, Jesus of Nazareth, was the one the law and the prophets had pointed to. Notice that Philip's evidence was from Scripture. "The Bible says" would be our way of presenting the facts. "The law" (given by Moses) refers to the first five books of our Bible. "The prophets" are the extensive sequence of books at the latter end

of the Old Testament. It is significant that the Lord came “to fulfil the Law or [and] the Prophets” (Matt. 5:17). The declaration that Jesus was the son of Joseph was the legal position. That he was called Jesus of Nazareth showed that he had spent nearly all his earlier days in that town.

Verse 46

“Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?” Nathanael asked.

Nathanael was sceptical that anything good could come from Nazareth, but this reminds us of the humility of our Lord, that he was willing to be identified even with the outcasts of society. To be called a Nazarene was to be insulted (Matt. 2:23; Acts 24:5). In the light of Nathanael’s testimony in verse 49, the Christ might well have been expected to be born in royal Jerusalem. We will see this reaction to our Lord’s place of origin again in chapter 7 (see 7:27, 42). This was obviously a very widely held attitude to Nazareth.

“Come and see,” said Philip.

Philip responded to Nathanael by telling him to “come and see”. That reflected his Master, who also said “Come” (1:39).

Verse 47

When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said of him, “Here is a true Israelite, in whom there is nothing false.”

Jesus’ insight leads to the fourth witness, Nathanael. As Jesus saw Nathanael coming he spoke well of him, describing him as an Israelite in whom there was nothing false. In this, Nathanael is an example of the one of whom the psalmist spoke (Ps. 32:2). The original Israel was Jacob (Gen. 35:10), but he was a deceiver. Nathanael was the genuine Israelite in whom there was no trace of Jacob, the schemer.

Verse 48

“How do you know me?” Nathanael asked.

Jesus answered, “I saw you while you were still under the fig-tree before Philip called you.”

Nathanael is bewildered that the Lord should know him so intimately. The Lord told him that he saw him under the fig tree. It was not just that he saw him there, but that he had insight into his character. We have an Old Testament example of such divine perception in Samuel’s anointing of David, “Man

looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart” (1 Sam. 16:7). This indicates, again, the true nature of “Jesus of Nazareth”. The fig tree in the garden of a home was typically a place for meditation.

Verse 49

Then Nathanael declared, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel.”

Nathanael recognised the Lord as the Son of God and the King of Israel. These titles were to be laid against Jesus as a charge at his trial (18:39; 19:7, 14, 19). Their use here is, therefore, very significant and is laying another foundation to the Gospel account. It is reflected in the Palm Sunday declaration by the people (12:13) which also emphasised that this Jesus was the one prophesied. The Messiah (Hebrew equivalent of the Greek “Christos”[Christ]) is the Anointed One. Anointing was the Old Testament practice for recognising a king (for example, 1 Sam. 16:6). The theme is seen in the prophetic Psalm 2:2-7. The Messiah will be the promised “King of Israel” (Zeph. 3:15).

Verse 50

Jesus said, “You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig-tree. You shall see greater things than that.”

The Lord responded to Nathanael’s spontaneous expression of faith with a promise that as a reward for his faith greater things would be revealed to this new disciple. Jesus explains more in the next verse of what these greater things will be.

Verse 51

He then added, “I tell you the truth,

The detail of the promise opens with a strong statement, “I tell you the truth.” In the original this is a double statement, “Truly, truly”, not because the Lord says anything but the truth, but to emphasise that this is a special truth to be noted. (It was the normal practice in Hebrew to emphasise something by such a double statement.)

you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.”

Nathanael would see the heavens opened. This happened on various occasions to accompany the Father’s testimony to the Son and, as a disciple, Nathanael would be a witness to at least one of these occasions. The reference to the angels ascending

and descending on himself carries a reminder of Jacob (Israel) and his vision (Gen. 28:12). The Messiah is the one who bridges heaven and earth, hence the significance of “Son of God” (1:49) and “Son of Man” (1:51). The vision Jacob experienced indicated God’s presence and continuing revelation. Our Lord promised that continuing revelation to his disciples.

Note on the Son of Man:

“Son of God” is an expression which is a means of describing character. We have a modern saying, “Like father, like son” which echoes this type of statement. He is indeed the true reflection of the Father (Heb. 1:3). “Son of Man” reflects on the prophecy of Daniel 7:13-14 and underlines the testimony of these first witnesses that this is the promised one, the Messiah. In the New Testament the title “Son of Man” is used only of Christ (81 times). The identity is given in Daniel 7:13 and Revelation 1:13. It speaks of his substitutionary mission. This concludes the first chapter and opens the door for the gospel message to be amplified in the rest of the book.



Summary

These verses demonstrate how Jesus works in the lives of men and women today. He calls and we can only obey. He is Lord. In this final section, we see three more testimonies to his true identity. His lordship is shown in his *authority to command*. His lordship demands, and is demonstrated by, our obedience. This final section (1:35-51) gives us a picture of true discipleship: those who are willing to testify to their friends concerning the Lord (1:41, 44) and follow him themselves (1:43). To them the Lord reveals himself. The Lord has authority as demonstrated in his title, King, and in his position, rabbi, in his authority to call to discipleship and in his ultimate glorification (1:49).



A suggestion of what to preach about from these verses

Theme – Christ found Nathanael

Introduction

No, the title is not wrong, as we will see. Philip had become a disciple of Jesus Christ. He had made a wonderful discovery and wanted to share it with his friend, Nathanael. What do we do when we make a great discovery? What do we do about our discovery of the Saviour? Do we tell a friend?

1. Nathanael's doubts

He couldn't believe that anything good could come from Nazareth. He lived in nearby Cana and knew Nazareth's reputation. It was a small town of no significance. What do people say today as excuses against following Christ? Commonly we hear arguments such as, Why does God not act in some special way? Philip's response was an invitation to "come and see". Our Lord frequently invited people to do that. (See 1:39; 7:37; 21:12; Matthew 11:28.) Don't stand with the crowd, but come and see, as the Lord invites you.

2. Nathanael's character

The Lord already knew all about him. He had seen him in his garden. But he also knew Nathanael's character and describes him. In this case it is a man of good reputation. Christ also knows all about us too. There are no secrets from him. What things in your life are hidden from others, even your closest friends? God knows them. He looks on our hearts (1 Sam. 16:7). Later on Peter acknowledges this (21:17). The Lord speaks well of Nathanael – but he still needs to be his Saviour. You may be bad or good humanly speaking; you still need the Lord.

3. Nathanael's response

The Lord's insight tells Nathanael who this rabbi really is. After all, only God can see into the heart. We will see the same reaction in 4:25, 29. When Nathanael realises that the Lord can see the secret places of his heart, he acknowledges to whom he is talking, "the Son of God" and "the King of Israel". These are terms that identify him as the Messiah. For example, Zephaniah 3:15. To acknowledge who Christ is is to recognise his authority over us and our need to get right with God.

4. Nathanael's promise

The Lord, who saw Nathanael before he came to him, now gives Nathanael a promise which must have surprised him. The Lord recognised his faith and acknowledged it. The Lord always does this (see Luke 7:9). So do not hold back because you are

not clever or a theologian or someone great. Come, just as you are – the Lord always welcomes sinners. The Lord promises Nathanael another experience (1:51). This description would remind him of Jacob (Gen. 28:12) who saw a similar thing. And remember what Jacob was like. But God had not forsaken Jacob and this vision told him that God was with him and he communicated with Jacob. So for Nathanael, and any disciple, God is with us and communicates with us. But notice that the true ladder is Christ. It is through him we know God. The rest of John's Gospel (which Nathanael experienced first hand) is God's revelation to him through Christ.

Conclusion

Christ found Nathanael under a fig tree. Wherever you are, he sees you and knows you. What is your response?

BP Focus point

Background notes to places and names in the passage (see map on page iii at the front of the book)

Bethsaida - though it was prominent in New Testament times, it became lost to history for nearly two thousand years. It was a very important town in Old Testament days, probably being the capital city of the kingdom of Geshur. It was a strongly fortified city which was eventually conquered by Assyria. King David married one of its princesses (2 Sam. 3:3). It has recently been discovered again at a site well removed from the modern coastline of Galilee. The shoreline has moved because of the lowering of the Sea of Galilee's water level and earth movements. Amongst the many things found there is a jar handle with the Hebrew name MKY. This is translated as Machyahu, "Who is Yahweh?" (YHWH, Yahweh, being the personal name of our God). Micah is probably an abbreviated form of this name. About the time of Christ's death the town was renamed as Julias, after the emperor's wife. A Roman temple has been uncovered from that time. Connections with the town of Chorazin have also been found. Bethsaida was eventually abandoned in the third century because of its remoteness from the Sea of Galilee, so destroying its fishing industry. It is interesting to compare these facts with the comments of Christ about Bethsaida (Matt. 11:20-23).

Nazareth - in contrast to Bethsaida this is a thriving town today. It is divided between Arabs and Jews and between the religions of Christianity, Islam and Judaism. It is situated on the side of a hill overlooking a large plain. Its name probably comes from the Aramaic meaning “watch tower”. In our Lord’s day it was a very insignificant village. In fact historians of the time often did not list it among the towns of the Galilee region. It was overshadowed by the main town of the region, Sepphoris, situated to its north. No wonder Nathanael was so amazed that anyone great could come from such a place. It is likely that if our Lord Jesus had not been brought up there, we might never have heard of Nazareth. Today there are a number of churches and other buildings marking places supposed to be sites of New Testament incidents.

Changing names

We frequently see examples of name changes in the Bible. God changed Abram to Abraham, Jacob to Israel. The rabbis would often do this. People appointed to positions of authority had their names changed (for example, Joseph, Daniel and his friends). In modern times people converted from non-Christian backgrounds sometimes change their names to reflect their allegiance to Christ. In general God does not require this of us. The new name usually has a specific significance, as Simon’s new name, Peter or Cephas.

Nathanael (Bartholomew)

The name Nathanael means “gift of God”. He is mentioned in 2:1 and then in 21:2. From the second reference he may well have been a fisherman. One might expect to hear more about this disciple in the light of the commendation that the Lord gave. We do not know for sure what happened with him as the Bible has no more to say about him. Tradition reported by some of the Early Church leaders indicates that he went to India and preached the gospel there and in many other areas. It is also claimed that he translated the Gospel of Matthew into the local language of India. Nathanael is also known as Bartholomew. Probably Nathanael is the personal name and Bartholomew is the “family name”, that is, he is probably the son of Tholomaeus. (“Bar” usually indicates “son of”). He was from Cana (21:2), a village we will meet in the next chapter.



Over to you

Review the notes on this chapter (studies 1-3) and identify the themes that you expect to see developed in this Gospel. What relevance does it have for you in your situation?

In this chapter several men become Jesus' disciples. What convinced them that he was the Messiah? What are the marks of discipleship shown in this passage? How do you present Christ to your people?

Can you find in this chapter any principles for evangelism?

The book of signs



Introduction to chapters 2 - 11

The main body of the Gospel (the Lord's earthly ministry) began in verse 19 of chapter 1. His identity is announced and his disciples are chosen. There are repeated "flashbacks" in the rest of the Gospel to the first chapter. Now, in chapter 2 John begins to uncover the **signs** to which we have referred. Later, from chapter 12, we have the **book of glory**.

In the next ten chapters (2-11) we have a sequence of signs and messages. These form a pattern. The signs point to Christ's nature as God and the accompanying teaching clarifies our Lord's objectives. The first pair demonstrate that his ministry is to change lives and that he has the power to do that.

