CHAPTER III
THE PUBLIC MINISTRY OF JESUS CHRIST (PART I)

John 2:1-6:71

Although continuity is evident as we consider events “on the third day,” v. 1, yet contrast is equally clear in the transition from a testimony of words to that of works or signs concerning the recent inauguration of the Lord Jesus Christ’s messianic ministry. In accord with 20:30-31, seven signs, incorporating supernatural occurrences, have been specially selected so that saving faith might be stimulated. All seven situations concern human predicaments, though the first has uniqueness on account of its social distinctiveness and jovial environment; another deals with the natural elements, 6:16-21, while the remaining five focus upon human physical frailty. It should also be noted that this segment takes us to that period in passion week, following the triumphal entry, when Jesus makes a final public presentation of himself, 12:44-50.


Here Jesus, who “came eating and drinking,” distinguishes himself from the austerity and isolationist lifestyle of John the Baptist who came “neither eating nor drinking” (Matt. 11:18-19). Leaving the wilderness, he invades the arena of this world; what better situation would communicate this truth than a wedding that readily leant itself to the subsequent spread in the Galilee region of reports concerning Jesus’ astonishing miracle.

Recall the eyewitness evidence concerning Jesus’ glory that John reported about in 1:14; now at Cana this glory begins to be manifest. Recall the purpose for which this Gospel was written, 20:30-31; now at Cana this purpose begins to be accomplished, albeit superficially.

1. The setting of the sign, vs. 1-2.

Jewish marriages involved five basic steps. First, the betrothal of up to 12 months; the couple were considered legally married though they did not live together; a document was signed and a dowry was agreed upon, cf. Matt. 1:18. Second, the procession from the bride’s home to that of the bridgroom led by his friend, with marry music, torches, myrtle branches, flowers, and praise of the beauty and virtues of the bride. Third, the taking of the marriage vows which conformed to Mosaic standards; the signing of the Kethubah by the groom concerning his responsibilities with regard to possessions. After a ritual washing of hands came the benediction. Fourth, the marriage supper, lasting from one to seven days usually with an increasingly joyous spirit. Fifth, retirement to the bridal chamber by the couple. Pious Jews would fast; it was almost a sacrament. Gifts were not merely desired, but required; hence the groom’s family was obliged to provide food and wine that was doubtless moderately alcoholic though not fortified.

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1 Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, I, pp. 353-5.
a. The wedding location, v. 1a.

Cana was the birthplace of Nathaniel, 21:1, being only 4 miles northeast of Nazareth, and sixteen miles west of Galilee. It is now three days since Jesus’ journey to the Galilee region and subsequent recruitment of Philip and Nathanael, 1:43-51. The formal public presentation of Jesus takes place in that region amongst the populace with which he was highly familiar.

b. The wedding guests, vs. 1b-2.

Joseph is probably deceased; Mary, not mentioned again until at the foot of the cross, 19:25, and Jesus receive invitations while the disciples tagged along, including Andrew, Peter, John, Philip, and possibly James. Mary’s subsequent concern would suggest intimate acquaintance with the families of the bridegroom and bride, and likewise with Jesus. Hence here is the first Christian wedding which the Son of God halloes, and the Anglican Prayer Book declares is not to be taken “unadvisedly, lightly, wantonly, and without due consideration,” but rather “reverently, discreetly, soberly, and in the fear of God.” Though here joy seems to depend on physical stimulation, not Christ’s presence.

2. The first sign pointing to Jesus as the Son of God, vs. 3-12.

It is significant that this first miracle of Christ should, in the context of his recent coming “to seek and to save that which was lost,” (Luke 19:10), take place at a wedding in anticipation of his own wedding when, at the close of this age, he takes a bride that is comprised of the sinners he came to save (Mark 2:18-20; Rev. 19:7-8).

a. The problem, an embarrassed bridegroom, vs. 3-5.

Possibly this household was of the poorer kind so that the provision of a lavish table was not an easy matter, especially if Jesus was accompanied with an excess of guests that he intentionally invited to accompany him.

(1) The interest of Mary with Jesus, v. 3.

“And having run out of wine [οἶνος, oinos, fermented grape juice,] the mother of Jesus said to Him, ‘They have no wine!’” Probably the drinking had been hearty to say the least. Yes, Jesus Christ drank fermented wine! cf. Matt. 11:18-19; Mark 2:22, but see Mark 2:18-20 for the reason. The law of expediency (Rom. 14:21), and the requirements of spiritual leadership (I Tim. 3:3, 8) would suggest abstinence for today. Mary’s concern is one of social astonishment, even sympathy for the embarrassed hosts. Why she addresses Jesus, without directly seeking his intervention, is difficult to determine; he was probably reclining next to her. Most likely her exclamation is tinged with petition that in some way hoped that her son

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2 The third person singular here of καλέω, kaleo, to call or invite, would refer primarily to Jesus.

would helpfully intervene. Had Jesus in the past displayed an aptitude for providing hospitality when accompanied with a host of friends?

(2) The interest of Jesus with the Father, v. 4.

What is remarkable here is the response, which literally reads: “What is it to me and to you, woman; my hour has not yet come!” Here was no parental disrespect any more than was the case when on the cross Jesus declared, “Woman, behold your son!” (John 19:26, cf. 20:13, 15). This was courteous address without intimacy, cf. Matt. 12:46-50, having the equivalence of “‘madam’ or ‘my lady.’”

We like to make much of Jesus’ social participation here, and yet his mind seems to be on something else, 7:6, 8, 30; 8:20; 12:23, 27; 13:1; 16:32; 17:1. While Mary makes a pertinent comment, Jesus seems to regard it as relatively trivial, as if to say, “Woman, you are troubling me with something that is of minor importance compared with the far greater concern of my soul. I have an appointment with death, an hour of destiny, that continually occupies my thoughts. Life is more than the mere absence of wine! My whole ministry concerns the provision of infinitely superior wine that you presently know nothing about, 4:10.” However, note that Jesus does not ignore his mother’s concern, but rather accommodates himself to the needy situation so that he might signify the better wine that he and his atonement ministry will amply embody.

(3) The interest of Mary with the servants, v. 5.

Here διακονοί, diakonoi, is not the common word for household servants, and thus means waiters, catering assistants. Surely Mary is focused on the face of Jesus following his serious and enigmatic comment; perhaps he rises to his feet to take charge, and this signals that her subtle plea is not about to be disregarded. So Mary meekly calls the waiters to attention: “Whatever he says to you, do it!” though hardly as some vaunted mediatrix according to Roman Catholicism.

In Genesis 41:55 we read that, “when all the land of Egypt was famished, the people cried out to Pharaoh for bread; and Pharaoh said to all the Egyptians, ‘Go to Joseph [a wonderful representation of the Lord Jesus]; whatever he says to you, you shall do.’” As a result salvation came to Egypt. So Mary’s identical exhortation has an application of even greater import, which the voice of God will affirm at Christ’s transfiguration (Matt. 17:5). When the waterpots of this world do not satisfy its own lustings, then heed the command of the Son of God to eat abundantly, 6:35 and drink freely, 4:13-14, of him with the “obedience of faith” (Rom. 1:5; 16:26; cf. Luke 6:46-49).

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5 Carson suggests that the inability of some Roman Catholic scholars to accept vs. 4-5 as being authentic is because of the subdued role that Mary here portrays, John, p. 173n.
b. The solution, obedience to Christ’s command, vs. 6-10.

The principle that obedience brings insight, rather than the reverse, is now dramatically illustrated, 3:21; 7:17. The waiters do something which they do not fully understand; but their obedience to the command of Christ will result in understanding and unimagined satisfaction.

(1) The path of obedience, vs. 6-8.

It is imperative to first grasp that what is described here concerns a real historic event, the like of which has not be seen since. It is significant that today there is no “Turning Water Into Wine Movement.” However, the waterpots may well be taken to represent the human frame of fallen mankind that contains natural, mortal life and is sustained by frequent fillings of natural nourishment.

(a) The empty waterpots, v. 6.

These were stone waterpots rather than clay so that the Jews would not contract uncleanness, Mark 7:1-5; their capacity was approximately 20 gallons each, with a combined total of 120 gallons. They were partially full having been used for the purification of hands, utensils, tables, etc. The six vessels may portray Jesus’ present disciples, while the water represents the present anemic religious economy of Judaism, the old order that Jesus had come to supplant.

(b) The full waterpots, v. 7.

Jesus’ command: “Fill the waterpots with water” is obeyed so that “they filled them up to the brim/to the point of overflow.” Here the fullness speaks of the impotence of natural resources in dealing with the thirsty human soul. When man is even full in the natural realm, full in the mere secular realm, at best he remains tasteless, void of sweetness, insipid of soul. Let man attempt to fill himself to the full, the end result is little distinction between himself and an animal drinking trough!

(c) The transformed waterpots, v. 8.

Jesus’ command: “Now draw [some wine] out and bring it to the headwaiter,” has been understood by some to indicate that a separate well was used here because that is the common use of ἀντλέω, antleō. Thus the waterpots simply remained as testimony to a passing and impotent era. But surely Jesus meant that a drinking vessel was to be

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6 One contemporary claim of turning water into wine is recorded in Mel Tari’s account of supposed supernatural events that took place during the late 1960s in Indonesia. There water turned purple, and when it was declared that the taste was that of water, the exhortation was given to exercise faith that it tasted as wine! Like a Mighty Wind, pp. 71-77.

7 So Bruce, Carson, Westcott; contra Barrett, Morris.
used to draw out some wine from the larger container so that the headwaiter could first taste and give his approval. Further, the magnitude of the new wine would only enhance the representation of the magnitude of the saving grace of God, 1:16-17.

(2) The fruit of obedience, vs. 9-10.

Here we are transported from a physical wonder, wherein water is turned to wine, to the transcendent truth of Christ's glory as the Savior of human waterpots!

(a) The wine that is remarkable, v. 9.

The waiters, who had filled the waterpots, are again described collectively as in v. 8 and this may suggest that six drinking-vessels had been used to take a sample from each waterpot to the busy headwaiter, ἀρχιτρίκλινος, architriklinos, for his approval. Hence the waiters were astonished at the obvious transformation of the water which they concluded was more than purple water; the bouquet or aroma of the wine was overpowering! So the troubled yet experienced headwaiter, with complete objectivity, having earlier tasted the best wine for the day, now tastes that presented to him. Perhaps expecting a hastily obtained batch of cheap wine, he is startled at the superiority of what he tastes; perhaps he exclaims: “This wine is heavenly!” Believing this to be an emergency provision, he excitedly calls the bridegroom.

(b) The wine that is superior, v. 10.

When human sensibilities are most acute, undiminished by the disorienting effect of alcohol, only then is fine wine readily distinguished and often applauded. But here the headwaiter concludes the bridegroom has had this new batch of superior wine stored away and only now has he made it available to guests who are a little inebriated, having “drunk freely,” μεθυσκόω, methuskō, become intoxicated. Thus he declares: “You have kept back the good wine until now!” In other words: “What you earlier set forth as the best wine is nothing compared to this.” By application, man’s best is not to be compared with God’s best! Man’s wine has been flowing for centuries, but “now,” in the person of Jesus Christ, in “the fullness of time,” Gal. 4:4, the best wine is about to be served. In fact the old has run out, the new is now in plenteous supply; the old has not fully satisfied, the new brings forth the unending praise of those who taste of its surpassing quality and sweetness.

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c. The significance, Christ glorified through resulting faith, v. 11.

This inaugural testimony, only recorded by John, is like an overture in that it introduces us to the major doxological or “glory” thrust of the select presentations of Jesus Christ, 1:14. R. C. Trench perceptively comments: “This first miracle of the New Covenant has its inner mystical meaning. The first miracle of Moses was a turning of water into blood (Ex. 7:20); and this had its fitness; for the law, which came by Moses, was a ministration of death, and working wrath (II Cor. 3:6-9). But the first miracle of Christ was a turning of water into wine, this too a meet inauguration of all which should follow, for this was a ministration of life; He came, the dispenser of that true wine which makes glad the heart of man (Ps. 104:15).”

(1) The significance of Jesus.

This first “sign” introduces us to the first of 17 references by John to σημεῖον, sēmeion, always intimating a supernatural event, though not used in the Synoptics. His other major word in this category is “work,” ἔργον, ergon, used 27 times, cf. 7:3, 7. Other synonyms are δύναμις, dunamis, a power, commonly used in the Synoptics but never in John, τέρας, a wonder, used by John once, 4:48, but not θαύμα, thauma, a marvel. For John a σημεῖον, sēmeion authenticates, it points beyond its material quality to its significance or higher meaning, which is the person of Christ. In this instance, to be merely occupied with the miracle of water becoming wine, or the multiplied loaves and fishes, 6:26, is to miss the significance of this sign which is the validated person of the Lord Jesus Christ, in contrast with John the Baptist who “did no sign,” 10:41.

(2) The glory of Jesus.

Here is the real significance of Jesus Christ, that is the self-revelation of his δόξα, doxa, the radiance, divine splendor and outshining of his person and work as a whole. But how specifically, on this occasion, has the display of Christ’s glory been accomplished? Through Christ’s sovereignty over creation; through his magnanimous provision; through his sympathy in time of need; through the praise of those who acknowledge his work; through the foreshadowing of his thirst quenching atonement. Here also is the real goal of genuine evangelistic proclamation. Yet the manifestation of this glory is one thing; the comprehension of it is quite another as 1:14 and the following clause suggests.

(3) The faith in Jesus.

“And his disciples [having already believed, 1:49] were believing in [into Μὴρξ] Him.” This faith was ongoing; it was not surface or momentary faith, not merely a whiff of Christ, but a faith that submerges more into him as they learn more about him. Morris comments: While it may be over

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pressing the use of the preposition to insist on its literal meaning yet John’s idea is not unlike that of Paul when he speaks of men as being ‘in’ Christ.”

Why did “His disciples” believe in Him? Because they admitted that they were human waterpots; the water of Jacob’s well at Samaria or any other place could not satisfy the cravings of the human soul. But such a confession qualified them for the infilling of Jesus as new wine that would never run out, 4:14. It is for this reason that the disciples of Jesus, waterpots though they were, yet obtained a bouquet, a divine fragrance incomparably greater than the water of this world. Then what of the other wedding guests? We never hear of them again; none seem to have believed; they accepted Jesus as a wonder worker, but they stopped short of his significance, that is believing in him as saving wine from heaven!

d. The aftermath, residence at Capernaum, v. 12.

“Capernaum,” meaning “Kefar-nahum,” or the “village of Nahum”, was Jesus Christ’s main place of residence or base during his northern or Galilean ministry. Located at the northwest edge of the Sea of Galilee, it was also the home of Andrew, Peter, James, John, and probably Matthew, and it is likely Jesus was gladly welcomed in boarding at one or other of their residences. Here he vigorously participated in Synagogue life, 6:59, as well as in this overall region, Matt. 4:23. The “brethren” here refer to Jesus’ younger brothers and sisters born of Joseph and Mary; if he had an elder brother, David’s throne could not be legitimately claimed, cf. Matt. 1:25; Luke 2:7. The inference here is that Jesus takes the initiative in returning to Capernaum rather than Nazareth, cf. Matt. 4:13; Mary comes as well since, Joseph probably being dead, she now lives with her children who are perhaps also involved in the fishing industry. However the astonishing sign at Cana causes them all to readily follow this supplier of incomparable wine; they may not yet appreciate the significance of what has transpired, but they earnestly want to know more; as a result, more will be given to them.


The glory of Christ displayed at this juncture concerns both his qualified person, as the rightful cleanser of the temple of Herod, and his redeeming work as the risen incarnate temple of God. Here are not two separate events, that is vs. 1-17 and vs. 18-22, since while v. 17 is an editorial parenthesis, vs. 18 continues the conversation of v. 16. Thus the cleansing of the earthly Jerusalem temple directs us to the cleansing ministry of the temple of God’s dear Son. However acknowledgment of this truth in Jerusalem was generally superficial.

1. The destruction and cleansing of the Jerusalem temple, vs. 13-17.

This incident, appearing at the commencement of Jesus’ ministry, is unique since while a similar cleansing is described in all the Synoptic gospels (Matt. 21:12-13; Mark

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10 Morris, John, pp. 335-6.
11:15-17; Luke 19:45-46), yet all of these three accounts occur after the triumphal entry into Jerusalem at the commencement of passion week. Thus we conclude that this is the first of two temple cleansing incidents.\(^\text{11}\) Here John refers to the temple as “a place of business,” 2:16, while the other accounts refer to “a robbers’ den.” Further, the time in John is the first Passover while the other accounts describe a cleansing during the last Passover.

a. The desecration of the Jerusalem temple, vs. 13-14.

Briefly, the temple built by savage King Herod commenced in 19 BC as a futile means of endearing the Idumaean (Edomite) ruler to the Jews. He was not against building pagan temples elsewhere. But this was his finest memorial, in cream stone and gold, that endeavored to rival Solomon. Patrick Fairbairn adds: “It had the unspeakable honor of being visited by the Lord of glory, the true Shekinah, but they who ministered in its courts—more peculiarly ‘his own’—knew him not; and ere long those courts became the scenes of such unparalleled atrocities as brought down with overwhelming retribution the vengeance of Heaven. The wish of Titus to spare the building was frustrated by the madness of the people on the one side and the fury of his soldiery on the other.”\(^\text{12}\) However in spite of the unsavory character of architect Herod, it is significant that the Lord Jesus designates his most illustrious edifice as, “My Father’s house,” v. 16.

(1) The celebration of the Passover memorial season, v. 13.

In estimating the span of Jesus Christ’s public ministry, the sequence of Passovers has provided a major basis for calculation. John mentions three, 2:13; 6:4; 11:55, and probably a fourth in 5:1, with the result that a three year ministry is most commonly proposed.\(^\text{13}\) “The Passover of the Jews” is an explanation for Gentile readers, though John has already alluded to this redemptive shadow, 1:29, 36; cf. I Cor. 5:7. Thus Jesus, as an obedient Jew (Deut. 16:16), goes up to Jerusalem. However, this was His first anointed of Messianic presentation of himself at the City of David. Did any disciples refer to him as the one that John had identified as “the Lamb of God”? if the Jews will desecrate the temple of Herod, which is also a shadow, what will they do with the reality?

(2) The celebration of religious marketing season, v. 14.

It was high season at the bazaars of the sons of Annas, the high priest, located in the Court of the Gentiles (Solomon’s Porch). Annas himself, although deposed as high priest and replaced by his son-in-law Caiaphas, yet

\(^{11}\) Carson, *John*, pp. 177-8, gives a detailed consideration of the belief that only one cleansing of the temple occurred, this being contrary to Morris and Hendriksen, so that John is said to have moved this incident in his sequence of the life of Christ. He concludes that, “the arguments for one [cleansing] are weak and subjective, while the most natural reading of the texts favors two.”

\(^{12}\) Patrick Fairbairn, *The Imperial Bible Dictionary*, VI, p. 262.

had five of his sons serving in the priesthood. Edersheim refers to Rabbinic writings that describe “the bazaars of the sons of Annas,” which were the source of much corruption; being located in the temple court, they “were the scene of the purification of the Temple by Jesus.” Josephus writes of one son as, “a great hoarder up of money, very rich, and as despoothing by open violence the common priests of their official revenues.”

“Oxen and sheep and doves” were on sale as offerings, often to replace blemished animals. This practice was abused since the priests sought extortionate profits as well as their regular inspection fee. The Jewish Talmud gives one example at about this time of a dove costing 15¢ being offered for $3. “Money changers” collected the annual temple tax of a half-shekel or about 50¢, but in a particular and exact coin. They charged for collecting, and more if change was given. Temple tax gleaned approximately $250,000 per year. When the Romans sacked the Temple treasury in 53 B.C., they collected over $8 million! Thus the aura of commerce rather than communion with God pervaded the temple precincts (Jer. 7:9-11), in much the same way that the Roman Catholic Church marketed indulgences in Germany by the Dominican priest Tezel in 1517 for the building of St. Peter’s in Rome. And today the huckstering continues.

b. The cleansing of the Jerusalem temple, vs. 15-17.

Here incarnate divine wrath focuses on man’s common tendency to make the sacred secular, the holy as unholy. As there will come a day when, “the kings of the earth and the great men and the commanders and the rich and the strong and every slave and free man” will fearfully cry out, “to the mountains and to the rocks, ‘Fall on us and hide us from the presence of Him who sits on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb’” (Rev. 6:15-16), so here we have a prelude in miniature of that climax of the ages. Ryle suggests that this scene also represents how the nominal church will be treated at that apocalyptic time.

(1) The righteous activity of Jesus Christ, v. 15.

“And having made a whip [φραγγελλιον, phragellion] out of cords [σχοινιον, schooling, woven rushes or thin rope, cf. Acts 27:32], he cast them all out of the temple [precincts], [along] with the sheep and the oxen, and he poured out the coins of the moneychangers and overturned their tables.” There is no specific proof that Jesus actually whipped the guilty Jews at this time, especially since he does not whip the sellers of doves, v. 16, yet he “cast them all” out of the temple, cf. Matt. 21:12, along with their produce. That is the whip was used on the animals, while the severe tone of his voice and look in his blazing eyes were enough for the religious merchants to wither and flee. Not a hand is raised to oppose Jesus. However, all attempts to minimize the fury of Jesus fail when he physically assaults the

15 J. C. Ryle, Expository Thoughts on John, I, p. 112.
moneychanger’s tables. Here divine emotion, even a holy violence, is evident, not mere anthropopathism (Mark 3:4-5; II Thess. 1:7-8).

(2) The righteous command of Jesus Christ, v. 16.

Why does Jesus appear to be less violent with those selling doves? Simply because the whip was used to drive the animals away in v. 15. But cages of birds cannot be so driven. Jesus’ anger was not directed against the animals, but rather the religious hucksters. The dove seller’s rebuke was: “Take these things [cages] away from here. Stop making My Father’s house [into] a secular bazaar [ἐμπορίον, emporion].” So Jesus alludes to his being the Son of God, and thus aligns himself most intimately with the Father from whose bosom he has come. Further, the holiness of that heavenly abode is here upheld in contrast with the unholy temple environment, that ought to be a place of prayer (Is. 56:7) and reconciliation, “the house of the LORD” (I Chron. 21:28-22:1 Hence a local church being “a holy temple in the Lord, . . . a [more permanent] dwelling of God in the Spirit” (Eph. 2:22), is likewise not to be defiled by commercial exploitation.

(3) The righteous revelation of Jesus Christ, v. 17.

“His disciples remembered that it had been written, ‘Zeal for Your house will consume [κατεσθίω, katesthiō, devour=possess] Me.” Probably in parallel with v. 22, the fact that Jesus’ disciples were able to recollect Psalm 69:9a; cf. 119:139, indicates the subsequent working of the Holy Spirit, 14:26. David was jealous for the maintenance of God’s honor (Ps. 4:5; 15:1-5; 24:3-10; 40:6; 51:16-17), and as a consequence, “the reproaches of those who reproach You have fallen on me” (Ps. 69:9b); David’s enemies were desecrators of pure temple worship. This love, this jealous concern for the Father’s honor would therefore become a hallmark of both Jesus Christ and his disciples, and especially at a pastoral level. As Isaac Watts writes:

Such was thy truth, and such thy zeal,
Such deference to thy Father’s will,
Such love, and meekness so divine,
I would transcribe and make them mine.

Furthermore, here was signification of Messiah having come according to foretold renovation and zeal (Zech. 14:21; Mal. 3:1, 3), even as the questioning of the Jews in v. 18 appears to suggest. So Hoskyns comments: “The action is not merely that of a Jewish reformer: it is a sign of the advent of the Messiah; it is not merely a protest against the irreverence and corruption of Jewish worship: it is a sign that the end of animal sacrifice is at hand (v. 21).”

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16 Both Bruce and Carson suggest that the action of Christ was moderate otherwise the Roman garrison at the overlooking fortress of Antonia would have intervened. However might not even these soldiers have been hesitant when beholding Christ’s righteous intensity and hearing his proclaimed holy cause?

2. The humiliation and resurrection of the Incarnate Temple, vs. 18-22.

It needs to be remembered that the substance of this resultant encounter with the Jews was used as a major charge against Jesus Christ during passion week by false witnesses before Caiaphas (Mark 14:57-59) and abusive critics at the foot of the cross (Mark 15:29-30); Stephen was similarly charged with proclaiming this same truth that was interpreted as threatening the Mosaic administration (Acts 6:14).

a. The Incarnate Temple challenged, vs. 18.

The “Jews” here are probably rulers, members of the Sanhedrin, cf. 1:19, who refrain from a shrill reaction that would involve the Romans. Possibly Nicodemus is present. Indeed the maintenance of order in the temple precincts was their responsibility. Carson perceptively adds: “[T]hey display no reflection or self-examination over whether Jesus’ cleansing of the temple and related charges were foundationally just. They are therefore less concerned with pure worship and a right approach to God than they are with questions of precedent and authority.”

On the other hand they recognize the Messianic import here, Christ’s deed and demeanor, by asking: “What [validating] sign do you [being neither a priest or Levite] show us on account of your doing these things?” Remember that it is likely this Passover season was marked by animated discussion about Jesus of Nazareth, the testimony concerning him by John the Baptist and his disciples, as well as that from the Galilee delegation with regard to the miracle at Cana. This being so, the request for a “sign” or σημείον, semeion, is not so unexpected; it would have to rank with a miracle of Moses, Elijah, or Elisha.

b. The Incarnate Temple responds, v. 19.

“Jesus answered and said to them, ‘Destroy/demolish this temple [ναός, naos] and in three days I will raise it up.” This address is to the Jews; Jesus is not saying he will destroy the temple, as wrongly charged (Mark 14:57-58; 15:29-30), but rather they! Further note that “temple” here is ναός, naos, meaning the sanctuary, holy house, or inner central building, not ναός, hieron, or temple complex, 2:14-15. Thus Jesus prophetically, by means of an exclamatory statement, describes both his crucifixion by the Jews and his self-initiated resurrection, 10:18; but consider the Father’s role (Col. 2:12; I Thess. 1:9-10; I Pet. 1:21).

Thus in response to a requested sign, that would not ultimately convince (Luke 16:31), Jesus reveals the prospective “sign of Jonah” (Matt. 12:38-40), yet with a measure of ambiguity that would confound the carnal mind as with a parable, and at the same time become light to the redeemed mind (Matt. 13:10-13).

c. The Incarnate Temple misunderstood, v. 20.

While blindness leads to misunderstanding concerning Jesus’ intent here, the Jews focus on the restoration of the temple rather than its destruction. They might well

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18 Carson, John, pp. 180-1.
have asked, “How is it possible that this magnificent architectural edifice could be destroyed?” and then received a distressing prophetic reply (cf. Luke 21:20-22).

As with other blind carnal responses to Jesus’ transcendent spiritual teaching, 3:4; 4:11; 6:32-35, 51-2; 8:51-2, 56-7; 10:1-6; 11:11-14, the Jews calculate from 19 B.C. when Herod’s temple, or ναός, naos, according to Jesus’ terminology in v. 19, was commenced. Thus they declare that 46 years have since passed; total completion was not until 63 A.D., or seven years before its destruction by Titus. The tone is that of great pride in such an established national edifice mingled with disdain for the seeming brash claim of this deluded Nazarene.

d. The Incarnate Temple interpreted, vs. 21.

“But that one [He] was speaking concerning the temple [ναός, naos] of His body.” However Jesus does not attempt clarification at this point; that will come, following his resurrection, to those whom the Father has given to him. In harmony with 2:4, the Son of God continues to focus on his future willing humiliation; this is his hour of earthly destiny that dominates his thinking. Granted that the focal point of Jesus’ astonishing claim is that of his bodily resurrection, yet it surely encompasses his atonement as “the Lamb of God,” 1:29. Further, he implicitly points to the superiority of his priestly work when compared with the mere shadows that are reflected by means of the ceaseless offerings that Herod’s temple presently witnesses (Heb. 10:11-14). This will involve “something great than the temple [ιερόν, hieron]” (Matt. 12:6), “something greater than Solomon” (Matt. 12:42) that is “made without hands” (Mark 14:58).

e. The Incarnate Temple understood, v. 22.

So those disciples who “believed in Him,” v. 11, yet following his resurrection, “believed the Scripture and the word which Jesus had spoken.” The intimation here is that Jesus taught more on this subject than is presently revealed (Matt. 16:21; 17:22-23), though there is some agreement that specifically “the Scripture” was Psalm 16:10; cf. Acts 2:27, 31; 13:35. But more to the point is the later quality of regenerate faith, 14:26; 16:13-14, that contrasts with shallow belief, about to be exposed in vs. 23-25 that hardly included resurrection. Here a vital principle is taught in which Scripture ought to be communicated to those who for the moment have at best a superficial grasp of its vital meaning, even children. Hence much Christian witness, while seemingly ineffectual, yet may, like the farmer who “waits for the precious produce of the soil” (Jas. 5:7), later produce much fruit. It will be over three years before these dull disciples really grasp the meaning of vs. 19, 21. Barrett adds: “The several incidents of the ministry could be understood only in the light of the completed whole; and of the inspired corporate recollection of the Church John is itself the most striking monument.”

3. The superficial response in Jerusalem to Jesus, vs. 23-25.

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19 Carson has estimated that there are “about thirty misunderstandings” in John. Ibid., p. 183.
In contrast with the prospective authentic faith of v. 22, the shallowness of present faith is now portrayed by Jesus as being spurious, even as he will later warn his disciples about: “Unless your righteousness [and ‘faith’ could be included here] surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 5:20). Such a revelation is preparatory with regard to Jesus’ encounter with the dim comprehension of Nicodemus.

a. The popular belief in Jesus’ sign ministry v. 23.

Over the singular confrontation just described is now imposed an overall portrayal of the impact of Jesus upon the Passover throng at Jerusalem. The fact that “many . . . [were] beholding the signs [as a spectacle] which he was doing” indicates a broad witness at that time and may explain why the Jewish leaders had just asked about his “authority for doing these things,” v. 18. Surely Nicodemus was witnessing these “signs,” 3:2. So on account of this display, “many believed in [into] His name.” However the quality of this faith does not equate that of 1:12, but rather a much lower level described in 4:48; 6:26; 8:30-31; 10:37-8. Thus, at the beginning of his ministry, Jesus clearly presented himself to Israel’s spiritual leaders and the people as the authenticated Messiah, yet as we are about to learn, he was fully cognizant of the vanity of the interest that resulted.

b. The popular support of man spurned, v. 24.

“But Jesus Himself was not entrusting himself to them since He knew all men.” In other words, while “many believed/trusted [aorist of πιστεύω, pisteuō] in His name” during the Passover celebration, v. 23, yet Jesus did not in a like manner respond with acceptance of this shallow profession, He was not “committing/entrusting [imperfect of πιστεύω; cf. I Tim. 1:11] Himself to them.” Probably there was the same frivolous acknowledgement of Jesus as the Messiah, 6:14-15, as would return over three years hence when the crowd would shout, “Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel,” and then in less than a week shout, “Away with Him, away with Him, crucify Him!” 12:13; 19:15.

The reason for this disassociation, which had exceptions such as in the case of Nathaniel, 1:45-9, was because Jesus “new all men.” And we should add that this knowledge is not in man’s favor! Rather it is an awful, withering verdict, 8:33-4, that is about to be illustrated in the lives of Nicodemus, 3:10-12, the Samaritan woman at the well, 4:15-19, the Galilean multitude, 6:26, Judas, 6:64, the scribes and Pharisees, 8:7-9, 44. The law may convict of sin in a mediate sense, but Jesus

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21 Godet adds: “This faith had nothing inward and moral; it resulted solely from the impression of astonishment produced upon them by these wonders. Signs may, indeed, strengthen and develop true faith, where it is already formed, by displaying to it fully the riches of its object, 2:11. They may even, sometimes, excite attention; but not produce real faith. Faith is a moral act which attaches itself to the moral being in Jesus.” Commentary on the Gospel of John, I, pp. 371-2.
Christ immediately knows our sin. Here is no mere humanistic Jesus, not even Solomonic and prophetic wisdom, but the divine, incarnate omniscience.

There is a sense in which the Christian does not need to know endless details about a troubled unbeliever since he knows what is at the heart of his problem, namely the cancer of unbelief which manifests itself with a variety of symptoms under the dress of self-righteousness. Thus Ryle warns us that, “the truth now before us, is one which ought to make hypocrites and false professors tremble. They may wear a cloak of religion, and appear, like whitened sepulchers, beautiful in the eyes of men. But the eyes of Christ see their inward rottenness, and the judgment of Christ will surely overtake them, except they repent.”

On the other hand, this same omniscience can be of great comfort to the true child of God who, being aware of his sinful frailty, can yet cry out as did Peter, “Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You,” 21:17.

c. The popular testimony of man spurned, v. 25.

Jesus Christ not only spurned present faith in him as illegitimate, but also he did not need “that anyone should witness [μαρτυρῶ, martureō] concerning [the] man, for He himself knew what was in [the] man.” At the present time in Jerusalem, popular response or superficial faith, concerning his sign ministry, did not qualify in terms of being legitimate witness, such as after the manner of John the Baptist’s “witness,” 1:7. Probably the “many [who] believed in His name,” v. 23, were taking it upon themselves, without Christ’s appointment, to be self-appointed messengers. On a broader and more contemporary scale, Jesus’ disqualification here would include the contribution of anthropologists, psychologists, psychiatrists, philosophers, etc., that is their pontifications about the “historical Jesus.” Thus the inference is that Jesus Christ required authentic witnesses who alone could manifest an authentic witness. He could discern to the depths a Nathaniel, 1:47-48, a Judas, 13:21, 26-27, indeed any man or woman within the multitudes who were drawn to his ministry. His present following was, in the main, essentially lacking in heart renewal; an unrenewed heart cannot faithfully bear witness to the message of heart renewal any more than a bald man can commend hair restorer!


While this chapter division introduces a significant encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus as the first of several major discourse sections, yet the continuity of thought concerns further appreciation of the widespread leanness of faith, already encountered, that contrasts with the regenerate faith that alone would be recognized in the kingdom of God.

1. Jesus’ discourse with Nicodemus, vs. 1-15.

Although John 3 proceeds toward the primacy of faith in vs. 15-36 with Jesus as its saving object, yet this emphasis is predicated upon the foundational importance of sovereignly imparted divine life that awakens the dead soul. Thus Nicodemus is an

object lesson in this regard, a “man” as described at the conclusion of 2:25 who, for all of his great learning, is astonishingly ignorant of this first principle of the indwelling Spirit of God who authenticates a true child of God.

a. Re-birth as a necessity for salvation, vs. 1-3.

In times when the term “being born again” has been so cheapened in the marketplace of worldly religion, we should be cautious and reverent in our examination of the *locus classicus* passage in the Bible concerning this doctrine that Jesus Christ so explicitly and forcefully taught.

(1) The pedigree of Nicodemus, v. 1.

“But there was a man of the Pharisees, Nicodemus was his name, a ruler of the Jews.” The suggestion is that this man was not your average fickle believer, ignorant in spiritual terms though he be, for his seeking out of Jesus with regard to the signs performed, was nevertheless respectful and uncommonly earnest. As a Pharisee, Nicodemus was a separatist, Sabbatarian, Jewish fundamentalist or Puritan, of the rabbinic school of Shammai, in contrast with the Sadducees who were Jewish political liberals of the school of Hillel. He believed in the Law as God’s inerrant and truthful Word, the immortality of the soul, a bodily resurrection, a future judgment, angels and spirits (Acts 23:8). Nicodemus was also one of seventy members of the Sanhedrin, “a ruler of the Jews,” and thus a judge of the highest Jewish council that was presided over by the high priest. Further, he was highly educated being “the teacher of Israel” or perhaps preeminent scholar in Jerusalem, v. 10.

(2) The pursuit by Nicodemus, v. 2.

Why did Nicodemus come to Jesus by night? Probably to avoid the criticism of some of his colleagues and their supporters while judiciously seeking a more quiet time when detailed interaction is possible. Further the “night” is reflective of the condition of Nicodemus’ restless soul, cf. 11:10; 13:30; 21:3. However, was he one of the “many” who believed in 2:23? The confession, “Rabbi, we know that you have come from God [as] a teacher,” avoids acknowledging Jesus as the Messiah, yet it also lacks bigotry and is surprisingly respectful. The “we” further indicates others at Nicodemus’ level who have approvingly talked about Jesus’ ministry, both with regard to signs and doctrine. In other words, a degree of significance in the signs has been grasped, namely that “God is with him [Jesus],” and for this reason Jesus is willing to reveal more, of a substantial nature, to this questing soul,

(3) The proposal to Nicodemus, v. 3.

To begin with Nicodemus is personally addressed. Here the second of 24 occasions where the double ἀμὴν, ἐμὴν, ἀμὴν, amēn, amēn is exclusively used in John introduces an emphatic and profound statement: “I say to you all [plural], except anyone is born again, he is not able [incapable, impotent] to see [comprehend with discernment] the kingdom of the God [of Abraham,
Isaac, and Jacob].” A wider audience is now spoken to because a universal principle of such importance is being declared.

But what is it to be “born [γεννάω, gennaō] again [ἀναθὲν, anathēn]”? The word for “again” can mean to be born “from above” or to be born “again/anew,” which is the meaning that Nicodemus carnally understands. The subsequent context, and New Testament usage (Matt. 27:51; Mark 15:38; John 3:31; 19:11; 23; Jas. 1:17; 3:15, 17), would suggest being born from above by means of the Holy Spirit who comes from above, vs. 5-8, and grants the sight described in v. 3, as being the primary intent, though Morris supports both meanings.23 Certainly those who are “born from above” are consequently “born again.” However, only those so regenerated, those made alive in their dead souls with life from heaven, are able to “comprehend/discern,” ὅρω, horao, the kingdom of God, and thus qualify for entrance, v. 5.

So John Murray explains: “Here [John 3:3-8] it is the radical nature of the change that is the most prominent feature. No external privilege, no hereditary quality, no birthright, no amount of good works, no self-discipline, no amount of adherence to rules, no degree of human effort, will make members of the kingdom of God. Membership is not an attainment, not a reward, not a prize. It is not what a person does that counts here. It is what occurs with reference to a person. It is not what a person effects but that of which the person is a recipient. There is no appreciation of, no entrance into, no life in, the kingdom of God except by a change as radical and momentous as birth. A person does not cause his birth to be; he is the subject of it.”24 Thus John is here describing the sovereign work of regeneration, 1:13, but not how to be born again. Furthermore, as Charnock expounds on James 1:18, “[f]rom this passage, it is very obvious, that the gospel is the instrument whereby God brings the soul forth in a new birth.25” Thus true regeneration will invariably result in saving faith, and the panorama of John 3 suggests this.

Furthermore while regeneration and conversion are not to be confused, yet they have a connected relationship. As Charnock comments: “Regeneration is the motion of God in the creature; conversion is the motion of the creature to God, by virtue of that first principle; from this principle all the acts of believing, repenting, mortifying, quickening, do spring.”26 By illustration:

23 Morris, John, pp. 212-3.
26 Ibid, p. 91.
Re-birth as a sovereign work of the Holy Spirit, vs. 4-8.

The dialogue between Nicodemus and the Rabbi from Nazareth intensifies with the result that Jesus expounds upon and illustrates the truth of regeneration with the seeming intention of enticing this serious though blind seeker.

(1) The mystery of the sovereignty of the Spirit, v. 4.

Since others are probably witnessing this encounter, Nicodemus is not prepared to confess to Jesus: “Would you explain to me what you mean because I cannot understand what you are saying?” Rather he is less open and more critical, as if Jesus’ proposition is not rational: “How is it possible for a man to be born [a second time] while being old?” After all, Nicodemus is probably old himself. Here then we see that the religious world finds Christian conversion to be incomprehensible, even as was the case with unconverted John Bunyan. He writes in *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* of being confronted in Bedford with, “three or four poor women . . . talking about the things of God; . . . but now I may say, I heard, but I understood not; for they were far above, out of my reach; for their talk was about a new birth, the work of God on their hearts. . . . And methought they spake as if joy did make them speak; they spake with such pleasantness of Scripture language, and with such appearance of grace in all they said, that they were to me, as if they had found a new world.”

(2) The necessity of the sovereignty of the Spirit, v. 5.

Jesus responds with greater emphasis: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and Spirit he is not able to enter into the kingdom of God.” Clearly Jesus intends to draw Nicodemus away from an earthly mindset toward a heavenly perspective. Herein lies the key to understanding the meaning of “water” and “Spirit.” The most significant antecedent to

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28 There are several alternative interpretations with regard to the meaning of “water” here: a. “Christian baptism,” especially baptismal regeneration according to Roman Catholicism, but Nicodemus would not have fully understood this since the cross was prospective. Further, nowhere else in John does water take on
“water,” in association with “Spirit,” would be that of 1:26, 33 concerning John the Baptist’s baptism of repentance, with which Nicodemus would surely be familiar, that is transcended by Jesus’ baptism with the Holy Spirit. Less significant, yet related, would be 2:6-9 where water is earthy and inferior when compared with Christ’s new wine, and 4:13-14 where the water of Jacob’s well does not satisfy.

Thus Jesus does not repudiate John’s baptism, of which he was a unique participant, since repentance is very much a prerequisite for those who come to Christ (Ps. 51:17). On the other hand, his overwhelming concern is with regard to the radical necessity of Spirit regeneration (Zech. 4:6). John may also include here the thought of heart cleansing (Ezek. 36:25-27) through the blowing of the breath of the Spirit of God (Ezek. 37:9-10). Thus candidacy for entrance into the kingdom of God requires both the preparatory attitude of heart, “God, be merciful to me, the sinner,” signified by water, and the transforming word, “this man went to heaven justified [and sanctified]” since, “he who humbles himself will be exalted [and regenerated]” (Luke 18:13-14).


“That which has been born of flesh [by natural procreation] is flesh [in nature], and that which has been born of the Spirit [by regeneration] is spiritual [in nature].” The contrast between “flesh” and “Spirit” parallels “water” and “Spirit” in v. 5, as well as “earthly things” and “heavenly things,” v. 12. Further note that while the topic of the Spirit continues on to v. 8, this is not the case concerning “water” and “flesh.” In other words, like begets like, even as 4:24 declares that God who is “spirit” in quality or “spiritual,” not “a spirit,” is to be worshipped “in spirit and truth,” or “spiritually and truthfully.”

Paul makes a similar point in that a “natural [soulish] man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand [he is not able to know] them because they are spiritually appraised. But he who is spiritual appraises all things” (I Cor. 2:14-15). Both John’s understanding of the “fleshy” person and Paul’s understanding of the “natural” person assume descendency from Adam, namely an inheritance of a sinful character. Thus only a radical rebirth, sovereignly imparted regeneration, can bring about a change of nature that qualifies the child of unholy Adam for citizenship in the holy kingdom of God.

(4) The credibility of the sovereignty of the Spirit, vs. 7-8.

The response of Jesus to Nicodemus: “Do not marvel that I said to you [sing.],” changes to, “it is necessary for you [pl.] to be born again.” This
suggests that others who are auditing this encounter have responded with bewilderment. But further the whole Jewish leadership may be addressed.

(a) Jesus challenges the incredulity of Nicodemus, v. 7.

What is “amazing/astonishing” or inexplicable or contradictory for Nicodemus is reasonable for Christ; the spiritual world view of his kingdom has a holy consistency that the natural order, for all of its limitations, well illustrates. Further his authentic disciples will accept the necessity of regeneration as being a kingdom necessity.

The point is that the new birth is the antithesis of current religion in Jerusalem, as reflected in Nicodemus and the nominal believers of 2:23-25, which is of the “flesh/earth;” in contrast, authentic regeneration is “spiritual/heavenly,” vs. 6, 12. Hence for the man from heaven, the spiritual economy of heaven is the norm of his kingdom, vs. 12-13, and not a marvel (Matt. 3:16-17; 4:1; Luke 4:14, 16-18; John 3:34-35; 6:63). For this reason Jesus did not need to be born again.

(b) Jesus illustrates the doctrine of the new birth, v. 8.

“The wind [πνεûμα, pneuma] blows where it desires and you hear its voice, but you do not know from where it is coming and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit.”29 As in the natural sphere where the wind is unpredictable in its gusts and identified only by its effects, so in the supernatural sphere the motions of the Holy Spirit are unpredictable, not subject to human command, being directed by heaven; these breezes also are known only by effects according to sovereign distribution, whether of conviction or conversion.

