

# "The Meaning of LIFE"

## Gospel of John



**A Guide for Personal Reflection and Group Discussion**

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# **“The Meaning of LIFE”:**

## **Reading the Gospel of John**

### **A Guide for Personal Reflection and Group Discussion**

The *Gospel according to John* gives us a unique insight into the facts and meaning of the life and ministry of Jesus the Christ.

These questions offer a way of reflecting on the meaning of the Gospel text, and exploring how the reality of Jesus makes a difference in our lives. My aim is to encourage reflective reading of this Gospel. These questions and comments are aids to thoughtful reading, not a substitute for reading.

First, let's take a big picture look at this account of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ.

This book, St. John's Gospel, is like a drama in four acts.

1. The Wonder of Jesus, Jn. 1:1-18.

The cosmic meaning of Jesus' life and ministry is set forth in a thematic introduction of deep significance.

2. The Witness of Jesus, Jn. 1:19-12:50

The first years of Jesus' public ministry are presented with many scenes and incidents that bear witness to his glory.

3. The Words of Jesus, Jn. 13-17

This section records vital teaching of Jesus to his apostles as the final climactic events of his ministry begin to unfold.

4. The Work of Jesus, Jn. 18-21

The final chapters of this Gospel recount the amazing victory of the Son of God, Jesus Christ, as he dies for sins and defeats sin and death.

In the Gospel of John, you are in touch with an original eye-witness testimony to Jesus Christ, who has told the events of Jesus with the benefit of mature reflection and insight into the inner meaning of the remarkable historical phenomenon that was Jesus Christ.

I invite you to read John's account of Jesus Christ, taking each section thoughtfully and reflecting on what it means. The questions provided will stimulate your thinking.

For the best results, please read the Bible passage first, and then reflect on the questions. You can meet with someone else to discuss each section of this Bible book or get together with others to talk about it.

May God bless you as you study this book about his Son, Jesus the Christ!

Ralph Bowles

## 1. Read John 1:1-18                      The Word Became Flesh

Is there an ultimate meaning or Reason behind the universe – a higher principle that is greater than the natural world or the dramas of history? Many people these days have bought into the popular “scientism” which sees the universe as a mysterious reality, with an order developing without any “reason” behind it.

Yet this is not really convincing, because physicists know that there are laws behind the natural forces, an order behind the natural selection events. Many today sense a spiritual force or reality in or behind Nature.

But can we know this “spirit” or Reason that is behind nature? Many people feel that the only way to get in touch with this transcendent realm is to escape from reality, to loose the bind of natural, material reality and find a secret mystical way.

The Christian gospel makes a very different claim – that God, who is the Reason (“Word”) or Spirit behind nature (his creation) actually unites our realm of creation (matter and people) with the Divine realm of Spirit by the surprising link of INCARNATION and RENEWAL. “The Gospel of John is the creation story with Jesus Christ presented as simultaneously the revelation of Creator and creation.”<sup>1</sup> In Christ’s life, death and resurrection, God himself has come into the closest possible union with creation – from the inside, as it were – to rescue and renew creation.

1. The opening words of John’s Gospel (1:1-5) recall the opening words of the book of Genesis (Gen. 1:1-5). What light do John’s statements throw on those in Genesis 1?
2. Why does John call Jesus “the Word”? What is his relation to God, to the world, and to people?
3. How does a person become a child of God? Jn. 1:12-13
4. What do we learn about God from Jesus? Jn. 1:14-18
5. What does this introductory section of John’s Gospel say about why Jesus came to earth?

Behind the particularities of the history of Jesus of Nazareth, the eternal realities of God came into historical view in the most “down to earth” way imaginable! When you read this majestic opening to John’s Gospel, think about how you can come to know this Word – God.

*Prayer Focus: Praise Jesus for his divine glory and salvation.*

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<sup>1</sup> E. Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*, 85.

## 2. Read John 1:19-51      Introducing Jesus the King

Before Jesus began his public ministry, he was preceded by the sensational impact of John the Baptizer – a prophet who arose in Israel announcing the impending arrival of the King to bring God’s final acts of spiritual renewal to Israel. John the Baptizer sounded the trumpet announcing that God was about to do a great and new thing; he was the last of the great Old Covenant prophets who prepared the way for the Lord to come to his people.

Jesus himself emerged from the edges of John the Baptizer’s movement, and this passage gives us the immediate prelude to the public ministry of Jesus, as he picks up the baton from John, and calls his own disciples.

1. What was the ministry of John the Baptizer? (See Isa. 40:3-5; Jn. 16-8; Jn. 3:28-30).
2. What are the four great truths about Jesus that formed the testimony of John the Baptizer? Jn. 1:26-34
3. Which of the titles of Jesus, given by John the Baptizer, means the most to you at the moment?
4. What is this baptism with the Holy Spirit that Jesus brings? Jn. 1:33; see Jn. 3:1-14; 16:5-16; 20:19-22.
5. What brought each of these five men to faith in Jesus Christ? (Jn. 1:35-51) How did Jesus approach these men and respond to them? Which one is closest to your experience of Jesus?
6. Jesus promises the disciples (not just Nathanael) that they will have a closer experience of God than the patriarch Jacob had (Gen. 28:12-13; Jn. 1:51). What are your expectations of following Jesus?
7. Has there been an “Andrew” in your life, the person who introduced you to Jesus?

*Prayer Focus: Ask the Lord to help you understand what is involved in being a follower of Jesus Christ.*

### 3. Read John 2: 1-22      The New Life and the Old

The apostle Paul exclaimed about the good news of Christ: “the old has gone, the new has come” (2 Cor. 5:17). The Christian faith came out of the revelation of God in the Old Testament and from the life and faith of the Jewish people. In this part of the story of Jesus as John tells it, we are shown from the first public events of Jesus’ ministry the way his salvation fulfils and transcends the faith from which it came. A section of the Gospel of John begins here and ends (at 4:54) with incidents in Cana of Galilee, with each episode illustrating the fulfilment of the old way of Judaism, with the new life of Christ.

Two dramatic incidents, one joyful and the other confronting, illustrate the new life that Jesus came to bring - a Divine Life that would overflow the old structures of Israel. The old water of Jewish purification rituals is to be replaced by the new wine of God’s Kingdom gift. The old physical temple in Jerusalem will be replaced by the new temple of God’s presence in Jesus and by the Spirit.

1. Why did Jesus choose to begin his miraculous works with this unusual and remarkable miracle of the water become wine? Jn. 2:11
2. What does this miracle of changing water into wine mean? Notice the details of the sign: the volume and quality of the wine, the purpose of the water jars.
3. What did the disciples see of Jesus’ glory in this sign? What does this miracle say to you about Jesus and your relationship with Him?
4. There is a link between these two significant actions of Jesus; it was the Temple (Jn. 2:13-17 and 2:18-22). What was Jesus demonstrating about himself in this extraordinary interruption of the Temple’s sacrificial system? See Malachi 3:1-3.
5. Look at the words in Jn. 2:23-25. What did Jesus foresee about his mission? Is it possible to be indifferent about Jesus Christ with no consequences?

