

**THE GOSPEL OF JOHN  
PART I**

**By**

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## Introduction

The word gospel is of Anglo Saxon origin, and means “good news”, it’s the rendering of the Greek word *evangelion* or “good message”, the good message, the good news of the redemption and salvation offered to us through Jesus Christ. As I’m sure you all know our Bible today contains four gospels, four versions of this good news. We’ve covered the reasons why these four versions were included in our Bibles in my “An Overview of the Bible” Teaching Day and I’m not going to cover that ground again today.

Three of those gospels – Matthew, Mark and Luke – are very similar in style and content, which is why they’re usually known as the synoptic gospels, but the gospel of John is quite different in style and content. We shouldn’t see that as a contradiction. The gospels were written at different times for different audiences and different purposes, but they are all either eyewitness accounts of Jesus’s life or firmly based on eyewitness accounts.

I like the comparison of John’s Gospel to a pool in which a child may wade and an elephant can swim. It’s simple enough that any believer can profit from reading it, it’s appeal is immediate and never failing, yet it’s also full of rich subtle language and ideas. No matter how many times you read it you will always be able to find something new. I must have read the prologue – the first 18 verses of chapter 1 of John’s gospel – hundreds of times, and yet every time I look at those verses I find something fresh and new. In it you can meet with Christ in all his majesty and power. I hope you’ll feel that as we study it together.

## Authorship

If John’s gospel were a book being published today, then I’m sure there would be a title page identifying the author. But the actual gospel offers us no such easy identification of its author. Towards the end of the book the writer vaguely identifies himself as “the disciple who Jesus loved” (21:20) and the person who “is the disciple who testifies to these things and who writes them down” (21:24).

In one sense the human author is not of ultimate importance since the Holy Spirit has supreme authority over human witness (16:12-15), but, whilst this is certainly true, it is still important to be able to assess the reliability and eyewitness credentials of the author.

Even the title of the gospel is not without its disputes. Today, we just call it “John”, but early manuscripts called it “According to John” or “the Gospel According to John”.

Traditionally, and in my own view, the author of the gospel of John was John son of Zebedee – the apostle John. There are strong grounds for this view, both in the *internal* evidence of the gospel itself and in the *external* evidence from other early writers.

The internal evidence has perhaps been best summarised by E F Westcott who argues that there is evidence within the gospel that the author was (a) a Jew, (b) a Jew of Palestine, (c) an eyewitness of the events described, (d) an apostle, and (e) the apostle John. Many have attacked Westcott’s views, but his case has never been successfully overturned.

The author's Jewishness seems beyond question from the numerous allusions to Jewish customs and history throughout the gospel. The lack of any echoes of the controversies current in the non-Jewish churches during the range of time when this gospel was probably written also testify to the Jewish orientation of the author.

The author specifically claims eyewitness status at a number of points during the text (e.g. 1:14; 19:35; and 21:24). This status is also made apparent by the writer's intimate knowledge of the reactions of the disciples (e.g. 4:27; 6:19; 12:16) and of Jesus himself (e.g. 2:11, 24; 6:15; 13:1) and the knowledge of the names of characters who are not named in the parallel accounts in the synoptic gospels (e.g. 12:3; 18:10).

The author having been a disciple is indicated by the fact that he was present in a place of significance at the last supper. Mark (14:17) states that only the twelve were present at this event.

As to the author being John son of Zebedee, I would point firstly to the facts of the surprising omission of this disciple from the gospel of John – whilst other 'lesser' disciple figures are frequently recognised. Secondly, we note the many parallels of phrasing and thought in this gospel with the three letters of John. Thirdly, we can see the close association in the gospel between Peter and 'the disciple whom Jesus loved' echoing the close association between Peter and John in Acts. Finally, if the author is not John son of Zebedee, it is difficult to imagine who could have been so closely associated with Jesus, attained such an intimate understanding of him, composed this remarkable gospel and yet disappeared from the scene without leaving any evidence other than the strange title 'the disciple whom Jesus loved'.

Turning now to external evidence, there is extensive material indicating that John was the author of the gospel. Many important figures from the early centuries comment on the authorship of this book. Firstly, Irenaeus (who was bishop of Lyons in the latter part of the second century AD), states that John the Lord's disciple, wrote the gospel and published it at Ephesus and that he lived on until the time of the Emperor Trajan (AD 98). Secondly, Eusebius tells us that Irenaeus' authority for this was the aged presbyter Polycarp, who had been a confidant of the apostles themselves, and who had conversed with John in person. Thirdly, Justin Martyr asserted that the disciple John was the author of the gospel as early as AD 140. Finally, this view of the authorship of the gospel was accepted without question by other major second-century figures such as Tertullian, Clement and Origen. The *Muratorian Canon* published in the time of Irenaeus also attributes authorship to John.

It is actually amazing that this gospel gained full acceptance in the churches from the second century onwards as it had two significant difficulties associated with it. Firstly, it was quoted and used by heretical Gnostic teachers during the first half of the second century who used its affirmation of the divine nature of Christ to support their denials of the true humanity of Jesus. Of course, they chose to ignore this gospels clear statements as to Jesus' humanity as orthodox Christian apologists were later to point out to them. Secondly, this gospel is so different in style and content from the three synoptic gospels that some early Christians were reluctant to accept it. In my view this gospel would not have gained the universal acceptance which it came to enjoy unless the early Christians were certain that the author was a distinguished figure with known apostolic credentials. The only person who could logically fit this description is John the son of Zebedee – 'the disciple whom Jesus loved'.

## **John the Gospel Writer**

So accepting that John the apostle wrote the gospel bearing his name, let's see what we can know about him as a man.

John was one of the sons of Zebedee and Salome (Matthew 27:56 and Mark 15:40), probably the youngest son of Zebedee and was born at Bethsaida. He was brother to the apostle James (often called the "Greater") – see (Matthew 4:21; 10:2). Zebedee was evidently a man of some wealth as the family evidently had a number of fishing boats and a house in Jerusalem (John 19:27), so John was probably reasonably well educated. When he grew up he worked as a fisherman on the lake of Galilee.

When John the Baptist began his ministry in the wilderness of Judea, John, along with many others, gathered around him and was deeply influenced by his teaching. Then he heard John the Baptist announce "Behold the Lamb of God" and, on the invitation of Jesus, became a disciple (John 1:36). It would seem that they later returned to fishing for a while as the events of Matthew 4:21 appear to be a second calling of John. After this second calling he became permanently attached to the company of the disciples. Indeed, he became one of the innermost circle of disciples – the disciple whom Jesus loved. He was full of zeal and his intensity of character was such that Jesus described him as a "Boanerges" one of the sons of thunder (Mark 3:17). This strength enabled him and Peter to follow Christ after the betrayal in Gethsemane when all the other disciples fled (John 18:15). Indeed he followed Jesus to his trial (John 18:16) and the place of his crucifixion (John 19:26). Mary conveyed the first tidings of the resurrection to him and Peter (John 20:2). After this they returned to Galilee where Jesus revealed himself to John and Peter (John 21:1, 7). After this Peter and John were often together (Acts 3:1; 4:13).

John apparently remained in Jerusalem as the leader of the church there (Acts 15:6; Galatians 2:9), although he was not there at the time of Paul's last visit (Acts 21: 15-40). He appears to have retired to Ephesus, but we cannot be sure exactly when. He then suffered under persecution and was banished to Patmos where he had the visions described in the book of Revelation. After the persecution was over he probably returned to Ephesus and died a natural death there in around AD 98.

## **Purpose and Date**

A wide variety of purposes have been proposed for John's gospel. These include the supplementing of the synoptic gospels, the correcting of the synoptic gospels, the combating of Gnosticism (a wide range of heresies generally claiming special knowledge of God was necessary for salvation), the combating of Docetism (an heretical view denying the physical reality of the incarnation and hence denying the humanity of Christ), the opposing of continued followers of John the Baptist – and many more. Some or all of these may have been subsidiary purposes of John, but for his main purposes I think we need look no further than his own expression in (20:31) – "... these 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."

Thus we see that John's main purpose was evangelistic – to bring people to faith in Christ in order that they might be saved. He wants to confront his readers with the claims of Christ and challenge them to respond. I believe his secondary purpose is also expressed in the

above quotation – to encourage and teach Christians in order that they might grow in their faith.

At this point let me take up this secondary objective of John's and emphasise just how important I believe the study of scripture – God's word and revelation to us – is for our Christian lives. Yes we do need a personal relationship with Christ as well as head knowledge, but that relationship needs to be founded in and sustained by a thorough knowledge of scripture. If it is not then we shall depart into heresy (which will certainly distance us, or even separate us, from Christ) or our faith will become weakened and unable to sustain us in those dark and barren times when God seems distant or even absent at the experiential level.

As to when the gospel was written there are two distinct schools of thought, that it was written before the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in AD 70 – perhaps around AD 65 - 68, or that it was written later, but before the epistles of John (which are thought to have been written shortly after AD 90) – perhaps around AD 85-90.

Clement of Alexandria asserted that John wrote his gospel in order to supplement the other gospels. However, even if that is correct, it is not sufficient to confirm either an earlier or a later date.

In 5:2 John refers to the pool of Bethesda in the present tense. This seems to argue for the gospel having been written before the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, but in fact John does use the present tense to refer to the past in other places.

The sophisticated Greek of John's gospel replete with multiple meanings and sophisticated use of language, argues for John having been assisted in the writing by a small group of well educated and sophisticated Greek speakers, probably at Ephesus. Although tradition has it that John died and was entombed at Ephesus (perhaps the only disciple to die of natural causes) we cannot be sure that John did not spend a period at Ephesus before his exile to Patmos. Again this evidence provides no certainty as to the dating, but, if John wrote Revelation by himself on Patmos, it does explain why the Greek grammar of Revelation is very different from that of the gospel.

There are many references in John's gospel, such as his references to "disciples" rather than "apostles" which suggest an early date and I think the evidence in favour of an early date is increasing.

In conclusion then, we cannot be certain as to whether an early or a late dating is correct. I used to be in favour of an early dating, but currently I incline towards the later dating favoured by the figures of the early church – although I don't think any final certainty is possible. Nevertheless we have moved forward a long way from the days when 50 years ago John's gospel was discounted by theologians as a genuine eyewitness account and dated well into the second century – which we now know is impossible.

### **John and the Synoptic Gospels**

We've already mentioned the fact that this gospel is very different from the three synoptic gospels. Of course, given that it was written by a disciple who was an eyewitness to the events he recorded, that doesn't make it unreliable.

Before commenting on the differences between John and the synoptic gospels, let's look at what common ground there is. All four gospels agree that the ministry of John the Baptist was the historical prelude to Jesus' ministry. All four agree on the call and instruction of the disciples, the miraculous feeding of the 5,000, Jesus' voyage with the disciples on the sea of Galilee, Peter's confession of faith, the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, Jesus' remarkable claims and his acts of power, the developing opposition and hostility of the Jewish leaders, the cleansing of the temple, Jesus' 'last supper' with the disciples (although John doesn't mention the "Eucharistic" elements), his arrest in Gethsemane, his trial, condemnation and crucifixion, his resurrection from the dead on the third day, his post resurrection appearances, and the commissioning of the disciples. In addition there are numerous sayings which appear either in a similar or a parallel form in all four gospels. This is quite a considerable list and covers most of the basics of our faith. But there are many differences. These can be summarised under five headings:

1. Material which appears only in one or more of the other three gospels

Some of this is incidents or teachings which only occur in one or two of the synoptic gospels – e.g. the parables of the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son which are in Luke only; the raising of Jairus' daughter which is Matthew and Mark only. So, John not including these is no more significant than their omission by one or more of the synoptic gospels.

It is perhaps more difficult to understand John's omission of the transfiguration, the healing of demoniacs and the agony in Gethsemane which appear in all the synoptic gospels. However, if as I believe (and more importantly as was attested by Clement of Alexandria), John wrote to complement the other gospels rather than to replace them, then the difficulty largely disappears. We must also always remember that writers in the day and age did not write historic accounts as a modern writer would, including all the detail he could find in chronological order. Rather, they focussed on incidents which interested them, or which supported the thrust of their narrative, and paid little attention to chronology.

It seems likely that John knew of the existence of at least some of the other gospels and may even have been aware of at least some of the texts. Scholars claim to find evidence in John's text of a knowledge of Mark and possibly Luke. This does not seem unlikely as Luke said he was aware of many other accounts when he came to write (Luke 1:1). If John wrote later than Luke as we have argued is likely then it is difficult to believe that he worked in ignorance of the efforts of his fellow evangelists.

The real truth is that each of the gospel writers is selective – and with some reason. John says that all the available traditions about Jesus would exhaust any known library (20:30; 21:25).

2. Material which appears only in John.

This includes large sections of the early chapters – e.g. the wedding at Cana, the conversations between Jesus and Nicodemus and with the Samaritan woman. It also includes the raising of Lazarus, the farewell discourses and the foot washing at the last supper.

One reason for this is that John concentrates almost exclusively on the ministry of Jesus in and around Jerusalem during the time of Temple feasts. On the other hand the synoptic writers concentrate more on the ministry of Jesus in the North, around Galilee.

Sometimes John's text complements the synoptic accounts. For example the citation from Jesus' teaching made at his trial before the Sanhedrin (Mark 14:58), is obscure in the synoptic gospels but is recorded by John (2:19).

### 3. Differences in Presentation

There are more extended discourses in John and less straightforward narrative than in the synoptic gospels. Also in John Jesus uses more sophisticated rabbinical methods of discussion whereas in the synoptic gospels Jesus is more anecdotal and employs a more popular style of preaching based on parables. I believe this difference is less significant than it might seem. As we have just noted the synoptic writers concentrate on Jesus' ministry in the North where we could expect him to use a simpler presentation, whereas in the teaching around Jerusalem recorded by John we could expect a more sophisticated treatment.

Certainly there is every reason to expect a great teacher – and Jesus was the greatest teacher known – to use different methods of presentation for different audiences.

### 4. Differences in historical detail and chronology

There are three major differences (i) the cleansing of the Temple (John sets it at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, the synoptic gospels at the end), (ii) the duration of Jesus' ministry, and (iii) the date of the last supper.

I dealt with all of these issues in the Teaching Day on "Jesus's Life and Work" as those who were there may remember, but for the benefit of those who missed that, I'll go over the material again very briefly.

As I taught then, (i) seems to be a serious discrepancy, but again I cannot emphasise too much or too often that the Gospels are not a simple chronologically ordered account such as we might write today. In the interests of harmonising the accounts, some scholars have suggested that there were two separate cleansings of the temple, but I do not believe that that was the case. The accounts are so similar in their details that I find it much more likely that they are all telling of a single event. I also find it much more likely that the cleansing occurred at the end of Jesus' ministry rather than at its beginning. Perhaps John placed it at the beginning of Jesus' ministry as an indication of His zeal and as a typical example, a preview, of the hostility Jesus would face from the religious leadership.

Turning now to (ii), again the issue is not acute once we again realise that the gospel writers left issues of chronology rather vague. On the face of it, the synoptic Gospels seem to indicate that Jesus' ministry lasted little more than a year, because no annual event such as the Passover festival is mentioned twice. Difficulty in using this material is compounded by the fact that these writers did not arrange their material in chronological order, as we mentioned earlier. However, that does not mean that Jesus' ministry did not encompass more than one Passover. When we turn to the Gospel of John we find events apparently arranged in a more chronological order. We also find references to certainly three Passovers (John 2:13, 23; John 6:4 and John 11:55) and possibly four if John 5:1 (which refers to "a Feast of the Jews") is a reference to the Passover. This terminology is usually used in reference to Passover, and thus I think the best conclusion is that Jesus ministered through four Passovers

or about three and a half years in total. Nothing in the synoptic gospels is in conflict with that conclusion.

Moving on to (iii), the Synoptics appear to place this on Thursday evening/Friday, 15 Nissan = Passover, whereas John appears to place it on Thursday evening/Friday 15 Nissan = eve of Passover. However, means of reconciling this difference can be found.

This chronology has been debated by NT scholars from earliest times. Personally, I firmly believe that the Last Supper was indeed a Passover meal. This not only accords with the Synoptic accounts, but also makes much more theological sense and there are many indications within the various Gospel accounts pointing towards the Last Supper having been a Passover meal.

I'm not going to give all the details of the arguments today, but if the last supper was indeed a Passover meal then either different Jewish sects followed a different reckoning of the date of the Passover or they followed a different definition of what constituted a day – which is the theory I believe is correct. Here we reason that the Galileans and the Pharisees used the sunrise to sunrise reckoning of a day whilst the Judeans and the Sadducees used the sunset to sunset reckoning. Thus, Jesus and the disciples (using the sunrise to sunrise reckoning) slaughtered the Paschal lamb later afternoon Thursday Nissan 14 and ate it that evening. The Judean Jews (using the sunset to sunset reckoning) would slay the lamb on Friday afternoon at the end of Nissan 14 and eat it that night (which had become Nissan 15). Thus, Jesus had eaten the Passover meal when his enemies who had not yet had the Passover arrested Him.

This view satisfies both the Synoptic gospels and John. It is also substantiated by the Mishnah which states that it was the custom of the Galileans to do no work on the day of the Passover whilst the Judeans worked until midday. The Galilean's day began at sunrise and they did no work on the Passover by their reckoning and neither did the Judeans for whom the Passover began at sunset.

## **John and Jesus**

John's gospel is by far the most theological of the gospels and is the only gospel to contribute important insights on the major foundational focuses of the Christian faith. In my view these are:

1. The nature and attributes of God (e.g. 1:1-1, 14-18; 3:16; 4:24; 5:19-23; 6:45-46; 8:16-19; 10:27-30, 34-38; 12:27-28, 49-50; 13:3; 14:6-10; 16:5-15, 27-28; 17:11; 20:20-22).
2. Humanity: fallen and redeemed (e.g. 2:24-25; 3:3-8, 19-21, 36; 5:40; 6:35, 53-57; 7:37-39; 8:12, 31-47; 10:27-29; 11:25-26; 14:17; 15:1-8, 18-25; 16:3, 8; 17:2-3, 6-9; 20:22, 31).
3. The person and work of the Holy Spirit (e.g. 1:13, 32; 3:5; 4:24; 6:63; 7:39; 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7-15; 19:34; 20:22).
4. The church and its mission (e.g. 4:35; 13:31-16:33; 17:20-23; 20:19-23; 21:1-25).
5. The life in the next world (e.g. 3:15, 36; 4:14; 5:24; 6:27, 37, 39, 47, 51, 58; 8:24, 51; 10:28; 11:25; 12:25; 14:2).
6. The work of Christ (e.g. 1:29, 51; 2:19; 3:14, 34; 4:22, 42; 5:25, 28; 6:33, 40, 44, 51, 53, 62; 10:9, 11, 15; 12:24, 32; 13:8; 14:3, 18; 16:33; 17:2; 18:14, 36; 20:1-21:14)
7. And finally and, in many ways supremely, the person of Christ His deity (e.g. 1:1, 14, 18, 49; 2:11, 19; 3:13, 18, 31, 34; 5:17, 22, 26, 28; 6:20, 27, 33, 35, 38, 45, 54, 69; 7:28; 8:12, 16, 23, 28, 42, 55, 58; 9:5; 10:7, 11, 14, 18, 30, 38; 11:4,



25, 27, 44; 12:41, 44; 13:3, 19, 31,; 14:1, 6, 9, 14; 16:7, 15, 23, 28; 17:5, 10, 24, 26; 18:5; 20:1-21, 25; 20:28).