Signs	Messages
2:1-11	3:1-21
4:46-54	4:1-42
5:1-18	5:19-47
6:1-15	6:22-65
6:16-22	7:1-52
9:1-41	8:12-59
11:1-57	10:1-42

In the other Gospel accounts (Matthew, Mark and Luke) the miracles are presented as demonstrations of Christ's power (*dunamis* in the Greek). John uses the Greek word *semeia*, meaning signs; that is, they are actions which had significance. A sign points to something greater than itself. In the signs recorded by John they point to Christ's power to change lives. Both terms, *powers* and *signs*, are used to show that these miracles demonstrate who Christ is. They are the "works" to which our Lord refers (5:17; 14:10), the ministry of the Father to this world through our Lord Jesus. They also demonstrate the new order: the new creation, new worship and so on. This is the introduction to the new covenant from God to mankind, as described in Jeremiah 31 (see, for example, verses 4, 7, 12, 13, 14 and especially from verse 31).

Miracles in John's Gospel

symbolise the transforming power of belief in Jesus Christ

- | | |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1. Water into wine | From law to grace (Ch.2) |
| 2. Healing of the son | From sickness to health (Ch. 4) |
| 3. Healing of the paralytic | From impotence to strength (Ch.5) |
| 4. Feeding of the crowd | From emptiness to fullness (Ch.6) |
| 5. Walking on the water | From fear to assurance (Ch.6) |
| 6. Giving of sight | From darkness to light (Ch.9) |
| 7. Resurrection of Lazarus | From death to life (Ch. 11) |
| 8. Miraculous catch | From failure to success (Ch.21) |

(Robert H. Gundry, "A Survey of the New Testament" (Paternoster) pp. 107-108)

The reader will notice the difference between these miracles and those "modern miracles" often claimed today. We hear of religious statues that apparently bleed, for example. Special meetings are advertised where healings will take place. As we look at the biblical miracles, we see that these modern claims have no relationship to the biblical pattern.

In chapters 2 and 3, the apostle demonstrates that Jesus Christ is greater than the old order by examples of the new wine, the new temple, the new birth and the new baptism.

Note about feasts

We have seen in this introduction that there are seven signs with parallel messages in John's Gospel. We will also see that there are regular references to the Jewish festivals ("feasts"). They may be present merely as time markers, but there are possibly theological significances too. An appendix to this study book on page 87 explores this possibility.

Study 4

Christ and his power to save lives



Miracles: old to new

John 2

Introduction to the passage

John introduces us to the first miraculous sign that Jesus did. There is an interesting contrast with the old order presented in this miracle (remember, an objective by John is to show that signs and miracles point to Christ as being God). Moses' first miracle was turning water into blood symbolising **judgment**; Christ's first miracle was turning water into wine: **grace**. In this miracle we see Christ *creating* wine, thereby demonstrating that he is, as shown in John 1:3, the Creator. The miracle also gives us clues concerning the character of the kingdom of God that Jesus came to establish on earth.

What these verses mean

I. The first miracle: water into wine (2:1-11)

Verse 1

On the third day

This dating relates to the third day after the event of Jesus' calling Nathanael (1:43-51). The inclusion of the dating emphasises that this is historical, not allegorical, so we must not try to explain it away. It appears, therefore, to have taken place on the seventh day of his public ministry:

Day 1	1:9-28	Day 4	1:40-42
Day 2	1:29-34	Day 5	1:43-51
Day 3	1:35-39	Day 7	2:1-11

There is no reference to day 6. That could have been the Sabbath. The seventh day event reminds us of the new creation, the original seventh day being the day in which God rested from the creation work. This miracle shows us that he is able to change even us. (John chapter 1 refers to Christ at creation and

echoes the opening words of Genesis. The sequence of days in this passage also reflects the creation week.)

a wedding took place at Cana in Galilee.

The event in which Jesus performed his first miracle was a wedding. It happened in Cana, a small town in Galilee, the home of Nathanael (21:2) to whom we have been introduced (1:45-51).

Jesus' mother was there,

It is not clear in what capacity Mary was there. One possibility was that it was a distant family relative getting married. In the context of the narrative she could have been there helping with the other women. How else would she have known that the wine had run out if it was not public knowledge and been in a position to speak to the servants?

Verse 2

and Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding.

We do not know if this is a wedding in Nathanael's family. Possibly he had been invited and so extended the invitation, with typical Middle Eastern hospitality, to the Lord and his disciples. In the previous chapter (1:50) the Lord told Nathanael that he would see greater things. Is this incident one of those greater things? Certainly it is one in which the Lord reveals his glory (2:11).

Verse 3

When the wine was gone, Jesus' mother said to him, "They have no more wine."

In the midst of this joyous occasion there was an embarrassment: the supply of wine ran out. It has been suggested that it could even leave the family liable to a lawsuit by the bride's parents. The wedding feasting would have lasted seven days and probably most of Cana was there. Mary, the Lord's mother, came to him with a request (2:4-5). We will comment on the nature of this conversation again later in this study.

Verse 4

"Dear woman, why do you involve me?" Jesus replied.

It is worth noting here that Mary has no authority over the Lord. He appears to dismiss her request. This shows that the practice of some, in which they elevate Mary, is without foundation.

This is not to say that she is to be ignored. There is much to learn from the example of this godly woman (Luke 1:28, 42, 48). But the Lord will not share his glory with anyone or anything else (2:11; Ex. 15:11; Is. 46:5, 42:8).

“My time has not yet come.”

The reference to this “time” or “hour” is a key expression in this Gospel record. It will come up several times (7:30; 8:20) until eventually Jesus says, “My hour has come” (12:23). His comment to Mary was not a refusal to act. That is apparent from her reaction: it was a promise. There are many occasions through the Lord’s ministry when he could have made dramatic displays of his identity, but this was not to be the moment.

Verse 5

His mother said to the servants, “Do whatever he tells you.”

Initially Mary approached Jesus as his mother and was chided (see lessons from the miracle on page 43). Now she has changed to a believing disciple and her faith is honoured. She instructs the servants to carry out whatever instruction Jesus gives them. God makes it plain through the Scriptures that he wants obedience, not sacrifice (1 Sam. 15:22) and obedience, not empty words (Matt. 7:21). That is what will bring real blessing as it did at this wedding.

Verse 6

Nearby stood six stone water jars, the kind used by the Jews for ceremonial washing, each holding from twenty to thirty gallons.

These jars were used for ceremonial cleansing such as the washing of hands (for example, Mark 7:3). We will see the concept of cleansing occurring repeatedly in the Gospel (for example, 3:25). The capacity of each jar was described in the Greek as two to three metretes. That is probably between 75 and 110 litres. The fuel tank of a modern medium sized car takes up to 55 litres. The significance of the size of the pots was the abundance of grace and joy of the new kingdom that would replace the ritual and rules of the older.

Verse 7

Jesus said to the servants, “Fill the jars with water”; so they filled them to the brim.

As a response to the need the Lord told the servants to fill the six jars with water. They followed the instructions and filled the large pots so full that there was no room for any more. This

action might have seemed strange, but what was to follow must have seemed even stranger to the servants.

Verse 8

Then he told them, “Now draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet.”

Jesus added a further instruction that the servants were then to pour the water out and to take it to the master of the banquet. The master was responsible for organising the details of the wedding feast.

They did so,

The Lord requires unquestioning obedience. It is faithfulness that the Lord looks for (1 Co. 4:2; Matt. 25:21; 1 Sam. 15:22). When the servants dipped into the jars they drew out water and would have reckoned that this is what the guests would now be drinking.

Verse 9

and the master of the banquet tasted the water that had been turned into wine. He did not realise where it had come from, though the servants who had drawn the water knew. Then he called the bridegroom aside

They took the water to the master of the banquet. When he tasted it before instructing them to serve the guests, he was amazed at the quality of the wine and called the bridegroom to speak to him.

Verse 10

and said, “Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink; but you have saved the best till now.”

Usually at such events the best quality wine would be served first, but as time went on and taste became less sensitive, cheaper wine would be served. But this was the “best”. The magnitude of this miracle is often not appreciated. It was not water being changed to look like wine, or just to taste like it. It was real wine with all the complexities of the real thing. Also, it was the best, for God could not do anything less. The psalmist testified in Psalm 104:14-15, “He makes grass grow for the cattle, and plants for man to cultivate, bringing forth food from the earth: wine that gladdens the heart of man, oil to make his face shine, and bread that sustains his heart.”

Note on interpretation of miracles

There is a lesson here for studying the miraculous: do not expect to be able to explain it scientifically. The locals recognised it as the best wine. No doubt an expert could have commented on the flavour and related them to some vineyard in Israel and perhaps commented on its vintage. Reasonable, but wrong! So it is with, for example, the creation. Scientists may examine the world around us and so decide how it might have come into being. It might be good science and yet still be wrong. It was a miraculous act, done at God's word.

Verse 11

This, the first of his miraculous signs, Jesus performed at Cana of Galilee. He thus revealed his glory, and his disciples put their faith in him.

This miracle symbolised the change from Judaism to Christianity (1:17-18). The law of the Old Testament was weak in that it gave direction, but it did not have the power to change. The miracle of changing water into wine gave joy to the young couple, their families and guests. But the miracle had greater significance. Firstly it revealed Christ's glory and secondly the effect it had upon the disciples was to build their faith.

Lessons from the miracle

Firstly, the focus was on Christ's glory not on Mary. This is emphasised in the conversation between the Master and his mother (2:4-5). She mentioned to him the embarrassment of the hosts (2:3). In his reply, the Lord addresses her as "Woman". This can sound discourteous in, for example, a western culture. In fact, it is a term of respect and love, one he used at the cross (19:26). It carries the thought of "dear lady". The reply is rendered, "Why do you involve me?" It is worded to mark a change in the relationship from now on. Until now Jesus had been subject to her (Luke 2:51).

The author of the Gospel had said that he and his fellow disciples had seen the Lord's glory (1:14) and here he demonstrates how. It seems that this glory had not been apparent up to this point. He demonstrated his glory as Ruler by revealing his power. God's glory is in his rule as King: "Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honour and glory for ever and ever" (1 Tim. 1:17). Here, for the first time, Jesus reveals his glory as Ruler. He

demonstrates his power. We will see that this affected someone like Nicodemus (3:2).

Secondly, there is a focus on the new life in Christ. Our problem today is that we often do not recognise the cultural or religious implications of New Testament events. The wine has a significance that would have been apparent to the Old Testament reader. The new kingdom is likened to new wine in Joel 3:18 and Amos 9:13. The fact that the old wine ran out is, therefore, very significant. The loss of wine symbolises a loss of joy (in Jewish thinking) and so, prophetically, the barrenness of Judaism. It cannot satisfy (Jer. 2:13).

The new wine announces the new kingdom; the old has “run out”. So the miracle symbolises the change from Judaism to Christianity (see 1:17, “The law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ”). The miracle had a great impact upon the disciples’ faith. They had experienced new life. This is in contrast to the Jews in 2.18. This miracle leads us to conclude that Jesus is able to change even us. We can become new creations in Christ (as we shall see in the next chapter), but for that, we must believe. To experience his blessing, we must trust and obey.

2. The future miracle: the new temple (2:12-25)

The next scene moves south to the capital, Jerusalem, where the temple was. This was respected as the place where God had been pleased to dwell. Any devout Jew would seek to go there for the great feast days.

Verse 12

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

After the wedding the Lord Jesus went with his family and disciples briefly to Capernaum, which was now to be his base in Galilee.

Verse 13

When it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, Jesus went up to Jerusalem.

