

George Philip Bible Readings

Book of John

This resource is free to use for personal study. Copyright is reserved by the Philip Family.

Introduction	3:10-15	6:4-14	8:39-47	12:9-11
1:1	3:10-15	6:15	8:39-47	12:12-19
1:1-2	3:16	6:16-21	8:39-47	12:12-19
1:1-2	3:16	6:16-21	8:48-59	12:20-26
1:4-5	3:16	6:22-27	8:48-59	12:20-26
1:4-5	3:17-21	6:28-34	8:48-59	12:27-36a
1:4-5	3:17-21	6:28-34	9:1-12	12:27-36a
1:6-8	3:22-26	6:35-40	9:1-12	12:27-36a
1:9	3:22-26	6:35-40	9:1-12	12:27-36a
1:10-13	3:27-30	6:41-51	9:13-17	12:27-36a
1:10-13	3:27-29	6:41-50	9:18-23	12:36b-43
1:10-13	3:30-36	6:51-59	9:24-34	12:36b-43
1:10-13	4:1-6	6:51-59	9:24-34	12:44-50
1:14	4:1-6	6:60-65	9:35-41	12:44-50
1:14	4:7-15	6:60-65	9:35-41	13:1-5
1:15-18	4:7-15	6:66-71	10:1-6	13:1-5
1:19-23	4:7-15	6:66-71	10:1-6	13:6-11
1:19-23	4:15-26	7:1-9	10:7-10	13:6-11
1:24-28	4:15-26	7:1-9	10:7-10	13:12-17
1:29-34	4:15-26	7:10-13	10:11-18	13:18-30
1:29-34	4:15-26	7:14-24	10:11-18	13:18-30
1:29-34	4:27-30	7:14-24	10:11-18	13:18-30
1:35-42	4:30-38	7:14-24	10:19-21	13:31-35
1:35-42	4:30-38	7:25-31	10:22-30	13:31-35
1:43-51	4:30-38	7:25-31	10:22-30	13:36-38
1:43-51	4:39-42	7:25-31	10:31-39	14:1-7
1:43-51	4:43-45	7:32-36	10:40-42	14:1-7
1:43-51	4:46-54	7:32-36	11:1-4	14:1-7
2:1-11	4:46-54	7:37-39	11:1-6	14:8-11
2:1-11	4:46-54	7:37-39	11:7-10	14:12-14
2:12-11	4:46-54	7:37-39	11:11-16	14:12-14
2:1-11	5:1-9	7:37-39	11:17-27	14:15-17
2:12	5:1-9	7:40-52	11:17-27	14:15-17
2:13-17	5:10-18	7:40-52	11:17-27	14:18-24
2:13-17	5:10-18	7:40-52	11:17-27	14:25-31
2:18-22	5:10-18	8:1-11	11:28-37	14:25-31
2:18-22	5:19-24	8:1-11	11:38-44	14:25-31
2:23-25	5:19-24	8:1-11	11:38-44	14:25-31
2:23-25	5:25-29	8:1-11	11:38-44	15:1-11
3:1-3	5:30-39	8:1-11	11:45-53	15:1-11
3:1-3	5:30-39	8:12-20	11:45-53	15:1-11
3:4	5:30-39	8:12-20	11:54-57	15:1-11
3:4	5:30-39	8:21-30	11:54-57	15:1-11
3:5-9	5:40-47	8:21-30	12:1-8	15:1-11
3:5-9	6:1-3	8:31-33	12:1-8	15:12-17
3:10-15	6:4-14	8:34-38	12:1-8	15:12-17

George Philip Bible Reading In John

15:18-21	17:1-26	18:7-9	19:17-22	20:19-23
15:22-27	17:1-5	18:10-11	19:17-22	20:19-23
15:22-27	17:1-5	18:12-14	19:23-24	20:19-23
15:22-27	17:6-8	18:15-18	19:25-27	20:19-23
16:1-4a	17:9-10	18:15-18	19:28-29	20:19-23
16:1-4a	17:11-12	18:19-24	19:28-29	20:24-29
16:4b-11	17:13-17	18:19-24	19:30	20:24-29
16:4b-11	17:13-17	18:25-27	19:31-37	20:30-31
16:4b-11	17:13-17	18:28-32	19:31-37	21:1-8
16:4b-11	17:13-17	18:28-32	19:38-42	21:1-8
16:4b-11	17:18-19	18:28-32	19:38-42	21:1-8
16:12-15	17:18-19	18:33-38	19:38-42	21:9-14
16:12-15	17:20-23	18:33-38	20:1-2	21:9-14
16:16-24	17:20-23	18:38-40	20:1-2	21:15-19
16:16-24	17:20-23	18:38-40	20:3-10	21:15-19
16:16-24	17:24-26	19:1-11	20:3-10	21:15-19
16:25-28	17:24-26	19:1-11	20:11-18	21:15-19
16:29-33	18:1-3	19:1-11	20:11-18	21:20-23
16:29-33	18:4-6	19:12-16	20:11-18	21:20-23
16:29-33	18:7-9	19:12-16	20:11-18	21:24-25

Introduction

The stated purpose of John in writing is to encourage faith (20:30-31). This he does by presenting to us the glorious Christ, and in so doing he answers the desire and the need of us all to see Jesus (12:21). There are many commentaries and much discussion of this gospel, its author, its nature and its historical reliability. For our purpose we take it that John was the author or source of the five books that bear his name: the gospel, the three epistles and Revelation. He was the younger son of Zebedee and Salome (Mk. 1:19-20), a fairly well off family who had hired servants in their fishing business. If we compare Matt. 27:56; Mk. 16:1 and John 19:25 it seems that Salome and Mary were sisters and thus John was a cousin of Jesus on his mother's side. John and his brother were called "sons of thunder" (Mk. 3:17) and their passionate temperament in its undisciplined days tended to erupt and had to be rebuked (Lk. 9:46-56). It was John's love for Jesus that made him passionate and extravagant in his loyalty, and that is a fault more easily corrected than cold reluctance. The most basic fact in the whole of John's life and work was not that he loved Jesus, but that Jesus loved him (John 13:23; 19:26). We shall learn much about John and his growth in grace and faith, but most of all in his record of the gospel we shall see Jesus.

[Back to Top](#)

1:1

Some facts about John will indicate why the opening of his gospel is so different from the other three records. He was a young man of possibly 20-22 years of age when called to discipleship. He was a close companion of Jesus and an eye-witness of His ministry for three years. He lived the life of faith for forty years or more and then put pen to paper to give, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, this unique and glorious picture of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, our Saviour. This gospel was written about A.D. 90 (Revelation was written about A.D. 95 and John died c. A.D. 100). Some commentators say that the first three gospels record the facts and John interprets them with spiritual comment. This does not mean that John's account is not to be relied on historically. The first three gospels begin on earth and Matthew presents the King, Mark the Servant and Luke the Son of Man. John shows us the Son of God. He does not claim to have written a total biography of Jesus, for that would be impossible (21:25), and therefore he has selected from the available material what is necessary for his purpose. Already in his life-time John was aware of those who were denying that Jesus Christ was the eternal Son of God and he wrote this gospel in order that men might. "continue to believe" that Jesus is the Christ. This makes John's gospel very important for our own day in which there is so much vague talk about Jesus. Some say, "He is just a man", denying that Jesus is God, as the Muslim faith does and as most humanists do. Others say they believe in God but do not believe that Jesus Christ is God the Son. Some said, and some say now, that "the Christ" was simply an anointing or appointing that came upon Jesus at His baptism but was withdrawn before He was executed, so that it was just a mere man who died on the Cross. Others again said, and say now, that Jesus was not really dead when taken down from the Cross. But these heresies do the same thing. They deny the divinity of Christ, the humanity of Christ, His atoning death and His physical resurrection. John's gospel is the answer.

[Back to Top](#)

1:1-2

John does not begin by introducing the historical Jesus, for the story does not begin at Bethlehem, nor in the prophecies and promises of the Old Testament. John goes back to the beginning, not the beginning of Genesis, for that is only the beginning of creation and its history. John goes back beyond the frontiers of time to the wonder of the secret counsels of eternity and to the mystery of the eternal Trinity. Jesus Christ did not begin at Bethlehem, as John 17:5,18,24 make plain, nor is the Christian gospel a thing invented in and emerging from history, as if it was a stratagem of human invention. Before the worlds were ever called into being Christ and the gospel plan of salvation were there. In the beginning, when everything began, He, the Word of God, the eternal Son, was there. He is the root principle, explanation, interpretation and dynamic of the whole universe. It is as if John is emphasising that all that is seen in the world has to be understood and interpreted in terms of the unseen realities of eternity (Heb. 11:3). John is not bypassing, devaluing or denying the wonderful Bethlehem stories of angels and shepherds and the long months of pregnancy, but rather introducing the glory and wonder

of the condescending love of God in Jesus Christ. In the beginning was the Word, not some philosophical concept of Logos, but a Person, with God, face to face with God, in intimacy of being and harmony of fellowship, love and purpose. There is a serenity about this scene that is expressed wonderfully in John 17 and also in Proverbs 8:22-31, where personified wisdom is not "created" in the sense of being brought into existence but rather "possessed" a word which hints at parenthood. In Prov. 8:30-31 we are made to think of a dear Son who is the delight of the Father's heart. Think well of Jesus. That pleases the Father.

[Back to Top](#)

1:1-2

In the beginning was the Word who is the visible, understandable expression of all God is (Heb. 1:1-3). This is the Word by whom the worlds were called into being when God spoke and it was done (Gen. 1:3). This is the Word of the Lord that came to the prophets (Hosea 1:2). It is also "the ruling fact of the universe, and represents that fact as the self expression of God. The Jew will remember that 'by the Word of the Lord were the heavens made'; the Greek will think of the rational principle of which all natural laws are particular expressions. Both will agree that this Logos is the starting point of all things." (Temple) But the starting point is a Person not a principle, and He is with God, distinct from God yet identified with God, co-equal, co-eternal and yet, in sweetest and glorious submission. If you can, read the chapters of the Westminster Confession of Faith dealing with the Trinity and the Person of Christ. Read Col. 1:15-19; Rom. 11:33-36; John 14:8-11. Think of eternity, sovereignty, sufficiency, harmony, purpose and redeeming self-giving love and you will be ready to read the next verses.

[Back to Top](#)

1:4-5

All these verses are deep and difficult and we cannot make daily notes into a series of sermons in order to say, or try to say, everything. There is obviously a deliberate contrast here between light and darkness and this is a theme which recurs throughout the gospel, e.g. John 8:12. But there is also a contrast between everything created by the agency of the Word (3) and life. This is near the heart of the gospel message for people need to be told that the sum total of all the worlds and all they contain is not equal to life (1 John 5:11-12). Life does not arise or emanate from creation. This is the error of evolutionist theories and pantheistic philosophies. The N.E.B. translation of v. 4a, "All that came to be was alive with His life," would lead to all sorts of "God in nature and sunsets" kind of religion and this is not the Christian gospel, even though the Christian stands by the radical doctrine of creation. It is God's world, for He created it by the Word, but He is distinct from it. Life is also distinct from creation. Life is in Him, the eternal Word, and only in Him, as John will later make plain (11:25; 14:6). Life is in Christ, the eternal Word, and is communicated by Him. He is also light, all we mean by light, whether the light of reason, or conscience, or salvation. Every "gleam" of goodness in the darkness of the world is in some way from the one source of light because, after all, the Spirit who brooded on the face of the deep when order was established in creation still broods and moves actively and creatively in the interest of God in every aspect of the world and its life. "Every virtue we possess, and every victory won, and every thought of holiness are His alone." (Auber) You cannot help feeling that this Prologue is not just the introduction to John's gospel but the rich fruit of deep thought before he compiled his narrative. He penned these words in profound worship and wonder, and this should always be the result of our considering Jesus.

[Back to Top](#)

1:4-5

The light of God has shone in many ways (Heb. 1:1-2). It shines in creation and history (Ps. 19:1-2; Rom. 1:19-20) and it has shone in the words of the prophets. But it shines in full glory and in a way people can understand and comprehend in the person of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 4:6). John insists that nothing in the order of creation has life in itself but only in and through Him who created it, upholds and sustains it (Col. 1:15-17). He is life and light, and the light cut through the darkness like the penetrating beam of a lighthouse. It is by that light that people are able to recognise the operations of God in the world. This is the only way to understanding, and it is by departing from Christ and from the written Word about Him that the world has grown dark. It is only by faith that we understand (Heb. 11:3). We do not come to faith by understanding but only by the Word about the Word

Rom (10:17). The light shone in the past, came to full brightness in the coming of Christ, and shines on in the darkness. Note John's description of the world. It is darkness, not just in darkness (Eph. 6:12; 1 John 5:19).

It is the darkness of sin and unbelief and it always stands over against and in opposition to the light. The darkness was not made by the Word. It is an intrusion and a contradiction that came by the entrance of sin and death (1 Cor. 15:21). John really introduces us here to the whole tragedy of the Fall of man, the darkness which ensued, and the dogged enmity to the light of God which was so manifest right through the life and ministry of Jesus. We are dealing here with fundamental doctrine.

[Back to Top](#)

1:4-5

There are several ways of understanding v.5b. In the RSV we have a statement of fact. Darkness has not overcome the Light and never will. It can also mean that *the* darkness (note how specific that is) cannot take control of the light because in the end darkness is negative but light is positive. Again it can mean that darkness could not comprehend the light, and here we are face-to-face with the astonishing and frightening blindness of unbelief (2 Cor. 4:4). People can look together at one situation and share one set of circumstances, and faith will see evidence of God and His goodness but unbelief will see nothing but human activity. People still look at the Cross and see nothing but folly (1 Cor. 1: 18). The verse again can mean that when the light shines people refuse to receive it for the simple reason that in their perversity they prefer darkness because their sympathies are there and their lives do not bear scrutiny. One practical lesson we need to learn from this verse is that we must not be surprised by unbelief and antagonism, and certainly we must not in any way be disheartened by them. No matter the full rampaging of darkness, it cannot and will not put out the light. God never has and never will leave Himself without a witness (Acts 14: 16,17).

[Back to Top](#)

1:6-8

The theme of witness is the bridge over to this reference to John the Baptist. God shines His light into the darkness of the world by sending a man of flesh and blood to bear witness to the light. There is both challenge and encouragement here. Wherever we live and work God has sent us there and placed us there to bear witness to the Light. We must remember that even if our light is refused and repudiated, the darkness cannot ever put out the light. The light is there, set in its place by God Himself with the specific purpose of producing faith (7). Whatever the immediate circumstances may be, the saving activity of God goes on. The first five verses of this gospel are gloriously sovereign and eternal setting Christ as pre-eminent (Col. 1:18) and showing the whole plan of salvation as proceeding from God through the eternal Word. But what is planned in heaven must be worked out on earth and here John begins to touch on the earthly historical story by referring to the appearance of John the Baptist. Between the Old and New Testaments there had been a strange silence. The word of the prophets had been refused and "God had gone underground" (T. Swanston) There were no "evidences" of His presence and working. Mere human assessment could have come to the conclusion that all His plans had fallen to the ground and that unbelief and darkness had triumphed. But that cannot ever be, and in due time John the Baptist burst in on the scene (Matt. 3:1-17; Mk. 1:1-11; Lk. 3:1-9,15-20). But this was no mere human event, for John was sent from God, ordained for service and filled with the Spirit before he was born (Lk. 1:13-17). He was raised up to be a polished reflector of God's light and by coherent testimony of life and word to point people away from himself to Christ. The trouble with many of us is that our lives get in the way of our witness (2 Cor. 4: 1-2; Phil. 1:27). The last thing we must note is that a man sent from God is not to be regarded lightly. It is best to listen to him.

[Back to Top](#)

1:9

This one verse gives the context of all Christian service. The Light shines in the darkness...(5); God's prepared servants bear witness to the light (7) and this is evangelism. But the truth is that the light of God which has always shone since ever He said, "Let there be light," was in fact about to come into the world in full brightness and focus. While the Baptist was exercising his ministry, the true light (which had been in the world since

Bethlehem but had remained concealed) was in the act of coming into the open in the world. But what is meant by the phrase "that enlightens every man"? It cannot mean enlightenment in the sense of salvation, for all will not be saved, as this gospel makes very plain. John cannot be referring merely to the light of reason or conscience although these are not to be denied. "There is no man whom some perception of the eternal light does not reach." (Calvin) Fallen though he be, man still has some trace or legacy of his original grandeur and some groping sense of his lost destiny. Every check on mere animal passion and every longing for something better (eternity in his heart - Eccles. 3:11) is light and truth from God, even though it be obscured and muffled. But it is when the gospel is proclaimed that light shines (Ps. 119: 130; 2 Cor. 4:6). This brings crisis and not necessarily salvation, as the following verses make plain and this is why we must see to it that our light of witness shines clearly. Let your light shine, without waving it around too much, in a dark and crooked world, for many are near the precipice (Matt. 5:16; Phil. 2:15).

[Back to Top](#)

1:10-13

The blindness of unbelief and the insensitivity of heart that are the result of sin are facts of experience which cannot be denied. Wherever the light shines and however the truth comes, people tend to shrink away (Ex. 20:18-20) and it was no different when the light came near and shone in its full glory. In the world He made, Christ was not recognised or desired by those who owed their existence and drew their breath from Him (Dan. 5:23). Even the people of Israel, who had been favoured above all nations and to whom belonged privileges given to no others (Rom. 3:1-2; 9:4-5) and who in fact boasted in the name of God, did not receive Him. Read John 3:17-21 and Acts 7:44-53. It is almost unbelievable that a people so taught by Word and by experience should be so blind to and rejecting of Christ when He came. But we see the same thing to this day. The Word in its fulness, the light in its steady shining, and the desirable sweetness and attractiveness of Christian fellowship draw many people, and they enjoy the blessings and benefits often without ever coming to saving faith in Jesus Christ. The Word is not met with faith (Heb. 2:1-4; 3:7-15; 4:1-2; cf. John 6:66). It is right here that we meet face-to-face the division that light and truth bring. The coming of Christ in the glory of His grace is salvation to some and judgment to others (Lk. 2:34; 2 Cor. 2:15-16; John 15:20-25). That is enough to think about for one day. As He comes to us again and again, not least through this daily note, are we receiving Him? Pray for tender hearts and willing spirits.