*Prayer Focus: Ask God to reveal the glory of Jesus his Son in the lives of people, bringing the new wine of his life into the water of the old ways.*

#### 4. Read John 2:23-3:36      The New Birth and the One From Above

In this section, the Gospel of John shows how the early ministry of Jesus began to make an impact on the leaders of his people and nation in Jerusalem. The remarkable works of Jesus (his miracles and his prophetic teaching) aroused the curiosity of leading religious figures, like this Pharisee, Nicodemus, who was also a member of the Jewish ruling council.

After the visit to Jerusalem, Jesus and his friends withdrew to the country districts of Judea and there they engaged in a similar ministry to that of the prophet John the Baptizer. Many of John's followers left him for Jesus. This raised the issue of how the two leaders were to be compared and evaluated.

This other influential figure in Israel - the prophet John the Baptizer - also pointed to Jesus as the bearer of God's Word to the people. Both these men - the seeker from within the circle of Jewish leadership and the prophet who was gathering a following of seekers - came to understand that Jesus was the one who was the channel of God's truth.

1. Many people place their faith in Jesus, but not all have genuine trust and understanding of the Lord. What was wrong with the faith of the people mentioned in Jn. 2:23? See Jn. 4:48; 6:30; Mk. 8:11-12; Acts 8:13.
2. What are the three facets of being 'born again'? Why is being 'born from above' necessary for salvation? (See Jn. 1:12-13; 2 Cor. 5:17).
3. Why was the lifting up of the Son of Man essential for salvation? Jn. 3:15.
4. What will be the grounds for judgement of people in relation to God's work in Jesus Christ? Jn. 3:16-21.
5. Why do people not want to open their lives to God? Jn. 3:20-21
6. How did John the baptizer regard Jesus? Look at the seven statements made about Jesus in Jn. 3:31, 32, 34, and think about how they set Jesus apart from all others.

The change that Jesus brings is a radical, deep renewal of human lives - indeed, a new start for humanity. Momentous changes happen when a person responds to Jesus with love and faith. The consequences of your choice about Jesus are large and lasting (see Jn. 3:35-36).

*Reflect: What is your response to Jesus? How do you regard him?*

The good news of salvation in Christ is for the whole world (as the introduction to this book has claimed, Jn. 1:1-9). In this encounter at a Samaritan well, we see the early stages of Christ's saving grace reaching beyond the nation of Israel. This woman from Samaria becomes a portrait of those from outside Israel who will come to believe in Jesus.

In his approach to this woman, Jesus broke down barriers which would have prevented him from helping her. He was a person from another culture, and with a gender distance that would have made contact unusual. Yet he reached across the divide to bring God's grace to her.

1. Why do you think that people become personally interested in Jesus? What need or needs does he offer to meet? What have been the stages of your own journey to personal faith in Jesus Christ? What has aroused your interest in him?
2. How did Jesus bring this woman to feel her need of salvation? How did he point to himself as the answer to her need? What can we learn here that may help us to lead others to Jesus as their Saviour?
3. Jesus used this incident with the Samaritan woman to teach a lesson to his disciples (Jn. 4:34-38). What do we learn from his application?
4. What does this incident teach us about how we might reach out with the gospel to people who are separated from us by race, religion and culture?
5. Some people believe because of what others have told them, while some have to have a personal experience themselves. Both kinds of faith are mentioned in Jn. 4:39-42. What do you need to be convinced about the eternal life that Jesus offers?

Notice the five steps that this woman went through in coming to full faith in Jesus: from curiosity, to discovery, to conviction, acceptance and even, finally, excitement.

*Prayer Focus: Ask the Lord to help us be aware of the "Samaritans" around us, and to show us how to relate wisely to them.*

6. Read John 4:43-5:47      What is Faith?

This episode shows us two incidents of miracles and healing. We see how Jesus is careful to discern the presence of true faith in him. In both these incidents, Jesus tests the faith of the people who come to him with a problem.

The royal official of Capernaum came to Jesus believing, with desperation, that Jesus could remove the fever and save his son's life. He "took Jesus at his word" when Jesus told him his son would live (Jn. 4:50). He was not coming out of idle curiosity but from real need.

Miracles themselves cannot create genuine faith in Jesus. These wonders however, function as 'signs' or indicators of the glory of Jesus Christ: in Jesus the Father God, the Creator is still at work (Jn. 5:17). The spiritual leaders of the people did not see this significance - only that Jesus had violated the Sabbath Law in their understanding (Jn. 5:8-10). Jesus gives his response to these critics, outlining his claims to be doing God's will (Jn. 5:15-47).

1. What does this "second" miraculous sign Jesus performed here in Cana, reveal about him (Jn. 4:43-54).
2. Jesus seems to test the man's sincerity in Jn. 4:38. What is Jesus doing?
3. Jesus commanded the official to act as if the healing took place, before he actually saw the healing. What does this tell us about faith in Jesus generally?
4. What does the healing of the man in the pool reveal about Jesus?
5. How is Jesus' relationship with God described in Jn. 5:17-29? What is Jesus' relationship to people?
6. Jesus mentions four testimonies to himself (Jn. 5:30-47). What are they?
7. Is it still possible to study the Bible without finding spiritual life? (Look at Jn. 5:39-41). Why?

*Prayer Focus: Ask God to open your heart to the ways He is testifying to the truth of Jesus and his Kingdom.*

## 7. Read John 6:1-71      The Abundance of Jesus

We have just seen real faith in Jesus in action; now in the next section of this Gospel, we see more of the power of the one in whom people were putting their trust.

This section narrates the fourth of the seven 'signs' or miracles that Jesus performed in his ministry as this Gospel records it. This unusual feeding miracle thus points beyond itself to higher truths about Jesus. It is the only one of Jesus' miracles that is told in all the four Gospel accounts.

The crowds here at the Lake in Galilee were probably going to Jerusalem for the annual Passover festival. The excitement caused by this miracle led the crowds to try to take command of Jesus for their own purposes as their leader (Jn. 6:15), forcing Jesus to flee. This was a crisis for him.

The fifth sign was the walking on the water by Jesus, when he came to his disciples' boat during a storm on the lake. It is possible that Jesus was going to the aid of his friends, whose boat and lives were in danger on the lake. We can imagine Jesus watching their boat and the storm from his prayer position on the mountain, and then going to them to deal with their danger and fears.

1. What was the overall lesson of this miracle? Jesus was deliberately doing this work to reveal something about himself (Jn. 6:6).
2. There was an abundant, oversupply of food for this huge crowd (Jn. 6:12-13). What does this suggest about the meaning of this miracle?
3. Why didn't Jesus want the crowd to make him their king? His miracles would have gathered great support to him and he could have taken over the rule of Israel.
4. How do you react to the accounts of the miracles of Jesus? What do you think about this aspect of his work?