The timing is noted: “The Feast of the Passover”. This would have been the first of three feasts that occurred during Jesus’ public ministry. The feast in the second year is not mentioned and the third was at the time of the crucifixion. The reference

to the Passover is significant to the theme of the Gospel and reminds us of the contrast to "Christ our Passover" (1 Co. 5:7) which links back to John 1:29.

Christ's authority

In this section the Lord is again contrasting the old order with the new. The old temple will be destroyed and replaced by a new one. This episode speaks of **his holiness** (2:13-18).

Verse 14

In the temple courts he found men selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money.

The Lord entered the temple courtyard and was confronted with a scene which resembled a noisy marketplace rather than a place of worship. The variety of animals reflected the provisions of the Old Testament law (as in Leviticus). The cattle and sheep were the primary requirements of the law for the various offerings specified. The pigeons or doves had a variety of purposes, but were a particular provision for the poor (Lev. 12:8).

Note on money changers

The money changers were needed because the worshippers had to pay a temple tax in the appropriate currency. Many of the people had come from other regions and would need to change their money. There was a discussion, for example, between the Jewish leaders and Christ over the nature of the coinage (Matt. 22:21).

Verse 15

So he made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple area, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables.

The Lord dramatically cleared out the temple.¹ This incident is often called the "cleansing of the temple". It is appropriate that this occurred at the Feast of Passover because the feast always began with cleansing of the home. Here Christ cleanses God's house.

¹ Jesus cleansed the temple twice during his ministry. John records the first incident here, at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. Matthew records the second time at the end of Jesus' ministry after he had entered Jerusalem to the cheering of the crowds and in his final week (Matt. 21:12-13).

Verse 16

To those who sold doves he said, “Get these out of here! How dare you turn my Father’s house into a market!”

The emphasis had shifted from the legitimate provision of sacrificial animals to “big business”. Further, they were trading in the Greeks’ court of prayer - imagine worshipping God amongst that hubbub. This trading should have been near rather than in the temple court as it had been in the previous times.

Verse 17

His disciples remembered that it is written: “Zeal for your house will consume me.”

This verse shows Jesus’ motivation for his action. His messianic mission was to honour the Father. In Psalm 119:136 this sentiment is expressed as "Stream of tears flow from my eyes, for your law is not obeyed." Such an expression of grief is a fulfilment of Christ’s messianic ministry demonstrated from the quotation from Psalm 69:9, “Zeal for your house consumes me.” Other references and reminders of honouring the Father through obedience can be found in Zechariah 14:21 and Malachi 3:1-4. This zeal of our Lord for his Father’s glory is in contrast to the zeal of the political “zealots” (as in Luke 6:15). All this is a demonstration of *his identity*.

Verse 18

Then the Jews demanded of him, “What miraculous sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?”

The response of the leaders is remarkable. It is not a reaction of repentance but a challenge to Jesus’ authority. They want Jesus to prove that he had the right to act in the temple courtyard as he did. They failed to see that the temple cleansing was in itself a sign. Instead of asking Jesus for a sign, they should have recognised their guilt in allowing the temple to be used as a market and confessed their sin. Later Peter was to write, “For it is time for judgment to begin with the family of God” (1 Pet. 4:17). This incident leads into Jesus’ pointing to his own death, even though he has only just begun his ministry. But this is what his ministry was all about.

Christ's prophecy

Verse 19

Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days."

Jesus replied to the religious leaders' demand for a sign by giving a new prophecy.

Verse 20

The Jews replied, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?"

Jesus' statement was misunderstood by the Jews. The Jewish leaders commented that it had taken 46 years to build the temple. The work had been begun by Herod the Great and the restoration had only just been completed. The temple was razed to the ground a few years later and a new order began.

Verse 21

But the temple he had spoken of was his body.

The temple to which Jesus referred was his body. This was raised from the dust of the grave on the third day. His body was truly the temple of God. Christ is the true (perfected) temple and his death is the true cleansing so that we might come to God (13:10-11). The Jews wanted a sign, which they did get; the resurrection was the sign and the ultimate demonstration of his authority. Unfortunately they did not accept that sign either. Later the apostle Paul used the same image of the body being a temple when he stated that the body of the Christian is a temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Co. 6:19).

Verse 22

After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed the Scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken.

The disciples themselves did not understand at the time what Jesus meant when he spoke about the temple being raised again in three days. This all came about much later, after Jesus' resurrection. The book of Hebrews emphasises that the old order has been replaced, both the temple's and its priesthood and sacrifices.

Christ's purpose

Verse 23

Now while he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast,

Jesus remained in Jerusalem during the entire Passover Feast that lasted for seven days. Many people came to the city from all over for this important festival in the Jewish calendar.

many people saw the miraculous signs he was doing and believed in his name.

The people who came accepted Jesus as a great prophet and some as the Messiah. This is not the same as surrendering their lives to him. Believing in a name is not saving faith, for saving faith must come from the Holy Spirit and not through signs or miracles. These are done in order to strengthen true, saving faith. Saving faith will believe in the words of Jesus even where there is no sign.

Verse 24

But Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all men.

The incident of clearing the temple courtyard also shows that Jesus' purpose was to distinguish between true and false belief. In verse 22 we see the nature of true faith. In verses 24-25 an inadequate faith is described. The Lord shows his unlimited knowledge of man's heart. He says, "I the LORD search the heart and examine the mind, to reward a man according to his conduct, according to what his deeds deserve" (Jer. 17:10). So again we see that our Lord Jesus is God himself.

Verse 25

He did not need man's testimony about man, for he knew what was in a man.

God does not depend on the unbeliever's testimony. Ultimately their testimony is meaningless. If they testify to the truth of God's Word, for example, we have to ask why they are still unbelievers. The words "believe" (2:23) and "entrust" (2:24) are the same in the original. They believed in him, but he did not believe in them. True belief means more than amazement at his miracles and words. It involves commitment. Biblical faith is taking God at his word. Saving faith is transforming faith.



Summary

The two miracles and surrounding events of this chapter demonstrated an attribute of God and foretold what is to come when the Lord Jesus Christ returns. His first acts will be to purify the church and hold a marriage supper. Elsewhere in the New Testament we have teaching about keeping the purity of marriage. Behind this overarching thought of purity we have the power of Christ changing people's lives. The changing of the water into wine at the marriage feast was the first public testimony to Christ's glory and power. The miracle symbolised the change from the old order to the new. Christ is the King and ruler of all and he demonstrated this power through the miracle. The disciples were deeply affected and they believed in him through saving faith. This was God's appointed way. The scene that Jesus found in the temple courtyard in Jerusalem was men's profaning God's ways. Their misuse of the temple area showed their real state. The leaders questioned Jesus' right to clear out the traders and money changers and wanted proof that he had that authority. They failed to understand the picture that Jesus gave them, pointing to his death and resurrection. The disciples only fully understood after the resurrection. Many people were impressed by Jesus' actions, but he saw through their outward behaviour because he knew the true state of their hearts. The apostle John has set out the battle line between true faith (a person cleansed and purified) and outward religion (failure to deal with man's corrupt and sinful nature).

PP A suggestion of what to preach about from these verses

There is material in this chapter for many sermons. We have kept the chapter to one study to keep together the theme of God's purity and Christ's power to change lives. It is worth keeping in mind this pattern in preparing sermons that are based on a section of the chapter.

Theme : Jesus the glorious Messiah is here; he brings a kingdom of abundance (wine) and judgment (whips) (John 2:1-25)

Aim: Lord God, show all present, the glory and joy of following Jesus; show all present the radical repentance and holiness King Jesus demands.

Introduction

Israel was struggling. They were meant for abundant life (pictured in the Old Testament as a fruitful vine, or, like here, a wedding feast!). Instead they were prisoners in their own land, under the boot of Roman conquest. Yet they had a hope: one day Messiah would come – a new leader to restore their glory, to make them shine again in the world. John is telling us that King Jesus has come to bring glory and abundance. But Jesus quickly became far too radical for many in Israel – especially the religious or political leaders. For these King Jesus comes with judgment whilst he will purify his people. Life in Jesus' kingdom is the joy of eternal life and the pain of true repentance.

1. Life in Jesus' kingdom is a wedding feast (v1-11) WINE

Verse 11 explains this miracle. This passage is not about the rights and wrongs of wine, nor whether Christians should go to parties. We are told it is a sign to reveal the glory of King Jesus and his kingdom.

(Briefly recount the story)

Jesus showed his glory by fulfilling Old Testament prophecy. God had promised that Messiah would bring a new abundance of life. At times this was pictured as overflowing wine or a wedding feast (Is. 25:6; Amos 9:13). Messiah's kingdom will bring peace and plenty for all who are called by God, a kingdom flowing in wine – abundant spiritual life. Notice the water pots; they were used, in Jewish custom, for ceremonial washing before meals. And Jesus fills them with wine. John often sees symbolic meaning to events like this. Here John hints: that Jesus fulfils everything that the Old Testament ceremonies pointed to.

2. Life in Jesus' kingdom is a purified temple! (vs. 12-22) WHIP

What kind of King is Jesus? He is a King consumed with passion for God's house (v.17). By quoting Psalm 69 (another prophecy), John reinforces his message: Jesus is the promised King – zealous for God's temple. Why was Jesus angry?

- The temple was the place where God met his people.
- In the temple people discovered they could only meet with God if their sins were taken away through the sacrifice of an innocent lamb.
- The temple taught the life of prayer. As the incense rose up, it symbolised their needs and longings being carried up to God!

But this glorious temple was turned into religious sham.

- It was ruled by men who went through the motions of religion.
- It was perverted by some who used religion for financial gain.
- The system made it almost impossible to worship God with a pure heart. It had become a meat market – not a place of prayer.

And King Jesus was justly angry, so he purified his temple with a whip!

In the final Old Testament book God predicts that Messiah will cleanse his temple and the priests who ran it (Mal. 3:1). The Jewish leaders knew this prophecy, for they asked Jesus for a sign to prove his authority to do this (v.18). Jesus instead challenged them: v.19: "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days." But they missed the point and so did the disciples. Jesus meant the great temple of his own body. His death on the cross will be the great sacrifice for sins, once and forever.

Some of these men a few years later judged and condemned Jesus to death. But in judging Jesus they condemned themselves. When Jesus died and rose again he rendered their temple obsolete forever. Since Jesus' death is the final sacrifice, the temple is not needed. When Jesus died on the cross, the temple curtain was torn in two, from top to bottom. God destroyed the separation between himself and us.

Conclusion

Jesus wants repentance, not enthusiasm. (v23-25) The crowds were impressed by Jesus' miracles. They believed because of the miracles. They had a sort of faith – perhaps we could call it spiritual enthusiasm for Jesus the miracle worker. But Jesus knew their hearts; it was not true faith, because they had not truly repented of their sin, nor committed themselves to Christ to save them. No-one can pretend any more. No-one can fool God about the state of their own heart.

What sort of King is Jesus? He is a King of abundance and zeal. He's coming again to finally complete his kingdom. Revelation 19:7-9 describes his kingdom..

(This is an edited version of a sermon preached by Adam Laughton on 6th November 2005)

PP Focus point

Background notes to places in the Galilean region

(See map on page iii at the front of the book)

Cana

This is an uncertain location. We are told that the Lord went down from Cana to Capernaum. This indicates that Cana is located in the hill country. One possible site (Kefr Kenna, 6 km north of Nazareth) had a rich water supply and shady fig trees (as mentioned in 1:48). Another site (Khirbet Kana, 14 km north of Nazareth) is more likely and is known by the locals as “Cana of Galilee”. It too has an efficient water supply.