[Back to Top](#)

1:10-13

We must never allow unbelief to demoralise us nor allow statistics to make us think that the fruit of the gospel is a "poor show". The parable of the sower (Matt. 13) speaks of a truly satisfactory yet varied harvest from one section of the sowing of the seed, and in John 6:37 Jesus speaks with confidence of a "perfect" response to Himself. Here in today's verses we are faced with two things. There is the glorious phrase, "All who received Him," which reaches out far beyond any one race, nation or background. This is the wideness of the gospel going out into all the world and its being welcomed and received in living faith. This "receiving" of Christ is spoken of as "believing in His name," and this, of course, is necessarily set in the context of the preaching of the gospel (John 5:25; Rom. 10:17). Receiving, believing, being given the right to become sons of God and being born of God all belong together and speak of how a person becomes a Christian. It is not just a case of believing the mere facts of the gospel, but accepting the Bible's own message regarding these facts and the interpretation of them, holding forth Christ as the only Saviour of sinners. In believing we enter into the power and benefit of all Christ was and did in His death and resurrection. But note carefully it is all a gift. Salvation is something done for us and given to us and to be received gift-wise by faith. It is by grace we are saved through faith, and that faith is the gift of God (Eph. 2:8). We return to this tomorrow.

[Back to Top](#)

1:10-13

To be born is to be brought to life and it is by this spiritual birth that we, who are natural-born sinners, become children of God. By the very nature of the process it is not and cannot be the work of man. This is what John says in v.13. It is not by physical descent. We do not become Christians because our parents were Christians,

just as the Jews were not believers simply because they were descended from Abraham. Nor is this spiritual birth by the will of the flesh, by self-effort, as if it was something we cultivated. It is not a thing of the senses or emotions, as if by "producing" or "working up" the right kind of feelings or responses in a religious context we could make ourselves Christians. Nor is this birth by the will of man. It is not something that another can do for us by either psychological, mental, or even physical manipulation. Spiritual birth has nothing to do with "priestcraft", whatever kind of "priest" (or priestess) may be involved. We need to be very careful about "bringing people to a decision" lest we end up with an abortion rather than a true spiritual birth. Salvation is God's work and He alone is able to do it by His Holy Spirit. The work of regeneration, the bringing to life of the soul that is dead in sin, is not something we do. It is something God does to us and for us, so that we are able to hear, believe and respond to Christ who is presented to us in the Gospel. Every conversion is a total, sovereign, divine miracle. It is the work of the Spirit, in the context of and by the instrumentality of the preaching of the Word. The dead hear and they live.

[Back to Top](#)

1:10-13

There is such confusion about the doctrine of the gospel and such an undue emphasis on "the part we play" as if our salvation depended solely on our decision that we quote the Shorter Catechism's questions and answers:

Q.29 How are we made partakers of the redemption purchased by Christ?

Ans. We are made partakers of the redemption purchased by Christ, by the effectual application of it to us by His Holy Spirit.

Q.30 How does the Spirit apply to us the redemption purchased by Christ?

Ans. The Spirit applies to us the redemption purchased by Christ, by working faith in us, and thereby uniting us to Christ in our effectual calling.

Q.31 What is effectual calling?

Ans. Effectual calling is the work of God's Spirit, whereby, convincing us of our sin and misery, enlightening our minds in the knowledge of Christ, and renewing our wills, he does persuade and enable us to embrace Jesus Christ, freely offered to us in the gospel.

Q.33 What is justification?

Ans. Justification is an act of God's free grace, wherein he pardons all our sins, and accepts us as righteous in his sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone.

[Back to Top](#)

1:14

Here is the glorious climax of John's introduction to the gospel. The eternal Word of God, in all the glory of His Sonship and Creatorhood, in whom all the fulness of God was pleased to dwell (1-4) became flesh and dwelt among us, for us and for our salvation, "He came down to earth from heaven, who is God and Lord of all, And His shelter was a stable and His cradle was a stall." (C.F. Alexander) It is utterly staggering. Was there no other way for God to accomplish our salvation? No! Here is God's last word to man. The eternal Word, begotten not created, become flesh, made in the likeness of sinful flesh (Rom. 8:3), tempted in all points like as we are, yet without sin (Heb. 4:15), touched by and sharing in all the feelings of infirmity that are part and parcel of human life (Heb. 2:17-18). This was no fictitious incarnation. He became one of us. He did not cease to be God, for He was God manifest in flesh (1 Tim. 3: 16). Not even when He lay in the manger was He anything other than He had been for all eternity. "Lo, within a manger lies, He who built the starry skies." (Caswall) When the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth His own eternal Son (Gal. 4:4). The glorious Son, who was before all things, freely and gladly took on Himself the form of a servant (Phil. 2:7) and He did so not as a temporary charade for a "performance" of certain divinely ordained functions; He assumed manhood for ever. He lived as a man, died as a man, rose again as a man, ascended to heaven as a man and remains forever in glorified

manhood, yet ever God. Now, it was this Jesus, "human name of God above" who came to His own and was neither received or wanted. What an exposure of sinful hearts.

[Back to Top](#)

1:14

The order of the words in A.V. and N.I.V. seems better than in R.S.V. John is in some way affirming the accuracy of his gospel record when he says that during the time the Son of God dwelt among men he, and others who were eye-witnesses, beheld His glory. That is, they watched and listened with deliberate care and consideration so that they would understand. Right through the life of Jesus, not least in all the "high" moments we shall read of in succeeding chapters, Peter, James and John in particular saw the glory of the Son of God. (2 Pet. 1:16-18). The majesty they saw in Jesus John describes in a particular way. He sums it all up in terms of grace and truth, words which sum up the personal integrity and attractiveness of our Lord Jesus Christ. This also we shall see in John's record of the life of Jesus and we shall be reminded of how we are called to be like Jesus. But there is also theological emphasis in the words "grace" and "truth". He not only revealed grace and truth, He brought them down in their fulness to needy people in all their brokenness and bewilderment of sin. All the grace of God, grace to cover all our sin and grace to meet every need we can possibly have (2 Cor. 12:9) came to us in Jesus Christ. All the truth of God is likewise summed up in and brought to us through Him whose name is Jesus. All the shadowy, yet glorious promises of the Old Testament, were fulfilled in Him. With the coming of Jesus we have the coming of certainty. God set in motion on the stage of history His perfect plan of salvation. This should thrill our hearts.

[Back to Top](#)

1:15-18

The reference to John the Baptist here seems to be a link between the Old Testament prophecies of Christ and his ministry, by which the gospel writer was pointed to Christ. The Baptist bore witness to the primacy, superiority and sufficiency of Jesus, and this is what all true ministry and witness must seek to do. Christ alone supplies all the needs of believers (16; cf. Col. 1:19; 2:3). Christ is superior to the Law of Moses (Heb. 3:5-6; Rom. 4:15; Gal. 3:24; 2 Cor. 3: 4-11). Christ alone reveals and expounds God so that people may know Him (18; 1 Tim. 3:16; Rom. 1:1-6). The Baptist's ministry was always setting Christ in the front. In birth and public ministry Jesus came after John but was always before him. John took men as far as he could and then handed them over to Jesus. In v.16 we find the truth that stems from v.14. Out of His fulness, which never diminishes, we receive grace after grace after grace. There is no limit or end and each blessing we receive in grace prepares us for the next and leads us on into it. Growing in grace, which is a spiritual duty, not an option, (2 Pet. 3:18) makes us capable of receiving more grace, and since it is all of grace there is never any place for pride. If we ever become proud of how spiritual and mature we are something has gone far wrong (1 Cor. 4:6-7). Grace is the source of all, it is the method of all God's working and it is the fruit produced in our lives. All of this is gospel. It could not ever be on the basis of the Law of God as given by Moses. The Law was good, but it was something added to or introduced to the scheme of salvation because of transgression (Rom. 5:20; Gal. 3:19). The Law was limited because of the weakness of human nature (Rom. 8:3) and besides, it had to do with demand and prohibition, and at its best with promise. But the reality of grace, truth, life and salvation came near in Jesus. He is the one who must fill our horizon.

[Back to Top](#)

1:19-23

We begin now the first main section of the gospel narrative which runs on to the end of chapter 6. It is suggested that the section 1:19-4:54 is concerned with Jesus revealing Himself in an increasing way to different types of people: to the Baptist, the Disciples, the Pharisee Nicodemus, the Outsider the woman of Samaria and to the hungry multitude. It is interesting to note that after having been announced by the Baptist to be the promised Messiah, and there being considerable commotion in the whole religious community, Jesus seems to have proceeded very quietly, gathering a few disciples and working in what seems a limited way. This is so different from the "strike while the iron is hot" of contemporary evangelicalism. But then, Jesus knew what He was doing, was assured of its divine sanction, and was working to a long-term plan whose issue was safe and

inviolable in the hand of God (John 6:37,44). Note how the action of the story begins with the preaching of John the Baptist which made such a powerful impact on society, even though he did not have the backing of "the right people" or the "powerful people". Think of the efforts made nowadays to "plug" forthcoming evangelistic events and how much more effort is put into advertising than praying. In the crisis days when the Word became flesh, God's technique was to raise up a preacher who simply got on with his God-given job of preaching. Read in Matt. 3:1-12 how this unattractive preacher with his unpalatable message caused the whole of Judea to go out to him. This is the power of God in the preaching of His Word, and it is the only thing that will turn the world upside down Acts 17:6).

[Back to Top](#)

1:19-23

Do not fail to note the impertinent authoritarianism of the leaders of established religion, which religion was so dead that it was largely ignored by its own people and held in contempt by most of the others. Note also that the establishment still believed, in theory at least, the basic doctrines of the faith which included the expectation of the coming Messiah. The question in v.19 could have been a genuine enquiry as to whether or not John was the one promised or it could have been a challenge to a man who was manifestly not one of the "accepted" characters of the religious world. John was quite categorical for he had neither ambitions nor pretensions. He was not the Christ. But he was making an impact of such a kind that it was difficult to deny that God was with him in a way He was *not* with the Pharisees. They knew the prophecy in Mal. 4:5-6 about Elijah who was to come as a precursor of the great day. John denied he was Elijah (but cf. Matt. 11:2-15) for he would not allow any attention to focus on himself. The Pharisees knew the letter of the Old Testament (as they did in the Bethlehem story - Matt. 2:1-6) but that is not the same as faith. They asked John about the promise of a prophet to come (Deut. 18:15-18) but again John replied in the negative. All he wanted to be was a voice, a mouthpiece for God, and he pointed out that he also knew the Scriptures, quoting from Isaiah 40:3-5. It was as if he was saying what Jesus so often said afterwards, "He that has ears to hear, let him hear." It is often the case that God is speaking loudly and working gloriously and those who ought to see it most clearly are in fact the most blind.

[Back to Top](#)

1:24-28

Note how quickly the messengers from the Pharisees shifted their ground when challenged by the quotation of Scripture. They raised the issue of ecclesiastical practice and procedure; questioning John's credentials and his right to be administering baptism. This does not give any warrant to those who feel themselves "spiritual" to despise or ignore church discipline and practice. None of us are allowed to write our own "standing orders" claiming for them divine right. If we belong, for example, to a certain denomination or congregation wherein we have been blessed in the things of salvation and to which we owe a debt under God, it is our Christian duty to be both loyal and obedient. John was not a rebel but a God-ordained prophet. He answered the challenge by speaking of his baptism as being one simply of water, symbolising that forgiveness which can come from God by way of repentance, confession and a declared intention of making a new start. But this is only preparatory. There was already One standing among them whom they did not, recognise, who would baptise with the very power of God by the Holy Spirit (33). Like many after them these priests failed to grasp the distinction between the sign and the thing signified. "All John can do is administer the sign (water); the Messiah - He alone- can bestow the thing signified- the cleansing power of the Holy Spirit." (Hendriksen) That Messiah was in fact amongst them but they did not seem to know or care.

[Back to Top](#)

1:29-34

It is important to note two things here. First, Jesus had already been baptised (32-33), numbering Himself with the transgressors, taking His stand with sinners in their need in relation to God (Mk. 1:9-12). He had also, by the Spirit, faced the full range of temptation possible to man when he challenged the Devil in the wilderness. At first, John had not recognised Jesus (Matt. 3:13-17) but now there was no doubt in his mind that this man Jesus was none other than the Man God had sent to be the Saviour of the world. Here was God's Lamb, set for sacrifice, a pure and spotless Lamb tempted but without sin, and already, as a man, conqueror over sin and

Satan. He was also God's anointed man inasmuch as He had already, in the Temptation, rejected all forms and avenues of service and success except that which was set out for Him by the plan of God. This leads to the second point which concerns the significance of the phrase, "the Lamb of God." This has nothing to do essentially with the gentle and gracious aspects of our Lord's personal character. It is a phrase spoken in the context of orthodox Jewish faith, grounded in Old Testament teaching. Those who heard it would at once think of the Passover Lamb in the story of the Exodus (Ex. 12:1-13), or further back, the story of Abraham, and God's promise to provide a lamb for the sacrifice (Gen. 22:8). They would think of all the symbolism of Old Testament sacrifice, of the High Priest with the blood of a lamb without blemish, and indeed of the great prophecy in Isaiah 53. This was a high moment of deep truth if only people had eyes to see it.

[Back to Top](#)

1:29-34

John the Baptist claimed clear divine authority, sanction and confirmation for his words (33-34). There was to be no doubt in people's minds that this Jesus was none other than the Son of God, come into the world according to God's promise to deal with the problem of sin, and to do so by fulfilling the role of the Lamb of God. Much later, John the writer of this gospel, spoke of the same theme in wonderful words that give the eternal view of this historical event. The atoning sacrifice of the Lamb of God is not some mere historical emergency move as God sought to counteract the consequences of man's stupidity in introducing sin into the world. The fact of the Lamb slain is built into the very foundation of the throne of God (Rev. 13: 8 AV. and N.I.V) and is the source of wonder in eternity as in time (Rev. 5:6). "Behold the Lamb," says John, and this seems to be a new kind of preaching from the man whose whole ministry so far had been one of judgment on sin and a call to repentance. Of course the two go together. It is only those who feel their need and who become aware of their wrong standing with God because of sin who look with faith to a Saviour. Perhaps this is one of the lacks of modern evangelism. We do not have the preaching of "Law work" as previous generations had and in consequence there is little sense of sin and little awareness of the moral standards of the gospel, even among evangelical Christians. If we look for revival we may need to heed John's call to prepare the way of the Lord.

[Back to Top](#)

1:29-34

We must not be reluctant to spend days on these preparatory verses. John commanded people to "Behold the Lamb of God", and what did they see? Here was a man coming from the wilderness after six weeks of frontal attack by the prince and powers of darkness. What did He look like? We are told in Luke 4:14-15 that there was a power and grace about Him, and His words were mighty, declaring that the day of God's salvation had indeed come (Lk. 4:16-21). The Lamb of God by the shedding of His blood would take away sin. This was forgiveness and reconciliation as the Old Testament made so plain. But mere forgiveness is not a true gospel for there is still life to be lived in a world of alien influences. That is why John speaks also of the power of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer whereby Christ "breaks the power of cancelled sin, and sets the prisoner free." But to do this, "the Son of Man must suffer." (Mark 8:27-31) Jesus was already committed to that way which would culminate in the Cross and what we have to grasp is that God was already active. In Christ He was bearing away the sin of the world. Note it is sin, not sins belonging to individuals. It is the dark mass, the sum total of all that is meant by iniquity. It is the self-will that pervades the whole universe. It is sin as a power, and the whole world is "under sin" (Rom. 3:9). Here we have gospel indeed. "John uses the word 'sin' in the singular number for any kind of iniquity; as if he had said that every kind of unrighteousness which alienates men from God is taken away by Christ." (Calvin) Whatever our sinful predicament the message is, "Behold the Lamb of God."

[Back to Top](#)

1:35-42

Here is the account of the new thing God was doing, pressing in upon individuals. But do not fail to note well the preparatory work of God in these men through the ministry of the Baptist. The work of grace had begun in their hearts long before they ever met Jesus and it would be difficult to over emphasise the debt they owed to John's ministry. Certainly his ministry was glorious, for it pointed unerringly to Jesus and this must be the mark of all our work and witness. We have no remit to draw attention to ourselves, and if the focus of our witness is

ourselves or our church or our "work" then we are misguiding people. The spiritual greatness of John (Matt. 11:11) is seen in that he did not try to keep the disciples to himself. His job had been to prepare them to meet Jesus, and having met Him, they go after Him. In the first instance they followed Jesus because of what another man had said. They trusted John not to lead them wrongly, and ministers must see to it that they are safe to follow (1 Cor. 11:1; Phil. 3:17). Right from the start it seems these men were well grounded in Scripture by John's ministry, for when Jesus challenged them as to their motives and desires and hopes they were not really put off. Perhaps they were not very sure exactly what they wanted or to what extent they wanted it. Were they seeking the Kingdom of God? Was it personal forgiveness they wanted? Did they know? Do any of us know, when we first are constrained to go after Jesus? Certainly these men wanted to know more, and that is a good sign. But when they asked for Jesus' address, possibly considering a delayed visit, Jesus said, "Come now." Follow and find out. You cannot discover Jesus from outside. It is as you follow on that you get to know the Lord. They came, they saw, and they stayed. The day of their salvation had dawned.

[Back to Top](#)

1:35-42

The first two disciples were Andrew and John himself, who so remembered that day that he even gives a note of the time. The first thing that Andrew did was to speak to his brother and bring him to Jesus. How we long that it might always be as easy as that to bring our own families to the Saviour. Andrew is usually referred to in the gospel in terms of bringing someone to Jesus (6:8-9; 12:22). It is interesting that Andrew said to his brother "We" have found Messiah. There must have been talk among the group of men about spiritual things under the ministry of the Baptist. There is no need to suppose that only Andrew and John were in the company of Jesus that day. Was the home of Martha and Mary at Bethany already a gathering place for disciples? We cannot say, but it is clear that the time had come for significant men to be brought in for the purpose of being trained for future service. It may have been that few realised just how significant the work was that was going on at that particular juncture. Had Andrew any idea of the long-term result of his bringing his brother Simon Peter to Jesus? Had Peter any idea of all that was promised when Jesus referred to what he was by name and nature and what he was going to become by the grace and power of God. There is a great word here to all of us. "You are full of problems, limitations, sins and failures But you shall become a rock-like character." Yes, there were many failures but on the Day of Pentecost Peter was found ready and faithful.