*Reflect: Do you believe that God the Creator is able to rule over his natural realm?*

## 8. Read John 6:22-71                      The Bread of Life

In John's Gospel we get extended 'de-briefings' on the meaning of Jesus from his own teaching to the disciples and to the people who interacted with him. You will have noticed that each of these seven signs that John has chosen is accompanied by a teaching discourse of Jesus that explains it. Here we hear how Jesus himself challenged the shallow understanding of the crowds and large group of followers in Galilee.

1. Observe carefully the three questions that the people asked and the request they made of Jesus (Jn. 6:25, 28, 30, 34). What did Jesus reply in each case?
2. What were the motives of the people who were seeking Jesus? What did they want from him? How did Jesus respond to them? Jn. 6:27-29
3. There is talk here of the manna in the wilderness in the time of Moses. No doubt some of these people saw a similar leader in Jesus, one who could give them supernatural bread. But Jesus wants them to understand that he has something much better to offer than earthly rewards or help. What is the gift that Jesus offers (Jn. 6:32-35)?
4. In Jn 6:35-40 Jesus talks about how God answers human need. What does he say?
5. We can see from this dialogue and discourse how Jesus challenged and stretched his adherents and inquirers, to the point when many could not believe him and deserted his movement. What is the stumbling block? Jn. 6:50-54.
6. The Passover feast was a time of eating in remembrance of a great salvation by God. Jesus tells these people that he gives his flesh for the life of the world. He is offering spiritual life through union with himself (Jn. 6:60-71). Do you have this spiritual union with Christ?
7. Peter gives three reasons why the disciples (the Twelve) were sticking with Jesus, while others were leaving. Think about them: Jn. 6:68-69.

*Reflect: Jesus gives so much, but also asks a lot from those who would be his followers.*

## 9. John 7:1-53                      Who is Jesus of Nazareth?

This chapter begins an account of Jesus' visit to Jerusalem at the Feast of Tabernacles six months before his death. We meet the various attitudes of groups towards Jesus, with a sharp divergence of opinion between the Jewish leadership and the people. The first group was generally hostile to wards Jesus; the second group was interested and somewhat positive.

These differing attitudes to Jesus (and God) are still evident today.

This chapter also holds another great discourse of Jesus, given at the Feast of Tabernacles (Jn. 7:37-53). On the last day of the Feast of Tabernacles, large vats of water were poured out on the pavement of the temple court as a reminder of God's provision of water in the wilderness period. Jesus used this to teach about his prospective gift of the Holy Spirit.

In these words Jesus gives important teaching on the way that his own ministry is connected with the Holy Spirit of God.

1. The first source of hostility and unbelief in Jesus comes from his natural family (Jn. 7:1-13). How did they show that they failed to understand him?
2. Jesus suggests two ways by which the source of his teaching may be known as to whether he speaks with merely human, or with divine authority. What are they? (Jn. 7:17-18).
3. What were the other opinions people held about Jesus (Jn. 7:20-36)? How did Jesus respond to these attitudes?
4. What do we learn about the Holy Spirit from Jn. 7:38-39?
5. What is your attitude to Jesus? What do you believe about him?

*Reflection: What in your experience has pointed towards the genuineness of Jesus' claims to speak from God?*

## 10. Read John 8:1-11          Justice and Grace

This incident was not originally part of this Gospel (being missing from the oldest and best manuscripts), but is doubtless genuine and has found its way into the written record of Jesus' ministry by inclusion in the fourth Gospel. The character of Jesus - his distinctive teaching and wise way of dealing with people - is seen beautifully in this incident of the woman caught in the act of adultery.

The opponents of Jesus set up this public confrontation to embarrass him and discredit his teaching (Jn. 8:6), but it backfired when Jesus turned the tables on these hostile teachers.

1. The Pharisees and the woman are both "sinners", but there is a significant difference between them. What is it?
2. Jesus treated these two kinds of sinners very differently. What was his aim in each case?
3. What can we learn here about the relation of God's law and God's grace?
4. Do you think that this woman needed to be convinced of her sinfulness? Why did Jesus treat her so gently?
5. What does this incident teach us about responding to the sins and failures of other people?
6. What do we learn about God's attitude towards us when we are conscious of our sin?

The way of Jesus was to welcome and help the wayward rebel back to the welcome of God's grace, but to challenge the self-righteousness and hypocrisy of the respectable but hardened souls.

*Reflect: Can you think of situations in which you have been caught between the spirit of condemnation and the need for grace?*

## 11. Read John 8:12-59 "Who Are You? "

Who is Jesus? Why is our relationship to him, our response to him, so vital for our salvation and knowledge of God? This key issue is before us in this controversial exchange between Jesus and his own contemporaries.

Jesus opens the debate by an audacious claim – to be the Light of the world (Jn. 8:12). His opponents attack his claims and his testimony, since he is asserting his own right to define Israel and fulfil its destiny as the light of the nations. They ask Jesus seven questions, the crucial one being “who are you?” (Jn. 8:25).

After responding to their challenge to his testimony, the discussion proceeds to the topics of judgement (Jn. 8:21-24), the relationship between Jesus and God the Father (Jn. 8:25-30), and the fact that so many of the people, especially its leaders, were slaves to sin (Jn. 8:31-47). Jesus warns them that to reject what the Father honours (the Son) is to invite judgement (Jn. 8:48-50). The real issue is how Jesus glorifies the Father and how the Father will honour and vindicate the Son (Jn. 8: 54-59).

The exchange closes with an astounding claim of Jesus to divine being and authority: *Before Abraham was, I am* (Jn. 8:58).

1. Look at Jn. 8:13-29 to see how Jesus explains his relationship to God the Father.
2. Our beliefs about Jesus will influence our choices and our destiny. Think about the sayings of Jesus in Jn. 8: 31 and 34.
3. How does our heart attitude affect our ability to respond to God? Jn. 8:42-47.
4. The opponents of Jesus accuse him of being possessed by evil, but he claims to be one with Jehovah God (Jn. 8:58-59). This is a sharp divergence. Do you see the issue this sharply?

Who do you say that Jesus is? Do you receive his testimony? The claims of Jesus are so strong and high, that they compel us to make a decision. The living God is revealed in the Christ, Jesus of Nazareth. To respond properly to Jesus, therefore, is of immense importance.

*Reflect: What does it mean to be a slave to sin?*

## 12. Read John 9:1-41

## The Light of the World

Jesus provoked very divergent responses from people. Some people were blessed and helped; others saw his power and hated him for it. The help that Jesus gave this man changed his life greatly and attracted the attention of others. Jesus healed this man with a delayed miracle that tested the man's faith and called him for him to act on the word of Jesus (Jn. 9:6-7). There is a beautiful irony in the meaning of the pool in which the man washes his face; Siloam means "sent". Jesus sent him there to complete his healing.