However, notice that Jesus does not say, “So is the manner in which the Spirit operates.” Rather, “So is everyone who is born of the Spirit.” The point is that while there is mystery in the Spirit’s sovereign working, yet, as with the wind, certain effects are inevitable. And the context suggests that the effects or symptoms of regeneration are here described as qualification for entry into and perception of the kingdom of God, vs. 3-5, and more particularly, glad knowledge and comprehension that this is so, v. 10. No effects, no cause! No birthmarks, no birth! So Pink adds that: “A change will take place in the deportment of the most moral unconverted man as soon as he is born from above. Not only will he be far less eager in his pursuit of the world, more scrupulous in the selection of his company, more cautious in avoiding the occasions to sin and the appearance of evil, but he realizes that the holy eye of God is ever upon him, marking not only his actions, but weighing his motives. He now bears the sacred name of Christ, and his deepest concern is to

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29 Some have maintained, especially due to overwhelming N.T. frequency of use, that πνεûμα, pneuma, here should be consistently translated as “Spirit,” even as Ezekiel 36:25-27; 37:9-10, 14, might confirm, so that we read: “The Spirit blows where it wishes.” Yet most commentators believe that the context demands “wind.”
be kept from everything which would bring reproach upon it.”\textsuperscript{30} If Nicodemus was born again, he would have supernaturally/spiritually understood this truth, v. 10, that is so vital to Jesus Christ. Hence those who expressed faith in 2:23-25 were not regenerate, while Titus 3:4-7 indicates that authentic regeneration and faith are inseparable.

c. Re-birth as a sovereign revelation of the Son of Man, vs. 9-13.

Recall the preferred meaning of the expression “born again” in vs. 3, 7, as being “born from above,” that is born by means of the sovereign Spirit from heaven. Further note that this same word “from above” [\(\alpha νοθε\nu\), another] is used in v. 31 by John the Baptist to describe Jesus as follows: “He who comes from above is above all.” So in vs. 9-13, especially vs. 12-13, linkage is made between the Spirit from heaven and the Son of Man from heaven, which relationship will be expanded upon in 7:39; 14:26; 15:26; 16:7. Here is further proof that the doctrine of regeneration should not be separated from the doctrine of redemption.

(1) The incredulity of Nicodemus maintained, v. 9.

So Nicodemus, being used to providing exhortation on the legal duties and spiritual hope of the Jew along with Israel as a nation, remains perplexed at Jesus’ teaching. “How is it possible for these things [concerning rebirth, entry into the Kingdom of God, water and Spirit, the analogy of mystery in the wind] to happen?” Little does he appreciate how, to such a great degree, he is living proof that a man is “born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God,” 1:13. Similarly in the Gentile arena, “the world through its wisdom did not come to know God” (I Cor. 1:21). Perhaps we should give minimal credit here for honesty; others, too proud to confess their ignorance, would have launched into scholastic ridicule!

(2) The incredulity of Nicodemus condemned, vs. 10-13.

Now Jesus provides a longer exposition that addresses Nicodemus’ need rather than his inquiry more bluntly and directly than ever. He first needs to know of his spiritual ignorance, and this is not an easy task to accomplish. However notice the intended transition here whereby Jesus draws the Jewish scholar’s attention away from the subject of regeneration, through the sovereign operation of the Spirit, toward himself, v. 13, as the object of saving faith, vs. 14-15.

(a) The spiritual bankruptcy of Israel, v. 10.

“Jesus answered and said to him, ‘Are you the teacher [\(\delta δι\d\acute{a}\sigma\acute{\iota}κα\ldots\alpha\sigma\lambda\nu\), ho didaskalos], the renowned Doctor] of Israel and do not know these things?’” Jesus has known of Nicodemus by popular reputation as a great Pharisaic scholar, highly esteemed by the people. But there is “divine astonishment” that a man, so well versed in Scripture, should be

\textsuperscript{30} Arthur Pink, \textit{Regeneration or the New Birth}, pp. 37.
so blind to essential spiritual truth (Ps. 51:10; 143:10-11; Jer. 4:4; 31:33; Ezek. 18:31; 36:26-28; Zech. 4:6). But if Nicodemus is blind, then why this expectation of Jesus? Because Nicodemus is responsible in his blindness; he ought to have known! Hence to be highly, cerebrally educated in conservative, fundamentalist Jewish religion and yet alien to an experiential, saving apprehension of this same truth is a perilous condition to be in (Matt. 7:21-23). To the Sadducees Jesus similarly charged: “You are mistaken [lead astray], not understanding the Scriptures nor the power of God” (Matt. 22:29). Here was an unconverted, ordained minister! Perhaps the silence of Nicodemus from now on indicates not anger, but a measure of conviction.

Not surprisingly then, the people were also dead to this vital truth in the region of Galilee as well, for there “He wondered at their unbelief. And He was going around the villages teaching (Mark 6:6), For this reason Jesus, “felt compassion for them because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things” (Mark 6:34). Here is the same problem that Hosea faced: “My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge. Because you [the priest and prophet] have rejected knowledge” (Hos. 4:6).

(b) The spiritual testimony that has dawned, v. 11.

“Truly, truly, I say to you [sing.] that what we know [with a full grasp] we are speaking and what we have seen [with discernment] we are witnessing, and our witness you [pl.] do not receive [welcome].” Nicodemus is first addressed, and then the Jewish leadership which Nicodemus represents. But who are the “we” here? Probably a collective host of witnesses, with Jesus at the fore, being “He who descended from heaven,” v. 13, to proclaim “heavenly things,” v. 12, cf. v. 32. Then there are the newly recruited disciples in Galilee and Jerusalem, also John the Baptist and his disciples. Hoskyns adds: “Isaiah had spoken because he had seen, 12:41, so to had Abraham, 8:56, and Moses, 5:46.”

Certainly contrast is made here with the authority and certainty of Jesus’ testimony. Hence, as Ryle comments: “No man has a right to teach unless he is thoroughly persuaded of the truth of what he teaches.” Jesus’ seems to be aghast at the lack of spiritual perception and authority in the leadership of Israel, especially Nicodemus.

(c) The spiritual conflict between earth and heaven, v. 12.

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Jesus has already spoken “the on earth things,” ἐπίγειος, epigeios, without any response of true faith. Concerning regeneration, they are fundamental, “elementary”\(^{33}\) truths that are even portrayed by means of earthy representations such as “birth” and “wind,” yet even these have not been comprehended. So if he should speak of more mature matters, “the on heaven things,” ἐπουρανίος, epouranios, then such ministry would be a waste of time. Ryle explains: “If you will not believe when you hear my first lesson, what will you do when you hear my second? If you are stumbled at the very alphabet of my Gospel, what will you do when I proceed to show you higher and deeper truths?”\(^{34}\) But what would comprise these “heavenly things”? Perhaps expansive truth concerning the person and work of Christ which can only be perceived as a result of initial regeneration; in other words, post-entrance vistas of kingdom life according to v. 5., such as the Upper Room Discourse reveals, and especially 17:1-26.

Of course Jesus is not contemplating such a prospect in terms of Nicodemus merely needing improved rationality. Rather the divine intent is to reveal to Nicodemus his impotence of soul; he does not need to think more sharply; he needs to confess his spiritual bankruptcy and seek salvation from, “He who descended from heaven: the Son of Man,” v. 13, the Savior of those who are on course to perish,” v. 16.

\begin{itemize}
\item[(d)] The spiritual visitation of the Son of Man, v. 13.
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“And no one has ascended into heaven except the one who has descended from heaven, the son of Man, who is [now] in heaven.”\(^{35}\) Here Jesus draws Nicodemus toward himself as the solution to his lack of understanding. He alludes to Proverbs 30:4 which the Jewish scholar would be familiar with: “Who has ascended into heaven and descended? . . . What is His name or His son’s name?” The comment in v. 12 of Jesus’ capacity for speaking “heavenly things” finds astonishing explanation in the fact that he, exclusively, is the Son of Man from heaven. No one else has gone to heaven to bring back such truth. But this Jesus is the unique revelation of heaven to man, indeed he brings heaven down to man! And further explanation of this atoning revelation follows in vs. 14-15.

d. Re-birth as a sovereign ministry of the Son of Man, vs. 14-15.

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\(^{33}\) Carson, John, p. 199.

\(^{34}\) Ryle, Expository Thoughts on John, I, p. 151.

\(^{35}\) While “who is [now] in heaven,” is not in the oldest manuscripts and excluded from the NASB and NIV, yet, as Bruce points out, there is “an impressive array of other witnesses.” He further explains that this statement, otherwise difficult to explain, would be true as an editorial comment by the time this Gospel had been written by John, John, pp. 87-88.
The subject of the new birth has not been superceded; it is simply incorporated into the necessary divine order of things, especially in view of the spiritual blindness of Nicodemus. The “and” or καί και, commencing this section indicates continuity with v. 13, cf. v. 31, so that we now have more detailed explanation concerning why the Son of Man “descended from heaven.” Pink best explains the connection here:

Christ had been speaking to Nicodemus about the imperative necessity of the new birth. By nature man is dead in trespasses and sins, and in order to obtain life he must be born again. The new birth is the impartation of Divine life, eternal life, but for this to be bestowed on men, the Son of man must be lifted up. Life could only come out of death. The sacrificial work of Christ is the basis of the Spirit’s operations and the ground of God’s gift of eternal life.36


It is important to review once again the indivisible relationship between the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and Jesus Christ’s atonement, especially in 1:33; 7:38-39; 14:26; 15:26; 16:7. Proof of this truth is indicated by the fact that the evangelistic ministry of the early church, especially as recorded in Acts, does not portray the apostles as repeatedly proclaiming, “You must be born again!” Rather, the apostolic imperative was invariably the exhortation to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation (Acts 2:36-38; 3:17-19; 4:10-12, 33; 5:29-32, 42; 8:34-38; 9:20). By this means spiritual sight was imparted to the spiritually blind.

(a) The lifting up of the brazen serpent.

“And just as Moses lifted up [aorist] the serpent/snake in the wilderness/desert,” is a trigger intended to stimulate recollection of the incident recorded in Numbers 21:1-9. In Jesus addressing Nicodemus, nothing more need be said, since while this rabbi was spiritually numb, yet textually he was highly informed. By way of summary, Israel, having been victorious over certain decadent Canaanites according to the standards of Deuteronomy 7:1-5 and the Lord’s oversight, vs. 1-3, yet reverts to complaining about the provision of manna while lacking a more exotic diet, vs. 4-5. Forty years ago there was the same murmuring (Ex. 16:2-3). Consequently God sends “fiery serpents” that inflict many mortal wounds, v. 6. In repentance, the people ask Moses to intercede for them, at which the Lord instructs that a brazen serpent be forged and uplifted on a pole, vs. 7-8a. With a population of approximately 2,000,000 and a camp circumference of about 12 miles, high elevation was needed so that the sun might cause the bronze to glisten. The promise is that whoever, having been bitten, looks at the serpent will live, vs. 8b. Moses’ obedience results in many Israelites being delivered, v. 9.37

37 It is well to remember that this serpent was later contained in the Ark of the Covenant. During the reign of Hezekiah it became an item of idolatry so that the sons of Israel burned incense to it.” As a result good
(b) The lifting up of the Son of Man.

“So it is necessary for the Son of Man to be lifted up [aorist].” In both instances here, one word for “lifting up,” ὑψάω, hupsóo, is used, even as the other references in John, 8:28; 12:32, 34, speak of Christ. Probably the main thought is that of “the death of death on display,” or better the “exhibition of divine atonement” before a sin blighted, mortally diseased world. The association of Christ with the serpent, albeit lifeless and defeated, may be likened to his intense identification with sin and its father (Rom. 8:3; II Cor. 5:21). The serpent itself is reminiscent of the Garden of Eden scene (Gen. 3:1-16); being bronze rather than an actual serpent, it is a representation of a judged foe. However all of this elevation of Christ in death is not merely a possible remedy, but a necessity, cf. Luke 24:26.

Hence the clear implication is that while the Hebrew smitten with serpent venom was to look at the brazen serpent and live (Num. 21:8), so the smitten soul in Jesus’ day was invited to look at his imminent elevation on a Roman cross. But what now is the mortal condition that necessitates his being lifted up? Surely Nicodemus has the affliction, and v. 15 implies that it is the lack of “eternal life,” that is the lack of being “born from above,” or deadness of soul. In other words, as Carson puts it: “Nicodemus was being challenged to turn to Jesus for new birth in much the same way as the ancient Israelites were commanded to turn to the bronze snake for new life.”

However, v. 15 will widen the horizon beyond the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus to “whoever believes.” Hence “looking” will be redefined as “faith,” indeed sola fide, faith alone. Arthur Pink provides some helpful negatives here.

1) They were not told to manufacture some healing ointment.
2) They were not told to get relief from others who were wounded.
3) They were not told to fight the serpents.
4) They were not told to make an offering to the serpent.
5) They were not told to pray to the serpent.
6) They were not told to look at Moses.
7) They were not told to look at their wounds.

(2) The atonement of the Spirit baptizer offered, v. 15.

King Hezekiah “broke it in pieces” and called it merely “Nehushtan,” that is “a piece of bronze” (II Kings 18:1-4).

39 Pink, John, pp. 130-3.
Here is the purpose for Christ being elevated on a Roman cross, “in order that all/everyone believing [present tense] will in him have eternal life [life that is eternal].” Here is Christ himself explaining to Nicodemus how the life that he lacks may be obtained.

(a) The connection of faith.

1) It is faith in Christ. The content includes acknowledgement of who he is, “the Son of Man,” that is the revealer come from heaven, v. 13, cf. 1:18, and what he will do, “be lifted up,” v. 14, as “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world,” 1:29.

2) It is faith that receives/welcomes Christ, 1:12, on the assumption that the believer is mortally wounded and in need of healing; it is the “look” of the sinner who well knows he is fatally smitten (Isa. 45:22), he is “perishing,” because of being infected with the venom of Adam and this world.

(b) The call to faith.

It is faith that is solicited. Recall the invitation of the bitten Israelites in Numbers 21:8-9; it is inconceivable that Moses did not instruct and invite the smitten children of God to look and be healed. So here, surely this conversation with Nicodemus invites his faith, even though it may not be forthcoming until that later time of Christ’s actual sacrificial elevation.

(c) The consequence of eternal life.

The is the first of seventeen references to ζωή αἰωνίου, ζωέν αἰόνιον, life eternal, in John’s Gospel, and six in his First Epistle. The meaning is that of the “life of the age [to come],” hence the life of God appropriated at the inauguration of the age of Christ, by kingdom entrants, as well as the future consummation of that age. A temporal sense is secondary; it is not linear duration, but rather as Charles Wesley describes:

To him that in Thy name believes
Eternal life with Thee is given;
Into himself he all receives,
Pardon, and holiness, and heaven.

Thus Westcott defines it as “life as a personal blessing (have life), as being more than the act of living.” Hence it is a bestowal by Christ, 10:10, through a faith relationship, and ongoing union. The above

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40 There is little manuscript support for the addition here of, “should not perish,” KJV; most likely this is an explanatory import from v. 16, Morris, John, p. 226n.

translation emphasizes that this eternal life is “in Him.” Thus: “[W]e know that the Son of God has come, and has given us understanding so that we may know Him who is true; and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life” (1 John 5:20; cf. John 1:4; 5:25). Hence this eternal life is parallel with the new birth, v. 3. Thus we could similarly understand: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one has eternal life through believing in Me, he cannot see, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God,” cf. vs. 3, 5.

2. John’s discourse with the world, vs. 16-21.

Most likely the preceding dialogue gives way to the following exposition of John upon a theme that he believes, in accord with the purpose of 20:30-31, must be pressed home to his readers. It far surpasses relating the details of Jesus’ ongoing conversation with Nicodemus. Thus what follows is predicated upon the essential declaration of v. 15. There is obvious repetition, but also vital expansion of gospel truth, particularly concerning the intensity, extremity, but not totality, of the saving love of God.

a. The extremity of God’s love for a decadent world, vs. 16-17.

Arguably, we consider here the most widely quoted passage in the Bible, especially with regard to gospel proclamation. According to John’s distinctive style, he presents the good news of life for the perishing through faith, both positively and negatively, by thesis and antithesis, as if hedging the truth in so as to leave no place for misunderstanding (cf. vs. 18, positive/negative; v.19, positive/negative; vs. 20-21, negative/positive).

(1) The primacy of the love of God, positively emphasized, v. 16.

In 1867, D. L. Moody met a boy preacher in Ireland who, having been saved from near suicide, expressed his desire to preach at Moody’s church in Chicago. Moody judged that he could not preach, so that when Henry Moorhouse arrived in New York he wrote to Moody twice and received cool replies. Having arrived in Chicago he persisted in his offer to preach so that Moody, who was to be away for a Thursday and Friday, reluctantly gave in for one night as a trial. On his return on Saturday he learned of wonderful preaching, which continued for seven consecutive nights all on John 3:16. Moody then concluded: “I never knew up to that time that God loved us so much.” To best grasp the major thrust of this verse, consider the subject, the main verb with its several modifiers, and the direct object of that verb. In the form of a simple sentence, its main parts are “God,” “loved,” “the world,” and these elements head this sentence. Everything else qualifies these major elements.

42 Morris well argues for, “whoever believes will in Him have eternal life,” rather than, “whoever believes in Him will have eternal life.” John, p. 226n. Likewise Barrett, Carson, Hendriksen, Plummer, etc.

43 The point of transfer from dialogue to commentary has stimulated much reflection, though the majority opinion by far is that the end of v. 15 is that place.

(a) The subject of v. 16 is “God,” ὁ θεός, ho theos, the subject of the gospel.

John’s understanding of “God” would be objectively Hebrew according to the Old Testament, “Thus saith the Lord [God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob],” and not subjective extrapolation according to, “I think God is.” This comprehension would be identical with that of Nicodemus. More specifically in John’s writings we learn that God is “true,” “spirit” (John 3:33; 4:24), God is “Light, and in Him there is no darkness at all,” “love” (I John 1:5; 4:16), God is “holy,” “just” (Rev. 4:8; 20:11-12). Further, “God” here is the “Father” who gives His “Son,” in conjunction with the regenerating “Spirit,” vs. 5-6. Thus we are here being advised by John of the saving work of the triune God.

(b) The direct object of v. 16 is “the world,” τὸν κόσμον, ton kosmon, the object of the gospel.

This word originally meant an adornment, hence the word “cosmetic” (cf. Tit. 2:10; I Pet. 3:5); then an orderly arrangement with beauty; then the framework in which man lives with himself at the center; then by John, all men alienated from God living in an ordered system. Thus the “world” is full of darkness, 1:5, 9; it is ignorant of Christ, 1:10; it is full of sin, 1:29; it is condemnable, needing salvation, 3:17; it hates Christ, 7:7; it incorporates not only Israel but also the Gentiles abroad; it lies in the power of the evil one, I John 2:2; 5:19; it is, to use John Bunyan’s terminology, the City of Destruction and the City of Vanity with its Fair all rolled into one. Here then a vast gulf has been established, a massive chasm, accentuated by a revelation of the true character of God and man. What is required is not so much a quantity of love as a quality and extremity and intensity of love.

(c) The main verb of v. 16 is “loved,” ἀγαπάω, agapaō, the action of the gospel.

This neutral word is used here in John for the first time. The aorist tense suggests an event rather than a process, even as “He gave” refers us to the uplifting of Christ, v. 14. Notice how ἀγαπάω, agapaō is used in v. 19 concerning the world’s voracious love of darkness. Hence it has no intrinsic divine quality, but may be distinguished from φιλέω, philia, as love subject to attraction, in that it is more purposeful, intelligent, and volitional; it is divine goodness/mercy/kindness directed toward sinful man. Of course for John this love is conditioned by righteousness whereby sin is dealt with justly, I John 1:9; 4:10. But how is this love directed toward the world? To say τὸν κόσμον, ton kosmon refers only to the elect may suit our systematic doctrine, but hardly the context, including v. 17. To suggest the extremity of the world beyond local

45 See Morris, John, pp. 126-8, for a detailed word study.
Judaism seems closer to the truth, I John 2:2, so that extremity is portrayed rather than totality.

However there is not to be denied a degree of love that God showers on the world at large. If Christians are to love “all men” (I Thess. 3:12; cf. Luke 6:32-35) this could not be the command of God who at the same time only loves the elect! Carson probably gives the best resolution when he describes a “dual stance of God [that] is a commonplace of biblical theology. The holy God finds wicked actions to be detestable things (Ezek. 18:10-13), but that does not prevent him from crying out, “Do I take any pleasure in the death of the wicked? Declares the Sovereign Lord. Rather, am I not pleased when they turn from their ways and love?’ (Ezek. 18:23).” In indicating this same stance in the New Testament, he concludes: “Apart from God’s love for the world, the very world that stands under his wrath, no-one would be saved; where there is a redeemed community, it stands in a different and richer relationship of love with God than does the world, but that distinction cannot legitimately be made to call in question the love of God for a world under his judgment.” Hence God, “is the Savior of all men, especially of believers” (I Tim. 4:10).

1) He “so” loved, οὕτως, houtos.

The word “love” can be applied to situations of lesser and greater importance, such as the love of a type of food or household appliance, and the love of a spouse or of God. Thus John here makes an intense qualification, as in I Corinthians 9:24, “So run in such a way that you may win,” where Paul describes the energetic type of running that distinguishes a Christian pilgrim.

2) He “so loved” that He “gave His only begotten Son.”

Without earthly solicitation, but according to God’s purpose in grace (Gal. 1:15-16; 4:4), He determined to save sinners from a planet ravaged by sin. Thus He “gave,” that is “offered up as an atoning sacrifice,” or lifted up as on a pole in the venomous wilderness of this world, v. 14, “the [His] only begotten [μονογενής, monogenēs] Son.” This was God’s unique Son, 1:14, according to promise (Gen. 22:2), abiding in the bosom of the Father, 1:1, 18, who submitted to the Father’s plan of redemption (Ps. 2:7-12; Heb. 10:5-10; I John 4:10). This was the appearance of “the kindness of God our Savior . . . according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior” (Tit, 3:4-6). This was, as Charles Wesley writes:

Love! What hast Thou done?  
The immortal God hath died for me!

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46 Carson, John, pp. 205-6. See also his The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God.
The Father’s co-eternal Son  
Bore all my sins upon the tree;  
The immortal God for me hath died!  
My Lord, my Love, is crucified.

3) He “so loved” that He offered “to whoever believing.”

The address here is, “that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.” So the KJV, NKJV, NIV similarly translate.\textsuperscript{47} There is an obvious parallel with v. 15, so that John is making added vital emphasis that is addressed to all hearers/readers; he delivers a proposition; he solicits faith; he encourages sinners to look and live through faith alone

a) They shall not perish.

The true believer in the uplifted, crucified Christ, in contrast with those of 2:23-25, will not “be destroyed,” \(\text{ἀπόλλυμι}\), that is suffer judgment, 3:18, as the consequence of the abiding “wrath of God,” 3:36.

b) They shall have eternal life.

The true believer in the uplifted, crucified Christ, in contrast with the spiritual impotence of Nicodemus, 3:9-10, will receive soul regeneration, the “living water” of 4:10, through the sovereign visitation of the Holy Spirit. Thus “eternal life” is not mere linear existence without end, cf. v. 15, but “that they may know You, the only true God [the Father], and Jesus Christ whom You have sent,” 17:3.

(2) The primacy of the love of God, negatively emphasized, v. 17.

Misconceptions about the coming of Jesus Christ abound, and they are just as numerous concerning the relationship of the Father and His sending of His Son in this same connection. So John here qualifies the coming of Messiah, even as most likely Nicodemus confused his first coming with the judgment rightly associated with his second coming (Dan. 7:9-22).

(a) The wrong understandings of Jesus’ coming.

\textsuperscript{47} Certainly the Greek reads, “in order that everyone believing in him,” though John here is being more than informative. In the light of Nicodemus being confronted with this truth before the very person of Christ in v. 15, and the purpose statement of 20:31 in which, “these [signs] have been written so that you [the reader] may believe that Jesus is the Christ, it is right to understand that here, as throughout this Gospel, John calls upon his audience to savingly believe in Jesus Christ. It is of no consequence that his audience is comprised of the elect and non-elect.
1) Singular emphasis on Jesus Christ, or “Jesuolatry,” or “Jesus only,” is rejected here since the Father continues to be He who purposes the mediatorial plan of redemption and directs the mediatorial work of the Son.

2) The angry Father placated by the intervening Son is rejected since, as with v. 16, He here purposes to save sinners, not judge them (Rom. 3:24). Thus the saving motivation of the Father and the Son is identical.

3) The intention of imminent judgment, especially that view of the Jews concerning a conquering Messiah who will only judge their Gentile foes, which misunderstanding Jesus corrects (Luke 13:1-9). Edersheim explains: “[T]he general conception which the Rabbis had formed of the Messiah, differed totally from what was presented by the Prophet of Nazareth. . . . The Rabbinic idea of the Messiah was not that of ‘a light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of His people Israel’—the satisfaction of the wants of humanity, and the completion of Israel’s mission. . . . So far as their opinions can be gathered from their writings, the great doctrines of Original Sin, and of the sinfulness of our whole nature, were not held by the ancient Rabbis. . . . In the absence of felt need of deliverance from sin, we can understand, how Rabbinic tradition found no place for the Priestly office of Messiah, and how even His claims to be the Prophet of His people are almost entirely overshadowed by His appearance as their King and Deliverer.”48 Perhaps, as a new disciple, Nathaniel reflected this misunderstanding (1:49).

(b) The right understanding of Jesus as a judge.

However, if Jesus has not come “to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him,” how then can we understand vs. 18-19? Further, how can he say: “For judgment I came into this world, so that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may become blind,” 9:39, cf. 5:27? The word κρινῶ, krinō, as in 3:17; 12:47, does mean “to judge” in a forensic sense as the Jews had in mind, whereas in 9:39 the meaning is clearly of discriminating “judgment,” κρίμα, krima. So here in vs. 18-19 we have the thought of “judgment that distinguishes” between those who are convinced they are sinners in need of salvation and those who are not; this “judgment” incorporates the purpose of Christ coming to save.

(c) The right understanding of Jesus’ coming.

Thus Jesus found it necessary to declare the precise purpose of his coming to the Jews in general, and even the like of Nicodemus in particular, time and time again, and this also necessitated his repeated emphasis of the profound sinfulness of both Jew and Gentile.

1) The revelation by Jesus of man’s sinfulness.

This has already been indicated, 1:10; 1:29; 3:14, though there will be greater emphasis in subsequent public discourse, 4:16-18, 29; 7:19-20, 37; 8:5-9, 21-24, 33-36, 40-44; 9:39.

2) The revelation by Jesus of his coming to save sinners.

Note that “world” is quoted three times in this verse, surely in harmony with v. 16, having the same broad inclusive meaning, after the manner of 1:10, which continues through to the end of chapter 12 in 6:14; 7:4; 8:12, 23, 26; 9:5 10:36 11:27; 12:46. It is significant that when Jesus withdraws in chapter 13 to the upper room with his disciples, there is repeated distinction made between the world at large and the elect, 13:1; 14:17, 19, 22, 27; 15:19; 17:6, 9, 14, 16, 25. Hence “world” here is not identical with the “elect,” even though it incorporates them.

Thus Jesus came, “that the world [as a dark entity] might [should] be saved [from perishing] through Him.” This “world” includes, “Jew and Greek, slave and free man, male and female” (Gal. 3:28) from “every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues” (Rev. 7:9). But in the earthly ministry of this Son of God, the universal qualification that he emphasized above all these variables was that of being a candidate for destruction, a lost sinner that needed to be saved. And this is the qualification that men have found the most difficult to confess. Consider the key verse, Mark 10:45, where Jesus has come to “ransom” men bound in sin; consider the parables of the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin, and the Lost Son (Luke; 15:1-7, 8-10, 11-32); consider the declaration of Jesus to Zaccheus, “For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost” (Luke19:10).

J. C. Ryle puts it this way: “The ‘world’ means the whole race of mankind, both saints and sinners, without any exception. The word, in my opinion, is so used in John 1:10, 29; 6:33, 51; 8:12; Rom. 3:19; II Cor. 5:19; I John 2:2; 4:14. The ‘love’ spoken of is that love of pity and compassion with which God regards all His creatures, and specially regards mankind. It is the same feeling of ‘love’ which appears in Psalm 145:9; Ezek. 33:11; John 6:32; Titus 3:4; I John 4:10; II Pet. 3:9; I Tim. 2:4. It is a love unquestionably distinct and separate from the special love with which God regards His saints. It is a love of pity and not of approbation or complaisance. But it is not the less a real love.” John, I, pp. 158-9.

J. C. Ryle further comments in this regard: “Those who confine God’s love exclusively to the elect appear to me to take a narrow and contracted view of God’s character and attributes. They refuse to God that attribute of compassion with which even an earthly father can regard a profligate son, and can offer to him pardon, even though his compassion is despised and his offers refused. I have long come to the conclusion that men may be more systematic in their statements than the Bible, and may be led into grave error by idolatrous veneration of a system.” Ibid., p. 159.
b. The judgment of God’s love upon a degenerate world, vs. 18-21.

The issue of judgment becomes an ongoing theme yet with a variation in emphasis, that is a distinction with regard to the immediate apocalyptic judgment that Christ disassociates himself from in v. 17. In other words, Christ, being qualified by the court of heaven, has not come as a judge on Israel’s behalf. Yet his coming does bring judgment of a different sort. John may have in mind the thought that no comfort is to be gained by reckoning that the final day of judgment is yet future because there is, by the very nature of gospel proclamation, present tense judgment. Paul senses this same sober reality when he declares: “For we are a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; to the one an aroma from death to death, to the other an aroma from life to life. And who is adequate for these things?” (II Cor. 2:15-16).

(1) Judged by the gospel soliciting faith alone, v. 18.

When an accomplished concert pianist plays Beethoven’s Moonlight Sonata, and someone in the audience whispers to a friend that such music is worthless, it is he who is to be condemned, not Mozart or the pianist. So the sinner who is confronted with God’s gospel masterpiece is the one who is judged by that gospel, and not vice versa.

(a) The present judicial status of the believer.

“Whoever is believing in him [Jesus Christ] is not being judged.” There is a Pauline element here in that not only is faith (alone) mentioned three times in this verse, but the result is that the believer “is not being judged,” but rather is in a state of justification that is void of condemnation (Rom. 8:1). Further this is a present condition that does not require waiting for a future day of acquittal at the great assize. Here then is true saving faith, being qualified as “believing in the name of the [unique] only begotten Son of God” (20:31; I John 3:23; 5:13), that is his essential divine character and saving work implicit in his coming.

(b) The present judicial status of the unbeliever.

“But whoever is not believing has been judged already/now [ἡδὲ, ἐδὲ] because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten [unique] Son of God.” Hence the present tense here displays a more sobering reality, namely that the unbelieving sinner is presently under the judgment of God, with “the wrath God abiding on him,” v. 36, as “a child of wrath” (Eph 2:3). This is true even if the gospel has not been heard since man is not in a state of innocence, but rather guilt through participation in Adam’s race (Rom. 5:12, 19). However if, as is here the case, the gospel is heard and rejected then there is enhanced accountability. Hence the gospel ministry is a serious calling in that it calls men to be judged by the gospel, judged and saved or judged and condemned.
(2) Judged by the gospel proclaiming light, vs. 19-21.

The truth of present judgment by the gospel continues to be emphasized except that Christ is now portrayed as Light in contrast with darkness, a familiar synonym for John (John 1:7-9; 8:12; 9:5; 12:35-36, 46; I John 1:5, 7; 2:9-10; Rev. 21:23-24). Perhaps this distinctive focus on Christ was born of the apostle’s experience on the mount of the transfiguration, that visible manifestation of radiant glory (Matt. 17:1-8; John 1:14), though as a Hebrew John is rooted in the belief of Genesis 1:3 where God proclaimed, “Let there be light.” Hence, “God is light, and in Him there is no darkness at all” (I John 1:5).

(a) The gospel proclaimed in the opposing darkness, v. 19-20.

For John, “darkness” is the realm where God is repudiated, particularly the world to which Jesus comes; it is the inveterate opponent of “the Light,” 1:5; it is the “night . . . when no one can work,” 9:4, it is the habitation of Judas, 13:30; it is a fruitless realm, 21:3, that becomes fruitful when “the Light” appears, 21:4-6; it is the abode of “haters” and “murderers” (I John 2:9-11; 3:15).

1) The Light judges the sinner who revels in darkness, v. 19.

Here is an expansion of 1:4-5; not only was the darkness of this world, inherent in humanity, confronted with “the Light of men,” but also it could not “overpower [and thus extinguish]” this “Light.” But further, in spite of the prevailing power of this “Light,” yet mankind decisively opted for the kingdom of darkness because of an appetite for the menu of darkness. “This is the judgment [that I am emphasizing, says John], this is the root cause of present tense judgment [let alone future judgment]. It is the fact that the Light [Jesus Christ] has come into the world, and according to the irrationality that sin produces, mankind loved [ἀγαπάω, agapao] the darkness rather than the light. Why? Because their works were evil.” This is a more damning scenario than 1:10. For this unbelieving man is supremely condemned. Dr. Lloyd-Jones sums up the problem here, and the solution:

Let us honestly face ourselves. Such are our natures. They love the darkness, they hate the light. They are twisted, they are perverted, they prefer the wrong to the right and enjoy evil rather than known good. What we need is not more light, but a nature which will be capable of loving the light instead of hating it. The light is there, we know it to be there but we dislike it. We hate it . . . What we need

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52 “Supreme condemnation” indicates the truth that the unbeliever remains guilty for his sins (Rom. 2:2) in addition to this primary sin of unbelief. Some have wrongly suggested that a general atonement has dealt with the sins of all men except that of unbelief in Christ.
is not knowledge, but love. [But] has anyone ever succeeded turning his own hatred of God into love? He may have given up this sin or that, but has he come to love God? Has anyone ever done so? Can a man entirely and completely change his own nature? Do you now love God? For if you do not, you hate Him! No! no one has ever succeeded in bringing this change about and yet it has happened. Paul and millions of others at one time hated Christ and persecuted His church, but afterwards came to say, ‘For me to live is Christ.’ What has happened? Oh, well, they have seen themselves as they really were in the light of Christ, they cried out to Him for mercy. And they obtained it, and a new nature also in addition.\(^{53}\)

Here John denies the commonly held belief of man’s essential goodness; to the contrary he upholds the doctrine of original sin since it is the world here, without exception, that is portrayed as having a delight in darkness. For proof, John adds, look at the universality of man’s evil deeds.

2) The sinner judges the Light who produces guilt, v. 20.

“For everyone practicing \([\pi\rho\alpha\sigma\omega, \text{prass}\omicron]\) the evil/foul things \([\phi\alpha\omega\lambda\omicron\varsigma, \text{phaulos},^{54}\text{ cf. 5:29; Rom. 9:11; II Cor. 5:10}]\) hates the Light and does not come to the Light, in order that his works not be exposed [and found to be evil].” The thrust of v. 19 is explained. Here a lifestyle of ungodliness, worthlessness is careful to anticipate and avoid any situation that offers condemnation (Is. 53:3; Mark 6:1-3; I Cor. 1:23). The common responses will be: “I don’t want to be preached at!” “Religion may be comfortable for you, but not for me;” “I don’t get into discussions about religion or politics.” “Fundamentalist beliefs are too narrow for me.” Other objections are said to be intellectual, the hypocrisy of religious acquaintances, lack of relevancy, etc. In reality, such a person avoids being troubled in conscience.

(b) The gospel practiced in the light of the truth v. 21.

“But whoever is doing the truth comes to the Light, in order that his works may be manifested that they have been formed in God.” There is an unbroken sequence here that is important.

1) First, “doing [\pi\omicron\eta\epsilon\omicron\omicron, \text{poie}\omicron] the truth,” contrasts with “practicing \([\pi\rho\alpha\sigma\omega, \text{prass}\omicron]\) evil” in v. 20. It is vital to appreciate that we start with truth here but do not stop at mere cerebral comprehension; rather there is active, consistent response to the truth or Light as it is embodied in Jesus Christ. Here then truth is not merely contemplated, even approved, but embraced.

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2) Second, “coming to the Light,” is the inevitable result of “doing the truth.” In contrast with those who, in doing evil, avoid the truth and the Light, v. 20, the person committed to the truth moves toward the Light. Simply put, a person doing the truth draws close to the Light or Jesus Christ out of love for him in contrast with those who love the darkness, v. 19.

3) Third, “manifesting works.” As “coming to the Light” is the inevitable result of “doing the truth,” so “manifesting works” is the inevitable result of “coming to the Light.” This process is the work of true faith, and not disjointed in order. As such it is a “work of God [through union with the Light];” it is not the result of religious discipline; rather it is the production of evident godly works, not evil practices, v. 20. Simply put, “coming to the Light” will produce fruit that is plainly seen to be “Light generated.” Here then is a further contrast with the spurious faith that Jesus Christ rejected in 2:23-25.


This is the last major scene involving John the Baptist prior to his martyrdom (Mark 6:17-29). Since the previous reference in 1:19-37, John has withdrawn from the limelight while Jesus has gained increasing prominence as a result of the miracle at Cana, but chiefly during the Passover celebration in Jerusalem, 2:13, when he fearlessly cleansed the temple and confirmed his authority with signs, 2:13-23. Following this witness, Jesus departs from Jerusalem for the purpose of privately instructing his disciples.

1. John the Baptist exalts in the bridegroom from heaven, vs. 22-30.

In parallel with the Epistle to the Hebrews, the Apostle John is intent on upholding the superiority of Christ over numerous aspects of the Old Testament administration. 1. He is superior to Moses, 1:17. 2. He is superior in his Spirit baptism over water baptism, 1:31-33. 3. He is superior as new wine that transcends the limitations of old wine, 2:1-11. 4. He is superior to Herod’s temple, 2:19-22. 5. He is superior as the mediator of spiritual life over the old carnal order, 1:50-51; 3:1-8. 6 He is now superior to the prophetic ministry of the Baptist, 3:25-30.

a. John’s baptism described, vs. 22-24.

We return to the subject of water baptism which would confirm our understanding of v. 5. In other words, again the water baptism of John and its significance recedes in importance compared with the water baptism of Jesus and its significance. Water baptism is important as Jesus here confirms, yet the referent of water baptism, Jesus Christ himself as the Spirit baptizer, is transcendentally more important as is a shadow when compared with its author.

(1) Jesus’ increasing ministry, v. 22.
There is broad agreement that Jesus’ removal from Jerusalem was to the outlying, countryside regions of Judea, perhaps in the vicinity of “Aenon near Salim,” v. 23, for the sake of needed privacy. Nevertheless, a following remains as the baptisms indicate. Since 4:2 indicates that Jesus’ baptizing was in fact by means of the agency of the disciples, we conclude that he was instructing his chosen band concerning that ministry which they would direct following Pentecost. Was this really Christian baptism, as distinct from that of the Baptist? In spite of the transitional nature of this period, how could it be anything else? Were not these disciples, having believed, as their former teacher had instructed them, that their new Master was “the Lamb of God,” consequently baptizing in this very name? We might designate it as anticipatory Christian baptism in the same way that the disciples, sans Judas, were truly Christians, that is owned by Christ, yet in an anticipatory sense with regard to the coming atonement and the Spirit’s outpouring at Pentecost (cf. Mark 1:14-15). Perhaps the triune formula came after Jesus’ resurrection. Ryle comments:

[I]t was a baptism in the name of Jesus, upon profession of belief that He was the Messiah. . . . [I]t was certainly not a baptism that required repetition. To suppose that a baptism, administered by our Lord’s own disciples, under our Lord’s own eye, and by our Lord’s own command, was not as effectual and profitable an ordinance as any baptism that was ever after administered, is a most improbable supposition.”

(2) John’s diminishing ministry, vs. 23-24.

The continuation of the Baptist’s referral ministry after his proclamation that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah, 1:29, 36, suggests that he remained a conduit of considerable influence that channeled disciples toward “the Lamb of God,” 1:37, as vs. 25-26 seem to confirm. “Aenon near Salim,” perhaps in northern Samaria just west of the Jordan, was a most suitable place for the people still streaming to hear the prophet because it had ὑδάτα πολλά, ὑδάτα polla, “many waters” or springs.

Thus the prophet John’s prolific ministry continues, except that we are also told of it preceding his imprisonment and martyrdom. But why record the obvious? Probably to point out that this was an earlier segment of the life of Christ, distinct from the synoptic accounts, that dovetails in before the account of Mark 1:14. But further, the Apostle may be preparing us for the thought that the prophet John’s dramatic career is drawing to a close; he will soon withdraw from the stage to make way for the leading Character in God’s drama of redemption.

b. John’s baptism displaced, vs. 25-30.

Jesus Christ later declared: “Truly I say to you, among those born of women there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist! Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he” (Matt. 11:11). So we have come to the

beloved Apostle’s declaration of this overlap when the dawning of a superior age eclipses the past.

(1) The dispute amongst disciples, vs. 25-26.

Controversy concerning water baptism is proverbial, for the reason that it has dominated the centuries of church history as have few other issues. Is it for children as well as adults? Is it by sprinkling, pouring, or immersion? Is it in the name of Jesus only of the triune name of God? Is it valid in certain denominations only? Is it saving or symbolic?

(a) Concerning John’s baptism, v. 25.

Apparently a Jew had witnessed John’s baptism, then that of Jesus by his disciples, and as a result had returned to interact with John’s disciples over the significance of “purification,” cf. 2:6. Perhaps he noticed some distinguishing features, that is John’s call to repentance, 1:23; Mark 1:4, in contrast with Jesus’ foreshadowing of the baptism of the Holy Spirit, 1:33. Perhaps he sensed a new emphasis here that transcended the traditional forms of cleansing. One matter he did notice was the larger crowd that Jesus encountered when compared with John’s audience. Though we might wonder why, if he had heard Jesus, he did not stay to be baptized? Hence he had not believed in him as the Messiah. Consequently there was a “discussion/ questioning/ controversy,” ζητήσεις, that was not resolved. Perhaps the conflict was as divisive as Paul recounts (I Cor. 1:11-15).

(b) Concerning Jesus’ baptism, v. 26.

As a result these disciples enquire of John the Baptist and in so doing reveal a degree of rivalry, of competitiveness. They are troubled that, according to the report of a Jew, Jesus, John’s Messiah, is baptizing with far more spectacular results; “the people are coming [streaming] to Him.” Probably there is a note of dismay here. Note again that Jesus is credited with this ritual ministry, which indicates that the disciples are in fact conducting the baptisms under his direction. To this John responds with unexpected dismay.

(2) The directive of John, vs. 27-30.

Here is a testimony of one of the greatest preachers the world has ever known which focuses on his motivation. There have been preachers of exceptional ability who have sought personal recognition; however God’s preachers are driven according to the purpose assigned to them by their Master. A lesser preacher might have been critical of the competition suggested by the Baptist’s disciples, but not so with John. He has been called to preach himself out of a job, to preach in such a manner that his congregation loses interest in him and departs for a better Man!

(a) The acceptance of divine appointment, v. 27.
“A man is not able to receive anything [any divine office] except that which has been given to him from heaven.” This appears to be a popular saying that acknowledges what Paul taught (I Corinthians 12:7, 11, cf. Ps. 75:6-7). John has a strong sense of vocation, of divine calling, rather than ambition, selfish aspiration. He confesses that only God in His heaven grants a true pastoral calling along with success, and in this unique instance, his destiny is to fade into insignificance in the light of Christ’s increasing radiance. Ryle adds: “The whole verse is a useful antidote to that jealousy which sometimes springs up in a minister’s mind, when he sees a brother’s ministry prospering more than his own.”

(b) The affirmation of divine appointment, v. 28.

John now emphatically draws attention to practical proof of his claim to selfless ministry that his disciples, as eyewitnesses, could not deny. He never took advantage of the suggestion that he might be the Christ or Messiah, 1:20; rather he knew his job description well. “I am the one who has been sent [by divine commissioning] ahead of Him.” In other words, he was appointed as a forerunner, an announcer, a herald, 1:29-30. By his own confession, John declared that “I am a voice of one crying in the wilderness, ‘Make strait the way of the Lord,’” 1:23. To John’s chagrin his disciples have been making a comparison on a most carnal basis, of baptismal statistics, whereas he points out a more important basis for comparison, namely the appointment of God in heaven. In this situation, John gladly recedes as a shadow before the dawning glory of his Successor.

(c) The distinction by divine appointment, v. 29.