The inseparability of Christ's deity from his true humanity (e.g. 1:14; 4:6; 6:42; 8:6; 11:33, 35, 38; 12:27; 19:5, 30, 31-42).

When the Nicene creed was formulated at the councils of Nicea in AD 325 and Chalcedon in AD 451, the gospel of John was particularly helpful in supporting the nature of Christ as truly God but also truly man. Of course, neither the creeds nor even John's entire gospel are able to fully express the nature of Christ – he remains a mystery beyond human grasp. He is the mystery which lies behind the revelation of John's gospel. As we get to know Christ better today as we study John's gospel together, we shall find ourselves having to acknowledge that the more we learn about Christ the more beyond our grasp he becomes. This should not worry us. If the ancient theological maxim *Deus comprehensus non est Deus* (a God who is comprehended fully is not divine) is true then we can also say that a Christ who was fully comprehended would not be divine either.

## **John's Gospel – Introduction**

We're now going to look at John's gospel in some detail, but due to limitations of time and the enormous amount of material to be covered we shall deal with some of the most important verses in quite a lot of detail and skip over other material. That doesn't mean that the verses we skip over contain nothing worthwhile. All scripture is valuable as Paul says in his letter to Timothy (Timothy 3:16), it's just that we have to make choices due to the limitations of time.

### **Chapter 1 verses 1-18**

This is an introductory section to the gospel, often referred to as 'the prologue'. Some scholars have suggested that the prologue was written by someone other than John, but it fits well with the rest of the gospel and I don't see any evidence for that idea. The beginning of the prologue deals with the most important question of Christianity - it tells us a lot about who Jesus was. Two of the synoptic writers (Matthew and Luke) start their accounts by going back to the birth of Jesus and even provide genealogical tables going back to Abraham (in the case of Matthew) and Adam (in the case of Luke), but John is concerned to place Jesus in the widest possible context – he relates him to the entire universe and to the Father and his eternal purposes.

Look at verses 1 and 2

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.” (John 1:1-2 NIV)

There is a clear parallel between the first verse of John's gospel and the first verse of the book of Genesis – “In the beginning God created ....” and I'm sure John intended that, but it also moves into a kind of antithesis, as his main purpose here was to show that Jesus had always existed. Jesus was not created he had always existed. Verse 1 is even more emphatic in the Greek, which is written in the imperfect tense. So verse 1 might be better translated: “In the beginning was continuing the Word, and the Word was continuing with God, and the Word was continually God.” As Athanasius (a Patriarch of the early church) said “there never was when he was not”.

Before that space-time structure we call our universe was created Jesus was eternally co-existing with God in that wonderfully mysterious relationship we call the Trinity. You know that means our whole dating system is wrong – there never was a BC, there is no “before Christ”.

You’ll note that in Verse 1 Jesus is called the Logos or the Word – actually that term is used in the prologue and only in the prologue – at least as far as the gospel of John is concerned. This was a very clever choice by John as it would have had appeal to both Greeks and Jews. Greeks would have been familiar with the ideas deriving from Heraclitus of Ephesus and embodied in the philosophy of Plato and Socrates that the world was created by the Logos or word – “the idea of all ideas, the archetype of the universe”. Indeed Plato once said, “It may be that there will come forth from God a Word, a Logos, who will reveal all mysteries ...”. Now John is saying yes the Logos has come. On the other hand, Jewish readers would have been familiar with the idea that everything was created “by the word of the Lord” (Psalm 33:6). Jews also frequently referred to God as “the word of the Lord”. Yet for Christians it also tells us about the relationship between Jesus and the Father. A person’s word is how he reveals what he thinks and so God’s ultimate revelation of himself is both in his written word the scripture and in his living word – Jesus. As a result of the incarnation of Christ, we now know more about what God is like and especially we realize that God is and always has been like Jesus.

These verses also tell us that Jesus was completely and fully God, as the last part of verse 1 says, “the Word was God”. This is where many cults such as the Mormons and Jehovah’s Witnesses go wrong, in that they don’t accept that Jesus was fully and eternally God. Some have tried to find a parallel between the conceptualising of Jesus as “the Word” and the Platonic school of Greek philosophy. But, in my view, there is no parallel between the Platonic or Alexandrine concepts of God as the “idea of all ideas” – God’s self-consciousness – and John’s portrayal of Jesus. Even if only because the idea of a material incarnation of God would have been totally repugnant to the Greeks. In my view, this verse also rules out such heretical concepts as Eutychianism, which hold that there was a blending of the human and divine natures in Jesus to create a new third kind of nature.

I can’t emphasise too much how significant and important all this is. Clearly for us today it’s leading us towards the concept of the Trinity. For John’s Jewish readers it would have seemed heretical. The thing they were most fixed upon was that there was only one God – Yahweh, the Lord. It’s also important that John says the Word was God and not God was the Word. The latter would have implied that God and Jesus were the same, but John is saying that there is more to God than the Word. Here John is saying that the pre-incarnate Jesus was God, but we’ll see later in verse 18 that he also gives the same status to the incarnate Jesus and again in chapter 20 to the risen Christ.

The phrase “the word was with God” could also be translated the word was towards God, it makes our notion of the Trinity even more intimate as it actually means “the Word was continually towards God” – so Jesus and God were face to face. It also contains the idea of both a fixed and a dynamic relationship as in the Greek a preposition of motion is combined with a verb of rest.

Verse 2 doesn’t really add anything new, it just re-emphasises the eternal nature of Jesus the Word.

Next, the prologue teaches us that Jesus created the whole of our universe. Look at verse 3: “Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.” (John 1:3 NIV)

The statements about the nature of the Word lead naturally to the role of the Word in creation, because creation was God’s initial revelation of himself and that initial revelation was through Jesus.

So, Jesus created everything from the smallest scale – the inner structure of the particles that make up the atoms of matter to the largest scale – the hundreds of millions of galaxies each containing 100 billion or so stars that make up our universe. This verse also absolutely rejects the Platonic idea of eternal matter. No matter exists except that which Jesus created. Jesus also sustains our universe. As Colossians 1:17 says, “in him all things hold together”. This verse also contradicts the Platonic and Gnostic idea that matter is inherently evil. We are told that everything is created and sustained by our good God.

We can trust such a God with everything. Because he is Creator, he knows just what his creation, including us, his people, need.

However, the text really means that everything was created “through” rather than “by” Jesus – which preserves the idea that the Father is the source of all things. Scripture gives us a careful differentiation of the parts played by the Father and the Son (1 Corinthians 8:6). Creation was not the solitary act of either. Both were at work (and, for that matter, still are; cf. 5:17, 19). The Father created, but he did it “through” the Word.

From the creation of the universe we move on to the creation of the most significant thing within it – life – see verses 4 and 5:

“In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.” (John 1:4-5 NIV)

Life is one of John’s main concepts – he uses the word 36 times. Often John is talking about eternal life, but here I believe he is talking about the life all around us. Note that John doesn’t say that the Word created this life, but rather that this life is “in” him. I think John is saying both that Jesus is the source of our spiritual life and that he sustains it so that it cannot exist without him and apart from him.

Just as John links life with Christ, he also links light to him. Now Christ is light in a physical sense for he appears as such in his glory, but here the emphasis is on his spiritual, life-giving light in a dark world. Verse 5 starts “The light shines in the darkness.” Literally, this means it shines continually in the darkness, meaning that Christ is continually bombarding every corner of our hearts of darkness through the work of his Holy Spirit in nature, conscience, and the Scriptures.

Unfortunately, the world does not want to receive the light of Jesus, as verse 5 says, “the darkness has not understood it”. This dark world neither understood nor appreciated Jesus. The opposition of light and darkness is an important feature of John’s Gospel – it was also an important feature of some Jewish writings and it figures a lot in the Dead Sea Scrolls. It’s interesting that the Greek word translated “understood” in our NIV Bibles can also mean, “overcome” or “overpowered” – so this verse also means that evil and darkness cannot

overcome Jesus, they cannot extinguish his light. As Christians, we must also reflect Christ's light into the world.

Jumping ahead, verses 10 and 11 amplify this:

“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.” (John 1:10-11 NIV)

Christ was unrecognized and rejected by his own creation and yet he still shines his saving light upon us trying to pry his way into hostile hearts – Amazing love, Amazing grace. Think about just how amazing it really is.

Darkness and light are metaphors for moral or spiritual conditions. To reject Christ is to turn from God himself and continue in spiritual darkness and death. Only Jesus offers true light and life.

Returning to verse 6, John the gospel writer now introduces the ministry of John the Baptist: “There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world.” (John 1:6-9 NIV)

This brings our John into step with the other gospel writers who all regarded the ministry of John the Baptist as the starting point for Jesus' public ministry. John the Baptist is sent from God as a witness to Jesus, a Christ centred message. John the Baptist's ministry was the immediate setting for Christ coming into the world. John the Baptist pointed the world and many of the disciples towards Christ. I think the main purpose of this section is to emphasise that whilst Jesus is God, John the Baptist is only a man. Nevertheless, we are told that John the Baptist was sent by God; his mission has a divine origin and is divinely ordained. In one sense it was pivotal, because Luke tells us that the Law and the Prophets were proclaimed up until the time of John (Luke 16:16).

Some of the followers of John the Baptist held that he (rather than Jesus) was the Christ, but John firmly repudiates that – “He himself was not the light ....” John makes clear the greatness of John the Baptist, but also his limitations.

World is a major term in John's writings. Almost without exception in his gospel the term 'world' has negative overtones; it is the 'world' organized in rebellion against God's rule and claim. It was to this world that Christ came in person, but, in the character of this world, his own did not receive him. See verses 10 and 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.” (John 1:10-11 NIV)

God is not indifferent to our pain and suffering as some would claim. Indeed he could not care more. It is because he cares that he sent his son Jesus into the world. The tragedy is that when he came the world did not accept his or even recognise him. It still does not – things would not be different if he came again today. John puts this more theologically a couple of chapters later in John 3:19:

“This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil.” (John 3:19 NIV)

It is even more tragic that Jesus' initial rejection was by his own people, the nation of Israel. Indeed the Greek of verse 11 could be rendered "his own home" rather than just "his own". What perversity. After centuries of waiting for their Messiah, the people of Israel not only dismissed his claim, but also instigated his death.

Fortunately, the picture gets more positive as we move into the next few verses: "Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God." (John 1:12-13 NIV)

In fact, this is one of the most stupendous statements in the whole of the Bible. Those who receive the light become children of God - a fantastic change of status. This is a stupendous truth. Apparently, John never got over it because when he was an old man he wrote, "How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!" (1 John 3:1). This ought to be the refrain of our lives if we have believed in him.

Now if we become children of God then we are adopted children. Under Jewish law, natural children could be disinherited, but adopted children could never be disinherited. Just think of that; as God's adopted children, our status as God's heirs will never be taken away from us! Furthermore as John says in his epistle (1 John 3), as God's children we shall become like his son Jesus. What an amazing prospect.

Furthermore, coming into this wonderful inheritance couldn't be simpler. As it says in verse 12, we just have to receive him and believe in his name. That sounds a bit odd to us today, but we need to remember that in the ancient world "name" expressed everything about a person. So, Jesus's name expresses his whole character and to believe in his name is to believe in that character – to believe in Jesus as he really is.

This saving faith is one of the main themes of John's gospel. John makes it clear that such faith has a dynamic nature; it involves much more than trust in Jesus, or confidence in him, it is a complete acceptance of Jesus and of what he claims to be, and a dedication of one's life to him. Such faith has three main attributes – we've already mentioned some of these, but I just want to summarise them here. Firstly, this faith has a universal scope; verse 12 makes it clear that it applies to *all* who receive Jesus. Secondly, it grants us a personal membership of the intimate family circle of God – verse 12 makes it clear that all of us are enabled to become children of God, adopted children who can never lose our inheritance. Thirdly, verse 13 makes it clear that this entry into God's family was somehow willed and worked by God. Salvation is open to all who choose to receive it and yet we are also born of God. Our salvation is both willed by us and worked by God. Clearly there is a tension, a paradox, here – but that is just one of the mysteries of the gospel.

Let's move on now to look at John's next stupendous statement in verse 14: "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth." (John 1:14 NIV)

This is one of the most concise, yet also one of the most profound, statements about the incarnation in the whole Bible and makes it absolutely clear that the Word of verse 1 is to be identified with Jesus. As we saw verse 1 tells us that Jesus was the divine logos or word, one

with God the Father from all eternity, but here we are told that he took on flesh, just like one of us, became one with mankind and came to live with us. The word John uses here *flesh* (sarx in the Greek) is interesting. John doesn't say that Jesus came into a body; he is saying that Jesus took on complete human existence in all its frailty and vulnerability. Jesus was wholly and completely man, but, he is also God. He is both God and man; he is the God-man. He did not take on some blended nature of God and man as the heresies of Eutychianism or Apollinarianism suggests.

The verb translated 'became' in the NIV, 'made' in the KJV (egenetō, from ginomai) 'expresses that a person or thing changes its property and enters into a new condition, becomes something that it was not before'. The tense is aorist, implying a definite and completed action; there is no going back upon the incarnation. The act of self-humbling on the part of God is irreversible; he is eternally 'Emmanuel', God with us. God's son has humbled himself for all time for all eternity – just think of that! Amazing grace. God the Son, without ceasing for a moment to be divine, has united to himself a full human nature and become an authentic human person, 'God with us'. In Jesus Christ, God 'was made man'.

No words can do justice to the height and depth of the truth expressed here. Its enormity overwhelms the mind. C. S. Lewis rightly refers to it as 'the Grand Miracle'. Dorothy L. Sayers, in a lyrical passage, observes that 'from the beginning of time until now it is the only thing which has ever really happened ... We may call this doctrine exhilarating or we may call it devastating, we may call it revelation or we may call it rubbish ... but if we call it dull then what in heaven's name is worthy to be called exciting?'

The miracle of the incarnation directly addresses our need for salvation. As Anselm argued back in the eleventh century, our sin and fallenness and the Israelites continued and continual failure to keep their covenant with God imply that we cannot save ourselves. Only God can save us. But, conversely, since it is we who have sinned, the repairing of our relationship with God must come from our side, from within our human life. Thus only God *can* save us; only we *should*. 'Since no one save God can make satisfaction for our sins, and no one save man ought to make it, it was necessary for a God-man to make it.' That God-man was Jesus and uniquely Jesus.

The coming of God in the flesh did not save us in itself; the death of the God-man is also required, as John will make very clear later. The incarnation, however, established the necessary precondition, and brought the healing of the great divide between God and his rebellious creatures into the realm of true possibility. In becoming one of us Jesus Christ was and is fitted to act on our behalf as Mediator and Redeemer.

The incarnation is a supreme affirmation of the value of human existence. For all our sin and fallenness, Jesus did not shrink from becoming one with us. Our human life truly was the vehicle for God's life, our flesh contained the Word, our humanity was home for him who is for ever.

The theme of identification with us is continued in the Greek of the second half of the first sentence of verse 14, which might be better translated 'tabernacled with us' or in modern English 'pitched his tent among us'. The words for 'dwell' and 'tent' are cognates of the Hebrew term *š'kînâ*, which commonly refers to the revealed glory of God. Hence, as John expresses it *we have seen his glory*. Just as the people in the Old Testament revelation had seen God's glory manifested in tabernacle and temple, so now God's glory is revealed in his

coming in person to live among us in Jesus Christ ‘full of grace and truth’ as this verse 14 says. Indeed there are many parallels between the tabernacle and the incarnation of Christ, but that’s too big a topic for me to address it today. The evangelist sees the whole ministry of Jesus as a “tabernacling”, a coming to live in the wilderness of this world, in which the disciples again and again had glimpses of his glory. The “grace” which is spoken of here (grace is a word John uses three times in the prologue and then not again in his whole gospel) is exemplified in Christ made flesh, but also looks forward to the undeserved favour which God, through Christ, would bestow upon us, as Christ won our salvation on the cross. John’s use of the word “truth” is also interesting. He uses this word 48 times in his gospel and it is clear that for John, truth is intimately bound up with God, and is not something which can be known apart from God.

In this verse 14 John identifies himself personally with this account of Jesus Christ through his use of the word *we*. He moves from description to testimony and makes it clear that he had the great privilege of being an eyewitness of the Word. So, John found the fullness of God’s glory in Jesus. But, what about you? If you haven’t found it yet you need to remember that Jesus is not only the first word of God to us, he is also the last. You will not be reconciled to God except through him.

Let’s move on again to 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 1:15 NIV)

Now we move on to John the Baptist’s testimony concerning Jesus. John the Baptist himself was a phenomenon in Israel in his day. His ministry engendered great excitement and his preaching had a marked impact on his hearers. In listening to John the people sensed that the long centuries of silence from God were now ending, the prophetic Word was again being heard in the land. But John is careful to disavow any final significance for his ministry; he points rather to Christ who *was before me*. This covers both a temporal and an absolute precedence. The use of the word “was” in “This was he ...” is interesting as it would have seemed more natural to use the word “is”, but probably John is just emphasizing the eternal nature of Jesus – John almost invariably uses the continuous imperfect tense when speaking of Jesus.

The evangelist rounds off the prologue, this remarkable opening to his gospel which is a truly magnificent summary of the eternal glory of the ‘Word made flesh’, by testifying to what his coming has meant for the community of faith. See verses 16-18:

“From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No-one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only [Son], who is at the Father’s side, has made him known.” (John 1:16-18 NIV)

We receive an unbroken series of gifts of grace from God – one blessing after another and Christ is the source of all our blessings. These verses also make it clear that this new grace represents a new covenant that supersedes and replaces the old Sinai covenant made when the Israelites under Moses’ leadership accepted the Law. John is contrasting the old Judaism with the new Christianity

You will note that I have added the word ‘Son’ in square brackets in verse 18. This is noted in the NIV margin as a possible manuscript reading. I believe the evidence for this reading is

very strong and it certainly makes a lot of sense as it is in line with the theme of John's gospel. John is saying that Christ has revealed or made known the hidden reality of God the Father. Before the incarnation, no-one had ever seen the face of God, but now, in Christ, God can be seen and known. As he brings the prologue to a close John moves subtly away from the God-Word distinction with which he began to a Father-Son distinction – a theme that will dominate his following chapters.