The Pharisees were caught in a difficult bind with this healing. If it was true, it was an undeniable act of God in mercy, yet it was done on a Sabbath, which violated their idea of obedience to God. The conclusion that they drew fitted their theology: *This man is not from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath* (Jn. 9:16).

The opponents of Jesus try to discredit the miracle, even if it took intimidating the witnesses and the formerly blind man himself (Jn. 9: 18-29). Despite a second interrogation, the man whom Jesus helped does not agree that Jesus is a sinner, but maintains his witness to the power of Jesus: *One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!* (Jn. 9:25).

The man who had been blind is convinced that such power is a mark of a godly man to whom God is listening – a man from God (Jn. 9:31-33). The leaders resort to blaming the man for his life-long blindness – in keeping with the general view of many, including the disciples of Jesus at the outset (Jn. 9:2, 34).

1. What is the relation between sickness and sin?
2. Why did Jesus use the saliva and mud, and command the visit to Siloam pool, in order to effect this healing? Why didn't he just 'say the word' of healing?
3. How did the Pharisees react when the genuineness of the miracle became obvious?
4. Can you think of examples of spiritual blindness about God?

Jesus found the man and drew some lessons about this incident. The real "sight" that this man received was a spiritual illumination about the nature of Jesus, which led to faith in him (Jn. 9:36-39). There are people who, though they can literally see, are spiritually blind.

*Reflect: The power of God can be evidenced in front of human eyes, but they will still reject it.*

### 13. Read John 10:1-42                      The Good Shepherd

This is the last and seventh public address of Jesus recorded by John. Here he puts forward a bold claim to be the Ruler and Leader of the people of God, for the meaning of “shepherd” in Biblical thought includes the meaning of spiritual and moral leadership of the nation (Jer. 23:1-4; 25:32-38; Ezek. 34; Zech. 11). The tension between Jesus and the leaders of the people is rising noticeably, as his ministry is applied to this crucial dimension.

The chapter opens with an explanation of Jesus as the great Shepherd of God’s people, through a parable (Jn. 10:1-18). Then, after a transitional section (Jn. 10:19-21), there follows a dialogue between Jesus and the Jewish leaders about his identity (Jn. 10: 24-42).

1. What are the marks of the good shepherd (leader)? Note the contrasts between the good shepherd and bad shepherds (Jn. 10:1-13).
2. There is a division of destiny between those who follow Jesus the good shepherd and those who follow the false shepherds. What are the differences (Jn. 10:7-10)?
3. What does this phrase in Jn. 10:10 mean: to have life to the full, “abundant life”? What are the blessings that following Jesus offers to us?
4. Who are the *other sheep* mentioned in Jn. 10:16?
5. What do we learn from Jesus’ words in Jn. 10:14-18 about his saving work for people?
6. Jesus points to his works as evidence to support his claim to be the Son of God and Messiah, although he is careful in his choice of self-description (Jn. 10:22-30). How do his works point to his identity?
7. In Jn. 10:30 Jesus defines his Messiah-ship in a dramatic fashion as a union of himself with the Father, leading his hearers to accuse him of blasphemy (Jn. 10:33). Here is the question for all of us: do you believe that Jesus is a *mere man* claiming to be God, or is he indeed one with God?

Many of the people saw the miracles of Jesus, which pointed to his divine nature, but still did not believe in him, while others believed John the Baptizer without any miracles in support.

*Reflect: What place to miracles play in convincing people about Jesus? (Jn. 10:17-42).*

## 14. Read John 11:1-57

## The Raising of Lazarus

This seventh “sign” brings the first half of this Gospel’s story of Jesus to a conclusion with a “raising” miracle, just as the second half also climaxes with the resurrection of Jesus, another, greater ‘raising’ miracle. Here in chapter 11 we read about a returning to life of Lazarus, a friend of Jesus who had died and been buried.

Lazarus figures in the Gospel story because he died and was raised from his grave by his friend Jesus. This miracle pointed towards the greater, permanent resurrection of Jesus himself, and of the future raising of the children of God from their graves (Jn. 11:25-26).

1. Why did Jesus wait longer in Galilee after he heard that his friend Lazarus was gravely ill? (Jn. 11:3-7, 15). In what ways can sickness serve to glorify God? See also 2 Cor. 12:7; Gal. 4:13.
2. Believing in Jesus as Lord and Saviour can transform our response to the awful fact of death. What difference should it make? See Jn. 11: 25-26.
3. If Jesus knew that he was going to bring Lazarus back from death (Jn. 11: 11), what upset Jesus so seriously when he finally got to the tomb of Lazarus? Jn. 11: 33-37.
4. Jesus spoke in different ways to the two sisters. Why did he do this? Jn. 11: 28-44.
5. People often say that if they saw a miracle, they would believe in God. But here his miracle had very different effects on the people who witnessed it (Jn. 11:45-57). Can you explain why the same evidence strengthens the faith of some, and provokes hatred of God in others (Jn. 11:47, 48; 12:11, 19; Matt. 27:18)?

The raising of Lazarus set in final motion a plot to have Jesus removed by death. It is ironical that the opponents of Jesus thought that they could do away by death the man who could reverse death himself! This obvious flaw in their reasoning was lost on them.

John sees a deeper meaning in the logic of Caiaphas. The plot to have Jesus arrested and killed, for purposes of political expediency and power, will nevertheless fulfil the purposes of God for his people – and the world (Jn. 11: 51-53).

*Reflect: If God can make even the wrath or evil of humans to serve his purposes of blessing and salvation (Ps. 76:10; Jn. 11:49-53), how much should we trust in his loving care of our lives?*

## 15. Read John 12: 1-36 Can the Death of Jesus Be a Triumph?

In chapter 12 this Gospel describes the closing scenes of the public ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. The shadow of the death of Jesus falls darkly over events. We have already heard John's view that the death of Jesus would actually be a blessing for the Jewish nation and a means by which scattered children of God would be brought together around the world (Jn. 11: 51-53).

The three scenes in this section each provide a commentary on the death of Jesus the Messiah. The anointing at Bethany (Jn. 12:1-11) expresses his coming burial, which will be the path to victory for God's King, acclaimed on his entry to Jerusalem (Jn. 12:12-19). The coming of the Greeks to see Jesus is a sign of the future blessing of the nations by the victorious Jesus (Jn. 12:20-36), whose light will shine abroad.

It is easy to imagine that this public banquet was a 'thank-you' to Jesus by the family of Lazarus, for restoring their brother to life and health.

1. Why did Mary do this action of anointing Jesus (Jn. 12:3, 7)? What are other ways of expressing similar devotion to Jesus?
2. Mary and Judas present a stark contrast in attitudes towards Jesus: one have loving devotion, the other has resentful meanness. Why did Judas speak this way?
3. Do you think that the crowds had the same view of Jesus as he himself possessed (Jn. 12:11-16)? What was Jesus attempting to communicate by this prophetic action based on Zechariah 9?

The coming of these Greeks to see Jesus at this crucial time signalled for him that his great mission was coming to a climax - to reach the world with the saving power of God, to bring in the Gentiles and reshape the people of God.