By way of a contemporary illustration with ancient roots, John recalls a typical Jewish wedding. Initially the friend of the bridegroom did many things, but chiefly he introduced or led to him his bride, in the midst of accompanying music and vocal expressions of her beauty; then his task was over; he was content to take a back seat with “fulfilled [consummated, climactic] joy” since his vocation had found completion. It is unthinkable that the friend of the bridegroom should even hint at having any claims on the bride. Edersheim quotes from rabbinic teaching: “Thus, in the spiritual union of Israel with their God [cf. Isa. 62:4-5; Hos. 2:14-20], Moses is spoken of as ‘the friend of the bridegroom’ who leads out the bride (Ex. 19:17); while Jehovah, as the bridegroom, meets His Church at Sinai (Ps. 68:7).” From a Christian perspective, faithful pastors, after the manner of Paul (II Cor. 11:2; I

56 Ryle, John, I, p. 181.
57 So Carson, John, p. 212; Morris, John, pp. 241-2.
Thess. 2:19-20). take on a role similar to that of John since they direct the bride (Rev. 21:9) to Christ as the bridegroom.

(d) The displacement by divine appointment, v. 30.

“It is necessary for that one to grow [αὐξάνω, auxanō, sprout forth, from which is derived an auxin or plant hormone], but it is necessary for me to decrease/recede [ἐλαττῶ, elatoō, middle voice, to make oneself less].” While there may be an allusion to the numeric loss of John to Jesus, the prophet is chiefly concerned with inevitable waning prominence. However, contrary to worldly estimates of failure in such a situation, this man has found supreme contentment in this life. He is like Paul and his faithful associates in I Corinthians 4:10-13: “We are fools for Christ’s sake, . . . we are both hungry and thirsty, and are poorly clothed, and are roughly treated, and are homeless; . . . we have become as the scum of the world, the dregs of all things.” Such disciples of Christ have not asserted themselves to achieve, to gain recognition; rather, like John, they have known God’s calling, and are supremely content in obedience to His job allocation. That is why John can be so happy in experiencing the discrediting comments of his disciples.

Though we would add one more element here with regard to John’s readiness to demean himself. It is not only a matter of acceptance of divine vocation, but also true perception of who Jesus Christ really is. He who is a mere voice, 1:23, a mere water baptizer, 1:16, one of lower rank, 1:30, a receding friend of the Bridegroom, 3:29, will agreeably yield to the Lamb of God, 1:29, the one with higher rank, 1:30, the baptizer in the Holy Spirit, 1:33, the Bride of heaven, 3:29. Stars have their place in the heavens, and so do Christian works, but they pale before the rising sun, and the stars only rejoice that this is so (Job 38:7).

2. John the Apostle exalts in the Son of God from heaven, vs. 31-36.

There is general agreement that the author John once again offers his editorial comment, especially in relationship to vs. 25-30 and the climactic statement that John the Baptist proclaims. It is as if the exclamation of v. 30, “He must increase, but I must decrease,” demands fuller, more exalted explanation.


As the God-man, Jesus Christ has challenged man to believe on him as such, as the theanthropic Son of God, whereas man has always tended to diminish his deity and elevate his humanity. Here John gives a corrective. Jesus Christ may be veiled in flesh, but his essence is sourced in heaven and thus he is the heir of heaven, v. 35. His incarnation is intended to draw focus on him as heavenly rather than the obvious earthly form.
(1) The messenger from heaven.

“The one coming from above [ἀνωθεν, anōthen] is over all, . . . the one whose existence is from [ἐκ οὐρανοῦ] heaven is over all.” In earthly terms, breeding counts, whether in the realm of horses, dogs, or high society concerning east side or west side status, or being from across the railway tracks. So John proclaims Jesus Christ’s infinitely superior heavenly breeding, having come from the Father’s bosom, 1:18. The same distinction has been made concerning the “new birth” that originates “from above, [ἀνωθεν, anōthen]” and distinguishes between being born of the “flesh” and the “Spirit,” vs. 3, 6. Thus Jesus Christ’s heavenly preeminence is infinitely above that of the Baptist on earth (Col. 1:18). No member of the race of Adam is in the slightest sense comparable (Eph. 1:21-22). So Charles Wesley has written:

Jesus! The name high over all.
In hell, or earth, or sky;
Angels and men before it fall,
And devils fear and fly.

(2) The messenger from earth.

“The one whose existence is from [ἐκ οὐρανοῦ] the earth is earthy by nature, and from [ἐκ γῆς] that earthy nature he speaks.” This is not so much a putdown of John the Baptist as a true description of his contrasting breeding. The same type of comparison is made in Job 15:15 where, “the heavens are not pure in His [God’s] sight.” Although God made the heavens, yet God is incomparably holy. Likewise John, even though a prophetic speaker, yet has limitations on account of his nature. But with Christ there is no such limitation as vs. 34-35 plainly declare. With John, at best he is like a star, reflective, but not intrinsically glorious. With Christ, he is like the Sun having innate glory that is essentially greater in nature than the star.

b. Christ’s superior testimony, vs. 32-35.

But if Jesus Christ has come from above, from heaven, v. 31, then what was the relationship that existed there in eternity past? Here Christ’s heavenly glory is described in a manner that is reminiscent of the relationship described between the Father and the Son in Psalm 2 and John 1:1-2, 18; 17:1-26.

(1) It is sourced in heaven, v. 32.

“What he has seen and heard, this One is witnessing [about], and no one is receiving His witness.” But what has the Son heard? Surely the word and direction of the Father (Ps. 2:6-9; John 5:19-30; 8:38; 17:2, 8, 14). In particular, when Jesus prays in 17:17, “Sanctify them in the truth; Your Word is truth,” He has in mind, not primarily the completed canon of Scripture, but rather the Word He received from the Father and delivered to his disciples. Yet the incredible truth is that for all of the religiosity of Jerusalem, this message, such as no prophet has ever proclaimed, is not welcomed. Jesus himself made the same point in 3:11. Of course “no one” is
a general statement since there is a believing remnant, 1:35-51. This recalls Christ’s Parable of the Landowner who, having sent servants to gain some return from his vineyard that had been rented, learned that they were killed and stoned by the vine-growers. Then he determined to send his son reasoning: “They will respect my son.” Yet the same vine-growers responded: “This is the heir; come, let us kill him and seize his inheritance” (Matt. 21:33-38).

(2) It is sourced in truth, v. 33.

By way of contrast, the Son comments on the faith of the remnant, and subsequent true believers. Such a person who “has received [aorist]” the witness/testimony of Jesus Christ has “set his seal that God is true.” The word σφραγίζω, sphragizō, means “to certify, to authenticate in a decisive and final manner, to positively substantiate,” that God authentically has spoken. Notice that in v. 34, “He whom God has sent speaks the words of God.” Hence, if we believe “He whom God sent,” Jesus Christ, then we affirm that God indeed has spoken truly in speaking through Christ. We affirm Hebrews 1:1-3. Morris well states:

When a man accepts Christ he is not merely entering into a relationship with a fellowman (as he would be doing, for example, if he attached himself to John the Baptist). He is accepting what God has said. He is recognizing the heavenly origin of Jesus. He is acknowledging the truth of God’s revelation in Christ. He is proclaiming to all his deep conviction that God is true [in His speaking!].

(3) It is sourced in Spirit born testimony, v. 34.

“For He whom God sent is speaking the words [ ήμα, rhêma, a specific gospel message] of God, for He did not give the Spirit according to measure [calculated limitation].” First, Christ’s coming is qualified as being according to the Father’s initiative (3:17; Gal. 4:4; I John 4:9), which ministry of “sending” this Gospel account mentions thirty-eight times. Second, implicit is Christ’s distinctive qualification necessary to deliver the Father’s words, namely a fullness of the Spirit, even from His youth (Luke 2:40; 4:1; cf. Isa. 11:1-2), that contrasts with the mere deposit that redeemed sinners receive (Eph. 1:13-14; 4:7). In this instance there was no limitation, only an unparalleled fullness that was fitting for the Father to lavish on His only beloved Son (Col. 1:18-19), as v. 35 confirms, which fullness the Son bestows upon his disciples, 1:16. Note how Matthew Henry carefully describes this divine generosity: “The Spirit was not in Christ as in a vessel, but as in a fountain, as in a bottomless ocean.” Third, as a consequence,
what Jesus speaks is the Word of God exhaled by the Spirit, at the behest of the Father. Here then is a clear revelation of the economic saving work of the Triune God.

(4) It is sourced in inheritance, v. 35.

The lavish Spiritual benefaction of the Father toward the Son is now justified in terms of, “The Father loves [ἀγαπάω, agapao] the Son.” This divine fraternal relationship surely focuses here upon that heavenly union which has temporarily been severed for the cause of obedience to the Father, and now is restored. It is this completion of the Father’s will that has resulted in the bequeathing of, “all things into His [the Son’s] hand” (Matt. 28:18). In earthly terms we know of a father’s desire to bequeath all that he has to his son. So we recall the prophetic expression of the Father’s generous proposal in Psalm 2 where He addresses “His Anointed [מָשִׁיחַ, Mashiah or Messiah],” v. 2, “Ask of Me, and I will surely give the nations as Your inheritance, and the very ends of the earth as Your possession,” v. 8. Plummer explains this bestowal as follows: “He [the Father] has given Him all things, 13:3; to have life in Himself, 5:26; all judgment, 5:22, 27; His name and glory, 17:11, 24; authority over all flesh, 17:2; faithful disciples, 6:39; commandment what to say, 12:49, and do, 14:31; 17:4.”

C. Christ’s supreme salvation, v. 36.

Here is John the Apostle’s awesome and weighty conclusion, a solemn finale to the ramifications of Christ’s encounter with Nicodemus. It is especially based upon vs. 31-35 which, taken cumulatively, present a portrayal of Jesus Christ that is incomparable. He is not merely the highest of religious gurus, but the matchless Son of God. All other religious leaders, whether Mohammed, Buddha, or Confucius, are “of the earth,” v. 31; some of these are legitimate in terms of their vocation, such as John the Baptist, or Moses and Elijah (Matt. 17:1-3), while most are fraudulent; but this Jesus Christ alone has come from heaven, and the bosom of God the Father in particular. As Charnock declares: “Christ hath an abundant fitness from God for the discharge of his office, and an abundant fullness for his people.” Consequently Jesus alone must have unrivaled attention (Matt. 17:4-5). Hence the great and inescapable issue of life concerns not only how a man or woman regards this unique Person, but also the question of destiny, life or death, heaven or hell. It is mankind that is on trial, as this gospel ultimatum declares, and the nerve of the matter concerns, in harmony with Paul, the principle of sola fide, faith alone that links the sinner to Christ the Savior.

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63 Note that in John 5:20, the same expression, “the Father loves the Son,” employs the verb φιλέω, phileō.
65 Stephen Charnock, Works, IV, p. 305.
(1) Faith in Christ results in eternal life.

“Whoever is believing in the Son has eternal life;” that is, as affirmed in vs. 15-16, 21. Concerning this reception of life and light, whoever welcomes Christ, 1:12, concerning who he is, 1:34, where he has come from, 3:13, 31, and what he has come to do, 1:29; 3:14-16, will both “see” and “enter into the kingdom of God,” 3:3, 5. The faith here is represented by a present participle, “the one believing,” ὁ πιστεύων, ho pisteuôn. Thus present and ongoing faith results in the present possession of spiritual life, that results in present blessedness (Rom. 8:1-2, 6, 16-16). All of this is true while we are presently pilgrims upon this arid planet earth.

(2) Disobedience toward Christ results in the wrath of God.

“But whoever disobediently, obstinately refuses to be persuaded [ἀπειθέω, apeithēo] concerning the Son shall not see life [the kingdom of God, v. 3], but the wrath [ὀργή, orgē, angry displeasure] of God is abiding on him.” This is a present sober reality previously described in v. 18: “[H]e who does not believe has been judged already.” Stephen Charnock has a long discourse on this verse entitled The Misery of Unbelievers. His meaning is based upon the wrath of God here described as “abiding,” present tense, upon the unbeliever, that is “the one who is being disobedient,” present tense, ὁ ἀπειθῶν, ho apeithôn. He gives specific reasons for this present misery, which is “inevitable,” . . . “speedy,” . . . “sharp,” . . . “irreversible.” Man being under condemnation, “his unbelief binds all his guilt upon him.” . . . Unbelief therefore locks all other sins like shackles upon the conscience.”

Here sin is at its greatest because, “it is high in ingratitude.” It is such because of the greatness of the mercy, “the height, depth, length, and breadth of [it],” that is spurned. J. C. Ryle indicates that the emphasis in this verse on the wrath of God provides an unanswerable reply to some grievous errors which are prevalent in some quarters. (a) It condemns the notion, upheld by some, that under the Gospel there is no more anger in God, and that He is only love, mercy, and compassion, and nothing else. Here we are plainly told of the wrath of God. . . . (b) It condemns the notion, maintained by some, that the elect are justified from all eternity, or justified before they believe. Here we are plainly told that if a man believe not on the Son, God’s wrath abideth on him. . . . (c) It condemns the modern idea, that Christ by His death justified all mankind, and removed God’s wrath from the whole seed of Adam; and that all men and women are justified in reality, though they do not know it, and will all finally be saved. This idea sounds very amiable, but is flatly contrary to the text before us. Here we are plainly told, that until a man ‘believeth on the Son of God, the wrath of God abideth on him.” . . . (d) Finally, it condemns the weak

67 Ibid., pp. 310-11.
68 Ibid., pp. 322-3.
and false charity of those who say that preachers of the Gospel should never speak of God’s wrath, and should never mention hell. . . . To warn men of God’s wrath, and of their danger of hell, is not harshness, but true charity. Many will go to hell, because their ministers never told them about hell. 69

E. THE GREAT SAMARITAN AWAKENING, 4:1-42.

The circumstances of Jesus’ departure northward from Judea toward Galilee are significant. Having already presented himself as the Messiah by means of both the proclaimed word and accompanying signs in Jerusalem, 2:13-23, a shallow reception has failed to result in true recognition of his person and ministry, 2:24-3:10. He has already withdrawn from the metropolis of Jerusalem to an outlying region in Judea, 3:22, and although he attracts an increasingly larger following than John the Baptist, 3:26, yet he determines to withdraw further northward. Such periodic retreats will be his intentional custom for over three years, (6:15; Matt. 12:14-16; 14:21-23; Luke 5:15-16); the clear impression given is that his control of circumstances will not allow a premature confrontation unto death until that time which has been appointed by the Father (2:4; 7:8, 30; 8:20; 12:23; 13:1; 16:32; 17:1).

The early ministry recorded thus far in John 1:19-3:36, and up to 4:45, in the main, has not been included in the synoptic gospels; they describe the more formal call of the twelve disciples as occurring in the region of Galilee, whereas John has indicated that several were first drawn to Christ when John was baptizing in the south. 70

1. Jesus departs from Judea, vs. 1-4.

It is at this time that John the Baptist is imprisoned by Herod Antipas, (Matt. 4:12; Luke 3:19-20). He has boldly condemned the immoral lifestyle of this ruler, that is an adulterous relationship with Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife, who was also his niece (Matt. 14:1-5). However Herod is the tetrarch (governor) of the regions of northern Galilee and eastern Perea, only a fourth of his infamous father’s original territory. Hence Jesus’ move northward was not to avoid the conflict into which John had became embroiled; rather he moved into the realm of “that fox” (Luke 13:32).

a. The incentive to move northward, vs. 1-2.

For some people, especially those who place great store in religious formality, such as the Pharisees, the statistical superiority of Jesus’ water baptisms was a matter to be reckoned with. It probably threatened their authority; here was a religious interloper having greater results than John the Baptist!

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69 Ryle, Expository Thoughts on John, I, pp. 190-1.

70 First, five disciples have been called “in Bethany beyond the Jordan” 1:28, namely Andrew, John, Peter, Philip, and Nathaniel (Bartholomew?); the emphasis here is upon faith in Christ as the Messiah. Second, there is the call of Simon, Andrew, James, and John, then Matthew (Mark 1:16-20; 2:14), all in Galilee, to be special disciples and learners. Third, there is the more official call to apostleship of the twelve, also in Galilee (Mark 3:13-19).
(1) The controversy concerning John over baptism, v. 1.

However, Jesus’ learning of the concern of the Pharisees, plus his learning of the fact that John has just been imprisoned (Matt. 4:12), plus the fact that he is evidently not so deeply united to these baptized multitudes, leads to his departure northward. This in itself suggests that Jesus was concerned about something of greater importance than the modern equivalent of evangelistic decisions, of baptismal scalps!  

(2) The conviction concerning Jesus over baptism, v. 2.

Here John the Apostle seems to go further out of his way to distinguish between John the Baptist and Jesus, cf. 3:29-30. While John did baptize in water, Jesus himself did not; it was implemented by his deputies. Recall that the Baptist has earlier made a distinction between his baptism and that of Jesus, “in the Holy Spirit,” 1:33, which is obviously regarded as being of far greater significance. So Jesus, although upholding water baptism, will not allow any confusion with that which is infinitely more important. Paul seems of a similar opinion; “For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel” (I Cor. 1:14-17). So Bishop Ryle comments: “One thing seems abundantly clear, and that is, that baptism is not an ordinance of primary, but of subordinate importance in Christianity. The high-flown and extravagant language used by some divines about the sacrament of baptism and its effects, is quite irreconcilable with the text before us.”

b. The withdrawal through Samaria, vs. 3-4.

Samaria was a land of apostate halfbreeds. In 722 B.C. the Assyrian captivity of 27,000 Israelites and their deportation was followed by the import of foreign Assyrian exiles, with whom the remnant of Israel intermarried. They established their own temple at Mt. Gerazin and dedicated it to Jupiter, since they were prohibited from attending the temple at Jerusalem; they also rewrote the Pentateuch. Under persecution they rejected their Jewish heritage, as was the case during the Maccabean resurgence when they continued to harrass the Jews in their valiant struggle.

(1) The reason for Jesus’ departure to Galilee, v. 3.

In abandoning Judea, except for the periodic festive visits required by the Law, he signified the lack of authentic response evident in Jerusalem. Yet this retreat will commence his prolonged Great Galilean Ministry that culminates with him being, “determined to go to Jerusalem” (Luke 9:51) and “give His

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71 Bruce suggests that Jesus’ decision to move northward was born of his reluctance to stimulate driving a wedge between his work and that of John’s. John, pp. 100-1. Carson similarly suggests that the purpose of Jesus’ departure was to minimize the polarizing of his own ministry and that of John’s. John p. 215. However it seems strange to suggest that Jesus attempts to damp down a conflict by abandoning his own numerous followers while at the same time John’s remaining followers have been abandoned due to his imprisonment.

72 Ryle, Expository Thoughts on John, I, pp. 196.
life a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). Further, his populous “success” must not be allowed to escalate out of control. He has a band of disciples who, as rough diamonds, require considerable shaping and polishing. There is a divine schedule that must be fulfilled, and carnal human enthusiasm must not be allowed to interfere. Also there are more receptive mongrels in Samaria, Gentile dogs and country bumpkins in Galilee (Matt. 4:12-17), that must be received into Christ’s kingdom.

(2) The reason for Jesus’ route through Samaria, v. 4.

So “it was being necessary [imperfect of ἰη, dei] for him to pass through Samaria.” But what exactly was the necessity here? Geographically, while distasteful for a Jew, it was necessary to pass through Samaria as the most direct route toward Galilee. The alternative route along the east of the Jordan was longer and a more Gentile environment. Theologically it was necessary because of the Father’s directing of the steps of His blessed Son, v. 34. Evangelistically it was necessary for the saving of sinners who Jesus had come to seek out and save, even mongrels who would welcome him in contrast with being spurned by “His own property and people,” 1:11.

3. Jesus’ confrontation with a Samaritan woman, vs. 5-26.

In an increasingly feminist world, it needs to be heralded today that the authentic Christian gospel brings liberation to the woman as a distinctive sinner (as a cat), even as it does to man as a distinctive sinner (as a bear). John seems to lay great stress on this point as is evident here concerning the woman at the well, along with the other adulterous women in 8:1-11. In this instance there is probable contrast with Nicodemus: “He was learned, powerful, respected, orthodox, theologically trained; she was unschooled, without influence, despised, capable only of folk religion. He was a man, a Jew, a ruler; she was a woman, a Samaritan, a moral outcast. And both needed Jesus.”

a. The setting of Samaria, vs. 5-6.

For all of the discrepancies between Jerusalem and Samaria, one truth held in common was belief in the coming of Messiah. Not surprisingly, the Samaritans expected that this Christ would finally convert all nations to Samaritanism. The fact that Jesus does now present himself to this outcast region indicates a small measure of correctness in their otherwise perverted understanding of Judaism.

(1) The significance of Sychar in Samaria, v. 5a.

Samaria was both a territory 20 miles north of Jerusalem stretching from the Jordan to the Mediterranean that contained the city of Samaria, originally the capital of the northern kingdom of Israel. Six miles to the east was the

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74 Edersheim, *Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, I, p. 403.
city of Sychar, perhaps regarded as “drunken-town” or “lying-town,” on the slope of Mt. Ebal, while one mile to the south was Jacob’s well.

(2) The significance of Jacob’s well near Sychar, vs. 5b-6.

Having wrestled with God at Peniel and become reconciled with Esau, Jacob settled in Shechem where he purchased land and erected an altar (Gen. 33:18-20). Joseph eventually inherited this site and was also buried there. At this location Jacob is believed to have dug the well that remains to this day as one of the most authentic of biblical sites. Being 75’ deep it produces refreshing water other than in the summer when it can become dry. Thus we read that Jesus, in “having become weary because of the foot journey, for this reason was sitting on the [edge of the] well [πηγή, pēgē, spring/fountain], it being about the sixth hour [12:00 noon].”

The weariness of Jesus here, κοπιάω, kopiaô, means physical tiredness, having become footsore and parched. Even Adam in his innocence tended the garden of Eden and necessarily slept. So the last Adam, in being clothed with perfect humanity, while about to evidence deity, vs. 18-19, yet experienced the limitations of the flesh during the mid-day heat. Thus “[h]e knows our frame. He has learned by experience what it is to be a man.[Heb. 4:15]. . . . Because He is God, we may repose the weight of our souls upon Him with unhesitating confidence. He is mighty to save. Because He is man, we may speak to Him with freedom, about the many trials to which flesh is heir.”

However here is a most remarkable conjunction. Jacob, who had wrestled with this Christ and Redeemer (Gen. 32:24-32; 48:15-16), dug a physical well for posterity and has the honor of his well being visited by this same Redeemer, a spiritual well, some 2000 years later. Here two complementary wells meet, the first a well of promise, the second a well of fulfillment.

b. The meeting with the woman, vs. 7-15.

Here we have the longest recorded conversation of Jesus Christ with a woman in the New Testament. Being midday, rather than near sunset when women would commonly come to draw water and chatter, it is probably her intention to avoid those looks of disapproval that her shameful and immoral life generate, vs. 17-18.

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75 In Andrew A. Bonar and Robert Murray M’Cheyne’s account, Narrative of a Mission of Enquiry to the Jews from The Church of Scotland, we are told that in 1839, as Bonar was bending over Jacob’s Well, “his Bible escaping from his breast-pocket fell into the well, and was soon heard plunging in the water far below. The guide made very significant signs that it could not be recovered, ‘for the well is deep.’” However in 1843 remnants of this Bible were recovered., pp. 212, 251.

76 Ryle, Expository Thoughts on John, I, p. 194.

77 Augustine, using his spiritualizing hermeneutic, explains “the sixth hour,” v. 6, as a reference to the six age or gospel dispensation preceded by five other ages from Adam to John the Baptist. Works, X, p. 214.
(1) The approach of Jesus, vs. 7-9.

Here divine prevenient grace is exquisitely portrayed, that is the wooing, through common circumstances toward a momentous appointment, of an unbeliever that God has set His affections upon. Akin to regular visits to a laundromat, this women has on countless occasions carried out this chore. But for this lady, while wearing on her face the marks of strain and stress, this is destined to be a day to remember that eternity will not erase.

(a) His surprising request, v. 7.

“A woman of Samaria comes to the well to draw water.” She keeps silent, while glancing at the solitary seated stranger, expecting a glowering look of disapproval. By reason of Jesus’ dress, she quickly identifies this stranger as a Jew. She silently draws water, and probably takes a drink for herself. Besides, she well knows that her invasion of this man’s privacy has established an embarrassing situation, cf. v. 27. The Rabbis had stated: “A man shall not be alone with a woman in an inn, not even with his sister or his daughter, on account of what men may think, A man shall not talk with a woman in the street, not even with his own wife, and especially not with another woman, on account of what men may say.” But Jesus is not offended since he asks: “Give me a drink,” that is from your drawing bucket!

(b) His solitary status, v. 8.

Presumably at the request of weary Jesus, the disciples had been sent into Sychar to buy food at the local market for lunch. Certainly Jews of the stricter sort would not have ventured in this way. But did they gain a wrong impression concerning Jesus’ separatism? Did they question why the Master should keep his distance from the polluting environment, but not they? In reality this shopping mission is a training session that the disciples miserably fail, v. 38. They will return with material sustenance, but no spiritual produce.

(c) His solicited response, v. 9.

In contrast, Jesus has no present material sustenance, but he is intent on a spiritual harvest. He has prompted indignation by suggesting he drink from her drawing bucket. She responds; “Jews do not use the utensils [συγχρόσομαι, sunchraomai, have joint use] /drink from the vessels of the Samaritans,” the reason being that as a mongrel race they were regarded as unclean. Nevertheless there is something surprising to this woman; this Jew converses with and “eats with tax collectors and sinners” (Matt. 9:11). Here is the bait that Jesus offers which is so refreshingly enticing, and thus without any contemptuous tone. Here is the attractiveness of Jesus Christ; he does not treat the refuse of this world as dogs, but rather desires to drink and sup and interact with

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78 Morris, John, p. 274.
them! This man does not treat this woman as a leper, as if to avoid
defilement; rather, as he touched a leper to cleanse from defilement
(Matt. 8:3), so he will drink from her vessel to establish rapport. The
element of astonishment really concerns, as Edersheim notes, “what
Israel was intended to have become to mankind; what it was the final
object of Israel to have been.”

(2) The explanation of Jesus, vs. 10-12.

The are definite items of engagement that Jesus uses in his drawing the net of
grace around this pitiful woman. First there is the request to drink from her
drawing bucket. Second there is his use of curious terminology that is
intended to beguile and stimulate the mind. “Living water” has ambiguity
about it. Perhaps Jesus is talking about his appreciati
on of this well that has
the coolest, the sweetest and freshest water imaginable. But on the other
hand he speaks with an attitude of spiritual depth, not materiality. So the
mind of this woman whirls with speculation.

(a) Jesus declares the woman’s spiritual ignorance, v. 10.

“If you knew the gift of God [and you don’t], and who is the one
speaking with you [saying], ‘Give Me a drink,’ you would have asked
Him, and He would have given you living water.” What is this “gift of
God” of which this woman is ignorant? Surely it is identical to that new
birth experience of which Nicodemus was ignorant. Hence it is
synonymous with “living water,” that is regeneration, conversion
through the Holy Spirit, which is likened to eternal life springing forth
from Jesus Christ, the unique, soul satisfying well, the baptizer in the
Holy Spirit, 1:33, He who has “the Spirit without measure,” 3:34. Thus, as Westcott succinctly puts it: “The gift of God is all that is freely
offered in the Son.” Also implicit here is the thought that, as with
Nicodemus, this woman ought to have known something about the
promise of the cleansing, soul quenching, life giving Spirit of God
according to the promises of the prophets. Jesus’ reference to “living
water” surely brings to mind (Isa. 12:3; 44:3; Ezek. 36:25; 47:1; Zech.
13:1; 14:8). She is perishing through the lack of biblical knowledge.

But further note the obvious willingness of Christ to bestow upon her
that which she is so bereft of in her arid life. Ryle stresses this aspect of
gracious eagerness:

The infinite willingness of Christ to receive sinners is a golden truth,
which ought to be treasured up in our hearts, and diligently impressed on

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80 A. T. Robertson designates this as a second class conditional sentence which assumes the proposition to be
82 Carson elaborates on this point, *John*, pp. 218-9. Ryle points out in that, “[a] sprinkling of clean water was
particularly mentioned as one of the things Messiah was to give (Isa. 52:15; Ezek. 36:25).” *John*, I, p. 213.
others. The Lord Jesus is far more ready to hear than we are to pray, and far more ready to give favors than we are to ask them. All day long He stretches out His hands to the disobedient and gainsaying [Isa. 65:2; Rom. 10:21]. He has thoughts of pity and compassion towards the vilest of sinners, even when they have no thoughts of Him.83

(b) The woman reveals her spiritual ignorance, vs. 11-12.

Her respectful address, “Sir,” Kύρος, Lord, indicates no more than acknowledgment that this is a distinguished rather than a more ordinary person. His holy bearing alone indicates uncommon piety.

1) Concerning living water, v. 11.

But just like Nicodemus, 3:4, the woman displays her carnal perception, her material focus; she cannot reach beyond her ability, that is until divine revelation is made to her, without and within. She seems to perceive Jesus as being unusually courteous, as if he would gladly draw water for her; he does not have a drawing bucket. On the other hand he seems to be offering water, so how could he possibly draw water without a drawing bucket. Now she suspects that a wondrous claim is being made, something astonishing that only a prophet with supernatural powers could perform. But the history of this well has had one thing in common, even from the time of Jacob; without exception, everyone desiring water has had to draw it up by manual labor. So who is this man to who intimates something quite unheard of?

2) Concerning Jesus’ supremacy, v. 12.

This question then is logically inevitable. “You are not greater than out father Jacob [Israel] are You, who himself drank here, and his sons and cattle? No, surely not! [expecting a negative answer].” But the answer is emphatically yes, as vs. 13-14 confirm. Indeed he is greater than the temple (Matt. 12:6), the Solomon (Matt. 12:42), and Moses (Heb. 3:1-3). He alone is the true and only well of life.

(3) The invitation of Jesus, vs. 13-14.

Here is the third point of engagement. It is now revealed that there are two wells that must be clearly distinguished. The gentle indication, avoiding direct personal comparison as the woman has proposed, is that Jesus’ well is indeed vastly superior to that of Jacob.

83 Ryle, Expository Thoughts on John, I, p. 204.
(a) The capacity of Jacob’s well, v. 13.

“Everyone who is drinking [present tense] of this water shall thirst again.” At best the satisfaction will only be for an hour or so; as a result craving will return. Here natural life is represented, along with natural religion, in all of its temporal vanity, the material world, its susceptibility to death and decay, its offering at best of fleeting pleasure that always gives way to displeasure, its fading, wilting manner of existence, its treadmill lifestyle that frustratingly always results in lack, weariness, hunger, thirst, that in turn call for stoking and replenishment over and over again. Yet the decadence and weariness and decay seem to be on the winning side! This woman has attempted to find satisfaction for her parched soul at a variety of wells, but they have all proved to be ineffectual.

Hence not only is the vessel lacking on account of inherent weakness, and thus thirst, but here it is especially the vanity, the impotence of the commonly suggested remedy. Life is as Jeremiah describes it: “My people have committed two evils: they have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters, to hew for themselves cisterns, broken cisterns that can hold no water” (Jer. 2:13). Likewise Haggai declares: “You have sown much, but harvest little; you eat, but there is not enough to be satisfied; you drink, but there is not enough to become drunk; you put on clothing, but no one is warm enough; and he who earns, earns wages to put into a purse with holes. . . . You look for much, but behold it comes to little; when you bring it home, I blow it away” (Hag. 2:6, 9). In the same vein Jesus will warn the Jews: “Your fathers ate manna in the wilderness, and they died” (6:49).

(b) The capacity of Jesus’ well, v. 14.

“But whoever drinks [aorist tense] of the water which I shall give to him shall not thirst forever; but the water which I shall give to him shall become in him a well of water springing up/leaping into eternal life.” The contrast in tense here is highly significant. When a thirsty sinner, unquenched by his continual drinking at the natural wells of this world, comes to the well of Christ and drinks, once in true saving faith, he discovers lasting satisfaction; other wells are now superfluous, their temporal supply being disqualified; to drink at the well of Christ is to discover a resultant inward, erupting spring that never runs dry. This was also the promise of the Old Testament (Isa. 12:2-3; 49:8-10; 55:1-3). Man’s essential need is not a well without, but one within! No other wells are worthy of consideration because they cannot touch the heart of the problem, namely a polluted source. But Jesus Christ goes to

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85 Bruce refers to a much later Samaritan liturgy for the Day of Atonement which “says of the Taheb (the Samaritan counterpart to the Jewish Messiah), ‘Water shall flow from his buckets’ (language borrowed from Balaam’s oracle in Num. 24:7). Was this stranger promising to give what the Taheb was expected to supply?” *John*, p. 105.
the root of the problem and implements a heart transplant; he replaces a
sewer with a spring connected to the river of the water of life (6:51, 58;
8:51; 10:27-28; 11:25-26; 14:16; Ps. 46:4; Rev. 22:1). Here is not
natural, but supernatural religion. Horatius Bonar explains:

I heard the voice of Jesus say,
‘Behold, I freely give
The living water—thirsty one,
Stoop down, and drink, and live!’
I came to Jesus, and I drank
Of that life-giving stream;
My thirst was quenched, my soul revived,
And now I live in Him.

c. The confrontation that leads to conviction, vs. 15-18.

The alternative to Jacob’s well remains a mystery so that the woman appears to
remain confused; thus she replies with a degree of ambiguity; whatever the well
may be that Jesus is speaking about, it makes sense to ask for a sample. Hence
Ryle cautiously suggests that here is the commencement of divine movement in the
heart of this woman: “In this verse, I think, we see the first sparks of good in the
woman’s soul.”

(1) There is perplexity, v. 15.

“Sir [Lord], give me this water, so that I may not thirst nor keep coming to
draw water at this place.” Perhaps the woman believes that Jesus can direct
her to a more convenient well. Nevertheless, there is one particular point
now in her favor. It is that as Jesus had declared in v. 10: “You ought to
have asked Him [Myself], and He [I] would have given you living water,” so
this woman, in spite of her clouded thinking, yet has done what she was told,
and she shall certainly receive (2:5). Her enquiry is ever so weak and dim in
terms of comprehension regarding the truth of Jesus’ promise. Ryle rightly
describes “a vague feeling of desire that the woman herself could hardly have
defined. . . . It is folly to say that the first movings of a heart towards God
must be free from all imperfect motives and all mixture of infirmity.”
However, grace shall sovereignly come to the aid of this woman’s pitiful,
feeble bleating. Weak faith, for all of its dim vision, will be heeded by a
strong Christ. This sheep is now being “called by name” (10:3).

(2) There is probing, v. 16.

So now this surgeon of souls presses his patient with a delving, exploratory
squeeze that is intended to reveal the deep-seated malignancy. When the pain
is acknowledged, then the surgery can proceed. “Jesus answered and said to
er, ‘You go and call your husband [man, ἄνηρ, anēr] and come here.’” Here

86 Ryle, Expository Thoughts on John, I, p. 217.
87 Ibid., p. 218.
is the fourth point of engagement that conveys the authority of this stranger and suggests a determined course of action. The fishing net of the Master is being cast while the disciples retreating from Sychar have much to learn in this regard. This woman my well be puzzled at Jesus’ request; if she had a husband, why should he necessarily be present? But divine omniscience is in charge here like a pre surgery examination. After all, the woman’s dullness is but a symptom of her fundamental problem.

(3) There is painful disclosure, v. 17-18.

In simple terms the disease that troubles this woman is sin, but to convince the patient of this mortal cancer is another problem of great magnitude. As Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones has stated: “It is not enough to tell a man he is a sinner; rather we must prove it to him.” Thus Jesus has started the process of conviction, and the woman is about to confess the tip of the iceberg, so to speak.

(a) The disclosure of the woman, v. 17a.

“I have no [legal] husband [man],” is the short, evasive reply. It is but a fraction of the truth, though it could have been much worse had she deceitfully suggested that, “he is too busy at the moment.” Living with shame always tends to restrict honest conversation. For man to plainly tell the unvarnished truth about himself is like pulling teeth; out of pride, he wriggles and squirms always attempting to give a better portrayal of himself than reality would allow. At the same time, this reluctance to give honest detail provides Jesus with the opportunity to reveal more detail than the woman would ever have publicly confessed.

(b) The disclosure of Jesus, vs. 17b-18.

His response, “You have well said that you do not have a man” speaks not so much with commendation as necessary exactness. This is born out by Jesus’ concluding quip, “This you have truly said!” Deftly this woman has selectively spoken some truth, but hardly all of the truth. The unvarnished truth is that she has been married five times, and now has an immoral relationship. Does “five times” signify anything, as patristic writers such as Origen and Augustine have fantastically supposed? No, rather it forcefully suggests that this was a loose, immoral woman. It is difficult to believe that she had become a widow five times simply on account of death; but now she is “shacking up” with a sixth man. However Jesus does not discredit or besmear the marriages or present relationship with the revelation of more sordid details. It is sufficient for him to indicate that he knows all about her. Have you ever had someone approach you with the strait faced comment: “I know all about you: I have just found out the details.” How do you respond? With a rapid, concerned review of the past, only

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88 Ryle refers to three instances of this type of allegorizing which he declares to be absurd. John, I, p. 220.
to find out that it was a practical joke? But the truth is that Jesus Christ does know all about you; it is not pleasant; however His interest here is as a surgeon, not simply a judge!

d. The conviction that leads to confrontation, vs. 19-26.

How the countenance of the woman must have rapidly changed; any mask of social respectability she pretended had been stripped away. It is disarming when the Spirit of God reveals and convicts us as naked in sin. But to be face-to-face with the Son of God in such a situation would be to drop our eyes, to blush, to struggle for an answer; to stammer at such instant humiliation, to frantically divert attention from personal embarrassment. Nevertheless, while you may not know very much about Jesus Christ, you cannot restrict him from knowing about you (1:48; 2:24-25; 3:19; 5:42).

(1) There is progressive understanding, v. 19.

“Sir [Lord], I perceive you [emphatic] to be [a] prophet!” But are there now shades of her believing that this anonymous Jesus is in fact “the prophet” of Deuteronomy 18:15-19? For one thing, a prophet’s role included the unveiling of sin (Luke 7:39). Further, the Samaritans, in accepting the Pentateuch only as authoritative, not the Writings or Prophets, believed that no prophet would arise between Moses and the second Moses or Messiah. Certainly the thought crosses this woman’s mind, as v. 25 indicates. Moreover, there is progress here concerning her initial estimate of Jesus simply as a “Jew,” v. 9, that will in a short while rhetorically confess to her neighbours: “This is not the Christ, is it?” v. 29. It is like the man born blind (9:1-41); his perception grows from Jesus being a “man,” v. 11, then a “prophet,” v. 17,” to finally being acknowledged as “Lord,” v. 38. Here then is particular prevenient grace that commences an awakening to the truth; such illumination must come before true saving faith can lay hold with resulting spiritual synapse, like the joining or fusion of nerve cells.

(2) There is theological diversion, vs. 20-24.

Some would suggest that this woman, in discovering the authoritative Jewishness of Jesus, is simply eager to engage him on the most contentious doctrinal point that separated the Jews from the Samaritans. Others perceive a disreputable person who is eager to escape further shameful exposure; this seems the more likely response at this juncture. However Jesus is willing, for a moment, to follow this detour and turn it around to his advantage. This results in his fifth point of engagement, namely a frank and radical explanation concerning the nature of true worship, vs. 21-24.

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90 Bruce, Carson, Ryle.
91 Morris, Pink, Plummer.
(a) The present contention in religious worship, v. 20.

“Our fathers worshipped in this mountain,” refers to the Samaritan patriarchs, probably including Sanballat (Neh. 13:28-29), who established a rival temple to that of Jerusalem on the slopes of Mt. Gerizim, the mountain of blessing according to Moses (Deut. 11:29; 27:12). It was 2850’ high with some crags almost overhanging Jacob’s well. The Samaritans believed that here Abraham offered Isaac, and also met Melchizedek, even as did the Jews concerning Jerusalem. Then follows a direct challenge to Jesus, the representative Jew: “And you [Jews] say that in Jerusalem is the place where it is necessary for men to worship.” A subject of perennial debate is laid down as a gauntlet. Like so many who are religious while unregenerate, this woman prefers a diversionary theological dispute rather than dealing with the ill health of her soul.

How often we set up our intellectual and theological excuses when the real trouble is our guilt and spiritual poverty. And what better array of religious differences could be paraded than in the realm of religious worship concerning denominationalism, liturgical form, baptism, the Lord’s Table, music, historic roots, ordination, etc. And this is not to say that such questions are unimportant. For Jesus will bluntly tell this woman that the Jews are basically correct and the Samaritans are incorrect, v. 22. But there is something transcendentally more important than this, as vs. 23-24 make plain.

(b) The future prospect of religious worship, v. 21.

Jesus’ retort, “Believe me woman,” is a matter of emphasis concerning the significant revelation he is about to make rather than an exhortation to saving faith. It is akin to “Truly, truly,” (5:19). “A time [hour] is coming when neither in this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father.” This is an arresting, shocking declaration. The point raised by the woman concerns either Jerusalem or Samaria as being the legitimate place of worship; Jesus declares that both are about to lose their legitimacy in this regard; such a perennial debate is now passé. Something revolutionary is afoot. However it should be remembered that the Mosaic economy was ordained of God, even the establishment of temple worship in Jerusalem under Solomon where the Father was indeed worshipped (I Kings 9:1-3; II Chron. 7:1-3). But now this age of “old wineskins” (Luke 5:36-39), the old covenant, has run its appointed course; further it has been utterly debased (2:13-17). Whereas God tabernacled with His people geographically, racially, now He is to tabernacle universally, incarnately, (1:14). As William Cowper writes:

Jesus, where’er thy people meet,
   There they behold thy mercy-seat;
Where’er they seek thee, thou art found,
   And every place is hallowed ground.
(c) The Jewish roots of true worship, v. 22.

Jesus plainly states that the Jews, for all of their present spiritual infidelity, have basic truth on their side rather than the Samaritans. The language is emphatic: “You [Samaritans, plural] worship what you do not know; we [Jews, plural] worship what we know, because [the] salvation is of the Jews.” The Samaritan system is based on ignorance, the absence of pure revelation; it is a mongrel religion, a synthesis of a little truth and much error. Samaritanism is similar to much worldly, abstract religion. In contrast the Jewish system is based upon knowledge, the revelation of “the law, the prophets, and the writings,” not just “the law.” So at this point, as a Jew, Jesus unhesitatingly identifies with basic Judaism.

But why does Jesus take sides here with a decadent system that will soon cry out for his crucifixion? Because in spite of such corruption this in no way nullifies the truth that, “the salvation is of the Jews,” which even Naaman the Syrian reluctantly acknowledged (II Kings 5:9-15). The essential Jewish revelation remains true because at its heart is “the salvation,” that which was first promised in Genesis 3:15, and then channeled again through promise, through Abraham, Genesis 12:1-3, thence Isaac, Jacob, David, etc. Hence it is probable that John, in writing that “the salvation is of the Jews” is in fact declaring that “the Savior is of the Jews.” In this manner Simeon declared concerning the baby Jesus in his arms: “For my eyes have seen Your salvation” (Luke 2:30); similarly John the Baptist preached: “And all flesh will see the salvation of God” (Luke 3:6). By plain inference then, salvation is not of the Gentiles. Thus if I am a Christian, I have been saved by a Jew! Hence here is the basis of grateful pro-Semitism, not anti-Semitism. Here is good reason why a Christian should never be tainted with maligning the Jew, even in his unbelief. In Christ, he is my relative in the flesh. In spite of frequent rejection by the Jews, yet Paul continued to call himself a Jew, lovingly addressing “my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh, who are Israelites, to whom belongs the adoption as sons, and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the Law and the temple service and the promises, whose are the fathers, and from whom is the Christ according to the flesh” (Rom. 9:3-5). Even the Gentiles, as wild olive branches, only have hope in Christ through being engrafted into “the rich root of the olive tree” (Rom. 11:17).

(d) The spiritual character of true worship, v. 23.