### **Chapter 1 – verses 19 - 34**

I am now going to move on and skip over verses 19-28. These concern the ministry of John the Baptist, who, as we have already seen in our discussion of verses 6 and 15, was to be a witness to Jesus. John was something of a problem to the Jewish religious establishment. His religious pilgrimage had not been by official channels (Luke 1:80). But, despite his unorthodox preparation and lifestyle, there were evident signs that God was at work in him and he was widely accepted as a prophet.

Particular exception was taken to John's practice of baptizing penitents in preparation for the Messiah's coming. This involved an assumption of independent religious authority on John's part, especially when those baptized were in many cases circumcised Jews in good standing in the synagogue and temple (see verses 24–25). The Pharisees, as the self-proclaimed guardians of the religious life of the people and champions of the Torah, felt themselves particularly threatened by John's ministry at this point.

We should also note John's astonishing humility. 'John is only "a voice" (verse 23). It is noteworthy that the lowliest task to be performed by a slave and the one specified limitation on the service of disciples for their teachers was the removal of the master's shoes. John states that he is unfit to perform even this service for the Coming One (verse 27).

Let's move on to 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 1:29 NIV)

Those who came to my talk on Jesus as the Lamb of God some time ago will know that scripture reveals multiple images of Jesus as the Lamb of God, such as the Passover lamb and the scapegoat, that highlight his role as a sacrifice for our sins. John is making it clear here that John the Baptist fully appreciated this aspect of Jesus' ministry. However, this is a vast subject by itself and much too long for us to tackle in any detail today – if you are interested further download that talk from my website. John the Baptist is also showing us how to witness to others – we must point them towards the Lamb of God.

Skipping again to verse 32, John the Baptist now gives his testimony about Jesus:

"Then John gave this testimony: "I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. 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.' I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God.'" (John 1:32-34 NIV)

Here John the Baptist is specifically identifying Jesus as the Messiah, although he does not use that term. Messiah literally means 'anointed one', so in testifying to Jesus' special anointing in which the Spirit remained on him John the Baptist is identifying Jesus as the Messiah. John is not writing of something he once saw, but of something that has ongoing



effects. John also gives a complementary truth. Jesus dispenses the Spirit to his people. He is the one who will baptize them with the Holy Spirit. With the single exception of 1 Corinthians 12:13, the only NT usage of ‘baptism with or in the Spirit’ is in connection with John’s witness to Jesus. Baptism is always an initiatory experience. In the case of John the Baptist, it initiated its recipients into a readiness for the coming of the Messiah; in the NT church, baptism initiated new believers into the family of God. To entitle Jesus ‘the baptizer with the Spirit’ thus means that he is the one through whom we are initiated into God’s kingdom through receiving the life of God in the Holy Spirit. In this sense it is a synonym of Jesus as the regenerator, the one through whom we are ‘born again’. Note verse 13 that we already discussed:

“children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God.” (John 1:13 NIV)

and we shall be looking at this issue of born again when we reach Chapter 3.

At the end of verse 34, John the Baptist also specifically announces that Jesus is the Son of God. This title was given to Jesus by the Father at his baptism as we know from the other gospel writers (Matthew 3:17 and Luke 3:22).

### **Chapter 1 – verses 35 – 51**

Here, as in the synoptic gospels, the call of the first disciples follows swiftly after Jesus’ baptism. In this, Jesus conforms to Jewish rabbinical models where teachers were traditionally surrounded by ‘learners’ - which is what ‘disciples’ means. There is, however, a significant difference in Jesus’ case. In Judaism the student was left to find a teacher for himself. Here, Jesus took the initiative in selecting his disciples.

John’s noting of the time-link involved by using the words *the next day ...*, (in verses 29, 39, 43 and 2:1) may be significant. In linking the events together, John presents Jesus’ early ministry as a week-long activity culminating in his first miraculous sign at Cana in Galilee – which we shall be discussing in a moment. Recalling the parallel between the beginning of Chapter 1 and Genesis chapter 1, it is possible that John is consciously presenting the work of Jesus, the Word made flesh, as the week of re-creation paralleling the original week of creation, coming to a climax in the first of the signs which reveal his glory.

A further preliminary question concerns the harmonizing of this account with the one given in the other gospels (see Matthew 4:18-22; Mark 1: 14-20 and Luke 5: 1-11) – where these disciples are called from their fishing activities, as opposed to the meeting described here in verses 35-39:

“The next day John was there again with two of his disciples. When he saw Jesus passing by, he said, "Look, the Lamb of God!" When the two disciples heard him say this, they followed Jesus. Turning round, Jesus saw them following and asked, "What do you want?" They said, "Rabbi" (which means Teacher), "where are you staying?" "Come," he replied, "and you will see." So they went and saw where he was staying, and spent that day with him. It was about the tenth hour.” (John 1:35-39 NIV)

There appears no reason why the meeting with Jesus described by John here should not have preceded the more critical encounter described in the other gospels. Indeed the occurrence of this earlier contact helps explain the disciples’ readiness to make the radical break, at the encounter which the synoptic writers describe, apparently without opportunity to examine Jesus’ credentials or to weigh the personal consequences.

John the Baptist's directing of his followers to Jesus (verses 35–36) expresses his belief that the ministry of the Messiah would supersede his own which we have already seen (verses 26–27). It is noteworthy that John the Baptist's conviction at this point is carried through into action which hurt him personally. Andrew's going over to Jesus at John's instigation would cost John a loyal and gifted follower and, moreover, Andrew was the link to Peter, whose immense potential would surely have been recognized by John the Baptist as it was by Jesus. Further, the other unnamed disciple also changed his allegiance, and he may well have been John the evangelist, hardly a nonentity! Yet John the Baptist deliberately encourages their transfer of allegiance to Jesus.

Here was a preacher who was prepared to live by the message he preached; which goes a long way to explain why he made such an impact, and why he was remembered with respect decades later when John composed his gospel. As believers we are all ambassadors for Christ and we should all always remember the challenge of the philosopher Nietzsche to Christians 'Show me you are redeemed and I will believe in your redeemer.'

The other significant words in our verses are Jesus' question 'what do you want'. This is still a relevant question for us today as we have to consider what we want from Jesus and prepare to count the cost. It's also worth noting that Jesus doesn't demand an immediate response to his question. We should bear that in mind in our own Christian witness to non-believers and allow them space and time to consider their response.

I'm going to skip over verses 40 to 51 dealing with the details of the individual responses of the first disciples Andrew, Peter, Phillip and Nathanael. As ever there are lessons we could draw out here, but lack of time impels me to press on.

## **Chapter 2 – verses 1 – 11**

Chapter 2 opens a new section of the gospel, containing John's account of the public ministry of Jesus from its commencement in Galilee to its climax in Jerusalem. It is organized around seven miracles. John's word for them is 'signs' (*semeia*), which is his alternative to 'miracles' or 'wonders'. The other gospel writers generally refer to Jesus' miracles as *dynameis*, or acts of power, and *terata*, which means portents, miracles. Those words are not used at all by John in the former case, and only once (John 4:48) in the latter case.

The distinction indicates a fundamentally different understanding of these miracles. For the synoptic gospel writers Jesus' miracles are actual occasions of the incursion of the kingdom of God into this world. Fundamentally, they are acts by which Jesus establishes God's reign and defeats the reign of Satan. For John, the miracles, though no less real as historical acts of supernatural power, are more symbolic; they point beyond themselves to Jesus and his significance. This should have been especially true for the Jews, who had the OT prophecies concerning the kind of miracles that the Messiah would perform. For John, faith based mainly on the evidence of miraculous signs is not regarded as satisfactory. It is, however, at least a step beyond those who willfully refuse even to see the signs. Indeed, even today, we need to remember that a power to perform miracles is not by itself sufficient, never forget that the Egyptian magicians were able to replicate many of the miracles performed by Moses.

One other aspect of the 'signs' is worth noting. Jesus commonly refers to them as 'works' (*erga*). 'Works' can also include Jesus' words (see John 14:10):

“Don’t you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you are not just my own. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work.” (John 14:10 NIV)

The use of this term ‘works’ directly links the ministry of Jesus to that of the Father—‘My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working’ (John 5:17). So close is the union of Son with Father that our verse 14:10 makes it clear that the works of Jesus can be considered as the Father’s works in him. Thus, the signs, like the entire gospel, confront us with Jesus and the inescapable challenge, ‘Who are you?’ We shall return to this latter issue again when we look at Chapter 8.

Let’s now look at the account of this first sign or miracle:

“On the third day a wedding took place at Cana in Galilee. Jesus’ mother was there, and Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine was gone, Jesus’ mother said to him, “They have no more wine.” “Dear woman, why do you involve me?” Jesus replied. “My time has not yet come.” His mother said to the servants, “Do whatever he tells you.” Nearby stood six stone water jars, the kind used by the Jews for ceremonial washing, each holding from twenty to thirty gallons. Jesus said to the servants, “Fill the jars with water”; so they filled them to the brim. Then he told them, “Now draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet.” They did so, 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 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.” This, the first of his miraculous signs, Jesus performed at Cana in Galilee. He thus revealed his glory, and his disciples put their faith in him.” (John 2:1-11 NIV).

As we’ve already noted, the opening words link this sign with the other events following Jesus’ baptism to stitch these together as an account of the first week of his ministry – the beginning of re-creation.

Jesus and his disciples being invited to the wedding (see verse 2) is interesting, clearly they are not perceived as antisocial killjoys, although there may have been a family link behind the invitation. Mary appears to have had some leading catering role judging by the act that she felt it appropriate to involve herself in the matter of wine supplies. The depletion of the wine supply is probably explained by the long duration of Jewish wedding celebrations, which often lasted as long as a week. To run short of wine for the guests was, however, at the least a serious social faux pas and reflected very badly on the bridegroom and his family. Lawsuits were not unknown in such circumstances.

Mary’s sharing her dilemma with Jesus was possibly a habit bred of long years of family dependence. On balance I believe that her husband Joseph had died by this time, in spite of the reference to Joseph in John 6:42 as the reference in Mark 6:3 to Jesus as Mary’s son would have been inconceivable in Jewish culture had Joseph still been alive. We also find no active mention of Joseph following Jesus’ youth. Given Joseph’s death, Jesus as the eldest son would have taken over the family leadership role.

Mary’s request, essentially informing Jesus of the need, is in my view a helpful model of intercessory prayer. We all have a tendency to try to use prayer to dictate to God and impose our will and desires. Of course, we shouldn’t do that. I believe our part is to lay the need

before God, and then trust him to respond as he wills. We should also note that Mary's request was followed by implicit obedience – see verse 5. Prayer without a willingness to obey God's leading is no better than faith without a willingness to give that faith practical application. Let me say that again.....

Jesus' response to his mother is surprising in two respects. Firstly, he addresses her as 'woman', and secondly he hesitates over responding to her dilemma. The first is not as jarring as might appear. The phrase 'Dear woman' expresses an affectionate undertone; indeed the identical word is later used in a deeply caring moment (see John 19:26). As to the second, the phrase 'Why do you involve me?', contains a note of correction, which cannot be eliminated. This exchange marks a change in Jesus' relationship to his mother (although still special) into a new phase in the light of his Father's mission and the shadow of its sacrificial finale.

While that hour of his sacrifice had not yet come, already its demands lay upon him. As a result, all previous relationships, not least his natural ones, must be revised. When Mary is prepared to adjust to this new order her plea is accepted. Mary first approaches Jesus as his mother, and is reproached;... she then responds as a believer in her address to the servants, and her faith is honoured.

It is not surprising that there were stone jars with quantities of water to hand at the wedding. Jewish law required that hands be ceremonially washed before meals and the vessels to be used also had to be cleansed by washing. The servants' obedience to Jesus' command is rewarded, notwithstanding how irrelevant his directive must have appeared to the immediate crisis. The master of ceremonies' exclamation of surprise at the quality of this 'new wine' compared to that served earlier. This takes us to the heart of the 'sign' and its meaning. The 'new wine' of the kingdom brought by Jesus contrasts with the old wine of Judaism. 'Jesus changes the water of Judaism into the wine of Christianity.'

As far as the actual nature of the miracle is concerned, I believe that there can be no doubt that what Jesus provided was real alcoholic wine – and a large quantity of it, judging by the size of the jars, although we can't be certain of the exact measure. Christ abundantly supplies all the needs of his people. The custom of the day was to serve alcoholic wine at weddings and when the master of the banquet tasted the 'wine', which had been miraculously produced; he called it "good wine" – apparently a term used of filtered wines. It is unlikely that an expert in wine and food would have confused a non-alcoholic drink with a normal alcoholic product with which he was familiar. Some Christians have argued that Jesus would never have created anything that was harmful and that therefore the 'wine' he miraculously produced could not have been alcoholic wine.

However, modern medical science has shown us that wine (certainly red wine) consumed in moderation is beneficial to the health – scientific studies currently recommend the consumption of two glasses of red wine per day for men. Thus, the argument that Jesus does only what is for our good has no substance here. However, having said all that, let us make it quite clear that this miracle does not advocate or even condone the excessive consumption of alcohol. The Bible makes it quite clear that drunkenness is a sin.

There is an argument for saying that the permission for Christians to consume alcohol only extends to wine and that Christians should therefore only drink wine and not strong alcoholic drinks – although I don't believe that the consumption of such strong alcoholic drinks is

expressly forbidden by scripture – even if only because drinks of the strength of modern distilled liquors were unknown in Biblical times (distillation was not invented until the Middle Ages). Certainly, the position of drinking only wine (and not other alcoholic drinks) would fit in with modern medical advice, and Christians who want to maintain the strictest adherence to scriptural writ might well conclude that this is the path to follow.

Finally, I would draw your attention to the words of Jesus at the Last Supper as recorded by Luke in Luke 22:18 - “ For I tell you I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.”. If I am correct in my belief that the Last Supper was indeed a Passover meal (as I strongly believe I am), then Jesus was clearly referring to alcoholic wine – which traditionally accompanies the Passover meal. This implies that we shall come to share a glass of good wine with Jesus when we go to join him in heaven.

## **Chapter 2 – verses 12 – 25**

Here John deals with the clearing or cleansing of the Temple.

In the Synoptic Gospels, the cleansing of the temple is intimately associated with the Triumphal Entry. In Mark it takes place on the following day (Mark 11:12) whilst Matthew and Luke place it immediately after the Triumphal Entry, connecting the two events with the word “then” (Matthew 21:12; Luke 19:45). Mark may have arranged it in this way to associate it with the cursing of the fig tree (Mark 11:12-14 and 20-25), so as to make it clear that the cleansing was an act of judgement. As I have said in other talks, we must always remember that the Gospel writers were much more concerned with spiritual truth than historical timelines. Our modern notion of a strict factual and chronological order was unknown to ancient writers who were much more concerned with the spiritual and philosophical reality.

In the interests of harmonising the accounts, some scholars have suggested that there were two separate cleansings of the temple, but I do not believe that that was the case. The accounts are so similar in their details that I find it much more likely that they are all telling of a single event. I also find it much more likely that the cleansing occurred at the end of Jesus’ ministry rather than at its beginning. Perhaps John placed it at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry as an indication of His zeal and as a typical example, a preview, of the hostility Jesus would face from the religious leadership. There is also another possible reason, to which I shall return in a minute.

In summary then, I believe that John has placed this section here for thematic reasons and that the strictly chronological placing of these events is during Holy Week – the last week of Jesus’ life – where it is placed by the synoptic gospels. Thus, I shall deal with this section of John’s gospel covering the end of Jesus’ ministry and life on earth during the second part of my talk on John’s gospel.

Jesus then went on to predict his crucifixion and resurrection – look at verses 18:22  
“Then the Jews demanded of him, "What miraculous sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?" Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days." The Jews replied, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?" But the temple he had spoken of was his body. 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.” (John 2:18-22 NIV)

But, at the time, no-one including the disciples understood what Jesus was saying and the Jewish leaders never understood it because they didn't want to understand the message Jesus was bringing. Isn't that still true for many of us today – we select from the Bible those elements that appeal to us, but won't hear the message of other passages. We must hear and receive the whole message. The fact that the Jewish Temple was completely destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD shows the futility of identifying worship, or in our days the church, with physical buildings.

I believe that the two main events related in chapter 2, the changing of the water into wine at Cana, and the cleansing of the temple in Jerusalem, establish the terms of Jesus' ministry. They also anticipate Christ's future work. To attend a marriage feast and to cleanse the temple were among the acts of our Lord's ministry at his first coming. To purify the whole visible Church and hold a marriage supper (see Revelations 19:9) will be among his acts, when he comes again.

### **Chapter 3 – verses 1 – 21**

This is an account of Jesus teaching Nicodemus who was apparently a member of the ruling Jewish council, the Sanhedrin, and yet a seeker after Jesus. Let's start by looking at verses 1-16:

“Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night 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." In reply, Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, no-one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again." "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!" Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no-one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' 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." "How can this be?" Nicodemus asked. "You are Israel's teacher," said Jesus, "and do you not understand these things? I tell you the truth, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? No-one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” (John 3:1-16 NIV)

Actually the name Nicodemus is Greek, but it did occur amongst the Jews. Josephus does refer to a high ranking Nicodemus and if this Nicodemus was from the same family then he belonged to a very important family. As far as scripture is concerned, we only hear of him in this gospel. Nicodemus could be classified as belonging to that class of superficial respondents to Jesus that we referred to earlier who only relate to the miraculous signs performed by Jesus, although as we shall see in Part II of John's gospel he did come out in half hearted support of Jesus before the Sanhedrin and came out more strongly in support of Jesus at the end by helping to bury him. Nicodemus comes to Jesus with the best of credentials, a member of the Sanhedrin, a Pharisee (and therefore a zealot for the law and pure religion) and a highly regarded teacher in Israel (as Jesus states). His coming by night

may have been occasioned by the difficulty of finding time to talk with Jesus during the day, but there may well have been an element of furtiveness. Jesus was not likely to have been the kind of company Nicodemus would be expected to keep. The reference to night could also be symbolic of the dubious, dark spiritual state of Nicodemus.