Capernaum

This is a well-known site on the shore of Galilee, though it is no longer inhabited. It is 15 miles from Cana. Several buildings have been uncovered there, including a synagogue. This was from much later than New Testament times, though there are remains underneath that probably date from the time of our Lord. One prominent building is called “Peter’s house”. It is thought that this is the site of his home and that a church was built on it. Several stone houses have also been uncovered in the village.

PP Over to you

Review the passages in the Bible that use marriage as a description of the relationship of Christ to his church.

Are signs and miracles a big thing in your country? How would you use this passage to counter the false ideas people have?

What do we learn from John chapters 1-2 about the nature of saving faith? Do the people you preach to follow Christ by trusting his Word? If you need to bring the nature of faith out more clearly, how would you use this passage?

Study 5

Christ and his power to save lives



New birth, new kingdom

John 3

Introduction to the passage

We move from a public celebration in chapter 2 to chapter 3 where we have a one-to-one conversation in the night. The two chapters are linked. In the introduction to this section of the book (page 38) we noted that the miracles are signs which are linked to specific teachings. The event that now unfolds in chapter 3 builds on the first miracle, the changing of water into wine. The second miracle described was the future miracle: the new temple. Between the two miracles Jesus moved from Galilee to Jerusalem for the feast of Passover (2:13). It was while he was there that he was approached by one of the religious leaders, Nicodemus.

What these verses mean

The greater miracle: the new birth

Verse 1

Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council.

We meet a new character called Nicodemus. We can note several things about him, each of which is encouraging, but none of which is sufficient. He is religious and is a Pharisee, a strict Jewish order. Though the Pharisees were often criticised by Jesus for hypocrisy, such a charge could not be made against this man. Nicodemus clearly was sincere. He recognised Jesus as a teacher, even though Jesus had not had any formal training for this (7:15).

Verse 2

He came to Jesus at night

Nicodemus came to see Jesus at night. We are not told why, but it is more than likely that this was because of fear of exposure,

though it is possible that it could have been the only chance he would have for a private talk with the Lord. The world was hostile (3:19-21), which would have influenced Nicodemus' secrecy. In spite of this risk, Nicodemus wanted to know more about the Lord.

and said, "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no-one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him."

Nicodemus came with an enquiring mind. He had seen or heard of the miracles Jesus had been doing. Obviously this included the Cana incident, but presumably others since then (2:23). He probably remembered that the prophets had predicted that the Messiah would heal the sick, give sight to the blind and hearing to the deaf; he would make lepers whole, the lame would walk and the dead be raised (see Isaiah 61:1-3 and Luke 4:16-21; look up also Isaiah 35:5-6 and Luke 7:22). Nicodemus was seeing this in Christ's deeds.

Verse 3

In reply Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, no-one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."

Nicodemus said that Jesus had come from God. Christ in reply set out a response which, in effect, challenged him with the question, "But do you know why?" Nicodemus was needy and Christ exposed the true nature of his need. The Lord controlled the questions: Nicodemus claimed to "see" where Christ had come from i.e. from God (3:2). Christ said he could only have done so by the "new birth". As a religious leader Nicodemus knew much about God, but Jesus showed him that he did not know him in an intimate way; he could not even see him.

This is a solemn warning to any religious leader. To have academic qualifications in theology is not enough for a person to see God. A true believer, even if he is uneducated, will know God better than an unconverted theologian.

Verse 4

"How can a man be born when he is old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!"

Nicodemus was mystified by Jesus' reply. He was thinking only in physical terms. What Jesus was speaking about concerned

spiritual matters (see 1:13 again). “Reborn” was a term the Jews used of Gentiles who converted to the Jewish faith. The difficulty for Nicodemus was to understand how a Jew could be excluded from God’s kingdom and needed to be reborn.

Verse 5

Jesus answered, “I tell you the truth,

The use of the statement, “I tell you the truth” several times in this passage demonstrates the seriousness and importance of what Jesus is saying.

no-one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit.

The true nature of the new birth is declared by Christ as he makes it plain to Nicodemus that this new birth is of divine origin. He said that to be born again means to be born of “water and the Spirit”. Various interpretations have been given of this, but we can find clear leadings in the Scriptures themselves.

John 7:37-39 Jesus refers to “streams of living water”. The explanation is then given that by this he meant the Spirit.

John 15:3 Jesus said, “You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you.” This reflects the words of Psalm 119:9.

Ezekiel 36:25-27 The prophecy is of cleansing and the Spirit: “I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove your heart of stone and will give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.”

Isaiah 44:3 “I will pour water on the thirsty of the land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour out my Spirit on your offspring, and my blessing on your descendants.”

Titus 3:5 Paul writes, “He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.”

From these Bible passages we can see that the new birth comes by the cleansing work of the Holy Spirit. We can see a link to the water-to-wine miracle in our previous study in which they used the vessels provided for washing.

Verse 6

Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.

Man, in his existing state, cannot be improved because the “flesh” (man’s natural state) is incurably wicked. Human efforts only produce human results. Man needs a new nature and that requires a miracle.

Verse 7

You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’

Jesus knew that what he was saying Nicodemus would find strange. Nicodemus would have been used to the idea that salvation comes from man’s observing the law, a human act. He is being taught that salvation is a gift of God and that the beginning stage, i.e. the birth, is when the person can do nothing about it. The fact that a person must be born again underlines that something has to happen and that the initiator is the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit has to plant in the person’s heart the new life from above. Nicodemus should therefore not be surprised that Jesus is stressing that a person must be born again. Though Jesus was speaking to Nicodemus, the “You must” is plural relating to all people including Jewish religious ones. This is brought out in verse 11 where Jesus says, “Still you people ..”

Verse 8

The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.

Another picture is given. The words for “Spirit” and “wind” are the same. Jesus compared the new birth by God’s Spirit to the movement of the wind. The wind is still a mystery. We can hear its action and see the results but we cannot predict its motion. So it is with the new birth; it is also a mystery - you cannot explain how a person becomes a Christian. Compare the statements, “the wind blows where it wants to” and “the Spirit breathes where he wills.” Neither is subject to human control or manipulation. As the Spirit moved over the old creation (Gen. 1:2), so he moves over the new. As God’s Spirit breathed life into the old man (Gen. 2:7), so he breathes the breath of life into the new man. Ezekiel (37:1-14) saw a miracle in which the Spirit, again likened to the wind, moved over lifeless bodies and

brought them to life again. If the parallel to Ezekiel 37 mentioned above is correct, it is more than likely that the Lord had this incident in mind too. Both the wind and the Spirit are invisible, but their effects are very apparent.

Verse 9

“How can this be?” Nicodemus asked.

Nicodemus was puzzled by this teaching and asked how this new birth can happen. It is the second time in this conversation that Nicodemus asks, “How can?” For all his religious training he cannot differentiate between the physical and spiritual.

Verse 10

“You are Israel’s teacher,” said Jesus, “and you do not understand these things?”

The Lord rebuked Nicodemus for not knowing the Scriptures on this matter. This man, widely recognised and prominent teacher of a favoured people, was ignorant of basic spiritual truths.

Verse 11

I tell you the truth, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen,

From this point, the emphasis changes from “we know” of Nicodemus (3:2) to “we know” of the Lord Jesus (3:11). The “we” could well refer to Jesus and John the Baptist.¹ Jesus speaks with authority because the knowledge of his “we know” is so different from Nicodemus’ “we know” in verse 2. The basis of Jesus’ knowledge comes from a close communion with his Father. It also stems from what he has seen. What has he seen and where did he see it? The answer could well be that he saw these things before the foundation of the world as his Father set out his plan of salvation (his will). The point here is that Jesus did not receive his knowledge as a human teacher receives it first from another teacher when he was a pupil.

but still you people do not accept our testimony.

Despite the clarity and authority of what Jesus was saying Nicodemus was not yet ready to accept the teaching concerning

¹ Bible scholars differ in who they think was included within the “we”. Some think that it was Jesus and the Old Testament prophets. Others think that it is Jesus and his Father and the Holy Spirit. A further view is that Jesus means only himself. He uses the plural to give weight and dignity to what he is doing.

the necessity of regeneration.² The “you” is plural and included the Jewish religious leaders who refused the teaching of John the Baptist.

Verse 12

I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things?

As Nicodemus’ bewilderment increased, the Lord described the nature of the problem. Jesus used the physical things of life on this earth to teach the doctrine of regeneration, a spiritual act. These truths were taught in the Old Testament. Nicodemus, and others like him, rejected these truths, thinking them strange. If they could not accept what happened before their eyes, by not believing these things, what was the point of Jesus talking about the heavenly things that could not be easily related to? Nevertheless, the Lord gave him a glimpse into this.

Verse 13

No-one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man.

The only way we can know of the heavenly things is through the Son of Man. No-one has ever gone up to heaven to observe these things and come down to earth to explain them, but the Son of Man (see 1:51) has come to reveal these things to us. The Old Testament speaks of some who ascended to heaven (e.g. Enoch and Elijah), but only the “Son of Man” has descended from there. This reveals a little more of the nature of the “real Jesus” in that it tells us of his origin, which is before Bethlehem. He will tell us more about this later.

Verse 14

Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up,

But Jesus goes on to tell us of his mission (3:14) and its purpose (3:15). From the preceding words, we might expect him to speak of his forthcoming ascension into heaven. Rather, he spoke of his “lifting up”. Again, this Gospel will gradually

² The word regeneration comes from the Latin “re-generare” which means again to bring forth. It is a word that today is used in the secular world to renew parts of towns and cities that have become old and decaying. The adjective regenerate is used theologically to describe the person being renewed through Christ’s saving work of the cross. This is the basis of a restored relationship with God. Regeneration is the “birth” by which this work of new creation is begun.

reveal the significance of that term for it can mean both to be crucified and to be exalted. There is also a significance in the comparison with the serpent Moses lifted up in the desert (Num. 21:8-9). The serpent was raised on a pole so that those who were dying of a disease generated by their sin of rebellion could be saved by looking at it. How can looking at a brass serpent save someone? It was by faith in the Word of God. The reference to the snake in the desert points clearly to nailing Jesus to a cross and lifting the cross to put it into position. Both the snake on the pole and Jesus on the cross were lifted high. How can the cross save a person? In the same way as the people were saved from death in the desert, by faith in the Word of God.

Verse 15

that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.

The purpose of Christ's being lifted up is for our salvation. Not by a look, but by belief in *him*. In the prologue (1:4) we were told that "in him was life". So we see a little more about the nature of saving faith. Confirming the statement in the introduction, the Lord says that those that believe in him will have "eternal life". This expression is literally translated as "life of the coming age". Anticipating the later teaching of the Gospel, this can be explained as the resurrection life. Since it is life found in the Eternal One, it must be eternal in its duration as well as being special in its character.