However, more important than where we have worshipped is who, how, and when we worship. “But a time [hour] is coming and now is coming when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such ones worshiping Him [in this manner].” As Nicodemus was confronted with a radical truth suitable to his enquiry and blind condition (3:3-8), namely the need of spiritual regeneration, so this woman is similarly engaged concerning the tilt of her enquiry about worship that nevertheless reveals the same
fundamental blindness of the human soul. While the actual moment when the whole concept of authentic worship will be inaugurated is yet three years hence, when “the veil of the temple [is] . . . torn in two from top to bottom” and signified by the shaking of the earth (Matt. 27:51), yet this radical event is spoken of proleptically, as a present reality (cf. 17:11). Genuine worship of the Father, so relatively sparse in Jerusalem and Samaria as Jesus speaks, will, at the inauguration of the gospel age that ushers in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon “all mankind [flesh]” (Acts 2:17), be marked by a fundamental principle. Positively enlarging upon the negative of v. 21, it will be “worship/true homage with reverence [of] the Father in spirit and truth.”

Here, πνεῦμα, pneuma, speaks of the human spirit (Rom. 1:9; I Cor. 7:34), the earnest response of the soul, in contrast with outward form, bodily motions, geographic location, etc. Inseparably joined with this root of human being and affection, is ἀλήθεια, alētheia, truth that charts a concrete, holy course for the direction of the spirit. This is more than genuine worship, but worship based upon divine reality.

Left to the mere human spirit, however sincere, a worshipper will founder if directed by error.

So the Father of this Jesus “seeks/is seeking,” ζητεῖ, zētei, such worshippers. Here is a glimpse of the heart of God that conflicts with the common thought of man seeking a distant God. The Old Testament divine imperative (Ex. 20:35) receives further explanation concerning divine desire and initiative (3:16-17). So “the Son of Man has come to seek [ζητεῖ, zētei] and to save that which was lost” (Luke 19:10), as the agent of the seeking Father (John 6:37, 39, 44, 65). Ryle adds that this seeking, “seems to show the exceeding compassion of the Father, and His infinite willingness to save souls. He does not merely ‘wait’ for men to come to Him. He ‘seeks’ for them.”

But apart from this gracious quest of God for men and women who worship Him “in spirit and truth,” what other reason is there for such a qualified search for “such worshippers”? The answer is in v. 24, since even in the character of God, the principle of “like being attracted to like” is true.

(e) The spiritual character of God in true worship., v. 24.

“God is spirit, and those worshipping him must necessarily worship Him in spirit and truth.” The KJV is incorrect in translating, “God is a Spirit,” especially in the light of “spirit” in v. 23. As Lenski succinctly explains: “‘Spirit’ does not here classify; it only states God’s nature.”

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92 So the KJV translates “spirit” here. Most commentators agree at this point. However Barrett significantly points out that: “The connection here of πνεῦμα and ἀλήθεια recalls that one of the characteristic Johannine titles of the Holy Spirit is τὸ πνεῦμα τῆς ἀληθείας, (14:17; 15:26; 16:13), John, p. 199.


95 Lenski, John, p. 325; likewise Westcott, John, p. 73. W. Robert Cook explains: “This is not a statement to the effect that God is of that genre of beings known as spirits. It is not a reference, therefore, to the Holy Spirit. The word ‘spirit’ is intended to be given prominence in the sentence, however, since it is in an
In the same vein Isaiah 31:3 declares: “Now the Egyptians are men and not God, and their horses are flesh and not spirit.” The point here is that God’s desire for worshippers in “spirit and truth,” v. 23, is grounded upon His own character. To worship God aright, acceptably, you must come to God on His terms, with an approach that is in harmony with His essential being. If the Queen of England designates that you seek audience with her in a suit, white shirt, tie, and black shoes, then she will not be pleased upon your presenting yourself in jeans, a tee-shirt, and bare feet. God is pleased when you worship Him on a spiritual level that is regulated by His truth; this is not a soft option. God not being carnal in nature, we offend Him if we seek to worship Him carnally. And this is predominantly man’s attitude. Peripheral concerns are in no way eliminated here, such as the two Christian ordinances, any more than the external demands of the Mosaic Law that were ordained of God during which period the priority of spiritual worship was not absent (Deut. 6:4-5; Ps. 51:16-17).

However, there is another aspect of this definitive statement that leads to an inevitable question. If God is spirit in character and must now be appreciated in a comparable manner, vs. 23-24, and thus appreciation of this truth inaugurates a new dispensation of worship, then specifically what are the distinguishing traits of worship under the new covenant that Christ has here announced? 1. True worship is now established by Jesus Christ. This includes His person, as deity (20:28), His work, as gospel (Heb. 13:20-21), and His apostolic revelation, especially of the ordinances (Matt. 28:19-20; Acts 2:42; Gal. 1:11-12; I Cor. 11::23-26). 2. True worship transcends racial/geographic distinctives (Gal. 3:28). Nationalistic churches are anomalous. 3. True worship is primarily spiritual rather than materialistic. Thus, “we are the . . . circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh” (Phil. 3:3). 4. True worship is grounded on revealed truth, incarnate and written (8:31-32; 14:6; Acts 2:42). 5. True worship is rooted in the converted soul/heart, and requires mental comprehension (Matt. 15:8-9). 6. True worship is singularly by the believer priest (9:38). 7. True worship is corporately by the body of Christ, “the people of God” (I Pet. 2:9-10). Thus Packer sums up:

The Puritans understood this [truth of John 4:24] as meaning that, on the one hand, worship must be inward, a matter of ‘heart-work’, and, on the other, worship must be a response to the revealed reality of God’s will and work, applied to the heart by the Holy Spirit. Therefore they insisted that worship must be simple and scriptural. Simplicity was to them the safeguard of inwardness, just as Scripture was the fountain-head of truth. The austere simplicity of Puritan worship has often been criticized as

emphatic position. When one worships, his worship will not be what it ought to be if he does not recognize that God is spirit.” The Theology Of John, p. 40. Refer also to Stephen Charnock, “A Discourse Upon God’s Being A Spirit,” Works, I, pp. 258-282.

uncouth, but to the Puritans it was an essential part of the beauty of Christian worship.  

(3) There is evangelistic confrontation, vs. 25-26.

Consideration by the woman, of traditional Samaritan teaching concerning this ongoing controversy, seems to recede. More likely the authority of Jesus’ proclamation is yielded to, even if with dim comprehension; this Jew is perceived of speaking in a profound manner, concerning the future, that she has never heard about before. Such a radically new perspective has caused her to recall some other messianic expectations that may well mesh with this man’s revelation.

(a) The woman confesses her hope in Messiah, v. 25.

“I know that Messiah is coming, He who is called Christ. When that One comes, He will announce to us all things.” Probably deferring to the Jewish term “Messiah” with which this distinguished Jew would be most familiar, rather than the Samaritan “Taheb,” so the woman reveals her own understanding of this “Restorer,” this expected teacher according to Deuteronomy 18:18.  

Hence in sensing something of this quality in Jesus, her confession is not only inquisitive, but also full of longing. She joins with Nicodemus in being drawn to his captivating presence, and that apparently without regard for signs (cf. v. 40; 6:2; 8:2; 10:24; 12:12-13, 20-21).

(b) Jesus confesses to the woman he is the Messiah, v. 26.

“Jesus said to her, ‘I myself [Ἐγὼ εἰμί, Egō eimi] am [He]; the one speaking to you.’” This is introductory to the seven notable “I am” declarations that follow (6:35; 8:12; 10:7; 10:11; 11:25; 14:6; 15:1). It is also the most explicit statement by Jesus before his trial in which he claimed to be the Messiah, and it is given to a mongrel Samaritan. Here is the proof of the gospel principle that the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ is primarily by means of revelation and not self-discovery (Matt. 16:17). Here grace is demonstrated to be abundant to any seeking sinner. And here is also the sixth and final climactic point of engagement; Jesus’ frank confession seems so arresting that the woman is now probably lost for words. Perhaps the first five points of engagement have had a cumulative effect. First, this Jew asked a Samaritan woman: “Give me a drink,” v. 7. Second, he recommended asking him about “living water,” v. 10. Third, he spoke of two water sources, Jacob’s well and himself, vs. 13-14. Fourth, he challenged her about her present immorality and past husbands, vs. 16-19. Fifth, he authoritatively spoke of a new, radically different era of worship, vs. 21-24. Now he forthrightly claims to be the Messiah! But further, this

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bold statement is at the same time an invitation to bow with saving acknowledgment and faith.\footnote{Morris, John, p. 273.}

It is important to appreciate here that for a Jew or, in this instance, a Samaritan, the crucial question is not simply one of inviting an unbeliever to believe in Jesus to be saved, or even the question that Jesus first addressed to his disciples: “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” Rather it is: “Who do you say that I am?” (Matt. 16:13, 15). Those who have believed in a promised Messiah must come to the conclusion that Jesus is this Messiah. Such a genuine acknowledgment is, with regard to the Jew, tantamount to saving belief in Jesus as a personal Savior.

Ryle well concludes this initial encounter:

[T]here are several striking points which ought never to be forgotten. (a) Our Lord’s mercy is remarkable. That such an one as He should deal so graciously with such a sinner is a striking fact. (b) Our Lord’s wisdom is remarkable. How wise was every step of His way in dealing with this sinful soul! (c) Our Lord’s patience is remarkable. How he bore with the woman’s ignorance, and what trouble He took to lead her to knowledge! (d) Our Lord’s power is remarkable. What a complete victory He won at last! How almighty must that grace be which could soften and convert such a carnal and wicked heart! We must never despise any soul, after reading this passage. If this woman was converted, any one may be converted.\footnote{Ryle, John, I, p. 228.}

4. Jesus’ confrontation with his disciples, vs. 27-38.

As the disciples now reappear, it might help to consider their attitude concerning their necessary shopping excursion into Sychar. Probably they were dismayed at having been told to buy food at that “drunken, lying” town. While Jesus has avoided exposure to such uncleanness, yet he sent the disciples on this most unsavory errand. Surely they were embarrassed at having to rely on Samaritan food since one Rabbi wrote: “He that eats the bread of the Samaritans is like to one that eats the flesh of swine.” But how relieved they now were to have left that defiling environment behind, even if they grudgingly admit that their food purchases seemed quite appetizing. Yet relief turns to dismay when, in the distance, they are surprised to identify Rabbi Jesus talking alone with a woman, and even worse, a Samaritan woman.

a. A lesson in contrasting occupations, vs. 27-30.

However, why did Jesus send the disciples alone into Sychar? Clearly he was not at all reluctant to enter this city, v. 40. Rather the following context would suggest that, in food not being his chief concern, he intended to reveal to the disciples a significant problem in their attitude toward evangelism; presently they do not seem to have a compassionate interest in sinners of whatever stripe.
The legalistic mission of the disciples, v. 27.

“At this moment/juncture, his disciples came and were amazed that he was speaking with a woman; however no one said, ‘What are you seeking?’ or, ‘What are you speaking with her about?’” Here we immediately see a contrast in perspective. Jesus compassionately perceives this woman in terms of the need of her destitute soul; the demeaning racism and sexism of Judaism at that time plays no part in Messiah’s outreach to impoverished sinners.\(^{101}\) For this reason Jesus is the foundation of true woman’s liberation, and for that matter true man’s liberation. However the disciples have no such concern for this woman as does their Master; their only interest is their preservation from racial defilement and feminine inferiority. Yet their timidity towards obtaining an explanation from Jesus betrays not only respect, but also a suspicion that they might well receive a stern rebuke.

The liberation mission of the Samaritan woman, vs. 28-30.

The contrast now focuses on the commendable attitude of the woman towards the citizens of Sychar and the disciples who have also recently mingled, though disinterestedly, amongst these same people.

(a) Her excitement, v. 28.

“Therefore the woman left her [large, cf. 2:6] waterpot [for head carriage], and went into the city and said to the men.” Some offer the unlikely suggestion that she leaves her waterpot out of concern for Jesus’ thirst. More likely is the thought of her erupting enthusiasm that will tolerate no hindrances. Having met the Son of God, this woman is ready to leave her natural water behind. What impels her is perhaps the commencement of water springing up on the inside. This was a rapid and energetic departure; notice how it contrasts with the disciples whose similar recent journey would doubtless have been gloomy, reluctant, with no thought for proclaiming good news. Here we see a common reaction resulting from those who are confronted with Jesus Christ based upon his own planned revelation. Consider Simon Peter and Andrew at Galilee. Jesus commands: “‘Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men.’ Immediately they left their nets and followed Him” (Matt. 5:19-20). To Matthew he says: “‘Follow Me.’ And he left everything behind, and got up and began to follow Him” (Luke 5:27-28). Of the Emmaus disciples we read, after their hearts had begun to burn at Jesus teaching about himself from the Scriptures: “And they got up that very hour and returned to Jerusalem” (Luke 24:32-33). So this awakened woman, in addressing “the men,” probably sought out some leading citizens of Sychar.

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\(^{101}\) Barrett quotes from the Talmud: “He that talks much with womankind brings evil upon himself and neglects the study of the Law and at last will inherit Gehenna.” John, p. 200. Westcott provides a similar reference: “[B]etter that the words of the law should be burnt than delivered to a woman.” John, p. 74.
(b) Her engagement, v. 29.

“Come, behold [and see for yourself] a man who said to me all things whatsoever I did. This man is not the Christ, is he?” Is this exaggeration born of the excitement of the moment? Probably not; it is simply an idiomatic way of saying: “This man [having never met me before] has spoken all about me!”

The men probably knew much about the woman’s sordid reputation as well. For this reason there is a respectful hesitancy in the use of μὴ, mē, here, which expects a negative or doubtful answer (18:35); but this deference is probably a matter of courtesy; the woman restrains her own more firm conviction. Yet her method is prudent; her seventh response and last recorded words are better than her first, v. 9. The manner in which we recommend Christ ought to vary according to the status of the person being addressed. Consider Paul addressing Felix (Acts 24:3), King Agrippa (Acts 26:1-3), and Festus (Acts 26:24-5).

(c) Her effectiveness, v. 30.

John, having briefly drawn us into Sychar, now leads us out, as if to invite us to observe the result of the woman’s invitation. “They went out [aorist] of the city and they were coming [imperfect] to Him.” While the aorist announces a departure, the imperfect stresses a multitude streaming out of Sychar and drawing near to Jacob’s well. Here is a graphic portrayal of the fruitful effect of the woman’s judicious witnessing. And what a contrast this provides with the disciples’ fruitless departure from the same city. So once again our perspective is transported back at Jacob’s well, as if to watch the approaching crowd in view on the horizon and anticipate a remarkable encounter, expected by Jesus and unexpected by the disciples.

b. A lesson in contrasting priorities, vs. 31-38.

Here is yet another contrast such as with baptism with water and the Spirit, 1:33, the destruction of Herod’s temple and that of Christ, 2:19-21, natural and spiritual birth, 3:3-8, natural and living water, 4:7-14, and now bread from Sychar and the will of the Father, 4:31-34. In a more broad sense, we are dealing with that which is our deepest interest, that which we crave after as if dying of thirst and hunger. The disciples are chiefly interested in the bread of this world; the woman, though parched through a lack of living water, yet is freely given it; the Son of God, though hungry through a lack of earthly bread, yet is wholly concerned about bread from heaven.

102 However Ryle refers to Lightfoot’s explanation that here is a probable reference to “the common opinion about Messiah’s omniscience” according to Isaiah 11:3. John, I, p. 237.
A first carnal concern by carnal disciples, v. 31.

“In the meanwhile [cotemporaneous with v. 30], the disciples were asking him saying, ‘Rabbi, [start to] eat.” On the other hand the master seemed deep in thought, as if almost longingly looking toward the direction of Sychar. On the other hand the interest of the disciples here is akin to that of Martha, busy “with all her [household/catering] preparations.” However the woman of Sychar “has chosen the good part” (Luke 10:40-42). Ryle sees here, “a striking illustration of a difference that may frequently be seen between a believer of great grace and a believer of little grace. The latter, with the best possible intentions, will often attach an importance to bodily and temporal things, with which the strong believer will feel no sympathy.”

Bunyan graphically illustrates this same point when, in The Pilgrim’s Progress, he contrasts valiant Great-grace with the carnal hypochondriac, Little-faith.

A first spiritual lesson to carnal disciples, v. 32.

“But He said to them, ‘I myself [emphatic] have food [βρῶσις, meat] to eat which you [emphatic] do not know about.” In other words, the Son of God has a heavenly appetite and satisfying heavenly smorgasbord that bears no comparison with carnal, earthly craving. From another perspective, Jesus has a radically different focus of mind that is reflected on other occasions (2:3-4; 6:26-7; 8:21-23; 11:11-13). Contentment is not so much a full stomach as a full soul. This is not to suggest that Jesus was not hungry; rather the business concerning His Father’s kingdom and the work assigned for him to do, which is reflected in His encounter with this woman, far outweighed any concern for earthly necessities (Matt. 6:24-33). The disciples have a present dullness that is like that of the woman in v. 11.

A second carnal concern by carnal disciples, v. 33.

“Therefore the disciples were saying to each other, ‘Has anyone brought [food] for him to eat?” The expected reply is: “Surely not!” Here are God’s elect who are yet ever so carnal in their perception of the truth of their Master. All they can surmise is that someone provided food for Jesus while they were away. Consider Nicodemus, “the teacher of Israel” (3:10), the disreputable woman of Samaria, and now the Galilean disciples gleaned from John the Baptist, all being so bereft of spiritual sensitivity. Then how true was the cry of the Forerunner, “I am a voice of one crying in the wilderness” (1:23), as well as that of Isaiah in prophesying that Messiah would be, “a root out of parched ground” (Isa. 53:2). Since Simeon and Anna (Luke 2:25-38), and more recently the death of John the Baptist, spiritual decline in Israel has continued to increase. Yet consider the great patience and forbearance of Christ with Nicodemus, the woman, and now the disciples!

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104 Bunyan, Works, III, pp. 147-50.
(4) A second spiritual lesson to carnal disciples, vs. 34-38.

The Son of God now expounds, to his disciples bound to an earthly menu, regarding details of his heavenly appetite and temporary earthly agenda. In essence it concerns a passionate desire for the harvesting of derelict souls that are to be raised from death to life according to His Father’s will; that is Jesus’ “meat”! True disciples of Christ will have the same appetite. Isaac Watts writes:

   Such was Thy truth, and such Thy zeal,
   Such deference to Thy Father’s will,
   Such love, and meekness so divine,
   I would transcribe and make them mine.

From the analogy of drink and food, we will shortly move to that of reaping and sowing.

(a) A necessary perspective on spiritual appetite, v. 34.

Certain statements of Jesus are particularly insightful with regard to his Messianic self-consciousness, especially regarding his sense of vocation, and this is such a passage. “My food [βρ̃ο̱μα, brōma, meat] is to do the will of Him who sent Me and to complete/finish His work.” Jesus’ sense of divine calling, having come from the bosom of the Father (1:1-2, 18) on account of being “sent,” permeates the whole of this Gospel (5:23-24, 30, 36-37; 6:38-39, 44, 57; 7:16, 18, 28, 33; 8:16, 18, 26, 29; 9:4; 10:36; 11:42; 12:44-45, 49; 13:20; 14:24; 15:21; 16:5; 17:3, 8, 18, 21, 23, 25; 20:21). As a consequence Jesus’ job description is ever before Him; He has commenced the work, it is now presently in progress, and will come to a definite point of completion (17:4). From the cross comes forth His final cry, “It is finished, it has come to completion” (19:30), the perfect passive, τετελεστα, tetelestai, indicating the conclusion of that which has been progressing toward a point of finality. But for now the work of redemption is proceeding along its appointed course toward the hour that has not yet come (2:4; 7:6, 8, 30; 8:20). More specifically, what is this work of the Father? It is the saving of those who the Father gives to the Son for this purpose (6:39-40). The devotion of the Son to the Father in this regard is unqualified (5:19-21, 36; 8:28); He “lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the LORD” (Deut. 8:3; cf. Matt. 4:4).

(b) A new perspective on spiritual sowing and reaping, vs. 35-38.

It is likely the disciples have already sensed that they have been chosen for future ministry, that is as they presently perceive it, though only to their fellow Jews, 4:2. They have excitedly, glibly talked about it as a prospect, perhaps in Galilee. Hence they anticipate a future time of messianic witnessing, like a person who declares: “I am going to be a missionary in Africa.” But the Lord Jesus would reply to this, even as he now does to his disciples: “You are missionaries right now, right where you are!” The problem here concerns a contrast in attitudes, between
that present consecration of the Savior in vs. 32, 34, and that present indifference of the disciples, born of self-righteousness, in vs. 31, 33. Simply put, if you are presently a Christian then there is a present responsibility for witnessing that is not to be postponed because of the need for training at Bible college or seminary.

1) The new perspective on harvesting illustrated, v. 35.

We translate here, Jesus probably speaking proverbially (cf. Matt. 16:2-3): “Do you not [commonly] say that, ‘Yet there are four months [after which] the harvest is coming?’” Yes they were used to a time sequence, first the short period of sowing seed, and second the longer period of growth, as James 5:7 describes: “The farmer waits for the precious produce of the soil, being patient about it.” Then follows the third period of harvesting when the grain is ripe. However the thought of simultaneous sowing and reaping is almost inconceivable (cf. Amos 9:13), that is until now. The disciples had no interest in the garnering of souls at Sychar; their racial bigotry was too incapacitating, too blinding. But Jesus continues: “Behold, I say to you, ‘Lift up your eyes [toward the horizon] and look at the fields that are white [ready] for harvest.” The disciples ought to have been fishing for souls in Sychar as the woman had done. Now a throng is approaching as a result of the evangelism of both Jesus and the woman. The disciples ought to feel ashamed since they have been more interested in food harvesting, their eyes being cast downward, earthward. They have no sense of urgency, no lifting up of their eyes toward the souls of men and heavenly interests, as does Jesus.

2) The new perspective on harvesting demonstrated, v. 36.

Jesus describes what he has been doing in the disciple’s absence. “Already [not after a waiting period] he [Jesus the sower] who reaps [the woman] is receiving wages [the townsfolk coming to the well] and is gathering fruit for eternal life [when they believe on Jesus as the messiah].” This would indicate that although the women has deftly aroused excitement in Sychar, with certain indications concerning messiah, yet the citizens there do not become authentic fruit until they have beheld Jesus and believed. Here then is an unusual order in harvesting. “So that he who is sowing [Jesus with the woman] and he who is reaping [Jesus through the woman, and now the disciples] may rejoice together,” according to an almost concurrent sequence! Concerning the sower and reaper, Lange describes, “common and simultaneous rejoicing; a thing not possible in the kingdom of nature, but belonging to the kingdom of grace.” In a broader sense, the time of waiting for Messiah is past; John the Baptist’s introductory ministry has past;

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the time has come for sowing on a large scale that will not think in terms of sequential delay. Sowing and reaping will happen together, as the looming revival in Sychar will prove, vs. 39-42.


Hence, in that the idea of time sequence is done away with in the whole matter of evangelism concerning Jesus, vs. 35-36, another proverbial saying nevertheless remains true: “One is sowing [Jesus, and the woman] and another is reaping [the woman and the disciples].” In other words, sowing and reaping are to be expected as working at the same time, interactively, vigorously, fruitfully, and thus disciples of Christ will be employed in different evangelistic vocations that yet focus on the one gospel. Instances of this are where one writes of Christ and another distributes this message in a published form. A pastor preaches the truth of Christ to a sinner while a friend personally commends the same truth to that same person. A Sunday School teacher instructs a young person in gospel truth who later in life is reminded by another of that same truth. One person labors to bring people to the sound of the gospel that is faithfully proclaimed by another. Historically as well, we are carried on the shoulders of Luther, Calvin, Owen, Bunyan, Newton, Spurgeon, Lloyd-Jones, etc. This is the broad principle that yet v. 38 more specifically elaborates upon.


“I sent you [emphatic, the disciples] to reap that for which you [emphatic] have not toiled. Others [?] have toiled and you [emphatic, the disciples] have entered into their toil.” Jesus indicates that he had purposely sent the disciples into Sychar, not chiefly to obtain food but rather test their spontaneous concern for mongrel Samaritan sinners. However they totally failed the test in not in any way toiling after the manner of their Master back at the well. Now, as the crowd from Sychar approaches, the disciples are about to participate in the toiling and sowing of others. But who are the “others” who have toiled and sowed? Probably the prophets, who promised Christ (Rom. 1:1-2; 3:21), John the Baptist who announced Christ (Matt. 3:1-3; John 1:29), and Jesus himself who, having become toil weary, v. 6, has further toiled and sowed with the Samaritan woman concerning himself. In other words, the disciples are thoroughly shamed. They follow a distinguished lineage, and as they now are about to enter into this heritage of spiritual productivity, it is with no thanks for their initial contribution. Yet these self-absorbed blockheads (Luke 9:46) eventually become the pillars of the Christian church!
Revive us Lord! Is zeal abating  
While harvest fields are vast and white?  
Revive us, Lord, the world is waiting,  
Equip Thy church to spread the light.

5. Jesus’ confrontation with the city of Sychar, vs. 39-42.

One of the most astonishing, attractive qualities of Jesus Christ is his compassionate readiness to stoop down and address the trials of men and women, whatever their social status may be, provided, that is, there is the evidence of a sense of helplessness, an earnest and humble desire for mercy, light, and truth. Consider the instances of the nobleman’s son, 4:46-54; a man full of leprosy (Luke 5:12-13), the paralytic lowered through a roof (Luke 5:17-26), the Centurion with the dying slave (Luke 7:2-10), the widow with the dead son at Nain (Luke 7:11-17), the invalid at the Pool of Bethesda (John 5:1-9), the Syrophoenician woman willing to accept crumbs from Jesus (Matt. 15:21-28), the trembling adulteress before her accusers (John 8:2-11), determined Zachaeus (Luke 19:1-10), persistent blind Bartemaeus (Mark 10:46-52). In these cases, and this would include the woman of Samaria, there was both a poverty of soul, often accompanied with physical symptoms, and a thirst for salvation, deliverance when confronted with Jesus. On the other hand Jesus Christ unhesitatingly dissociated himself from religious dabblers and triflers, and this appears to have recently been the case when he not only cleansed the temple, but also distanced himself from many in Jerusalem who “believed” in a superficial manner, 2:23-25. But now at Sychar, such a disreputable place, Jesus has sensed a more genuine seeking of the truth, so that he responds with saving interest. The result is revival, not retreat from religious professionals.


“From that city [of Sychar], many of the Samaritans believed in him because of the word of the woman who testified that, ‘He told me all the things that I had done.’” John is anxious to focus on the large harvest of souls that resulted from the sowing of one unsavory woman, a layperson. The fact and reason that “many believed” may well suggest just how widely known was the reputation of this disreputable woman in Sychar. However the populace also probably awoke to the truth that he knew their hearts as well! But also they noticed an earnest change of attitude, the absence of a water pot on the woman’s head and living water in her head! Again, what a sad and yet obvious contrast this presents with the five (?) ineffectual disciples, John himself (? cf. 1:35-39), Andrew, Peter, Philip, and Nathanael (1:40-45). Hence John writes in retrospect, feeling a sense of shame, yet he does not hesitate to give credit where credit is due.


“Therefore when the Samaritans came to Him [Jesus], they were asking Him to stay with them; and He stayed there two days.” Beside Jacob’s well, the throng from Sychar ask questions that appear to receive just as direct a revelation by Jesus concerning himself as did the woman. Recently in Jerusalem Jesus’ presence had fomented a sense of being threatened amongst the Jewish leaders, and certainly they had no earnest desire to seek his instruction, 4:1-3. But here, by way
of contrast, these Samaritan city leaders sincerely desire to learn; their light is so
dim, yet they want more, they ask for more, and they shall have it. So with the
disciples on the Emmaus road (Luke 24); they received light, v. 27, they asked for
more light, v. 29, and they received more light, vs. 30-1. Undoubtedly true revival
is a sovereign work of God, yet not without means, as is here indicated. “You do
not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask
with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures” (Jas. 4:2-3).

c. A lesson in faithful gospel proclamation, vs. 41-42.

They “heard,” they came to “know,” and thus they “believed,” vs. 41-2. During
this two day revival, it is likely that Jesus expounded the Scriptures, concerning
himself, as on the Emmaus road (Luke 24:27). This silent period, that so easily
provokes us to curiosity, presents a scene that is unique in all of Jesus’ earthly
ministry. Here, “God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the
wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which
are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised God has chosen, the
things that are not, so that He may nullify the things that are, so that no man may
boast before God” (I Cor. 1:27-29).

(1) There is resultant faith that is fruitful, v. 41.

The results are immediate, substantial, apparently embraced by Jesus, and
may well have led to long-term effects. Here is revival breaking out in the
most unlikely location on account of a most unlikely agent. But it is the
changed lives, at all levels of society, that give it credibility. Surely the
Samaritans asked Jesus to stay longer. Perhaps he gave reassurance of future
ministry. Approximately four years later, when Philip the evangelist preaches
in Samaria, “the crowds with one accord were giving attention to what was
said. . . . So there was much rejoicing in that city” (Acts 8:6-8).

(2) There is resultant faith that is authentic, v. 42.

It is one thing to say, “I have heard of Jesus,” and quite another to say, “I
have met Jesus.” So the Samaritans, while not demeaning the woman’s initial
testimony, are now exalting in personal relationship with the Messiah. The
nuance here is of ongoing, excited chatter with the woman that must have
caused her to rejoice. She had personally met Jesus by which encounter living
water was accessed; now her neighbors have also met Jesus and received the
same living water. How gloriously has this Jew brought former barriers
crashing to the ground. If a Jew can save a Samaritan, and a Samaritan can
exalt in a Jew, then anyone can be saved. For this reason comes forth the
New Testament confession: “This one truly is the Savior of the world” (cf. I
John 4:14). As Charles Wesley has written:

Love, like death, hath all destroyed,
Rendered all distinctions void;
Names, and sects, and parties fall:
Thou, O Christ, art all in all.
F. **SIGN TWO – CHRIST HEALS THE NOBLEMAN’S SON, 4:43-54.**

Jesus’ public ministry thus far has focused on two contrasting individuals. First there was aristocratic, learned, spiritually blind Nicodemus, who for the present remains in darkness. Second there was the disreputable, racially maligned woman at the well, who has come to the light and been instrumental in many of her fellow citizens likewise becoming true believers in Jesus as the promised Messiah. So is there any hope for the more culturally elite in Jewish society? At the present, the only real fruit has been a few northern Galileans and some Samaritans. Yes, there certainly is hope even for nobility, as Jesus’ next personal encounter demonstrates.

1. **His return to Galilee, vs. 43-45.**

   The retreat of Jesus northward from Jerusalem, and now Samaria, has raised the question as to whether he continues to seek more receptive territory on account of his general rejection in Judea. A better explanation would be that he chooses the region of Galilee as his home base for near two years, Capernaum in particular (Matt. 9:1), for two major reasons. First, Jesus presently has but five disciples so that the anticipated band must find completion and a suitable training ground, without the turbulence that Jerusalem presents. He sees them as future pillars in His church (Matt. 16:16-19; John 15:16; Eph. 2:19-20), and thus shortly after arrival in Galilee, will give attention to their consolidation (Luke 5:1-11; 6:12-16). Second, Jesus has a profound sense of a future appointed time, His “hour,” 2:4; 7:30; 8:20; 12:23; 13:1; 17:1, which must not be prematurely inaugurated. Since that time of sacrifice, as God’s Lamb, 1:29, is about two and a half years away, he will periodically present himself at Jerusalem, establish measured renown in the north, yet restrain any untimely response and surge in His ministry, 6:15.

   a. **Jesus’ departure from Samaria, v. 43.**

      It is likely some of the converted Samaritans desired to attach themselves to Jesus upon his notification that he must depart, but this he does not appear to allow. Rather he heads toward Galilee with his chosen disciples who by now must have not only marveled at the ministry they had heard over the past two day, but also had learned something of what true, nondiscriminatory evangelism is all about.

   b. **Jesus’ declaration about his reputation, v. 44.**

      “For Jesus Himself testified that a prophet does not have honor/respect in his own hometown/country [πατρίς, patris].” While some suggest “country” here refers to Judea and Jerusalem as the heartland of Israel that has already expressed its rejection,\(^{106}\) that is the region that Jesus is now leaving behind, yet every other use of this proverbial expression in the other three Gospels (Matt. 13:57; Mark 6:4; Luke 4:24) has specific reference to the disrespect Jesus encountered in Nazareth. Hence while he enters the district of Galilee, yet to begin with he avoids his hometown.\(^{107}\) To its added shame, 1:46, the belligerence of Nazareth sharply contrasts

\(^{106}\) This is the view of Hoskyns, Plummer, Westcott

\(^{107}\) This is the view of Calvin, Ryle, while Carson identifies Jesus’ country as Galilee.
with the welcome reception in Samaria. That this animosity toward Jesus was particularly strong in the town of his growth into manhood, is indicated by the fact that, in a short while, his eventual visit there will result in rage and attempted physical violence (Luke 4:16-31).

c. Jesus’ destination as Galilee, v. 45.

Upon Jesus’ arrival in Galilee, probably at the home of Simon Peter and Andrew (Mark 1:29), “the Galileans received/welcomed Him,” on account of eye witnesses from the recent Passover festivities in Jerusalem. Here is reason why Jesus’ exposure at the main Jewish feasts was so important; it enabled visitors from around the nation to learn of his works and words. However, on this occasion, Jesus does not appear impressed with this shallow reception in Galilee since the interest seems more concerned with the signs and wonders that were performed, 2:23, rather than their significance. It is likely that there was much encouragement for Jesus to put on a display for the local constituency, even as v. 48 suggests. It is also probable that many asked Jesus to repeat some of his teaching earlier heard in Jerusalem.

2. His significance in Cana, vs. 46-54.

It is a curious fact that Jesus returns to Cana, the location of his first miracle/sign at the wedding feast, 2:1-11, to initiate his second miracle/sign. Possibly he visited the home of the newlyweds at their invitation; they could never forget the taste of Jesus’ “new wine.” At the same time he may have offered marital counseling to these new believers.

a. The plight of the nobleman displayed, vs. 46-47.

It is amazing how God can use a tragedy, some traumatic occasion to get our attention when the past has been so full of self, material acquisition, and the offerings of this world. So here is an instance where a government official is led to realize that there are some problems that government cannot solve, even the might of the Roman Empire. When our child, a beloved son or daughter, is mortally ill, suddenly material pursuits lose their importance. If we had a million dollars, we would gladly spend it on medical care. But now even a million dollars cannot help. We may not have thought much about God in the past, at least seriously. But suddenly, He gets our frantic attention. We are forced, in desperation, as a last resort, to approach Him! Here is such a person, and in sheer mercy, he is not dismissed!

(1) His rank and residence, v. 46.

“And there was a certain royal official whose son was sick/without strength in Capernaum.” This senior government officer, a βασιλικός, basilikos, perhaps a Jew according to v. 48, with civil and military responsibilities, was probably employed by Herod Antipas, the tetrarch of Galilee and Perea, whose capital was Tiberias, nine miles to the south. He may well have known Simon, Andrew, James and John, also disciple-to-be, Matthew. In this environment he was probably well aware of the newest reports from Jerusalem concerning a messianic claimant named Jesus from Nazareth,
except that he had heard astonishing accounts of his miracles. Upon his son becoming critically, hopelessly ill, and the local doctor being unable to help, here was the only glimmer of hope. He would try anything, in spite of the local skeptics and Nazareth critics!

(2) His recollection and request, v. 47.

Having learned that Jesus, recently in Jerusalem, has returned to Cana, about eighteen miles south-west of Capernaum, this senior government official plans an emergency trip. Having consoled his wife and semi-conscious son, he rides furiously and arrives at Cana in under two hours. Enquiring about Jesus’ address, he enters the house and was, “imploring/begging [ἐροτάω, erōtaō] Him to come down and heal his son; for he was at the point of death.”

Here this man’s faith is not so strong as that of the Centurion who will declare to Jesus, “just say the word, and my servant will be healed” (Matt. 8:8). Nevertheless, weak faith that is directed toward the Great Physician will still have its reward, while strong faith in a quack physician will have none. And further, the desire of faith here is not for some religious spectacle, as was the case in Jerusalem, which Jesus recognized as phony, 2:23-25, but the saving of another person, as was the case with the woman at the well, vs. 28-29.

b. The power of Jesus displayed, vs. 48-50a.

In dealing with men in general Jesus would sometimes make a provocative declaration, in other words offer bait that was intended to hook interest and draw forth a heartfelt response. In seeking “fishers of men” (Matt. 4:19) Jesus taught by example. To the Syrophoenician woman Jesus declared: “It is not good to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs” (Matt. 15:26). Consider the address to astonished Nicodemus, “You must be born again,” 3:7; the woman at the well was prompted to ask for “living water,” 4:10.” And here a desperately serious man is challenged, as if he was typical of the curious religionists currently seeking titivation by means of a display of signs and wonders. Indeed there may have been a number of these thrill seekers in Cana.

(1) His testing of faith, v. 48.

“Jesus said to him, ‘Unless you [plural] see signs and wonders, you [plural] will in no way [emphatic] believe.” Is this a display of skepticism by Jesus? In a general sense, yes, since he is making a comprehensive assessment that will convict the carnal Galilean multitudes and draw clarification, even a denial, from the serious minded minority. Of course this Gospel is designed to present selected signs, 20:31-32; 2:11; 4:54, so that sinners might be encouraged to have saving faith in Christ. But here these signs are mere objects of fascination for sensationalists, seekers of religious spectacle, and not the means to an end, namely serious recognition of and submission to Jesus as the only Savior. Morris adds: “In this gospel it is clear that Jesus accepted people who came only because of the miracles (cf. 6:26; 14:10-11).
But such faith is not the highest kind of faith (cf. 2:23f.). It appears that the recent Samaritan awakening was not supported by signs and wonders. Yet vs. 52-53 do indicate the apologetic worth of such works, when rightly appreciated.

(2) His discovery of true faith, v. 49.

Surely there is trembling pathos and urgency in the response here, even arousal. It is as if the official pleads: “But Rabbi, I have not come this distance merely to be entertained. Search my heart and you will find that my concern is only for my son. Oh he is so sick, even near death’s door. Please come with me immediately and heal him. I know you have done such works before!” In such circumstances, only the counterfeit has cause to worry when it is challenged, whereas the genuine is validated upon such examination. So here Jesus’ challenge only draws forth the genuineness of this man’s faith, weak though it is. He believes that Jesus can heal a serious, even mortal illness, but once death overtakes, then all is lost, even for Jesus. So he pleads: “Sir/Lord, come down [to Capernaum] before my young child [παιδίον, paidion] dies.”

(3) His response to true faith, v. 50a.

“Jesus said to him, ‘Go, your son is living.’” Weak faith is yet rewarded. This man, unlike the Centurion, does not ask of Jesus: “Just say the word” (Matt. 8:8), nevertheless Jesus does “just say the word.” As a result the authority of the Son of God impresses itself upon the official, and so displaces his lesser suggestion. He does not now insist, “But you must come to Capernaum with me.” There is a yielding here that indicates a strengthening of faith.

c. The persuasion of the nobleman, vs. 50b-53.

There is here a graphic display of what Paul describes as, “the obedience of faith” (Rom. 1:5; 16:26), which principle Mary has already indicated when she directed the servants at the Cana wedding feast, “Whatever He [Jesus] says to you, do it,” 2:5. So here, if deliverance is to be obtained, Jesus’ word of command is to be unhesitatingly, instantly obeyed, cf. 9:6-7, even as the elements yield to His authority (Mark 4:39-41).

(1) Persuasion evident in action, v. 50b.

“The man believed the word which Jesus spoke to him and he was going [immediately on his way].” The portrayal here is of someone who springs into action; the NASB translates, the man “started off.” This individual’s desperate pursuit of Christ has resulted in a more firm grasp of who Jesus really is. Here strengthened faith is evident; it inevitably expresses itself; here is the constraint of truth firmly grasped (Acts 4:20).

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108 Morris, John, p. 290
(2) Persuasion assisted through fellowship, v. 51.

Like the work of the woman of Samaria, whose zeal resulted in a larger harvest, so again the saving work of the Lord Jesus brings forth a greater ingathering. The official’s household know why and where their master has gone. Then suddenly, the boy recovers, at a time which they easily estimate to be when their master ought to be with Jesus in Cana. Their minds race with calculation and contemplation of what this sudden healing might indicate. Surely they also know of Jesus’ reputation. Hence, out of love and curiosity several servants rush to Cana and en route meet their master speedily returning downhill. But notice that the look on all of their faces has changed from grief to hope and joy. How excited the conversation must have been. “Jesus has told me that my son lives,” the father exclaims. But the look on the servants’ faces says it all. “Yes, he is alive and well, and asking for you,” they respond. Now a whole household begins to be influenced by this Jesus, especially when he demonstrably imparts life to a loved one.

(3) Persuasion assisted through reasoning, vs. 52-53.

But is the faith of the father now challenged? Does a tinge of unbelief creep in with the inner suggestion that what we have here is a mere coincidence? So sanctified reason is employed. The astute government official calculates, according to the report of his servants, that his son revived at the very same time as when Jesus pronounced, “Your son lives,” that is according to Jewish time, at 1:00 pm in the afternoon. But added to this persuasive truth would be the account of the servants as to just how well the boy now appeared. Hence faith, first believing sufficiently, investigatively, to come to Cana, v. 47, second being strengthened to believe Jesus’ declaration and thus return alone to Capernaum, v. 50, now rises to a third height that is evangelistically infectious in his household. Like the woman at the well and her fellow Samaritans, He unashamedly, convincingly, passionately declares that Jesus is the Christ, the Savior of the world, v. 42. This man has really come to understand the significance of Jesus, and the result is that Jesus is glorified in the whole of that household through the conversion of its head.

d. The performance of Jesus’ accounted, v. 54.

While Jesus had performed signs in Judea, 2:13-23, the tallying here concerns the first sign completed at Cana, 2:1-11 and now the second sign, again in the north at Cana, 4:46-53. This geographic reoccurrence is the point of John’s reckoning and not further enumeration. Undesignated signs four and five also occur in the northern region of Galilee, while six and seven are performed in the south at Jerusalem and Bethany. Perhaps the inference is that, in contrast with the lack of recognition in Judea to date, signs there notwithstanding, the Samaritan awakening and now the repetition of a sign at Cana is reflective of the more...
receptive attitude of the north which is favored with the revelation of Jesus as “a
great Light, . . . a Light dawned” (Is. 9:1-2; Matt. 4:12-16).


To use a technical term, the life of Jesus Christ has been preserved by means of a
quadraphonic recording that we term the four gospels. When we study one gospel, such as
John, it helps if we link it with the chronology of the other four accounts. Here then in our
study it will help if we discover what transpires between John 4 and 5. According to the best
harmonies of the life of Christ, we must include a series of events that cover several months.
They include: 1. Jesus’ violent rejection at Nazareth. 2. Jesus’ walking on the Sea of Galilee.
3. The recall of Peter, Andrew, James, and John; the call of Matthew. 4. Numerous healings,
of a demoniac on the Sabbath, Peter’s mother-in-law, a leper, a paralytic along with the
power to forgive sin. 5. Increasing fame in the region of Galilee that has also aroused
opposition from the Pharisees.

1. Jesus contends with the troubled waters of sin, vs. 1-9a.

It is well to remember two important truths that underlie this miracle. First, on this
occasion, Jesus appears to indicate that the man’s sickness was the result of sin in his
life, v. 14. Second, this healing takes place on a busy feast Sabbath, which point ignites
the ensuing discourse and controversy that focuses on the deity of Jesus, especially his
relationship with his Father.

a. The setting of sickness in Jerusalem, vs. 1-4.

Recall 1:11 where, “He [Jesus] came to his own embassy [residence, inheritance,
possessions, territory] and his own ambassadors did not welcome [receive] him.”
In spite of Jesus’ training base, with regard to his disciples, which was located in
Capernaeum, his witnessing base remained in Jerusalem. This is evident when we
consider that Jesus’ periodic festive visits to Jerusalem were the occasions of his
most fierce prolonged encounters with the Jewish leadership that were witnessed

(1) The time, v. 1.

“After these things [the prior sequence of events], there was a feast of the
Jews and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.” Most likely this was the feast of the
Passover, though whether Pentecost or Tabernacles, they all would have been
dutifully attended by Jesus as an impeccable Jew. However Jesus’ perception
of his duty here would have risen much higher than legal obligation. Every
visit to Jerusalem was in fulfillment of his Father’s plan, 4:34, that would
anticipate Jesus’ eventual “hour” of trial and triumph; every visit would
enable him to present himself with longing: “How often I wanted to gather
your [Jerusalem’s] children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under
her wings, and you [the religious leaders] were unwilling” (Matt. 23:37).
(2) The place, v. 2.