4. Jesus uses the illustration of sowing seeds for a harvest to make an important point (Jn. 12:23-26). What is he saying?
5. What did Jesus mean by "walking and believing in the light" (Jn. 12:35-36)? Do people understand that there are opportunities to respond to God's light or truth, which, if not taken, pass away from us? The day of opportunity to respond to God does not always last for people.

*Reflect: Are you acting on the light from God that you have received, or are you looking and then refusing to acknowledge or act on the truth you see?*

## 16. Read John 13:1-30 The Sign of Love and the Sign of Betrayal

This chapter opens a new section of the Fourth Gospel. Jesus has finished his public ministry and has given his last words to the nation. Now, with the clouds of his impending death gathering, he spends time with his close disciples, teaching them (Jn. 13-16) and praying for them (Jn. 17). Some of the richest spiritual teaching of our Lord Jesus is found in this Farewell discourse and the great intercessory prayer he makes.

John tells us the story of the Last Supper (Jn. 13:1-2), but omits any reference to the significant actions we recall in the Holy Communion. Instead, John focuses on another unforgettable action of Jesus (the foot-washing of his friends), the teaching he gives with it, and the dreadful betrayal by Judas Iscariot. This reminds us that the Gospel writers select and shape their record of Jesus to underline different facets of his ministry.

1. Foot-washing was normally a slave's job. Given Jesus' self-identity (Jn. 13:13), why did he do this?
2. Christians have in Jesus' actions the highest motivation and example of service and humility (Jn. 13:1-3). Do you think of this incident when you consider what God is like?
3. Why was Peter reluctant to let Jesus wash his feet (Jn. 13:8-9)? How did Jesus convince him?

Being a Christian is first of all a matter of allowing Jesus to cleanse us, through his atoning death for us (Jn. 13:8; Titus 3:5; 1 Jn. 1:7).

4. Jesus gave another application from his foot-washing action (Jn. 13:12-17). How does the example of Jesus' love affect your life?
5. What was the final breaking point for Judas that led him to decide, finally, to betray Jesus? Was it something that happened at the meal? (Jn. 13:18-30). What effect did Jesus' offer of the morsel of bread (a gesture of friendship) have on Judas? (Jn. 13:27).

*Reflect: How may our choices and attitudes invite darkness and evil into our lives?*

## 17. Read John 13:31-14:31      The Glorification of the Son of Man

Here begins the great Upper room farewell discourse of Jesus, as he answers his friends' questions and gives them final encouragement and instruction. John omits the celebration of the Last Supper, and gives us instead the 'sermon' of Jesus at this Supper. This discourse has been called 'The New Testament Inner Sanctuary', its 'Most Holy Place'.<sup>2</sup>

When the traitor leaves the room, Jesus is able to speak freely of their shared love, his departure, his mission, the love that his friends must show, and the help which he will send them from the Father – the Holy Spirit, "the Helper".

1. Jesus speaks of two occasions when the Son of Man will be glorified (Jn. 13:31-32) – one is about to happen and the other is in the future, the second depending on the first. What are these two "glorifications"?
2. Why does Jesus call his command for the disciples to love one another a "new commandment"? What was new about it (Jn. 13:34)? See also 1 Cor. 13.
3. What role does this new commandment to love one another in the Christian fellowship in the mission of Jesus and his Church? (Jn. 13:35)?
4. In John 13 we have prophecies of the failure of two disciples (Judas and Peter). One fails by deliberate and deceitful betrayal of Jesus, the other by weakness despite good intentions. What are the lessons for us in these two cases of spiritual failure?
5. Jesus' words in Jn. 14:1-7 are perhaps his greatest message of comfort to his friends in times of distress, loss and danger. What is the basis for comfort here?

Jesus claims to be the way to God the Father (Jn. 14:8-14). Notice that Jesus does not offer people the comfort of going to heaven – he offers us the peace of knowing God, which means 'heaven' and rest in the Father's house. *No-one comes to the Father except through me* (Jn. 14:6). Jesus promises his disciples the help of the Holy Spirit to help and strengthen them. Look at Jn. 14:15-31 and list the blessings that come from the presence and help of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

*Reflect: How does the peace Christ gives differ from that which the world offers?*

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<sup>2</sup> Charles Ross, *The Inner Sanctuary*, (Banner of Truth, 1888, 1967), 49.

## 18. Read John 15:1-17

## Relationship with Jesus Christ

The Lord Jesus continues to give rich instruction for his followers. Here he uses an allegory of the vine and the branches to describe the way we are to relate to him and to grow in him. The vine was a recognised symbol for Israel (Ps. 80:8-16; Isa. 5:1-7; Hos. 10:1). Jesus claims here that he himself is the new Israel, the faithful remnant of Israel. "He is in His own Person the whole People of God."<sup>3</sup> We belong to God's people in and through Jesus Christ the Son of God. But how will we function and grow as the people of God. The story of the Gospel is the tragic account of the failure of old Israel, and the renewal of 'Israel' through Jesus. The new people of God must actively stay faithful, obedient to their Lord.

1. What does the allegory or parable of the Vine and the branches teach us about the Christian life? (Jn. 15:1-8).
2. Look at Jn. 15:3-4, 9-10. How do these two ideas (being made clean and remaining in Jesus) sum up the Christian message? Try to put these into other terms.
3. What is the *fruit* that Jesus is talking about (Jn. 15:4-8)?
4. How can we "remain" in Christ (Jn. 15:7, 10)? What are the benefits of remaining in Christ (Jn. 15:7-11)?
5. Notice that loving Jesus (remaining in him through faith and obedience) is connected with loving one another (Jn. 15:11-17). What is the secret of loving others in this way (Jn. 15:9)?
6. Jesus addresses his disciples (and by implication, all his disciples) as his "friends". What does this friendship mean (Jn. 15:14-17)? List the differences it makes for us.

This wonderful explanation of the Christian gospel and discipleship is full of spiritual benefit to us. Charles Ross sums it up well: "The substance of it may be briefly stated thus: Abiding in Christ as the source of all spiritual fruitfulness, and abiding in his love, by keeping his commandments. That is to say, faith in Christ himself and obedience to him, especially in the duty of brotherly love - faith in Christ, in short and love to the brethren."<sup>4</sup>

*Reflect: What fruit is Christ producing in your life as you trust and obey him?*

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<sup>3</sup> William Temple, *Readings in St. John's Gospel*, (Macmillan, 1955), 252.

<sup>4</sup> Charles Ross, *The Inner Sanctuary*, 135.

Jesus had to ensure that his disciples were ready for the ferocity of the attacks upon them, which history has now recorded. There is an unreasonable hatred of God and the people of God, coming from “the world”. “They hated me without reason”, claimed Jesus, quoting Psalm 69:4, and this will be true of us too on occasions. Bearing witness to Jesus and the truth of God’s Kingdom will not be easy or popular. Jesus wanted his friends to be prepared beforehand: *I have told you this, so that when their hour comes you will remember that I warned you about them* (Jn. 16:4).