[Back to Top](#)

1:43-51

Do not fail to note that we are dealing here with four successive days (19, 29, 35, 43) and with the momentous and fascinating events that unfold before our eyes. It is important also to note the different ways by which these various men were brought into discipleship because we all tend to limit God in His working of salvation. We have had reference already to those influenced and prepared by John the Baptist's ministry and how, inspired and counselled by that ministry, they sought out Jesus. We know that before they ever began to seek, the grace of God had been working in their hearts. Now we are told that Jesus decided to go to Galilee. In that context we are told He found Philip. Just exactly where Philip was we are not told but it does seem he was called directly by Jesus rather than through John's ministry or the testimony of a brother. But at the same time we are told Philip came from the same city as Andrew and Peter and it seems that these two men were exercising good, godly and biblical influence before they were ever converted themselves. Philip immediately found Nathanael and we begin to see how much these early disciples were evangelists. It was evangelism by personal testimony in which their own experience pointed unerringly to and centred exclusively upon Christ. But note also how very much the whole situation was conditioned by the acceptance of and knowledge of the Scriptures. People knew the Scriptures, as v.45 makes plain, and this highlights one of the great problems of our own age. We may not any more assume that people know the Bible. We have to teach them in their ignorance and that is why we must know our Bibles.

[Back to Top](#)

1:43-51

Three further things have to be noted about Philip. The first is the note of expectation in a barren generation as a result of his being taught in the Scriptures. Then we must note the word "we" in v.45. As an immediate result of his coming to Christ Philip had joined himself to the already existing, and increasing company of believers. True Christian experience brings you into fellowship and into commitment to it. To be a loner, an independent and consequently irresponsible disciple, is not a biblical concept. The Lord adds to the church those who are being saved (Acts 2:47). Independence, whether it be of thought or action, is not necessarily a good and spiritual thing. The third thing is Philip's testimony to the fact of Christ in all the Scriptures. It is strange that after the resurrection the disciples still had to be persuaded about this (Lk. 24:25-27). Wherever you start in the Bible you will end up with Christ (1 Pet. 1:10-12). Even if He is not spoken of by name the Scriptures testify of Christ (John 5:39). He was the prophet like Moses, great David's greater Son, the Lamb, the Righteous Branch, the Shepherd of Israel, the Servant of the Lord, the Messenger of the Covenant. Take a concordance, search the Scriptures, find these references and let your heart centre on Christ. But note this last thing about Philip. Like most new converts he spoke about things he was not sure about and he made a mistake about the parentage of Jesus (45). He was not the son of Joseph, although Joseph was his legal guardian. We must be careful not to expect of new converts the fully formed theology that we have taken years to grasp.

[Back to Top](#)

1:43-51

People start their journey to Christ from all sorts of places and Nathanael started from cynical unbelief. It was a good thing that Philip knew how to answer him. Argument or rebuke would have been disastrous. He was invited to come and see for himself. He did and got to the place of sound theology before Philip (49). At the same time do not miss the great confidence Philip had in his new-found faith. He did not hesitate to invite Nathanael, even though Nathanael indicated that there were no Scriptural references to give Nazareth such an importance. All this was taking place in territory long associated with Jacob, a crafty scheming man full of guile, and this was possibly in Jesus' mind when he complimented Nathanael on being a man of sincerity. It may have been that Nathanael had been pondering all the events of his day issuing from the preaching of the Baptist and the general awakening of interest in God. He responded to Jesus with a surprised question (48) and got an even more surprising answer. Before Nathanael had been conscious of any operations of the grace of God in his heart, life, searchings and reasonings, this Man had known him, and His heart had been toward him. It seems that the Spirit of God simply illuminated this genuine man in that moment of time and he confessed Christ as the Son of God. It seems he had been something of an unconscious believer, as Simeon and Anna had been (Lk. 2:25ff, 36-38) and now, face to face with Jesus he found salvation.

[Back to Top](#)

1:43-51

We linger with these verses so that we might ponder the ways of God with people and so be safeguarded from expecting and requiring that every person's experience of Christ should be identical to our own. God fulfils Himself in many ways. Nathanael, under the fig tree which was a symbol of Israel, would have known well passages such as Prov. 15:3 and Psalm 139, and may well have recalled Zech. 3:10. He could not escape the sense that he was in the presence of God's promised Messiah. How much he really understood of the great confession in v.49 we cannot say. Was it emotional or was it divinely given as in the case of Peter at Caesarea (Matt. 16:16,17)? In v.50 we seem to sense an echo of Jesus' words to Thomas in John 20:29. Jesus seemed to be saying Nathanael would yet see far greater proofs of His divinity and Saviourhood. Perhaps Jesus was hinting to Nathanael about the story of Jacob's ladder in Gen. 28:12. But what is the message? Was Jesus saying to the man that he had only just come to faith, and that while that is a heart-thrilling thing it is only the beginning of what God has prepared for them that love Him (1 Cor. 2:9). Was Jesus speaking of the glory of God coming down among men to touch their lives and lift them up to glory? Was Jesus linking together the names Son of God and Son of Man and was He pointing to a day still future to us when Christ shall come in the glory of His angels? All of these are possible interpretations. Perhaps we should content ourselves with the promise of "heaven opened", for this is exactly what has happened. The door is open and access is ours right to the Throne of God (Rom. 5:2; Heb. 4:16).

[Back to Top](#)

2:1-11

In compiling his gospel record John is deliberate and systematic. He has given a theological statement of great depth by way of introduction. This is followed by an account of the ministry of the Baptist with its Christ-centred emphasis. Then he gives the story of the calling of disciples, men who were so prepared by John's ministry that they stood firm and went on. The first chapter ended with the promise of greater things to come and evidences of heaven opened and heaven's power coming down to bless the human situation. The presence of Christ was to transform man's life by introducing new power and, when the disciples (note that the emphasis is on them and not on the generality of the company) saw the first manifestation of Christ's glory in the wedding miracle their faith was strengthened. The interesting thing is that John, who obviously remembered the incident very clearly, states deliberately that this was the first of the signs Jesus did by which He manifested His glory and demonstrated His transforming power, not just in the business of water into wine, but in the increasing of human joy and gladness. But think of the audience and location of this first miracle. It was shown to five new disciples and a handful of servants in the back kitchen of an ordinary home in an insignificant town. It reminds you of the miracle at Bethlehem! It also rebukes us for our wrong ideas of glory and greatness.

[Back to Top](#)

2:1-11

Consider this story well. It begins in the decisive will of the Lord Jesus when He decided to go to Galilee (1:43). He had been invited to the wedding at which Mary, His mother, was obviously an important person with responsibility for the reception and with authority to order the servants. Such a wedding feast might well last as long as a week and there would be a steward (8) or head waiter responsible for all the catering. He would not be one of the family and therefore his testimony to the quality of the wine is an independent and reliable one. This discounts the stupid attempts of some to explain away the miracle by saying that it was just water added to the dregs of wine jars and so absorbed some of the flavour from the earthenware pots. We are dealing with miracle, whether we think of all the water being turned to wine or only that which was drawn by the servants to meet the need. There is no difficulty in accepting the miracle if we accept the identification of Jesus given by John. He was the Creator God and here He is simply exercising His right over the processes of creation, compressing into an infinitely small span of time the "normal" process by which rain, sun, seed, growth and harvesting of the vine result in wine. But it is not just miracle; it is a sign pointing to Jesus in which Jesus is set in contrast to mere man (10). When man is on his own and left to his own devices there is a "run-down" element in all his life. Everything goes done. But with Jesus in life's situation the best is yet to be. He comes to bring abundant life (John 10:10).

[Back to Top](#)

2:12-11

This story is always referred to at weddings and rightly so, but we must be careful about statements that Christ's presence sanctifies the secular. He will never bless what is morally wrong nor does He bless right things that are grasped presumptuously. We must also recognise that the arrival of Jesus sometimes seems to herald embarrassment and complication. A group of invited guests (2) arriving when things were so far on may have precipitated the lack of wine. We do not know to what extent Mary's words were an appeal to Jesus to do something. It may well be that she simply laid the facts before Him, in the most natural way telling her own Son of something that was upsetting her. The reply of Jesus to Mary was gentle, "Dear woman, why do you involve Me?" How Mary reacted to the next words, "My hour has not yet come," we cannot tell. There was an element of rebuke for she had to learn to leave Jesus to choose His own times and methods of action. There were other times when she and her family tried to influence Jesus and were rebuked firmly (Mk. 3:21,31-35). Mary might not seek to initiate miracle for the "hour" for that is determined by the secret counsel of God and not simply by immediate human need, or in this case social embarrassment. At the same time, having accepted the rebuke, Mary shows astonishing faith in her Son, whom she had observed for thirty years (cf. Lk. 2:52). Jesus knew the situation, how best to deal with it, and had the power to deal with it. That being so we should expect Him to act, leave the issue in His hands, and do whatever He says. We need this last exhortation because what He

commands sometimes seems foolish and irrelevant. Drawing *water* must have seemed pointless to servants who were supposed to serve wine. But the power of Christ makes sense of it all.

[Back to Top](#)

2:1-11

This was the first of seven "signs" by which Jesus manifested His glory. Not all beheld that glory (1:10). The steward (9) and the main body of the guests did not know how this rich "blessing" had come to them. The servants saw the miracle or at least the mechanics of it but did they "see" the glory? Some did discern and saw not an austere and unapproachable Jesus but one who entered into human joy and gladness to increase and to bless it. John himself seems to have sensed that there was in fact no limit to the supply of blessing. It could have been a deep well of wine or even a river (John 4:10-15; 7:37-39; Ezek. 47:3-5; Rev. 22:1-2). It is no secret what God can do, nor is there limit, and it gets better all the time. To show this in our lives is part of our witness. Without qualifying in any sense the demands of discipleship (Lk. 9:23,24) and without giving any sanction to wrongdoing (Jn. 14:15) we must show the happy humanity of Jesus. He is the friend of sinners (Matt. 11:19) but He is against sin. His liberty is never licence and He comes that we might have abundant life (Jn. 10:10) and that our joy might be full (Jn. 15:11). If this first sign tells the difference Christ makes, then the following ones testify that faith is the only requisite (4:46-54); that Christ is the restorer of lost powers (5:2-9); that Christ is the food by which we live (6:4-13); that Christ is our guide (6:16-21), our Light (9:1-7) and our life (11:1-44). These titles are from William Temple's commentary on John. This is the story we go on to study.

[Back to Top](#)

2:12

It is the ordinariness of this one verse that makes it important. It requires us to set the works of Jesus in their context. The wedding at Cana was a story of exquisite joy and human fulfilment and a manifestation of Jesus' power and glory. But prior to that there had been the grim and prolonged fasting in the wilderness during the temptation and the deliberate refusal by Jesus to turn stones into bread when that seemed a far more "necessary" miracle than water into wine (Lk. 4:1-4). But we must see that there is a "time" for everything (Eccles. 3:1) and that this calls for the submission of faith (2:5; cf. Job 23:10). Now, after the demonstration of power at the wedding, our Lord returns to the very ordinary life of Capernaum, and to the blessings, duties and demands of family life (Mk. 6: 3). There is no mention of Joseph (who may have died by this time) but the mention of disciples signifies that the "family" was already larger than just relatives.

Not all our Lord's family believed (7:5). How He understands the situation, pressures, loneliness and longing of many of us, and how He points us to the wonderful compensations of a spiritual family (Matt.12:46-50). Capernaum was Jesus "own town" on the shores of the Sea of Galilee (Matt. 4:13; Mk. 2:1). He worked more miracles there than anywhere else and yet no place received a more severe rebuke and judgment (Matt. 11:23). What responsibility comes with spiritual privilege. There may be some excuse for those who are denied the ready application of the Word of Truth and access to the means of grace and beneficial fellowship, but there is none for those among whom the light shines brightly (Jn. 15:22).

[Back to Top](#)

2:13-17

We have here a most remarkable example of our Lord acting in righteous indignation and it must be seen, in measure at least, as a fulfilment of the prophecy in Mal. 3:1-5. John records this cleansing of the Temple at the beginning of Christ's ministry and the other gospel writers record a second cleansing at the end of His ministry when, in spite of all the mighty works of God among them, the establishment of Jewish religion had gone from bad to worse in its Christ-rejecting unbelief (Matt. 21:13; cf, Jer. 7:8-15). When rebuke and correction are refused there is an inevitable deterioration in the situation and a corresponding hardening of the heart. This is why we must be alive to the Word of God when it comes to us (Heb. 2:1-3; 4:1- 2). Before considering the detail of this incident we must point out the care that must be exercised before we take it upon ourselves to cleanse the House of God. There is a zeal which can be very unwise and which is in fact carnal, because it stems from spiritual pride and over-confidence. The point here is that Jesus had the right to cleanse the Temple because He was the Lord of it by virtue of His Sonship (Heb. 3:1-6). Right at the start of His public ministry

Jesus was therefore affirming His authority in spiritual matters in face of the presumption of the leaders of the Jews. This same spiritual authority He had already manifested in His encounter with the Devil (Matt. 4:10) and His righteous anger in the Temple was focused on the blatant distortion of spiritual truth displayed in the commercialisation of holy things. This was not a time for gentle teaching but for the authority of the Son of God.

[Back to Top](#)

2:13-17

In the Temptation the Devil twisted Scripture truth to suit his own ends and to seek to divert the Holy son of God from His Father's will and way. Through the corruption of the priest's the Devil had already turned the feet of men away from spiritual worship. The House of God was meant for prayer (1 Kings 9:1-3; 2 Chron. 7:1-3, 11-22), but as in a former day the wrongdoing of the priests of Israel had brought the place into disrepute (1Sam. 2:12-17). The court of the Gentiles was like a stock yard. The animals for sacrifice had to be pronounced clean by the priests and only those bought at inflated prices in the "closed shop" managed by the priests would be passed. The worshippers had to pay the half- shekel temple money and only Jewish coins were acceptable. The money changers would "oblige" at a price. The "establishment" had control and the people had no power to change the situation. All this was going on at the Passover time when the dominant note should have been gratitude to God for His glorious "free" salvation at the time of the Exodus. But the glory of the God of salvation was obscured by all the greed of commercialisation, just as in our day it is often hidden by the claims of entertainment, worldly and evangelical alike. The House of God is a place to meet with God, to hear the glad tidings of forgiveness and newness of life. Anything and everything that runs counter to that comes under the whip in the hands of Jesus. When things that are started in innocence and genuineness prove to be a hindrance to the gospel, then they must go. The church must be the church, and only then can it be a light and a hope to a lost world. But if we are ardent and urgent to cleanse the House of God, let us start with the temple of our own hearts, lives and homes. We may be surprised by the opposition, for we are not all that keen on being holy unto the Lord.

[Back to Top](#)

2:18-22

In every new movement of God's grace, at every significant stage in the development of God's purposes of salvation, judgment begins at the House of God (1 Pet. 4:17), and confirmation of the backslidden state of the church is found in the resentment with which the authority of Christ is met. The Jews demand that Christ should prove His divine commission, suggesting that if He did so they would accept Him. This is what they did at the Cross (Matt. 27:40) when, likewise, they had no intention of bowing to Him. The words of Jesus, though deep and mysterious, are nevertheless blunt in their challenge that they were more concerned with a building (built and financed by Herod) than with God. This is a permanent temptation. Sticks and stones, memories and associations are not in themselves wrong but when they become the focus of our religion they become idolatrous. The Jews demand a sign, a showing of credentials. But, "When God speaks to either the heart or conscience He does not first prove His right to do so. The divine command is its own evidence, and the heart or conscience that is not utterly numbed by complacent sin recognises its inherent authority." (Temple) Yet Christ gave a sign, one which only believing hearts would see or receive. The idea of the destruction of the Temple was totally foreign to their thinking. It was something which to them, just would not happen for it would signify the end of everything, including God! They did not see that what they were doing in refusing Christ and prostituting the whole pattern of worship was guaranteeing the destruction of the whole system. It is a matter of history that within a year or two of the building actually being finished, it was destroyed in A.D. 70. It is all very solemn.

[Back to Top](#)

2:18-22

Jesus had referred to "My Father's House" but in Lk. 13:35 He called it "Your house" for it had lost its significance and relevance to the ongoing purposes of salvation. In Lk. 19:41-45 He speaks of its destruction. Something of the secularisation of people's thinking about the things of God is seen in their preoccupation with

a magnificent building that was simply a monument to past glories (Mk. 13:1) and with the idea of a kingdom established in worldly categories (Acts 1:6; John 19:36). But Jesus spoke of a different holy temple in which God would dwell (Eph. 2:21-22), a house, eternal in the heavens, not built with hands (2 Cor. 5: 1). Of course, unbelief simply cannot grasp this kind of thing for only faith can see the invisible (Heb. 11:27; 2 Cor. 4:18). What Jesus seems to have said to these men is that the sign they sought which would confirm His identity and power would be seen in His death and resurrection (Rom. 1:4). His body was in fact the Temple of the living God, for in Him God was manifest in flesh and dwelling in the midst of His people with power to save and to bless. But they did not believe it, and even the disciples were at that time without understanding, even though they trusted Christ and were committed to Him. Note in passing how Christ claimed for Himself the glory of His resurrection even though elsewhere it is spoken of as the work of the Father (John 10:8; Acts 2:24). There is no contradiction for the three persons of the Trinity are in perfect accord in all things.

[Back to Top](#)

2:23-25

In the previous verses it is plain that no sign was going to be given to these men except the sign of the resurrection (Matt. 12:38-42; Lk. 16: 27-31). It is unbelief which demands signs in order to believe and in this men seek to bring God down and confine Him to their capacity. Of course there were other signs or miracles which Jesus did, as is evident in today's verses and in 3:2; 20:30-31; and 21:25. Wherever Jesus is, there are things happening which are not capable of explanation in mere human terms. It is sad that we do not recognise this more. Of course the trouble with miracles is that they tend to produce the wrong results. They do not necessarily lead to faith. Indeed they can result in the very opposite and you are left with credulity married to religious association without any real heart faith or commitment. Association with and involvement in Christian things and even success in Christian activity do not necessarily signify faith and salvation. Read Matt. 7:21-23. People say that miracles would fill the churches, and some churches are full of people drawn by the extraordinary. But we need to remember that the way of startling manifestations of power was deliberately rejected by Jesus as a means of establishing the Kingdom of God (Lk. 4:9-13). The Devil kept trying and in today's verses he is repulsed again. There is wonderful wisdom in our Lord's dealings with people and it is based on His perfect knowledge and understanding of them. He knew full well the tendency in human nature to be preoccupied with solutions to immediate problems rather than with eternal salvation. Jesus held back from them (24), not to abandon them but to draw them to true enquiry of faith, as in the case of Nicodemus which is about to be narrated.