Nicodemus' approach, while not without some warmth 'Rabbi', (a generous note since Jesus had not gone the official route to obtain accreditation as a teacher), is also somewhat patronizing. He says *we know* –or in other words, 'this is how we have judged your ministry to date'. Yet, by the end of the discourse, it was his ignorance rather than his knowledge that was evident. Also behind Nicodemus' statement was the clear question as to whether or not Jesus was the Messiah. I'm sure that finding out the answer to that question was the real purpose behind his coming to meet with Jesus.

Whatever the precise terms of his approach, Nicodemus is immediately rocked back on his heels by Jesus' rejoinder, which unceremoniously exposes his spiritual need. Jesus says: *I tell you the truth, no-one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.*

Now when I was first a Christian I always thought that Jesus was being a little bit hard on Nicodemus in the rest of this story. As we saw, in verse 3 Jesus suddenly says to Nicodemus that no-one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again: "I tell you the truth, no-one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."

Now it seemed to me that the idea of being born again was not easy to understand. So when Jesus says to Nicodemus in verse 10 "You are Israel's teacher," said Jesus, "and do you not understand these things?" – it always seemed to me that this was rather a harsh criticism.

Actually, a real understanding of this part of the story lies in the fact that the Greek word "anōthen" translated in our bibles as "again" in verse 3 has a double meaning in Greek. It can mean "again" but it can also mean "from above" and I think that was the main sense in which the word is being used here. Jesus was saying that to enter the kingdom of heaven we must be born from above, or transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit. Of course, Jesus was probably not speaking to Nicodemus in Greek, but I think John is trying to convey the flavour of a spiritual misunderstanding here.

Probably realising that Nicodemus has not grasped his meaning from what he said in verse 3, Jesus expresses himself again slightly differently and even more clearly in terms of his intended meaning in verse 5: "Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no-one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit." A rebirth in the repentance of water and in the power of the Holy Spirit. Interestingly, this is the only verse in this gospel which refers to "the kingdom of God".

That's why Jesus berates Nicodemus so severely in verse 10 – because Nicodemus has ignored the correct spiritual meaning of what Jesus is saying and allowed himself to become confused by an alternative earthly meaning. Jesus was going behind the opening words of Nicodemus and his unspoken question as to whether Jesus was the Messiah and telling him that what he really needed to know was how to enter the kingdom of God. That's still the most relevant piece of information for us today. Jesus is telling Nicodemus that he can't enter God's kingdom by observing the Law – and neither can we.

Jesus' words in verse 5 are full of meaning. Water could represent actual physical birth, but it can also represent the water baptism of a believer – which is where the idea of being

baptised by the Holy Spirit comes from – and water also represents a cleansing. Here I think it is significant that a water baptism was part of the ritual for initiating someone into the Jewish faith and in this baptism the convert would promise to renounce idolatry, to take the God of Israel for his God and to have his life conformed to the precepts of Jewish Law.

What I believe Jesus was saying to Nicodemus, and indeed to us all – since the use of the term “you” in verse 7 probably widens the application away from Nicodemus – is that we need to be cleansed from sin and filled with the Holy Spirit, so as to convert us to the divine likeness, before we can enter the kingdom of God. When John the Baptist came baptising with water he made it quite clear – as we saw earlier today – that this would not suffice and that a baptism of the Holy Spirit would be necessary. Let me say here that I do not believe that Jesus is saying that a water baptism is a necessary condition for believers to enter the kingdom of God. There is no evidence whatsoever that any of the disciples or the thief on the cross were ever baptised for example. Thus, I believe that water baptism is good and honouring to both scripture and God, but I do not believe it is necessary for entering God’s kingdom. I think that in our text baptism signifies both repentance and a public acknowledgement of our Christian faith.

As a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin, Nicodemus had many advantages. If birth and religious advantages – and no doubt as a leading Pharisee, scrupulous observance of religious forms and practices – could put man into the kingdom of God, then Nicodemus could surely have claimed to be there. The sign and seal of his belonging to God were upon him. Yet, as we just saw, Jesus said to him in verse 5, “I tell you the truth, no-one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit.” Religious practice and observances are meaningless unless there is real life – and that is what Jesus Christ came to give. Nicodemus might have known Jewish scripture from one end of the scroll to the other – but that is of no use unless we also have a relationship with God. Being born in a garage doesn’t make you a car and going to church every week doesn’t necessarily make you a Christian.

Jesus was saying to Nicodemus that the starting point in the Christian life is rebirth. What he was in the natural man would not enable him to enter the kingdom of God. God implants the faith we need for believing in Christ in our hearts. It is then that new life is conceived. The Holy Spirit opens up God’s word to us and we begin to grow in our new life.

In verse 8 Jesus says: “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.” What Jesus is saying to Nicodemus here is that he should not judge being born again in the Spirit in terms of understanding the process, but rather judge it by its effects, its sound. When people are born again in the Spirit we see the changes that are produced and we don’t need to worry about how that change has come about. In effect Jesus is saying to Nicodemus, let your relationship with God and the Spirit happen. You do not control it or command it – God does. In our relationship with God we need to trust him in and with those things we cannot fully understand. That doesn’t mean that you should throw reason away – we are told to love God with all our heart AND mind.

Jesus had told Nicodemus in verse 3 that unless one is born again he cannot enter the kingdom of God. This is a general statement, not just applicable to Nicodemus, but to us all. This teaching was clearly a mystery to Nicodemus. Even after Jesus had expanded on his initial statement about being born again or from above, Nicodemus did not understand. He says in verse 9 “How can this be?” Nicodemus asks the “how” question of being born again,



and to this Jesus responds. Jesus' real answer is at the end of the passage, in verses 14 to 16. Jesus says that he must be lifted up and that everyone who believes in him will have eternal life.

Where Jesus refers to his being lifted up as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert in verse 14, he is referring back to Numbers chapter 21 verses 8 and 9. At that time whilst the Israelites were wandering in the wilderness, many people were dying from snake bites. So God told Moses to put a bronze serpent on a pole elevated amongst the people, and promised that all those who looked upon this serpent when bitten would be cured. There is a direct parallel here. The bronze serpent is made to picture Christ. Christ's being lifted up refers both to his being lifted up as our example and to his crucifixion when he was lifted up on the cross and there atoned once and for all for all our sins. All the sins of each and every one of us; past, present and future. Jesus' reference to himself as the Son of Man makes clear his dual identity as both God and man.

We don't know whether Nicodemus was able to completely accept Christ's message at this time, but I think not. Unbelief binds the heart and mind from seeing spiritual truth and accepting the provision of salvation that God has so graciously given us in Christ. Nicodemus was a spiritual leader and teacher in his time, but he did not understand because of his unbelief. As we've already noted and as we shall see in more detail in the second part of this presentation, it is likely that Nicodemus did eventually come to some sort of faith.

The dialogue with Nicodemus is a crucial section of the whole Bible, since it expresses most clearly the truth of regeneration by the Holy Spirit; the fact that it is by the secret, powerful operation of God's Holy Spirit alone that one can experience salvation. *You must be born again/from above.* This teaching is anticipated in the Old Testament (e.g. Isaiah 32: 15-20; 44: 3; Ezekiel 36: 25-27; Joel 2:28). It is taught elsewhere in the New Testament (Titus 3:5; 1 Peter 1:3, 23; 1 John 2:29;3:9; 4:7; 5:1, 14, 18), and is also congruent with other New Testament images for salvation—entering the kingdom of God, believing in Christ, receiving eternal life, and the like.

The specific contribution which regeneration by the Spirit makes to our understanding of salvation is in its stress on salvation as a supernatural work of God involving a radical change of nature. At a time when 'religion' is again generally in vogue, with ancient world faiths experiencing some resurgence, and new brands such as New Age gaining ground in the market, the idea that religion cannot save is as startling in our ears today as it was to the ears of religious Nicodemus. To experience God's salvation is not simply a matter of illumination; it is a matter of regeneration. It is not just new seeing, but new being. *You must be born again/from above.*

This truth of new birth has far-reaching implications for those engaged in evangelism, for it teaches us that becoming a Christian is always a miracle. The Christian witness therefore will inevitably be a person of prayer as well as of words, and churches which engage in evangelism with integrity will inevitably be prayerful churches, beseeching God for his intervention to enable dead people to be reborn.

Regeneration also makes clear the radical difference between Christians and non-Christians. We are either one or the other, born again, or dead in sins; we have come to the light, or are still in darkness; we are saved from condemnation, or under condemnation. There is no middle ground.

Before leaving this section, I must comment briefly on what are possibly the four greatest verses of scripture – John 3:14-18:

“Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. 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.” (John 3:14-18 NIV)

These verses really say it all. God in his grace and love sent his Son that by believing in him we might be saved from our sins and come into God’s salvation of eternal life, but if we don’t turn to Christ we stand condemned.

Having looked at Jesus’ encounter with Nicodemus in some detail, I’m going to skip over the second part of this section – verses 17 – 21.

### **Chapter 3 – verses 22 – 36**

Let’s start with verse 22:

“After this, Jesus and his disciples went out into the Judean countryside, where he spent some time with them, and baptised.” (John 3:22 NIV)

Jesus now embarks on a more general preaching and teaching ministry in the Judean region. His proclamation apparently includes invitation and initiation; those responding are baptized – although we shouldn’t see this as Christian baptism, this baptism, like that of John the Baptist, would have been a baptism of repentance. In fact, as we see from John 4:2 the actual baptism was performed by the disciples rather than by Jesus himself. Though Jesus is not recorded as performing baptism at later points in his ministry (possibly in order to distinguish his ministry from that of John the Baptist), he would later endorse it without qualification (see Matthew 28:18). Practicing baptism at this point generally enabled Jesus to express his affirmation of John the Baptist’s preparatory ministry, which was continuing, as we see from 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.” (John 3:23 NIV)

More particularly baptism, especially if by immersion, expressed most fittingly the radical life-change involved in response to Jesus and was an obvious vehicle to convey entry to the new life of the promised kingdom.

Not surprisingly, this activity by Jesus, led to a potential conflict with John the Baptist – see 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.”” (John 3:26 NIV)

But, John the Baptist makes it clear that there is no competition in spiritual matters – see verse 27:

“To this John replied, “A man can receive only what is given him from heaven.” (John 3:27 NIV)

John the Baptist also confirms his earlier stance and turns people back to Jesus – see verses 28-30:

“You yourselves can testify that I said, ‘I am not the Christ but am sent ahead of him.’ 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. He must become greater; I must become less.” (John 3:28-30 NIV).

Now, after making it plain what Jesus is and what he stands for, John the Evangelist returns to the Baptist to show that he bears witness to the Jesus of whom John is writing. The words of verse 30, the last utterances of John the Baptist recorded by John, show how clearly he understood his role as merely the forerunner of Jesus – he willingly lets go of his disciples to further Jesus’ ministry.

John the Evangelist then summarises what Jesus is and stands for once again in verses 31-36, he emphasises the pre-eminent nature of the Jesus who is from above. Verse 36 is a fitting summary statement to this chapter in which the crucial nature of Jesus’ mission for human salvation has been expressed:

“Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on him.” (John 3:36 NIV).

What is at stake in the ministry of the Son is nothing less than the bringing of salvation to the world. Jesus is the one from heaven, come from the loving heart of God to the world to offer salvation to everyone who will believe in him. Believing in him brings eternal life to us NOW; it brings about a rebirth into a new order by the Spirit, the personal reception of the supernatural, endless life of the kingdom of God. Conversely, and there is no third alternative, all who do not come to the Son for this life, but reject him and his salvation, consign themselves to the most terrible of judgments—they *will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on [them]* – note carefully what it says in our verse 36, those who reject Jesus will be subject to the wrath of God. You can’t straddle the fence with our God. We are either for him or against him.

Many people today are uncomfortable with the idea of the wrath of God, but as I explained carefully in my Teaching Day on the Atonement it is both an essential part of the theology of Christ’s Atonement for us on the cross and also extensively taught by both OT and NT scripture. The Bible in general, and Jesus in particular, take the wrath of God with an awesome seriousness. It’s an integral part of God’s just and righteous nature and God acts in accordance with ALL of his attributes ALL of the time. The problem of forgiveness of our sins was not in the world, it was within God. Thus, we couldn’t just be let off or forgiven by God, either we or someone else had to pay the price of those sins. Unless Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross saved us from real peril it would have been unnecessary and meaningless. If you are still uncomfortable with the idea of the wrath of God, or unclear or puzzled over it, then I urge you to read again my notes on the Atonement which you can download from my website. At this point let me say that the wrath of God needs to be held together with the love of God, which is also affirmed in this chapter from John. The place from which to view both of these attributes of God is in their mutual relationship is the cross, to which John will bring us later and which I shall cover in the second part of this talk next month.

#### **Chapter 4 – verses 1 – 26**

The first three verses just make I clear that Jesus left Judea where he had just been ministering to avoid conflict with the Jews and competition with John the Baptist – there’s a

lesson there that Christian leaders shouldn't compete in their service – so, having noted that, let's pick up at verse 4:

“Now he had to go through Samaria. So he came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about the sixth hour. When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, "Will you give me a drink?" (His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.) 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.) 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." "Sir," the woman said, "you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? 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?" Jesus answered, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, 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 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." He told her, "Go, call your husband and come back." "I have no husband," she replied. Jesus said to her, "You are right when you say you have no husband. 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." "Sir," the woman said, "I can see that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshipped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem." Jesus declared, "Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. 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. God is spirit, and his worshippers must worship in spirit and in truth." The woman said, "I know that Messiah" (called Christ) "is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us. Then Jesus declared, "I who speak to you am he."” (John 4:4-26 NIV)

This section finds Jesus once again in conversation. The contrast with his partner in chapter 3 could hardly be greater. Nicodemus represented everything that was admired in orthodox Judaism. He was a Jewish male, a highly learned teacher, a Pharisee scrupulous in his adherence to all the details of the law, and as a member of the Sanhedrin a person of considerable public repute and authority. Jesus' new conversation partner by contrast represents everything that would have been despised by orthodox Judaism. She is a Samaritan (and thus hated by the Jews), a female, certainly illiterate (since women in those days were completely shut out from educational opportunities), with a lifestyle in flagrant contradiction to the law, and therefore publicly despised and ostracized. Yet, both of these very different persons needed Jesus and Jesus responded to their needs. In fact, we all need Jesus, and he will always respond to each and every one of us, and meet us where our needs are. Indeed, in this case, Jesus made an effort to meet with the woman, as there was no physical need for him to pass through Samaria on this journey. He could simply have crossed the Jordan as almost all Pharisees and most Judean Jews did, although that route is considerably longer. John is making it absolutely clear that Jesus and the salvation he brings is for all people, for everyone, irrespective of race, sex, level of education or social status.

What is also striking about the two dialogues in Chapter 3 and here in Chapter 4 is Jesus' remarkable ability to be 'at home' with each different person and to present the good news of salvation meaningfully and attractively to them. There are other echoes from chapter 3 in this

section, in that water is again used to symbolize spiritual blessing, and more generally Jesus appears once more as the fulfiller of Old Testament promises, though a fulfillment which sends the old religious order into a fundamentally new dimension.

John continually depicts the deity of Jesus, but here he also makes Jesus' humanity quite clear to us, both in his tiredness and his request for a drink. Jesus' request for a drink invited censure on two counts. Firstly he was speaking to a woman, and secondly he was speaking to a Samaritan. As regards the latter, John's editorial comment in verse 9 says it all: *Jews do not associate with Samaritans*. The reasons for this were historical, dating from the division of the kingdom after the death of Solomon (see 1 Kings 12:1–24) and the annexation of the northern territory by the Assyrians in 722–721 BC. The Assyrians resettled the northern territory with foreigners (see 2 Kings 17:24–41) which meant a loss of both racial and religious purity from the standpoint of the Judeans in the south. The religious divide was deepened when the Samaritans (as they came to be called) were not allowed to participate in the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem (Ezra 4:2-3) and then built their own temple at Mount Gerizim around 400 BC. As regards the first gender issue, male Jewish attitudes at the time are reflected in the following rabbinic citations: 'One should not talk with a woman on the street, not even with ones own wife, and certainly not with somebody else's wife, because of the gossip of men,' and 'It is forbidden to give a woman any greeting.' However, Jewish men did speak freely to prostitutes, who were deemed not to be true people.

Jesus' request of the woman was a simple and sincere one; he was thirsty after the journey. Not for the first time Jesus' point of contact with a 'seeker' was a confession of personal need (see Luke. 5:1–3; 19:5). The living water which Jesus holds out to the woman would have been a particularly vivid image in an arid country like Palestine. In these days of piped water, at least in the West, we tend to forget how important and arduous the daily visit to the well is in primitive cultures. Indeed we forget that in a desert country, a well is the difference between life and death, and Jesus was telling the woman that this was the kind of difference he could make in her life. Also there are Old Testament themes in the background (see for example Isaiah 55:1, Ezekiel 47:1-12 and most importantly Isaiah 12:3), and there are also first-century rabbinic references to show that at times both the law (the Torah) and the Holy Spirit were referred to using this kind of image. The image of 'living water' for Jesus' gift of eternal life continues to strike a chord. Over against the dissatisfying lifestyle of modern hedonistic culture, Jesus still issues his invitation: 'if anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink' and we receive the new life which Christ offers through the work of the Holy Spirit.

The Samaritan woman, like Nicodemus (though with more excuse), misunderstands Jesus' allusion, thinking in merely physical terms of some 'magic' water source which would dispense with the need for laborious drawing of water each day. Jesus' penetrating request that she bring her husband elicits her evasive, but truthful, reply that she had no husband (Jewish law did not recognize any equivalent to a modern common-law arrangement). Serial marriage, such as she admits to, was not altogether frowned upon, though the rabbis generally taught that three marriages were the maximum allowable. The deeper point is that Jesus brought to her awareness of the relational desert in which she was living. His offer of *a spring of water welling up to eternal life* must have appeared wonderfully attractive. The living water that Jesus gives keeps us permanently satisfied. The woman, by now 'caught' because of Jesus' obviously supernatural knowledge of her, raises the issue of the Jewish-Samaritan division.

Jesus' response to the woman includes some of his most basic teaching on worship. The Samaritans confined 'Scripture' to the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible, which gave them no loyalty to the account of David's decision to build a temple for the Lord in Jerusalem and thus no loyalty to Temple worship in Jerusalem – for reasons we explained a few moments ago. The Samaritans had a messianic anticipation based on the Pentateuch, so they anticipated the Taheb (meaning 'converter'), who, in the terms of Deuteronomy 18:15–18, would be a second Moses, revealing the truth, restoring true belief and renewing true worship. Jesus informs the startled woman that she is speaking with the Promised One in person: I who speak to you am he (verse 26). This is the one occasion that Jesus openly admits his Messiahship prior to his trial, yet here he is saying more than that he is the Messiah the Jews or Samaritans expected. His emphatic use of the word "he" is a clear claim to deity. He is the God-man, the answer to the sins of the world.