Verse 16

For God so loved the world

We can now begin to see how all this can happen. Eternal life is the result of *God's love*. Note how great it is - it is for the whole world, not just Israel. It is also shown to us even while we were so bad (Romans 5:8, "God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."). Verses 15-16 emphasise the universality of the message ("everyone ... the world ..."), but this is *not* universalism, which teaches that *everyone will be saved*. Only those who believe in God's Son, Jesus, will be saved. It is amazing love. To see its greatness we need to have the holiness of God as a background. Man's sin is repulsive to God. His holiness demands judgment. Yet his love comes shining through. To see the brilliance of God's love, imagine a completely dark room (our sin) and his love at the cross like a brilliant sun shining through it. Later we

will see something amazing about that love when our Lord says, “[You, the Father] have loved them even as you have loved me” (17:23). That is something too amazing for our finite minds to comprehend.

that he gave his one and only Son,

The Gospel speaks not only of the intensity of God’s love but also the manner of it. He gave. This is real love, love that gives. We are reminded of the prophecy of Isaiah 9:6, “Unto us ... a son is given”). The greatness of God’s gift is that he gave his “one and only” Son, who was unique and beloved of the Father. The Greek description of Jesus’ relationship with his Father is translated as “one and only”. The word emphasises his uniqueness. He has a unique relationship with the Father.

that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

Eternal life is received by faith. Crucially eternal life is the result of Christ’s death (3:14). “Lifted up” is used to mean “crucify” in the Aramaic language (the popular language of the Jewish people). This must have been a stumbling block to his hearers. In the law (Deut. 21:23) it was stated, “Anyone who is hung on a tree is under God’s curse.” This is not what would be expected by the Jewish listener of the Messiah. However, this word “lifted up” in Scripture always carries the implication of Christ’s exaltation. The same word is used in John 12:23; Acts 2:33; Philippians 2:9. For example, in Isaiah 52:13, “See, my servant will act wisely; he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted.” Eternal life, the result of the new birth, is life of the age to come. It is “resurrection life”, life which is far greater than we can imagine. Peter describes it: “Praise be to the God and Father... In his great mercy he has given us new birth into to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ” (1 Pet. 1:3).

The new kingdom of God

Verse 17

For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

The Lord’s coming was to bring salvation. As Jesus said on another occasion, “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost” (Luke 19:10). God does not condemn the sinner. Many people think God is hard because he condemns, but this

verse tells us that the sinner condemns himself by not believing. Christ came to save us. God does not condemn the one who believes in his Son (Rom. 8:34). Christ speaks on behalf of those who follow him. Christ may discipline his children, but he does not condemn (1 Co. 11:32). Rather, Christ was condemned on our behalf — that is how he saved us (Rom. 8:1). The world's only hope is God's love. God takes no delight in judgment (Ezek. 18:23; Jer. 48:31, 36, Rom. 6:23). But it is while we were of this world that he demonstrated his love to us (3:16; Rom. 5:8). So he is the "Saviour of the world" (4:42). There is no other saviour for this world. To refuse him is to refuse salvation.

Verse 18

Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.

For those who will not believe there is an inevitable judgment. To avoid this, we must believe. It is not of works because that would certainly lead to failure since we can never satisfy God's righteous requirements. This belief is not limited to a social class for some would then be unavoidably excluded; instead God saves some of every group and class. The crucial distinction is between one who trusts in Christ as the Son of God and one who rejects Christ by not believing that he is God's one and only Son.

Verse 19

This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil.

This is the verdict, says the apostle. This form of words is common in John's Gospel and letters (for example, 17:3; 1 John 1:5). From all this the verdict is that the Light has come into the world, just as mentioned in his introduction (1:9) and that was for our salvation. But this same light brings condemnation to the unbeliever. Why? Because the unbeliever's deeds are evil. As the prophet Isaiah had said, "All our righteous acts are like filthy rags" (Is. 64:6). The best that we do falls far short of God's standard of purity.

Verse 20

Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed.

Such people hate the light because it exposes the darkness of

their deeds. A thief works in the dark. If someone turns a light on, it exposes him and he flees. That is why people run from God. Those who live in the truth, that is, act faithfully, are attracted to the light; they have nothing to hide, no desire to deceive. This is what shows that the Lord Jesus has come from God (3:20-21; compare Nicodemus' statement in 3:2). For example, Jesus' action in cleansing the temple (2:12-17) is a demonstration of God's wrath.

Verse 21

But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God.

Those who live in the truth, that is, act faithfully, are attracted to the light; they have nothing to hide, no desire to deceive. This is the alternative against perishing and condemnation: the new birth, salvation, belief and eternal life, the difference between light and darkness. The difference is not any credit to us: we are by nature evil-doers, but God has worked in those who believe and transformed them ("through God"). Is there no hope for the fallen world? Look to the one who has been lifted up for our salvation and believe in him.

John the Baptist's final testimony

If we consider Nicodemus' comments as the *fifth testimony*, then the *sixth witness* was John the Baptist, who was also the first witness (1:15).

Verse 22

After this, Jesus and his disciples went out into the Judean countryside, where he spent some time with them, and baptised.

Following the interview with Nicodemus, which took place in Jerusalem, the Lord moved into the Judean countryside to teach his disciples. The "some time" could well indicate a period of six months. Here he baptised, though the apostle makes it plain that his disciples did the actual baptisms (4:2). The apostle is highlighting the transition between the baptisms of John and that of a follower of Christ.

Verse 23

Now John also was baptising at Aenon near Salim, because there was plenty of water, and people were constantly coming to be baptised.

Not far away, to the north, was John the Baptist, who continued

to minister at a site called Aenon near Salim. The last reference to John the Baptist was in 1:28, when he was in Bethany beyond the Jordan. We pick him up here, on the other side of the Jordan, in a location where people from four different provinces could easily reach him. Aenon is probably from the Aramaic meaning fountains. There was a group of seven springs in the area which gave a good supply of water for baptising.

Verse 24

(This was before John was put in prison.)

This comment is to indicate that the ministry at Aenon refers to an early Judean ministry not covered in the other Gospels. This ministry took place between Christ's temptation and the arrest of John the Baptist. It therefore shows that a considerable amount of time took place between the two events, though the other Gospels deal with them in two consecutive verses (Matt. 4:11-12; Mark 1:13-14; Luke 4:13-14).

Verse 25

An argument developed between some of John's disciples and a certain Jew over the matter of ceremonial washing.

Like his Lord John the Baptist faced controversy from friend and foe. One Jew criticised him because his baptism did not conform to the accepted rituals of the leaders, as described by the Essenes who lived by the Dead Sea. The argument was begun by John's disciples who probably described the baptism done by John as being superior to the ritual of ceremonial washing.

Verse 26

They came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, that man who was with you on the other side of the Jordan—the one you testified about—well, he is baptising and everyone is going to him."

On the other hand, John's own disciples were concerned at the "competition" from the Rabbi Jesus. Their jealousy was such that they did not even mention the name of Jesus. They exaggerated their complaint by saying everyone was going to "him" (Jesus).

Verse 27

To this John replied, "A man can receive only what is given him from heaven."

The preceding verses describe the background to the testimony that now follows. John the Baptist acknowledged God's

sovereignty. Whatever our work, great or small, it is given by the direction of the heavenly Father and so should lead to our contentment in doing his will. John had no right to claim an honour which heaven had not given to him.

Verse 28

You yourselves can testify that I said, 'I am not the Christ but am sent ahead of him.'

Instead of complaining about the success of Jesus, John points out to his disciples that his task of one being sent ahead is being fulfilled. The true nature of the Baptist's task had been clearly indicated in 1:8 and 1:20 and his followers should have recognised that.

Verse 29

The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete.

To illustrate this, John returns to the marriage symbolism (see the comments in the introduction to this section of the book on page 38). The focus at a wedding is on the bridegroom and the bride (the Christ and his church; 2 Co. 11:1-3). The "best man" (the "groom's friend") gets his satisfaction from seeing the happiness of the couple and eyes focused on them. John's ministry is now complete and so the disciples would see that Christ would become more important and he, the Baptist, less so. His work was done.

Verse 30

He must become greater; I must become less.

The word "must" in this verse emphasises that Christ's becoming the eminent one was the Father's will.

Verse 31

The one who comes from above is above all; the one who is from the earth belongs to the earth, and speaks as one from the earth. The one who comes from heaven is above all.

The chapter closes with another comment by the apostle (3:31-36). He confirms that Christ is the greater because he has come from heaven. Someone from a heavenly origin is higher than everything else, higher than a messenger who has an earthly origin and character. Whilst God may use such a messenger and speak through him, his own sinful nature can so easily surface

with doubts and fears. This actually happened in John the Baptist's case (Matt. 11:2-3). The Christ who is from heaven is above all these things.

Verse 32

He testifies to what he has seen and heard,

Christ's divine nature is shown by his perfect knowledge. John the Baptist may have used the expression "seen and heard" to make his disciples see who Jesus really was. Jesus was a witness by being in the presence of God, in heaven above and could testify of it.

but no-one accepts his testimony.

Jesus was rejected (1:11). John said no-one accepted his testimony. A few had, as we saw in the calling of the first disciples in chapter 1. John was answering his disciples' exaggerated comment that everyone had gone to Jesus (v. 26) with similar hyperbole. The truth they had to learn was that however many people came to hear Jesus very few would believe.

Verse 33

The man who has accepted it has certified that God is truthful.

Though many would reject Jesus there would be those who would accept his testimony. In acknowledging Jesus as being the Son of God, they demonstrate that they believe God is true. They are agreeing with and approving of God's own testimony concerning his Son. This is a contrast to what the apostle writes in his first epistle, "Anyone who does not believe God has made him out to be a liar" (1 John 5:10). Those who believe in Jesus will have the witness of the Spirit in themselves as to his truthfulness. In 14:6 we are told that he is the truth.

Verse 34

For the one whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for God gives the Spirit without limit.

When God spoke through the prophets they were anointed with the Holy Spirit sufficient for the ministry to which they were called (Heb. 1:1). But Jesus Christ is God's last word (Heb. 1:2; Matt. 21:37) and so was greater in his mission. The Spirit was given to him without limit. This means that Jesus always spoke the words of God, and was not limited like the prophets who spoke God's message at particular times.

Verse 35

The Father loves the Son and has placed everything in his hands.

So the Son was greater in authority with everything placed in his hands (5:19-30; 6:37; 12:49; Matt. 11:27; 28:18). John the Baptist having witnessed the descent of the dove (Holy Spirit) upon Jesus at his baptism and hearing God speaking to his Son, understood the eternal and trinitarian love relationship between the Father and the Son through the Spirit.

Verse 36

Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him.

Only in Jesus as God's Son is life. Outside of him there is condemnation. The verbs used here are significant. "Has eternal life" tells us that it is a present possession of the believer, not something to be received after death. The expressions "see life" (3:36), "see the kingdom of God" (3:3) and, later, "see death" (8:51) mean experiencing these things. "Remains" points to the total and eternal nature of the condemnation.



Summary

This discourse shows the ultimate inadequacy of the law in its inability to change lives. This can only come about through the new birth, salvation, belief and eternal life. Without that a person perishes and is condemned. The difference is like that between light and darkness. Those who are born again because they believe in Jesus as the Son of God cannot take any credit themselves: we are by nature evil-doers. But God has worked in those who believe and transformed them (3:21, "through God"). At this point Nicodemus did not believe (3:12). He was a Jew but he needed to be born again; natural birth is not part of the new birth. Biblical faith is not "blind faith". It is faith in God who has proved himself in Christ. Elsewhere the Scriptures show us that this faith only comes from God (Eph. 2:8). We will see Nicodemus again (19:38-42). John the Baptist, by contrast, was bowing out. He had to show his disciples that he was leading them to the bridegroom, Jesus Christ. As the bridegroom's friend it was his duty to lead the bride to him. They were to accept Jesus as the Spirit-filled Son of God.

Summary of John's Gospel so far

We have seen that the purpose of the Gospel is evangelistic and for this reason John presents a series of witnesses and describes the miracles as signs. In the previous two chapters we have seen that the Gospel presents the change from law to grace. This was demonstrated by the turning of water into wine. Moses' ministry began with water to blood, speaking of judgment, and Christ's ministry began with water to wine, speaking of His grace. This change was reinforced in the discourse between the Lord and Nicodemus.

P A suggestion of what to preach about **P** from these verses

Theme –Born again? Born again!