[Back to Top](#)

2:23-25

These verses point to many lessons in the whole chapter. Note how clear it is made that Jesus was master of the whole situation. No one seems to have tried to stop Him physically in the Temple. His hour was not come (Jn. 7:30; 8:20). He refused the arrogant demand for a sign but went on to spend time and patience with the genuine enquiry of Nicodemus. He did not grasp at new converts as if they were necessary to confirm or vindicate either His person or His work. We get over excited about converts and lay ourselves open to many disappointments. We talk sadly of people who have backslidden, when in fact they have never been at the place of true faith and commitment from which to slide back. We have much to learn in the business of evangelism, especially in terms of the things that accompany salvation (Heb. 6:9). What is happening in these verses is that many were joining in with the Jesus crowd, and that is understandable for Christ, and Christian truth and fellowship, are attractive things in a weary world. They can indeed be the initial instruments by which people are led to faith, but the test comes if and when we are separated from these things. It is then that it is seen whether or not our faith was centred on Christ Himself. To be attracted is not the same as to be converted. Miracles *may* help faith, but essentially they are a concession to weakness rather than a confirmation of strength, and Jesus Himself suggests that faith which rests on signs and wonders is a second-best (John. 14:11). Indeed miracles can become a crutch to faith to the extent that the crutch becomes indispensable. We must learn to believe and to trust even when there is no sign or evidence (John 20:29).

[Back to Top](#)

3:1-3

This story follows closely on 2:24 and illustrates why Jesus was slow to commit Himself to people. Nicodemus had been impressed by the miracles and recognised something of God in the person and life of Jesus. But however genuine his enquiry was, there was a hesitation about committing himself to Jesus and that may be why he came by night. He was undoubtedly a sincere man yet he was conditioned by the social and religious patterns of his life. To break from that would be a colossal and costly move and therefore the deep longings and searchings of his heart were frustrated by the feeling that he had to conform to what his own class expected of him. It is clear from Jesus' blunt words in v.3 that Nicodemus assumed that he was part of God's kingdom and it must have been a shock for him to be told otherwise. After all, he was religious, cultured, educated, accepted and respected in society. He was in fact one of the best examples of a religious man, but that is very different from being a Christian. Religion has been defined as trying to seek, find and please God by your own efforts. It is a hard and unrewarding struggle. Religion centres on man's search for God (as if God was lost), whereas the gospel is concerned with God's search for man (Luke 19:10) who is in fact lost. It seems clear that Nicodemus was aware of the fact that he had not found in religion what his heart desired but he was not prepared for the truth about the radical change that was necessary in him before he could even see the kingdom of God. Jesus' words about being born again from above made plain that this was something quite beyond man's power to accomplish. It was something God had to do and Nicodemus should have known this.

[Back to Top](#)

3:1-3

Being a well-taught Jew Nicodemus should have known such scriptures as Jer. 31:31-34; Ezek. 36:25-27. No doubt he did, but there was a blindness upon his soul and it is right here that we must see the need for a sovereign work of God's grace by the Holy Spirit to accomplish salvation. As Jesus will go on to point out there is an essential element of mystery in the working of the Spirit and we cannot pin down the exact moment when He begins to work. But who can deny that it was the work of the Spirit that caused Nicodemus to be aware of the unsatisfying nature of his "religion" and constrained him to seek after Jesus. By nature there is none who seeks after God (Rom. 3:11-12) and no one comes to Jesus except the Father draws him (John. 6:44). Blindness as well as deadness describes the condition of the unregenerate sinner (2 Cor. 4:4; Eph. 2:1-3). The "natural man", even though he be very religious, cannot receive or accept the things of the Spirit and indeed regards them as foolish (1 Cor. 2:14). The tragedy of religious people is that in their sincerity they are always looking for something *they* must do in order to set things right with God. When Jesus said to Nicodemus that he needed to be born all over again the man realised this was something he could not do for himself. All life comes by birth, and spiritual life comes by spiritual birth, and until the miracle of birth takes place there can be no living of the life. It is no use trying to live a Christian life until you are a Christian. It is a new life we need by way of a radical heart-transplant on the spiritual level. This is what Jesus came to do: "Born to raise the sons of earth, born to give them second birth." (Wesley)

[Back to Top](#)

3:4

Nicodemus' words here seem to indicate that he was an elderly man and consequently set in his ways. Youth is the time of pliability when changes can be quick and radical and this is something we must remember in evangelism. Youth may be a time of great opportunity and we must seek the conversion of the young before they are grasped by the spirit of the world. But older folk also need to be converted and they have less time left. Are there not ministers who have so concentrated on "youth work" with its fun and its immediate and obvious satisfaction that they have left the older generation to die their sins? Of course we must not expect older folk to change as quickly as youngsters or to grasp new evangelistic language with ease. It took Nicodemus a long time to grow into a clearly committed disciple and it was costly for him to take his stand (John 7:45-52). But when the youngsters had all fled, it was the older men who ministered to Jesus at His burial. It may be a distraction from the immediate story but let it be said clearly that you cannot build a church with only young people. They must grow up in grace (2 Pet. 3:18) and in so doing put away childish things (1 Cor. 13:11). When this does not happen we are left with a sad situation indeed as Heb. 5:11-6:4 and 1 Cor. 3:1-4 make plain. Let our hearts thrill here and be encouraged by the fact that one of our Lord's early converts was an elderly man. Let this encourage

us to pray for older people, especially in our own family circle. And let us be mindful of the fact that experience testifies that those brought up in the old-fashioned way of religious duty and faithfulness make great Christians when converted. They can be depended on.

[Back to Top](#)

3:4

The fact that Nicodemus put such a physical emphasis on Jesus` words (as the woman of Samaria did in 4:11-12) confirms his spiritual blindness. This is what blights human society. People reduce everything to the physical, sensual and material as if determined not to allow any reality beyond their very limited experience. On the other hand Nicodemus seems deeply interested in the possibility of being born again but he seems still to be thinking of a second beginning rather than a new beginning. The idea of putting the clock and calendar back, and so undoing many, many things we now regret, is one that has immediate appeal but it is no real answer. If we had our lives over again we would do the same things unless we were in fact changed into different people. Nicodemus faces the fact. He recognises that over the years we gather to ourselves qualities and characteristics, influences from outside and from within, and developments of inherited traits and imbalances. In a. sense we become part of all we meet and the good Pharisee wonders if, having become this, he can ever be changed.

The answer is glorious. If any man be in Christ he is a new creation, the old has passed away, and all has become new (2 Cor. 5:17). Being born again means that complete change of heart and character which is produced in a man when he repents and believes on the Lord Jesus Christ. To be born again, born of the Spirit, or born of God means that radical change whereby the very life of God is born in a human soul (1 John 3:9). Paul described it as Christ living in him (Gal. 2:20). It is total transformation with limitless possibilities.

[Back to Top](#)

3:5-9

When new life is created it is perfect in embryo and all the future potential is there. In due time that new life emerges into identifiable, independent existence and there begins the process of growth and development as 1 Pet. 2:2 makes plain. It is miracle, sovereign and divine, the work of God and not the work of man as the Christmas story makes plain (1:35). But people can be amazingly blind to spiritual truth and reality, even when it is being proclaimed and demonstrated before their eyes. When Jesus refers to water and spirit (5) He seems to be referring to the ministry of John the Baptist which was so well known that Nicodemus must have been aware of it. Indeed the Pharisees must have reacted sorely to John's ministry which was devastatingly blunt (Matt. 3:7-9). But even that did not deter Nicodemus from coming to Jesus. Is this a sign that the Spirit of God was already working in the man's soul? Jesus seems to urge the man to be open to God, to go and join himself to John's revival movement, to take the sinner's place in repentance of heart, to believe God's promise of salvation and life, and so be born of the Spirit. There may be suggestion of the water cleansing away sin and the Spirit giving life, but we must not think of baptism in water as effecting regeneration. It is the Holy Spirit who is the energising power and He is spoken of in terms of water, or fire, or wind, or dove. It is by the life-giving power of God by the Holy Spirit that a man enters the Kingdom. Jesus emphasises to Nicodemus in v.7 the absolute necessity of such a radical spiritual transformation because without it a man is in the wrong world.

[Back to Top](#)

3:5-9

Jesus' words in v.7 indicate that Nicodemus was showing the usual reaction of cultured religious men to the whole idea of being born again. One notable Scottish Professor, often regarded as an evangelical, went in print on this theme saying that possibly for total outsiders this business of being born again had some meaning but for those born and brought up in the church it was just not necessary. But this position assumes that by natural birth, background and breeding we are children of God, whereas Jesus said on one occasion to Pharisees that they were of their father the Devil (John 8:44). The Bible makes it plain that by nature sinner-man is not a child of God (Eph, 2:1-3, 12) and that the heart of man is incurably diseased (Jer. 17:9). Natural man may be educated, cultured, refined and developed to the highest degree possible to human nature, but he is still natural man, belonging basically to a fallen and disordered world. We are born in sin (Ps. 51:5) and cannot be anything other than sinners. That is the only life we have, unless we are born again (Titus 3:7; cf. Rom. 3:9-19). This is

not in any sense to despise or devalue human gifts or graces which sweeten life for ourselves and others. It is simply a recognition of spiritual fact. We need to be born again with the very life of God. The whole concept seemed beyond Nicodemus because he could not grasp the manner or mechanics of the process. But it is foolish indeed if we accept only those things which we can explain. Jesus points out that in nature there are things we do not understand yet we benefit from them. The wind, the currents of air, are there for us to breathe and to harness in power and service. The power of God is likewise present and active to work life-giving salvation.

[Back to Top](#)

3:10-15

Nicodemus still stumbles (9) possibly because his thoughts are too anchored in the formalism of institutional religion. The idea of the working of the Spirit, the operation of the power of God, and a whole new order of things coming to pass seems in measure to frighten him, for he is out of his depth. Jesus rebuked him, possibly to demolish his spiritual confidence for which there was no justification. A man like Nicodemus who was responsible for teaching others should himself have known the Old Testament scriptures and the references in Ezek. 36:24-27; Jer. 31:31-34; and Ps. 51:10. But Pharisee religion had become a thing of human pronouncements and tradition, and had moved away from the united testimony of the prophets. Jesus insisted that He and John and all God's prophets spoke with the same voice, message and authority. Their message was not the product of human reflection on religious and spiritual matters, but the word of the living God. In v.11 however, Jesus seemed to be using the royal "we", declaring truth He had known from all eternity, which truth had been amply demonstrated in the calling and transformation of the disciples and in the works of power already done, which were the very things that drew this man to Jesus. Nicodemus himself had testified in v.2 to the divine nature of the "signs" but now he was declining to receive them. There is an inconsistency in unbelief and it is never justified or excusable. Nicodemus was being rebuked and this was part of the process that was yet going to lead him to faith.

[Back to Top](#)

3:10-15

Jesus began to lead Nicodemus further into truth that had already mystified him and we must learn here first that it is not necessarily a bad thing when people say they do not understand preaching. Certainly we must not allow the presentation of the gospel to be limited to the narrow confines of acceptability. It is as if Jesus says, "If you have not understood the A.B.C of the gospel, how can I lead you into the full divine truth of it?"

Nicodemus accepted that he was not all he should be or could be and that some change or improvement was necessary to fit him for the kingdom of God. He was told more than he expected. He needed a new birth. This is an earthly thing in that it has to do with human experience (although it is the work of God's Spirit). People talk of regenerating society and nations and even the economy. They know what the language signifies. But this is all anchored in human categories, as are thoughts of self denial and dedication which Nicodemus would have grasped easily. But underlying all we mean by regeneration there are the doctrines of the incarnation, the atonement and justification by faith, and these are the matters Jesus now began to expound. The impartation of new life and the glorious work of the Spirit are not "things in themselves" but are grounded in the atoning work of the Cross. In v.13 Jesus corrected Nicodemus' false assumption in v.2 that He was one teacher among many. He is in fact the Son of Man - Dan. 7:13-14; Micah 5:2 - which Scriptures Nicodemus must have known.

[Back to Top](#)

3:10-15

Try to imagine the baffled consternation of this teacher of Israel as he was faced with sublime truth and tried to grapple with it. Jesus said there was only one messenger of these divine truths. No man can go to heaven to find them; only the One who came down from heaven could declare them. This messenger was in fact God's personal representative, the Son of Man, the Messiah in all His glory, and He stood before Nicodemus saying, as He would say later to the disciples, "I am the way, the truth and the life..." (John 14:6). Note how our thoughts are being sent back to the Prologue of the Gospel, especially John 1:9-10,14. The one who spoke to Nicodemus was the exact image of the invisible God (Col. 1:15; Heb. 1:1-4) and whoever has seen Him has seen the Father (John 14:8-11). Now Jesus went on to make plain that the One who came down from

heaven did so not just to teach and to befriend but to be lifted up on the Cross for the salvation of a people who were dying under the judgment of God for their sins. Jesus made it plain that this was not a new gospel, but one rooted and grounded in the Old Testament, particularly Numbers 21:4-9. The bronze serpent lifted up was God's sovereignly given way of salvation to a people who were dying without hope. What they had to do was to look in faith to God's way of salvation and atonement. It was the way of justification by faith. They had to believe God and take Him at His word. There never has been any other way of salvation. Nicodemus should have known this for Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness (Gen. 15:6; Rom. 4:3; Habakkuk 2:4).

[Back to Top](#)

3:16

There are depths here that we cannot plumb. We are dealing with the length, breadth, depth and height of the love of God (Eph. 3:18-19). We are dealing not only with the essential character of God, which is love (1 John 4:16) but with the actions of the God of redeeming love. We must emphasise again the reference to Numbers 21 because it shows the true interpretation of the Cross. Christ died for our sins according to the pattern of the Scriptures (1 Cor.15:3) and, of course, we need Isaiah 53; the story of the Passover Lamb and the story of the scapegoat (Ex. 12; Lev.16) to name but a few of the Old Testament pictures of the Saviour and His salvation. The one used here about the bronze serpent is profound. The situation was one of rebellion, discontent, refusal and rejection on the part of the people of God. They were faithless and in inexcusable sin they were perishing under God's judgment. They were without hope until God in His mercy provided a free and sovereign and undeserved way of salvation. Note carefully that the "serpent" lifted up was the symbol of the very thing that was smiting the people, and in this we must see something of the truth that Christ was made sin for us (2 Cor. 5:21). In the Old Testament story those who refused to believe God's way of salvation, and refused to look and live, perished, and they perished because of their stubborn unbelief. Salvation was effected and demonstrated before their eyes but many refused to look in faith. Do not fail to see the urgency in the story. There was no time to waste.

[Back to Top](#)

3:16

Here is the wonder and the mystery of the gospel. The word "must" in v.14 speaks of the divine necessity for the death of the Son of God our saviour Jesus Christ. In this way we are led back to the wonder of eternity and the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world (Rev.5:6; 13:8). What was already a reality in the mind and heart of the eternal father was now to be worked out on the stage of history and the truth of it is stated here, not in terms of logic or systematic theology regarding the nature and scope of the atonement, but in terms of redeeming love. The use of the word "world" must have shattered the narrow exclusivism of Nicodemus who, as an orthodox Jew, would have thought of God's interest being centred only on that select people. But God so loved the world. Does that include the groaning fabric of creation (Rom. 8:22) and the sparrows (Matt. 10:29-31) and peoples who have never heard God's true name or that of His Son (Rom. 2:12-16)? Does this refer to the whole world of men and women, for we know that all will not be saved, and does this mean there is wasted love and love that is ineffectual in terms of salvation? The verse does not speak of God's plan or purpose but of His love, and does He love only the elect who will be saved? There is a mystery which we must accept and before which we must bow, not least when we consider the tears of Jesus over a rebellious Jerusalem and His words, "I would.... but you would not," (Matt. 23:37). What we must grasp is the fact of God's love which is the source and guarantee of our salvation. God commended His love (Rom. 5:6-8) and in that love spared not even His own Son but gave Him up for us all (Rom. 8:32).

[Back to Top](#)

3:16

Take time to ask why God should love the world. It was not a good world nor one trying to be good. It had broken God's law and His heart (Rom. 3:10ff). It had rejected His messengers with amazing consistency (Acts 7:51-53; Matt. 21:33-39) and its entire disposition was to regard God as an inconvenience (Rom. 1:21, 28). One would expect a statement to the effect that God judged the world and sealed it to destruction (as 2 Pet. 3:7

indicates). God being God, we could well have accepted without much feeling the statement that God tolerated the world, had patience with it and sought to educate and improve it, all of which is true, as is the statement that God hates sin. But we read that God loved the world to such an extent of extravagance that He set His heart towards worthless, undeserving, broken and rebellious humanity and gave up His own dear Son to be the Saviour. Read Rom. 5:6-8. The objective in giving His Son was that people might look to Him in faith and see the very heart of God poured out in saving power. How can anyone doubt the love of God when they look at Christ and Him crucified? God has declared His love, leaving it in no doubt. He committed Himself, and in that sense love took the risk of being spurned. Think of how the Jews mocked Jesus on the Cross! But think of how the centurion's eyes were opened. No one who looks to Him believably will perish, but everyone who does not look to Him will perish. This is the crisis that is thrust upon men and women in the coming of the Saviour. It is a matter of life and death eternally.

[Back to Top](#)

3:17-21

Jesus may still have been correcting the wrong ideas of Nicodemus, for many Jews thought of the coming of Messiah in terms of bringing the nations to judgment and in one sense that is true. But the glory of the gospel is not judgment but salvation. God did not send His Son to condemn, for the sentence of condemnation rested on the world from the disaster of Eden, and in terms of practical outworking the world is quite capable of destroying itself unaided. God sent the hope of salvation (1 John 4:14). When the fulness of time had come God sent His Son to bring sinners out from under the curse and judgment of eternal Law (Gal. 4:4). This is sovereign grace indeed, for the world had no claim upon or right to such mercy. But this glorious action of God, which is the savour of life to some, is in fact the savour of death to others (2 Cor. 2:15, 16). In v.18 we are told how people are lost, just as in v.16 we were told how they are saved. There is no question of every single man and woman being saved and getting to heaven. There is salvation in the world because God has sent His Son, but when the light shines in the darkness and it is not received (1:11), and when people choose darkness rather than light because their deeds are evil (v.19) then they remain in their natural state of sinner-hood and are condemned already. People's reaction to Jesus as He is proclaimed in the gospel marks them out for what they are. As Jesus made plain, all that are of God will come to Him (John 6:45). One of the sorest things in being a preacher of the gospel is to see men and women becoming confirmed in their unbelief. Jesus experienced this very thing (John 5:40).