The Samaritans were second class citizens both in their own eyes and the eyes of the Jews, but Jesus the promised one meets them and accepts them. The excluded were included.

Jesus also makes it clear that the old system of Temple worship will pass away, that disputes between Jews and Samaritans will fade away, and that God will now be worshipped "in spirit and in truth" rather than by physical sacrifice BUT that this new worship will still be based on OT scripture – see verse 22:

"You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews." (John 4:22 NIV)

*Worship* is one of the great preoccupations in the churches today, and sadly a frequent cause of division. This section of John's gospel has something to teach about hindrances to true worship. Firstly, it is hindered first by *wrong practices*. The woman illustrates this principle. Until her life is put right and its failures addressed, she will not be able to engage in true worship. This was Israel's error right through the Old Testament period, the assumption that if the externals of worship were in place, God would be satisfied. He was not, and is not today. This is not to imply that worship of our Lord is possible only for perfect people, but God does seek a sincere and humble dependence upon him and a genuine commitment to live in obedience to him. 'The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise' (Psalm 51:17). Secondly, worship is hindered by *wrong priorities*. In essence this was the error of the Jews and Samaritans who were locked in conflict over where worship should take place, largely unaware that the long-awaited Messiah, who was sent to renew their entire relationship with God, was at that very time in their midst. I believe that the church suffers from a similar problem today. We MUST worship in complete sincerity and complete reality as we approach our God if we are to be the kind of worshipers that he wants. Additionally we cannot dictate the "how" or the "where" of worship; we must come before God in the way that the Holy Spirit opens for us.

#### **Chapter 4 – verses 27 – 42**

This section describes how the Samaritan woman evangelises her whole town with her testimony concerning her encounter with Jesus – see 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.'" (John 4:39 NIV)

Our testimony about our personal experiences with Jesus can still be a powerful tool for evangelism today and like the woman, we don't need to be perfectly sinless in order to be

effective witnesses. But, as with the Samaritans this evangelism will need to be followed up by a grounding in the words of scripture. Look at verses 40-42:

“So when the Samaritans came to him, they urged him to stay with them, and he stayed two days. And because of his words many more became believers. 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.”” (John 4:40-42 NIV).

#### **Chapter 4 – verses 43 – 54**

Jesus now returns to the site of his first miraculous sign – Cana in Galilee – to perform his second miraculous sign, the healing of the royal official’s son. These two stories from Cana are a cycle which points to the nature of true faith – believing expressed in obedience. They have many parallel themes. This second story has certain superficial similarities to the healing of the centurion’s servant in the synoptic gospels. The differences, however, are marked, for example the centurion simply spreads his need before Christ, whilst the nobleman dictates, and these are clearly two different occasions and miracles. Let’s look at the second part of verse 46 to verse 50:

“... And there was a certain royal official whose son lay sick at Capernaum. When this man heard that Jesus had arrived in Galilee from Judea, he went to him and begged him to come and heal his son, who was close to death. “Unless you people see miraculous signs and wonders,” Jesus told him, “you will never believe.” The royal official said, “Sir, come down before my child dies.” Jesus replied, “You may go. Your son will live.” The man took Jesus at his word and departed.” (John 4:46-50 NIV)

Here Jesus is met by a man in great personal anguish. The individual concerned is simply described as *a royal official*, probably a Gentile on Herod Antipas’s payroll. His anxiety is a deeply human one: his son is dangerously ill at home in Capernaum, some twenty miles away. Jesus’ earlier miracle at Cana is quite probably known to the father and, on the basis of this ‘faith’ in the supernatural power of Jesus, he beseeches him to come to his home and perform a healing miracle on his boy who was apparently, by this stage, at death’s door. The Greek is in a continuous tense, so we can assume he was persistently begging Jesus. This is noteworthy as it is the only one of the signs in this gospel where Jesus does not take the initiative. Jesus’ rejoinder in verse 48 seems at first sight surprisingly brusque: *Unless you people see miraculous signs ... you will never believe*. However, the “you people” makes it clear that Jesus is also addressing a wider audience. They wanted to experience the spectacular and sensational and lacked a deep trusting faith. Elements of the church which lay undue stress on charismatic spectaculars can be like this today. We can also see this as a challenge to the father to exercise faith in the miraculous power of God operating through Jesus.

If an element of apparent rebuke is present, there is, as we saw earlier, a similarly unpromising response recorded in his reaction to his mother at the Cana wedding (John 2:4) and the Syrophenician woman (Mark 7:27). As in these other cases, the apparent refusal by Jesus provokes a fuller and more earnest request – see verse 49, *Sir, come down before my child dies*. The official does not argue and he is saying it’s not a moment for discussion of the niceties of faith; action is needed! Action follows though in the form of a promise from Jesus in verse 50, *You may go. Your son will live*. The official had obviously been expecting Jesus to visit his son, but Jesus is saying he doesn’t need to do that. Anyway the official accepts what Jesus is saying, he rises to Jesus’ demand for faith, as he *took Jesus at his word*, and departed forthwith to his home – he believed and obeyed.

The journey would have required an overnight stop, and so it is not until the following day that he encounters his servants on the way to meet him with the good news that his son has indeed recovered. A check as to timing confirms the cure as synchronous with the word spoken by Jesus – Jesus gives us life. On the basis of this clear miracle of healing, the official and his household profess faith – presumably a belief that Jesus is the promised Messiah of Israel.

This second ‘sign’ thus builds on the first. Jesus’ glory is revealed in his mastery of the personal afflictions which threaten human life, as well as of the inanimate forces of nature.

The lessons of this passage concern the *meaning of faith*. John has already argued for *the crucial nature of faith* for salvation (1:12; 3:14-18; 4:41-42). Here its necessity is again underscored. That faith (on the human side) is the crucial ingredient is demonstrated by the fact that the lad, whose desperate need Jesus met, is never at any point in Jesus’ physical presence. At that point the miracle is parallel to our own situation. Like the boy, we have never physically met Jesus but that does not limit his ability to minister to our needs. Rather, it creates the context in which our faith must operate.

This story also clarifies *the nature of faith*. Jesus exposes the limits of a ‘faith’ based merely on miracles and signs. He will not commit himself to those who respond only at that level – see verse 48. True, this level is where many people begin in their relationship to God. ‘If you will answer my prayer, give me this thing I am asking for, do this miracle for me, then I will believe in you.’ It says much for the graciousness of the Lord that these ‘prayers’ are often answered.

Faith based on signs and miracles must not be mistaken for true faith, however, which is why Jesus does not encourage it. Such faith fails to honour God, since by it he serves us rather than the other way round. We are left with the mistaken notion that we are in a position to dictate terms to him. It is in obeying God’s commands and trusting his promises that true faith is expressed. Now we have ceased to dictate the terms of our relationship—we exist for him, not he for us. We obey, now we truly ‘believe’.

This leads us to another aspect of faith, its *development*. There is a notable progression in the official’s response to Jesus, from seeking *miraculous signs* to taking *Jesus at his word*, to *believing*. Our faith, like that of the official, is a living thing which grows and develops.

In a sense something even greater was at stake in this encounter with Jesus than simply the healing of the boy. There was the healing of the father also, a healing of spirit, which, having been obtained, was the means of blessing to his entire family. It is *this* final treasure that Jesus seeks and he is prepared to allow us to experience deep affliction in the process of obtaining it. As it says in Psalm 119 verse 71 ‘It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees’.

We should also note the persistence of the official in making the long journey to meet with Jesus. We need to exhibit similar persistence in our prayers and petitions to our Lord.

## **Chapter 5 – verses 1 – 15**



This section deals with Jesus' third miraculous sign, the healing of an invalid at the pool of Bethesda. Just to remind us that we are dealing with history and not myth in these accounts I'll just point out that a pool with five colonnades located in the north quarter of the city – which fits the description here – has been identified by historians. I'm largely going to skip over this story, but I do want to draw out a few points.

Firstly, Jesus does his mighty works, his “signs”, but instead of producing faith amongst the Jewish leaders, they produce opposition – eventually leading to Jesus' crucifixion.

Secondly, Jesus' question to the invalid in verse 6 ‘Do you want to get well’ is a penetrating one. An eastern beggar often loses a good living by being cured. Cure has its implications, particularly when the need is so long-standing that a whole way of life has been built up around it. Jesus' question needs to be faced by all of us today who would be delivered. Are we ready for all the implications, including repenting of sin and expressing a new loyalty to Christ?

Thirdly, the healing of the cripple does not seem to have required any faith on his part – look at verses 7-9. Indeed there seems to have been no room for faith, the man did not even know who Jesus was.

Fourthly, Jesus' command to the invalid to take his bed home in witness to the reality of his cure brings conflict with the authorities. The day of the healing was the Sabbath and carrying one's bed was a breach of the Pharisaical law of Sabbath observance. Strictly, there was no contravention of the written commandment of Ex. 20:8–11, which was generally interpreted as a prohibition of performing one's daily occupation on the Sabbath. Since the man was clearly not a furniture remover, he could not be accused of ‘working’ in that sense.

However, the oral traditions, which the Pharisees cherished, amplified the written law into an elaborate jurisprudence, which significantly extended its range. With respect to the Sabbath, thirty-nine categories of “work” were identified which breached the Sabbath law. These included carrying anything, except in cases of compassion. In practice the letter of the law had come to dominate its spirit. Outward conformity replaced heart commitment. They lost sight of the ultimate purpose of the law – its modeling a life which pleased God and witnessed to his gracious choice of Israel. The law became an end in itself.

It is notable that when *the Jews* (John's usual term for the Pharisees) confront the man, they do not show any interest in the wonder of his recovery, nor do they appear in the least open to the significance of his healing as a pointer to who Jesus was. The man's personal limitations are reflected in his unawareness of who has healed him. Like many today he is ignorant of the identity of the God who has provided graciously.

When Jesus meets the man again, possibly at some time removed from the healing, he warns him of the need to respond to the grace of God in his life by repenting of his sin, lest he face a worse fate. This *something worse* of verse 14 is most probably a reference to the coming last judgment.

## **Chapter 5 – verses 16 – 47**

One might summarise this section as Sabbath controversies and testimonies. Let's look at verses 16 and 17:

“So, because Jesus was doing these things on the Sabbath, the Jews persecuted him. Jesus said to them, “My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working.”” (John 5:16-17 NIV)

This is the first record of open opposition to Jesus. Jesus defended his Sabbath healing by appealing to the identity of his work with the work of the Father. This points to the unceasing activity of God. Although God entered the Sabbath rest on the seventh day to rest from his work of creation (and arguably still remains within that rest), he continues to work to maintain and sustain our universe – and he does so unceasingly. If he didn’t, I believe the universe would literally fall apart. God works and yet remains in his Sabbath rest. Unless he works continually no one could survive – and because of his close relationship with the Father, Jesus works in the same way. The Sabbath cannot interfere with the work of such a one. This has implications for our own observance of the Sabbath. We should observe it as regards secular work, but that does not imply idleness. God’s compassion for his people must be reflected in our own Christian service. Also, we should not so much *observe* the Sabbath as *celebrate* it. The Pharisees *observed* the Sabbath but Christians should rejoice each Sabbath in the overflowing grace of God and joyfully praise and worship our loving Father.

In response to Jesus’ defence, the Jews have accused Jesus of the blasphemy of claiming equality with God in the sense of setting himself up in rivalry to God – see verse 18: “For this reason the Jews tried all the harder to kill him; not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God.” (John 5:18 NIV).

To an extent, one can have some sympathy with the Jews here. After all the commandment of Deuteronomy 6:4 that God was one God was one of the strongest commandments of Judaism. But, Jesus is not claiming ‘equality with God’ in the sense of being a second rival deity. Rather it is an equality expressed as a unity in which the Son is so utterly submitted to the Father that the two are one in the works that they do – see verse 19:

“Jesus gave them this answer: “I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does.”” (John 5:19 NIV)

Put another way, we are not confronted here with a bare monotheism but with a rich Trinitarianism. Nowhere else in the gospels do we find such a strong and systematic account of Jesus’ unity with the Father.

The second part of this section deals with Jesus’ testimonies about himself. He is clearly concerned to justify his right to make the staggering claims about himself he has asserted. He asserts that his authority derives from the Father – see verse 32:

“There is another who testifies in my favour, and I know that his testimony about me is valid.” (John 5:32 NIV)

This authorization is validated through three channels. Firstly, the witness of John the Baptist – see verse 33:

““You have sent to John and he has testified to the truth.”” (John 5:33 NIV)

John’s human witness to Jesus was not of ultimate importance, but it was persuasive. We are still commanded to give witness to Jesus today.

Secondly, there was the witness of the signs or miracles that Jesus had performed.

Thirdly, there was the witness of scripture – see verse 39:

“You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me,” (John 5:39 NIV)

Jesus contends that the Jews study the scriptures, but that their study is not fruitful because they do not recognise the Messiah – see verse 40:

“yet you refuse to come to me to have life.” (John 5:40 NIV)

In conclusion we can say that their fundamental failure lay in esteeming human praise above God’s praise – look at verse 44:

“How can you believe if you accept praise from one another, yet make no effort to obtain the praise that comes from the only God?” (John 5:44 NIV)

## **Chapter 6 – verses 1 – 15**

This section deals with the fourth miraculous sign performed by Jesus – the so-called feeding of the five thousand. In fact we know that there were five thousand men alone – see the end of verse 10:

“... and the men sat down, about five thousand of them.” (John 6:10 NIV)

so the total crowd would probably have been more than double that number.

The time-link to the previous section is vague: the some time after this of verse 1. The feeding of the five thousand is the only ‘sign’, other than the cross and resurrection, to appear in all four gospels, indicating its importance in the minds of the first Christian witnesses.

As the synoptic gospels make clear (see Mark 6:31), Jesus is seeking privacy at this point – although John’s account doesn’t say this. The disciples have just returned from a highly successful preaching tour and are also in need of rest. Jesus takes them to the hills to the east of the Sea of Galilee, the area known today as the Golan Heights. The crowd gets wind of Jesus’ whereabouts and follows him round the head of the lake because of the miracles Jesus has been performing. Jesus is seated among the disciples as they approach – which shows that this was an official teaching session with the disciples.

The reference to the Passover in verse 4:

“The Jewish Passover Feast was near.” (John 6:4 NIV)

is important for the interpretation of this Chapter. The movement from the miracle to the discourse, from Jesus to Moses, and above all from bread to flesh is difficult to see unless the reference to the Passover is appreciated. We should also note that the Passover was a great patriotic festival which stirred the Jews’ sense of national identity and that one of the main benefits celebrated in the modern Seder ceremony is the feeding of the Israelites with manna.

Jesus accepts the invasion of his vacation and as we know from the synoptic gospels (see Mark 6:34) ministers to the crowd. The passing of time raises acutely the question of food and provides Jesus with an opportunity to test the disciples, Philip in particular. He was from nearby Bethsaida and was perhaps the spokesman conveying the disciples’ consensus that they had a major problem on their hands. Alternatively, knowing the district better than the others, he would know that there was no local food source to draw upon. Philip thinks only in terms of the immediate reality of limited resources and makes his calculations accordingly – see verse 7:

“Philip answered him, “Eight months’ wages would not buy enough bread for each one to have a bite!”” (John 6:7 NIV)

Over against Philip’s gloomy estimate, Jesus remains unperturbed since he already had in mind what he was going to do – see verse 6:

“He asked this only to test him, for he already had in mind what he was going to do.” (John 6:6 NIV)

Andrew now comes into the picture, to somewhat greater effect than Philip – look at verse 9: ““Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?”” (John 6:9 NIV)

The lad has brought a meal with him, but not enough to feed a crowd, let alone ten thousand. John alone mentions the boy in this personal way, a nice eye-witness touch.

But, on the basis of this tiny contribution, the Master proceeds to make arrangements for a general feeding of the multitude. After thanksgiving the miracle happens – look at verse 11: “Jesus then took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed to those who were seated as much as they wanted. He did the same with the fish.” (John 6:11 NIV)

The multitude is fed, and satisfied too! Here, it’s interesting to note that the Greek word for ‘giving thanks’ in verse 11 is *eucharistein*, from which our term ‘Eucharist’ is derived, a common term for the Lord’s Supper, although I’m not saying that we should see this miracle as prefiguring the Lord’s Supper as some have suggested. It’s also interesting that Jesus multiplies the small contribution of the boy, rather than creating food out of nothing

The twelve baskets of pieces left over may be intended as an indicator of Jesus’ ability to more than meet the needs of his whole people – the twelve tribes of Israel – but more generally makes the point that after all have been satisfied there is more left over than there was at the beginning. Jesus’ resources are without limit; he can meet all our needs and more.

The sequel to this miracle is summed up in verses 14 and 15:

“After the people saw the miraculous sign that Jesus did, they began to say, “Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world.” Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself.” (John 6:14-15 NIV).

Jesus well knew that this was not the kind of Messiah he was called to be and would have none of the crowd’s aspirations for him.

## **Chapter 6 – verses 16 – 24**

Before Jesus discusses the meaning of the feeding miracle with the disciples we come to the fifth miracle performed by Jesus. There is much to be learned from these events, but today I’m just going to quickly draw out one or two important points due to limitations of time.

I expect most of you are familiar with the story. As we know from the synoptic gospels, the disciples have been commanded by Jesus to cross the lake of Galilee and are alone in the boat in the darkness when a storm blows up, as was frequently the case on the lake of Galilee. They are unable to make progress against the strong wind and are frightened when Jesus comes to them walking on the water. Jesus calms the wind and the waves (as the synoptic gospels tell us), takes the boat to the far shore and the disciples are saved.

Firstly, it’s also worth noting that the disciples experience this storm just after they witnessed the wonderful miracle of the feeding of the five thousand. Often storms come in our lives just after a time of blessing. Secondly, we should note that Jesus comes to be with us in our troubles and trials, just as he did with the disciples here – see verse 19:

“When they had rowed three or three and a half miles, they saw Jesus approaching the boat, walking on the water; and they were terrified.” (John 6:19 NIV)

but, as with the disciples here, we often fail to recognize Jesus when he comes to us – we’re unaware of the one who can save us.

## Chapter 6 – verses 25 – 71

This section really deals with the application of the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand, where Jesus presents himself as the bread of life, the satisfier of the hunger of the human heart – although once again, I don't believe that this teaching is a *primary* reference to the Lord's Supper, but there is a *secondary* element of foreshadowing that here. The theme is that Jesus himself is the source and sustenance of eternal life – that there must be a spiritual appropriation of Christ, whether in the sacraments or in some other way. Here we need to remember, as we shall see in the second Teaching Day on this gospel, that John omitted all mention of the Last Supper as a "Eucharist". I believe there was a reason for this, and that the reason was probably the undue importance given to the sacrament of the Eucharist in the early church. Nevertheless, John did want to cover the principles underlying the Last Supper. This section contains some of the most profound teaching on the significance of Jesus in the whole of John's gospel.