But the Lord Jesus will send help from the Father – the Holy Spirit, the *Helper* (Jn. 15:26; 16:6-11). He will empower the mission and he will embolden and instruct the witnesses (Jn. 16:12-15). There will be joy from God in the midst of trouble (Jn. 16:33).

1. Why does Jesus say that his disciples can expect to be hated by the world? (Jn. 15:18-25)
2. Why is the Holy Spirit’s presence an even better help than having Jesus himself bodily with us? (Jn. 16:8-11)
3. What does the Holy Spirit do for the church? (Jn. 16:12-15)
4. Christians will live in two environments – in the world (where trouble can often come) and in the Spirit, with Christ in the love of the Father, having his joy. What is the reason for this joy? (Jn. 16:25-33)

Jesus speaks about God the Holy Spirit in a personal and experiential way. The Spirit’s presence and activity in our lives will be real and with effects in us and through us.

*Reflect: Do you know from experience this kind of joy that Jesus speaks about here?*

## 20. Read John 17:1-5      The Glorification of the Son of God

Jesus affirms (in Jn. 16:33) that he has *overcome the world*. His public ministry of signs and teaching is now over, and his great work of dying and rising for our justification is about to be fulfilled. This great prayer of John 17 is the longest recorded prayer of our Lord Jesus. It is a sublime and wonderful intercession by the great High Priest of God's people. It is the Lord's self-dedication to his work and his loving intercession for his people, then and in later years. He is praying for you and me in this prayer!

We can discern three movements of thought in this prayer. First, Jesus prays for his glorification by the Father (Jn. 17:1-5). Second, he prays for his disciples then gathered with him, his immediate and foundational witnesses (Jn. 17:6-19). Finally, he intercedes for his church to come and their witness and welfare in the world (Jn. 17:20-26). Let us slow down and consider these facets in turn.

We are struck first by the intimacy between Jesus, the Son and his Father. Our praying as Christians has flowed from this relationship of the Divine-Human Son and the Divine Father.

1. Jesus has the glorification of God the Father on his heart; it is his life-mission (Jn. 17:4) and his prayer (Jn. 17:1). Is the glory of God – the advancement of his purposes and the exaltation of his name your top priority? Does it shape your prayers?
2. How does the Cross of Jesus glorify the Father? (Jn. 17:1,2,5). What is the role of Jesus the Son in the plan of God the Father to bring new, eternal life to people? (Jn. 17:2-4). What is the connection between the death of Jesus and the Church? (Jn. 17:2).
3. There is a claim by Jesus in Jn. 17:5 to possess divine being and glory. Think about how Jesus the Eternal Son has added to his divine glory another dimension of glory by his cross (Jn. 17:1,4). St Paul celebrated this double-glory of Jesus the Lord in Phil. 2:1-11.
4. Jesus states in Jn. 17:4 that he has completed the work that the Father gave him to do on earth. Is this your life-goal, to find and to finish the work God has given you to do on earth?

Archbishop Temple commented on this section: "The Cross is the glory of God because self-sacrifice is the expression of love. . . What is revealed in the Cross is not only the perfection of the divine love, but its triumph."<sup>5</sup>

*Reflect: Are the glory of God the Father and the salvation of people in competition? (Jn. 17:1-2,4).*

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<sup>5</sup> William Temple, *Readings in St. John's Gospel*, 308-309.

## 21. Read John 17:6-19 Praying for His Own

Now Jesus turns to pray for others - the prayer of intercession. He starts by recollecting, in his conversational prayer with the Father, how these men responded to him and what has happened in their lives (Jn. 17:6-8). This is implicitly a thanksgiving prayer, for Jesus is in no doubt that it was the work of God the Father that opened the hearts of these people to Jesus and his truth (Jn. 17:6). The Father had given them to Jesus "out of the world".

Jesus then turns to intercede for the apostles, and he has some specific requests about them: for their protection in the world with the struggles to come (Jn. 17:9,11); for their joy - the supernatural kind (Jn. 17:13); for their faithfulness to God's Word of truth (Jn. 17:17); for their mission (Jn. 17:18) and for their holiness or consecration to God (Jn. 17:19).

1. The fact that people listen to the message of Jesus Christ (the gospel), believe it is from God, and respond to it with faith and obedience, is a miracle of divine power in their lives (Jn. 17:6-8). How does this fact influence our own witness and praying?
2. Why is the unity of the disciples to be so important for their spiritual protection in the world (Jn. 17:11)? What will keep the disciples united (Jn. 17:11)?
5. Jesus seems to have a particular danger in mind as he prays for the protection or preservation of his disciples. What is it? (Jn. 17:12).
6. Why should Christians not be surprised when the world hates us? (Jn. 17:14)
7. Jesus does not pray that his followers will be insulated from attacks and troubles, just that they will be protected from the Evil One's temptations and discouragements in these times of trouble (Jn. 17:15). Do Christians today tend to withdraw from contact with the world, rather than stay faithful in the world?

Jesus finishes his prayer for the apostles by asking the Father to make them dedicated to the truth (Jn. 17:17) and consecrated in their lives (Jn. 17:18-19).

8. Think about these two apostolic qualities: dedication to God's truth and commitment to holiness. How do they mark our lives and service to Jesus?

*Reflect: "Scripture has little in it about praying for the unsaved, but much about praying for those who are to be witnesses to the unsaved." (Everett F. Harrison) <sup>6</sup>*

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<sup>6</sup> Everett F. Harrison, *John, A Brief Commentary*, (Moody Press, 1962), 102.

## 22. Read John 17:20-26 Jesus Christ Prays for His Church

Jesus now turns to pray for all those who would come to believe in him through the apostolic witness – he is praying for us! The thought that our Lord was praying for us, his future Church, should move us and thrill us. He looks forward in faith and vision to see the Church growing through the power of the word of the gospel. “The circle of the Church widens for ever from the moment of the Incarnation till it reaches the limits of the world.”<sup>7</sup>

Jesus has several vital matters of prayer for his Church: for our unity in him, for our love for one another, and for our eternal glory. In this section we find rich spiritual teaching about our relationship with God and one another in Jesus Christ.

1. Jesus knew how important the unity of the Church would be for his followers. Why did he believe this and make it such an important matter for prayer? (Jn. 17:20-23).
2. What kind of unity is Jesus talking about? Why is it so important in our witness to the world about him? (Jn. 17:22-23).
3. Jesus speaks of a unity that means oneness in the Father and the Son, from which comes divine life and power. It is very much more than formal organisation or natural unity of mind. Have you seen this remarkable, supernatural unity in the life of the Church?
4. How can we foster and develop this kind of spiritual unity that comes from the indwelling presence of God the Father and the Son in us?
5. Jesus prays for our eternal salvation, which means here our perseverance in the faith until “glory” (Jn. 17: 24). Do you and I pray for our own endurance and for the continuance of our brothers and sisters in the faith of Christ? Make a decision to pray like this.