[Back to Top](#)

3:17-21

When God comes into the human situation, into personal or congregational life, reactions of reluctance, reticence, indecision and uncertainty are bad signs. That which is of God will respond and the whole disposition of life is made manifest one way or the other. Real conversions bring people right out into the open light, for they no longer have anything to hide. They begin to walk in the light as He is in the light (1 John 1:5-7) and increasingly by the fruits of their lives they are seen clearly to be Christians (Matt. 7:16-20). In relation to these verses (20-21) we must set the complaints and criticisms of worldly people who censure God and His prophets whenever stern words are spoken. There is a deep refusal in the human heart of any thought of judgment and rejection by God, but we are told here of the evil perversity of human nature that prefers darkness to light. Unbelief declares man's wickedness even more than his wrong living, for unbelief looks right into the face of the Son of God, and Him crucified, and refuses to bow. An evil heart of unbelief is sin indeed, and it is the sin which so easily grasps us (Heb. 12:1). But unbelief is not static. It causes us to depart from God (Heb. 3:12). It may not be immediately apparent that we are going away from God, and indeed we may remain active in religion, even evangelistic religion without ever coming to Christ (Matt. 7:21-23). It may *seem* that we have come to Christ, but the test is that of doing what is true and good. The Bible makes it plain that faith which does not issue in works is fraudulent (Jas. 2:26) and that those who love the Lord will keep His commandments (Jn 14:15). When people will not come to Christ, it is proof that there are things in their lives that cannot stand the light of God. Walking in the light is the way of faith and salvation as well as the way of fellowship (1 John 1:5-9).

[Back to Top](#)

3:22-26

Wherever there is a work of God there will be a work of Satan seeking to counteract or at least to confuse it. The Devil's technique is often to heat up feelings of jealousy, indignation and hurt, and in so doing distract from the person of Christ and so to hinder the progress of the work. The situation here is of two ministries being exercised in areas close to each other, both with a similar message of repentance, faith and reformation of life. Both "movements" baptised their converts (cf. 4:1-2) and in terms of statistics one was manifestly more successful than the other. In this situation the disciples of John the Baptist were resentful and aggressive and not a little critical of their leader for handing over the initiative to Jesus (26). They were also critical of Jesus, refusing actually to name Him, and suggesting that He had been less than righteous and gracious since John had been so publicly honouring to Him. It may have been that these men were feeling sore at no longer being the main spiritual movement of their day and they may have felt it keenly that they, personally, were no longer leaders of the work. There is nothing new under the sun, and the old Devil certainly knows how to get at us through our pride and self-centredness. We forget that we are only servants or signposts (1:23). Read 1 Cor. 3:1-9; Lk. 9:46-50.

[Back to Top](#)

3:22-26

These verses are rich in instruction. Note v.24 which pinpoints the fact, not yet apparent to John's or Jesus' disciples, that one significant ministry had almost run its course and would soon be terminated. This is the danger of a work being too centred on one human leader! But it also highlights the truth that all ministries are really preparatory works setting the scene for that which comes after (1 Pet. 1:10-12). We will never evaluate our work rightly unless we see it in terms of future generations and are prepared to do our work right to the end without really seeing the full flower and fruit of it (Heb. 11:39,40). Note also that the trouble between two groups of men engaged in spiritual work under God was stirred up by men of unbelief and their question about "purifying" or "baptisms" or "washings" of that ritual kind of which there were so many among the Jews. Whose baptism was the right kind? That became the mighty issue at a time of great spiritual moment. "This prompts the observation that times do not change very greatly in some respects. How people love to argue about baptism! They go on and on and on, as if the whole gospel was comprised in the rite. Some Christians have water on the brain, and their preoccupation with it would be comic were it not for the fact that such obsessional preoccupation generally beguiles them from the simplicity that is in Christ and takes the edge off their testimony and their usefulness in Christ's service. Their allegiance has been transferred from Him to 'another gospel' which is no gospel." (J. Philip).

[Back to Top](#)

3:27-30

John's spiritual stature is seen in that he turns what was a dangerous attack of Satan into an opportunity for profound spiritual instruction to set his disciples back on the right road and to focus attention again on the person, the primacy and the sufficiency of Christ. In v.27 John states that if the power of God is attending a ministry (his own or Christ's) then it is because God has ordained it so and has given His power. No man can "take up" the ministry, or elect to use the power of God as if he had free access to it when and where he chose. It is God alone who raises up His men, sets them in their places and gives them power (Jer. 1:4-10; Amos 7:14, 15; Heb. 5:4). Compare how Paul turned to the glory of God a situation confused by the brash interference of evil spirits (Acts 19:11-20). In v.28 John emphasises the importance of accepting God's assignments and of learning to be content with the work He has given, the place where He has set us and the measure of success (or failure) that He ordains. Jeremiah had little statistical success after a lifetime of ministry. Peter had to learn that comparisons were dangerous and a hindrance (John 21:20-22) and Paul learned to be content because everything worked out under God for the furtherance of the gospel (Phil. 1:12-14; 4:10-13). We must never try to emulate or excel others but, recognising the measure of faith (Rom. 12:3), see our ministries as complementary rather than in competition. If God has entrusted some work to our stewardship then we must see to it that we are faithful *in that work* (1 Cor. 4:1,2).

[Back to Top](#)

3:27-29

In v.27 John is giving a job description of his own work but may also be questioning his disciples as to why they had not gone after Jesus as others of his disciples had done. Had they not gone on spiritually as they should have done? That can often be the explanation of spiritual blindness and disaffection (Heb. 5:11-14; John 7:17). The marriage illustration John uses is vivid. All the guests have the privilege of being invited and enjoying the wedding but the bride belongs to the bridegroom alone, not to the guests or to the "best man". In Jewish custom the "friend" of the bridegroom brings the bride to him and delights in the doing of it. The "friend" does not grudge or transgress but recognises that a new situation of life has come into being. Of course, the friend is not cut off but rather brought into the new situation of love fulfilled and his joy is complete. This is what John is saying. His work is done, and done well. This is how Paul spoke of his work in 2 Cor. 11:2-3 and in Col. 1:21-29. In Matt. 9: 14-15 Jesus uses this very illustration of the wedding to emphasise the joy that is of the very essence of Christian service. This is what we lose when we get our eyes off Jesus and become preoccupied with ourselves and other people. Christ is everything and we must learn to do everything unto Him with joy and thanksgiving (Col, 3:17).

[Back to Top](#)

3:30-36

If our service is to honour God then Jesus must continue to increase and we must continue to decrease. This is not easy. There is a death to die, indeed many deaths to die, so that Christ might be glorified in use It is the principle of the corn of wheat falling into the ground to die in order to bring forth fruit that interprets for us much of life's experiences (2 Cor. 4:1-12; John 12:24; Phil. 1:19-26). Here in v31 John is not devaluing his own ministry, for that would be contrary to facts, to Jesus' testimony (Matt. 11:7-11) and would be false humility. He is simply saying that when the full sun shines all other lights fade into the background. Christ is all. John's ministry was indeed "Christ exalting, self abasing", and he maintains this attitude at the end of his ministry as at the beginning. What a ministry it was. He declared the divinity, pre-existence and pre-eminence of Christ in v.31. He is far above all and head over all (Eph. 1:21-22). In comparison to Christ, even the best is but earthly, and yet in comparison to all other earthly teachers of his time John was the greatest. Jesus was the one who refused to let John be undervalued. John on the other hand was the one who lifted up Jesus to be seen in His glory as the bridegroom of the church (29), coming from above (31), God sent (34), the very voice of God (34, cf. Heb. 1:1-3), giving the Spirit without measure (34,cf. Col.1:19), beloved by the Father (35) and the One to whom all things and all power were given (Col. 1:17-18; Matt. 28:18). Over against this is the strange refusal of people to believe. In the last verse faith and dis-obedience are set over against each other, with the issue in time and eternity.

[Back to Top](#)

4:1-6

Nothing in our Lord's weariness denies His divinity. In v.1 we have deliberate decision to leave the area of persistent disbelief. In v.4 we are told He had to pass through Samaria and this may indicate more than a mere comment on an obvious route. There seems to be the note of divine necessity which we find right through the Gospel, not least in references to the fact that the Son of Man had to, or must suffer (Mk. 8:31 9:12). We find Him right in position to meet and to minister to a needy, broken and bitter life. He was there to meet the woman and He met her in broad daylight when there could be no shadow of suspicion on the meeting or the relationship. It is not for nothing that we read in 1 Thes. 5:22 AV that we must steer clear of all *appearance* of evil. It is for the gospel's sake. A solitary meeting with Nicodemus in the dark of the evening was quite another thing. Both Nicodemus and the woman were in the same condition, hungry-hearted and more than a little disillusioned with religion. The saving power of Christ was more quickly seen in the woman's case than in the man's. The two meetings seem to come about in very different ways. But the message is the same. The Saviour has come to seek and to save the lost.

[Back to Top](#)

4:1-6

The final point to note here, and it is really very encouraging when you remember that the outcome of the story was revival, is that Jesus was in very hostile territory where deep prejudice existed against the Jews and where non-conformity and non-spiritual and non-evangelical religion was virtually an obsession. Of course Jesus had just left an "orthodox" area where there was the same prejudice against His person and His word. He came to this area unasked and unheralded as He had every right to. The people of Samaria were a "mixed breed" not of pure Jewish stock, descended from the mixed marriages that took place many centuries earlier when, because of their sins, the whole of the ten tribes of the Northern Kingdom of Israel were carried away captive. The division and enmity of Jews and Samaritans went right back to the division of the kingdom after Solomon (1 Kings 12). It increased after the fall of Samaria and the mingling of blood already referred to (2 Kings 17:1) and as late as the time of Ezra 4:10 the Samaritans were still standing in their anti-Jew independence. They would serve God their own way, as they had always done. That was their tradition, and few evangelists would choose that kind of territory. But there was a deeper and longer tradition going right back to Jacob. God in His grace had been active there long before idolatry took command of the situation. The whole area was steeped in the godly associations of long ago and linked with the names of Jacob and Joseph. There seem to have been several wells in the vicinity and it is significant that the two characters of the story made their way to the one named after Jacob. The God of Jacob is the God of the failures. Happy indeed is the man or woman who has the God of Jacob as their help (Ps. 146:5).

[Back to Top](#)

4:7-15

Here is a marvellous lesson in soul winning and it came about in a totally natural way. Jesus' request in v.7 was not a lever to turn the conversation to spiritual things. That would be artificial and indeed dishonest. It was a genuine request from a thirsty man and at the same time it was an expression of compassion, for any man of that time would know that a woman coming on her own to draw water at mid-day was a woman ostracised from the normal company of her sex. What the woman's initial thoughts were when she saw the man on His own we cannot say. Perhaps she had seen the disciple company on their way to the town. Perhaps she resented the person who had intruded on her quiet mid-day break because after all we do not know how she felt and it is not wise to judge solely on the basis of her cynical and bitter words. The naturalness of Jesus' approach and His manifest genuineness brought an immediate response and it is clear that the woman was quite a character and well able to hold her own in argument. How a woman of such calibre had ended up with her life in such a confused mess we cannot say. We must not jump to conclusions. The last thing she would be willing to do would be to admit her heart hunger or to submit to an evangelistic lecture about her soul. What we read of is an intensely honest conversation in which personality was respected and in which there was conveyed to the woman the sense that here was someone who valued her as a person, no matter what life had done to her or made her. That she was willing to continue the conversation was a token of the presence and working of the Holy Spirit.

[Back to Top](#)

4:7-15

Note in general terms how Jesus appealed to the woman's sympathy (7) without invading her personality which was a new experience for her. He then appealed to her curiosity (9-12), her hunger of heart (13-15), her conscience (16-18) and then to her vague, submerged religious awareness (19-25). Only then did Jesus present Himself as the Saviour that she needed (26). In today's verses we must be aware of the value Jesus set on this woman and note how He dealt with the inevitable defensiveness of her attitude. Jesus bypassed her critical attitude and probed right to the secret longing of her heart when He referred to living water. But He spoke of it as the grace gift of God. Now this was very different from the religion of law and demand that the woman was accustomed to. What she thought of as living water we cannot say. She obviously had some knowledge of the Old Testament Scriptures and may have had some thoughts of Isa. 12:3; 44:1-4; Zech. 13:1; 14:8, and other passages which link the mention of water with the coming of Messiah (Jer. 2:13). At first, however, the woman spoke only of physical water and emphasised the apparent impossibility of this man being able to do what He spoke of unless, of course, He was in fact greater than Jacob. Note that Jesus did not speak in theological

language about grace, pardon, peace and power to live. What He did was to awaken in the woman's heart the possibility of a change in her circumstances and life and to emphasise the need for her to ask. Which would triumph, her awakening sense of need or her dogged independence?

[Back to Top](#)

4:7-15

The statement of Jesus in v.13 is a tremendous summary of life lived at the wells of this world, and needs to be blazoned over the doorways of all places of so-called entertainment and indulgence. This is a fact of experience.

The world does not satisfy and sin gives no profit (Rom. 6:20-21). Indeed, far from satisfying thirst, it increases craving and accentuates dissatisfaction. No doubt the woman knew that and the facts of her life confirmed it, although she would be unlikely to admit it. But right at that point Jesus spoke of water that did quench thirst, water of unfailing supply that was not dependent on outward circumstances but came from an internal spring within a person's life. This appealed to the woman, not least in that it would allow her to escape from the lonely ritual of coming to the well day by day, a routine of life that simply emphasised her emptiness; failure and rejection by society. It may have been that right away she thought of water rising in freshness within her life to cleanse, refresh and enliven her whole being. It all seemed a bit much, too good to be true, and yet it offered her the way of escape from life as she had made it, and life as it had trapped her. Always keep in mind that great sinners may not be as easy in their hearts and consciences as their outward brashness may suggest. Under the hard crust of this woman's life there was a lonely heart that was very hungry and thirsty. Escape from it all was an appealing thought, but escape from circumstances is not salvation, and Jesus' next words are searching. Read Isa. 55:1-7 which the woman may well have known about.

[Back to Top](#)

4:15-26

There is a wealth of teaching here but we must concentrate on Jesus' dealings with one specific case of a broken life which had begun to long for something better. There is no salvation without repentance. There is a moral side to the gospel and if sin and wrong living are draining away the vitality of life then that must be rectified. The glory of the gospel is that sinners are offered not just forgiveness but deliverance from the power of cancelled sin. But there must be an honest dealing with the facts of life. Now, it is the grace of God that enables the sinner to begin to be honest with God. In v.16 the woman had the opportunity of escaping from this now embarrassingly personal conversation on the pretext of going to call her husband, but she did not run away.

She confessed the truth of her situation, bringing out into the open the story of her own failure in a way that she had probably never done before. In v.17 she may still have been a little evasive, for it is never easy to admit fully what we know ourselves to be. How she reacted in v.17-18 to the realisation that she was not giving this man any new information, and that He really knew all about her but had not in fact accused her to her face, we cannot say. There is a sure touch about Jesus' handling of this woman, her conscience and her conscious need. Would that we were all as tactful and considerate as this in helping one another to come to terms with the facts of life and the need for help. There is exquisite kindness and gentleness in Jesus' plain words in v 17-18.

[Back to Top](#)

4:15-26

Utter honesty does not require us to blast sinners and the woman must have been taken aback by Jesus' kindness. Little wonder they said of Him, "This man receives sinners," (Lk. 7:39; 15:2). Think of some of the hymns that may be sung in churches today:

"Down in the human heart, crushed by the tempter,
Feelings lie buried that grace can restore;
Touched by a loving hand, wakened by kindness,
Chords that were broken will vibrate once more."

(van Alstyne)

"There is no place where earth's sorrows
Are more felt than up in heaven:

There is no place where earth's failings
Have such kindly judgment given."

(F.W. Faber)

"O Hope of every contrite heart,
O Joy of all the meek,
To those who fall how kind Thou art!
How good to those who seek!"

(St. Bernard of Clairvaux)

We must never lose our sense of wonder at the loving kindness of God as it is shown to and as it comes to sinners through our Lord Jesus Christ. Nor must we ever lose the thrill and glory of the message of forgiveness and cleansing as it is expressed in Isaiah 1:18. Nor must we forget the necessity that those whom God has forgiven must learn to forgive themselves, believing that their sins have indeed been put away, behind God's back, never to be called to memory again (Isa. 38:17; Jer. 31:34). All this the woman at the well was in the process of discovering but it was not easy for her to grasp it.

[Back to Top](#)

4:15-26

The woman's words in v.19 make plain that she recognised that she was dealing with a prophet, a man who spoke for God, but her words in v.20 are capable of a double interpretation. Was she introducing a subject of debatable issue as a means of channeling the conversation away from her moral and spiritual wrong? It may be so. But in view of our earlier comments on v.16 and accepting from the story the obvious fact that God the Holy Spirit was working in her heart, and believing that some degree of spiritual hope and longing was already awakened in her, it seems that her question may have been genuine. It is almost as if she was saying, "Tell me the way, the place to go to, because people all say different things." How was she to know the truth? Who had the answer, the Jews or the Samaritans? She quoted the traditions and customs of the Fathers regarding both the place and method of worship and in doing so she manifested the natural ignorance of unconverted people regarding spiritual things and the tendency to be side-tracked into religious argument even when under a measure of conviction by the Holy Spirit, as this woman was. Yet at the same time this woman was indeed now a seeker after truth and salvation. Her real concern now was not about methods of worship but how to find the answer to her troubled soul. She had never been taught the truth of God. This is the deep problem of many and we must understand their bewilderment when the newness of the gospel comes to them. With slow sureness Jesus led this woman to the point where He said, "I am the Saviour you need."

[Back to Top](#)

4:15-26

This is a very important lesson on soul-winning and we must learn it well. We have seen how such a meeting is not accidental, and how Jesus in wise grace made the woman aware of her need, leading her to a longing for change and giving her a real measure of hope. In v.21-26 our Lord's language became profoundly spiritual. He made plain that the day of uncertain knowledge about God and salvation had come to an end. God has spoken, ignorance has been dispelled, salvation has come to the world through the Jews, and by them God is known as He really is (Heb. 1:1-3; Acts 17:16-34). God is Spirit, and therefore not capable of being limited to specific localities to which people must go if they would find Him. Psalm 139 makes that plain as does Heb. 9:24. The woman was made aware of the immediacy and personal nature of salvation and of the fact of the seeking God. Could she dare to believe that God really wanted her, unworthy, complicated and unhappy as she was? Would she wonder if she could ever be able to be all she should be? Jesus made plain she could begin there and then. Worship in spirit is heart worship, as opposed to formal ceremony, when the Spirit of God turns the soul to Christ. Worship in truth is not simply a case of being sincere, because we can be sincerely wrong. It is worship according to the truth which God has made known, declaring that there is but one way to God (John 14:6) and one Mediator between God and man (1 Tim. 2:5). The woman's words were almost a cry, "Who will do this for me?" Jesus' answer is glorious.