Introduction

Born again is the biblical description of what it means to become a Christian (1 Pet. 1:23; John 3:3). Nicodemus, a religious man, wants to know God. Like all religious people he thought the way to know God was by observing religious rules and ritual. In his discussion at night with Jesus he was told that to know God a person had to be born again. But how can this be?

1. The necessity of the new birth (3:7).

Without the new birth a person cannot see the kingdom of God (3:3). The religious leaders were blind to what Jesus taught; they preferred darkness to light (3:19-20). Without the new birth we cannot enter the kingdom of God (3:5). Countries have entry controls (such as passports); we need a "birth certificate" to enter heaven. Without it we are *condemned* (3:17-18), we are guilty before God. Without it we are *spiritually dead* (3:16). The Israelites in the wilderness died (3:14) because they did not trust God.

2. The means of the new birth (3:9).

New birth does not come by:

- knowledge: Nicodemus was a very learned man, but he was ignorant about the new birth.
- religion: Nicodemus was very religious; it is not by our devout lives but by a changed life.
- natural means (3:14; 1:13) but by God's power.

New birth comes by God's Spirit (3:3), by cleansing from sin (3:5), by Christ's death (3:14) and by faith in Christ (3:16).

3. The consequences of the new birth

- We have life (3:15,16) and will never perish.
- We have light (3:21) and we will see God and his kingdom.
- We are not condemned (3:18) and so are no more under God's judgment.
- We are to be witnesses (3:21) and our changed lives will show it.

Conclusion

Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.

PP Focus point

Background notes to this passage

“Jewish ruling council” (3:1)

Also known as the Sanhedrin. It was the highest Jewish organisation in New Testament days permitted by the Roman authorities. It was made up of the religious leaders, the Pharisees and Sadducees. Their opposition in later chapters is probably because of the supposed threat to their autonomy.

Jerusalem

The city existed even before the Israelite occupation of the land. It is also known as *Salim* (Psalm 76:2), meaning “peace”. In the New Testament times the Greek form of the name was Hierousalem, which sounded similar, but includes a Greek prefix meaning “holy”. It was considered by the Jews to be the “holy city” (Isaiah 52:1) because of the presence of the temple. It was made their capital by King David. The city was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon (2 Chron. 36:17-21). The Jews were allowed to rebuild it by the Persians and the temple too was reconstructed (2 Chron. 36:22-23). The city and temple were destroyed again and were ultimately restored by Herod the Great who was reigning at the time of Christ's birth. The city at this time was considerably larger than that in David's time. Jerusalem was destroyed again by the Romans some thirty or more years after the Lord's death.

Salim

Salim was a common name in Israel. It means “peace”. Several places of this name are recorded. It is believed that Jerusalem itself was also called Salem at one time. There are two possible sites for this Salim: Salim near Shechem or Salim, six miles south of Bethshan.



Over to you

As you consider the people you minister to how many would be like Nicodemus, regular attendees at the services, devout and leading upright lives. But do they have a true knowledge of God?

Based on these first three chapters, what is the nature of true faith and what is a true Christian? Has this been at the centre of your preaching and teaching?

Look at these verses in John's first letter and make a note of the changes that he says come about in someone who is born again: 2:29; 3:9; 4:7; 5:1; 5:4; 5:18. Are these characteristics evident in your people?

Study 6

Christ and his power to save lives



The outcast

John 4:1-42

Introduction to the passage

In this study we listen in on another meeting Jesus had with an individual and it is so different. Nicodemus was a learned, influential, respectable, orthodox theologian; this woman was unlearned, without influence, despised, and followed a “folk religion”. The religion of the Samaritans was a mixture of biblical teaching and local tradition, which made it unbiblical religion. Nicodemus we know by name but this woman is not named: and yet she is known wherever the gospel is preached.

What these verses mean

Verse 1

The Pharisees heard that Jesus was gaining and baptising more disciples than John,

The apostle John sets out the reason why Jesus made the journey from Judea to Galilee. The content of this study took place during the trip, the route of which was unusual and very significant. In 3:24 John inserted a piece of information to let the reader know that what he was writing about then took place before John the Baptist’s arrest. Now John the Baptist has been arrested, much to the joy of the religious leaders, the Pharisees. This joy was short-lived because news reached the Pharisees that Jesus was gaining greater popularity with the people than John the Baptist had known. This shift started to take place before John’s imprisonment (3:22-26).

Verse 2

although in fact it was not Jesus who baptised, but his disciples.

The baptising carried out by Jesus mentioned in the previous verse is further explained. Jesus himself did not baptise with his own hands, but it was administered in his name by others.

It shows that what is done by those appointed as leaders (ministers, pastors etc.), at Christ's command, is to be looked upon as being done by Christ himself. The practical application is that the person making their public declaration of allegiance to Christ is what is important, not who is doing the baptising.

Verse 3

When the Lord learned of this, he left Judea and went back once more to Galilee.

As Jesus came to know of John's imprisonment and the fact that the Pharisees had heard that the crowds had gone over to him, Jesus decided to leave Judea. Why? The Lord Jesus knew that for every event in his life there was an appointed time in God's decree. If he stayed in Judea then his popularity would have antagonised the religious leaders, thus sparking off a premature crisis. It was not yet time for his death, for which he would voluntarily lay down his life. Hence he had to leave Judea.

Verse 4

Now he had to go through Samaria.

The route between Judea and Galilee was through the heart of Samaria. It was used by the Galileans when they went to Jerusalem for festivals.¹ However, many Jews would avoid the Samaritan territory by crossing the Jordan River. Later (Acts 1:8) the church was to be told to evangelise this region. John suggests by the phrase "had to go" that there was a purpose to Jesus' taking the Samaritan route and that what was to follow was in God's divine plan.

Verse 5

So he came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph.

The action of this study took place on the piece of land that Jacob once owned and not far from the place where Joseph was buried.

Verse 6

Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well.

Near this plot of ground Jesus stopped to have a rest. He demonstrated his humanity by his physical tiredness. The place he stopped at was a well, dug by the patriarch Jacob. He

¹ According to the historian Josephus.

probably dug the well, even though there were other springs in the nearby mountains of Samaria, because he wanted to avoid the problems of water rights that his father Isaac had experienced (Gen. 26:15).

It was about the sixth hour.

Again we have a difficulty in determining the exact time of the day. The Jewish method of telling time would put the sixth hour as being midday. The Roman method would have been either six in the morning or at night. The six in the morning can be discounted. Scholars differ as to whether Jesus arrived in the middle of the day or in the evening. The midday view emphasises that this would have been the hottest time of the day when most folk would stay in the cool. Also the woman went at this unusual time because of her character and so the other women would not have wanted to associate with her. The evening timing, if the Roman method were used, would give consistency to other timings in the Gospel. It would have been natural for Jesus and his disciples to rest and seek food at the end of the day.

Verse 7

When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, "Will you give me a drink?"

Jesus broke all conventions here: he spoke with a woman, a prostitute and a Samaritan. The Jews considered Samaritans to be outcasts (4:9). The ultimate insult was to call someone a Samaritan. We see that the Jews insulted the Lord Jesus in this way (8:48, "The Jews answered him, 'Aren't we right in saying that you are a Samaritan and demon-possessed?'"). The meeting took place at a well.² The well was a common meeting place (see Genesis 24; Exodus 2:15-22) and was public, not secretive.

Verse 8

(His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.)

The disciples had gone into the main part of the village to obtain food which was why Jesus was alone.

² There was a stone cover to the well (and it can still be seen). It was about 50 centimetres thick and 1.5 metres across. There was a small hole in its centre through which the rope could pass. This stone cover was used as a surface to help fill the water jar from the bucket. It would also provide a resting place for a traveller. Travellers would carry their own buckets which would be of leather or canvas, but Jesus' bag was probably with the disciples and so he could not get any water for himself.

Verse 9

The Samaritan woman said to him, “You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?” (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.)

The Lord came here to meet the untouchable woman. She was ceremonially unclean because apparently she was a prostitute. To touch the impure is to become impure, but what Jesus touched became clean. We see him mixing with and touching lepers and the social outcasts (Matt. 8:3, 15; Luke 5:13; 15:2). The Lord humbled himself to ask help from such a woman as this. His action of humility elevated the woman’s feeling of self-worth. Even her bucket would have been unclean to the Jew because it belonged to a Samaritan and an immoral woman too. Yet the Lord was willing to drink from it.

Verse 10

Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.”

She came to draw water, a basic necessity of life, but the Lord pointed out a deeper need. She probably thought “living water” referred to fresh spring water. As happened with Nicodemus, she failed to grasp the significance of what the Lord was saying at first. Notice how the Lord began to communicate with her; it was different from his talk with Nicodemus. In each case Jesus started with people where they were. He did not silence them with his initial argument. Jesus had asked her for water from this well, but he revealed to her that he could give her “living water”.

Fulfilment of Old Testament prophecies

Jeremiah 2:13 points us to this greater water that Christ was offering. “My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of *living water*, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns, that cannot hold water.” Zechariah prophesied of this day in Judea and Samaria, “On that day *living water* will flow out from Jerusalem” (Zech. 14:8). Many other Old Testament promises are fulfilled here. For example in Isaiah: God’s people will “draw water from the wells of salvation”. (Is. 12:3) and “For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour out my Spirit on your offspring, and my blessing on your descendants” (Is. 44:3).

Verse 11

“Sir,” the woman said, “you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water?”

For the woman there were two obstacles. Firstly Jesus had no bucket to draw water with. Secondly was the depth of the well, probably about 35 metres. She had not yet understood what Jesus meant by “living water” and assumed he was talking about the fresh water that bubbled up from the spring at the bottom of the well. The living water was too deep to reach. Though perplexed she continued to try and unravel the riddle of this living water.

Verse 12

Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his flocks and herds?”

The woman described the well as given to them by Jacob. This comment that Jacob was part of the Samaritans’ heritage illustrates why the Jews showed such animosity to them. (See Focus Point on page 84 for further information about the Samaritans.) Despite the superstitious nature of her Jewish-related religion, the woman was curious about the stranger before her and sneered that he could not possibly supply more abundant and fresh water than Jacob did for all his family and animals. This well had supplied water for all the subsequent generations since Jacob.

Verse 13

Jesus answered, “Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again,

People could drink from Jacob’s well, but they would need to come again and again as their thirst returned.

Verse 14

but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”

The water that Christ offered was better than that of this fine well. The straight answer to the woman’s scepticism was that Jesus was better than Jacob. The writer John is demonstrating his central thesis. The water did give some temporary satisfaction just as the pleasures of sin may do, but only for a

season. You need to come again to draw - and at a cost. Christ offers better and for ever. He is greater than the great entertainers, rulers and providers of this world.

Verse 15

The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water so that I won’t get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water.”

No wonder the woman asked Jesus to satisfy her need, though she thought it would be a physical satisfaction rather than spiritual. Nicodemus had the same problem (3:4).

Verse 16

He told her, “Go, call your husband and come back.”

The exchange between them continued and the truth began to gradually dawn on this woman (4:16-19). The Lord needed to make her aware that her spiritual need was greater than her physical need and so Jesus went straight to the heart of her problem. He told her to fetch her husband.

Verse 17

“I have no husband,” she replied.

Jesus said to her, “You are right when you say you have no husband.

The woman replied that she had no husband, a statement which the Lord confirmed as true.

Verse 18

The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true.”

But Jesus went on to show that he knows the heart of man (Mark 7:21). She had had five husbands and she was currently in an unmarried relationship. She was guilty of adultery.

Verse 19

“Sir,” the woman said, “I can see that you are a prophet.

The woman realised that this was an insight into her life that could only come by revelation to this stranger. So she concluded that Jesus must be a prophet.

Verse 20

Our fathers worshipped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem.”