In the first section, verses 26-29, Jesus warns against an undue focus on the material world and urges us to focus ourselves on Jesus – see verse 27:

"Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. On him God the Father has placed his seal of approval." (John 6:27 NIV)  
John continually associates life with Christ.

This prompts the crowd to ask what they must do – look at verse 28:

"Then they asked him, "What must we do to do the works God requires?" (John 6:28 NIV)  
The crowd are still looking for salvation by their good works.

Jesus' rejoinder is simple, to believe in the one whom God has sent – Jesus Christ. Look at verse 29:

Jesus answered, "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent." (John 6:29 NIV)  
What a reminder that we are justified by faith in Christ and that nothing else in our lives even approaches the importance of having that faith. Life is not the reward for work; life is the gift of God through his grace when we believe in Christ. However, we should note that the word John uses for "believe" means to sincerely believe and not merely to have a superficial faith.

In the next section (verses 30-35) the crowd again calls on Jesus to demonstrate his credentials. One might have assumed that the feeding of the crowd was a sufficient confirmatory sign, but apparently not. People are not necessarily convinced by signs and wonders. In response to their demand, Jesus makes it clear that he is the spiritual food we so desperately need – see verse 35:

"Then Jesus declared, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty." (John 6:35 NIV)

This saying enshrines the essence of Jesus' message—he is the answer to the needs of the human heart. However, he is not manna; he's not the materialistic answer the crowds were seeking. *The bread of life* implies the fundamental, elemental role Jesus claims to fulfill in relation to the yearning of the human spirit. For Jesus' audience bread was 'the staff of life', the primary source of nourishment, as it continues to be for millions in Third World countries. But, since bread is a basic food universally, there is the implicit claim that he fulfills this role for everyone. We must come away from our old materialistic life and come to a new life in Christ.

In verses 36-40 Jesus makes it clear that he has a ‘keeping’ ministry to secure all those whom the Father has given to him even to eternal life. Our eternal life is no ephemeral thing – it’s ultimate, settled and completely secure and it’s secured by our belief in Christ.

In verses 41 to 51, Jesus tells us about the destiny of all who believe in him. The Galileans’ response to Jesus’ claim to have ‘come down from heaven’ is typically materialistic. They knew Jesus’ parents. How can he have come from heaven? Look at verse 42:

“They said, “Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, ‘I came down from heaven?’”” (John 6:42 NIV)

In reply, Jesus simply reaffirms that only the Father can enable someone to respond to the Son – see verse 44:

““No-one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day.” (John 6:44 NIV).

We won’t respond to Christ’s call unless the Father impels us through the Holy Spirit, because of our distorted perceptions. Here Jesus also re-iterates his claim that he is the “bread” which brings us eternal life

This brings Jesus to the question of the identity of those who truly believe. He uses the language of feeding ourselves. He tells us that faith is like eating the flesh and drinking the blood of Jesus himself. I certainly believe that the sacrifice of the cross is in his mind here. We must remember that he has already been proclaimed as ‘the Lamb of God’, and the one who will be ‘lifted up’, as was the serpent. Look at verses 53-56:

“Jesus said to them, “I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him.” (John 6:53-56 NIV)

These words are symbolic. In effect, Jesus is saying that His broken body, and blood poured out on the cross, need to be personally appropriated in an act of faith in Jesus which is akin to the personal act of eating food. This will produce a communion between Christ and his believing disciple parallel to the communion of Father and Son, which underlies the salvation that the Son will offer, the eternal life which will triumph over death. There is a reference to the Lord’s Supper here, but Jesus is certainly not saying that receiving Holy Communion is our means of salvation or even essential to our salvation. We can say this with complete confidence because in verse 53 the Greek is in the aorist tense indicating a once and for all completed action in the past rather than a continual receiving of the sacraments in the present or the future.

Furthermore, I think Jesus’ statement in verse 47 of this section is quite clear:

“I tell you the truth, he who believes has everlasting life.” (John 6:47 NIV)

thus the later statements about Jesus’ body and blood need to be seen in the context of faith and belief not the other way around.

In the final part of this section, John deals with the reaction of the disciples to Jesus’ teaching. This was overwhelmingly negative, many who were disciples turned away – see verse 66:

“From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him.” (John 6:66 NIV)

Here I think it is clear that term disciples extends beyond the twelve, presumably to all who were associated with him. They find Jesus' teaching hard. Being part of a group or a church is not enough. We need to be obedient followers of Christ even in the tough times. Far from easing his demands or reducing his claims in the light of their discomfort, Jesus assures them of greater cause for offence which lies in the future – see verses 61 and 62:

“Aware that his disciples were grumbling about this, Jesus said to them, "Does this offend you? What if you see the Son of Man ascend to where he was before!" (John 6:61-62 NIV)

Jesus is not overwhelmed by the loss of commitment on the part of many who had professed some allegiance to him. He already knew about human response to him – see verse 64:

“Yet there are some of you who do not believe." For Jesus had known from the beginning which of them did not believe and who would betray him.” (John 6:64 NIV)

In spite of the life giving quality of Jesus' words, there are some who do not accept those words or him.

Jesus then invites the twelve to clarify their position – look at verse 67:

“"You do not want to leave too, do you?" Jesus asked the Twelve.” (John 6:67 NIV)

Peter typically speaks for them. He reaffirms their loyalty on the grounds that, since Jesus alone has the words of eternal life, there is no other to turn to – see verses 68 69:

“Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”” (John 6:68-69 NIV)

They had believed in Jesus and went on believing in him.

Jesus then reminds the disciples that their being with him depends on his sovereign choice of them – look at verse 70:

“Then Jesus replied, "Have I not chosen you, the Twelve? Yet one of you is a devil!"” (John 6:70 NIV)

Here we encounter the mystery of sin and unbelief as it interfaces with the purpose of God. That Judas was personally chosen in order to do the work of the betrayer is unthinkable, yet Jesus, who knows all hearts, recognized the terrible possibility within Judas, even as he afforded him the supreme and surpassing privilege of belonging to the twelve.

## **Chapter 7 – verses 1 -13**

Here, Jesus is staying in Galilee to avoid the Jews who want to kill him, and attends the feast of the Booths or Tabernacles in secret. This was probably some six months after the events at the end of Chapter 6, but John records nothing that happened in-between. It's apparent from the attitude of Jesus' brothers that they are not yet believers. In fact, the brothers urgings to Jesus here are reminiscent of one of Satan's temptations of Jesus in the wilderness – but that's too much of a digression for us to tackle today. The feast of Tabernacles was instituted by God through Moses (Leviticus 23:34) and was associated with the ingathering of the harvest. The feast ran for seven days and was reputedly the most popular of all the annual festivals. It commemorated the gathering of the harvest and the provision of God for his people in the wilderness, and the celebrants were required to recall that historical period by living during the feast in temporary structures of leaves and branches – the tabernacles. A special feature was the water-drawing and lamp-lighting rite, which was performed each day in the temple and upon which Jesus drew in his teaching. During the festival the people gave thanks for the rainfall which nourished the harvest, but also looked forward to that coming day when God's Spirit would be poured out at the coming of the kingdom of God.

## Chapter 7 – verses 14 – 39

Having arrived secretly, Jesus emerged at the height of the feast. We are told that he got up halfway through the feast to teach – see verse 14:

“Not until halfway through the Feast did Jesus go up to the temple courts and begin to teach.” (John 7:14 NIV)

As Jesus teaches the Jews are amazed at his learning, particularly since he had never studied at the rabbinic centres of learning – see verse 15:

“The Jews were amazed and asked, “How did this man get such learning without having studied?”” (John 7:15 NIV)

Apparently many had never heard Jesus teach before and indeed John records no previous teaching in Jerusalem.

Jesus tells them that his knowledge comes from the Father – look at verse 16:

“Jesus answered, “My teaching is not my own. It comes from him who sent me.” (John 7:16 NIV)

The rabbinic method was to cite authority for every statement (originality was not esteemed in those days) and Jesus cites God as his authority.

He goes on to say that those who do God’s will are going to be aware of this – see verse 17:

“If anyone chooses to do God’s will, he will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own.” (John 7:17 NIV)

Anyone who has spiritual discernment will see that Jesus’ teaching is of God.

In his teaching, Jesus first of all establishes a connection with Judaism, and then with the Father as the source and goal of his life. As far as Judaism was concerned the issue was Jesus’ attitude towards the Law, Jesus would have been well aware that the Jews would remember his healing at the pool on the Sabbath that we briefly considered at the beginning of Chapter 5. Look at verses 21-24:

“Jesus said to them, “I did one miracle, and you are all astonished. Yet, because Moses gave you circumcision (though actually it did not come from Moses, but from the patriarchs), you circumcise a child on the Sabbath. Now if a child can be circumcised on the Sabbath so that the law of Moses may not be broken, why are you angry with me for healing the whole man on the Sabbath? Stop judging by mere appearances, and make a right judgment.”” (John 7:21-24 NIV)

Firstly, Jesus reminds them of one of his miracles, no doubt the healing at the pool of Bethesda since the Sabbath is the focus here – he isn’t saying that he has only done one miracle in all. Then Jesus points out to them that there are exceptions to the letter of the Law and argues that the vital thing is to observe the redemptive purposes that lay at the heart of the old covenant in the Law. These verses are absolutely vital to a real understanding of the Sabbath controversy between Jesus and his opponents – we need to go back to the basic reasons for this institution.

The argument then moves to the question of whether or not Jesus is the Messiah – look at the end of verse 26 and verse 27:

“... Have the authorities really concluded that he is the Christ? But we know where this man is from; when the Christ comes, no-one will know where he is from.”” (John 7:26-27 NIV)

Some Jews of these times believed that no-one would be aware of the origin of the Messiah on the basis of Malachi 3:1, although this view was not universally held. Remember the scribes who told Herod and the wise men where the Messiah would be born. Jesus neither accepts nor refutes this view. Rather, he simply points out that though they may indeed be



aware of his human origins, these do not in fact disclose his true origin – see verses 28 and 29:

“Then Jesus, still teaching in the temple courts, cried out, “Yes, you know me, and you know where I am from. I am not here on my own, but he who sent me is true. You do not know him, but I know him because I am from him and he sent me.”” (John 7:28-29 NIV)

This audacious claim incenses the authorities, who attempt to seize him, but are frustrated – see verse 30:

“At this they tried to seize him, but no-one laid a hand on him, because his time had not yet come.” (John 7:30 NIV)

So Jesus moves steadfastly and deliberately forward in the will of the Father who directs his every movement. He is utterly secure from the machinations of the authorities until the hour appointed in eternity when he will go home to the Father’s side, there to direct through his Spirit the realization of all his purposes across the ages.

We now move forward in time to the end of the festival and Jesus makes a dramatic statement – see verses 37 and 38:

“On the last and greatest day of the Feast, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, “If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him.”” (John 7:37-38 NIV)

It is deeply moving to visualize the Saviour standing in the temple among the crowds of pilgrims, probably in the proximity of the altar where the water from the Pool of Siloam was carried each morning in a golden pitcher and poured on the altar accompanied by psalms. On the seventh day of the feast this was done seven times, but on the final eighth day no water was poured. The Talmud connects these ceremonies with the Holy Spirit. Jesus’ words are to be understood against this background, he is calling on all who would come to him and to receive the life-giving blessing of the Spirit. This Holy Spirit will be like a living, springing river within the heart (literally in the Greek, the belly) of the believer. It is also encouraging to note the global range of this gifting – the *anyone* and the *whoever* – the gift of the spirit is just as universal as the gift of salvation.

## **Chapter 7 – verse 40 – 52**

This section largely deals with the reaction of the Jews to the preceding events.

In verse 40 we are told that some thought he was the prophet that Moses had foretold:

“On hearing his words, some of the people said, “Surely this man is the Prophet.”” (John 7:40 NIV)

They are clearly reminded of Moses giving water from the rock to the people in the wilderness, and hence of Moses’ prophecy of a ‘prophet like me’ (Deuteronomy 18:15).

Others wonder if Jesus is the Messiah, but some find difficulty with this because of Jesus’ Galilean origin – see verses 41 and 42:

“Others said, “He is the Christ.” Still others asked, “How can the Christ come from Galilee? Does not the Scripture say that the Christ will come from David’s family and from Bethlehem, the town where David lived?”” (John 7:41-42 NIV)

OT scriptures made it clear that the Messiah was of David’s line and from Bethlehem.

As is still the case today, Jesus provokes division – look at verse 43:

“Thus the people were divided because of Jesus.” (John 7:43 NIV)

Nicodemus, who you will remember had an encounter with Jesus earlier now re-emerges. He appears to have become a sympathizer if not a believer in the meantime – see verses 50 and 51:

“Nicodemus, who had gone to Jesus earlier and who was one of their own number, asked, “Does our law condemn a man without first hearing him to find out what he is doing?”” (John 7:50-51 NIV)

But the Pharisees are not interesting in hearing any defence of Jesus – see verse 52:

“They replied, “Are you from Galilee, too? Look into it, and you will find that a prophet does not come out of Galilee.”” (John 7:52 NIV). That’s actually untrue as some quite famous prophets such as Elijah and Jonah originated in Galilee – but Jesus’ accusers weren’t really interested in truth.

## **Chapter 8 – verses 1 -11**

The oldest manuscripts do not contain this story of Jesus and the woman caught in adultery – so it is of somewhat doubtful authenticity and is probably a later scribal addition. None of the early church fathers who comment on John’s gospel include it. However, the teaching of this story fits well with Jesus’ other teaching recorded in the gospels, and it is most probably a genuine oral tradition, so I believe we should accept it as a true incident from Jesus’ life and regard it as part of the inspired word of God.

The essence of the story is a cunningly baited trap for Jesus, which he neatly avoids. Look at verses 4-11:

“.... “Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?” They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him. But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, “If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her.” Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground. At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. Jesus straightened up and asked her, “Woman, where are they? Has no-one condemned you?” “No-one, sir,” she said. “Then neither do I condemn you,” Jesus declared. “Go now and leave your life of sin.”” (John 8:4-11 NIV)

The use of the word adultery implies that this was a married woman. Deuteronomy 22:22 did call for the death penalty in such circumstances, although this penalty was for both the man and the woman involved and the method of execution was not specified (in contrast with the penalty for sexual relations with a virgin bride which was stoning). Although the traditional form of Jewish execution was stoning, the tradition of the Talmud specifies death by strangulation in such circumstances, except for daughters of priests who were to be stoned.

The trap is a clever one. To refuse to uphold the stoning would clearly confirm the authorities’ suspicions, already aroused by matters like Jesus’ attitude to the Sabbath, that he did not take the Law seriously. If that were established, then Jesus is a self-proclaimed heretic and their rejection of him is clearly justified. On the other hand, his compassion for the downtrodden and the lawless is known. A hard-line judgment in this case would have discredited Jesus in the eyes of the common people.

There was also another hook on their line, in that advocating the death penalty, in strict conformity with the Jewish law, might have brought down on Jesus' head the wrath of the Roman authorities because of their jealous retention of the right to execute.

Some have suggested that in his response, Jesus was writing down the sins of the chief instigators of the accusation, but I believe he was pointing back to the writing of the Law on tablets of stone given to Moses – although all these ideas are pure speculation. Whatever we make of Jesus response, there is no doubt that he was putting responsibility squarely back onto the witnesses, as it was their responsibility under Jewish Law to initiate the stoning. In any event, Jesus is not refusing to uphold the law; he is saying that the stoning can go ahead, but only under morally appropriate conditions. The witnesses feel the power of Christ's words; they feel their own sinfulness and melt away. Jesus ends by saying to the woman that if she has no accusers he will not accuse her either, but rather summons her to a new life of obedience.

### **Chapter 8 – verses 12 – 59**

If we put aside verses 1 to 11, this section follows on neatly from the previous material about the feast of the Tabernacles. As we saw, Jesus has already claimed to fulfil the water motif of the feast and now he turns to another symbol from that feast – light – see verse 12:

“When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” (John 8:12 NIV).

At the end of the first day of the feast in the ‘court of women’ (which John 8:20 indicates is the probable location of Jesus' teaching) four golden lamps were lit amid great rejoicing. These were lit on each night of the feast except for the Sabbath as they were intended to symbolize the Israelites leading the people of Israel with a pillar of fire and their commitment to the God of light. Singing and celebration with music and dancing by ‘chosen men of piety’ continued through the nights of the feast, with the light in the temple illuminating the entire city. In this setting, Jesus' claim in verse 12 stands out boldly. As the feast ends and the lights are extinguished, Jesus proclaims himself as the true light of the people of God, and not only of Israel, but of the whole world! That was a role reserved for Yahweh, so this was a claim of cosmic significance. But, that was not all, Jesus was claiming that those who follow him are delivered from darkness and enjoy the light. Jesus was identifying himself with the God who gave Israel this feast of the Tabernacles.

The Pharisees reaction to Jesus' claim is predictably critical, although they do not directly address his claims, instead they question the truth of Jesus' witness – see verse 13:

“The Pharisees challenged him, "Here you are, appearing as your own witness; your testimony is not valid.” (John 8:13 NIV)

There are two specific points here, and a more general one which is a key to interpreting the section. First, the Pharisees are probably citing Jesus' own earlier criteria for truthfulness: ‘if I testify about myself, my testimony is not valid’ (John 5:31). But they have once again misunderstood him, for Jesus' point is the one he will make again here, that his witness is not by himself to himself, but for the Father with the Father – see verse 18:

“I am one who testifies for myself; my other witness is the Father, who sent me.” (John 8:18 NIV)

Secondly, the Pharisees are certainly also alluding to the Old Testament requirement that claims be corroborated by supportive witness (Deuteronomy 17:6; 19:15), thereby highlighting one of the most distinctive features of Jesus' teaching ministry, viz. his

assumption of direct personal authority. This was in direct contrast to the rabbinic method which involved regular appeal to supportive authorities. True, Jesus respected the Old Testament and repeatedly cited its words, but even here he came as one who fulfilled these Scriptures and so was sovereignly free in his handling of their witness.

Finally Jesus appeals to his impending crucifixion and glorification – look at verse 28: “So Jesus said, “When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am the one I claim to be and that I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me.” (John 8:28 NIV).

This impending exaltation of the Son of Man will significantly vindicate his teaching.

Before we move on, it’s worth noting that the harsh judgement promised by verse 24:

“I told you that you would die in your sins; if you do not believe that I am *the one I claim to be*, you will indeed die in your sins.”” (John 8:24 NIV)

leaves no room for the doctrine of universalism – the idea that everyone will be saved.