[Back to Top](#)

4:27-30

How would this interview have developed if the disciples had not arrived back just at the critical moment? Had they spoiled things by barging in disapprovingly just when a soul was being led to salvation? What would happen to the follow-up work? Jesus might well have said, "I believe in the Holy Spirit" and He turned His attention to the instruction of the disciples. But note also that by the same Holy Spirit the disciples were prevented from saying, as they might well have said and said hurtfully to the woman, "What do you want?" Nor do they express their surprise at Jesus talking to such a woman. No doubt both Jesus and the woman were aware of their thoughts. There is nothing hidden from Him (Matt. 10:26). But the thrill of these few verses is great. The woman left her water pot just as the disciples left their nets (Mk. 1:18) and Matthew left his custom (Matt. 9:9) and Paul his Pharisaism (Phil. 3:7) because a greater issue had arisen. Did she leave the jar as a token that she was coming back? She went right to the community where she was known and with spontaneity spoke of the Saviour she had met. Note however that she posed a question to the people (29) rather than making a statement and in this way guaranteed their further enquiry rather than producing resentment. After all, who would take kindly to this kind of woman preaching to them? They knew her too well. New converts should be very careful in their witnessing. At the same time we should be encouraged because in v.30 we have indication of the beginning of a revival in a most unexpected area, Samaria.

[Back to Top](#)

4:30-38

Gospel evangelism, even in times of revival, does not take precedence over the teaching of disciples and the building of the church in the interest of long-term work. The disciples brought the situation right down to earth with the matter of food. We must not be too critical because they had done the shopping in the noon-day heat! Jesus' reply baffled them and, looking possibly at the water jar left by the woman, they wondered if someone else had also been with their Master. Do not fail to note that the disciples, as well as the woman, were out of their depth, for they were still inhibited by many of their natural, cultural and religious prejudices and conditionings. So far, they had little idea of the dimension of the work they had been called to and little awareness of the extent to which the power of God was working and gathering in a harvest for the kingdom. Nor had they yet discovered the sustaining and satisfying food of doing the will of God. They could see the light of joy and peace in the face of Jesus and yet there was no visible evidence of food and support to explain it. The secret of the Lord is with them who fear Him (Ps. 25: 14 AV) and the satisfactions of God are for those who are set to do His will, which will is gloriously acceptable. Many have begun to prove that those who wait on the Lord renew their strength and their lives begin to manifest a vitality and capacity that worldly people just cannot understand (Isa. 40:29-31). Of course this is no warrant for foolish neglect of eating and sleeping patterns. Our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit and must be looked after (1 Cor. 3:16; 6:19).

[Back to Top](#)

4:30-38

Jesus began to teach the disciples an important lesson in Christian service. It concerned the necessity for faith and expectation so that they would never underestimate what God is doing. It is often because we are not expecting God to work that we are taken unawares when He does and are so surprised and baffled that we are not really competent to grasp the opportunities presented to us. Jesus seems to quote a Proverb in v.35 and on the physical level it is true. A couple of months from now it will be harvest in our land. But in spiritual work there is not the same rigidity of timetable and we must not postpone to some future date the gathering in of blessing. This is one of the psychological dangers of mass evangelism. Such are the "preparations" that psychologically all expectations are fixed to some point a year or two ahead and no one really expects anything significant to happen in the interim. This is wrong. It is folly, for it pre-supposes that there will be the next months and years, whereas we know not what a day may bring (Prov. 27:1) and in such an hour as we think not the Son of Man comes (Matt. 24:44) and time is no more. It may have been that the crowd of people from the city were already to be seen streaming up the road to see Jesus. We must be persuaded that God's calling of us is positive and the service laid before us is creative, purposeful and fruitful. Read Matt. 9:35-38 and Lk. 10:1-2. But read also Mark 5:17 and remember that the community does not always come with welcome in their hearts.

[Back to Top](#)

4:30-38

There are three clear statements about Christian service in v.36-38, lessons we must learn. Read in conjunction with today's passage 1 Cor. 3:1-9; 15:58; Jas. 5:7-8; Ps. 126:5, 6. First of all there is reward for labour in the Lord's field of service. Indeed there is no reward greater than that which someone receives for winning souls to Christ. It is in fact a crown of glory that never fades away (1 Pet. 5:4) enjoyed in the company of men and women who will on the great day stand up and call you blessed because your faithful service led to their salvation. The second lesson concerns the difference and yet the interdependence of various forms of service. Some are called to sow the word and others to reap the harvest in due time. Some have to do the hard slog of clearing, tilling and preparing the ground to receive the seed and others again have the task of watering the seed by prayer and weeding the ground so that young spiritual plants have the chance to grow safely and healthily. They are foolish people indeed who seek to set evangelistic and teaching ministries over against each other as if they were in opposition. We are told in v.36 that there is no envy in heaven nor among heavenly-minded workers because, after all, any good that is produced is from God alone, not from man. The final lesson makes it plain that God seldom, if ever, gives the work of the conversion of a soul into the hand of one person. This is a principle that is true of every piece of spiritual work. There is no room for pride at all. Others laboured and but for the fruit of their labours our success and achievement would not have been possible. What a privilege to enter into the labours of godly men and women of the past and what a responsibility to see to it that we pass on to others a situation for which they will thank God.

[Back to Top](#)

4:39-42

The exact meaning of the words, "I sent you" in v.38 is not clear. It seems to refer to the general commission of the disciples rather than to the visit they had just paid to Sychar. For all we know they may have witnessed to their faith while doing their shopping in the town and now that a crowd of the people were coming out to Jesus the disciples had to be protected from success! They were told that others did the hard work. Who knows what godly influence had been exercised in that community even though it had been overlaid with all manner of secular influences, unbelief and immorality. The mighty Spirit of God breathes on valleys of bones at times and brings life from the dead (Ezek. 37). It is good for us to remember that people we may have never met, grandparents and godly neighbours who may have died while we were still children, may well have prayed believingly for us and for our salvation. Then after long years when we have come to faith in Christ we marvel at the miracle of our conversion because, as far as we know, there were no Christian influences. Other men laboured. The past influence of the Law and the Prophets in Samaria now was quickened and when the people heard the woman's testimony and saw the radiance of her new-found faith, life and hope, many of them believed. The proof that their believing was indeed the beginning of faith is shown in that they came to Jesus and asked Him to stay. Then having sat at the feet of Jesus, hearing His word, they confessed plainly that they believed unto salvation. All this happened in an area full of prejudice, and the depth of this work of grace is seen in that three years later that area was still open and responsive to the preaching of the gospel (Acts 8:5-12).

[Back to Top](#)

4:43-45

The significance of these verses has been much debated but one thing is clear. After the two days just mentioned Jesus deliberately moved away from the area where he had met with such success and publicity and returned to Galilee. It may have been that His concern was to concentrate on the teaching of His disciples, or it may have been that He did not wish His person and work to be identified with the rebel race of the Samaritans, for that would have been misunderstood and might have constituted a great barrier. His ministry was to the Jew first (Rom. 1:16; Mk. 7:24-30) and, in order to carry out the Father's will and finish His given work (4:34; 17:4), the narrower work of local success was not allowed to stand in the way. Jesus' words about the prophet having no honour are given by both Matthew and Mark in relation to Nazareth (Matt. 13:53-58; Mk. 6:1-6). The attitude of Nazareth is vividly portrayed in Lk. 4:16-30. When Jesus left Samaria He went to Galilee but not to His own "country" or area for the above very good reason. Nazareth was far too familiar with Jesus to appreciate Him, just as some congregations are too accustomed to gospel privileges to maintain a truly spiritual response. There is much truth in the saying, "The nearer the church the further from God." No true prophet of

God should be over-concerned at not being appreciated. Jesus said, "Woe to you when all men speak well of you" (Luke 6:26).

[Back to Top](#)

4:46-54

There is so much in these chapters that daily notes tend to grow into a major commentary but at least we are being taught to read the Bible carefully. Yesterday's verses told of how the Galileans received Jesus with a degree of reverence, not necessarily faith, because they had seen the things Jesus had done in Jerusalem during the feast. This is another example of long-term influence. Now we read of Jesus again in Cana where the first miracle had been done, which miracle obviously had been talked about in the community. No doubt the sceptics would have tried to explain it away, as they do to this day. Many would no doubt prefer to "keep an open mind" but some were impressed deeply. One such man was the nobleman or royal official, and in his story we are given a third example of Jesus' dealings with individuals in different needs. The first was Nicodemus, a man with a deep religious and spiritual hunger to be right with God. The second was the woman of Samaria whose hunger was for satisfaction of life, because she was sick with sin and bitter with cynicism. The third was a man we know little about apart from this story. The first thing to note is that our Lord wins His trophies of grace from every level of society and they are brought to faith by a variety of processes through the experiences of life. No one would have predicted that this man would be an early convert, just as no one expected the raging Pharisee from Tarsus to become a disciple and a missionary apostle (Acts 9:1-2 ff). We underestimate God.

[Back to Top](#)

4:46-54

Consider the man's story which in some ways is similar to that of Jairus in Mk. 5:35ff. It was crisis in his home-life that brought him to Jesus. Family-life, with all the blessings of human love, can take a man away from God but it can also bring a man to God. Enoch walked with God from the time his first child was born (Gen. 5:22). In the nobleman's case it was not until the dearest thing on earth was almost lost that he sought for Christ. It is interesting to note how much there is in the Bible about parents coming to Christ on behalf of their children, compared to examples of children coming to Christ on behalf of their parents. In spite of the statement in Isaiah 11:6 it seems that we must do a lot of thinking with regard to children's work in the gospel. The Bible pattern seems to be to go for the parents and so bring the families. Household salvation is a concept strange to the ears of many in this generation of individualism (Josh. 24:15; Acts 2:39; 16:33). Note that the miracle was done at Capernaum, a place privileged more than most to see the mighty works of God (Matt. 11:23):- the centurion's servant in Matt. 8:5ff; the ruler of the synagogue's daughter in Mk. 5:35; and now the son of a high-ranking civil servant. This man heard that Jesus had come and that fact tells us how widely the reports of Jesus' movements were known and how powerful a reputation Jesus already had. The man may have come with the kind of faith that is kindled by miracles because, after all, he was desperate. But saving faith and the life of discipleship cannot be based on miracles because healing is not always given. Nor can it be built on the satisfying power of Jesus for that does not always operate. Think of Job. Nor is life based on the fact of answer to need and prayer, because Mary and Martha were left in the dark (John 11:3-7,21). This is why Jesus dealt first with the man and then with his request.

[Back to Top](#)

4:46-54

In answer to earnest and urgent pleading, Jesus seemed to speak with great bluntness and even rebuke in v.48. This is exactly what He did in the story in Mk. 7:24-30 and we must not attribute to Jesus any harshness or unwillingness in either case. His objective is always the highest one of bringing people to real faith and that is more than just answering their prayer. Some, like Naaman in 2Kings 5:1-14(expecially v.11-12) react badly when their earnest seeking is not answered in the way they expected. A sense of need, a specific desire, and the beginning of a seeking after God are not necessarily saving faith and each individual has to be dealt with in the right way in order to draw him out to personal faith in Jesus Christ. Sometimes Jesus was exquisitely gentle, as in John 8:1-11; sometimes He seemed to embarrass people publicly as in Mk. 5:24-34; and sometimes He seemed harsh and stern, as in this story. But note the man's response. He was not deterred. He seemed to accept

that his faith was limited and that it was stories of miracles that had brought him. But he still believed Jesus was the one to help. Then, in spite of the man's weak faith, Jesus spoke the word of power. Now note in v.50 how instantly the man believed in a way that was quite radical. Without another question or hesitation he went on his way believing, for no other reason than that Jesus had said all was well. It is not difficult to imagine the confirmation of the man's faith when he met his servants. He had learned that Jesus Christ was to be trusted even when He was not actually present. We must learn not to limit God.

[Back to Top](#)

4:46-54

There are two lessons remaining in the last two verses. In v.53 we note the emphasis on household salvation, something that is emphasised in Scripture (Acts 16:15,33; 1 Cor. 1:16) and which is found to this day in missionary situations where not only families but whole villages turn to Christ with one accord. This should highlight for us the tragedy of the disintegration of the family unit in our own bewildered generation. In v.54 there is emphasis on this being the second sign worked in Galilee and yet there was not the faith in Galilee that there had been in Samaria where they had not seen such miracles. We need to emphasise that miracles are not necessarily a help to faith. Indeed they can be seen more as concessions to weakness of faith, as in the case of Gideon in Judges 6:11ff and 36ff. The Jews, unwilling to accept Christ or to believe the promises of God, were always wanting signs and wonders to authenticate the gospel (1 Cor. 1:22) but again and again Jesus refused to give such signs (Matt. 12:38-42). There is an obsession in fallen, unbelieving human nature with the miraculous, and the Devil was well aware of this in the Temptation of Jesus when he tried to turn Jesus into a miracle worker in order to capture the people by excited sensations (Matt. 4:5-6). But faith that needs the props of signs is suspect for it becomes dependent on them, just as drug addicts become dependent on their particular "boost". The end is obvious. More and more "signs" and artificial stimulation are needed for less and less faith. This has far-reaching application to contemporary evangelicalism which tends to be frantic for signs and confirmations of spirituality. We need to remember that all signs do not come from the same source (Matt. 24:24) and many signs have no spiritual significance at all (Matt.7:21-23). Pharaoh's magicians were as good at signs as Moses was (Ex. 7: 8-13). We need surer ground for the life of faith than signs and feelings.

[Back to Top](#)

5:1-9

Jesus was a man whose spirituality was not in doubt and He never despised or devalued the religious institutions, practices or traditions of His own day. He recognised these things as God-ordained, tried and proved means of grace. He was not a rebellious individualist! Jesus went to the feast and this led to another fascinating incident. The previous story told of Jesus leading a man on to true faith, refusing to allow him to stay a spiritual weakling. Now, it is one thing to trust when our prayers are answered but another to trust when the worst happens. This is when we need to have faith in the person of Christ and not just in His power. It is not easy to say, "Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him" (Job 13; 15 AV). We often doubt if our faith could rise to this level and this story assures us by telling of the miracle of restored powers. The emphasis is not on the possibility of transformation but on the desire for it. Do we want things to be different (6)? Too often we say "can't" when in fact we mean "won't." This man was faced with a realism that he had not really met before and it shook him. The Son of God invaded his private world of paralysing self-pity, took the initiative and with a word of command had the man on his feet. The impossible happened; the paralysis was overcome; the man began to live a real life. If the healing is a miracle so is the hatred that followed it (18). The deliberateness and determination of unbelief are quite astonishing and beyond explanation.

[Back to Top](#)

5:1-9

In some manuscripts v. 3b-4 are omitted and modern translations give these verses as a footnote. They may have been added to the story to explain the man's words in v. 7 or omitted to exclude superstition. The main thrust of the story is not affected. The picture is a tragic representation of every age. There was a crowd of people for whom life was a boring disappointment and so much a rut of negativeness that it was like a grave. They were powerless pathetic misfits and rejects, all just waiting for something to turn up that would transform their

situation. It is like the people who live in hope of a "win on the pools". This was in Jerusalem, the spiritual centre of the Jewish faith but, as in Acts 3:6ff., no-one in the "church" thought about these poor poor souls, and they themselves never thought the "church" had anything to say or do that could help them. A powerless church with no message is a tragedy indeed. But a crowd is made up of individuals and this particular man was discontented and critical but acquiescent. He had resigned himself to hopelessness and in this "every man for himself" situation he was sorry for himself and blamed others and his circumstances for the continuance of his predicament. Note that Jesus saw him, singling him out, and demanded to know if he wanted things to be like this. The man was shocked and no doubt resentful, as his words in v.7 indicate. He was not being given the sympathy he craved for, and this is both a psychological and a spiritual condition that is very serious. Do we want to be helped and changed or is the thought of having to stand on our own feet just too much for us?

[Back to Top](#)

5:10-18

This is the sequel to the healing miracle and it throws us back to consider the issue spoken of by Jesus in v.14. How did the man get into this helpless condition for which Jesus held him responsible? Jesus said it was because of sin, not one isolated act of sin (if there is such a thing), but rather an attitude to sin persisted in. Let no one be in doubt, there is forgiveness with God (Isa. 1:18)! But equally let no one doubt that specific sin never repented of, or for which no right restitution has been made, can remain like a cancer of guilt, eating away the vitality of the life and distorting the personality. Think of David's anguish during the year after his great sin when he tried to brazen it out with men and with God (Ps. 32:1-5; 51:1-17). Of course the problem can lie in something not done, such as refusing a missionary call, so that you are living at cross-purposes with God. 1 Cor. 11:27-32 indicates another "unhealthy" condition of spirit. The amazing thing is that no matter how long the condition has lasted, even thirty-eight years, nor how deep the emotional and physical paralysis has become, it is not able to withstand the powerful command of Jesus. He commanded the man to get to his feet; to make no provision for relapse or to think of the change as temporary but to take up his bed, and to walk, not expecting to be carried. The man found his impotence gone, and proved it to himself by doing exactly what Jesus had said. This does not mean that Jesus always heals (think of Paul and Timothy in 2 Cor. 12: 7-10; 1 Tim. 5:23) nor that healing is always instantaneous. There are reasons for God's ways sometimes being by little and little (Ex. 23:29-30). But there must be no questioning of Jesus' power. That is of the essence of the gospel.

[Back to Top](#)

5:10-18

In the first instance the Jews challenged the man rather than Jesus, but it is appalling to see them fixing on the legal prohibition about carrying parcels on the Sabbath when a well-known cripple of so many years had been suddenly healed. This is indeed straining at a gnat and swallowing a camel (Matt. 23:24). Here are the representatives of dead religion taking it on themselves to pass judgment on One whose word is authenticated by the saving power of God. This is something that the fruitless critics of evangelical churches need to think about deeply. Note, however, that the man did not seem to have known who Jesus was and the Jews were indignant that a man, not known to or authorised by them, should dare to do work in the name of God. This is ecclesiastical pride run riot. It is the attitude that says, better a dead preacher with the right credentials and vestments than an "ordinary" man who carries the blessing of God. Note carefully that the man was in the Temple when Jesus met him again and it may indicate something of the spiritual healing that had taken place that the man went to the House of God so soon. Jesus spoke again with directness, possibly recognising that this man in good health might easily become careless and begin trifling with sin. Jesus warned him to be vigilant because successive lapses would lead to greater impotence. Why the man then went to the Jews to identify Jesus is not clear. It could have been misguided enthusiasm or it could have been that he resented Jesus' sharp and searching words about his own life and personality. People who are helped are not always grateful.