Again, perhaps not intentionally, she diverted the conversation. Having decided Jesus was a religious man, she started a

theological debate. What is true religion? The woman began by querying as to where God should be worshipped. Should it be at Mount Gerizim (where the Samaritans worshipped) or in Jerusalem (the Jewish centre of worship)? A Jew would have immediately pointed to the temple in Jerusalem as the place where God had called his people to come. Jews would have reminded her that this is where God came and dwelt (1 Kings 8:10).

Verse 21

Jesus declared, "Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem."

The Lord said that neither place would be the place of true worship in the future. That response was enough to shatter not only her ideas of worship but also that of the Jews. Again we see this developing trend in this Gospel: there is a new sacrifice (1:29), a new temple (2:19), a new birth (3:3), new water (4:11) and new worship (4:23). What Jesus was doing was to point out the true nature of worship. It is not an outward form, such as ritual, but inward, of the heart. This was not new truth because we find reference to the heart of worship in the Old Testament (e.g. 1 Sam. 15:22), but what the Lord does is to take us one step further here.

Verse 22

You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews.

Jesus pointed out that the Samaritans were unacquainted with the truth. Both physically and spiritually they were at the wrong place for true worship. They had only the books of Moses for their Scriptures, rejecting the prophets through whom God had spoken. But now the Messiah had come to bring both Jew and Samaritan to the place of true worship.

Verse 23

Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshippers the Father seeks.

The Lord marked this new beginning with the words, "A time is coming." This reminds us of the theme of God's time that runs through this Gospel (see 2:4). What is more, Jesus said, "And now has come." The expression "the time" crops up frequently

through the Gospel, usually in connection with Christ's death and then he is declared to have come (12:23, 16:32, 17:1). Here Jesus speaks of one aspect of the kingdom of God: a new dimension to our worship. The centre of worship changes (it is our hearts rather than a building), the sacrificial basis changes (the Lamb of God has replaced all animal sacrifices), the priorities in worship change (not personal preferences), the perceptions of worship change (it is to be concerned with who God is) and the nature of the worshippers changes (his new children).

Verse 24

God is spirit, and his worshippers must worship in spirit and in truth."

We are to worship in spirit and truth. Christ himself is the Truth (14:6). John details this further in chapters 14-15 when Jesus tells of the Spirit who will guide us in our worship. So it is through Jesus Christ that true worship is given, by the means of the Spirit (Eph. 2:18). The cross, the resurrection and the coming of the Spirit are the new dimensions that will determine new covenant worship.

Verse 25

The woman said, "I know that Messiah" (called Christ) "is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us."

The woman realised something of the implication of the Lord's reply, perhaps perceiving that he was looking at the time when the Messiah himself would arrive.

Verse 26

Then Jesus declared, "I who speak to you am he."

The Lord responded with another term which will be repeated often by him in John's Gospel: "I am". In revealing himself as the Messiah to the woman, Jesus used the language of Exodus 3:14, "I AM WHO I AM". This was when God revealed himself to Moses through the burning bush. (See Focus Point on page 85 for the meaning of I AM). This is Jesus' first disclosure of his identity and it is to a Samaritan and to such a woman. What grace. He does not necessarily reveal himself to the great, or the theologians, but to ordinary people.

Verse 27

Just then his disciples returned and were surprised to find him talking with a woman. But no-one asked, "What do you want?" or "Why are you talking with her?"

The disciples reflected something of the Jewish prejudice in their reaction upon their return from the town, but did not feel free to question the master. Their arrival broke up the conversation between Jesus and the woman.

Verse 28

Then, leaving her water jar, the woman went back to the town and said to the people,

Despite the sudden interruption the woman had heard the Lord's words and so she left her water pot and went to tell her friends. She had received the satisfaction of which the Lord spoke and forgot her physical thirst.

Verse 29

"Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Christ?"

We see the transition in the woman's thinking. She saw the Lord first as a "Jew" (4:9), then one "greater than Jacob" (4:12), then as a "prophet" (4:19), and finally "the Christ". She believed and then testified to her neighbours. Do you catch the excitement with which the realisation came upon her? Christ also honoured her by sending her to witness to a man (her supposed husband). This was not within the normal practice of the culture. He did the same thing after his resurrection when he gave Mary Magdalene a message for his disciples (20:17).

Verse 30

They came out of the town and made their way towards him.

The woman's testimony and perhaps her change of attitude made the people of the town inquisitive.

Verse 31

Meanwhile his disciples urged him, "Rabbi, eat something."

The disciples were amazed at the Lord's loss of hunger as he has ministered to this lost woman. This is the experience of satisfaction that comes in evangelism when someone comes to Christ in response to our witness. The disciples expressed a proper concern for their rabbi.

Verse 32

But he said to them, “I have food to eat that you know nothing about.”

Jesus responded to the disciples’ concern by saying that his food was to do God’s will. Not only the woman but his disciples learnt something special. For the woman it was the true meaning of *living water*, whilst for the disciples food had been the priority. Jesus introduced them to a greater need and satisfaction.³ The Lord’s comment was based on Deuteronomy 8:3 (“He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD”). At this stage the disciples had no idea of what Jesus was talking about.

Verse 33

Then his disciples said to each other, “Could someone have brought him food?”

The disciples’ ignorance lay not only in their lack of spiritual understanding but also because they had not been present during the conversation between Jesus and the woman. They had no knowledge of the mysterious food to which Jesus was referring. Like the woman (4:9) they interpreted his words literally and asked each other who in the land of the Samaritans could have brought any food to Jesus. Surely that was the purpose of their going off to the town.

Verse 34

“My food,” said Jesus, “is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work.

Jesus explained the character of the food. That is, he came to do the Father’s work and he was able to claim to have done it (17:4). He had come to finish the work and on the cross Jesus would cry out, “It is finished” (19:30).

Verse 35

Do you not say, ‘Four months more and then the harvest’? I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest.

Jesus was probably referring to a common saying of the period that there were still a few months to harvest time. Jesus saw the

³ See John 6:22-59 for an amplification of the concept of the food and 6:35 with 7:37-39 for more on the water.

relationship between the physical and the spiritual and commented that the fields were already ripe for harvesting. He was, of course, alluding to this visit to Samaria and the coming months when they would see people coming to faith in him. By this time the procession from the town walking across the fields had begun and the spiritual harvest was about to take place amongst the Samaritan people. The harvest was to be the people (crossing the fields) who were ready to receive the good news of the Messiah, not the plants that had been sown.

Verse 36

Even now the reaper draws his wages, even now he harvests the crop for eternal life, so that the sower and the reaper may be glad together.

The Lord encouraged his disciples to get involved in the sowing and reaping so that they could rejoice in the harvest. Their wages as reapers would be an eternal reward, the crown of glory that will never fade away. The result of their work would go beyond the normal life of this world. In this case the time interval between sowing and reaping would be very short. The conversation with the woman was followed quickly with the townspeople coming to see Jesus. Christ, the sower in the conversation and the disciples, as the reapers, would be able to rejoice together. In farming the time between sowing and reaping does not allow such immediate celebration. Was this the fulfilment of Amos 9:13, “‘The days are coming,’ says the Lord, ‘when the reaper will be overtaken by the ploughman and the planter by one treading grapes. New wine will drip from the mountains and flow from all the hills.’”?

Verses 37-38

Thus the saying ‘One sows and another reaps’ is true. ³⁸ I sent you to reap what you have not worked for. Others have done the hard work, and you have reaped the benefits of their labour.’

The rule in the spiritual realm is that the sower and the reaper are two different persons. Jesus confirms this when he told the disciples that they would be able to rejoice in a spiritual crop which they themselves had not planted. We have differing ministries, one sowing and another reaping, but both are essential in God’s harvest fields and both will receive their reward.

Verse 39

Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I ever did."

The result of the conversation that took place at the well between Jesus and the woman was dramatic. From the context of the preceding verses of reaping the harvest, the people's belief in Jesus was one of true faith of the heart. They believed in Jesus on the basis of the woman's testimony and because Jesus knew all about her life. We know from Acts 8:5-12 that Philip's preaching in Samaria after Pentecost was received with joy and many were baptised. Was this partly due to what had taken place at Sychar?

Verse 40

So when the Samaritans came to him, they urged him to stay with them, and he stayed two days.

Jesus spent two days with them and they listened intently. There were no clever arguments by this woman; she had simply told them that Jesus knew everything about her. On the basis of that straightforward testimony many believed in Jesus and wanted him to stay. His ministry was confined to this one place in Samaria and to this one time. When Jesus sent out the twelve, he told them to stick to the lost sheep of Israel and not go to any of the towns in Samaria (Matt. 10:5). There was no conflict for it was in God's purpose that a seed should now be sown in Samaria for future harvest, whilst the main effort of Jesus' public ministry would be concentrated upon Israel. The gospel would spread throughout the region after Pentecost. Jesus would tell his disciples in the upper room that they would do even greater things than Jesus had been doing (14:12). In this early part of his public ministry there was recognition of his world rôle that is now about to be revealed (42).

Verse 41

And because of his words many more became believers.

The woman's testimony drew the people to meet the Lord, and convinced a number of the villagers but it was Jesus' words to them that saved even more of them. As John expressed it in his letter (1 John 4:14), "We have seen and do testify that the Father sent the Son to be the Saviour of the world."

Verse 42

They said to the woman, “We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Saviour of the world.”

The title “Saviour of the world” was acknowledged by the Samaritan villagers. The confession (4:39-42) was very significant as the Samaritans had been looking for a prophet like Moses (Deut. 18:18) rather than for a saviour. This title *Saviour of the world* reflects the message of the angels to Mary, Joseph and the shepherds (Matt. 1:21; Luke 2:11), but it goes even beyond those statements. It is an acknowledgement that the message had reached beyond the Jews to the “sheep of another fold” (John 10:16). It is a fulfilment of the prologue (1:11-12). It was also a title which challenged the culture of the day. The Greeks and Romans of his day used the title Saviour, but John records this outreach beyond the borders of Judea as the sign of the Lord’s greater ministry as *Saviour of the world*. There is also an echo here of the Lord’s word to the Psalmist, (Psalm 35:3): “I AM your salvation.”



Summary

Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritan woman is a detailed and lengthy narrative. The Lord left the region of Judea because the people were comparing him with John, though it was the Lord’s disciples who did the baptising for him. The route from Jerusalem to Galilee took them through Samaria. John stated that Jesus had a need to go through Samaria. That need was so that he could be seen to be the Saviour of the world. Also, it anticipated the instruction to his disciples in Acts 1:8 in which they were to go to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth with the gospel. Jesus was setting them an example. In this passage we see an interesting parallel between the Lord’s approach to the Jews first (John 3), then to the Samaritans (John 4) and ultimately to the Gentiles (John 10) and the commission that he gave to his disciples (Acts 1:8). The setting is at a well outside the town of Sychar where Jesus and his disciples could take a break in their journey. Through a conversation with a local woman of questionable repute a number of the people are brought to

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believe in Jesus. As we read of the believing Samaritans, we ask, Where were the believing Jews? We have seen their scepticism in chapters 2 and 3. The despised Samaritans are entering the kingdom of God ahead of them.

PP A suggestion of what to preach about from these verses

Theme - Drink and live

Introduction

Solid foods and liquids are essential to life; a person cannot live without them. Any deprivation or poor diet can have serious consequences for the health of a person. As human beings we have to eat and drink to live. Often when a person is unwell the medical advice is to drink plenty of liquids. Jesus was on a journey through Samaria and stopped to take drink from a well. He asked a woman who came to the well to draw water for a drink. In the ensuing conversation Jesus talked to her about living water that was not just for this life but for a life that never ends. This is the good news, the gospel. At the very heart of this gospel is Jesus himself. Let us follow what went on.