Jesus now addresses those who have accepted his teaching – see verses 30 to 32:

“Even as he spoke, many put their faith in him. To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”” (John 8:30-32 NIV)

Some believed him, but they didn’t believe *in* him. Remaining in the truth of Jesus’ teaching was a mark of the true disciples then, and remains so today. If we do not recognize the truth of his teaching, and act on it, then we are slaves to sin. It’s not possible to be a casual disciple of Jesus.

Sadly these persons who superficially accepted Jesus’ teaching fail to understand, asserting their status as the chosen people – look at verse 33:

“They answered him, “We are Abraham’s descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?”” (John 8:33 NIV)

Clearly they are ignoring the deeper meaning, but they are also ignoring the fact that they are under Roman occupation and had been in exile in Babylon.

Jesus then tells them the real nature of their bondage in verses 34-37:

“Jesus replied, “I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it for ever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed. I know you are Abraham’s descendants. Yet you are ready to kill me, because you have no room for my word.” (John 8:34-37 NIV)

Here Jesus makes it clear that salvation comes from him – he sets us free – and that this salvation is permanent – we belong for ever. We also need to remember that this freedom comes in submission to the truth and teaching of the Son, not in our asserting our own independent freedom. As D A Carson said ‘True freedom is not the liberty to do anything we please, but the liberty to do what we ought; and it is genuine liberty because doing what we ought now pleases us.’

The Jews answer by accusing Jesus of being a Samaritan (which was a deep insult to a Jew) and also demon possessed – look at verse 48:

“The Jews answered him, “Aren’t we right in saying that you are a Samaritan and demon-possessed?”” (John 8:48 NIV).

They are saying Jesus is no better than a Samaritan. Jesus ignores that comment, but tells them he is not demon possessed, but rather the opposite, and again stresses the importance of holding to his teaching to gain eternal life – see verse 51:

“I tell you the truth, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death.” (John 8:51 NIV).

The Jews respond by asking Jesus who he thinks he is – is he greater than Abraham – see verse 53:

“Are you greater than our father Abraham? He died, and so did the prophets. Who do you think you are?” (John 8:53 NIV)

Jesus tells them that Abraham rejoiced at his coming – verse 56:

“Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad.” (John 8:56 NIV)

but the Jews do not believe Jesus could have seen Abraham – verse 57:

““You are not yet fifty years old,” the Jews said to him, “and you have seen Abraham!”” (John 8:57 NIV)

This chapter comes to a climax with Jesus’ response - an unequivocal claim to deity by Jesus – verse 58:

““I tell you the truth,” Jesus answered, “before Abraham was born, I am!”” (John 8:58 NIV)

A conscious reflection of the Old Testament self-designation of God – the “I Am” – is evident. Jesus is making an explicit claim to deity. The Jews evidently take this point too, because they pick up stones to stone Jesus for what they consider to be his blasphemy which needs to be dealt with as prescribed by Leviticus 24:16 or Deuteronomy 13 ‘If a prophet ... appears among you ... and he says, “Let us follow other gods” ... That prophet ... must be put to death ... do not yield to him or listen to him. Show him no pity ... Stone him to death, because he tried to turn you away from the LORD your God’. Look at their reaction in verse 59:

“At this, they picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus hid himself, slipping away from the temple grounds.” (John 8:59 NIV)

In the light of this reaction, R Brown’s comment is entirely appropriate, ‘No clearer implication of divinity is found in the gospel tradition.’

## **Chapter 9 – verses 1 – 41**

This chapter is a unified whole dealing exclusively with Jesus’ sixth sign or miracle, the healing of a man born blind. The prophet Isaiah makes it clear that one of the marks of the coming messianic age is to be the receiving of sight by the blind (Isaiah 29:18; 35:5). So, this chapter has a function as part of John’s demonstration that Jesus is the Messiah. In this context, it’s interesting to note that none of the disciples or apostles are recorded as performing a similar miracle, whilst there are more miracles of this kind performed by Jesus than any other category.

In verse 5 Jesus again reiterates his claim to be the light of the world:

“While I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” (John 9:5 NIV)

we learn that this light has two effects. Firstly, verses 6 to 38 tell us that it brings healing to the blind whilst the remainder of the chapter casts the shadow of judgement over those who will not come into the light.

Verse 1 sets the scene:

“As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth.” (John 9:1 NIV)

The disciples want to know who is responsible – see verse 2:

“His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"” (John 9:2 NIV)

For the disciples, as for the Jews of the time and for many others since, even to this day, the answer is simple. Personal suffering of this nature is due to personal sin. The only uncertainty concerns who is directly responsible. Since the sin concerned here must have been congenital, the options were either that this man committed it during his antenatal life in the womb (as some rabbis held possible), or that his parents had committed it before his birth. This is the viewpoint of Hinduism and many adherents of the New Age movement. Jesus firmly rejects this point of view – look at verse 3:

““Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus, "but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life.” (John 9:3 NIV)

Whilst the Bible allows a general relationship between suffering and sin, due to the Fall, it refuses to permit the principle to be individualized in every case. Sin has produced a suffering world, but an individual’s personal suffering is not always attributable to his or her personal sin. Sometimes of course it may be, as, for example, when suffering results from drunken driving. But, Scripture refuses to universalize such instances. This was the issue between Job and his friends, and the lesson of the book of Job is God’s dismissal of that simplistic theology of suffering, as it is dismissed here by Jesus. Of course, this verse doesn’t mean that God caused this man to suffer for many years. Rather God over-ruled this disaster so that the man might eventually be saved through faith in Christ – as we shall see in a moment.

Jesus proceeds to heal the blind beggar, using a mudpack made from saliva – look at verses 6 and 7:

“Having said this, he spat on the ground, made some mud with the saliva, and put it on the man’s eyes. "Go," he told him, "wash in the Pool of Siloam" (this word means Sent). So the man went and washed, and came home seeing.” (John 9:6-7 NIV)

There were primitive beliefs in the first century concerning the magical powers of the saliva of heroic figures. No reason for Jesus’ using this method is given. Indeed, we are not told why he should use means at all when a word had sufficed in previous acts of healing. Perhaps the man needed to be involved in the healing process by some simple act of obedience to Jesus. Early writers saw a link between the ground used in the mudpack and the dust from which Adam was formed. The meaning of the name of the Pool (Siloam = Sent), is surely not coincidental from John’s perspective. Consistently in this gospel Jesus is the ‘sent one’ of the Father. As such he wields the Father’s re-creating power. It’s also interesting to note that according to the Mishnah, this was the pool from which water was drawn for the Feast of the Tabernacles. The man having obeyed the command to wash in Siloam *came home seeing*.

The man is now subject to a series of interviews, first by his neighbours, who are not even sure he is the same person – see verses 8 and 9:

“His neighbours and those who had formerly seen him begging asked, "Isn’t this the same man who used to sit and beg?" Some claimed that he was. Others said, "No, he only looks like him." But he himself insisted, "I am the man.”” (John 9:8-9 NIV)

The man is called upon to ‘tell his story’ of his healing but of course cannot identify Jesus, as he has never ‘set eyes’ on him – look at verses 10-12:

““How then were your eyes opened?" they demanded. He replied, "The man they call Jesus made some mud and put it on my eyes. He told me to go to Siloam and wash. So I went and

washed, and then I could see." "Where is this man?" they asked him. "I don't know," he said." (John 9:10-12 NIV)

The neighbours bring the man to the Pharisees, concerned no doubt to have some help in understanding this astonishing miracle and it is at this point we learn that the healing had taken place on the Sabbath – see verses 13 and 14:

“They brought to the Pharisees the man who had been blind. Now the day on which Jesus had made the mud and opened the man’s eyes was a Sabbath.” (John 9:13-14 NIV)

From the strictest Pharisaical standpoint, Jesus had infringed the Sabbath tradition (although not the Law as set out in Scripture!) at three, points. Firstly, he had healed on the Sabbath, which was permissible only when life was in danger. Patently that was not so in this case. Secondly, in making the mud he had kneaded on the Sabbath, which was specifically forbidden as one of the 39 prohibited activities listed in the Mishnah. Thirdly, he had healed the man’s eyes with saliva on the Sabbath, which the Talmud specifically prohibited.

The Pharisees take the matter with great seriousness. They conduct three interviews, firstly with the man; secondly with his parents; and thirdly with the man for a second time. The man’s account of what happened is so persuasive that some of the Pharisees are clearly impressed – see verse 16:

“Some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath." But others asked, "How can a sinner do such miraculous signs?" So they were divided.” (John 9:16 NIV)

For the others, however, Jesus’ breach of the Sabbath traditions is enough to damn him. Good men do not break the Sabbath which God has instituted. Jesus breaks the Sabbath; therefore Jesus is not a good man. It was all so tidy. No hint here of any openness to review what might have been God’s purpose in giving the Sabbath, or to face the possibility that the God who had given the Sabbath had further things to reveal. Their God was petrified in the past.

The man is asked to take sides in their dispute by giving his view of Jesus – see verse 17:

“Finally they turned again to the blind man, "What have you to say about him? It was your eyes he opened." The man replied, "He is a prophet.”” (John 9:17 NIV)

He is not daunted. He says that Jesus is a prophet, probably the highest category he could bring to mind at this point. So, he sides with the pro-Jesus camp.

The Pharisees in their scepticism are still not inclined to believe that the man is really telling the truth, and so decide to seek corroboration from his parents. The parents confirm the miracle, but are evasive on how, or through whom, it has happened. The reason for their evasiveness is simple – to agree that Jesus is the Messiah meant excommunication from the synagogue – see verse 22:

“His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews, for already the Jews had decided that anyone who acknowledged that Jesus was the Christ would be put out of the synagogue.” (John 9:22 NIV)

While such hardened rejection of the followers of Jesus had become more common among Jews by the time John wrote his gospel, there is no reason to believe that this ban was not applied on a limited local scale during the years of his public ministry. That Jesus stirred up considerable hatred is plain from the historical fact of his crucifixion; that it could take this form is certainly not incredible.

In defence of his parents, it needs to be said that being excommunicated from synagogue worship was an extremely serious penalty in that fiercely religious culture. It meant a far-

reaching reduction of social status as well as religious life and, in their eyes, probably forfeiture of standing with God. The man himself, however, seems to have been ready to pay that price – look at verses 33 and 34:

“If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.” To this they replied, “You were steeped in sin at birth; how dare you lecture us!” And they threw him out.” (John 9:33-34 NIV)

The man who was healed shows amazing spirit in his dealings with the authorities throughout this chapter in contrast with the blind man we saw healed at the pool earlier. I find him one of the most memorable and spirited characters in any of the Gospels.

The real tragic figures in this story are the Pharisees. No-one can ponder their tragedy without asking deep and disturbing questions. Here were men who revered the Scriptures and were zealots for pious behaviour and practices, such as prayer and fasting. They were frequently in worship and gave most sacrificially to God’s work. Yet they were among the principal instruments in the hands of Satan in having Jesus destroyed. Their failure lay in the way they viewed and used the law. They did not see it in its covenantal framework, as the way of life appropriate to those who belonged to God solely on the basis of his grace. They should have kept the Law out of gratitude for grace received, and not as the means of securing standing with God. They were committed to the ten commandments of Exodus 20:3–17, but had overlooked verse 2, which is the critical context, ‘I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.’ The law was supposed to be for those who lived by the merciful deliverance of God alone. Because they had lost this context, their zeal for the law committed them to a religion of merit, in which the letter of the law and its meticulous observance, along with all the additional oral requirements, became the essence and end of everything in their religious universe.

Jesus now seeks to minister to the man he has physically healed and help him to fuller understanding – see verse 35:

“Jesus heard that they had thrown him out, and when he found him, he said, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?”” (John 9:35 NIV)

What matters almost more than the title Jesus takes, is his identifying himself as the one in whom the beggar should now believe. Seeing Jesus for the first time, and having experienced his delivering power at first hand, he is ready to commit himself – see verses 36-38:

““Who is he, sir?” the man asked. “Tell me so that I may believe in him.” Jesus said, “You have now seen him; in fact, he is the one speaking with you.” Then the man said, “Lord, I believe,” and he worshipped him.” (John 9:36-38 NIV)

This is the only place in this Gospel when anyone is said to ‘worship’ Jesus.

Jesus then gives a one sentence summary of the whole incident and exchanges – look at verse 39:

“Jesus said, “For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind.”” (John 9:39 NIV)

At first sight this verse appears to be a direct contradiction of 3:17:

“For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.” (John 3:17 NIV)

The texts, however, are easily reconcilable. Jesus did not come specifically and primarily to condemn or to effect damning judgment. He came primarily and specifically to save sinners in this lost and fallen world. But his coming results *both* in salvation *and* in judgment. The



light shines in the darkness. Those who welcome it are delivered into the light, but those who refuse it turn away into a deeper darkness. The same light both dispels darkness and casts shadows.

The Pharisees, overhearing Jesus, question the relevance of his statement to themselves – see verse 40:

“Some Pharisees who were with him heard him say this and asked, “What? Are we blind too?”” (John 9:40 NIV)

Jesus answers them in verse 41:

“Jesus said, “If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains.” (John 9:41 NIV)

If they were without any moral responsibility for their response to Jesus, the light of the world, they would indeed be ‘blind’, with a ‘good’ blindness in contrast to their present plight. But since they actually are responsible and yet reject the light, their *guilt remains*, and that’s a terrible condition.

Before leaving this Chapter, I just want to make a few further points that we can draw out. Firstly, the man expresses the human condition prior to meeting Christ—*blind from birth*. Part of the implication of being born into a fallen world is that our natural spiritual perception is very limited – we are blind. The blind man represents fallen humanity languishing in the darkness of ignorance and sin without hope of salvation – apart from the intervention of Jesus. Secondly, the blind man eloquently models the way of salvation, the turning from darkness to Jesus, the light of the world. We can see the growth in the healed man’s perception. From his initial *The man they call Jesus*, he moves on through *He is a prophet, he opened my eyes*, to *he is from God*, and finally to, *‘Lord, I believe,’ and he worshipped him*. Faith is a journey towards Jesus up to the point of commitment to him as Lord. When that happens sight is born. Finally, the man also illustrates the repercussions of coming to believe in Jesus. Such belief may be highly upsetting for our families and those around us, indeed all who are not already believers – as was this man’s belief upsetting to the Pharisees.

## **Chapter 10 – verses 1 – 21**

The first half of chapter 10 continues in the setting of the feast of tabernacles and concludes the great central teaching section of this gospel. There are two sub-divisions. In the first, verses 1-18, Jesus illuminates the distinctiveness of his ministry, and, in the second, verses 19-21, reactions to his teaching are identified. This part of chapter 10 is a continuation from Chapter 9. Two contrasts dominate this chapter, the contrast between Jesus and the Pharisees as shepherds of the people and between the blind man and the Pharisees as recipients of Jesus’ message.

Let’s start by looking at verses 1-5:

““I tell you the truth, the man who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. The man who enters by the gate is the shepherd of his sheep. The watchman opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognise a stranger’s voice.” (John 10:1-5 NIV).

The imagery of sheep and shepherds, especially the intimate relationship of Eastern shepherds to their sheep, although a little strange to us today, would have been very familiar

to Jesus' listeners. There is a basic message here. What Jesus is saying is that the church is like a sheep pen, in which God assembles his people, and Jesus is the gate to that sheep pen, since he is the only entrance. In those days sheep pens were often communal affairs with a single appointed watchman, and were places of security and protection for the sheep, so we can see how that could be an image of the church.

In these verses, Jesus contrasts himself with the false shepherds with whom he has just tangled, and whose dereliction has been apparent in the case of the newly healed blind-man. He identifies five features of *his shepherding* which show him to be a 'true' shepherd.

1. The appointment he receives. Jesus is appointed by the Father, not self-appointed like the false shepherds of his day (verses 1–2).
2. The response he evokes. *The sheep listen to his voice* (verse 3). It is true that many refused to listen, but, as Mark says (Mark 12:37) the common people heard him gladly and as John said in chapter 6 'All that the Father gives me will come to me' (6:37). So the beggar has responded, 'Lord, I believe' (9:38). Note that there are some in the sheepfold who do not belong to the shepherd and do not respond to his voice.
3. The call he issues. *He calls his own sheep by name* (verse 3). Naming was extremely important to the Jewish people; remember the significance of the name changes of Abram to Abraham, from Jacob to Israel and many others. Shepherds often gave their sheep individual names based on a characteristic of the animal. It is in personal terms that Jesus calls his followers today. It's significant that it was the shepherd who knew the names of his sheep.
4. The direction he provides. *He ... leads them out* (verse 3). Jesus is the guide of his people. To follow him is not to walk in darkness but to have the light of life (8:12). The Pharisees' leading was to follow a set of rules, but here Jesus teaches that we must follow him as our Lord and Master. True he does lay down some rules, but the emphasis is on a living relationship with a living Lord.
5. The obedience Jesus elicits. *His sheep follow him because they know his voice* (verse 4). Jesus is recognized by *his own* and they gladly give him the rule of their lives. Other leaders are false leaders whom the sheep of Christ will not follow (verse 5).

We can also turn this little story on its head and see it not as a teaching about Jesus as the good shepherd, but as a teaching on who his sheep are. Of course, they are those who hear his voice and obey it by following him.

In the next part of the discourse, verses 7-18, Jesus imagery becomes more difficult to follow. He likens himself to the gate to the sheep pen and also to the shepherd.

In verses 9 and 10:

"I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go out, and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full." (John 10:9-10 NIV)

Jesus summarises the benefits he will bring as shepherd. Firstly, salvation, in verse 9 Jesus says that he is the gate to this salvation, by implication there is no other way. There is an exclusiveness about the door. Secondly, nurture and security. Thirdly, new life in all its fullness – the life we were created for and intended to have. He also makes it clear that other rival shepherds do not have the welfare of the sheep at heart.

In verses 11-15:

"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand is not the shepherd who owns the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons

the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. "I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me— just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep." (John 10:11-15 NIV)

Jesus explains how these benefits will be won by him as shepherd. A real shepherd should put himself in danger for his sheep in fighting off the attacks of wild animals, although the Mishnah tells us that a hired shepherd was required to defend his flock against attack by one wolf, but not against an attack by two wolves. Jesus unconditionally says that he will not run away but will lay down his life for us – he is predicting Calvary. The expression of laying down his life voluntarily here should not be missed.