[Back to Top](#)

5:10-18

Do not fail to note how constantly Jesus was hounded by His enemies for no other reason than that He did the will and work of God. Our experience will be the same if we are true to our calling (John 15: 18, 19; 1 Pet.

4:12ff.). As soon as Jesus was identified, the Jews went to challenge Him for breaking the Sabbath. Of course the Jews themselves allowed works of necessity and mercy to be done on the Sabbath as Matt. 12:1-13 makes plain. But in this situation they saw the control of the Sabbath and of the people being taken from their hands and they did not like it. They did not seem to see the inconsistency in their planning murder which was a clearer breach of the commandments than Jesus' healing on the Sabbath. Of course we are all a bit like this. We are much better at seeing others' faults than our own. Jesus had a word about this in Matt. 7:3. Here we must note Jesus' answer to the carping, critical Jews who were so insistent that they and not Jesus were the spiritual servants of God. His answer was very much in the context of the Sabbath. It is true that God rested on the Sabbath from His work of creation and ordained the Sabbath rest for a memorial and a blessing to all. But God does not rest inactive and uncaring in the face of human sin, need and brokenness. He takes action as the saving God, and Jesus declared to these men that they had been confronted by a signal demonstration of the activity of God. Not only so, Jesus claimed one-ness with the Father and equality with the Father. It was a very clear claim and was confirmed by His critics (18). Jesus was God manifest in flesh (1 Tim. 3:16 AV; Phil. 2:6; Heb. 1:1-3).

[Back to Top](#)

5:19-24

Regarding this passage right to the end of the chapter Bishop Ryle says, "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." If this be so then daily notes can only point the lines of study rather than give an exhaustive verse-by-verse exposition. Some commentators suggest that Jesus had in fact been summoned before the Sanhedrin and that this was His formal defence. There is no strict evidence that this was so, especially in view of the recurring emphasis in the gospels about Jesus' hour being not yet come (John 7:30; 8:20; 12: 23). The passage (19-47) is more of a statement of truth rather than a defence of his person, just as Stephen's "defence" before the Sanhedrin was in Acts 7. Like Stephen, Jesus finally charged the Jews with unbelief, inconsistency, refusal of their own Scriptures and with being more concerned with the praise of men than the approval of God. Think of Jesus' scathing words in Matt. 6:5, 6 exposing the hypocrisy of self centred spirituality. What a warning! These few verses alone (19-24) serve to bring home to our hearts how shallow our understanding is of the "deep things of God". We can never reduce the glory of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit to a formula of words. When we ask God to show us His glory, as Moses asked (Ex. 33:18), we must be prepared to bow in awe and worship.

[Back to Top](#)

5:19-24

This is not a picture of the Father and the Son in eternity before the world began but an expression of the relationship of the Son to the Father during His earthly mission as a true man. The incarnation did not in any way cancel out our Lord's divinity and there remained the total unity of, and harmony between, Father and Son. The Son, as the Word, expressing all God is, had been sent forth from the Father and He knew and shared all that was the Father's and reproduced the thought and action of the Father among men. The initiative is always with the Father and those who are at cross-purposes with the Son cannot ever be in harmony with the Father (19). Such is the love of the Father for the Son that the whole plan of salvation was revealed to Him and through Him (20), although specific timing remains in the Father's sole keeping (Matt. 24:36). There is both harmony and equality with Father and Son and yet there is sweetest submission on the part of the Son. These critics ought not to have objected to Jesus acting with power and authority even on the Sabbath because saving power and judging power are alike given to the Son (21-22) and in the economy of salvation all centres on the Son (23). This means, among other things, that the electing power of the Father and the regenerating, life-giving power of the Spirit are not to be considered as theological entities in themselves They centre on and hold together in the Son and His redeeming work on the Cross. But note finally in these verses the clear emphasis on judgment (22, 24). God has appointed both the day and the person of judgment (Acts 17:30-31). That makes v.24 a very Christ-centred verse and of eternal import to all who hear the Word preached.

[Back to Top](#)

5:25-29

We read in v.21 that the Son gives life to whom He will and we recognise the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit in this as we have seen in the story of Nicodemus. But this is never spoken of apart from the proclamation of the Gospel and the presentation of

Christ to men as Saviour (24). Of course the preaching of the Gospel is foolishness to many (1 Cor. 1:18) and we must recognise the astonishing nature of the Gospel. It is preaching to men and women who are dead in trespasses and sins (Eph. 2:1-3) and at the same time in a condition of alienation and enmity. But the amazing thing is that some hear with the hearing of faith. Granted there is a deep mystery here because faith itself, like repentance, is a gift of God's grace (Eph. 2:8; Acts 5:31). When you see someone being drawn and captured by the Word preached, then you see a Christian, but when you see an insensitive, careless, unresponsive spirit then you are seeing someone who is remaining in death. Every time the gospel is truly preached and Christ is held up before men there is a crisis occasion in which the issues of eternal life and eternal death are being worked out and sealed. Note carefully, with solemn thoughts, the emphasis on the two-fold resurrection to life and to judgment (28-29). It appointed to men once to die and after this the judgment (Heb. 9: 27). And there is a resurrection of the just and the unjust (Acts 24:14-15AV), that is, the justified sinner and the unjustified sinner, the righteous and the wicked (NIV). Those who will not have Christ will die in their sins (John 8:21, 24) Do not be side-tracked by the "doing good" in v.29. Look on to John 6:28-29. Without faith of the kind that brings you to Christ you cannot please God (Heb. 11:6).

[Back to Top](#)

5:30-39

Keep in sight what has been happening. Following the healing miracle the Jews criticised Jesus for making Himself equal with God, accusing Him of presumption, and setting themselves in deliberate and diabolical opposition. But such was the constraint of Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit that these men were compelled to stay and to listen to the truth from the lips of the Son of God. There must have been all that we call "unction" upon Jesus' words and there was listening, but there was no attitude of faith (Heb. 4:2). It seems as if their attitude could have been expressed in words such as, "We have only your word for all this", and so Jesus brought forward witnesses to authenticate His claim. He spoke of three such witnesses whose testimony could not be lightly rejected. The first is John the Baptist, acknowledged by the Jews as a true prophet and yet rejected by them. For a time they were willing to accept both the man and his message (35), and that message concerned the Person and work of Christ, the Lamb of God. John's message had the ring of truth and people remembered his words (10:40-41). But when the message began to challenge the proud wills of men they turned back.

Preaching Christ does not always draw people in a permanent way and, as Jesus made plain in the parable of the sower (Matt. 13:1-9, 18-23), there can be immediate results which are very suspect. Sad to say there are those whose only Christian testimony is to look back to days when they seemed to flourish in the things of Christ.

But plants with no root and which are choked never come to a harvest of life. Hebrews 10:39 AV speaks of drawing back to perdition. We must look on to Jesus' words in John 5:40.

[Back to Top](#)

5:30-39

The second witness Jesus brings forward is the works they have seen with their own eyes. If John's ministry pointed to Jesus as the Lamb, the wonderful works declared the Kingship and Lordship of this same Jesus. All around these Jews were evidences of lives healed, restored, forgiven and consecrated to God, but they still refused to believe. Read John 12: 37-40. Unbelief is nothing new. There is a deep mystery about it which should disturb us. It is without excuse (Rom. 1:18-25). Read Acts 4:13-17 and see how perverse unbelief is. It maintains its proud stance in the face of incontrovertible evidence. Many people, faced with the transforming power of God in their own congregations, seeing changed lives, new freshness in the whole of worship, and a staggering change in the finances of the church, leave the congregation rather than come to Christ. When you read of the Jews here it is little wonder we later read of Jesus weeping over Jerusalem (Matt. 23:37). Unbelief is sin, it is not weakness that can be laughed off. This is more than enough to think about for one day. Let our prayer be, "Lord, I believe. Help Thou my unbelief." (Mk. 9:24)

[Back to Top](#)

5:30-39

The third witness is the voice of the Father Himself but Jesus said they were quite incapable of hearing this. To say such a thing was to point the finger at their claim to be spiritually-minded men. Jesus could not here be referring to the voice of the Father at the time of His baptism which seems to have been heard only by John, nor can it refer to the disciples who also heard the very voice of God on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matt. 3:17; 18:5. These were private occasions for the men concerned and not a witness to the whole nation. Further, these Jews could not speak with authority for they have never seen the Father, who indeed cannot be seen (1 Tim. 6:16). We must not try to "imagine" or to "portray" the Father for that is forbidden in the Commandments (Ex. 20:4). The danger of presenting in visible form our own ideas about what God is like is evident in the fact that artists tend to portray God as a benevolent, but very old man. Jesus went on to speak a final devastating word about these men's religion, of which they were so proud. He declared that they did not have God's Word and were ignorant of His truth in spite of all their claim to spiritual superiority and long tradition of privilege in the things of God. "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. Had they really been familiar with the writings of the Old Testament they would have believed." (Ryle) The confirmation of this is seen in the fact that the more Jesus spoke to them and showed His power, the more determined they were to crucify Him. Yes, unbelief is a terrible thing, especially when it is religious.

[Back to Top](#)

5: 30-39

The voice of the Father, as the third witness, is without doubt the voice of Scripture. This is very important. Unless our thinking is rooted and grounded in Scripture we will go astray. We must be careful of the kind of church we go to, because in the contemporary trend even "evangelical" churches are sitting very lightly to the Word of God. We must take heed *what* we hear (and that is the responsibility of the minister) and also *how* we hear (that is our responsibility). How sad it is for a preacher to see Christians (they would resent the suggestion that they are not Christians) manicuring their nails, eyeing up the fellows or girls, or just looking bored during the preaching of the Word of God. We have it too easy in some churches. We need a spell in a place where "nothing is prepared" (Neh. 8:10) and where "the hungry sheep look up and are not fed," (Milton; cf. Ezek. 34). In v.39 it is not clear whether Jesus' words describe what the Jews did in a clinical, academic, objective and unbelieving way, or whether He is giving a command to search diligently with hearts hungry for God. Search the Scriptures. What a word for a lazy generation that does not know its Bible. Think of how the apostles "reasoned out of the Scriptures," (Acts 17: 2,3) and turned the world upside down. The message of the Scriptures from beginning to end is Christ (Lk. 24:26, 27) and if people will not come to faith by means of the Scriptures, they will not come at all, not even by someone rising from the dead (Lk. 16:19-31). Even after Christ's resurrection the Jews still refused to believe. Search the Scriptures and when you find Christ there, be sure to answer Him in faith.

[Back to Top](#)

5:40-47

These Jews searched the Scriptures. They desired eternal life. But they refused to come to Christ. They were like their fathers before them (Acts 7: 51). It was evident to Jesus already that most of these men would not be saved, yet we must remember the thousands who were saved when the Scriptures were preached on the Day of Pentecost. Jesus spoke here of a deliberate refusal to come to Him. It is no use people saying they cannot help being what they are. That has been answered already in John 3:19. But another answer is given here in v.41,44. They had not the will to come to Christ because they loved the praise of men rather than the praise of God (John. 12:43). In v.41 Jesus may have been refuting the accusation that His concern was simply to gain popular favour. What a snare popularity is! What a danger it is, especially to preachers! The size of a congregation may signify many different things (Lk, 6:26). But how we love to be thought well of, even in our spiritual exercises (Matt. 6:1-6). Jesus went on to expose how these men would gladly receive any wandering preacher who claimed to speak from God but they would not receive Him, though He was testified to as coming in the Father's name. How sad it is in every generation to see the enthusiasm with which false prophets are welcomed.

In v.44 we are shown one of the greatest barriers to faith. People's opinion mattered too much to them and their eyes were not on God. Some spend their lives restless, dissatisfied, doubting, having neither peace nor joy in God, even though they may be part of a real church. It may be because they lack honesty towards God. There may be sins and idols they refuse to give up. The problem may well be people! Who do we want to please? Who do we want to have?

[Back to Top](#)

6:1-3

It is sometimes difficult to pinpoint the exact geographical details and the exact time sequence in John's gospel. In chap. 4:3 Jesus is in Galilee; in 5:1 He is in Jerusalem during one of the Feasts possibly the Passover; in 6:1-4 He is in Galilee when the Passover is near and possibly a whole year has elapsed. The huge crowds may be explained in terms of Jews on their way to Jerusalem for the Feast or simply in terms of a big population in the many fishing villages by the Sea of Galilee. John, writing much later than the other three gospel writers, uses the name Sea of Tiberias which was the generally accepted name then among Gentiles. John has already told us in 4:45 that the Galileans had received Jesus gladly because of the miracles He had done. Now we are told that crowds were following Him and it may be that the disciples were beginning to interpret this in terms of success. That could be part of Jesus' reason for withdrawing with His disciples. Mark 6: 30-34 ff. indicates something of the pressure our Lord and His disciples were under and to this must be added the mounting antagonism of Jerusalem and the hatred from the Herod family. It is natural that our Lord should seek quiet in Bethsaida since three of the disciples, Philip, Andrew and Peter (John 1:44) belonged there. But there was to be no rest, for the people followed Jesus round the head of the lake and gathered round as He taught His disciples. Note how emphatic it is that Jesus was concentrating on preparing a group of men for the future and note also how suspect or at least shallow the motives of the people were. They were drawn by the miracles. They had no vision of Messiah's kingdom, no long-term view of the out working of the purposes of God, no sense of the priority of the spiritual. Their concern was with the immediate answering of their human needs by miraculous power. Now the story goes on.

[Back to Top](#)

6:4-14

All four gospels record this miracle, which is in fact several miracles. The simplicity with which a crowd of five thousand tired people was organised for a picnic meal is astonishing. The obedience of the disciples who were quite out of their depth is also remarkable. The actual multiplication of the loaves and fish is total miracle by the sovereign power of the Creator. The attempts to explain away the miracle in terms of people being so moved by Jesus' teaching that they shared their packed lunches which they had forgotten to eat earlier in the day are so ridiculous that it is a miracle that anyone would even suggest it. It is a wonderful story and the dominant character is, of course, Jesus who, faced with an unplanned for situation of need and danger (a crowd can turn nasty very easily when hunger grips) knew what He would do. He always knows what He is going to do; is never taken by surprise; and has always the power to do what needs to be done. This is tremendous comfort and encouragement, especially when you see in the story how Jesus makes use of the situation for the spiritual instruction, challenge and the blessing of His disciples. They would never forget how Jesus led them to spiritual assurance through their own confessed impotence and incapacity. The difference between Jesus and His disciples must be noted. He saw the people as sheep without a shepherd and in great need (Mk. 6:34-37) but the disciples saw simply a problem that was disturbing their much needed rest and fellowship with their Master. The way we see things can often tell a great deal about our own spiritual condition.

[Back to Top](#)

6:4-14

Why was Philip the one to be put on the spot? Jesus will have had His reasons. He always has. Remember that when life challenges you! Philip had the chance to reveal how much he had learned thus far in companying with Jesus. Unfortunately he did not seem to have progressed in spiritual apprehension of the person and power of Jesus (cf. 14:8, 9) for all he did was to make a totally human assessment of the situation, then he stated the problem and left it at that. He seemed to have concluded that the sheer magnitude of the task made it quite

impossible. From Mark 6 and Luke 9 we learn that the disciples wanted to "do the obvious thing" and send the folk away to get bed and breakfast in the villages but they were told by Jesus to enquire as to what food supplies there were among the crowd. Andrew pointed out the resources available and immediately seems embarrassed by even suggesting that would help You can imagine the disciples thinking, "It would take a miracle to do anything with such a small amount to start with. " They were right and immediately they began to see the sovereign command of Jesus. He did not in fact need to have even the supplies of the young lad to perform the miracle but, as always, He deigned to make use of the little we can give when it is given willingly. There is no limit to what God can do with even the simplest of lives handed over to Him. It seems that it was in the breaking of the bread that the miraculous multiplication took place. All received as much as they wanted and, with many over-estimating their appetites, there were twelve baskets of sizeable fragments to be gathered up after the meal. Even when dealing with miraculous power there is no excuse for waste. Stewardship is a Christian duty.

[Back to Top](#)

6:15

We take this one verse and the previous one, linking up with Mk. 6:45-46, in order to emphasise a very important lesson we must learn in the service of the gospel. In relation to the establishing of His eternal kingdom the mighty miracle was abortive. This does not mean Jesus was wrong to feed the hungry people. Can it ever be wrong to meet or at least, to alleviate human hunger and hurt? Of course not. We must be compassionate. But we must recognise the strict limitations of all such work. It does not make people Christians and it can, in fact, work harm to the disciples who are involved in such work. In this story the people were powerfully impressed; they looked on Jesus as a God-sent prophet who might well transform their human situation; and their reaction was one of total materialism in terms of making Jesus a human king who would throw off the detested yoke of Roman government. They wanted to make use of a spiritual Jesus to achieve a political and earthly objective. This is exactly what so many want to do with the Church of Christ in our own day, so much so that the salvation of men's souls is forgotten about in the clamour for political liberty and social betterment. But Jesus dismissed the crowd (and that is another miracle); He brought the stratagem to nothing by sovereign authority; He sent His disciples away from this danger of sidetrack which was already enticing them, so that they were reluctant to go; and Jesus Himself withdrew. There may be here some indication of why there is so little sign of the power of Christ to save and to bless in much of the work of the church. Perhaps our objectives have become too earthbound, our motives too carnal and our minds too preoccupied with statistics of immediate success. The whole situation had gone wrong and the discerning Jesus acted before it got out of hand. Once men of carnal thought get hold of the work of Christ's kingdom it is difficult to shake them off. Commotion, even when miraculously induced, is not the same as true spiritual work.