(a) **The Lord's approach.**

The Lord talks with a social outcast: they too need the Lord. Consider those in our modern society who are "untouchable" but need to know the love of God.

(b) **The Lord's insight.**

He knew all about her and so revealed her deeper need. We need to understand the underlying need of our society: sin is at the root of all trouble.

(c) **The Lord's blessing.**

Living water - he is the only one who can satisfy. The world cannot give true satisfaction and it cannot give eternal life.

(d) **The Lord's news.**

Society favours certain people. Religions offer the possibility of a god's favour if people earn it. The gospel news and benefits are for all who will believe; you do not have to be clever, powerful, rich, educated or even foolish, weak, poor, uneducated.

(e) The Lord's disciples.

These are people who believe and confess him as the Saviour of the world: Jews, Samaritans and Greeks.

Conclusion

We need to drink this living water by trusting in Jesus Christ, believing him to be the Son of God who died on the cross to save us from our sins. If we have trusted in Christ then we have received the same commission and can talk to people, like the woman at the well, of living water (Acts 1:8).

PP Focus point**Background notes to places and people****Samaritans**

These were people originally from Babylon and other places who were brought to settle in the towns of Samaria by the Assyrian king after the Israelites of the northern kingdom were taken into exile (2 Kings 17). After some difficulties the king sent one of the captive Israelite priests back to Samaria to teach the people how to worship the Lord. The newcomers took on the Jewish "religion" as possessors of the land, but it was not the trusting faith of the patriarchs such as Jacob. They had rejected the prophets that God had sent. They accepted only the Pentateuch (the five books of Moses) as Scripture. Many of the Jews who remained there married these non-Jews who had settled in the land. This was, of course, in disobedience to God's law (Deut. 7:3-4). As a consequence they and their descendants were not recognised as true Jews and were treated as ceremonially unclean. One view is that their name, Samaritans, is not based on the location of their home (Samaria) but comes from a Hebrew word, *Shomerim*, meaning "keepers of the law". Samaritanism is claimed to be an Abrahamic religion closely related to Judaism and its followers assert that it was the Jews returning from the Babylonian exile who brought back an amended religion. The words Jesus spoke to the Samaritan woman (4:22) point out that whatever their claim of ancestry their current practice of worship was misguided.

Sychar

Sychar is located at the modern site of Asker. It is about one mile from Shechem. Today Jacob's well is located inside a church on the site.

Mount Gerizim

This is to the west of Shechem. It was the place at which the Israelites were told of the blessings they would experience if they obeyed the Lord (Josh. 8:30-35). It was here that the Samaritans worshipped and celebrated the feasts prescribed by Moses. In the time of the Persian rule over the area the Samaritans built their own temple.

The significance of the phrase “I AM”

This is the personal name of God. It is the name he allowed his special people to know (Ex. 3:14). The full name is “I AM who I AM”. This is often shortened to “I AM”. The people would say “HE IS”. In Hebrew “HE IS” is YHWH, pronounced as “Yahweh”. This is also shortened to “YAH” (Psalm 68:4). In older English Bible translations these two words are written as JeHoVaH and JAH. The shortened form is used in the expression Hallelu-Jah, that is, “Praise the LORD.” Traditionally the form “LORD” has been printed in the English Bibles for Jehovah/Yahweh.

The Lord’s approach in dealing with people

As we study this account of the woman at the well, we can learn lessons on how to deal with people. The Lord’s approach is a model from which we should learn. This list shows the characteristics of his approach and we should see how we can imitate him in our evangelism and reaching out to people.

- He relates to the person’s real need
- He is natural in his talking with the woman
- He knows her situation and need
- He is direct in his discussion with her
- He is positive rather than negative in his comments
- He does not let us avoid the truth
- He is filled with compassion in dealing with her

This passage also demonstrates that the Lord’s humanity is real: he was hot, tired and thirsty. So he does understand us and all our physical needs.



Over to you

The Lord went to where he would meet with this woman. Where should we go to meet the needy in our communities? Are there people that we find offensive? How should we reach them with the gospel?

We read of the Lord's saying, "The hour is coming" in connection with the practice of worship. We know that "the hour" refers to his cross and resurrection and to the coming of the Spirit. How do these things influence our worship?

The Lord challenges the disciples concerning the imminent harvest (4:35-38). How can we apply this to our ministry?

Appendix

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE JEWISH FESTIVALS IN JOHN'S GOSPEL

As we have noted throughout our study of the Gospel, the Jewish festivals are mentioned frequently by John. This is another unique feature of his account. It is possible that there is a significance in the mention of these celebrations. In this appendix we give a survey of the festivals and their likely relationship to the events or messages recorded.

INCIDENT	SIGN	MESSAGE	FESTIVAL
Water to wine	2:1-11	3:1-21	Passover, 2:13-17
Healing of son	4:46-54	4:1-42	Not mentioned
Healing of paralytic	5:1-18	5:19-47	Not named, 5:1
Feeding of crowd	6:1-15	6:22-65	Passover, 6:1-4
Walking on water	6:16-22	7:1-52	Tabernacles, 7:1-10:21
Restoring sight	9:1-41	8:12-59	continued
Resurrection of Lazarus	11:1-57	10:1-42	Dedication, 10:22-24

The table lists the signs and miracles from the table in our second chapter and adds the relevant festivals. John 5 refers to a “feast of the Jews” but does not name it. John 4 is unusual in not referring to any feast, but it has been suggested that there is a hint of the Pentecost festival. We will consider the greatest sign, the Lord’s death and resurrection, and its connection to the Passover when we come to study that passage.

The first Passover.

This was prescribed in the law (Ex. 12) and a one-year old male sheep or goat was to be sacrificed in remembrance of the original Passover which led to the liberation of God's people from Egypt. The animal had to be free of any blemish. Its blood was applied by a hyssop branch to the door frame and the animal roasted without breaking its bones; it was eaten with unleavened bread. The preparation for the Passover included removal of all traces of leaven from the home (Ex. 12:15-18).

The distinctive feature of this event in the Gospel is the cleansing of the temple. We can relate this cleansing of the temple to the Lord's warning of the "leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees" (Matt. 16:6). So, the Lord's first act as the Messiah in Jerusalem reflects this cleansing which is a feature of the Passover.

The prophet Malachi foresees this (Mal. 3:2-4). In fact, this Old Testament passage begins with reference to the one who would prepare the way for the Messiah, John the Baptist. As we have seen, his ministry included baptism, a ceremonial washing in preparation for the Lord's coming.

The unnamed feast of chapter 5:1 (*Hashanah?*).

From its position in the record, this feast was obviously between the first and second Passovers of the Lord's ministry (John 2 and John 6). Unlike the Passover, Tabernacles and Dedication feasts, it is not named and so is unlikely to be one of them. Two alternatives have been suggested: Pentecost or New Year (known as *Hashanah*).

The reference to the sick at the pool suggests that the event would have been a late summer/early autumn festival which would have fitted with the New Year festival. This is not one required by the law and so John may be reflecting this in his description as "a feast of the Jews". (The modern church celebrates Christmas and Easter in a similar way; the only "feast" required by the Lord for us is the communion service or Lord's Supper).

The *Hashanah* festival included the theme of the future resurrection. The celebration included a time to contemplate

the Day of the Lord, the last great judgment. This could be reflected in John 5:25-30.

The second Passover.

The text tells us (6:4) that the Passover was near. At this point the Lord is in Galilee. He would certainly have planned to be in Jerusalem for the feast. Taken with the events and the time required to reach Jerusalem, it was probably about a week before the festival.

The Sabbath immediately prior to the festival was an occasion when a rabbi would be invited to address the congregation. The theme would obviously cover the events of the exodus and, in particular, the provision by God of the manna from heaven and water from the rock. This theme is clearly reflected in the feeding of the multitude and the Lord's talk about these events.

The Feast of Tabernacles.

The instructions on this festival are given in Leviticus 23:33-36. There are many rituals associated with this event, including the building of booths (tents) in memory of the Israelites' wanderings through the wilderness. They were guided by the fiery cloud and God provided for their needs. In 2 Chronicles 5:3, we see that this festival was also marked by God's glory coming to the temple of Solomon as it was dedicated to the Lord.

As indicated in the table, this feast is covered in four chapters. We see that these events were reflected in John's account. The cloud of fire was celebrated by the lighting of the huge Jewish lamp and water was poured out each day before the altar. These chapters include the Lord's identity as the Light of the World (8:12).

The significance of the booths or tabernacles was picked up in John's introduction where he tells us that God has come to tabernacle among us (1:14). The glory originally dwelt in the tabernacle in the wilderness; now it is in the Lord Jesus, the Messiah. Haggai (2:7-9) foretells of this when he tells of the greater glory of the rebuilt temple. This was on the greatest day of the feast. So, it was on this day that the Messiah made his powerful disclosure (7:37). In fact, it also reflects the fulfilment of Isaiah 12:2-4 which speaks of the "wells of salvation".

The Feast of Dedication.

This recalls the “recovery” of the temple after its desecration by the Syrian ruler, Antiochus IV. He deliberately offended the Jews (and so, of course, God) by offering sacrifices to his god, the notorious god of Old Testament times, Baal. Further, he sacrificed a pig there, knowing that it was an unclean animal which would not be touched by devout Jews.

The revolt was led by the Maccabee family and the temple was cleansed and rededicated under Judas Maccabee. This festival was not required by the law, but became an important remembrance for the Jews.

The only New Testament reference to this feast is here in John’s Gospel. It seems that the readings associated with this festival would have included the Shepherd passages from the Old Testament, including Ezekiel 34. This is reflected in the Lord’s response in which he rebukes the leaders of his day and presents himself as the Good Shepherd. The leaders were so incensed that they tried to arrest him.

The unmentioned feast of John 4 (the Samaritan Pentecost?)

We would not notice this except for the fact that this is the only passage that has no apparent reference to one of the festivals. Taking the chronology that John has given us, the only possible feast would be that of Pentecost. It is 50 days after the Passover.

This is one of the prescribed feasts for which the Jew would make every attempt to go to Jerusalem (which is where the Lord has just been). The Pentecost feast celebrates the new wheat, the first fruits of the wheat production.

As a part of the celebration the people would prepare two loaves of bread to a size prescribed in the law and would present them to God as a thanksgiving for the harvest. It was a day of joy and one which was marked by gifts to the needy (Deuteronomy 16:11,14).

The Jews and Samaritans calculated the fifty days differently and so had conflicting dates for the celebration - just as the modern churches of east and west have different dates for Christmas and Easter.

As the Samaritans celebrated after the Jews, it may well be that the Lord was passing through Samaria just at this time for them. The discussions he had on the water and the Spirit anticipate their reference in the first Pentecost of the church (Acts 2:1).

Now if this is the timing for his visit, we can see further significance in the discussion. The Samaritans would celebrate such festivals dressed in white clothing. The men came out to the Lord (4:30), perhaps dressed this way and caused his comment on the fields being white (or ripe) ready for harvesting. He goes on to comment on the “four months and then the harvest” (4:35).

This first is the feast of the first fruits which is followed *four months later* to the day (Exodus 23:16) by the Feast of Ingathering (the final gathering of the harvest). This final feast does, of course, suggest the parallel with the final judgment (Matt. 13:30). This feast would be exactly four months after the Samaritan Pentecost. The Lord says that the time is right for them now.

(The contributor of these notes is grateful to Dr Geoff Barnard for helpful discussions on this theme of the Feasts in John’s Gospel).