Charles Ross exhorts us: “Oh! Brethren, it is not until the spiritual unity of believers in Christ shall show itself strong enough to destroy the selfishness, carnality, worldliness and indifference that feed like a canker-worm at the root of our Christianity, in all the visible sections of it – it is not until then, that we may expect the world to be won to the Saviour.”<sup>8</sup>

*Reflect: We are called by Jesus to know the love of God the Father and to have the love of Jesus dwelling in us, as we have fellowship with him (Jn. 17:25-26). This is the gospel of Christ, this is the Christian life.*

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<sup>7</sup> William Temple, *Readings in St. John's Gospel*, 326.

<sup>8</sup> Charles Ross, *The Inner Sanctuary*, 231.

## 22. Read John 18:1-27 Jesus is Rejected and Abandoned.

This section begins the dramatic account of the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ – the great work and witness of the Son of God, his glorification in obedience to the Father.

The machinery of betrayal is in motion (Jn. 13:27; 18:2-3). Jesus has prepared himself in prayer (Jn. 17) after having given final instructions to his disciples (Jn. 14-16). Now he goes forth to meet his “hour”.

1. After so many displays of remarkable divine power, Jesus goes through this process of arrest, interrogation, trial, torture and execution without once using miraculous abilities to defend himself. His enemies anticipated his use of power (Jn. 18:3, 6). Why did Jesus not do signs here in this final contest (Jn. 18:11)?
2. The Master (Jesus) is not the only one on trial in this narrative; the Student (Peter) is also on trial – for his courage and integrity as a disciple. What led Peter to deny his association with Jesus, at the time when Jesus was most alone?
3. The Gospel accounts preserve the record of Peter’s cowardice and failure, so that during the apostle’s life-time this memory was proclaimed. What does this tell you about the Christian gospel? Can our *failures* become part of our testimony to our faithful God?
4. John reminds us that Caiaphas was acting to sacrifice Jesus for the sake of the whole people (Jn. 18:14), for reasons of power-politics and expedience. This is a clue that John wants us to see the deeper truth in the high priest’s comment; Jesus was indeed being called to die for the people – for the rejection of God’s truth and their many sins.
5. How does Jesus depicted in this section? What qualities of character and decision does he show? (Jn. 10:18; 13:27; 18:10-11).

Think about this fact: “Jesus permits himself to be arrested provided that his followers are not harmed. Jesus does not use the protection of the divine name for himself but for those whom he loves.”<sup>9</sup>

As readers, we must see this dramatic confrontation of Jesus with the leaders of his people with a depth of meaning. This is the one who is the Divine Word and eternal Son who is being rejected. This is God himself who is submitting to die for the sins of his people!

*Reflect: We have a God who understands the experience of being rejected and humiliated.*

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<sup>9</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John, XIII-XXI*, (Geoffrey Chapman, 1966), 818.

## 23. Read John 18:28-40 My Kingdom is Not of This World

The Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate, finds himself literally caught between Jesus and the Jewish leaders. Due to their religious scruples, he actually has to go back and forth from inside with Jesus to the outside area to talk to the accusers.

The Jewish opponents of Jesus must allege a serious charge that will compel the Roman law to act – so they charge him with sedition, as is implied in Jn. 18:33. Both in the Roman law and in Jewish circles, a claim to Kingship could land one in very hot water. The governor must clear this matter up with Jesus.

1. How is the Roman Governor presented in this narrative? What did Pilate do to secure Jesus' release?
2. Notice again how John sees the cross of the fulfilment of prophecy and the plan of God. The very manner of Jesus' death (Roman crucifixion) will fulfil Jesus' own prophecy (Jn. 12:32). He would die as if under the curse of God (Deut. 21:23).
3. Jesus told Pilate: *My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews* (Jn. 18: 36). What is the nature of Jesus' Kingship? How does it relate to worldly rule and politics?
4. Is it ever right to use physical force to uphold the Kingdom of Jesus (Jn. 18: 36)?

Pilate was a practical man of action and politics; he was impatient and uninterested in discussions about spiritual truth. He was typical of many since his day whose concern for things of this world lead them to write off Jesus as irrelevant to real life in the kingdom of this world (Jn. 18:36-40).

Finally, consider how strange a message the Christian gospel must have sounded to its first ancient hearers. Not many ancient pagans were naturally likely to see in a crucified leader a Divinely-anointed Saviour.

*Reflect: The kingdom of Jesus outlasts the kingdoms and governments of human history.*

## 24. Read John 19:1-16 Where True Power is Found

Governor Pontius Pilate does not emerge from this incident looking strong and in control. He is squeezed by power-politics in a volatile situation. His desperate stratagems to release Jesus include having him flogged (in the hope that this humiliation might satisfy the opponents). The mocking of Jesus provides the governor with an opportunity to make fun of the Jews and their pretensions to rule (Jn. 19:1-3).

The opponents of Jesus reveal their basic charge against him: he claimed to be the Son of God (Jn. 19:7). John wants us to see that this was indeed the claim of Jesus, but that it was a correct claim, not a blasphemy as the leaders claimed.

1. Why did Pilate react differently after the charge that Jesus claimed to be the Son of God was revealed to the court? (Jn. 19:8). Why was he *even more afraid*?
2. Why did Jesus refuse to talk to the governor at first? (Jn. 19:8-10). See Isa. 53:7.
3. What do you think Pilate was thinking when he asked Jesus: "Where do you come from? (Jn. 19:9)"

The Gospel is in no doubt that God is in overall control of this stormy and ugly incident. As Jesus tells Pilate: *You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above* (Jn. 19:11).

We often find it hard to see what God is doing in situations where human evil and malice seem to be operating unrestrained. The death of Jesus shows us that humans can find themselves fulfilling the purposes of God despite their own sins and failures, while still bearing responsibility for their choices (Jn. 19:11).

Pilate capitulates to the Jewish leaders, and against his better judgement, surrenders Jesus to them for execution under Roman authority (Jn. 19:16). He cannot resist a malicious snipe at the high priests, when he presents the humiliated and bound Jesus to the people as their Jewish king (Jn. 19:14).

4. What does the timing of this execution suggest for the gospel writer? (Jn. 19:14)

This scene closes with a dramatic rejection by the Jewish leaders of God as their earthly King, in favour of Caesar (Jn. 19:15).

*Reflect: Jesus is the real King, but he is in disguise, as it were, working his glorious rule in a very strange way, by embracing the curse and judgement of his own people upon himself.*

## 25. Read John 19:17-42      The Death and Burial of Jesus Christ

John's narrative here tells the dreadful story of Jesus' crucifixion with restraint and focus, drawing attention to the strange fulfilment of ancient Scriptural prophecies. Once again, we are left in no doubt that God is overseeing this strange salvation by the cross.