The “[bathing] pool of Bethesda [house of mercy]” is probably that now known as the pool of St. Anne. There were actually two pools with a porch in between and four other porches surrounding the whole complex, which comprised the “five porticoes.” Located near the Sheep Gate (Neh. 3:1) and supplied with rain water, it was commonly used for Jewish rites of cleansing.

(3) The participants, v. 3a.

The “multitude of those who were sick, blind, lame, and withered,” interspersed amongst the porticoes, was a pitiful sight, with their crutches, walking sticks, and support implements. Some, the more affluent, were well attended with friends and aids. But others struggled alone in their feeble attempts to enter the pool and surely many fell in the attempt.

(4) The tradition, vs. 3b-4.

Now we know from v. 7 that the water periodically “stirred,” that is became agitated; it probably even bubbled. However it was said, according to vs. 3b-4, that when the water “moved,” was “disturbed,” this was the work of an angel; further, it was claimed that any sick person, of whatever ailment, who entered the water when it was so agitated would be healed. But the problem is that vs. 3b-4 are not found in most of the oldest and most reliable manuscripts. Indeed there is continuity in reading v. 3a, then v. 5. Hence, as Alfred Edersheim writes:

This bubbling up of the water was, of course, due not to supernatural but to physical causes. Such intermittent springs are not uncommon, and to this day the so-called ‘Fountain of the Virgin’ in Jerusalem exhibits this phenomenon. It is scarcely necessary to say, that the Gospel-narrative does not ascribe this ‘troubling of the waters’ to Angelic agency, nor endorses the belief, that only the first who afterwards entered them, could be healed. This was evidently the belief of the impotent man, as of all the waiting multitude. But the words in v. 4 of our Authorized version, and perhaps also the last clause of verse 3, are admittedly an interpolation.\(^{110}\)

In a day when whirlpools of various sorts are readily available, and their ability to soothe certain bodily stresses is acknowledged, it is not difficult to understand the belief that the agitated water did offer relief.

b. The salvation of a sick man in Jerusalem, vs. 5-9a.

One of the features of biblical Christianity is its focus on the individual, and not some amorphous group. This has been dramatically portrayed in the encounters of Jesus with Nicodemus, the woman at the well, and the nobleman at Cana. So

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\(^{110}\) Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, I, p. 463. Here acknowledgment is made of Westcott’s “masterly criticism” at this point. Of the same opinion are Alford, Bruce, Carson, Hendriksen, Morris, Plummer, etc.
here, amidst a throng of health enthusiasts, hypochondriacs, and physical human wrecks, the Son of God sets his eyes upon one soul, a most unlikely character in terms of striking up a friendly conversation. Here we are ushered into the glorious mystery of particular grace that brings forth the cry of astonishment, “Why me!”

(1) The paralysis of the sick man, v. 5.

“A certain man was there having his sickness for thirty-eight years.” By way of illustration we might point out that as Israel wandered in the wilderness for thirty-eight years (Deut. 2:14), so this man had similarly endured a wilderness of suffering in his life and undoubtedly been tormented by numerous Job’s comforters. If then this man represents Israel, perhaps the pool reflects the present impotence of Jewish religion, while Christ’s appearance is the superiority of the New Covenant. In lacking friendly assistance, we may assume that this man was not particularly popular or well provided for. Rather he was a pitiful fixture, a man of despair and remorse.

(2) The conversation with the sick man, v. 6.

“Jesus seeing this one reclining and having known the long time of his sickness, he said to him, ‘Do you desire to become whole/well?’” How did Jesus know about this man? Perhaps he had passed this way before and seen the same man lying in the same place over several years, even from his youth. But then the divine prescience of Jesus concerning Nathaniel, 1:47-50, of “all men,” 2:24-25, of the woman at the well, 4:17-19, and the acknowledgment of Peter, “Lord, You know all things,” 21:17, suggests redemptive particularity. This suggestion is reinforced by the fact that amongst a multitude of “sick, blind, lame, and withered,” this man, according to pure grace and divine compassion, was chosen for salvation. Faith is in no way eliminated, but the wonder here concerns the initiative of Jesus. This candidate for mercy does not identify Jesus here, v. 13, he has no thought of cooperating with Jesus, or boasting; he only knows about his disease, even though perhaps he has heard about Jesus. However what matters most is the fact that this derelict of society is found by Jesus. Possibly he had cried to the God of Abraham for relief from his seemingly hopeless condition, with the result that Jesus passed by. Nevertheless, like Matthew (Matt. 9:9), Zaccheus (Luke 19:5), and the man born blind (John 9:35), he was found by Jesus.

I sought the Lord, and afterward I knew
He moved my soul to seek him, seeking me;
It was not I that found, O Savior true,
No, I was found of thee.

However what was the intention of Jesus question: “Do you desire to become whole/well?” Did he ask the obvious? Only if his meaning of “well” is identical with that of the invalid; only if the man considers Jesus’ question to be redundant because of his dullness of soul. But often in John a question

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111 Ryle, John, I, p. 274. “These are pious thoughts, but it may well be doubted whether there is any warrant for them.”
is asked by Jesus that has an element of ambiguity and transcendent mystery about it, 3:3; 4:10; 6:35, 53. So here, surely the “wellness” that Jesus speaks of, with intended provocation, is that which can not only deliver a paralytic body, but also a paralytic soul.

(3) The impotence of the sick man, v. 7.

Like the perception of Nicodemus and the woman at the well, this man interprets Jesus’ reference to “wellness” in strictly physical terms. He accepts the tradition that the agitated water represents, and probably recalls numerous testimonies of others who had been aided by the therapy, and ascribed the benefits to (invisible?) angelic intervention. Yet in the citadel of Judaism there is no room for courtesy, let alone grace. Rather there is demonstrated the selfishness, the personal benefit focus of natural religion, even as Ezekiel 34:1-5, 20-21 describes. This derelict then has “no man” willing to carry him into the water. He is personally impotent, and so are his neighbors. Yet perhaps this noble stranger may oblige. Here is illustrated the futility of trusting in innate human goodness, unless, according to the Parable of the Good Samaritan, grace converts the heart (Luke 10:30-37). Yet although unaware, for this man grace is nearby, even at the door.

(4) The saving of the sick man, v. 8.

“Jesus said to him, ‘Get up/arise, gather/lift up your [portable] mattress and start walking,” cf. Mark 2:11. There is no assistance given by Jesus that would help the man enter the pool; there is no need for the waters to bubble; there is no physical contact of any sort; there is not even any call for the expression of faith; and the man does not even know who Jesus is, v. 13. Hence there is no expectation as to what might happen. On this occasion, there are no preconditions for healing, other than an expressed desire. Even with the initial command comes the power to obey, to fulfill three imperatives, “arise,” “lift up,” “walk,” all of which were beyond this man’s natural ability. Now the indifferent crowd becomes aroused by such a display of authority; fascination with the pool fades at the dawning of “the sun of righteousness . . . with healing in its wings” (Mal. 4:2).

(5) The testimony of the sick man, v. 9a.

“And immediately the man became whole/sound in health, and he gathered/lifted up his [portable] mattress and commenced walking.” There is no evolutionary healing here, rather instant and complete recovery by means of naked divine power. As Barrett comments: “Just as the thirty-eight years prove the gravity of the disease, so the carrying of the bed and the walking prove the completeness of the cure.” Yet as beneficial and attention getting as this sign may be, that which arouses the people most of all is its significance, its indication concerning the person of Jesus. This miracle will be the ground of periodic debate about Jesus on through to 7:23. But why?

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2. Jesus contends with the troubled waters of unbelief, vs. 9b-18.

In the earthly ministry of Jesus Christ there are two major points of contention that repeatedly arise in his confrontation with the Jews. They concern, first his claim to have sovereignty over the Sabbath, and second his claim, in accepting recognition as the Son of God, to be deity. The two matters now arise in the midst of heated debate, v. 18. However, to begin with it is the Sabbath controversy that comes to the fore according to John’s account of the healing of the paralytic. Even so, controversy over the Sabbath has already erupted concerning the paralytic healed in the Synagogue at Capernaum; as a result Jesus’ fame spreads throughout Galilee (Mark 1:21-28). So here we simply have another occurrence of this conflict. From another perspective, here is the inevitable problem, even explosion that arises when new wine confronts old wineskins (Mark 2:22). Jesus Christ and humanistic, legalistic religion do not mix.

a. The Jewish leaders confront the healed man, vs. 9b-12.

The “Jews” who confront Jesus here, v. 10, cf. 1:19; 5:18; 7:12-13; 11:47, are surely members of the Sanhedrin who are quick to sense any challenge to their authority. State religion is especially sensitive to any diminution of its control over the populace, particularly the questioning of its man-made laws by which it exercises control. This was at the heart of Roman Catholicism’s excommunication of Martin Luther, in that he challenged the authority of the priesthood, the bishops, the cardinals, and the pope.

(1) The authoritarianism of human religion, vs. 9b-10.

“However it was the Sabbath on that day.” Now the Jew was well aware of the fourth commandment (Exod. 20:8-11; Deut. 5:12-15), and other related biblical references (Neh. 13:15, 19; Jer. 17:21-2). Even so the minute, stifling application of this law according to scholarly, clerical dictate was another matter, especially when governed by formal compliance rather than heart attitude, as well as the need for protective hedging of the commandment. The Talmud listed 39 categories of labor that were prohibited on the Sabbath. Barrett quotes an instance from this same source where a couch could be carried on the Sabbath if a living man was on it, the inference being that there is infraction if there was no living man on the couch. On another occasion our Savior encountered this traditional rigidity when the disciples were challenged by the Pharisees as they gleaned and ate some ears of corn on the Sabbath; having defended them from Scripture, Jesus authoritatively declared: “So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath” (Mark 2:23-28).

In declaring, “It is not lawful for you to lift up your [portable] mattress,” the chorus of objectors well illustrate the paralysis, the hardheartedness, the insensitivity, the void of compassion, that constant focus on the law has brought to their souls. Here is knee-jerk legalistic reaction that is quick to judge rather than appreciate mercy (Prov. 14:29). The immediate concern is not the astonishing, joyous fact of a man, having suffered for thirty-eight years, now being made well.

111 Ibid.
(2) The greater authority of Jesus Christ, v. 11.

What is the answer to the accusatory tyranny of the law and its messengers? It is the silencing response of amazing grace, 8:10-11. The healed man may have been puzzled by his accusers, but not muzzled. He may well have sensed the compulsion to testify, however inadequately, as Psalm 66:16-20 suggests.

Come and hear, all who fear God,
And I will tell of what He has done for my soul.
I cried to Him with my mouth,
And He was extolled with my tongue.
If I regard wickedness in my heart,
The Lord will not hear;
But certainly God has heard;
He has given heed to the voice of my prayer.
Blessed be God,
Who has not turned away my prayer
Nor His lovingkindness from me.

“But the man answered them, ‘He who made me well, that is the one who said to me, ‘Lift up your [portable] mattress and start walking.’'’” In other words, the demonstrable authority of that man was far more effectual in my life than whatever you might say. To coin the expression of the man born blind, he in effect said, “While I cannot identify who this man is, one thing I do know is that though I was an invalid and unable to walk, now I am completely healed and able to walk. Look, watch me jump in the air!” 9:25. Again, the answer to law is grace, and as here, it ought to be demonstrably so.

(3) The common ignorance concerning Jesus Christ, vs. 12-13.

In conjunction with v. 10, we conclude that the Jews did not witness the miracle actually taking place. Rather a tumultuous crowd gathered after the event and as a result reports of the healing quickly spread. Thus the leaders quickly came, though more threatened by Jesus than interested in praising God because His Son had performed a great work of mercy.

(a) The ignorance of the Jews, v. 12.

There seems to be a calculated reluctance to acknowledge that a miracle has taken place. For this reason the question is, “Who is the man who said to you, ‘Take up [your portable mattress] and start walking,’” not, “Who is the man who healed you?” Plummer suggests that in addressing whoever wrought this miracle as the “man,” there is implied here “a contemptuous contrast with the law of God.”

Certainly there is a willing blindness, a ready skepticism that instinctively opts for some rational, contorted explanation rather than the obvious that threatens

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Rabbinic authority and tradition. The same reaction confronted the man born blind, 9:13-34.

(b) The ignorance of the healed man, v. 13.

Apparently the man was too overcome, dare we suggest too self-absorbed, to enquire as to the identity of Jesus. But why did this distinctive, unidentified healer “slip away/retire” from or “dodge” the gathering crowd, as was the case on other occasions (Luke 4:30; John 6:15; 10:39)? As has been suggested earlier, the ministry of the Son of God was always under his control with regard to his eventual determination to offer himself up as “the Lamb of God,” 1:29. Hence although constantly presenting himself to Israel as its identifiable Messiah, Jesus would never allow circumstances to get out of control and thus provoke a premature altercation or offering. He constantly held the crowds at bay until his appointed hour had come; only then were they allowed to respond according to their nature and fulfill the will of God, 12:12-19; 19:13-15.

b. Jesus confronts the healed man, vs. 14-15.

What a blessed event it is in any sinner’s life when it can be testified, as surely this man did, “Afterward Jesus found him.” The circumstances equally apply to the man born blind who, having been thrown out of the temple precincts, was found by Jesus, 9:35. Most likely the man here was sought out after the crowd around him had subsided. Only then would Jesus carry out further surgery on the man’s soul, quite apart from that already completed on his body.


The location of Jesus’ finding of the healed man is the temple courts, where the Jewish leaders could also readily confront Him. Hence, following concern for a man’s physical need, Jesus addresses a greater matter in more private circumstances. “Behold, you have become whole/well,” probably is another of Jesus’ provocative, ambiguous statements, as if challenging the man to think more deeply.” “Behold, you think you have become well, don’t you. But is this really the case?” Therefore, “Let me point out an area of your life that is not at all well. Do not continue to sin anymore so that/lest a greater [calamity] does not happen to you.” Here then is a call for repentance, addressed to a pitiful individual who, to this point, has continued in sin. He is now well in body, but not in his soul. However, rightly assuming that Jesus knows the sordid details of this man’s life, as with the woman at the well, 4:17-19, a number of issues arise here.

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115 Refer to the introductory comment on 4:1-42.
(a) Does bodily sickness result from sin?

Simply put, the answer is “yes” and “no.” “Yes,” all bodily sickness ultimately results from the Fall. “No,” every illness we experience is not necessarily the result of personal sin. Some illnesses, such as aids, can be the result of individual immorality, yet a marital partner and children can contract aids while not being participants in immorality. Alcoholism can produce direct consequences, such as cirrhosis of the liver, while hemophilia can be inherited without this being the direct result of personal sin. Further there are specific cases in the Bible of physical punishment being the result of sin (Acts 5:1-11; I Cor. 11:30; I John 5:16). However in this case we should not think too narrowly in terms of a disease. Possibly this man was seriously crippled due to involvement with unlawful violence. Moreover other Bible references describe specific illnesses that were not to be regarded as the result of immediate sin (9:3; 11:4). Great caution is required here.

(b) Does continuance in sin result in greater punishment?

Yes, Jesus would so indicate here. Continuous promiscuity will increase the likelihood that a variety of sexually transmitted diseases will be contracted. Yes, continued participation in alcoholism will increase symptoms that may threaten one’s life. Yes, persistence in sin will reap greater consequences, just as the children of Israel, while being punished for individual transgressions in the Arabian wilderness, yet eventually saw God’s anger accumulate to the point where He denied them entrance into the land of promise (Heb. 3:16-19). Similarly perseverance in personal sin, in the face of “much reproof,” will produce a thickening callous on the soul that becomes so hard that eventually this condition is “beyond remedy” (Prov. 29:1; cf. 1:24-31).

(c) Was Jesus being like Job’s comforters?

The self-righteous friends of Job were relentless in bringing accusations against their neighbor; they charged him with reaping the consequences of sin in his life (Job 4:7-9; 18:5-21). Even today, it is so easy for us to suggest that the suffering of others, not so much ourselves, is due to personal sin. Jesus faced this attitude and rebuked it when eighteen victims of the collapsed tower in Siloam were thought to be greater sinners than those living in Jerusalem. To this he replied: “I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish” (Luke 13:4-5). No, Jesus was not a Job’s comforter here; there is no comparison. He acts as the Son of God knowing with that divine certainty which we all lack. In this instance it was certain knowledge that the healed man had reaped what he had sown.

(2) The further testimony of the healed man, v. 15.

Hence for this man, and for us, the great question concerns how we respond to Jesus’ admonition. He calls for repentance, as was often the case (Mark
1:15). So, “the man went away and announced/said to the Jews that it was Jesus who had made him whole/well.” Probably he felt obliged to more fully explain what had earlier been asked of him, vs. 12-13. But as to his repentance, we know nothing further except to declare that of course the exhortation was never rescinded; it is a universal. Our Savior never came to minimize sin, but to confront it, and surgically remove it. Yet if the evil root has been forever severed, yet the body of flesh remains. Hence even for the Christian the words remain true, “You have become well; do not sin anymore.”

c. The Jewish leaders confront Jesus, vs. 16-18.

We have noted that Jesus has previously healed a demoniac in the Synagogue at Capernaum on the Sabbath. As a result: “Immediately the news about Him spread everywhere into all the surrounding district of Galilee” (Mark 1:21-28). Certainly the religious hierarchy in Jerusalem has by now learned of this worker of miracles, this Nazarene, so that they are ready with a charge that has already been agreed upon within their fraternity, namely “Sabbath-breaking.” Now the opportunity has arisen in the arena of Jerusalem for a face-to-face confrontation.

(1) Jesus is persecuted as a Sabbath breaker, v. 16.

Because of the testimony of the man healed at the pool of Bethesda, “the Jews were persecuting/hounding [imperfect, literally with the intent to drive away] Jesus because he was doing [imperfect] these things on the Sabbath,” and, we should add, before crowds in Jerusalem. Here is the intimation that Jesus did other things on the Sabbath, besides this particular healing, that riled the Rabbinic dogmatists. The imperfect tenses here portray an ongoing conflict, though perhaps this particular incident had a catalytic effect (7:23). It has been pointed out that, more precisely, it was the healed man who broke the Sabbath; however he is regarded merely as a pawn. Jesus is the real threat because he has commanded Sabbath breaking in accompaniment with the authoritative support of his healing power. Inherent in this assertion of Jesus is a prerogative that rises above the dominion of Israel’s religious leaders. Hence a broad principle is evident here and it is that institutional, legalistic religion reacts when its base of authority is challenged. In this case Sabbatarianism has held sway over the people, that is by means of strict control imposed by Jewish leaders, resulting in Sabbatarian tyranny. Alfred Edersheim emphasizes this point: “[T]he Pharisees laid most stress [on] the observance of the Sabbath. On no other subject is Rabbinic teaching more painfully minute and more manifestly incongruous to its professed object. . . . The Mishnah includes Sabbath-desecration among those most heinous crimes for which a man was to be stoned.” 116 It is in the light of this background that Jesus challenged the rampant Sabbatarianism of his day on many occasions (Mark 2:23-28; Luke 6:1-11; 13:10-17), the frequent response on the part of the Jewish leaders being “rage” (Luke 6:11) and “indignation” (Luke 13:14). So it is the case here.

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(2) Jesus declares his deity as a Sabbath worker, v. 17.

“But [Jesus] answered them, ‘My Father is working until now and I Myself am working.’” When one considers the pristine Jewish environment which heard this declaration, the only conclusion possible is that this was a stupendous claim such as had not been made before in the history of Israel.

(a) God the Father as a Sabbath-worker.

Of necessity God works on the Sabbath. Following creation, He rested from His creative work, but not the maintenance of His creation. Certainly manufacture has continued with the use of existing material, but no further creation *ex nihilo* has occurred since God rested following the “completion” of His creative labor (Gen. 2:1-3). Hence Jesus is making a point that the Jews had debated, namely that although the Law reflects the will of God, yet He must uphold that which He commenced, even on the Sabbath. Thus God must work on the Sabbath, otherwise the universe would “cease to operate,” and thus disintegrate. However this point being acknowledged as true, even by the Jews, that which aroused immediate hostility was Jesus’ claim of intimate union with “My Father,” not the more commonly used expression, “Our Father.” The following context bears this out (5:18-23, 26-27, 36-38, 43). It is as if the Son, having come from the bosom of the Father, is able to recollect his close observance of the Father’s working in that heavenly realm. Now He has come to earth to do His bidding.

(b) God the Son as a Sabbath-worker.

Like an earthly son who delights to follow in the steps of his father’s career, Jesus is saying that by occupation, “I am the Son of My Father. As it is My Father’s practice of working on the Sabbath, and this is a supremely good work, so it is My identical practice as well. The healing of this paralytic, sinful man was a similar good work,” v. 19. So Jesus will shortly afterward ask the Pharisees in Galilee, “Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath?” (Luke 6:9). At that time he will further declare, “The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath” (Luke 6:5), not controlled by it. Hence the plain indication is that Jesus is deity, God the Son, and the Jews were not slow to perceive this point, though their response was one of condemnation, not submission. But when Jesus declared, “I Myself am working [on the Sabbath],” surely He had in mind not simply special work on that day, such as this particular healing, but that which is His continual good employment, even as the Father has had continual good employment since creation. The Son is continually working 24/7/12, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, twelve months a year. And that work is comprehensively described in 4:34, being inclusive of a judgment job description, v. 22, and a redemption job description, a “bringing many sons to glory” (Heb. 2:10), a “going after the lost sheep until He finds it, . . . a laying it on His shoulders rejoicing” (Luke 15:4-5). This then is the working of
the Son, and it is identical with the working of the Father; it is a good work, a saving work, a divine work.

(3) Jesus is condemned to death for blasphemy, v. 18.

In some churches today, the fourth century Nicene Creed is occasionally recited which declares, concerning Jesus Christ, that he is, “the only begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all ages, Light of Light, true God of true God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father, through whom all things were made.” Now that is a lofty statement, declaring Jesus Christ’s deity, that has to be supported from Scripture, and here in v. 18 the Apostle John jumps into the text, so to speak, to make sure that we understand the essence of this teaching. It is vital for him here, as was evident in 1:1-18, even as it was during the first four centuries of the Christian church. At that time both the Gnostics and Arians rejected what is here declared; even today both humanistic liberals and Jehovah’s witnesses do the same in rejecting the deity of Jesus Christ. However we have here not only substantial evidence in Jesus’ miraculous working, his declared sovereignty over the Sabbath, along with His Father, his unashamed claim to be the Son of God from His own lips, but even the confirmation of the angry, seething Jewish leaders. They recognize the truth that is so evident, even though they do not embrace it. Here is the most astonishing evidence that, “those [people] who were His own did not receive [welcome] Him” (1:11).

(a) The increasing conflict over the reputation of Jesus.

“On account of this [bold, outrageous confession], all the more were the Jews seeking to kill him.” We must not forget that the life of Jesus may be likened to a gathering storm. Already there is developing antagonism due to the accumulation of reports (1:19; 2:18; 4:1-3; Luke 4:16-30; Mark 1:21-28; 40-44; 2:1-12; John 5:10). Hence things are now getting out of hand; the leadership is beginning to lose control. As a result plans have already been suggested for the killing of Jesus; now the urgency for assassination has increased. How indicative this is of the fact that then and now, the greatest opposition to Jesus Christ comes from the religious rather than the irreligious; the truth cannot be tolerated; it must be eliminated. State religion can be ruthless in the maintenance of its power.

(b) The increasing conflict over the working of Jesus.

Specifically the works of Jesus presented undeniable evidence of His messianic claims. But, aha!, a gaping loophole appeared which only blind bigotry could discern: “He was breaking/releasing the binding force of the Sabbath” (7:23; 10:35), that is bringing about its abolition. The fact of a man having been radically healed was of no consequence. He was literally “loosing” the constraints of the Sabbath, whereas the Jewish leaders had made tying up the Sabbath an art form. The interminable imperfects here suggest almost a flurry of liberating
ministry on Jesus’ part that would inevitably disenfranchise the Jewish hierarchy.

(c) The increasing conflict over the person of Jesus.

However the charge of Sabbath breaking paled before the more serious indictment of blasphemy. “But [Jesus] was also calling God His own Father, making Himself equal with God” (cf. Phil. 2:6). The Jews plainly understood this claim better than the Arians and Jehovah’s Witnesses. Here was a man at full bloom, a Nazarene, a friend of publicans and sinners, claiming to be “the Son of God,” not simply “a son of God” (10:33; 19:7). In affirming God as “My Father,” not simply “our Father, Jesus’ meaning transcends the common understanding (I Chron 29:10; Isa. 1:2; 63:16; 64:8) since he speaks of having come from and returning to the Father (3:13, 34; 5:37; 14:12; 16:10, 28). Consequently Jesus is implicitly declaring that He is the Son of God, which Messianic title is elsewhere affirmed (Luke 1:35; John 1:34, 49; 3:18; 5:25; 9:35-8; 10:36; 11:4; 20:31). Further Jesus never attempted to repudiate the accusation, but rather justified it according to greater explanation and further evidence (5:18-23, 26-27, 36-38, 43).

H. THE WITNESS OF CHRIST’S RELATIONSHIP WITH HIS FATHER, 5:19-47.

A submissive and loyal son will be quick to confess, and imitate, the virtues of his father. Such boasting results from an intimate, filial union that leads to obedience, admiration, likeness. Hence a wise and respectful son will learn from watching his father at work, and often obtain a profitable trade. As a result he will work after the distinctive style and manner of his father; there will be a similarity of creative productivity. If anyone should be critical of the son, he is at the same time being critical of his father, who will respond accordingly.

When Jesus Christ was raised as the son of Joseph, and thus was called “the carpenter’s son” (Matt. 13:55), it is highly likely that the young Nazarene became a craftsman, a woodworker, τεκτόν, tekton, through the tutelage and example of his father. Whatever Joseph fashioned, Jesus likewise learned to make. Indeed, from Mark 6:3 it could be inferred that, Joseph having died, Jesus earned a living as a carpenter in support of his mother. Hence the following discourse of Jesus, stimulated by his bold confession of vs. 17-18, may well be drawing upon his earthly experience so as to illustrate his heavenly relationship. If the Jews appear to be offended at the manner in which Jesus speaks of “My Father,” Jesus is swift to unashamedly expound upon this beloved theme. This Son boasts in His Father as has no earthly counterpart!

1. The witness of the Son to His Father, vs. 19-30.

For Jesus Christ, the priority of His Father was of supreme importance, as the following exhortation makes plain (cf. 4:34). Ryle comments in this regard: “Nowhere else in the Gospels do we find our Lord making such a formal, systematic, orderly, regular statement of His own unity with the Father, His Divine commission and authority, and the proofs of His Messiahship, as we find in this discourse. To me it
seems one of the deepest things in the Bible.” However, for the average Christian today, such a glorious perspective of the Father is all but lost because of ignorance of the doctrine of the Trinity. In 1981 a significant book was published called The Forgotten Father in which an Anglican vicar turned from his Charismatic beliefs because of a misplaced pneumaticism. The priority of the Father, especially for the Lord Jesus, forced him to turn from a Trinitarian perversion.

a. The subordination of the Son to the Father, vs. 19-23.

Here is a sublime corrective for out-of-focus “Jesuolatry;” the Son functions in adoring subordination to His Father, yet He maintains essential equality with the Father. Here we reach the end of human comprehension. As Ryle explains: “I want more light,” says proud man. God gives him his desire in this chapter, and lifts up the veil a little. But behold, we are dazzled by the very light we wanted, and find we have not eyes to take it in.”

(1) The Son copies the works of the Father, v. 19.

“Therefore Jesus answered and was saying to them: ‘Truly, truly [emphatically], I say to you, the Son is not able to do anything of Himself except whatever He sees the Father doing. For whatever that One does, the Son also does likewise.’” The function of a son is primarily to reproduce the thought and action of his father. A master violin craftsman trains his son in his skilled occupation, and then sees in him not only his own nature and essence, but also his craftsmanship (cf. v. 17). As the essence of a stream is inseparable from its spring, so Jesus Christ is by nature the same as his Father. Hence, “He who has seen Me has seen the Father” (14:9). As Barrett comments: “This is at once a humble acknowledgment and a lofty claim.”

The “humility” is in the freely confessed subordination; the “lofty claim” is in the filial relationship and place of abode (1:18), the identical occupation that requires identical character. It is this element of exalted, appointed occupation that now receives a threefold exposition.

(2) The Father appoints the works of the Son, v. 20-22.

As Joseph trained the young Jesus how to follow a drawing, to use various tools, to shape wood, to assemble and join pieces, to complete a construction, so the Father in heaven has provided His divine Son with a greater vocation, using a gospel blueprint, to the end that new soul-creations might be fashioned. Now follows a description of some of that imparted saving craftsmanship.

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118 Thomas Smail, The Forgotten Father, pp. 189.
120 Barrett, John, p. 214.
(a) The Son is appointed to *great* works, v. 20.

“For the Father affectionately loves [φιλέω, philēō, cf. ἀγαπάω, agapēō, 3:35] the Son and shows Him all things that He Himself is doing; and the Father will show Him works greater than you have recently witnessed, so that you may marvel/be astonished.” In accord with the “bosom” relationship of 1:18, the full plan of redemption is unfolded to the Son. But why does the Father love the Son? Because He is of His very being, of His likeness; because He is an agreeable Son (4:34); because He is an obedient, adoring Son (17:11, 25). For these reasons the Father lavishes upon Him every responsibility and honor He is able to bestow (Ps. 2:8). Hence the Son is commissioned to perform “greater works” than heretofore. The physical healing of sinners is one thing, but the saving of their leprous souls is something infinitely more glorious. The catalogue of miracles to date will pale before the vast prospective work of salvation, its numeric, geographic, redemptive, eternal dimensions. Believers will be rapturously amazed; unbelievers will be uncomfortably amazed. Hence consider the description of His future resurrection and judgment ministries, from His own lips!

(b) The Son is appointed to *resurrection* works, v. 21.

“For just as the Father raises the dead and [in so doing] imparts life, so also the Son gives life to whoever He wishes.” The Jews that Jesus addresses uniformly believed that resurrection power exclusively belonged to God, their Father (Deut. 32:39; I Sam. 2:6; II Kings 5:7). Furthermore the rare instances of Elijah and Elisha raising the dead, by means of mediated power, only enhance this exclusivity. Such occasions involved strictly physical resurrection, whereas here the strong inference is that Jesus provides comprehensive resurrection that encompasses the soul, not merely the body. Further, Jesus’ distinctive ability to “give life/make alive,” ζωοποιέω, zōoipoieō, is according to His own sovereign determination. As God “breathed into his [Adam’s] nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being” (Gen. 2:7), so the Son of God likewise imparts life to the lifeless. Here the claims of human autonomy in salvation are disqualified; they are absurd since here they would require the cooperation of the dead in its own resurrection. Rather Jesus simply anticipates the declaration of Paul that, “when we were dead in our transgressions, [God] made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)” (Eph. 2:5; cf. 5:14). The life of salvation comes by grace, as does the divine choice.

(c) The Son is appointed to *judgment* works, v. 22.

“For not even the Father judges anyone, but He has given all judgment to the Son.” The claim of blasphemy in v. 18 was well appreciated by Jesus; his subsequent responses leave no doubt as to his essential agreement with the charge of claiming to be deity. His boast of greater accomplishments in v. 20, His claim to independent resurrection power in v. 22, and now His claim to be the appointed Judge at the end of the
age (Matt. 7:21-23) all assert the truth of His indictment. Once more Paul makes the same point (Acts 17:31). Again, the Jews understood that God was the ultimate judge of all (Gen. 18:25). Here Jesus the Jew affirms a staggering appointment that requires qualifications equal with those belonging to God. The language here, as with vs. 20-21, adds to Jesus’ revelation of Himself as being not an employed deputy or envoy, but rather the only begotten Son of God. Judge God the Son is due the same honor as is Judge God the Father. In other words, to presently reject Jesus is to come under His immediate judgment (3:18-19), with the prospect of eventually standing before Him at the great and final day of judgment (Rev. 20:11-15). Obviously His sentences, judgments are in total harmony with the holy will of His Father. However to presently believe in Jesus is to pass from judgment unto life (5:24).

(3) The Son claims the honor of the Father, v. 23.

However truth has consequences so that the lofty claims of Jesus in vs. 20-23 are not those that can be treated with indifference, nonchalance, a take it or leave it attitude, mere cool cognition, as Jesus now makes unambiguously clear. While vs. 20-23 present vital truth that is to be believed, yet here truth believed is validated by the offering of honor to the Son, and thus to the Father. This present revelation of Jesus himself has been for the purpose, “that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father who has sent Him.” To “honor the Son” is to revere his claims, to yield to him unconditionally, obediently as the divine Son of God. Then, to avoid any misunderstanding, leaving no doctrinal wriggle room, he further expounds: “Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent Him.” In plain terms Jesus is saying, “If you do not honor or know Me, you do not honor or know God!” D. A. Carson rightly concludes: “Either John is supremely deluded and must be dismissed as a fool, or his witness is true and Jesus is to be ascribed the honors due God alone. There is no rational middle ground.”

In other words, this Jesus alone settles the destiny of the human soul! Does this offend you? Does it seem to lack broadmindedness? If so, you could not possibly be a Christian, for he bows before this truth as did Thomas, and declares, “My Lord and my God!” (20:28; cf. 9:35-38).

b. The proclamation of the Son as the mediator of eternal life, vs. 24-25.

The intimate, exalted relationship between Jesus Christ and his Father continues to be the dominant truth that is being communicated, except that now with greater emphasis. There is no controversy amongst the Jews concerning belief in the Father, the only Lord and Jehovah. What is at question is the astounding claim of Jesus regarding his relationship to this Father. Consider vs. 16-23 thus far. This takes us to the heart of the question as to why exclusive faith in Christ is the supreme issue for any person. It concerns Jesus’ own claims about himself, which he now underscores with unblushing boldness and forcefulness. The religious world of Jesus’ day did not take kindly to his lofty, uncompromising

claims. Likewise today the religious world reacts with a similar dislike for such an exclusive, unaccommodating Jesus.

(1) The saving transition from death to life through hearing faith, v. 24.

“Truly, truly, I say to you that whoever hears and believes in the One who sent me has eternal life and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life.” When we intend to make an emphatic, significant statement, usually we have our favorite attention getting expression, such as: “Listen to me!” or, “Let me make myself plain!” So Jesus used this “verily, verily” to underline the truth he was about to pronounce. In this instance, there is also the intimation of the authority of the Father since Jesus has been sent by the Father. This is the sixth of twenty-five references to “verily, verily,” in John. But in vs. 19, 25, the emphasis is repeated. In other words, this truth about Jesus from Jesus, as profound and vital as it undoubtedly appears, is not intended simply for theologians, but rather people in general. In other words, Jesus is calling out, “Hear ye, hear ye!”

(a) The positive aspect, eternal life received.

There is an assumption here that man does not have “eternal life” (6:53). In other words, it is not that man lacks life without end, but rather the life of God in his soul. Thus in I John 5:11, 20, “And the testimony is this, that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. . . . We know that the Son of God has come, and has given us understanding so that we may know Him who is true; and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life.” But such a prospect is meaningless unless a person admits to a great void in his soul, emptiness. Hence Jesus Christ has not come merely to give longer life, but “resurrection life” (5:29), “abundant life” (10:10), life through the knowledge of the Father; “This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God” (17:3).

However, it is to be noticed here that this life, this awakening conversion, comes through “hearing the word of the Son” who opens up the way for “belief in the Father who sent the Son” (cf. Rom. 4:24; I Pet. 1:21; 3:18). Hence the hearing here is implicitly a glad welcome which Christ later describes as when, “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them” (10:27). In welcoming the word of the Son, it is inevitable that heartfelt belief in the Father, who sent the Son, follows. Consequently the Father delights in this devotion toward Himself that the Son has stimulated. Here then is a clear indication of the saving work of the Triune God; it is most natural in the revelation here of the Son’s emphatic gospel declaration.

(b) The negative aspect, judgment passed.

Here is the reverse side of this evangelistic proclamation from the very lips of Jesus. The presumption is that man is subject to judgment,
indeed unavoidably, relentlessly journeying toward a disastrous day of moral, holy accountability before God. Why the peril? Because his present condition is identified with “death,” surely death in the soul, as a living, breathing, active, energetic, spiritual corpse who is captive to sin. Here “death” is not concerned with personal extinction. This person’s body is active, ever pursuing the offerings of this world, its man-centered agenda, everything that Vanity Fair offers, but his soul is dead to God and heaven and eternal truth and the need of righteousness (Eph. 2:1-3). This is the point of Jesus in declaring, “Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps My word he will never see [spiritual] death” (8:50-51; cf. I John 3:14).

But the Son of God has bridged earth and heaven, judgment and pardoning mercy, death and life. There is no place here for a “purgatory.” The great practical question for anyone is whether they will soberly, honestly, humbly listen to what Jesus has to say and believe in him and his saving work, planned by his Father. This same gospel plan was revealed even to Moses (Deut. 18:15-19). It is the only basis for having life in this life rather than death in this life. It is the only basis for having life in the world to come rather than death in the world to come.

(2) The saving transition from death to life through hearing, v. 25.

The Jewish orthodoxy of Jesus’ auditors, in believing in a future day of resurrection, could have easily understood v. 24 with regard to that final apocalyptic day of reckoning when all the graves are opened and all men stand before God’s judgment throne. This could remain the perspective even if some of the addressees acknowledged that Messiah Jesus would be the judge at that future time of accountability. But here Jesus expands our understanding of his saving justification, of his causing the dead to receive life. He emphatically explains that there is a present judgment, not only for those refusing to hear who thus remain dead in their souls (3:18), but also for those hearing believers who are raised to life, right now. Then in vs. 28-29 he also upholds a future day of bodily resurrection judgment for those unbelieving and believing hearers. In other words, at the present “an hour is coming and now is” (cf. 4:23) when those who hear, with genuine acceptance Jesus’ messianic proclamation of himself as the Son of God, will immediately discover that their dead souls have been converted to living souls. Suddenly, “old things [will have] passed away; behold new things [will] have come” (II Cor. 5:17; cf. John 9:25; I John 3:14). This regeneration is similarly described by Paul: “You also, after listening to the message of the truth, the gospel of your salvation—having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise” (Eph. 1:13). Hence, there is life for the dead now! However it is important to note that Jesus continues strenuously to declare that he alone, “the voice of the Son of God,” is the judge of all men both now and at the end of this age. He will deal with that future aspect in a short while. But for the moment his concern is the avoidance of judgment now, and the obtaining of life in place of death now.
c. The proclamation of the Son as the judge of all, vs. 26-30.

Jesus now seems to anticipate a crucial question that is probably evident on the faces of his audience. It concerns his authority for making such astounding claims about the present, and especially that he is Judge Jesus from heaven appointed by Judge Jehovah. If life from the dead is available now, then Jesus needs to uphold his authority now.

(1) The present judgment of the Son, vs. 26-27.

Again, we are confronted with compelling evidence, in a world filled with religious gurus, why we should commit our soul’s destiny exclusively to Jesus of Nazareth. The Son of God has already told us why, and he now continues to provide further compelling evidence. He boldly places himself at the center of human destiny. Without blinking he proclaims himself to be the crux of the matter concerning life or death and judgment. Further his life and works are in full support of that which he speaks. Other religious claimants make verbal claims, but their lives indicate that they are frauds, charlatans. So in 10:37-38 Jesus pleads: “If I do not do the works of My Father, do not believe Me; but if I do them, though you do not believe Me, believe the works, so that you may know and understand that the Father is in Me, and I in the Father.” So here Jesus places great store on backing up his authority with substantial evidence, in particular his life being the life of his Father and his resultant unique capacity for imparting spiritual life to the spiritually dead. It is impossible for gurus who are dead to God in their souls to impart the life of God!

(a) The source of the Son’s judgment authority, v. 26.

One of the prominent distinguishing characteristics of the God of Israel is that He is the “living God” in contrast with the multitudes of lifeless pagan gods (Josh. 3:10; Jer. 10:3-5, 8-10). As such he is not mute, deaf, dumb, and asleep, but active in creation, providence, and redemption, as Paul enjoined the pagans at Lystra to “turn from these vain things [Zeus, Hermes] to a living God” (Acts 14:12-15). Furthermore this life of God is not derived, but, as here, “in Himself.” So Peter declared of Jesus, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matt. 16:16), and so this same Jesus declares of himself here: “For just as the Father has life in Himself [independently], in the same manner also He has given to the Son to have life in himself.” But this life did not come at Jesus’ earthly birth since at the beginning, “in Him life was existing” (1:4).

So the Son here likewise has “life in Himself.” The point is that the life of God is available through His Son now, through faith, and not at the end of this age at the day of resurrection. This same truth is expressed by Jesus in 6:57: “As the living father sent Me, and I live because of the Father, so he who eats Me [earnestly believes in Me], he also will live because of Me.” Again in 1 John 1:1-2, of “the Word of Life” we are told that this “life was manifested, and we have seen and testify and
proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was
manifested to us.” Yet once more in I John 5:11: “God has given us
eternal life, and this life is in His Son.” This was the point of v. 25 that
“now” life is available for those who “hear,” that is life for those who,
though physically alive, are possessed by death, v. 24b.

(b) The appointment of the Son’s judgment authority, v. 27.

However for those who do not welcome the voice of the Son of God,
the alternative to life is judgment, present consignment followed by
future sentencing, vs. 28-29. Jesus is also qualified in this realm because
he is “Son of Man,” not only having identity with humankind, but also
being the promised one having “everlasting dominion” (Dan. 7:13-
14). The point then is that “now” is the day of salvation (II Cor. 6:1-
2), and “now” is the day of judgment, the dividing of men (3:18), and
to Jesus Christ has been given the dual roles of Savior (3:17) and Judge
(5:22; 9:39; 12:31). He is the great discriminator, consigning to life or
death. Hence this earthly life is not a time for entertainment, for
indulgent opportunity, for living it up to the full, for extracting from it
every possible form of achievement. This is the life of death. To such
Jesus Christ addresses them as “fools,” like the man who took Christ’s
words lightly and built his life upon sand (Matt. 7:26), or the five
foolish virgins who regarded Christ’s instruction negligently (Matt.
25:2), or the rich man who regarded Christ’s claims as being of little
came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” This has nothing
to do with life identified with this world. It is not the life that the health
spa speaks about as “total fitness.” Rather the life that Jesus Christ
speaks of and provides is the life of God that makes us alive unto God
(Rom. 6:11)! It is “[God’s] divine power [that] has granted to us
everything pertaining to life and godliness” so that we become
“partakers of the divine nature” (II Pet. 1:3-4).

(2) The future judgment of the Son, vs. 28-29.

One of the most common complaints of secular man, when faced with a
seeming inexplicable human tragedy, especially some affront to his moral
sensibilities, is the complaint, as if directed toward heaven: “Where is the
justice of it all? Where is your God in the midst of this?” Often such a
complaint is made without ever having given any glad acknowledgment of
God’s goodness in some more pleasant circumstance. However, more often
the cry is for justice “out there,” so to speak, while with regard to ourselves
the plea is simply for mercy rather than justice! But in Jesus Christ mercy and
justice kiss one another (Ps. 84:10). In vs. 25-27, there is the present offer of
life, the rejection of which results in present judgment. But life goes on with
its seeming inequities, and people who are living under the judgment of God

122 Refer to Barrett, Carson, Morris.
appear to be totally untroubled. So Jesus then responds in vs. 28-29 concerning the future ultimate moral resolution of all things, the day of final, inescapable judgment. Then there will be judgment for others, and myself!

(a) His voice will call all men, v. 28.

“Do not marvel [θαυμάζω, wonder, be perplexed, astonished] at this, because an hour [in the future] is coming in which all those in the tombs shall hear his voice.” The audience here was comprised, in the main, of orthodox Jews who believed in a future day of judgment. So a present sense of spiritual resurrection and judgment seemed strange. Hence Jesus responds to this bewilderment. His voice, the voice of Judge Lord Jesus will be heard by all yet again, this time in fulfillment of Daniel 12:2. Once more the Son of God boldly presents himself as the judge of all men (Matt. 7:21-23; cf. John 1:51; 3:18-19). Surely this is a different, subsequent “hearing” to that of vs. 24-25. Then the response was either glad, welcome submission, or defiant, arrogant rejection. Now the voice heard is remembered as that which was previously heard. For some, it is a happy recognition, the fulfillment of hope; for others it is a fearful portent of that which they had attempted, with difficulty, to brush aside, namely accountability, guilt, consequences, in the face of judgment. Now they face He who they had conveniently spurned!