In verse 16:

"I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd." (John 10:16 NIV)

Jesus tells us who the benefits are for. The sheep of the sheep pen are clearly the Israelites. I believe this verse is a clear reference to Isaiah 56:3-8 and on that basis the other sheep must be the gentile church that was to come. The two groups are to be united into one flock under Jesus as the one shepherd. This is not a natural unity, but one brought about by the activity of the shepherd, it's a unity of all who have faith in Christ. The unspoken reality here is that the resurrection of Jesus will be necessary to achieve this – but Jesus now turns to that issue.

In verses 17 and 18:

"The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life— only to take it up again. No-one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father." (John 10:17-18 NIV)

Here Jesus tells us the reason why he is going to sacrifice himself for us on the cross – because in his love for the Father and the Father's love for him he obeys the Father's will. Note especially that this is a purely voluntary act on Christ's part. Jesus also foretells the resurrection, because he says he has authority to take up his life again – note that he says *he* will take it up which stresses his part in the resurrection. His death is not a defeat but a victory, Jesus is completely in control of the situation – and he's still in control today.

In the final verses of this section there is again division between those who want to accept Jesus as the Messiah and those who will not. The important issue here is not who the Jews said he was, but who do we say he is today.

## **Chapter 10 – verses 22 – 42**

We now move on in time to the Feast of Dedication – Hanukkah – which was held in winter about three months after the feast of Tabernacles. Unlike the other feasts which had ancient biblical roots, this particular feast had its origin in comparatively recent history. In 167 BC, when the Syrian Emperor, Antiochus Epiphanes, was attempting to establish uniformity of worship throughout his empire, he desecrated the temple in Jerusalem by erecting an altar to Zeus. In an heroic struggle, Judas Maccabaeus led an ultimately successful revolt against the Syrians, and in December 164 BC the temple was reconsecrated in an eight-day celebration. This became an annual, joyous commemoration of the victory and the restored freedom of worship. Unlike the other feasts it did not involve pilgrimage to Jerusalem, but could be celebrated at home.

This visit was Jesus' final period of ministry in Jerusalem before his 'processional' move on the city at the Passover four months later. The brevity of his reported encounter and its concluding threat of violence are in keeping. The time is running out for Jesus, and he knows it. The 'hour' appointed by his Father will soon be at hand, but until that hour strikes he must 'finish the work' he has been given to do. Jerusalem must be given one further opportunity to embrace the light before the 'hour of darkness' arrives.

In verse 24 the Jews confront Jesus:

"The Jews gathered round him, saying, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly.'" (John 10:24 NIV)

Jesus had always refused to make a public proclamation that he was the Messiah, although he was not reticent with individuals. The most probable reason is that their political and military understanding of the messianic role made it impossible for Jesus to make the claim openly. That would have been an especial issue at the timing of this feast. To some extent his teaching and his miracles made it clear who he was, but he did not fit with Jewish military and political expectations.

Jesus gives them a short answer in verses 25 and 26:

"Jesus answered, "I did tell you, but you do not believe. The miracles I do in my Father's name speak for me, but you do not believe because you are not my sheep.'" (John 10:25-26 NIV)

Jesus points to the dual witnesses of his miracles and his words, but says that they have rejected him *because they are not his sheep*. He is telling them that they are closed to the call of the Father through him. This brings us straight up against the tension between our free will to accept the call of Jesus and God's predestination of us to accept that call. That's a very big issue which I'm not going to attempt to deal with today, other than to say that I believe both are true in a way that is difficult for us to understand. There is a tension between the two concepts, but we have to hold to them both in that tension. I would also point out that any element of predestination by God does not in any way absolve us of individual responsibility to respond to Jesus' call.

Before moving on from chapter 10 I just want to draw your attention to three things. Firstly, Jesus' clear claim to divinity in verse 30:

"I and the Father are one.'" (John 10:30 NIV)

although I do believe that here Jesus is referring to a unity of purpose as well as a unity of person.

Secondly, the reaction of his audience to this claim in verse 31:

"Again the Jews picked up stones to stone him," (John 10:31 NIV)

In his defence, Jesus reminds them of his great miracles, but they will have none of it. In effect, Jesus is calling the Jews to a revision of their understanding of God. Their radical and uncompromising monotheism implied that any claim to deity represented, necessarily, a claim to rival God, as a second God. Hence the charge of blasphemy inevitably followed. By contrast, Jesus presents them with a God who possesses an internal richness of being, a God able therefore to appear in person among them as 'the Father's Son' without thereby abdicating or compromising his majestic Godhead. The God who had appeared on Sinai was now 'God a second time' in the one who confronted them as 'the Son of the Father'. God was not an undifferentiated monad but a multi-person Trinity.

Jesus' defence against their accusation of blasphemy is to refer them back to the Old Testament Scriptures, specifically to Psalm 82:6 – see verse 34:

“Jesus answered them, “Is it not written in your Law, ‘I have said you are gods?’” (John 10:34 NIV)

Here, Jesus is alluding not only to the fact that this title is clearly appropriate for him, but that it also can be appropriate for mere men. We note too Jesus' passing affirmation of the veracity and trustworthiness of the written Scriptures. Certainly Jesus' accusers were now going to find it difficult to support their charge of blasphemy.

Finally, we see in verses 40 to 42, that Jesus withdrew to the wilderness where many came to faith in him.

### **Chapter 11 – verses 1 – 57**

This was the seventh, and in many ways the greatest, miraculous sign performed by Jesus. It is helpful to sub-divide the chapter as follows.

- (i) The sickness and death of Lazarus of Bethany (verses 1–16)
- (ii) The meetings with Martha and Mary and Jesus' grief (verses 17–37)
- (iii) The raising of Lazarus from the dead (verses 38–44)
- (iv) The Sanhedrin's decision to have Jesus killed (verses 45–57).

Jesus has withdrawn from Jerusalem prior to his return to the city for the final Passover, as we just saw. His preparation for the supremely demanding crisis of his crucifixion is interrupted by an urgent request for help. This comes from a family especially close to him, living at Bethany, a couple of miles south east of Jerusalem. The family consists of two sisters, Martha and Mary, and their brother, Lazarus who were evidently good friends of Jesus. Indeed given their proximity to Jerusalem it is very likely that Jesus stayed with them on a number of occasions which are not recorded in scripture, certainly the wording of verse 3 shows that they had very close ties with Jesus.

It is usually presumed that Lazarus and his sisters were resident in the same household, though in fact the text does not state that. Indeed the way he is introduced as “living in the same village” in verse 1 and the fact that he was apparently a man of mature years would both suggest that he was living in a separate household, though within the village. This may explain the comment in chapter 12:2 where, at the dinner given in Jesus' honour by the sisters, Lazarus is explicitly identified among the guests, an unnecessary detail if the dinner was being served in his own home. However, the unity of the family is obvious, so when their brother falls seriously ill, the sisters send to Jesus for help. Their message is somewhat oblique – look at verse 3:

“So the sisters sent word to Jesus, “Lord, the one you love is sick.”” (John 11:3 NIV)

It may be that they were informed of his recent encounter with the authorities in Jerusalem, and recognized that to bring him again to the vicinity of the city would be dangerous. Certainly Thomas is in no doubt about the folly of such a journey in these circumstances – look at verse 16:

“Then Thomas (called Didymus) said to the rest of the disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.”” (John 11:16 NIV)

The wording of verse 3 may be a conscious compromise. Perhaps the sisters are also aware of Jesus having healed on a previous occasion by means of a word, without his physical presence being necessary (John 4:43–54), in any event the sisters ask for help without specifying the ways and means.

Jesus responds to the sisters' request by making two comments on the illness of Lazarus, and by deliberately choosing to stay where he was two more days – look at verses 4-6:

“When he heard this, Jesus said, "This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it." Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. Yet when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days.” (John 11:4-6 NIV)

His first comment is that the sickness will not prove fatal in the long run. Some see this as a recognition that Lazarus was not in fact dead at this point and that Jesus hoped he could still be cured, but this is clearly contradicted by the wording of verse 14. It also conflicts with the clear control of events which Jesus exercises at every point in this incident. So we must interpret this initial reaction as setting the scene for what follows. Lazarus, a beloved and valued friend, has succumbed to the power of sickness and indeed is already dead, as verse 14 makes clear. But the power of sickness will not have the final say. The final outcome (Jesus' second comment), will be life, not death, thus manifesting the glory of God and his Son.

Jesus' attitude to sickness here is parallel to the healing of the blind beggar, the sickness provides a platform so that the 'work of God might be displayed in his life'. What is true here at the level of physical illness can be extended to all the trials we face as Christian disciples. Our natural response is to rebel against them as alien intruders, which must be expelled from our lives as quickly and painlessly as possible by every means available, including God's miraculous intervention. With hindsight, however, another perspective is possible. We can offer our trials to God for him either to remove or retain as he pleases, thereby bringing glory to his name and deepening our faith, and possibly that of others too. Joni Eareckson Tada, a paraplegic sufferer, authentically expresses this second alternative. 'I do not care if I am confined to this wheelchair provided from it I can bring glory to God.'

According to verse 6, Jesus, receiving the news of Lazarus' condition, deliberately remained where he was for two further days before making any response. Now we are not told what sickness Lazarus was suffering from, but it clearly must have been serious both because Mary and her sister called for Jesus to come and because Lazarus died quite quickly. Yet Jesus doesn't come immediately but stayed where he was for two more days and then decided to respond to the sisters' call. There are some important lessons for us there. God's delays are not necessarily God's denials. Even when God decides to give a positive answer to our prayers, that answer doesn't necessarily come immediately, we may have to wait. But, God's timing will be perfect. Even though Mary thought that Jesus was too late, it's never too late with God, he has the power to do immeasurably more than we can ask or conceive of. So it was here. The sisters were hoping for a healing from sickness, but actually received a healing from death, a resurrection.

Sometimes we don't know why the answers to our prayers are delayed, but in this case I think we can see why. Jesus wanted to test the faith of his loved ones, to teach them about timing and patience, and through that testing to grow their faith. He also wanted to display the power and majesty of God to those who were witnesses, to those who would hear their testimony and indeed all those who would receive the words recorded in John's gospel down the ages – including all of us here today.

But why did Jesus wait for two days? Verse 39 tells us that Lazarus had been in the tomb for four days when Jesus arrived, so even if Jesus had set out immediately when he heard the sisters' request, Lazarus would apparently have been dead for two days anyway. Thus, I

think the answer to our question lies in the beliefs and burial customs of those times. Bodies were normally buried immediately due to the hot climatic conditions and lack of refrigeration. But, mourning would go on for at least seven days after the burial, becoming more intense after the third day, when the spirit was believed to finally separate from the body and depart. Some Jews believed that certain magicians could accomplish resuscitation during the three day period after death before the spirit finally departed, but held that no one could be brought back to life once the three day period was over. Jesus was not affirming that belief, but he was accommodating it, by delaying things so that his arrival came after the end of the critical three days. Jesus did not intend that the forthcoming raising of Lazarus should be dismissed as merely the work of a capable magician. In the New Testament, Jesus raised Jairus's daughter and the widow's son at Nain, but those resurrections occurred quite soon after the deaths had taken place. Here, Jesus proved beyond any doubt, that even if the body is starting to decompose, God can raise up a man from the grave. This is how we are going to be resurrected if we die in Christ.

When Jesus first said to Martha that Lazarus would rise again in verse 23:

"Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." (John 11:23 NIV)

Martha thought that he was alluding to a resurrection of Lazarus on the last day. In those days, most Jews other than a sect called the Sadducees, believed in a resurrection on the last day – so it's no surprise that Martha was able to accept this. But Jesus was going beyond Martha's focus on the healing he could have performed in the past if he'd been there, and her hopes for a resurrection in the future. He was trying to tell her that his resurrection life was being made available NOW, in more ways than she realised. Jesus isn't just for the past or just for the future – he's also a Jesus for today.

In verse 25 Jesus makes it clear that he offers all who believe in him the gift of eternal life: "Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies;" (John 11:25 NIV)

for me this is one of the clearest declarations of salvation – eternal life – through faith in Christ, for everyone who has that faith, in the whole of scripture. At this point, Lazarus is dead, and we also are all dead in our sins, apart from the redemption life given to us by Jesus.

In verses 33 - 35, we see the overlap between Jesus' deity and his humanity:

"When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. "Where have you laid him?" he asked. "Come and see, Lord," they replied. Jesus wept" (John 11:33-35 NIV)

The rendering of the last part of verse 33 is actually rather a poor effort by the NIV. The Message does rather better and puts it that "a deep anger welled up within [Jesus]". The Greek word used here 'embrimasthai' invariably speaks of anger when used in relation to human emotion, in fact it could be translated as Jesus snorted like a horse, so we can take it that Jesus was angry, perhaps against the ravages of sin and death on humanity, or against the hypocrisy of the Jewish onlookers, or the relative unbelief of the sisters who had spent so much time with him. Verse 35, "Jesus wept", is actually the shortest verse in the Bible. But Jesus' weeping is completely different from that of the professional mourners. The Greek word used here means to weep convulsively. That is the perspective Christ wants us to have. If you are hurting, he wants you to know that he weeps with you. This is a compassionate God worth believing in, and that's the God I commend to you today.

Then we come to the climax of this story. In verse 38 of our reading Jesus arrives at Lazarus's tomb and in verse 39 he commands that it be opened up – look:

““Take away the stone,” he said. “But, Lord,” said Martha, the sister of the dead man, “by this time there is a bad odour, for he has been there four days.”” (John 11:39 NIV)

A typical tomb of those times would have had the capacity for eight bodies in indentations in its walls – three on each side and two at the end – so there might well have been other bodies from earlier burials in this tomb. Martha objects that Lazarus’s body will by now have started to decompose and there will be a stench. In a way we can sympathise with her – she didn’t understand what Christ wanted to do and was not keen to gaze on the putrefying corpse of her brother.

Jesus tells Martha that she is about to see a miracle and commands the others present to take away the stone sealing the tomb – look at verse 40 and first part of verse 41:

“Then Jesus said, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” So they took away the stone.” (John 11:40-41 NIV).

It is possible that that the stone here was covering the mouth of a pit rather than being a stone which could be rolled away (as with Jesus’ tomb), since the Greek used here carries the sense of the stone being laid on it and being carried away – although the second option fits better with the following verses describing Lazarus emerging from the tomb. Here, I think we can see the stone as a barrier to Lazarus receiving the benefits of Christ’s resurrection power. Similarly, there are barriers which prevent us from receiving the benefits of that saving power. Barriers that prevent us from entering into a saving faith in Christ. Like the stone, these barriers in our life must be removed.

Jesus then prays to the Father for a miracle – see the second part of verse 41 and verse 42:

“Then Jesus looked up and said, “Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me.”” (John 11:41-42 NIV)

We can take heart from these words of Jesus. True they are spoken by the sinless Son of God, but our struggling souls can take heart. Our Father is a God defined by his alertness to our cries. As it says in Psalm 65:2 ‘O you who hear prayer ...’

Suddenly in verse 43 Jesus cried out in a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!”. He did not have to shout, but he wanted everyone to comprehend the drama. Here I believe that Jesus called Lazarus specifically by name, otherwise the whole graveyard would have arisen. Then the miracle occurred – see verse 44:

“The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, “Take off the grave clothes and let him go.”” (John 11:44 NIV)

According to Jewish custom the body would not have been fully mummified, but rather wrapped round with a large linen cloth and tied at hands and feet with further strips. The head would have been wrapped in a separate face napkin to keep the jaw in place. So bound, a living person could still shuffle or hop, as Lazarus apparently now proceeded to do.

Jesus then orders his release. Death has been robbed of its prey. We see the good news of the ultimate power and authority of Christ. In the raising of Lazarus Jesus made good his claim, ‘for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out’ (John 5:28). The devil’s power, though real, is limited. His reign in death (Romans 5:17) is only temporary.

Here I think we can liken the grave clothes to those elements remaining in our lives which prevent us from fully experiencing and receiving the benefits of Christ’s resurrection power. Lazarus was instantly resurrected, just as we instantly receive justification from Christ when



we first come to faith in him and enter into eternal resurrection life. But Lazarus was not enabled to fully enter into the benefits of his resurrection life until his grave clothes had been stripped away – elements of his former existence in death remained with him and hampered him. In the same way when we are justified by faith elements of our old sinful nature remain with us and are only gradually stripped away as we are sanctified and made more Christ like.

This final extremely powerful miracle of Jesus was witnessed by many Jews from Jerusalem (verse 19) and brought about the final provocation which would lead to Jesus' crucifixion. Look at verses 47 to 53:

“Then the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin. "What are we accomplishing?" they asked. "Here is this man performing many miraculous signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation." Then one of them, named Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, spoke up, "You know nothing at all! You do not realise that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish." He did not say this on his own, but as high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the Jewish nation, and not only for that nation but also for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one. So from that day on they plotted to take his life.” (John 11:47-53 NIV)

Caiaphas' proposal in verse 50 is a cynical one. Jesus has become a threat to their well-being and that of the nation as a whole. They acknowledge Jesus is doing miracles, but will not be convinced by any amount of evidence. He must go. Much better *that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish*. While John often relates sayings which have deeper levels of meaning, leaving the reader to uncover the further significance, on this occasion he draws it out. In this saying, Caiaphas is an unwitting prophet as well as a priest, for in it he proclaims the substitutionary death of Jesus. The model of the lambs slaughtered daily in the temple ritual to redeem the lives of the worshippers becomes the basis of the political strategy of the Sanhedrin. Jesus is to be offered up for the saving of Israel, one man for the nation. That was nothing less than the truth. And not just for Israel, for he will die as the sacrificial substitute for the sins of the world. Thereby, the saving and uniting of the people of God among all the nations, and in every age, will be accomplished.

Chapter 11 ends in tension. As the feast of the Passover approaches the Pharisees are looking for Jesus – will he come to the feast? The chief priests and the Pharisees had ordered that anyone becoming aware of Jesus' whereabouts should report it so that he might be arrested. As the pilgrims prepare to sacrifice the Passover lamb in commemoration of God's gracious liberation from slavery, so God's own true Lamb is prepared and ready at the Father's summons to offer himself in bloody sacrifice for the sins of the world. In that act he will win a new and everlasting freedom for his people, thereby fulfilling and rendering obsolete this feast and every Jewish feast till the end of time. The scene for the final week of Jesus' ministry was fully set. That and the events of the resurrection and ascension will form the second part of this talk next month.

Let's just close with a few words of prayer. Father I pray that as today we have looked at the first part of John's gospel telling us of the incarnation and ministry of your Son, we have been enabled to see more clearly who he is, his majesty and deity, and how he has shone his light into our dark world and brought us forgiveness from our sins - salvation. May this increased knowledge of Jesus draw us closer to him, and develop and renew our saving faith. We pray this in the name of Jesus Christ Our Saviour and for His greater glory. Amen.