1. The story of the crucifixion contains seven incidents, each with significance in casting a light on the glory of the Son of God. Consider each incident and its lesson: Jn. 19:17-18; 19-22; 23-24; 25-27; 28-29; 30; 31-37.
2. Why do you think this account downplays the physical brutality of the crucifixion, giving minimal physical description of Jesus' sufferings?
3. Notice the key phrase of John: *These things happened so that the scriptures would be fulfilled* (Jn. 19:36). Think about the mystery of God's providence, whereby the purposes of God in prophecy and salvation can be fulfilled by people who are acting for unworthy reasons and in ignorance.
4. Where were the other disciples of Jesus during his crucifixion?
5. Why did Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus both now come out openly as friends of Jesus, and offer a lavish burial for him? (Jn. 19:38-42).

Remember that we must read the story of Jesus in the light of his identity, as revealed in Jn. 1:1-18. What happened to Jesus became a personal experience of God. We have a God who has suffered evil and defeated it in a costly triumph.

If the Son of God could achieve God's purposes of salvation and blessing by going through the cross, then we can be heartened to know that God's purposes and presence, his love and his action, can reach into the worst kinds of human suffering and darkness, in order to bless and to save.

*Reflect: Jesus was executed as a criminal, but buried as a King.*

## 26. Read John 20:1-18      The Empty Tomb and the Risen Lord

This Gospel opened with a majestic claim that God who made this world will shine his light into the world, and come into the world (Jn. 1:1-18). The Resurrection of Jesus is the re-making of creation – the start of the new creation of God. Most Jews believed in the Resurrection, as an event at the last day, when God would bring all faithful Israelites up from their graves.

It is clear that the disciples of Jesus did not expect the Resurrection to happen so soon, or to begin with Jesus. Easter was a shock to them; the resurrection future rushed up and took them by surprise.

The Gospel here records the first three witnesses to the empty tomb: Peter, John and Mary Magdalene.

1. Do you agree that the disciples do not seem to have expected the Resurrection to happen? Look at Mary Magdalene's conclusion when she found the tomb open (Jn. 20: 2).
2. Peter and John saw the empty tomb, but only John immediately understood what had happened. What convinced John? (Jn. 20:6-9)
3. Why didn't Mary recognise Jesus at once? (Jn. 20:14-16). This is a strange touch to put into a witness story – unless it was how it actually happened.
4. Jesus tells Mary to stop touching him, to let him go and not keep a hold on him (Jn. 20:17). She was clingy! The encounter between Mary Magdalene and Jesus shows us some important things about the risen Jesus (Jn. 20: 16-18). What were they?

Resurrection means much more than the continued existence of Jesus after he died (this kind of immortality was very commonly held). Neither was "Resurrection" seen to be a kind of visit to this life by people who had died – a kind of haunting or apparition (like the witch of Endor in 1 Sam. 28). Resurrection was a return to real physical life in this world, as well as the beginning of the renewal of this world.

*Reflect: It is a lovely thought that Jesus chose Mary Magdalene as his first Resurrection encounter. This woman who had been so blessed by Jesus' ministry and who was such a devoted follower, was the one to whom he first came in the glory of his new life.*

## 28. Read John 20:19-31                      The Resurrection Peace

The disciples were slow to believe the reports of the risen Jesus. It appears that they were frightened and perplexed by the tumultuous events of that weekend, as they gathered behind locked doors that first Easter evening (Jn. 20: 19).

Into their midst came their Lord, who stood among them and gave them his blessing of “peace”. He showed them his physicality and the marks of his crucifixion (Jn. 20:20). Only then did they let themselves rejoice at this sight.

The words of Jesus here and his action in breathing on them speak of a new day of creation, as the Lord by his Spirit breathes new life into the world that had been controlled by the law of sin and death (Gen. 2:7). Now death is defeated and the new creation is begun (Jn. 20: 21-22).

1. These disciples and friends of Jesus had deserted him and fled at this time of need. How do you think they felt when he greeted them with “Peace”?
2. The sin of the old creation now has a remedy through the death of the Son of God. What is the connection then between the Resurrection of Jesus Christ and the message of the Church? (Jn. 20: 22-23).
3. How can a person’s sins be pronounced “not forgiven”? (Jn. 20: 23)
4. Think of how you would use this incident to explain the Christian message?
5. Why did Jesus make a special appearance for Thomas?
6. How do you help people who like Thomas, have doubts about the central claims of Christ?

John, the author of this Gospel, tells us his purpose in writing (Jn. 20:30-31). He wants us to have sufficient reason and signs to support belief in Jesus Christ the Son of God.

7. How do these two aspects of believing in Jesus Christ go together: first, the need to trust where you cannot have proof (Jn. 20:29); and second, the proper need to have the witness of the miraculous signs and words of Jesus (Jn. 20:30-31)?

*Reflect: The Christian gospel is both an offer of forgiveness to those who repent, and a warning of judgement to those who refuse to come back to God.*

## 29. Read John 21:1-14

## Called to Work with Jesus Christ

Chapter 21 is a kind of epilogue to this Gospel. Jesus told his disciples to go back to Galilee (Mk. 16:7). Here we have a record of his appearances to them at the Lake of Galilee. You get the sense that they were restless and unsettled as they waited for the new commission from their risen Lord. So they went fishing. Here at the water, Jesus chooses to come to them and remind them of their original calling to be “fishers of people”.

1. This incident seems to recall one recorded in Luke 5:1-11. What was the Lord trying to teach them by this catch of fish?
2. What are the lessons in this Resurrection incident for the Church today in our mission?
3. Does the physical body of the risen Jesus matter to our faith in him now? (Jn. 21:12-14)

*Reflect: The Resurrection of Jesus was to empower the Church's mission.*

## 30. Read John 21:15-25

## Restored and Commissioned

The Gospel story does not try to hide the sad failure of Peter to stand up with his Lord at the darkest time of the trial. Here we see Jesus dealing with the brokenness and failure of his close disciple Peter, so that the apostle can go on to be a powerful shepherd for the flock of Jesus.

Jesus speaks directly with a challenge to Peter: *Do you love me more than these?* (Jn 21:15). It is not clear what is being used as the comparison. It is likely to be the other disciples. Jesus, aware of Peter's failure, is asking him about his resolve and love for the Lord. The repeated questions and repeated undertakings make this a threefold renewal of commission, corresponding to the threefold denial at the trial.

1. Why did Jesus restore Peter publicly in front of the other disciples? What encouragement can we find in Jesus' treatment of Peter here?
2. Peter's love for Jesus is the basis for the commission he receives: *Feed my sheep*. If we claim to love Jesus, how is it showing in our care for the people he wants us to care for?

Jesus tells Peter that he too will walk the way of the cross and bear a final sacrifice for his Lord (Jn. 21:18-21). Peter voices a concern about what will happen to other disciples, and is told not to concern himself about how the Lord calls others. Each of us should follow the Lord in the way he wants us to do so, and to leave him to call others in his own way.

*Reflect: To what path of service may the Lord Jesus be calling you?*