(b) His voice will divide all men, v. 29.

“And those coming forth doing the good [τὰ ἀγαθά, the good things] unto a resurrection of life, but those practicing evil deeds [τὰ φαῦλα, the worthless, contemptible things] unto a resurrection of judgment.” At this future occasion there will be no option of walking away as before. There will be a command that cannot be resisted. The power of God shall raise all of the dead, elect and non-elect, believer and unbeliever. What then will distinguish these two groups? Justifying works, however not those which obtain pardon but rather those which authenticate saving faith (Eph. 2:8-10; Jas. 2:18-26). Salvation is by faith alone, yet true faith is never alone in terms of its fruit. To such people who have this authentic productive faith, there is no condemnation, no judgment (Rom. 8:1), v. 24. Bishop Ryle draws four conclusions here:

1) “This passage condemns those who believe that this present world is all there is, so that death ends everything.” Certainly many hope that death ends everything; they want to do all they can without consequences. But the authority of the Son of God utterly discredits this. To them resurrection is a fearful prospect because it promises that light will shine on the hidden, shameful crevices of the soul. At that day there will be no clever questions, no plausible

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123 Ryle, John, I, p. 301.
excuses, no bargaining, simply trembling at total exposure, erupting guilt, and speechless fear.

2) “This passage condemns those who teach that there is no time of future punishment, no hell, only love and mercy.” Here Jesus Christ himself categorically declares there will be a day of moral accountability and separation, the distinction being based upon the unchanging righteousness of God, with eternal consequences. Here love will be understood as being conditioned by holiness, not vague sentiment.

3) “This passage condemns those who teach only a resurrection of believers, since the wicked will be punished with annihilation.” But here our hope is not to be simply in resurrection, but “a resurrection of life,” that is of “the just” (Matt. 25:46; Acts 24:15). The reason is that the unjust will also rise. Death will not be a hiding place; the wicked shall also be raised to life, dressed in their unrighteousness, their naked, visible shame.

4) “This passage condemns those who teach that men’s lives are of little importance as long as they profess faith in Christ.” Here the Lord Jesus in no way denies the truth of the particularity of grace, of those given to him by the Father (6:37-39). Here he simply describes the resultant character of those who he will save. They shall produce “good deeds” being partakers of the life of God.

(3) The dependant judgment of the Son, v. 30.

“I Myself am not able to do anything by Myself; just as I hear, [so] I judge, and my judgment is just because I do not seek My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me.” It is well to understand that while Jesus speaks of his Father in such intimate, exclusive and dependant terms, as in v. 19, at the same time he is talking of, “My Father who glorifies Me, of whom you say, ‘He is our God’” (8:54). Here is further indication of why Jesus was charged with blasphemy; His dependant relationship was not simply that which any devout Jew might express, but the dependency of the unique Son of God. This is further born out by the fact that the role of judge that Jesus claims here is certainly not that which any devout Jew might claim, but again that which is the exclusive office of Judge Jehovah that will yet be exercised, according to delegation, through His Son at that future day of judgment, vs. 28-29. Thus Jesus’ confession, “As I hear, I judge,” reflects an audience with His Father as has no earthly mortal. The same can be said of v. 19 where Jesus can only do that which, “He sees the Father doing,” as does no earthly mortal. However, the fact that the Son will judge so impeccably at that time only enhances the present, awesome portrayal of his righteous person that so astonishes the Jews! The question that remains then concerns reliable evidence, apart from Jesus’ mere say-so, that would corroborate his unique claims. Such credible testimony, that surely must invoke more concrete persuasion than mere verbal self-witness, is now forthcoming from Jesus in fourfold form.
2. The witness of the Father to the Son, vs. 31-32.

We are introduced to a significant word for John, “to witness,” μαρτυρέω, martureō, and its noun form, “testimony,” μαρτυρία, marturia, both words being used eleven times in vs. 31-39, with greater concentration than in any other portion of John’s writings. The Jewish audience was well aware that for valid testimony concerning criminal charges, the Law required “two or three witnesses” (Deut. 19:15). Hence, in surely reading the hearts of his opponents, Jesus responds to the legal objection that his astounding claims were quite unsupported by additional concrete witnesses (cf. 8:12-18). Should this be so, He would be guilty as charged, v. 18. However for himself, any proof outside of Jesus’ intimate filial relationship with His Father was totally unnecessary. But for the sake of His audience, more objective proof at their level was readily, graciously offered with the intent that some might be saved.

a. The independent witness of Jesus concerning the Son is invalid, v. 31.

“If I myself am witnessing concerning Myself, My witness is not true/valid.” In 8:14 Jesus seems to say the opposite, “Even if I testify about Myself, My testimony is true, because I know from where I came and where I am going.” But here Jesus is simply conforming to the legal, earthly standard that is commonly associated with human estimate, without reference to His passion for His Father’s holy will. However in 8:14 he speaks of His ultimate heavenly status in terms of regal authority upheld by His Father in that ultimate court, “from where he has come and where He is going.” Heaven is a theocracy, not a democracy, and there King Jesus is not on trial, nor is His testimony to be challenged! There His vindication by His Father is unquestioned. But here He submits to the law of man in the presence of man for the cause of man.124

b. The independent witness of the Father concerning the Son is valid, v. 32.

“There is another who is testifying concerning Me, and I know that the testimony which He is testifying concerning Me is true.” Because of His heavenly status and origin, the Son first draws upon the ultimate witness to His authenticity, and that is the present ongoing testimony of His Father.125 This concerns what “I know,” as Jesus puts it, concerning the whole eternal relationship between the Father and the Son (3:35). At this level, the testimony of the Father is supreme, absolutely “true,” even as occasionally voiced from heaven (12:27-28). It results from the periodic interaction of the Son with the Father (Matt. 11:25; Luke 22:42; John 12:27; 17:1, 11, 25). However Jesus elsewhere indicates that his skeptical audience knows nothing about this relationship and evidence (vs. 37-38; cf. 8:14; 54-55). But this will not deter Him; evidence concerning John the Baptist, Jesus’ significant works, and Scripture, are to be evangelistically employed.

124 Hendriksen explains: “The true solution, as we see it, will be found when we realize that Jesus is speaking the language of the people, the vernacular. . . . Jesus simply means, ‘If I testify concerning myself, my testimony is not true in your estimation.” John, p. 206.

125 Chrysostom, Gill, and Lightfoot identify John the Baptist here. However the greater weight of Alford, Bengel, Barrett, Bruce, Calvin, Carson, Morris, Plummer, Ryle, Westcott, identify the Father, and point out the support of the present tense of μαρτυρέω, martureō, here in contrast with the perfect tense in v. 33 and the imperfect tense of εἰμι, eimi, in v. 35 concerning John, who has now been martyred.
3. The witness of John the Baptist to the Son, vs. 33-35.

Here is our final encounter in this Gospel with Jesus’ cousin, and it involves recollection, not direct testimony, for John has now been imprisoned by Herod Antipas, if not martyred.

a. It was a testimony of truth, v. 33.

“You have sent to John and he has testified to the truth.” Jesus reminds his auditors of their earlier enquiry, “when the Jews sent to him [John] priests and Levites from Jerusalem” (1:19). At that time John was most emphatic: “I am not the Christ” (1:20). But of Jesus he declared: “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (1:29). Hence here is a powerful testimony by an acknowledged prophet. Thus Jesus is saying: “You may be alienated concerning the witness of heaven that I have told you about; but here is concrete evidence on earth that cannot easily be ignored, and at the same time this truth agrees with that of My Father in heaven. If you give legitimacy to John, then why not to Myself?”

b. It was a testimony of the evangel, v. 34.

“For I Myself am not receiving/welcoming the testimony derived from man; but I am saying these things so that you might be saved.” Here is a profound comment with regard to Jesus’ consciousness of His ministry. He is not at all concerned about personal vindication (2:25); He is not even saying, “Thank you very much,” to John the Baptist. The evidence that Jesus recommends is not for the purpose of justifying himself; the Father in heaven is all that He needs in this regard, whether man is aware of it or not. What does greatly concern the Son of God is “that you may be saved!” Here is a reflection of the heart of Jesus, of His priority in dealing with men, of the reason for His coming. If you ask, “Saved from what?” the answer given in v. 29b is, “a resurrection of judgment.” If you ask, “Saved unto what?” the answer given in v. 29a is “a resurrection of life.” The same distinction is made in v. 24. Jesus Christ did many things in His earthly ministry, but they are all means that have a singular, saving goal (Mark 10:45; Luke 19:10; I Tim. 1:15).

c. It was a testimony of proclamation, v. 35.

Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones tells of a church synod in Wales where two professors of theology preached and were critiqued by an astute old preacher in the assembly. Of the first professor he declared, “Light without heat.” Of the second he declared, “Heat without light.” The point was well made that a good preacher will have both the light of truth and the heat of fervency. Thus, “Light without heat never effects anybody; heat without light is of no permanent value.” So the Lord Jesus gives his stamp of approval to this same principle when he resorts to further substantial proof of his claim to be the Son of God through the preaching ministry of John the Baptist. “That one [John the Baptist] was the lamp that was burning and shining, and you desired to rejoice/be glad at the hour [time] in which

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his light [shone].” Jonathan Edwards makes the same point as that of Lloyd-Jones in an ordination sermon using this description of John the Baptist.

[He] was a burning light, as he was full of the Holy Ghost from his mother’s womb, having his heart warmed and inflamed with a great love to Christ. . . . [He] was animated with a holy zeal in the work of the ministry: he came, in this respect, in the spirit and power of Elias. . . . [He was also] a shining light: he was so in his doctrine, having more of the gospel in his preaching than the former prophets, or at least the gospel exhibited with greater light and clearness. . . . [He] gave knowledge of salvation to God’s people.  

Therefore we would conclude here that the best testimony to this Savior is that which both burns and shines. The Lord Jesus himself acknowledges the great effectiveness of this type of ministry.

However, the particular point here is that this respected prophet of Israel, concerning whom the Apostle John adamantly declares, “He was not the Light,” τὸ φῶς, to phōs (1:8), yet in passionately preaching before Israel was most persuasive as “the lamp/light reflector,” τὸ λυχνος, to luchnos. So popular was the Baptist at that time that many of the Jews, including some of their leaders, were overjoyed at the prospect of Messiah’s appearance, with attending salvation (Matt. 3:5, 7), at least for a short while. Hence, in effect Jesus is saying: “Where now is your former excitement? John specifically identified Myself as the Messiah, as ‘He who comes after me,’ 1:27, as the ‘Lamb of God,’ 1:29, as the ‘baptizer in the Holy Spirit,’ 1:33, as the ‘Son of God,’ 1:34. What further evidence do you now require?”

4. The witness of Jesus’ works to the Son v. 36.

As v. 34 indicated, Jesus is not slack in offering as much persuasive evidence as His overflowing gracious interest in the salvation of men will allow. Thus He proposes serious consideration of far greater witness. “But I Myself have the greater witness than John, for the works which the Father has given to Me to accomplish, the very works which I do, these witness concerning Me that the Father has sent Me.” What are the “works,” τὰ ἔργα, ta erga, of Jesus here? In a comprehensive sense they are the “works” which the Father has directed the Son to accomplish, even “greater works” in the future (5:19-20). More particularly they are the “signs” that are to indicate the significance of Jesus (20:30-31), that is His having come from the Father as the saving Son of God (10:25). Whereas John the Baptist “performed no sign” (10:41), Jesus performed countless “signs,” that is “miracles.” These were divine, heaven wrought “works” on the stage of this world that were unique (15:24), especially because of their source (4:34; 14:10; 17:4), being collectively the “work” of the Father (4:34; 17:4).

However, from the perspective of the present audience, Jesus indicates that He has already performed many “works” that support His present claims. The miracle at Cana that pointed to the significance of Jesus as new wine for the soul (2:1-11), the cleansing of the temple that pointed to Jesus’ messianic zeal for true worship of the Father (2:13-22), the Passover feast “signs” before a vast crowd that even caught the serious attention of a great Jewish scholar (2:23; 3:2), the healing of the nobleman’s son that

led to the conversion of an important government household (4:46-54), the authoritative synagogue teaching ministry that led to the healing of a demoniac on the sabbath and a spreading reputation (Mark 1:21-28), the healing of Peter’s mother-in-law that led to the whole city of Capernaum coming to the door of Jesus’ residence and consequent numerous healings (Mark 1:29-34), the compassionate healing of a leper at Capernaum that resulted in overwhelming crowds (Mark 1:40-45), the innovative rooftop invasion of Peter’s house that led to the healing of a paralytic and the forgiveness of his sins (Mark 2:1-12), the healing of the lame man at the pool of Bethesda during a feast of the Jews (5:1-9). This indeed was substantial testimony to the lofty personal claims that Jesus Christ has recently made, yet we are not halfway through the record of his earthly life.

5. The witness of the Father to the Son repeated, vs. 37-38.

Jesus Christ reverts here to His supreme passion, namely His intimate relationship with the Father, and especially the Father’s delight in testifying with regard to His Son, as v. 32 has already indicated. Of course the preceding evidence of Jesus’ works was but a manifestation of the Father’s appointed vocation for the Son. Like an earthly son who is wholly, adoringly devoted to his father, so Jesus asserts His delight in the Father’s exalted testimony concerning Himself, except that now He contrasts it, not with mere ignorance, but blatant, irresponsible, rebellious unbelief.

a. This testimony of the Father confronts deafness, v. 37a.

“And the Father who has sent Me, that one has witnessed concerning Me. You have neither heard His voice at any time.” But what is the witness here described? Probably it was that voice from heaven at Jesus’ baptism that declared, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased,” as well as the perceived manifestation of the descending Holy Spirit (Matt. 3:17; cf. Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:21-22; John 1:31-34). The point here is not primarily the absence at that time of those being presently addressed, though it is to be associated with their unbelief, v. 38. Rather, the Father audibly addressed the Son on earth and visibly poured out His Spirit upon Him; for the Son this was glorious, incontrovertible testimony, whether these Jews were present or not. Even so, at the time of Jesus’ baptism it was believers in the main who were there; John the Baptist heard and saw at that time, as John the Apostle probably did (I John 1:1-3). This was a result of the fact that they believed.

b. This testimony of the Father confronts blindness, v. 37b.

Further, “Nor have you seen His visible form/appearance [εἰδος eidos].” It is significant that at Jesus’ baptism, Luke records that, “the Holy Spirit descended upon Him in bodily form [σωματικὸς εἴδει, σωματικῶ εἰδεί]” (Luke 3:22). This would all the more confirm that here the Lord Jesus has His baptism in mind. In other words, the multitude that was baptized immediately prior to Jesus’ baptism (Luke 3:21), along with John the Baptist and John the Apostle, all witnessed the visible appearing of God the Holy Spirit. The presupposition of this revelation

128 In agreement here are Bengel, Bruce, Chrysostom, Gill. Others, Alford, Calvin, Carson, Hendriksen, Lightfoot, Ryle, Westcott, believe this witness is more general, through Scripture and the Spirit.
was the manifestation of faith, through John the Baptist’s ministry of proclamation. The baptism of Jesus was not designed as a display for skeptics. Hence Jesus is saying to his present audience, “There has been objective evidence not so long ago at the Jordan; many will testify of this witness; John the Baptist has. But you have neither seen or heard anything like this, other than the healing of the man at this pool called Bethesda; concerning this you still remain skeptical. However the reason you do not rightly appreciate all of this evidence is that you do not believe in Me and the Father who sent Me. Indeed, the evidence to believe is there, so that you choose not to believe; it does not suit your deaf and blind souls to believe. You have a man-centered religious agenda that conflicts with the truth that has accumulated in your soul; so much the worse for the truth” (cf. vs. 39-40).

c. This testimony of the Father confronts vacant hearts, v. 38.

“And you do not [presently] have His word abiding/residing in you because you are not believing [Him] this One whom [He] that One sent.” What a bold challenge this is to the Jews who so prided themselves with their knowledge of the Word of God. J. C. Ryle further explains.

This verse seems to remind the Jews that with all their pretended reverence for God, and affected zeal against blasphemies of Him, they were really ignorant of God’s mind. Their reverence for Him was only a form. Their zeal for Him was a blind fanaticism. They knew no more of His mind than of His shape or voice. They were not acquainted with His word; it did not dwell in their hearts and guide their religion. They proved their own ignorance by not believing Him whom the Father had sent.\(^\text{129}\)

Hence, in the light of v. 46, only when the Word of Scripture concerning Messiah is acknowledged to be fulfilled in Jesus Christ, only when we bow to this truth, only then do we have the Word of the Father legitimately abiding in our souls. Thus to bow is to submit to Jesus Christ, to confess Him as does the Father, “to believe Him [the Son] whom He [the Father] sent.” A real knowledge of the Word of God will always lead a man to saving faith in Christ. This Son of God does not so much teach that we see and therefore believe, but rather that we believe and then consequently see the evidence with such soul-absorbing clarity (20:25-29). Thus many, like the Jews here, although having a deposit, a system of Bible and theological truth, nevertheless have no spiritual life resulting from that truth. They have a rich inheritance while remaining irresponsible toward it, they have privilege while avoiding accountability, they have achievement while neglecting answerability. Here is the danger of scholasticism; but it is also the danger of growing up in a Christian family and environment!

6. The witness of the Scriptures to the Son, vs. 39-47.

Following on from the condemnation of the Jews by Jesus in vs. 37-38, especially the disarming comment, “You do not have His word abiding in you,” we are faced with the qualification that the Son of God draws between “learning” and “comprehension” concerning Scripture. This is a vital difference to make when it comes to distinguishing

biblical Christianity from religious interest. Learning is the accumulation of knowledge, the storage of data, the ingestion of facts, whereas comprehension is the personal embrace of knowledge, the personal relevance of data, the personal digestion or assimilation of facts. Learning may humanistically confess that Jesus Christ died, was buried, and raised from the dead. Comprehension is the personal, Spirit generated grasp of the truth that Jesus Christ died for me, was buried for me, was raised from the dead for me. Herein was the problem with the Jews, and indeed it is the problem every student of the Bibles faces. We might go further and state that to study the Bible is a dangerous exercise, resulting in either life or death!


With regard to the concrete evidence concerning Jesus Christ thus far, that is the testimony from John the Baptist and the miracle signs, none of these are comparable with the even more objective, fixed, tangible character of the written, inscripturated Word of God. This is why Peter seems to describe the prophetic Word of God as more sure than the revelation of the voice of God at the transfiguration of His Son (II Pet. 1:18-19).^{130}

(1) The testimony to Christ rejected, v. 39.

“You are searching^{131} the Scriptures because you think [that] in them you have eternal life, and those are the witnessing [testimonies/records/truths] concerning Me.” The devotion of the Jews to the study of the Word was manic, obsessive, which intense commitment was the object of self-admiration, even self-congratulation in their belief that such consecration earned eternal life. There was the understanding that God promised “eternal life” in the Old Testament (Gen. 2:9; 3:22; Deut. 30:19; Ps. 16:10-11; 21:1-4; 36:9; Jer. 21:8), yet the Jews were oblivious to its mediated source (Isa. 55:1-3; Jer. 2:13; Amos 5:4, 6; Hab. 2:4). Edersheim comments: “Their elaborate searching and sifting of the Law in hope that, by a subtle analysis of its every particle and letter, by inferences from, and a careful drawing of a prohibitive hedge around, its letters, they would possess themselves of eternal life, what did it all come to? [They were] utterly deceived, and far from the truth in their elaborate attempts to outdo each other in local ingenuity.”^{132} Paul the Apostle, formerly Rabbi Saul, had become proudly enmeshed in this bondage to a soul-deadening bibliolatry. He recounts that, “I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries among my countrymen, being more extremely jealous for my ancestral traditions” (Gal. 1:14). Upon conversion, did Paul’s regard for the written Word of God diminish? Not in the slightest. But, “when God . . . called me through His grace . . . to reveal

^{130} Charles Bigg, with support from Alford, follows this understanding of a comparison in revelation, and thus translates, “And even surer is the word of prophecy which we have,” St Peter and St. Jude, (ICC), pp. 267-69; contra is Joseph B. Mayor.

^{131} The indicative mood here is supported by Barrett, Bengel, Bruce, Carson, Hendriksen, Hoskyns, Lightfoot, Morris, Plummer, Westcott; the imperative mood, “Search the Scriptures,” as in the KJV, is supported by Alford, Augustine, Calvin, Chrysostom, Luther, Ryle.

^{132} Alfred Edersheim, The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah, I, p. 465.
His Son in me” (Gal. 1: 15-16), then Paul’s understanding of the Word changed. He further tells us that, “whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ, . . . [that is] rubbish so that I may gain Christ” (Phil. 3:7-8). There is a right bibliolatry (10:35; 17:17) when we comprehend Jesus Christ as the point of convergence in Scripture. In a sense, the Jew’s rigorous devotion to Bible study was not nearly as deficient as their focus; the Son of God’s fundamental point is that the law, the prophets, and the writings, all “testify about Me.”

(2) The testimony to eternal life rejected, v. 40.

“And you are not willing to come to Me in order that you May have life.” What is the reason for this unwillingness, this stubborn refusal to admit to the obvious in terms of the available evidence? It is principally a responsible blindness, a self-imposed blindness,\(^{133}\) to the Word of God. It is a feverish zeal for Bible truth that, although cerebrally absorbed, yet is not personally comprehended by the soul since Messiah Jesus, as the source of life, is not recognized. A man-centered agenda gets in the way. At seminary I heard a graduate of Harvard University relate how, during doctoral studies, a leading professor there declared concerning a biblical truth under discussion: “The heart of the matter is that you believe it and I don’t.” Again, the Old Testament does speak about eternal life, yet it is mediated solely through Jesus Christ: He will be “as a light to the nations” (Isa. 42:6); “He will sprinkle many nations” (Isa. 52:15). Yet as 3:19 reveals, “the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil,” and therefore they chose not to acknowledge the clear truth of Scripture.

(3) The testimony to the glory from God rejected, v. 41.

“I do not receive/welcome glory/honor from men.” In v. 34 Jesus has already repudiated any personal religious ambition. Here He is quick to further assure his audience that although He seeks their salvation through genuine faith in Himself, v. 34, and now He might appear frustrated, even critical, at the lack of response, yet His design is not personal accomplishment. He is not a religious scalp hunter, the recruiter of a personal following, the instigator of a new movement for His own sake. There are several instances in this Gospel alone of Jesus’ retreat from the opportunity of increased popularity (2:23-25; 4:1-3; 6:14-15, 25, 34; 12:17-19). He is wholly occupied with His vocation as the Son of God who has come to accomplish His Father’s will and receive His approbation; this is His principal ambition. Here also is a very significant principle for any Christian worker. Like his Master, he is not to seek personal acclaim, as easily as it may be obtained.

\(^{133}\) John Gill notes here: “Though man lies under such a disability, and has neither power nor will of himself to come to Christ for life; yet his not coming to Christ, when revealed in the external ministry of the Gospel, as God’s way of salvation, is criminal and blameworthy; since the disability and perverseness of his will are not owing to any decree of God, but to the corruption and vitiosity [impairment] of his nature, through sin.” The Cause of God and Truth, p. 33.
Rather he is to be dominated by the hope of “Well done!” by his heavenly Father.

(4) The testimony to the love of God rejected, v. 42.

“But I have known [perfect tense] you, that you do not have the love of [toward] God in yourselves.” There is intended stark contrast here between the sordid ambitions of religious men and the sacred ambition of Jesus. Here is a piercing denunciation that certainly proves Jesus’ claim in v. 41 that He does not seek to cultivate human recognition. His omniscience (2:24-24; 21:17) comprehends a panorama of a shameful past that leads to a present judgment that ought to cause any person to cringe with guilty fear. To declare to these monotheistic Jews that, “you do not have a love for God,” was a devastating, naked unveiling of religious pretense. Remember, these Jews were used to regularly reciting the “shemah,” יְהֹוָּה, “Here, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one! You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might” (Deut. 6:4-5). Further, this verse was contained in their phylacteries worn by a band across their foreheads. Hence, what would the Lord Jesus say to us today? There would only be two declarations, “you do not have a love for God,” or “you do have a love for God.” Which would it be? The answer could only be positive if, to quote v. 40, “you come to Me [Jesus] so that you may have life.”

b. The testimony of Christ rejected, v. 43-44.

The spurning of Jesus Christ as the Messiah of God by Israel in general, notwithstanding much objective evidence, vs. 33-40, does not result in a vacuum, only a far worse state. The Son of God taught this principle in Matthew 12:22-24, 43-45, where “the last state . . . becomes worse than the first.” Here we have illustrated the consequences of rejecting His ministry, namely a more serious condition than before that ministry was first confronted. The Pharisees were demonically possessed of evil until there came John the Baptist and Jesus with a period of temporal cleansing influence in Jewish society. However the Pharisees’ rejection of Jesus led to a much greater degree of demon possession and manifest evil, a flood of demons, that led to a far worse condition than before. Here Jesus makes the same point. If Israel does “not have the love of God [in not coming to Christ for life, v. 42],” then there will be an alternative devotion for “another.” In more broad terms, anyone who does not have a love for Christ will have a substitute love for another master.

(1) The welcome of Israel for another, v. 43.

“I myself have come in the name of My Father, and you are not receiving/welcoming Me. If another should come, in his own name, you will receive/welcome that one.” The third class conditional sentence here

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134 An objective genitive is more likely here meaning love toward God, so Alford, Barrett, Carson, Gill, Hendriksen, Morris, Plummer, Ryle, rather than a subjective genitive meaning love from God.
indicates probability. Thus, in the extreme perversity of Israel, the rejection of Christ will be followed by the acceptance of “another [shepherd],” in parallel with the singularity of Christ, not “others.” But who could this one be? Morris references sixty-four messianic claimants, over the centuries, according to Jewish historians.\textsuperscript{135} However the early church fathers were in general agreement that the Antichrist was here described, that is he who would deceive national Israel toward the end of this age.\textsuperscript{136} More recently others have agreed with this interpretation, representative being J. C. Ryle who comments: “I think it highly probable that the world may yet see a personal Antichrist arise, who will succeed in obtaining credence from a vast portion of the Jewish nation. Then, and not till then, when Antichrist has appeared, this verse will be completely accomplished.”\textsuperscript{137}

However, a particular proof of this identification is found in Zechariah 11 where God, having provided the Good Shepherd for Israel who is nevertheless paid off, disengaged, for a paltry “thirty [pieces] of silver” (Matt. 26:15; 27:9-10) vs. 4-14. He then appoints a substitute “foolish shepherd” who appears to be more welcome, vs. 15-17. Yet this “worthless shepherd” is utterly derelict in his shepherding duties; instead he devours, tears, and abandons the flock! He is surely the “Antichrist,” \textit{\textsuperscript{\textalpha}ντίχριστος}, antichristos, who will be both a substitute for and an opponent of the Christ of God (I John 2:18, 22; 4:3). According to Paul, he is “the man of lawlessness, . . . the son of destruction, who opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, displaying himself as being God.” However, this “lawless one . . . the Lord will slay with the breath of His mouth and bring to an end by the appearance of His coming; that is, the one whose coming is in accord with the activity of Satan, with all power and signs and false wonders” (II Thess. 2:3-4, 8-9). This is in clear harmony with the revelation in Daniel where a “little horn” is “waging war with the saints [Israel] and overpowering them until the Ancient of Days came and judgment was passed in favor of the saints of the Highest One.” This little horn “will speak out against the Most High and wear down the saints of the Highest One” (Dan. 7:7-8, 11, 19-26; 11:36-39; cf. Rev. 13:1-10). Again in simple terms, if man spurns God’s provision of grace, then God will substitute the provision of judgment, often mediated by human agency, as was the case with the Babylonian captivity.

(2) The welcome of Israel for human glory, v. 44.

A further substitution for the rejection of Christ is the indwelling of humanism. There is no vacuum in the human heart, but rather Christ or man and his appointed idols. So, “how are you able to believe when you are receiving/welcoming glory [\textdeltaοξa, doxa] from one another, and you do not seek the glory that is from the [one and] only God?” In other words, Jesus

\textsuperscript{135} Morris, \textit{John}, p. 333n.
\textsuperscript{136} Hoskyns, \textit{Fourth Gospel}, p. 275.
\textsuperscript{137} Ryle, \textit{John}, I, p. 322, also Alford, Pink.
explains that the hearts of His audience are wholly filled, brimful, with man, with self-aggrandizement, especially in the sphere of religion. So the welcome false messiahs, antichrists, and eventually the Antichrist, in recognizing this preoccupation, will promote self-betterment through their seductive proposals. Further they will scorn the personal, exclusive glory of Jehovah, as well as that revealed and communicated in Christ (17:1, 5, 22), that comes through faith and grace, upon the confession of personal corruption and guilt. Hence the only solution is the repudiation and evacuation of this humanism, this man-centeredness, in repentance, and the welcome inhabitation of the Lord Jesus alone, through faith; there is not room for both; they are mutually exclusive (Matt. 6:24). In other words, it is impossible, you are incapable of believing in Christ when you glory in yourself and others with back-scratching reciprocity. As Ryle puts it, unbelieving man, who dabbles in man’s religion, “is like a child sitting on the lid of his box, and wishing to open it, but not considering that his own weight keeps it shut.”

So it is impossible to open your heart to Christ when the weight of your boasting keeps it shut! The problem here is dishonesty with self, that is denial that I am the problem. In contrast Paul defines a true Jew as “one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God” (Rom. 2:29). Such a person is essentially God-centered, owned of God, constrained by God, not himself.

c. The testimony of Moses rejected, vs. 45-47.

As this encounter between Jesus and the Jews draws to an end, it is plain that the Son of God has been increasingly accusatory, cf. vs. 37-38, 40, 42, 43, 44. This in itself does not sit well with popular, sentimental views of Jesus. Such condemnation should be viewed in the light of His chief intent “to seek and to save that which was lost” (Luke 19:10), “that you may be saved” v. 34. Further it is likely the religious audience here conveys little respect for this supposed “Sabbath breaker” and “blasphemer,” v. 18. It is for this reason that Jesus calls upon a witness that the audience does respect, at least nominally, namely the revered Moses. According to tradition, he was assumed up into heaven, he “outweighed all other pious men. . . . [H]e surpassed also the entire creation that God brought forth in six days.”

It is as if Jesus, in suggesting a courtroom scene, tells the Jews that their vaunted leader, 9:28-29, in fact proves to be, for them, a hostile witness.

(1) His accusatory witness to Israel, v. 45.

“Do not think that I myself will accuse you before the Father. The one accusing you is Moses in whom you have hoped.” There is great force here in hypothetical reality. Ultimate judgment has been committed to the Son by the Father, v. 22. Moses in fact is not a witness at the end of the age. Nevertheless, theoretical testimony by Moses does condemn the accused.

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139 Louis Ginzberg, Legends of the Bible, p. 505.
However his damning evidence concerns, not so much the lawgiver’s sin revealing ministry (Deut. 31:26), but his Messiah promising ministry! The tragedy is that the Jews were so near to the truth, so full of it cerebrally speaking, and yet so far from it in terms of the heartfelt power of grace; they had a resolute hope in the revelation of Moses (9:28-29; Rom. 2:17) and yet were void of embrace of its essential, transforming gospel truth. The same is true for the fundamentalist today, the loyal creedalist, the lukewarm evangelical who is solidly, even militantly committed to the truth of Scripture and yet lacking in saving union with the Lord Jesus.

(2) His written witness of Christ, v. 46.

“For if you were believing Moses [though you really don’t], you would be believing Me, for that one wrote concerning Me.” To the Jew, the Law focused on promised blessing and cursing according to the response of obedience or disobedience. To the Son of God, the Law centered on something of far greater significance, Himself, as the Emmaus disciples learned. (Luke 24:27; cf. v. 44; John 5:39; Acts 3:20-21). In claiming that, “Moses wrote of Me,” certainly not some unknown editor, there is no blushing, no apology here. Jesus plainly claims that He is the hope of Israel (Jer. 14:8; 17:13). In other words, while “the Law [of Moses] came in so that the transgression would increase” (Rom. 5:20; cf. Gal. 3:19), yet that revelation also included the gospel truth that, “where sin increased, grace abounded all the more” (Rom. 5:20). Jesus is declaring that He is that grace incarnate, specifically promised by Moses. The key passage of Torah here would be Deuteronomy 18:15, cf. Acts 3:19-23; 7:37, yet a broad panorama is surely in mind (Gen. 3:15; 22:15-18; 48:15-16; 49:10; Num. 24:17). Both Moses and Elijah were present at the transfiguration of Jesus, and surely the conversation was about promise and fulfillment (Matt. 17:3). Hence they gladly yielded to He who they had earlier heralded, as well as the Father’s voice: “This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased; listen to Him!” (Matt. 17:5). Thus the knowledge of the Old Testament is a great aid to saving faith in the Lord Jesus.

(3) His comparative witness with Christ, v. 47.

“But if you do not believe the writings [γράμμα, gramma] of that one [Moses, and this is certainly true], how will you believe My words [ ῥῆμα, rhēma]?” The truth of v. 46 is now negatively expressed, but most appropriately when confronted with entrenched unbelief that yet is not ignorant of Scripture. Here is a timeless, perplexing phenomenon. The unbelief our Savior confronts is astonishingly related to a comprehensive knowledge of Scripture and doctrine that at the same time is void of the sanctifying grace and life of God in the soul. It is a problem that confronted Jewish family life, Jewish synagogue life, and Jewish Rabbinic life. And it is a problem today that similarly confronts Christian family life, Christian church life, and Christian college/seminary life. Paul describes such people as, “holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power” (II Tim. 3:5). In contrast, his ministry at Thessalonica was not “in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction” (I Thess.
1:5). But further, this religious posturing, that cloaked soul deadness, manifested itself in three areas.

(a) *The Bible as a whole*, accepted as grounded upon the writings of Moses, yet was practically rejected if not formally. There were Bibles in the home, but no Word of God hid in the heart (Ps. 119:11). Study of the Bible was filtered through a grid of self-importance. Ezekiel’s ministry of the Word was similarly received (Ezek. 33:30-33).

(b) *The person of Christ in particular*, his prominence in Scripture was hidden. The Jews were, to some degree, like the Ethiopian eunuch, in possession of the Bible, reading Isaiah 53, who was yet blind to the supremacy of a crucified Christ (Acts 8:26-35). Paul writes that, “whenever Moses is read [by the Sons of Israel], a veil lies over their heart” (II Cor. 3:14).

(c) *The work of Christ in particular*, his signs, were witnessed, examined, even acknowledged (3:2), yet repudiated! A man has just been publicly healed at the pool of Bethesda, so that Jesus declares, “the very works that I do—testify about Me, that the Father has sent Me,” v. 36. People often say, “But if I could see Jesus, then I would believe.” However, here people do see and will not believe. Jesus responds, in effect, “You have the Word of God; that is more than sufficient.” And today you have that same Word of God, and that is more than sufficient. If you reject it, other signs and wonders are of no use! It is a fearful thing to be well acquainted with the truth of Christianity, and yet be condemned by it!

I. **SIGN FOUR – CHRIST FEEDS THE HUNGRY MULTITUDE, 6:1-15.**

As this miracle is central in terms of John’s selection of seven signs, so it is similarly prominent in being the only such supernatural event recorded in all four gospels (Matt. 14:15-21; Mark 6:34-44; Luke 9:12-17), that is apart from the resurrection. Further, unlike the Synoptic Gospels, apart from the miracle at Cana, this is the only portion of John devoted to Jesus’ Galilean ministry. Between John 5-6, the apostle probably passes over almost a year of ministry that includes further Sabbath controversy, the Sermon on the Mount, numerous miracles, and substantial teaching by means of parables.

More recently Jesus has made his last visit to Nazareth. Following this he has sent out the twelve to heal and preach the gospel, of the dawning kingdom of heaven, to the lost sheep of the house of Israel in various Galilean villages. Upon returning to Jesus, the disciples have reported concerning their ministry, after which He sails with them across the Sea of Galilee (Tiberias) to Bethsaida. However the crowd who saw him depart, captivated by his signs, nevertheless followed him around the shore, some even running (Mark 6:32-33).

1. The setting of the sign, vs. 1-4.

   Jesus is at the middle of his public ministry and the height of his popularity, though we should be cautious as to the reasons for his present fame and acceptance. Napoleon
Bonaparte, Thomas Paine, Robert Ingersoll, and Mahatma Ghandi, all esteemed Jesus Christ very highly, though it is doubtful that any of these were true disciples of this Son of God. The reality here is that most of the throng that presently follows Jesus is interested in him more for utilitarian and carnal reasons, based upon fascination, not faith; He is good for a free quality meal, v. 26, and an astonishing performer who rivals Elijah, v. 30.

a. The place, vs. 1-3.

Bethsaida, meaning “House of Fish,” the northern most town on the Sea of Galilee, to the north-east of Capernaum, was the fishing home of Philip, Andrew, Peter, and perhaps James and John.

(1) The Galilee location, v. 1.

The short voyage was approximately four miles, with the boat always remaining in view from the shore.

(2) The Galilee crowd, v. 2.

Doubtless Jesus and his disciples could see the large pursuing crowd from their boat, even some lagging behind because they helped the sick. So perceiving the same crowd at Bethsaida as had been left behind, being sheep without a shepherd, Jesus welcomed them, generously healed many, and taught concerning the kingdom of God until the closing of the day. (Matt. 14:13-14; Mark 6:32-34; Luke 9:11).

(3) The Galilee mountain, v. 3.

“Then Jesus went up on the mountain [to the Golan Heights], and there He sat down with His disciples,” apparently without any supply of food for themselves. Surely Jesus had planned this famine preceding a feast, or was there a small amount of food stored in the anchored boat that the disciples were not prepared to share with the crowd, in contrast with a generous lad?

b. The time, v. 4.

“Now it was near the Passover, the feast of the Jews.” What a strange interruption this appears to be! But it is not injected for mere chronological reasons. Rather, John is saying, “In the light of what follows, I want you especially to keep this fact in mind. I assume you know of the details of that feast concerning flesh and blood. Well, now consider the parallel details of this feast!” However Plummer raises the question as to whether John is drawing attention to the multitude heading northward rather than southward toward Jerusalem at this time, and also the likelihood that Jesus did not attend the Passover on this occasion (7:1-2).140


141 Plummer, John, p. 147.
3. The response of calculating human reason instead of faith reason, vs. 5-7.

“Human reason” is the filtering of selected particular truths through the grid of materialistic humanism that results in a conclusion. “Faith reason” is the filtering of selected particular truths through the grid of divine revelation that results in a conclusion. The selected particulars will vary; different conclusions are inevitable. Hence, faith in Jesus first depends upon our grasp of the right particulars about Him. Philip now becomes a case in point.

a. The prompting of Philip to faith reason, v. 5.

A large, tired, hungry crowd approaches the mountainside. The number here may be well above five thousand if this figure only represents men, v. 10. So Jesus takes the opportunity to probe Philip’s faith. He has been a disciple for about eighteen months; he has observed much of Jesus’ ministry; he has preached and witnessed about Jesus; he is a son of Bethsaida. Hence the test question is: “Where shall we buy bread so that these [this large crowd] may eat?” Probably this is in response to the fact that the disciples have already suggested that the people be sent away, “so that they may go into the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat” (Mark 6:36). Thus Jesus suggests that there are no stores nearby that could supply such a demand.

b. The purpose of the Examiner to extract faith reason, v. 6.

“He was saying this testing him for he had known [already determined] what he was about to do.” Jesus well knew that any shops in Bethsaida had probably closed by now; besides this is a desert region (Mark 6:35). The catering problem is obviously enormous. But the real question concerns how Philip perceives this problem in the light of his perception of Jesus. Eighteen months ago he testified to Nathaniel: “We have found Him of whom Moses in the Law and also the Prophets wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph” (2:45). But how has this initial faith developed?

c. The response of Philip with human reason, v. 7.

So Philip answers: “Two hundred denarii worth of bread is not sufficient for each one of them to receive [even] a little [bread].” This amount equaled a laborer’s daily wage for 200 days (Matt. 20:2). Perhaps this was the total in the common purse that Judas held. Whatever, Carson well states: “Philip’s response betrays the fact that he can think only at the level of the market place, the natural world,” and that in spite of such privileged exposure to Jesus. This disciple is indeed a slow learner as is later indicated by Jesus when He comments eighteen months hence “Have I been so long with you, and yet you have not come to know Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father” (14:9). Yet the Samaritans were not so slow (4:39-42)! How long have you known about Jesus? Have you come to know about Him as more than a central Bible character? He invites you to “learn from Me” (Matt. 11:29), and there are still vacancies in His classroom!

142 Carson, John, p. 269.
4. The response of pragmatic reason instead of faith reason, vs. 8-9.

If Philip epitomizes calculating human reason, then Andrew represents pragmatic human reason, the difference being slight. Andrew, Peter’s brother, has also known Jesus for about eighteen months. Tradition tells us he was of similar unbelief as Thomas, since to believe in the resurrection, he also declared the need to physically touch his Savior, 20:27. At this juncture, such skepticism is quite believable.

a. The demonstrator of reason, v. 8-9a.

“There is a lad here,” responds Andrew, but who is this “child/ lad,” παιδάριον, paidarion? He is old enough to be on his own. Like the Lord Jesus when aged twelve, he has not been occupied with playing or other childish diversions. He has not selfishly withdrawn to indulge himself. He has heard Jesus and become attracted to what he has heard. He would like to help in an ever so small way. Hence his thoughtfulness will be a memorial over many centuries. Even now Jesus honors the young man by replicating the offered menu. On another occasion at least a year hence, babies, τὰ βρέφη, ta brephê, will be brought to Jesus, who, notwithstanding the discouragement of the disciples, will declare, “Permit the children [τὰ παιδία, ta paidia] to come to Me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these” (Luke 18:15-16). Immediately after his triumphal entry and the second cleansing of the temple, Jesus will heal the blind and lame at which children will shout, “Hosanna to the Son of David.” To this Jesus agreeably responds and quotes Psalm 8:2, “Out of the mouth of infants and nursing babies You have prepared praise for yourself” (Matt. 21:14-16).

b. The conclusion of reason, v. 9b.

“But what are these [five small barley loves and two sardine-like, dried, salted or pickled fish, pauper’s food] for so many people?” laments Andrew. What a question from one who had already witnessed the turning of the water into wine at Cana! What a question concerning the need of more likely 75,000 loaves and 30,000 fishes, in the presence of He who has created all barley and fishes (Col. 1:16)!

5. The response of Jesus promotes faith, vs. 10-13.

The manifestation here of divine catering suggests that God believes in the grace of full service for the hungry and not a lesser buffet style where you serve yourself. This is not an indifferent point when one sees the drama played out here that is representative of future apostolic ministry. John 6 is comprised of 71 verses, the first 25 being historic narrative in the main while the remainder of 46 verses focuses upon the Lord Jesus presenting himself as the Bread of Life for hungry souls. However it is the first 13 verses that set the scene, in a descriptive sense, for the real significance of the person of Jesus and His apostles who will minister to a spiritually hungry world.

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“Have the people sit down.” To be fed by Christ requires that the hungry submit to His method of distribution. So He appointed the disciples to order the crowd to recline in groups of between fifty and a hundred (Mark 6:40) upon “the green grass” (Mark 6:39, cf. vs. 35-36) on the hillside, a most colorful scene. Surely this foreshadows the orderliness that God would require in the future foundational building of churches (Eph. 2:19-22; 4:11-16).

b. The comprehensive provision of Jesus, v. 11.

Taking the loaves and fishes, Jesus looked heavenward and blessed them; his giving thanks, εὐχαριστέω, eucharisteó, was, according to Edersheim, “Blessed art Thou, Jehovah our God, King of the world, who causes to come forth bread from the earth.” Yet this was far more than a table grace! Here Jesus also acknowledged His Father’s bestowal of power at such a significant time. Then he miraculously multiplied and distributed to the twelve disciples who in turn distributed to the groups (Matt. 14:19; Luke 9:16; cf. I Cor. 11:23). Here was portrayed the essence of their future ministry, the offering of Christ to a spiritually impoverished world, but particularly those who sought Him out. There is a degree of discrimination here on the part of Jesus (Matt. 7:6) that yet does not merely encompass the elect. But further, the apostles were doubtless instructed to be generous since all could have as much as they wanted; there was available “grace upon grace (1:16); hard crusts and less tender portions of fish did not have to be consumed.

c. The tidy provision of Jesus, v. 12.

“And when they were filled/satisfied,” according to the participants taking advantage of the generosity of their host, and upon the apostles receiving expressions of gratitude for the best fish and bread they had ever eaten (2:10), Jesus ordered a clean-up, born of Jewish fastidiousness for cleanliness. The orderliness of the mind of God again becomes evident; He is not satisfied with randomness and chaos, but tidiness in design, and as a result witness to His ways that is to be admired.

d. The generous provision of Jesus, v. 13.

But further, the remaining twelve baskets of bones and crusts testified that the people had been supernaturally fed in a manner superior to that of Israel receiving manna in the wilderness, that “miserable bread” (Num. 21:5) that had to be gathered (Exod. 16:16-18; cf. Ps. 78:18-19). Moreover, even these scraps were far greater than the original human contribution. These crumbs from Jesus’ table, laid for the lost sheep of the house of Israel, were perhaps representative of the excess that the Gentiles would receive (Matt. 15:21-28).

\[144\] Edersheim, *Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, I, p. 684.

“Therefore the men having observed the sign which He performed were saying [repeatedly, excitedly], that this one is truly the Prophet [like unto Moses] who is to come into the world,” (1:21). Was this a response that encouraged Jesus? Not at all! The reference here is to Deuteronomy 18:15-19, which was not usually regarded as Messianic, at least by the Pharisees. Yes, the formal recognition here is partially correct, yet the significance is completely missed! Even though our present evangelical scene might have been impressed, Jesus was not encouraged (2:23-25). Later, after the feeding of the four thousand, the Pharisees and Saducees will ask for yet more signs. Shortly after, the twelve disciples, again being concerned about their lack of bread, are rebuked: “You men of little faith, why do you discuss among yourselves that you have no bread? Do you not yet understand or remember the five loaves and the five thousand, and how many baskets full you picked up? Or the seven loaves of the four thousand, and how many large baskets full you picked up” (Matt. 16:8-10).

Profession is one thing, genuine conversion is quite another. This will become abundantly clear in the discourse that follows back in Capernaum. How often in this Gospel men and women come so near to Jesus and yet remain so very far from him. C. H. Spurgeon wrote of this:

If now with eyes defiled and dim,
    We see the signs, but see not Him,
O may His love the scales displace,
    And bid us see Him face to face.

f. The dissatisfied withdrawal of Jesus, v. 15.

Unlike opportunistic religious gurus, Jesus Christ never allowed man to establish His Messianic agenda, or the devil for that matter (Luke 4:5-8). Hence: “Therefore, Jesus knowing that they were about to come and [forcibly] seize him in order that they might make him [their] King, again [Mark 6:30-32] He departed [from them] to the mountain by Himself alone.” The region of Galilee was known for movements of revolt aroused by the claims of false prophets. Thus the Jews respond as if they were giving approval to a politician’s lures and promises. The motivation here is not according to a submissive heart, but rather carnality, v. 26, self-centeredness, indeed arrogance, for it is the Father’s prerogative to appoint His Son as King of the Jews (Ps. 2:6; Luke 1:32; Acts 2:30). By way of contrast, surely Peter also ate the food that Jesus had provided, but his appreciation of the Savior was for a reason far more profound, vs. 27, 67-69.

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J. **SIGN FIVE – CHRIST WALKS ON THE SEA OF GALILEE, 6:16-21.**

To begin with, we continue to include in our study the two synoptic parallels that add significant details (Matt. 14:24-33; Mark 6:47-52). As an introductory consideration, recollect the preceding fourth sign, and now look to this fifth of John’s seven selected signs. Those today who presently declare the validity of the “signs and wonders movement,” and “charismatic phenomena,” who uphold the present replication of Jesus’ miracles, conspicuously do not tell of “food multiplying signs,” and “walking on the water signs” as being part of the modern evangelist’s repertoire. How popular he would be! But why is this so? The answer is obvious, namely that these signs are not so easily counterfeited. One further introductory point concerns the common use of this incident evangelistically, yet it chiefly deals with the saving of the saved!

1. **The appointment to voyage alone without Jesus, v. 16.**

Mark tells us that it was Jesus who instructed His disciples to return to the anchored boat and then embark for Capernaum while he, after sending the crowd away, stayed behind to pray alone on the mountain side (Mark 6:45). Of course He prays for Israel in its evident blindness. However He particularly prays for his disciples who are so immature. How will they grow, except by means of His knocking away their props, especially those of self-sufficiency and rationalism, so that they will more fully trust in him (17:9, 12). But further he prays about testing the disciples in the school of spiritual depression, by means of His planned absence.

2. **The voyage of despair without Jesus, vs. 17-19.**

In the annals of church history, there are numerous accounts of people encountering a storm that not only humbled them, but also caused them to contemplate their hopeless, godless condition. Consider John Wesley crossing the Atlantic to be a missionary to the American Indian, observing the calmness of Moravian missionaries and their children in the midst of a storm, while he was terrified. Following his arrival, he declared: “I came to America to save the Indians. But Oh, who will save me?” Also consider the infamous, blasphemous slave trader, John Newton, in the midst of a terrifying storm in the Atlantic near Ireland, feebly crying out to God for mercy, then to receive it and an awakened interest in Jesus. As the voyage ended, his appetites had radically changed. But by way of contrast, consider George Whitefield, likewise in an Atlantic storm. He tells us in his diary:

> The mainsail was slit in several pieces, and several of the other sails, and much of the tackling all to tatters. Not a dry place was to be found in all the ship. The captain’s hammock, in the great cabin, was half filled with water; and though I lay in the most dry part of the ship, yet the waves broke in upon me twice or thrice. In short, all was terror and confusion, men’s hearts failing them for fear, and the wind and the sea raging horribly. But God (forever be adored His unmerited goodness) was exceeding gracious unto me. I felt a sweet complacency in my will, in submission to His. Many particular promises God has made me from His Word, that I should return in peace, flowed in upon my heart; and He enabled me greatly to rejoice.\(^{146}\)

Presently the disciples are like Wesley and Newton; later they shall be like Whitefield.

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\(^{146}\) George Whitefield, *Journals of George Whitefield*, p. 103,
a. Distance from Jesus increases despair, v. 17.

Surely the disciples were not too troubled with the fact that Jesus had sent them alone to the boat, though he appears to have told them to wait for a specified time, after which, if he did not arrive, they should depart for Capernaum. But now they are disturbed since, having set sail, the darkness is overwhelming without the close presence of the Light of the world, and a storm is looming. They are like Jacob, all alone in the night at Peniel (Gen. 32:24), until the Savior comes to embrace them in the darkness. All sorts of doubt arise, the thought of being neglected, forsaken. Then weariness of the flesh only multiplies the anxiety. However, as John Newton has written:

Constrained by their Lord to embark,
   And venture without him to sea,
The season tempestuous and dark,
   How grieved the disciples must be!
But though he remained on the shore,
   He spent the night for them in prayer;
They still were as safe as before,
   And equally under his care.

b. Stormy weather increases despair, v. 18.

Although this voyage commenced calmly, now with a storm brewing these big fishermen seem so small, even in their own estimate. Added to inward distress is now the outward aggravation of a notorious Galilean tempest; the disciples completely lose sight of the glory of the previous day; now their progress almost grinds to a halt; now they have longings for Jesus. But surely their Master’s plan has gone all wrong. On a previous occasion in the day, Jesus rebuked the wind and the sea as a boat passenger, and amazingly it had worked (Matt. 8:23-27). But this situation is far worse. It is night time and apparently Jesus is far away.

c. Weariness in laboring increases despair, v. 19.

Having rowed three to four miles, it is now between 3:00-6:00am (Mark 6:48), the worst time for those who fear the darkness and long for the dawn. Weariness only adds to the confusion in the disciples’ souls. Then, amidst the spray and high-cresting waves, there appears a phantom-like person walking over the waves (Mark 6:49), who arouses their attention. There is no instant recognition that turns sadness into relief and a smile, that is if he was merely walking along the shore in the darkness as some have suggested, but rather fear at such a startling event. For those limited to human reason rather than faith reason, such a happening was contrary to all of their thinking processes. However the mysterious person draws nearer, and the features sharpen, and surprisingly fear increases. A depressed soul is more likely to doubt and be skeptical than believe.

147 This is Westcott’s explanation concerning the expression here: “It had become dark, and Jesus had not yet come.” John, p. 98.
3. The voyage of deliverance with Jesus, vs. 20-21.

Although the disciples are believers, even of little faith, yet what now takes place is a perfect representation of how Jesus Christ deals with sinners lost in darkness, whether saved sinners of little faith or lost sinners of no faith. According to Mark: 1. He sees the distressed disciples, before they see Him (Mark 6:48). 2. He comes to the distressed disciples, before they come to Him (Mark 6:48). 3. He provokes the distressed disciples, before they respond to Him. “He came to them walking on the sea; and He intended to pass by them” (Mark 6:48, cf. Luke 24:28-29). Here is provocation that teases for an invitation. Thus John indicates that Jesus saves the distressed by revelation and through reception, that is responsive faith.

a. By the personal revelation of Christ, v. 20.

“It is I; do not be afraid.” More literally it is, “I, I am, do not fear,” or “I Myself am, do not fear,” ‘Eγώ εἰμι, Εγώ ειμι. Surely there is anticipation here concerning the seven future “I am” declarations that reflect “Hashem,” “the Name,” or “the LORD” of the Old Testament (Exod. 3:13-15; 6:2-9; cf. John 6:35; 8:12; 10:7, 9; 10:11, 14; 11:25; 14:6; 15:1, 5). It was divine revelation to the disciples that caused the darkness to vanish and the light to flood into their souls. This was not a mere phantom, but the Savior of the World, the Son of God. The revelation of Christ Himself by name was salvation! It was similar with John Newton, in the midst of that Atlantic storm; revelation awakened his soul, as never before, from deep darkness.

b. Through the personal reception of the sinner, v. 21.

“So they were willing to receive Him into the boat.” The divine enticement succeeds. There can only be reception when first there has been revelation. Again this truth is perfectly revealed in the conversion of John Newton, who, following the revelation of God to his soul during the storm, responded with newfound interest in Scripture and Jesus Christ. Following this welcome of Christ into the boat we read, “Immediately the boat came to the shore/land to which they were going.” Thus, with Christ on board, the storm ceased (Mark 6:51), so that the ship quickly reached the shore at the dawning of a new day. Sea voyages are only enjoyable when the captain is trustworthy, and the company is both edifying and compatible! Years later John Newton further wrote:

We, like the disciples, are tossed  
By storms on a perilous deep,  
But cannot be possibly lost,  
For Jesus has charge of the ship.  
Though billows and winds are enraged,  
And threaten to make us their sport,  
This pilot his word has engaged  
To bring us in safety to port.

148 It is not explicitly indicated that Christ entered the ship at the invitation of the disciples, though most commentators suggest that this was so. Some also see a miraculous arrival at the shore, including Barrett, Origen, Godet, though others, such as Bruce, Ryle, Westcott, see a natural arrival (cf. Mark 6:53).

Following two signs, one major and the other minor, we are quickly transported by John to their significance, though preeminently concerning the miraculous feeding of the five thousand. To avidly contemplate such a sign while avoiding its significance results in catastrophic, soul destructive consequences, as vs. 60-61, 66 indicate. Imagine a visit to your doctor where you are told that you have a serious illness. A prescription is handed to you, at which you are told, “Now take this and you should have good health.” Consider how foolish it would be for you literally to chew up and swallow the prescription itself rather that taking it to a drug store. Similarly some people buy a book or record mainly for the jacket or cover; they have little interest in their contents, and shrivel in their minds as a consequence. So the problem here with Israel has become similar; the focus to date has been essentially material, that is with regard to good tasting wine, 2:10, the grandeur of Herod’s temple, 2:20, captivating miracles, 2:23, physical rebirth, 3:4, competitive water baptism, 3:23, 26; 4:1-2, water from Jacob’s well, 4:11-12, geographic worship, 4:20, Sabbath keeping, 5:18, and physical hunger, 6:5-9, that is shadows rather than substance, being Christ Himself (Col. 2:16-17). In other words, Jesus has become esteemed as a spectacular religious utility, a means to an end, a self-satisfying cornucopia, whereas the prospective Bread of Life discourse declares that He Himself is food for the hungry soul, a glorious end in Himself. To miss this vital point is like endlessly browsing over attractive menus while never placing an order with the chef. We remain famished in the presence of plenty, or as Isaac Watts has written concerning:

When thousands make a wretched choice,
And rather starve than come.

1.  The arrival at Capernaum, vs. 22-24.

If you were well fed at the feeding of the 5,000, how would you feel the following morning, having slept overnight in the open, especially with the prospect of walking south-westward back to Capernaum around the Sea of Galilee? Doubtless you would be hungry, even contemplating the twelve baskets of fragments that were gathered the previous day. However, a better thought comes to mind. Why not seek after Jesus for another generous meal. But where is He?

a.  There is confusion at Bethsaida, v. 22.

At the north-eastern shore, that is Bethsaida, a remaining crowd waits for Jesus, although they know that the disciples have departed without him the previous evening. There are no other boats available for Him to use. So these hungry enthusiasts would gladly wait so as to walk back to Capernaum with Him. They are reasonably confident that Jesus has not returned by walking along the shore. However, He does not appear to have descended from the mountain where they thought he had passed the night. Consequently, they become impatient. And then a providential happening intervenes that encourages those not looking forward to a four mile walk home.
b. There is a convoy from Tiberias, v. 23.

Had word spread to the more southern city of Tiberias on Galilee that Jesus had retired to Bethsaida? If so, then a flotilla of small, bedraggled boats, containing the sick and curious, has slowly made it through the recent storm to Bethsaida, only to learn that Jesus is nowhere to be found. What they do learn about, from bragging participants, is an enthusiastic report concerning the amazing, generous feast they participated in the day before. This stimulates increased longing.

c. There is conveyance to Capernaum, v. 24.

Hence, upon encouragement from the crowd that can no longer wait, the little ships sail with added passengers. With hunger increasing, they “came to Capernaum seeking Jesus.” En route, how animatedly the additional passengers continue to testify, to the throng from Tiberias, concerning the remarkable ministry of Jesus from Nazareth. It is possible that some testify to being healed by him only the day before. Yet puzzlement remains about Jesus’ reluctance to accept their call to kingship; His attitude is compassionate, yet at the same time decidedly sober.

2. The Bread of Life clarifies His ministry to the crowd, vs. 25-34.

A series of preliminary questions establishes the arid spiritual condition of the Galilean multitudes that are comprised of two general groups, the hostile Jews associated with the Capernaum synagogue, vs. 41, 52, 59, and Jesus’ loyal disciples, vs. 60-71.

a. The first wrong question is asked, vs. 25-27.

When you watch the performance of a clever magician, the inevitable question is, “How did he do it?” There is a similar attitude here, that of rational curiosity that continues to avoid the remarkable particulars of Jesus’ person that call for earnest faith.

(1) “Rabbi [esteemed teacher], when did You get here?” v. 25.

Presumably Jesus is discovered at the synagogue, v. 59, and His given title, “Rabbi,” may indicate the degree of kingly status that the people had in mind, v. 15. The concern here remains, “What has Jesus done to get here?” rather than “Who is this Jesus?” Suppose that He simply replied: “Why I walked on the water; ask my disciples.” Surely the immediate response would be, “Rabbi, do it again for us [cf. v. 30].” There is an intoxication here with signs and wonders. As Carson comments, “mere miracles can be corrosive of genuine faith.” Thus Jesus does not provide an explanation.

149 Carson, John, p. 283.

Here is the unadulterated truth. “Truly, truly, I say to you, you seek me not because you saw signs, but because you ate of the loaves and were filled.” In other words, “You did not allow the signs to lead you to My significance; rather they led you to carnal, sensual, self-centered stimulation.” As Mark 6:52 explains: “[T]hey had not gained any insight from the incident of the loaves, but their heart was hardened.” Israel, and modern day seekers after signs and wonders, regard Jesus as a type of religious credit card, a blessing provider. They are like children crying out at Christmas time: “Yes, we believe in Santa Clause, but now lets get down to what really matters. What presents have you brought us?” How miserable, desolate, and yet pervasive is this self-indulgent religion that is so often dressed up in Sunday finery, television performance, and attractively produced literature.

(3) The positive response concerning spiritual food, v. 27.

“Do not work [be working] for the food that is perishing, but for the food which remains and results in eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you. For on this one the Father, [the] God, has set His seal [σφραγίζω, sphragizō, cf. 3:33].” In reality, the throng before Jesus had been laboring very energetically. So many had walked and searched and rowed for hours, just for the satisfaction of watching a great religious performance, and possibly the obtaining of physical healing. As a bonus they received wonderful earthly food that was worth the pursuit of Jesus. Man-centered religion is usually very activist and materialistic. Both Nicodemus and the woman at the well have illustrated this point.

However in contrast there follows the commendation of a totally different dimension of living and thinking with regard to laboring and feasting. Further this is more than mere instruction about it by Jesus, but an entreaty, a pleading, an urgent request, a serious invitation given to a large crowd of elect and non-elect, almost certainly within the Capernaum synagogue. The work that really counts, that God delights in, is the response of genuine faith, v. 29; the food that really satisfies is Jesus Christ Himself, v. 35. All of this revolutionary state of being is sourced in Jesus Christ the Mediator; it is “eternal life,” not merely “lineal life,” but the life of the eternal God imparted to dead souls that, unlike earthly bread, endures (I John 1:1-2; 5:11, 20). Suppose you were in that crowd and began to ponder: “I seriously long for that life of God in my dead, withered soul. Where can I find it?” Jesus responds, “Believe in Me,” vs. 29, 40, 47, “Come to Me,” v. 35, “Consume me as spiritual food,” vs. 53-54, 57. “But why You in particular?” you ask. “Because,” Jesus replies, “I have been validated, certified by the Father, from My baptism onwards, before your very ears and eyes!”

150 Refer to Dana and Mantey, A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament, p. 176, where the frequent “Imperative of Entreaty” is described.

151 Perhaps, as Hoskyns suggests, drawing upon Westcott, the certification here alludes to the “sealing” of sacrificial animals as “perfect/unblemished” according to the standards of Leviticus, Fourth Gospel, p. 292.
b. The second wrong question is asked, vs. 28-29.

Here Jesus encounters the preacher’s constant dilemma. He has just exposed error and plainly stated the truth in vs. 26-27 only to discover that his congregation has not, in the slightest, understood what he was talking about. As this demonstration of blatant blindness continues, in site of repeated explanations from Christ Himself before the very eyes of the Jews, v. 36, it is not surprising that He will soon move to a different level of explanation, vs. 37-40, 44, 64-65. It will be the level of the sovereign will of God which takes us to the backstage operations of His modus-operandi in the particular saving of sinners. It will help to explain the astonishing unbelief. However, encounter with the frontstage perspective of human reaction to the truth of God, the darkness and ignorance of it, is ongoing.

(1) The incorrect request for ethical direction, v. 28.

“What shall we do in order that we may be working the works of God?” But what are “the works of God” here as perceived by Jesus’ audience? Surely they involve a misunderstanding of Jesus’ exhortation in v. 27. Whereas Jesus encouraged an earnest spiritual quest, a “working” or pursuit for eternal life as found in Himself, in contrast with the people’s pursuit of material food, the congregation has interpreted this to mean that they ought to accomplish certain things, do specific deeds, perform certain acts acceptable to God that would obtain His approval and acceptance. This response was reflective of the pervasive Jewish belief in faith and works. Here are people restless in their souls, discontented, groping in a dense fog of self-righteousness, who propose human activity as a corrective that merely requires the ethical advice of Jesus Christ. Other Rabbis have provided ethical directives that have not proved effectual; but Rabbi Jesus surely has a better course to offer.

(2) The corrective response, v. 29.

“Jesus answered and said to them, “This is the work of God that you may believe in [He] whom that one [God] sent.” Status quo religion is immediately challenged at its most crucial point, that being its presumption concerning the need of human contribution in cooperation with God. Hence Jesus challenges the misconception concerning his earlier exhortation: “[Work] for the food which endures to eternal life.” He boldly presents a seeming conundrum, namely that the labor God calls for is in fact faith only in His sent Son. The use of the term “work” here is simply to distinguish it as most earnest, heartfelt trust in Himself. Thus Jesus’ designated work here is in fact faith alone that excludes human work. However it should be noted that the true object of faith is carefully distinguished here. It is exclusively He, the eternal Son of God, who has been sent by the Father and none other.

Paul explains this same “faith alone” principle as follows: “[T]o the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness” (Rom. 4:5). Of course the backstage viewpoint is that such genuine saving faith is in fact “the work of God,” that is His
sovereign bestowal, vs. 44, 65. Yet it is the front-stage perspective that dominates at this point in the discourse.

c. The third wrong question is asked, vs. 30-33.

As the preacher preaches and the questions increase, His frustration must surely be near to reaching boiling point, especially as faith in Him alone has been sought, even if indirectly up to this point, vs. 27, 29. However, will direct and explicit revelation from Jesus’ own lips make any difference, v. 35? Not in the slightest!

(1) The request for a display of signs and wonders, v. 30.

“Therefore they said to Him, ‘What sign then do you perform so that we may behold and believe You? What will You work?’” Surely the congregation here is comprised of some who participated in the feeding of the five thousand. Then there are others who have only heard reports of the miracle and are envious of those who tasted the “supernatural bread and fish.” They are hearing acclamations that this is “the Prophet who is to come into the world,” v. 14, even the Messiah. And now He is calling for belief in Himself. The groundswell of belief is in this direction, though this “faith” here that the people propose, cf. v. 14, is not identical to that “faith” which Jesus has just solicited, v. 29. So these in particular, who did not go to Bethsaida, now urge the Lord Jesus to provide a repeat performance for their benefit, to satisfy their lusting after signs and wonders. Such an interest is in the phenomenal, the sensual, not the holy, the object of submission; it is a sensationalist, tabloid mentality that is unrelated to truth and righteousness.

(2) The request for manna as in the wilderness, v. 31.

“Our fathers ate the manna in the desert/wilderness, just as it has been written, ‘He gave them bread out of heaven to eat’ [Ex. 16:4, 15; cf. Ps. 78:24; Neh. 9:15].” Later rabbinical teaching was that Messiah would repeat the miraculous provision of manna that occurred under Moses.\footnote{Barrett, \textit{John}, pp. 239-40; Bruce, \textit{John}, p. 151; Carson, \textit{John}, p. 286; Morris, \textit{John}, p. 363n; concerning the signification of a second redeemer, with support from Ps. 72:16).} So the Jews, especially the synagogue leaders, may well here be calling for such identification. In effect they are demanding that Jesus out-do Moses! Further, the intimation is that the fathers who ate the manna were responsible for obtaining the miraculous provision. It is true that Moses appears to have successfully interceded with God concerning a grumbling, discontented, hungry people, that longed for the fleshpots Egypt. As a result manna was provided, “bread from heaven” (Exod. 16:1-7). Hence, the emphasis here focuses solely upon what the man Moses had accomplished. God the Father is a mere assumption.
The negative corrective response, v. 32.

With almost indignant assertion, Jesus emphatically turns the emphasis completely around, from man/Moses-centeredness to God the Father-centeredness. “Truly, truly, I say to you, it is not Moses who has given [perfect tense] you the bread out of heaven, but it is My Father who is giving [present tense] you the true bread out of heaven.” Even the manna in the wilderness was God’s provision. With what intense passion were the words, “My Father” uttered. But there is also the intimation concerning a new category of bread from heaven in the present that is quite superior to that of the past.

Here the whole problem of the Jews is exposed in a nutshell, even as is the gospel remedy. The enthusiasm of the Jews following the feeding of the five thousand is all about man-centeredness, physical food, physical healing, physical life, physical deliverance, physical wonders, even as were associated with Moses. But what is of fundamental, superior importance is heavenly provision, the Father in heaven, the food from heaven, the Son from heaven, eternal life from heaven. The contrast here is as radical as that between heaven and earth, life and death, grace and judgment, religion and redemption. Here is the cry of Jeremiah: “For My people have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters, to hew for themselves cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water.” Here Jesus is making the same distinction, except that He is that living water, as He has plainly declared in 4:10, 14; 6:35.

The positive corrective response, v. 33.

“For the bread of God [the best bread from heaven over the course of human history] is that which is coming down out of heaven and giving life to the world.” As was the case on the mount of the transfiguration, the focus here is to be upon the Christ from heaven and not the earthly Moses or Elijah (Luke 9:28-36). In effect Jesus is saying, “For the most important bread of all, that which feeds the soul and not merely the body, that which forever satisfies the deepest longings of the human appetite, is that which now has come from heaven, even as I have, for the purpose of giving spiritual life to the world as a whole, and not merely Israel. The best bread has an appealing scent about it. Have you not sensed who I am talking about? ” Doing everything but explicitly declaring himself to be the bread of life, Jesus looks out across his congregation to see if there are any who have suddenly caught the soul-satisfying aroma. Again this preacher is disappointed. There is an obvious interest, but it is wholly of this earth. Probably those who ate bread and fish at Bethsaida, while acknowledging that this was a supernatural provision, continue to believe at this materialistic level.

d. The resultant wrong conclusion is reached, v. 34.

“Therefore they said to him, Lord, always give to us this bread.” Thus feeling new pangs of hunger and sensing that Jesus is encouraging his congregation to solicit further provision from him, the eager response is: “Lord, do it again and keep on doing it on a daily basis.” They are like the woman at the well who, although
mystified, yet ventured to ask of Jesus, “Sir, give me this water, so that I will not be thirsty nor come all the way here to draw” (4:15). Here is a tragic and all too common instance of a large number of people having a taste for Jesus that is totally misdirected. He is appreciated for his utilitarian usefulness, v. 26. Upon hearing the teaching of Jesus, then His invitation, “Follow Me,” they have a degree of interest, and yet are like those who make excuse with regard to matters of immediate urgency (Luke 9:59-62). They have, as it were, “ate and drank in His presence and been taught by Him in their streets.” But later Jesus will say of them, “I do not know where you are from” (Luke 13:26-27). So here, when put to the test, these phony disciples will quickly scatter, v. 66.

3. The Bread of Life proclaims His ministry to the crowd, vs. 35-40.

There is something climactic and bold here about Jesus’ response to the shallow, inquisitive crowd at Capernaum; reserve is dropped. Here implicit indications give way to explicit declaration; Old Testament allusions give way to New Testament substance. While to date Jesus has been perceived as the promised prophet, like Elijah, who will bring some message of hope from God (1:21; 7:40), here He plainly declares Himself to be that message incarnate. Jesus has not come to preach the gospel; He has come so that the gospel might be preached, for He is the embodiment of that gospel; He is the gospel.

a. The frontstage proclamation, v. 35.

“Jesus said to them, ‘I Myself am the bread of life. He who comes to me will not hunger, and he who believes in me will never thirst.’ To begin with, there is great personal emphasis here in this first of the seven “I am” pronouncements of Jesus.153 With ἑμών ἐμαυτός, Egō eimi, “I Myself Am,” surely the Hebrew mind of John alludes to Hashem, “The Name,” the proper name of God revealed to Moses (Ex. 3:13-15; 6:2-8). Then there is immediate association of Jesus with bread and drink. Now before we enter into the intense application of this figurative language in vs. 51-58, it is vital that our introduction to such figurative language is here seen for what it really is. This verse is the interpretive key. So Carson writes:

Jesus is the bread of life, but it is the person who comes to him who does not hunger, not the person who eats him; similarly, it is the person who believes in him who does not thirst, not the person who drinks him. . . . [Thus when] we read of eating Jesus’ flesh and drinking his blood, the meaning of the metaphors has already been established.154

However, the most important truth here concerns what Jesus means when he claims to be “the bread of life for the hungry,” and “the water of life for the thirsty.” Let us suggest three vital elements.

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154 Carson, John, pp. 288-89.
Jesus Christ is fundamental to the impoverished soul.

Quiet likely Jesus has in mind the invitation of Isaiah 55:1-3: “Ho! Every one who thirsts, come to the waters; and you who have no money, buy and eat. Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. . . . Listen carefully to Me, and eat what is good, and delight yourself in abundance. Incline your ear and come to Me. Listen, that you may live.” In other words, Jesus as “bread” here speaks of that which is basic to the health of the human soul, as with “life” and “water” and “light” in this Gospel. Of course, by inference, the human soul is dead toward God, hungry, thirsty, and in darkness. Consider all of the broken cisterns we have tried without satisfaction, the ambitious pursuits, the sensual exploration, the religious fads. Then consider the incomparable Jesus, He who best knows our warped frame, who visits us in our imprisonment, who brings lasting emancipation, peace and rest with God that abides.

Jesus Christ is satisfying to the nourished soul.

When the hungry soul appreciates Jesus for who He really is; when he earnestly welcomes Jesus as the most refreshing drink for his soul, then he proves what Jesus earlier said to the woman at the well: “[W]hoever drinks of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him will become in him a well of water springing up to eternal life,” 4:14. In other words, believing in Jesus results in a renovation of our inner plumbing. Earlier we had to repeatedly draw from an outside source. Now we have a permanent inside spring provided by Jesus. Former external sources of supposed nourishment are abandoned. As Horatius Bonar has written:

I heard the voice of Jesus say,
‘Behold, I freely give
The living water—thirsty one,
Stoop down, and drink and live!
I came to Jesus, and I drank
Of that life-giving stream;
My thirst was quenched, my soul revived,
And now I live in Him.

Jesus Christ beckons the impoverished soul to nourishment.

Yes, we are still frontstage at the moment, and will shortly be taken backstage. However the Lord Jesus most often proclaims Himself from frontstage, as 1:12, 35-37; 2:11, 23, cf. 20:30-31; 3:14-16; 4:10, 14, 26; 4:54; 5:34; 6:2 indicate. The language here of “coming” and “believing” is surely more than a declaration of fact. Yes, there is a lot of unbelief in that Capernaum synagogue; it is a spiritual leprosarium. Nevertheless the tone of Jesus’ voice is not cool and dispassionate. His passion for soul’s thirsting after him is still the same as 5:34. His belief in the sovereignty of God does not diminish His overall concern for the perilous condition of His
congregation. He joins with Isaiah, and again, as it were, beckons, “Ho! Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters.”

b. The backstage explanation, vs. 36-40.

In a theatrical performance there are two dimensions. First there is the publicized frontstage presentation that the audience observes and responds to. Second there is the hidden backstage operation that follows the orders of the producer/director. So here the present grim frontstage response of unbelief needs to be understood according to the glorious future prospects that a visit backstage provides. Backstage management guarantees an eventual glorious frontstage response that will exalt the Lord Jesus.

(1) The need for explanation concerning present unbelief, v. 36.

“But I said to you that you have even seen me and yet you did not believe.” As Jesus surveys his congregation, in spite of the explicit proclamation of v. 35, he sees the same attitude as has been evident before, 2:23-25. For instance, upon feeding the five thousand, yet the attitude toward him was one of carnal wonderment at self-gratifying phenomena, not the faith acknowledgment of His real glory as the Son of God. At Jerusalem the blindness has been pervasive, 5:36-38. Now at Capernaum the same blind perception is evident, v. 26. Hence the question could be raised, even by the close disciples, as to whether Jesus’ ministry was proving to be a failure. Is the present pall of unbelief here too intractable? Is the evident darkness of soul here too impenetrable? Shall the blindness of man frustrate God’s gracious, saving intention? For the moment, the enemy seems triumphant. Hence to this present frontstage scenario Jesus responds with backstage understanding and confidence. After all, he has come from backstage, from heaven, being sent by His Father, vs. 38-39. He knows the backstage plan that is now confidently unfolded.


If ever a group of verses needed to be understood in its context, this is such a case. Arminians have focused on the latter slice and its encouragement of welcome to sinners by Christ, while Calvinists have responded by reminding us of the former slice and its focus on God’s governing predestination. Few give attention to the preceding and following context, or enquire as to the reason why Christ was led to introduce such an emphasis as is in vs. 37-44, 64-65. At this point, simply notice that in vs. 36-37, 43-44, 64-65, the preceding stimulus is invariably of unbelief and discontent concerning Jesus.

(a) The appointment of the Son by the Father to save sinners, v. 37.

“All [everything comprising elect sinners] that the Father gives to Me shall come to Me, and the one coming to Me shall I in no way cast out [of My presence, but rather assuredly welcome him].” As Carson succinctly explains here, “Jesus’ confidence in the success of his mission
is frankly predestinarian.” 

Thus we are first taken backstage. There, in the counsels of heaven, the Father has determined to save a particular number of sinners through the redeeming work of His Son. Hence the Father has advised the Son of those who He appoints to be saved by means of Jesus’ earthly ministry; they are for the Son an inheritance (Ps. 2:8; Eph. 1:18). If it were not for this divine intervention, the result would be according to the present sterility of interest. Clearly the elect of the Father will be drawn to the Son who will welcome and save every one without exception, 17:6, 9, 12. The implication is that, “I, if I am lifted up from the earth [but not before], will draw all men [the elect from ‘every tribe and tongue and people and nation,” Rev. 5:9] to Myself.” In other words, a time is coming, unlike the present, when a host will unfailingly, certainly respond. For the moment, “His own do not welcome Him,” 1:11. Here then is the guarantee of fruitful evangelism in the midst of arid circumstances, but not the substance of the evangelistic message. Hence Ryle rightly warns: “God’s election must never be thrust nakedly at unconverted sinners, in preaching the Gospel. It is a point with which at present they have nothing to do.”

However, following this behind-the-scenes revelation of the perspective of heaven, we are immediately, though briefly, returned frontstage. Here Jesus declares that whoever is “coming to Me shall I in no way cast out [of My presence, but rather assuredly welcome him].” Christ is portrayed as being advanced upon by a multitude. What a disheveled, motley bunch they appear to be; the lame, the blind, the deaf, the dumb, the destitute, the immoral, the base, the despised, the foolish, even a few rich; there are not many wise, mighty, or noble (I Cor. 1:26-28). What then is His response? It is not that of worldly disgust, repugnance, but encouragement to enter into his welcome embrace. It is like the “father [of the prodigal son who] saw him and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him and kissed him” (Luke 15:20). At this point a person is not to be concerned with the question, “Am I predestined to come to the Son?” Rather, he is to be encouraged by the gracious invitation reinforced by a negative cast. “Coming to Me shall I in no way cast out,” is intended to allay all doubt. John Bunyan writes that,

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155 Carson, John, p. 290.1
156 Ryle explains: “Your unbelief does not move Me or surprise Me. I foresaw it, and have been aware of it. Nevertheless, your unbelief will not prevent God’s purposes taking effect. Some will believe, though you remain unbelieving. Everything that the Father gives Me will come unto Me in due time: believe, and be saved. In spite of your unbelief, all my sheep will sooner or later come to Me by faith, and be gathered within my fold. I see your unbelief with sorrow, but not with anxiety and surprise. I am prepared for it. I know that you cannot alter God’s purposes: and in accordance with those purposes, a people will come to Me, though you do not.” John, I, p. 376.
‘in no wise,’ cutteth the throat of all objections. . . .

But I am a great sinner, sayest thou.
‘I will in no wise cast out,’ says Christ.
But I am an old sinner, sayest thou.
‘I will in no wise cast out,’ says Christ.
But I am a hard-hearted sinner, sayest thou.
‘I will in no wise cast out,’ says Christ.
But I am a backsliding sinner, sayest thou.
‘I will in no wise cast out,’ says Christ.
But I have served Satan all my days, sayest thou.
‘I will in no wise cast out,’ says Christ.
But I have sinned against light, sayest thou.
‘I will in no wise cast out,’ says Christ.
But I have sinned against mercy, sayest thou.
‘I will in no wise cast out,’ says Christ.
But I have no good thing to bring with me, sayest thou.
‘I will in no wise cast out,’ says Christ.

. . . Coming sinner, Christ inviteth thee to dine and sup with him. He inviteth thee to a banquet of wine, yea, to come into his wine-cellar, and his banner over thee shall be love (Rev. 3:20; S. of S. 2:5). ‘But I doubt it,’ says the sinner: ‘But,’ it is answered, ‘he calls thee, invites thee to his banquet, flagons, apples; to his wine, and to the juice of his pomegranate.’ ‘O, I fear, I doubt, I mistrust, I tremble in expectation of the contrary.’ ‘Come out of the man, thou dastardly ignorance!’ ‘Be not afraid, sinner, only believe; He that cometh to Christ he will in no wise cast out.’

(b) The obedience of the Son to the Father in saving sinners, v. 38.

The theatrical application already introduced is a representation that continues to have contemporary, albeit sacred relevance. The world is a vast auditorium/amphitheater in which Israel is the stage upon which the Son of God has come to perform for gratis. This Jesus is no mere professional. This performance is at the direction of His Father who is backstage in heaven. Thus the Jews first, and then the Gentiles, have comprised the audience. Who then is best qualified to unveil the backstage direction that determines frontstage results before this frontstage audience? It could only be He who has come from backstage, the preexisting Jesus, having consulted with the Director of the whole production, vs. 33, 41, 42, 50, 51, 58. Jesus is not simply a religious guru who has found the Father. Rather, this Son of God alone has come from the throne of His Father, having received His gospel commission in great detail, described from God’s perspective. Hence Jesus “has come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me.” This truth has already been revealed to Nicodemus and the Jews in Jerusalem (3:12-13; 5:36-37) as well as to the disciples at

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158 Bunyan, Works, I, pp. 279-81. This quotation comes from Bunyan’s work, “Come And Welcome To Jesus Christ,” which is a detailed exposition and application of John 6:37.
Samaria (4:34). Here the gospel significance of the Trinity is made plain. However, sad to say, to date this has not proved to be a very receptive audience. Moreover, this present repudiation of Jesus is therefore a repudiation of His Father/Director who has sent Him (5:17, 19, 21, 23, 26-27, 37-38, 42-43).

(c) The effectiveness of the Son for the Father in saving sinners vs. 39-40.

One characteristic of a good employee is corporate loyalty; the same could be said of a good child who reflects parental loyalty. As a boy in a Melbourne suburb, after school with a friend, I passed through a Woolworth’s type of store. On arrival at home, my mother asked if I had been in that store. I replied, “Yes.” Then she continued, obviously hurt, “But did you not see me? I looked at you but you seemed to avoid me, to look through me, as if you did not want to acknowledge me.” In the depth of my heart I knew that, in the midst of a crowd, I had simply not seen her. It hurt me to think that she would consider such a possibility. I still remember this incident, because my loyalty to my mother and father was unquestioned. Unlike popular misconceptions about Jesus Christ as a religious man among men, here His loyalty is principally to His Father in heaven from where He has come. Further, the depth of this commitment is evident as the Son of God now unveils His divinely ordained job description, received from His Father, to which His commitment is primary and absolute.


“This is the will of Him who sent Me that, of everything that [everyone who] has been given to me, I should lose nothing, but should raise it [him] up at the last day.” We revert to the thought of v. 37a. God is in His heaven, and the question for man is, “Does God have the right to populate His territory according to His terms and choice? Does He have the right to be eclectic?” The answer is not difficult to discern, if indeed God be God. But so-called, self-appointed “autonomous man,” indeed rebellious man, has great difficulty in submitting to this truth. Notice how Jesus describes two extreme points here. First there is the particular electing grace of the Father revealed to the Son, presumably in heaven. Second there is the resurrection of these same elect at the last day. All that is in between, justification and sanctification, as well as the trials along the way, is, for these secure transients, under the Son’s sovereign keeping power (cf. Rom. 8:30). He does not fail (10:27-29). It is unthinkable that the Son should lose so much as one of the Father’s elect. The doctrine of the perseverance of the saints is in fact the doctrine of the perseverance of Christ (Luke 22:31-32; John 17:6-24). We are, as Fanny Crosby has written, “Safe in the arms of Jesus.” This is in no way meant to diminish the role of faith and believer responsibility, as v. 40 makes plain. It is simply the backstage disclosure of what will
assuredly be fulfilled, notwithstanding man’s unbelief, because God is on His throne, and not man!

2) The Son’s job description with a *frontstage* perspective, v. 40.

“For this is the will of My Father that everyone beholding/contemplating the Son and believing in Him may have eternal life, and I Myself will raise him up at the last day.” Again we revert to *frontstage*, and the mandate for evangelism concerns what is here proclaimed, not the explanation to unbelievers of what is going on *backstage*. Calvin warns us at this point of focusing on “the whirlpool of predestination” while “taking away faith” instead of allowing faith to “have as much weight with us.”

The vital human response to Jesus Christ that is to be first solicited, beckoned, entreated, implored, is that of “beholding,” θεορέω, theóreō, Him. This speaks of careful observation, not casual patronage, 17:24; 20:5-6. Only then is authentic “believing” possible. Sinners must first learn about Christ, and this is especially what the Gospel records are all about. Herein is a fundamental problem today, namely that of Jesus Christ receiving abstract allegiance as some sort of religious hero, and not the Son of God come from the Father, under contract, so to speak. But what a contract this is! True belief awakens to the gift of eternal life as a present possession bestowed by Jesus Christ (10:27-28), that death

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159 And this is the will of him who sent me. He had said that the Father had committed to him the protection of our salvation; and now he likewise describes the manner in which it is accomplished. The way to obtain salvation, therefore, is to obey the Gospel of Christ. This point he had, indeed, glanced at a little before but now he expresses more fully what he had spoken somewhat obscurely. And if it is the will of God that those whom he has elected shall be saved, and if in this manner he ratifies and executes his eternal decree, whoever he be that is not satisfied with Christ, but indulges in curious inquiries about eternal predestination, such a person, as far as lies in his power, desires to be saved contrary to the purpose of God. The election of God is in itself hidden and secret; the Lord manifests it by calling, that is, when he bestows on us this blessing of calling us. They are madmen, therefore, who seek their own salvation or that of others in the whirlpool of predestination, not keeping the way of salvation which is exhibited to them. Nay more, by this foolish speculation, they endeavor to overturn the force and effect of predestination; for if God has elected us to this end, that we may believe, take away faith, and election will be imperfect. But we have no right to break through the order and succession of the beginning and the end, since God, by his purpose, hath decreed and determined that it shall proceed unbroken. Besides, as the election of God, by an indissoluble bond, draws his calling along with it, so when God has effectually called us to faith in Christ, let this have as much weight with us as if he had engraven his seal to ratify his decree concerning our salvation. For the testimony of the Holy Spirit is nothing else than the sealing of our adoption, (Romans 8:15.) To every man, therefore, his faith is a sufficient attestation of the eternal predestination of God, so that it would be a shocking sacrilege to carry the inquiry farther; for that man offers an aggravated insult to the Holy Spirit, who refuses to assent to his simple testimony. Whosoever seeth the Son, and believeth in him. He uses the words, see and believe, in contrast with what he had formerly said; for he had reproached the Jews with not believing, even though they saw, (verse 36.) But now, speaking of the sons of God, with the feeling which they have of the power of God in Christ, he joins the obedience of faith. Moreover, these words show that faith proceeds from the knowledge of Christ; not that it desires anything beyond the simple word of God, but because, if we trust in Christ, we must perceive what he is, and what he brings to us. John Calvin, *Commentary on John*, pp.

160 In v. 5, John “looks,” βλέπω, blepō, inside the tomb, whereas in v. 6, Peter, having entered the tomb, “observes,” θεορέω, theóreō, the linen wrappings.
cannot quench; hence there is resultant assurance of eventual resurrection life. This is the frontstage truth that Jesus Christ Himself pressed upon the multitudes of Israel, and the apostles subsequently proclaimed to the Gentiles (Acts 8:35-37; 10:43; 13:38-39; 15:7; 16:30-31; 18:8; 19:17-18).

4. The Bread of life defends His ministry to the Jews, vs. 41-59.

The Lord Jesus has presently been giving forth with some solid and astonishing doctrine that challenges the status quo religion of Capernaum. Also it is more and more couched in the language of food, concerning spiritual ingestion, digestion, indigestion, and rejection.

a. The expression of unhealthy carnal indigestion, vs. 41-42.

To appreciate good food requires a palate that has been educated, first by the experience of bad food, and then encounter with something infinitely better. But it is not enough to study a good menu, to see good food; it has to be tasted, ingested, and digested (Ps. 34:8). However, some become so set in their ways that, although a superior menu is placed before them, they are critical of anything new and, being in a rut, still order the same unhealthy, greasy stodge they have eaten for years. So the Jews here do not like the look of the new menu, superior as it obviously is. Religious, formalistic stodge will do.

(1) The symptom of grumbling, v. 41.

“Therefore the Jews were grumbling/murmuring/complaining about Him because He said, ‘I Myself am the bread that came down out of heaven.’” The “Jews” here are probably the synagogue leaders at Capernaum, cf. 1:19; 5:18. Their “grumbling” [γογγύζω, gonguzō, being onomatopoeic] here, employs the same word used in the LXX where Israel’s complaining in the wilderness is described (Exod. 15:24; 16:2, 8-9; Num. 14:2; Ps. 106:24-25). However it may surprise us that the chief objection here is not so much concerned with Jesus’ recent emphatic teaching on the Father’s electing grace. This they may have blithely accepted. Rather the strenuous objection is to His claim of a heavenly origin that is well understood to profess superiority over Moses and identification with deity. Yes, when Jesus Christ is rightly understood according to His own claims, the response will be one of either critical complaint or contrite confession. But oh, to what depths will the privileged stoop to! To murmur and complain and to be ashamed of Jesus Christ, grace and mercy incarnate! That is perversity in the extreme.

Concerning Lydia at Philippi, we are told that “the Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul” (Acts 16:13-14). However, what was it that Paul spoke about to those assembled at the riverside? Surely it was not concerning whether any there had been electively given by the Father to the Son for redemption, as true as that may be. Rather it was the persuasive proclamation of Christ as Messiah, that is the gospel (Phil. 1:18; 4:15).

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Ashamed of Jesus, that dear Friend,
    On whom my hopes of heaven depend!
No, when I blush, be this my shame,
    That I no more revere His Name.

(2) The symptom of distaste, v. 42.

   “And they were saying [grumbling], ‘This is not Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we [emphatic] know, [is it?]. How is he now saying that, ‘I have come down out of heaven?’” Had these Jews learned from reports in the south that there this Jesus of Nazareth had called “God His own Father making Himself equal with God” (5:18, 23, 36-37, 43)? Here in the north he is making the same confession (6:38-39) which is regarded as blasphemous (5:18). To add insult to their unbelief, the Jews are confirming, at best, only a lowly, and at worst, only a disreputable lineage (2:46). Thus, with a sneering manner, it is absurd to attribute spiritual nobility to such a Jewish commoner! Hence notice the claim, “we know Jesus’ parents, the humble Joseph and Mary,” when in fact they are willfully ignorant of His heavenly origin. How easy it would have been for Jesus to reply: “But look at the following I have; my popularity is increasing.” However, a different response comes forth, and it is akin to vs. 37-40 in the light of entrenched unbelief.

b. The exposition of healthy spiritual nutrition, vs. 43-59.

To help understand what is going on at this particular moment in Jesus’ earthly ministry, contrast the response here with that which will erupt at Pentecost. Then there will be praise and rejoicing at “the mighty deeds of God,” the Lord’s “adding to their number day by day those who were being saved” (Acts 2:11, 47). But now the characteristic response is continuous “grumbling,” at a proposed royal menu, perhaps even by some who have been fed loaves and fishes at Bethsaida!

(1) Jesus describes the guests at His table, vs. 43-51.

   Let us further take up here the analogy of “eating,” as at a banquet. Here the Lord Jesus is distinguishing between true guests and intruders. He will certainly have a full table; His Father will send out the invitations, and He will seat everyone of them providing the best bread and wine ever tasted.

(a) It is not for grumblers, v. 43.

   “Jesus answered and said to them, ‘Do not be grumbling among yourselves.’” This is not, by implication, a pleading for a more thoughtful consideration of Jesus’ real identity. Rather, he is saying, “Don’t waste your breath with your complaining. You are insulting the Father who sent Me and His certain plan of redemption. Your grumbling is in fact grumbling against God. Do not offend Him any further.” In their sheer blindness, these Jews need to be “born again” (3:3). Ryle puts it this way:
Your murmuring is only what I am prepared to expect. I know what human nature is. I am not moved by it. Think not that your unbelief will shake my confidence in my divine mission, or prevent my saying what I do. I know that you cannot naturally understand such things as I am speaking of, and I will proceed to tell you why. But cease from these useless murmurings, which neither surprise nor stop Me.  

(b) It is only for the invited, vs. 44-47.

Thus Jesus again explains to the Jews that they cannot invite and seat themselves at the feast prepared by the Father. Further, they cannot define what is on the menu; this is according to the Father’s determination. A full banquet is certain, but only for invited guests.

1) Those drawn by the Father, v. 44.

“No one is able [δύναμαι, dunamai] to come to Me unless the Father, who has sent Me, draws [ἐλκύω, helkūo] him.” If the command of v. 43 has not shut the mouths of these Jewish malcontents, then this further explanation concerning the Father’s particular elective grace ought to. It expands upon vs. 29, 37, 39, especially with a more exclusive emphasis, and the manner in which the Father’s elect come to, are given to, the Son. They are “drawn,” which term is used in 21:6, 11 of hawling/dragging in a net full of fish. So in 12:32, “I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself.” Morris documents that an element of resistance is involved and concludes: “There is not one example in the New Testament of the use of this verb where the resistance is successful. Always the dragging power is triumphant, as here.”

Thus God’s particular prevenient grace is here displayed, which is for Luther a repudiation of popular conceptions of “free choice.” This sovereign gracious drawing by the Father results in consignment to the Son who redeems and raises up everyone of the Father’s chosen without exception. So Matthew 11:27 makes a similar assertion. These effectually drawn sinners comprise the full table of guests who, all being dressed in the host’s wedding garments, will delight in the menu of the body and blood of the Lord Jesus. The uninvited will be excluded (Matt. 22:1-14), but the bona fide guests will sing:

I’ve found a Friend, O such a Friend!  
He loved me ere [before] I knew Him;

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162 Ryle, John, I, p. 387.
163 However in John 21:8, σῦρω, surō, is used, which Trench distinguishes as having more employment of force. So the KJV translates 21:6, 11 as “draw,” but 21:8 as “dragging.” However, surely this drawing is more than “potent allurement,” Synonyms, pp. 72-74.
164 Morris, John, p. 371n.
165 Rupp and Watson, Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation, pp. 326-27.
He drew me with the cords of love,
And thus He bound me to Him;
And round my heart still closely twine
Those ties which nought can sever;
For I am His, and He is mine,
For ever and for ever.

2) Those taught by the Father, v. 45-47.

What exactly is it to “come to Christ,” biblically speaking? We have been taught thus far that those elected by the Father are a gift to the Son in vs. 37, 39; further, in v. 44 this same select company is drawn to the Son by the Father. Now this whole process is further explained according to means that accomplish God’s certain ends.

a) Through the influence of prevenient grace, v. 45.

“It has been written in the Scriptures, ‘And they shall all be taught of God.’” Here is a paraphrase of Isaiah 54:13, cf. Jer. 31:34, that reads, “All your sons will be taught of the LORD.” Delitzsch comments: “The children of Jerusalem will need no instruction from man, but carry within them the teaching of heaven, as those who are ‘taught of God,’ cf. Jeremiah 31:34; Matthew 16:17; I John 2:20.”166 On the one hand, Romans 3:11 declares in general, “There is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God.” Yet there is also the exceptional truth of particular prevenient grace whereby the elect are drawn to Christ through instruction prior to conversion. As Carson well puts it, the compulsion here, “is not by the savage constraint of a rapist, but by the wonderful wooing of a lover. Otherwise put, it is by an insight, a teaching, an illumination implanted within the individual, in fulfillment of the Old Testament promise.”167

As a consequence of this divine internal nudging through the Holy Spirit: “Everyone having heard from the Father and learned, comes to Me.” The wooing of a soul, by means of divine invasion, instruction, and attraction, will inevitably result in the winning of that same soul. This process commences with an awakened God-consciousness that both compass-like and with an imparted divine charge, directs the seeking soul to Christ the attracting lodestone (12:32). Again this is back-stage revelation that only the saved can fathom.

166 Delitzsch, Isaiah, II, p. 350. Bruce refers to the opinion of some that, “Isaiah 54 was included in the appointed synagogue lessons for this period of the year,” in which case these words “may have been fresh in the minds of many of his hearers. He wishes them to understand that the time for the fulfillment of these words has now arrived.” John, pp. 156-57.

167 Carson, John, p. 293.
b) Through the revelation of the Son, v. 46.

“Not that anyone has seen the Father except the One who is from God; this One [He] has seen the Father.” To avoid a misunderstanding, namely that to hear and learn of God suggests also the real frontal seeing of Him, Jesus makes a categorical denial that at the same time upholds His own unique relationship with the Father. To claim that He alone has seen the Father was a stupendous claim. This is reminiscent of 1:18. Indeed the clarification here directs our thinking to 14:9. However, before a Jewish audience, that would easily recollect instances of God being seen in the Old Testament, something more astonishing may be intimated. As Ryle suggests:

I cannot but think that one object our Lord has in view, both here and in 5:37, is to impress on the Jews’ minds, that all the appearances of God which are recorded in the Old Testament were appearances not of the First Person of the Trinity but of the Second. His object in both places, I suspect, was to prepare their minds for the great truth which as yet they were unable to receive,—that, however unbelieving they now were, Christ who was now with them, was that very Person who had appeared to Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and Moses.  

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Ryle, John, I, pp. 392-93.

c) Through the reception of the Son, v. 47.

“Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life.” Again we return to a frontstage perspective and proclamation commencing with the third strong affirmation in this discourse of “Truly, truly,” vs. 26, 32, all of which are intended to focus, with pleading, upon Christ as the consuming object of true saving faith. This is a frontstage declaration of what it is to come to Christ. This is the essential gospel message to both south and north, 3:36; 5:24; 6:51, 58; 11:26. The Lord Jesus only is the fount of saving grace; faith is the act of imbibing by parched souls. This congregation is full of parched souls, with distorted, warped palates, who have not under-stood the backstage revelation thus far.

But that is not the vital necessity at this stage, nor is the Lord Jesus discouraged from giving such an impassioned invitation to blind souls; surely the tone here is of earnest encouragement, of serious, yearning compassion, not stoic fatalistic indifference. Again Ryle comments: “He [Jesus] now speaks out much more clearly and plainly about Himself,
dropping all reserve, and revealing Himself as the object of faith, openly and without figure. It is one of those great, broad, simple declarations of the Gospel way of salvation, which we can never know too well.\(^\text{169}\)

(c) It is only for the malnourished, vs. 48-51.

There is an increasing intensity in the following plea; there is no condemnation of obvious blindness, only a reaching out by way of expanded illustration, as if to go to extreme lengths to make the gospel truth to be never so more clear. But at the same time, the quality of faith called for in v. 47 is defined with astonishing graphic power. To really believe in Jesus is to consume Him, to ingest and digest Him!

1) This hunger is for Christ, v. 48.

“I Myself am the bread of life.” This is a reemphasis of the emphatic truth of v. 35. Here is a climactic frontstage declaration since this particular divine presentation is drawing to a close; this is the plainest possible revelation of God’s new menu for people who are dying because of their present diet of formal, useless, religion. It is not so much as if they have no food; they have eaten from the table of Moses for generations; they still eat that which gives them religious heartburn, v. 49. People today similarly continue to feed their soul with religious junk food, but their diet of man-centered religion only results in sclerosis and paralysis of the heart, and inevitable death. Deliverance, that is life instead of death, only comes from feasting on Jesus at that banquet appointed by the Father, not worldly religion.

2) This hunger is not for earthly manna, v. 49.

“Your fathers ate the manna in the desert/wilderness, and they died.” While there is recollection here of earlier discussion that the Jews initiated concerning manna provided under Moses’ ministry, vs. 31-34, now the initiation concerning this subject is by Jesus. The point He presses home is that, whatever esteem there remains for the manna from heaven under Moses, the reality is that those who ate nevertheless died. In fact “manna” was suitable wilderness food, when under discipline, “a fine flake-like thing, fine as the frost on the ground, . . . like coriander seed, white, and its taste was like wafers with honey” (Exod. 16:14, 31). However it did not rank with the “fish, . . . the cucumbers and the melons and the leeks and the onions and the garlic” of Egypt (Num. 11:5-7); rather they came to loathe it (Num. 21:5). Such a provision in no way enlivened the soul. Even “the fathers,” including Moses and Joshua, ate this provision and yet “they died.” This parallels Paul’s

\(^{169}\) Ibid., p. 393.
3) This hunger is for heavenly manna, v. 50.

“This [One?] is the bread coming down out of heaven, in order that a person may eat [aorist] of it and not die.” Jesus now plainly, as before, v. 35, declares Himself to be the unique, incomparable antidote to soul atrophy and death. Without the drugs of today, how much more was sickness and death a constant visible terror at that time. But for Jesus, death is much more comprehensive. Hence spiritual and not simply physical death is in mind here. Hence, the remedy is also transcendently greater than mere physical bread and physical longevity. Whereas the manna physically originated from the heaven above the earth, this “life-imparting Bread” originates from the heaven beyond where the Father, in dwelling upon His throne, has cohabited with His Son and sent Him to earth as the Savior.

The exhortation then is for a person to “eat” this life-imparting heavenly bread. In other words, at a point of time, the malnourished soul is to “consume” Jesus Christ. Initial conversion faith is the focus here, cf. 4:13-14. However, it is the serious intensity of true saving faith that is now being described. Of course the assumption is that a person realizes the shriveled state of their soul, their unsatisfactory present religious diet, and their peril before a holy God.

4) This hunger is for living bread, v. 51.

“I Myself am the living bread having come down out of heaven; if a person should eat of this bread he will live forever; and the bread also which I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.” With what earnest perseverance, with what clarifying zeal Jesus presses home the truth of Himself as the embodiment of the gospel.

It is as if He said: “Make no mistake about it, yes, I, My very self, I am the bread that the Father has sent from heaven that nourishes the soul and not simply the body. Yes, if you would live forever, by means of the transforming life of God that I alone impart, then you must believe in Me, you must come to me [as v. 35 explained]. However this believing or coming must be a devotion that can be likened to the eating, the consumption, the ingestion, and digestion of Me, and not merely in an abstract sense. This eating will be the most serious commitment of your being to a work of redemption involving My whole earthly being; it will be the redemption of
yourself as an impoverished believer.” It will be, “the just for [ὑπέρ, huper, as here in v. 51] the unjust, so that He [Jesus Christ] might bring us to God” (I Pet. 3:18). This work will encompass the salvation of Jew and Gentile on an unprecedented worldwide scale (3:15).

We even use this language today when we speak of “devouring a book,” of “being consumed by a cause,” of “being absorbed with a person,” often at the prospect of marriage. So, with the destiny of the human soul at stake, the Lord Jesus defines true saving faith in the same manner. There is no room for mere patronage, a trial run, so to speak. Rather:

I hunger and I thirst;
Jesus my manna be;
Ye living waters burst
Out of the rock for me.

Thou bruised and broken Bread,
My life-long wants supply;
As living souls are fed,
O feed me, or I die.

(2) Jesus describes the menu at His table, vs. 52-59.

Remember that as Jesus has spoken so plainly and directly, especially in such graphic and pictorial terms, he has not used a form of communication that is strange to the Hebrew mind, especially when the ministry of the psalmists and prophets is considered (Ps. 42:1-2; 63:1; Isa. 25:6-8; 44:1-5; 55:1-3; Jer. 31:29-30; Ezek. 2:7-3:4). Further, it should be kept in mind that the furious dispute amongst the Jews indicates differing understanding’s of Jesus’ figurative language. Perhaps some used a literal objection as a cloak for a deeper resentment concerning Jesus’ obvious claim that, in “coming down from heaven,” v. 50, He is the Son of God. This was a form of argument using ridicule. Not for a moment did the Jews really believe that Jesus was advocating cannibalism! However it is likely that some did understand Jesus in more spiritual terms with regard to the interpretation of His words, His lofty claim. Nevertheless they in turn disagreed with the meaning that Jesus is the bread of heaven sent by the Father.

(a) The distaste for His menu, v. 52.

“Therefore the Jews were heatedly arguing/verbally rag-ing/striving [μάχομαι, machomai, cf. Acts 7:26] with one another saying, ‘How is this man able to give us [his] flesh to eat?’” This was not a respectful preaching session! Here the best teaching in the world did not result in an automatic, overwhelming positive response, that is enlightenment

170 Carson well puts it this way: “Any dullard could see that Jesus was not speaking literally: no-one would suppose Jesus was seriously advocating cannibalism and offering himself as the first meal. But if his language was figurative, what did it mean? John, p. 295. Bruce argues in a similar fashion, John, p. 159.
and a glad reception. Quite the opposite. Here the best preaching in the world is scorned. The truth about Jesus Christ inevitably brings division (7:43; 9:16; 10:19. And this is especially true concerning vs. 53-58. Consider the persecution of the protestants in England by Queen (Bloody) Mary during the sixteenth century. In J. C. Ryle’s *Five English Reformers*, concerning martyred Bishop John Hooper, Rowland Taylor, Bishop Hugh Latimer, John Bradford, and Bishop Nicholas Ridley, he has an introductory chapter titled, “Why Were Our Reformers Burned?” He then explains:

The point of [cardinal importance] I refer to is the special reason why our Reformers were burned. Great indeed would be our mistake if we supposed that they suffered for the vague charge of refusing submission to the Pope, or desiring to maintain the independence of the Church of England. Nothing of the kind! The principal reason why they were burned was because they refused one of the peculiar doctrines of the Romish Church. On that doctrine, in almost every case, hinged their life and death. If they admitted it, they might live; if they refused it, they must die. The doctrine in question was the real presence of the body and blood of Christ in the consecrated elements of bread and wine in the Lord’s Supper. . . . [A]ll, without an exception, were called to special account about the real presence, and in every case their refusal to admit the doctrine formed one principal cause of their condemnation.  

(b) The description of His menu, vs. 53-58.

In 1981 a revised and modern Roman Catholic Catechism was published. It was designed for pre-school children entitled, “The Blessed Sacrament.” Part of it reads:

3. Q. Where is Jesus in the Church?
   A. He is behind the door (veil) in a little house we call the tabernacle.

4. Q. How does Jesus get there?
   A. The priest puts Him there when He brings Him down from heaven.

5. Q. What does He look like?
   A. He looks like a little round piece of bread (called the Sacred Host). It only looks like bread. Insist: It is not bread. It is truly Jesus.

Ask any Roman Catholic Priest for scriptural support for this belief and undoubtedly he will refer you to John 6:53-58. How would you

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171 Ryle, *Five English Reformers*, pp. 26-27. Then follow nine documented responses of such Reformers to their inquisitorial investigation.


173 In *The Teaching of the Catholic Church*, George D. Smith, ed., II, pp. 844-46, there is a chapter titled “The Sacrament of the Eucharist.” In a subsection “The Eucharist in Scripture,” the commencing reference is with regard to a detailed study of John 6. Also refer to, “The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent,” Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, II, p. 136. “If anyone denieth that, in the sacrament of the most holy Eucharist, are contained truly, really, and substantially, the body and blood together with the soul and
respond? Recall the truth of v. 35. It is coming to Jesus that satisfies the hungry soul, not the literal eating of His flesh; it is believing in Jesus that satisfies the thirsty soul, not the literal drinking of His blood. But also recall our study of John’s Gospel thus far, especially some emphases that wholly oppose such a repugnant doctrine (1:33; 2:20-21; 3:4-6, 31; 4:21-24).

1) It is spiritually exceptional, v. 53.

In reading the faces and souls of this synagogue congregation, Jesus now well perceives, not merely the look of simpletons, but rather contemptuous expressions, full of despite. To be sure a more faithful though bewildered remnant is also listening. But there is not the slightest retraction from Jesus. The picturesque language is only enhanced and amplified so that it will both emphatically clarify and intentionally distinguish. “Therefore Jesus said to them, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, except you eat [aorist] the flesh of the Son of Man and drink [aorist] His blood, you do not have life in yourselves.’” Surely the understanding of this verse is a matter concerning eternal consequences. The two main understandings cannot both lead to heaven because Jesus Himself will allow no ambiguity. The two aorists here sufficiently indicate initial saving faith, not ongoing sacramental participation. To “eat the flesh of the Son of Man” is to be savingly absorbed with His person; to “drink His blood” is to be savingly absorbed with His shed blood, His atoning death. Here again true saving faith is defined in stark contrast with the faithless response of a dark, lifeless soul. Ryle provides a threefold explanation concerning this true, vital faith.

Faith in Christ’s atonement is a thing of absolute necessity to salvation. . . . [F]aith in Christ’s atonement unites us by the closest possible bonds to our Savior, and entitles us to the highest privileges. . . . [F]aith in Christ’s atonement is a personal act, a daily act, and an act that can be felt. . . . We need food every day, and not once a week or once a month; and in like manner, we need to employ faith every day.—We feel better when we have eaten and drunk, we feel strengthened, nourished, and refreshed; and, in like manner, if

divinity of our Lord Jesus Christ, and consequently the whole Christ; but saith that he is only therein as in a sign, or in a figure, or virtue: let him be anathema.” Thus Roman Catholicism teaches that, through the exclusive agency of the priest, having succession from Peter through the laying on of hands of a bishop, grace and life is literally received by means of the physical, transubstantiated wafer (body of Christ) and wine (blood of Christ), and hence, through the eating and drinking of the believer, is ingested and digested within the body. As a result the believer, having been regenerated, and thus converted, through the instrumental means of water baptism, cooperates with this assimilated divine grace and so produces good works that result in gradual justification.
we believe truly, we shall feel the better for it, by sensible hope and peace in our inward man.174

As Isaac Watts has written:

Jesus invites his saints,
To meet around his board;
Here pardoned rebels sit and hold
Communion with their Lord.

For food he gives his flesh,
He bids us drink his blood;
Amazing favor! Matchless grace
Of our descending God!

This holy bread and wine
Maintains our fainting breath,
By union with our living Lord,
And interest in his death.

2) It is spiritually nutritional, v. 54.

In typical fashion, John positively presents the truth negatively described in v. 53. “Whoever is eating/munching [τρωγω, trōgō, cf. 13:18, both present tense] My flesh and drinking my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.” Hence the ongoing theme of life alone in Christ through faith is forcefully pressed home, especially as believing is now qualified as “chewing.” It is not simply “eating/devouring,” [φαγω, phagō, vs. 31, 50-53, aorist tense], but rather “a process of ruminating, masticating” [τρωγω, trōgō, vs. 54, 56-58, present tense], over the truth concerning Christ. Thus Ryle comments: “I venture to suggest that the word is purposely used [in v. 54], in order to show that our Lord meant the habit of continually feeding on Him all day long. He did not mean the occasional eating of material food in an ordinance.”175

Further notice how the Lord Jesus distinguishes, yet connects, in the realm of life. There is “eternal life” in the now for the believer, and “resurrection life” in the future (5:29) for the believer in the present. However, the believer’s quality of faith is that which ingests and digests Christ, in much the same way that he “abides/has residence in Christ” (15:4-7; cf. 6:56). To sum up, we have been graphically introduced to the doctrine of union with Christ.

175 Ibid., pp. 405-406.
3) It is spiritually satisfactory, v. 55.

“For My flesh is true food [βρόσις, brōsis, to really eat], and My blood is true drink [πόσις, posis, to really drink]. In other words, there is eating and drinking in this life at a variety of levels, but this is the highest realm that involves the nourishment of the awakened soul. As Isaac Watts has written:

My God provides a richer cup,
And nobler food to live upon;
He for my life has offered up
Jesus, His best-beloved Son.

Such a person “will joyously draw water from the springs of salvation” (Isa. 12:3; cf. Ps. 36:7-9). At the same time, by implication, there is addressed here that universal, mere carnal pursuit of satisfaction for the cravings of the flesh and ambitions of the worldly soul. “These are springs without water and mists driven by a storm, for whom the black darkness has been reserved” (II Pet. 2:17; cf. Ezek. 12:19).

4) It is spiritually vivifying, v. 56-58.

Here again is clear evidence that Jesus Christ is in no way teaching the Roman Catholic doctrine of the mass, which is at the heart of their doctrine of sanctification. Regular attendance at mass ensures a physical diet of Jesus Christ. Without this physical diet there is no sustaining grace. Rather, to consume Christ by faith is to be in intimate union with Him through faith.

a) Establishing union with Christ, v. 56.

“Whoever is eating/chewing My flesh and drinking My blood is abiding in Me and I in him.” Admittedly we are dealing with a mystical truth, but the repetition here, as in v. 54, tells us this is nevertheless vital, real. Sometimes this union is likened to being intimately joined to Christ (κολλάω, kollaō, I Cor. 6:16-17; cf. γίνομαι, ginomai, Rom. 7:3-4). The present tense in all three verbal forms here is significant, especially since it eliminates mere religious posturing because of some decision in the past. Ryle adds:

Just as ‘food and drink’ received into a man’s body become part of the man’s self, and are incorporated into his system, and add to his health, comfort, and strength,—so when a man by faith feeds his soul on Christ’s sacrifice for his sins, Christ becomes as it were part of himself, and he becomes part of Christ. In a word, there is as intimate an union between Christ and
the believer’s soul as there is between a man’s food and a man’s body.\textsuperscript{176}

But further, we become like the food we eat; compare the health of a person who lives on junk food with that of he who has a balanced diet that includes fresh fruit and vegetables. Thus my soul prospers according to its dietary intake.

b) Establishing the life of God in the soul, v. 57.

“Just as the living Father [the only true God of Israel, Josh. 3:9-10; Ps. 84:1-2; Jer. 10:10; Dan. 6:26] sent Me, and I live because of the Father, also the one eating/ruminating on Me [the whole person], that one shall live because of Me.” Often the world will exclaim, “That’s living!” with regard to some carnal extravagance. But what is it really to live, as God intended? Here is the clearest possible answer. It is to be reconciled to the living God (Matt. 16:16; John 5:26; 17:3; I John 5:19-20) through His sent living Son (14:19; I John 5:11) so that I might become alive unto God (10:10; 14:19; Rom. 6:11; Phil. 1:21). Jesus’ whole ministry is one of life and death. So it was the case with Paul (II Cor. 2:15-16). There is vegetable life and animal life; even the bad angels and Satan have life. But here we are talking about being alive in the soul, about eternal life, about having the very life of a holy and righteous God as the ground of our being. If this is not a reality, then I am dead even though I live. To have this reality is to feast on Christ, to imbibe Christ, to earnestly believe in Christ. For Augustine explains: “He that believes, eats.”\textsuperscript{177}

But this eating is not sampling; it is, in hunger, enjoying a full meal.

c) Establishing eternal life in the soul, v. 58.

“This is the bread which came down out of heaven; not as the fathers ate and died. Whoever eats/chews this bread shall live forever.” Once again (3:13; 6:33, 38, 41-42, 50-51, 58), with closing evangelistic stress, Jesus distinguishes himself as food for the human soul that so greatly surpasses the manna obtained through Moses or the loaves and fishes that were multiplied at Bethsaida. This whole discourse has been grounded upon human concern for physical food, vs. 26-27, an excellent analogy with regard to what is of greater importance for the shriveled human soul. As Paul explains: “The first man [fallen Adam] is from the earth, earthy; the second man [Jesus Christ] is from heaven. As is the earthy, so

\textsuperscript{176} Ibid., p. 407.

\textsuperscript{177} Aurelius Augustine, \textit{John}, I, Tract. xxvi, 1.
also are those who are earthy; and as is the heavenly, so also are those who are heavenly” (I Cor. 15:47-48). Thus Jesus Christ has come to impart heaven to earth, to implant the life of heaven in the earthy human heart.

(c) The presentation of His menu, v. 59.

“These things He said [while] teaching in [the] synagogue in Capernaum.” The emphasis here is upon the religious character of the gathering, not so much the building, probably erected by the centurion of Luke 7:1-5. The point is that Christ’s presentation of Himself as bread from heaven has been a major, albeit rejected, testimony in a center of Judaism, after the manner of His unwelcome coming to Israel described in 1:11.

5. The Bread of Life defends His ministry before false and true disciples, vs. 60-71.

“After synagogue,” akin to “after church,” the dispersing congregation enters into animated group discussion about the “sermon” and the “preacher.” The focus narrows toward the responses of disciples and the twelve. “Disciples” include those who have followed Jesus to Bethsaida and sought him from Tiberias. They are enquirers, learners, without a definite commitment. The twelve are the chosen disciples who have already been sent out on witnessing/training missions as apostles (Mark 6:1-30).

a. The defection from discipleship, vs. 60-66.

Jesus first gives attention to those disciples who have had difficulty in understanding His teaching. Although skeptical, puzzled, they are not quickly discarded, nor is Jesus hesitant in giving yet further clarification that includes both frontstage and backstage explanations. Nevertheless, after all of this effort, in human terms, the end result is relative failure, that is the substantial loss of a following. However, the Son of God is not in the slightest discouraged in terms of following through with His appointed ministry.

(1) Because of the Jews’ unwillingness to digest Jesus’ teaching, v. 60.

“Therefore many of His disciples having heard, they said, ‘This word is hard/difficult [σκληρός, skl¯eros, to chew/digest]; who is able to hear it?’” Jesus Christ did not minister merely ethical platitudes; grasp of His mystical truth, especially before the crucifixion, is not simple. Certainly a plain literal understanding of Jesus’ teaching combined with the Jewish abhorrence of drinking blood presents a conflict. But so also does a figurative literal understanding of the same teaching. Granted, “[t]here is, indeed, in Rabbinic writings frequent reference to the sufferings, and even the death of the Messiah,” yet how is one to eat and drink this truth, especially since the additional fact of the resurrection is not under consideration? These disciples are like those who, wholly governed by carnal religion, confess an admiration

178 Edersheim, Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah, I, p. 165.
for the ethical Jesus yet stumble at belief in the saving efficacy of His
substitutionary atonement.

(2) Because of the Jews’ lack of spiritual appetite, vs. 61-63.

The intervention here of Jesus is stimulated, not only by divine omniscience,
already demonstrated (1:48-49; 2:23-25; 4:16-19), but also divine
compassion in clarification (5:34), followed by further omniscience
concerning God’s elect and the reprobate, vs. 64-65.

(a) Jesus questions the grumblers’ grumbling, v. 61.

“But Jesus beholding/conscious in Himself that the disciples were
grumbling [γογγύζω, gonguzō, cf. vs. 41, 43; 7:32] concerning this, He
said to them, ‘Does this offend [σκανδαλίζω, skandalizō] you?’” These
disciples are like shortsighted people being expected see things clearly at
distance who consequently become frustrated at their lack of vision.
In fact their vision is very close to this world, but unable to see heaven
at a distance. But the surgeon of men’s souls quickly diagnoses the
sight dim concerning this matter?” Of course Jesus asks this question to
explain that he understands their difficulty, the implication being that
He is more than willing to explain yet further. The murmuring is not
rebuked at this stage in the conversation.

(b) Jesus questions the grumbler’s carnal comprehension, vs. 62-63.

Here the patience of Jesus is evident in His willingness to provide
further clarification at two different levels, of logic and plain
explanation. But this is the end of the road, so to speak, after which we
will be brought backstage once again and instructed concerning the
divine perspective.

1) Carnal comprehension exposed, v. 62.

“Therefore, what [will you do/say] if you behold the Son of Man
ascending going up to where He was before?” Jesus logically
propounds a present hypothetical situation, His bodily return to
the bosom of the Father, His former place of blissful residence,
which consideration will lead to a resolution of the disciples’
problem. Since their difficulty has most likely been the thought of
literal consumption of Jesus, such a bodily translation makes this
an impossibility. How could the disciples on earth eat and drink of
Christ’s ascended person in heaven? Thus an impossible literal
meaning must be substituted by a more figurative understanding,
which is exactly the result in v. 63. The same reasoning ought to
dismiss the Roman Catholic doctrine of the mass.

179 So Plummer, Ryle.
2) Spiritual comprehension explained, v. 63.

“The [Holy] Spirit is the one giving life, the flesh is of no profit; the words which I have spoken to you are spirit and are life [words].” Here is the clearest explanation of all concerning Jesus’ preceding teaching.\(^{180}\) Surely His intention is to clarify further and not muddy the waters, so to speak. There are two related principles taught here.

a) The broad principle of life in the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit brings life to this teaching, on a heavenly, spiritual plain, 3:6, not belief in material consumption. Focusing on the carnal digestion of the body and blood of Jesus is a dead-end journey where there is no life for the soul, no profit, no spiritual benefit. Such is an “earthy” perspective that is no more beneficial than drinking the superior wine Jesus made at Cana or eating the superior bread He multiplied at Bethsaida. There is only benefit in the parched, hungry soul coming and believing in Jesus, v. 35. This is the only consumption that counts in terms of obtaining eternal life.

b) The narrow principle of spiritual life words.

Hence, the words of Jesus are “spirit and life words.” That is, the material terms, the very words “flesh” and “blood” are spiritual in nature. Their content concerns truth at a spiritual, not a carnal level. They describe the divine person and the atoning work of the Son of God. Nicodemus and the woman at the well were choking on carnal words. Both were told by Jesus that he was speaking to them with “spirit and life words.” Nicodemus had explained to him that the second birth Jesus was speaking about was of the Spirit, not the flesh, of heaven, not earth (3:4-12). The woman at the well had explained to her that the physical water from Jacob’s well would not satisfy the cravings of the soul, only the spiritual water that Jesus Himself would supply (4:13-14).

(3) Because of the decree of the Father, vs. 64-66.

Once again, Jesus’ confrontation with unbelief, vs. 36, 37, 41-44, in the face of a most transparently clear front stage witness, and persistent clarification concerning His person and work, results in yet another backstage revelation.

\(^{180}\) Ryle seems to offer excessive caution here that Barrett, Carson, Morris, etc., do not express: “This text is, perhaps, one of the most difficult in the Gospel of St. John. It is easy to slur it over, and be satisfied with a vague impression that it means, ‘We are to put a spiritual sense on our Lord’s words.’” Of course part of the difficulty could also be vigorous confrontation with those who uphold a variety of sacramental interpretations that are repudiated here. Ryle, *John*, I, p. 414.
Here is unveiled the ultimate reason for seeming failure at the present, and future success, even as Paul acknowledges (I Cor. 15:10; Gal. 1:14-17). Much of the crowd remains offended at Jesus’ ministry; it continues to grumble at the demands of his teaching. There is both a simplicity and a depth in the true gospel that can only be perceived through particular enabling grace.

(a) The foreknowledge of the Son, v. 64.

“‘But there are certain ones of you who are not believing.’ For Jesus had known from the beginning who those certain ones were not believing and who the one is betraying him.” Here Jesus’ penetrating knowledge of human nature is again revealed. Being deity, He has the perception of Deity. The Lord said to fearful, discouraged Paul in a vision at Corinth, “I have many people in this city” (Acts 18:10. Not surprisingly Paul later writes to Timothy, “the Lord knows those who are His” (II Tim. 2:19), and those who are not. From eternity and on into time, “from the beginning,” Jesus sees through all of man’s religious pretense. A doubting Thomas, a pragmatic Pilate, the weak believer with little yet authentic faith, the wolf-like minister seeming to be an angel of light, With editorial insight, born of subsequent experience, John relates how Jesus knows the hearts of them all, but especially the seeming deceiver of deceivers, the beguiling, treacherous Judas, not directly identified at this stage. How man vainly attempts to put Jesus under examination when in fact it is Jesus who searches our hearts to the depths, sees all of the hypocrisy, the selfish ambition, the pretense, but also the pure, child-like trust, the thirst for God, the holy inclinations.

(b) The appointment of the Father, v. 65.

“And He was saying, ‘On account of this I have said to you, that no one is able to come to Me except the one having been given to him from the Father.’” Unbelief has been portrayed here as both a widespread plague and a formidable enemy, something that is not easily overcome, especially by some flawlessly rational presentation. The proclamation of the light of truth is one thing; the embrace of that truth by a darkened soul is something that only the will and power of the Father can enable. Jesus Christ was not a Calvinist. But John Calvin was a believer in the doctrine of Jesus Christ here. Men do not find God! but they are found by God, 5:21. The mystery is that God moves in saving men like the ebbing and flowing of the tide. He enables periods when the catch in our fishing is overflowing, the fruit ripe for the picking, and periods of the night “when no man can work” (9:4). Presently, for Jesus, the harvest is lean; but a time of unprecedented reaping is just around the corner, and He knows it. This is the backstage truth of the courts of heaven.
An Outlined Commentary on John

(c) The apostasy of many disciples, v. 66.

“As a result of this [conversation] many of His disciples withdrew/retreated to their former life and no longer were walking [περιπατέω, peripateō] with Him.” What a test this is for the greatest preacher, the world has ever seen, largely to be abandoned. “What they wanted, he would not give; what he offered, they would not receive.”

A lesser person might have listened to advice concerning a change of emphasis and method. “Don’t place so much stress on the sovereignty of God,” they perhaps said. Another preacher might have given up in discouragement because of the multitude of desertions, and quit the ministry. Of course these deserters were never true disciples (8:31; I John 2:18:19). They well portray the “seed sown on the rocky places, this is the man who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet he has no firm root in himself, but is only temporary, and when affliction or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he falls away” (Matt. 13:20-21). But further note that this great exodus does not cause Jesus to rush after these defectors, as if pleading with them: “Hey, friends, give me another hearing and I will really try to make my message easier to grasp. I am sorry for the confusion.” On the contrary, Jesus takes the opportunity to “cleanse His membership,” so to speak, as He addresses those who remain.

b. The devotion of apostleship, vs. 67-71.

Now the Son of God appears to be reduced to a following, a “membership of twelve disciples,” so to speak, and as we know, even that little gathering is still not pure. Yet he will nevertheless not soft-peddle because of the meager group that remains. The Lord Jesus insists upon loyalty (Luke 14:26-27, 33), and even this little band is now further tested, especially in the midst of a seeming disappointing environment. It is so easy to follow a man who draws a great crowd, an acknowledged hero, but not so with a loser, one despised by the present religious elite in Israel.

(1) The tested confession of the twelve, vs. 67-69.

Hence all true relationships come to a point of testing in life, such as in marriage, a business partnership, a long-standing friendship, simply because life involves a struggle, not a relaxing cruise. But this is especially so with regard to our Christian commitment and loyalty to Jesus Christ. The testings of discipleship seem to come daily.

(a) The test of apostasy, v. 67.

“Therefore Jesus said to the twelve, ‘You do not also wish to go away [do you]?’” Actually the question expects a negative answer, that is “Surely not you.” Of course the enquiry is intended to draw forth a

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181 Bruce, John, p. 164.
response, and not simply inform the omniscient Master. Jesus did this on the Emmaus Road where, “He acted as though He were going farther” (Luke 24:28). He similarly elicited faith when recently walking on the water, returning from Bethsaida. While the disciples strained at the oars, “He intended to pass by them,” at which they cried out in fear (Mark 6:48-49). Here the divine romance intensifies because of the stimulation of the Bridegroom. In this instance, the response will not disappoint the Savior. However, surely He is soliciting more than a “yes” or “no” answer. He wants some explanation of why any professed disciple should persevere with Him. That is what really counts, and such a reason will indicate whether we will persevere to the end. For instance, suppose we reply negatively, “No, I will not defect, because of being fed so well back at Bethsaida,” or, “I will not defect, because my deafness has been healed.” That faith will certainly fail; it is self oriented; perhaps another religious leader comes along and offers similar benefits.

Hence, what if the Lord Jesus asked us, “Surely you don’t plan to abandon Me, do you?” what would we say? What if we were attended a large church of hundreds, and it was reduced to twelve members? What then would you say? “Yes” or “No” is not enough!

(b) The testimony of Peter, vs. 68-69.

The first among the twelve asserts himself, as when fearful on the sea of Galilee (Matt. 14:26-28), but especially according to the stimulus of divine revelation as well as temperament.

1) Jesus Christ alone bestows eternal life, v. 68.

“Simon Peter answered Him, ‘Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life.’” The stumbling, impetuous Peter, according to the unveiling of fundamental gospel truth from backstage (Matt. 16:16-17), rises to the occasion and evidences a degree of comprehension concerning Jesus’ teaching at a spiritual level. There is no grumbling, no sense of being offended. As a consequence, revelation from backstage gloriously becomes frontstage proclamation! Clearly there is some comprehension of the thought of v. 63. When Jesus Christ is rightly perceived, His uniqueness as the Savior of sinners is the inevitable, the only conclusion, even for a relative spiritual babe. But later Peter will speak more fully of this truth concerning what it is to be “born again . . . through the living and enduring word of God” (I Pet. 1:23), to “die to sin and live to righteousness” (I Pet. 2:24), to “live in the spirit according to the will of God” (I Pet. 4:2), and be “called . . . to His [God’s] eternal glory in Christ” (I Pet. 5:10).
2) Jesus Christ alone is the Holy One of God, v. 69.

“And we [emphatic] have come to believe and know that You are the Holy One of God [ὁ ἁγιὸς τοῦ θεοῦ, ho hagios tou theou].” The other disciples nod their heads in agreement, including duplicitous Judas. The surrounding dissention and defection has in no way discouraged the little flock of disciples. During the past eighteen months of Jesus’ public ministry, there seems to have developed some degree of increased understanding. What lofty proclamation this is. Here the rough fisherman of Galilee boldly confesses in a manner that resembles the declarations of the princely prophet Isaiah (Isa. 10:17; 29:23; 40:25; 43:15; 49:7; cf. John 17:11), though with a decided messianic perspective (Mark 1:24; Acts 3:14). Yet, as with the confession of Matthew 16:16, this right understanding of the person of the Lord Jesus is incomplete at this stage since it does not incorporate the saving work of this Son of God. But again, later Peter, and the other disciples, will understand that, “Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God” (I Pet. 3:18).

(2) The treacherous conspiracy of Judas, vs. 70-71.

Notwithstanding the sublime truthfulness and heavenly origin of Peter’s preceding declaration, yet, as B. B. Warfield suggests, was there not perhaps “an element of boastfulness in this confession,” especially as indicated by the prominence, in the original, of “we” with regard to the disciples’ faith and knowledge? And further, has not Peter too hastily, unknowingly included Judas in his eager proclamation? Hence, is there not now an element of correction in what follows?

(b) The chosen reprobate, v. 70.

“Jesus answered them, ‘Have not I chosen/selected [ἐκλέγω, eklegô] you [as] the twelve, and [yet] one of you is a devil [διάβολος, diabolos, in character]?’” While, according to Ryle, the thought of choice here may simply refer to appointment to the apostolic office, yet the note of correction would necessitate a more particular, intensive meaning that contrasts with the disciples’ professed faith. Alford sees this selection here to be a consequence of the disciples being given to the Son by the Father (17:6). Hence divine election, that also includes appointment to apostleship, as reiterated in 15:16, not only trumps human response, but also inculcates needed humility and the greater appreciation of grace. However, the election here also includes Judas who yet,

182 B. B. Warfield, Faith and Life, pp. 103-115. Similarly Carson remarks that “Peter’s way of expressing himself appears somewhat pretentious. . . . But Jesus will not allow even a whisper of human pretension.” John, p. 304.

according to his own perception, acts with total freedom. He has not slipped into or even invaded the plan of God, but is purposely included in it. Although presently unidentified, there is something almost tantalizing, before the disciples, about the reference here to Satanic personification (cf. 13:2; Mark 8:33), especially the derogatory name given to a member of the inner circle.

(c) The deceptive reprobate, v. 71.

“But He was speaking [concerning] Judas, [son] of Simon Iscariot, for this one, being of the twelve, was going to deliver over/betray [παραδίδωμι, paradidōmi] Him.” Here is John’s editorial identification, based upon subsequent experience, that enhances a sense of impending tragedy in the life of Christ. No animosity is expressed, or confession of being deceived on the part of John. However here is proof of the treacherous, hence devilish character of Judas designated by Jesus, that is so frequently mentioned in the four Gospels. But further there is a most sobering lesson as Ryle points out:

If ever there was a man who had great privileges and opportunities, that man was Judas Iscariot. A chosen disciple, a constant companion of Christ, a witness of His miracles, a hearer of His sermons, a commissioned preacher of His kingdom, a fellow and friend of Peter, James, and John,—it would be impossible to imagine a more favorable position for a man’s soul. Yet if anyone ever fell hopelessly into hell, and made shipwreck at last for eternity, that man was Judas Iscariot. The character of that man must have been black indeed, of whom our Lord could say, He is “a devil.” Let us settle it firmly in our minds, that the possession of religious privileges alone is not enough to save our souls. . . . Without grace we may live in the full sunshine of Christ’s countenance, and yet, like Judas, be miserably cast away.\(^\text{184}\)