[Back to Top](#)

6:16-21

Very soon after having shared in and been the instruments in a mighty miracle the disciples found themselves sent away without explanation (Matt. 14:22) and left to struggle in the stormy darkness alone. They did not know that their Master was praying (15). They did not know the extent of the danger they had been in when they were beguiled by the apparent response of the people. They did not know that they were safer in the darkness, storm and physical danger than anywhere else, for the simple reason that they were where Jesus had told them to go. The immediate experience of the disciples must have been one of bafflement. Why had Jesus sent them away? Why had He refused the praise of the crowd? Why had He not come with them? What was going to happen to them now? Was there a fear in their hearts because of the storm, a fear they did not understand because it was not really caused by the storm? After all they were seasoned fishermen. Had Jesus dismissed them for good? They were facing a tremendous challenge to faith. Without their knowing it there was being fought out in the hills something of a repeat of the temptation in the wilderness where the Devil had tempted Jesus to make stones bread and so feed the people and win them. If this was so, then we can better understand how the Devil would also be hard at it with the disciples seeking to demoralise them so that they would be tempted to give up, and abandon the work God had called them to. They did not realise the issues that were at stake nor did they expect the intervention of Jesus in a gracious way. Their fears had got the better of

them. That is Devil's work. And when Jesus did come they were afraid, either not recognising Him or expecting to be rebuked. When He spoke, they were glad and immediately the presence of Jesus resolved their situation. Think well of what God is doing with you, and in every situation look for Jesus.

[Back to Top](#)

6:16-21

We must not fail to recognise the significant miracle element in these verses. Compare the story with Mk. 4:35-41 where Jesus was with the disciples in the storm and actually stilled the wind and the waves which He did not do here. The question, "Who then is this?" (Mk. 4:41) is the important one. We see Jesus in His total independence of and mastery over the laws of nature. Without suspending the laws of gravity (for the boat remained in the water) He controlled them, as He controls all else (Eph. 1:11, 22) in the interest of His kingdom. In the same way the sovereign Creator over-rules the laws of time and space, for without any lapse of time they were at their destination. Do not try to explain away the miracle by suggesting they were actually near the shore and that Jesus was simply walking in the shallow water. The narrative says specifically that they were three or four miles out and that it was stormy. No conversation was possible, the disciples were not hallucinating and it was dark so that recognition at a distance was impossible. Attempts to explain away miracle, and some popular commentators are almost frenzied in their attempts, are simply a statement of unbelief. It is a refusal to believe in the divinity of Christ and an idolatrous elevation of so called "natural laws" as if they, and not God the Creator, were the ultimate explanation of all things. How many among the disciples or the crowd who were fed would have thought about Psalm 107:1-9, 23-32? They should have done, because they believed the Scriptures. But do we, in times of distress, lay hold on the Word of God in faith to understand our experiences?

[Back to Top](#)

6:22-27

The detail of these verses, the careful observations of the crowd, and their perplexity as to how Jesus had got to the other side of the sea all confirm the miraculous element in the previous verses. They also emphasise the considerable interest there was in Jesus and the measure of excited reaction there was to all He said and did. But excited interest is by no means the same as faith, nor is it necessarily a help in leading people to faith. This is something we tend to forget in what is called "mass evangelism" which, with its attendant elements of music, drama and publicity build-up, has an inevitable appeal to the emotions and interest of all kinds of people. But, as this story makes plain, it is all too easy to draw the wrong kind of conclusions, to have the wrong kind of expectations, and to make the kind of response that is anything but spiritual. Jesus made it plain that although they had eaten their fill of the bread they had not seen the significance of the sign. The miracle had very little spiritual fruit, although it had ministered wonderful compassion to hungry people. Jesus rebuked the crowd for being so dominated by their craving for satisfaction on a merely human level. That is not the essence of the gospel. Sometimes the Lord satisfies the longing soul with exactly what has been longed for (Ps. 107:9) but sometimes His purposes are other and greater and must be accepted by faith. It is the man who hungers and thirsts for righteousness or salvation who is assured of being filled (Matt. 5:6). Jesus' words in v.27 are a guide for daily living. We are all too short-sighted and far more anchored in "this world's empty glory" than we realise. If the drive and determination we show in personal and business affairs (to say nothing of pleasure and enjoyment) were given to the work of the gospel we might well turn the world upside down. Perhaps we prefer the world the way it is.

[Back to Top](#)

6:28-34

In v.27, speaking to a crowd of carnally minded men, Jesus made a wonderful free offer of salvation. But this does not in any sense mean that Jesus expected or even hoped that all would believe on Him. He goes on to declare that in the perfect counsel of God it has been ordained (sealed) that eternal life is to be sought and found in God's own Son and nowhere else. Jesus would say later that all who are truly of God will manifest this fact by coming to Him (John 6:45). But note carefully here that Jesus did not stop teaching those who came to Him for the wrong reasons. As opportunity presented itself so He took it. Note also the terrible spiritual

blindness of these people. When Jesus spoke of "labouring" for the food of eternal life they immediately asked what they must "do" or work at in order to gain eternal life. This whole idea of salvation by works is ingrained in human nature and constitutes one of the great barriers to gospel ministry. The other great hindrance is the tenaciously held idea of "universalism", the belief that all go to heaven in the end. The answer to the question, "What good thing must I do to have eternal life?" (Matt. 19:16) is that there is nothing any man can do. Eternal life is a gift of God's grace which cannot be earned. It must be received gift-wise by faith. The thing above all that God wants us to do is to believe on His Son for salvation. It is a good thing when people are sufficiently awakened to ask what they must do to be saved. Too many refuse to believe that they need salvation and only the Holy Spirit can work conviction in their hearts (John 16:8-11). But we must not be deceived by the first stirrings or questionings. Here, they came to nothing!

[Back to Top](#)

6:28-34

No-one will stay the course of discipleship and service unless they are well prepared for disappointments. To have people responding (apparently) in a spiritual way and then to have them manifest their total lack of quickening and understanding is desolating unless you have learned well the parable of the sower in Matt. 13:1-9,18-23. In today's passage at v.30 these eager "enquirers" became argumentative and wanted to know how Jesus could "prove" that His way was right. They boasted about their spiritual ancestry just as nowadays people say, "My father used to go to a great church and my mother was a great worker," even though they themselves never go to church at all. They would resent any suggestion that they were not Christians. But here, asking for a sign, they showed that they had very quickly forgotten the feeding of the five thousand and all the other mighty works Jesus had done. Is not this an example of "the birds of the air" snatching away the good seed almost in the moment of its sowing? Is there not here also an indication of the danger of placing too much confidence on signs and wonders as confirmations of faith? Signs may be encouragements to weak faith but they are not indications of strong faith but rather of unbelief. In v.31 there may be a suggestion that they were comparing Jesus' "one-off" miracle of feeding with the day-by-day provision of manna by Moses. But Jesus answered that it was God not Moses who gave the bread from heaven, and that the manna, real though it was, saving the lives of the people, was only a symbol or promise of the true bread that would come from heaven. When Jesus spoke of true bread coming down from heaven and giving life to the world there was an immediate response, "Lord, give us this bread." The woman of Samaria reacted in the same way (4:15). But though they wanted the bread, there was no real sign of faith.

[Back to Top](#)

6:35-40

These few verses call for a series of sermons, not a brief daily note. They are glorious in their simplicity and assurance, yet they plumb the depths of all we mean by salvation and life. They focus immediately on the person of Christ who is in Himself the living bread who gives and sustains life. The bread He gives is not just a blessing He imparts, it is Himself in all the full glory of His person. He is everything (John 1:1-4; Col. 1:15-20; Heb. 1:1-3). All we can possibly need He is: Saviour, Justifier, Reconciler, Victor, Keeper, Shepherd, Friend, King and Judge. He is life itself (1:4) and He is the bread that sustains and builds up life. But He is this only to those who come to Him in faith and many who see and hear Him refuse to believe on Him. Unbelief screams its contradiction even in a passage like this, but we must not let it desolate us as if human decision and unbelief were the key determining factors in the business of salvation. We are driven back to the Father's will which cannot be frustrated by man's unbelief or by the Devil's rebellion and presumption. We are chosen in Christ (Eph. 1:4) and our understanding of this must always be in relation to Christ, never separated from Him as if we were dealing with some mechanical, unfeeling determinism. The assurance Jesus expresses in v.37 must be ours also in the business of carrying out the great commission to evangelise, otherwise we will be totally demoralised by the blatant and persistent unbelief we will meet. We must also draw assurance from these verses regarding the irreversible nature of our salvation. We are indeed eternally safe in the keeping of Christ by the will of the Father.

[Back to Top](#)

6:35-40

The original language uses a double negative here and could read "shall not never hunger". This seems to rule out the possibility of hunger and thirst afflicting the believer. This does not mean the believer's life will be a bed of roses, for Jesus Himself spoke of taking up the cross and following Him (Lk. 14:26-33). But whatever the circumstances of experience, we will find if we keep on coming to Him that He is faithful in His promise to meet our need and to give us His promised rest (Matt. 11:28-30). We come to Him when we make use of all the opportunities given us and all the means of grace provided for us: our Bibles, our prayers, worship, fellowship and service, so that we are deliberately turning our eyes to Him. What of the times when our hearts seem cold and lifeless? We must not try to work up appropriate feelings but rather must wait upon God, for it is He alone who draws us to Christ. Remember that we have already read of Jesus sending His disciples alone into a dark, stormy night! We must not try to screw up our faith as if we were determined to believe by sheer will-power. Rather we cry, "Lord, I believe, help Thou mine unbelief!" (Mk. 9:24 AV). Resting in the Lord is much more a spiritual attitude than struggling to prove our faith or prove ourselves. Note how Jesus Himself spoke of the centrality of sweet obedience to the Father's will. This was His rest and joy as well as His power. Note also the clear statement from Jesus regarding his pre-existence and eternal Sonship (38). Note also the emphasis on assurance, the perseverance of the saints, and the final resurrection. Note also the clear statement that true faith is evidenced in that people come to Christ. When we think of salvation in these terms we begin to worship, and in that worship we both glorify God and begin to enjoy Him.

[Back to Top](#)

6:41-51

Even when they express desire (34) the bread of life is of no avail to unbelievers and unbelief centres on the rejection of the person of Christ. People show interest in and tolerance for Christ when He is presented simply as one of us and the same as us, even if He is a prophet. But when the divinity, eternity and sovereignty of Christ are brought to the forefront there is resentment (41). Jesus declared Himself to be *the Bread* which came down once for all into the world. The Jews knew Jesus and the circumstances of His domestic life but not His real identity, for He was not Joseph's son (42). The Jews, like many others, made a totally human assessment of Jesus. This is the natural blindness of the human heart and Jesus confirms this in v.44 where the total inability of human nature is made plain. The natural man is dead in trespasses and sins (Eph. 2:1) and has neither capacity nor inclination to turn to Christ until the grace of God by the Holy Spirit quickens him. It is the work of the Spirit to bring people to Christ, and that work is not tentative, in the sense that the Spirit suggests that we should come and then leaves it up to us. The work of the Spirit is effectual calling and the work of salvation initiated by the Father is brought to completion by the Son (44b). But note how in v.45 Jesus goes on to show the necessity of God-given ministry in the work of salvation, for it is by the Word spoken and proclaimed that faith comes (Rom. 10:14-17). Sovereign as He is, God has chosen to work through the instrumentality of His Word (1 Cor. 1:21). This makes our private reading and studying of our Bibles and our attendance on preaching a very important thing, not to be neglected.

[Back to Top](#)

6:41-50

"They shall all be taught of God. But teaching involves a double process; the lesson must be spoken so as to be heard, and when heard it must be heeded. The "drawing" of the Father is not a mechanical impulsion in which our wills play no part; the "drawing" is effected by the influence of the spoken word on our hearts and minds. We cannot hear unless the Father speaks; all initiative lies with Him; but when we hear it lies with us (sustained by His grace) to learn or not to learn. Everyone that heareth from the Father and learneth cometh unto me. This suggests an error that must be at once repelled, the alluring peril of mysticism, according to which a man may have direct experience of unmediated communion with the infinite and eternal God. That is not so; and any experience taken to be this is wrongly interpreted. Only the Son has direct communion with the Father (1:18)." (Temple). These are wise words for our generation in which not only experience but "experiences" have become the touchstone of spiritual life. No one would deny that there are times when we are deeply moved in a way that is beyond expression in words or even tears, and these occasions can often be in a religious or spiritual context. But deep emotion, however joyous or exalted it may be, is not necessarily a God-inspired spiritual

experience. It may be totally human and something that is a conditioned reaction to atmosphere, and therefore temporary and having little or no spiritual or moral effect. The mark of true spiritual experience is that it makes a person come to Christ and makes him or her press on ever more fully into the glorious wonder of His person and work. The people Jesus spoke to were getting out of their depth, and we too must confess that there are depths of truth here quite beyond us. But faith will ponder and seek and wait for light to dawn. It is unbelief that will become exasperated and critical.

[Back to Top](#)

6:51-59

Note how totally the emphasis is on Christ Himself, not on the will of the Father or the work of the Spirit (48). He presents Himself before people and declares that salvation and life are in Himself. This creates a situation of challenge and choice for all who see and hear. The emphasis is on life that defies and transcends death, for it is eternal life which people may have now. They do not have to wait until death comes and then exchange the worn-out life for new and eternal life. But beginning in v.51, Jesus makes plain, in what is essentially sacrificial language, that it is not merely human nature in His incarnation that feeds the soul and gives life, it is His life given up in death for the sins of all. The Word becoming flesh among us is in itself not the gospel. There is no gospel without the Cross. What sinners need is not just help, comfort, and encouragement but forgiveness, reconciliation to God and a new and heavenly birth. People like the idea of a great Teacher and an example and inspiration, because that makes "Christianity" essentially something people do. They follow, they strive, they do their best to live up to the Teacher's words and example and so make salvation a thing of human works. But salvation is a gift, the gift of eternal life, and that gift is in Christ. He cannot be earned. He can only be received "gift-wise". But these verses go on to point out that salvation is not just a matter of recognising and receiving Christ but of sharing in and partaking of His death. His body is given up in death, a sacrifice for sin, a ransom for many (Matt. 20:28).

[Back to Top](#)

6:51-59

When Jesus spoke of the bread of life being His flesh the Jews disputed intensely among themselves, giving Jesus' words a strict physical meaning just as Nicodemus and the woman of Samaria had done. This happens when people insist on reducing spiritual realities to the narrow dimension of their understanding. Jesus' words must obviously be taken in a spiritual sense otherwise we would be dealing with a form of cannibalism. It may be that Jesus was directing His hearers' thoughts to the story of the Passover (6:4) when the blood of the sacrificial lamb was the safety and life of the redeemed people and the flesh of the lamb was their sustenance for the redemption journey ahead of them. In the same way the breaking of the Saviour's body and the shedding of His blood were the life and fellowship of all who believed. Although we inevitably associate these words with the Lord's Supper that does not seem to be the emphasis of Jesus. He speaks of His life and His death in their fulness as being the salvation and life of the believer, received by faith and by faith alone. Without this there is no life at all. Jesus is our life. His life, given up and taken again (John 10:17-18) in all its victory, power, peace, sustenance and blessing is given to us to be our life. This is life that transcends all circumstances and nothing has the power to take it from us (cf. Rom. 8:35ff.). Little wonder the Scripture says, "Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good. Blessed is the man who trusts in Him". (Ps. 34:8)

[Back to Top](#)

6:60-65

The disciples, let alone the crowd, were taken aback by Jesus' words and complained that they were hard to understand and receive, and we may well have sympathy with them for these verses are not easy to study. But look back to v.54 and the reference to the great Day of Judgment, and to v.56 with its indication of the deep, close, intimate communion there is between Christ and the believer. These glorious truths are all bound up with the teaching about those who "receive" Jesus in His life- giving, life-sustaining power. Christ dwelling in us and us in Christ is a message of marvellous comfort and assurance, and opens up all sorts of possibilities, as John later makes clear (John 15:4-5, 7; 1 John 3:24; 4:15-16; cf. Col. 3:3). Why then were the disciples so put off by the whole idea of Christ being as much the life of the believer's soul as food and drink are the life of his body?

Was it all rather theoretical, verbal theology? Was it because they could in fact see little connection between the Father and Jesus (57; cf. John 14:8-11)? Why was it that though Jesus taught all this in the synagogue in Capernaum to people grounded in the Old Testament they seemed incapable of grasping it? We cannot really tell, except to say it demonstrated the terrible blindness and obtuseness of unbelief. Jesus challenged them about their negative reaction (61) and rebuked them for putting a carnal interpretation on words that were manifestly spiritual (63). We must not be too critical of the disciples because we also tend to bring the glorious truth of God down to the level of personalities and argument. We do not by any means always grasp the spiritual principles of a situation.

[Back to Top](#)

6:60-65

Unbelief is a chronic condition and spreads its influence if it is not challenged. The Jews murmured about Jesus' claim to have come down from heaven (41), about His statement in v.52 about eating His flesh, and even the disciples found themselves stumbling in unbelief in v.61. In presenting further truth (v.62) regarding His ultimate ascension to Heaven, which would confirm that He came from Heaven, Jesus was really saying to them that it was not the hardness of the sermon but the hardness of their hearts that was leading them into the sin of unbelief. Instead of being critical, all the people, including the disciples, should have been asking if there was a deeper sense than the merely physical in the words they were hearing. That is the humble attitude of faith in which we must always attend upon the Word of God. To react in exasperation when we do not immediately see the significance of what is being said is to assume that we have perfect comprehension. It is not so. We are all learners, not nearly so far on in spiritual things as we imagine! The people to whom Jesus spoke looked on Him in His lowly humanity and judged Him to be so much like themselves that they felt it permissible to question His radical statements. But the day would come in His resurrection and ascension that He would be seen in His glory (Acts 1:6-11; 2:32-36; Rom.1:4). In the last verses of the passage (63-65) Jesus is rebuking the materialistic, physical thinking about His flesh and blood and He not only demands that they understand His words in a spiritual sense, He also makes plain that the Spirit of God was not at work in their hearts. Let us be quite clear that it is the words of Christ brought home to the hearts of people by the Holy Spirit which are the agents of salvation and life.

[Back to Top](#)

6:66-71

The opening verse could read "Because of this" many "disciples" went back from walking with Jesus. The cause of offence may have been the whole sermon on the Bread of Life, which they felt was too mysteriously spiritual, or it may have been the accusation of unbelief in v.64. John's comment in v.64b is a wonderful one, not only with regard to Jesus' knowledge of the presence of a betrayer but His toleration of that evil person at the heart of the disciple band. This should teach us not to be surprised by evil, even when it erupts at the very centre of a fellowship, and not to be afraid of such evil because it stands in the full sight of the living God. Even more we learn from this how much of the operations and impudence of evil we should be prepared to put up with, following our Lord's example with Judas at His side right through His ministry. In reading v.70-71 we must not think of "choosing" in terms of eternal election unto salvation as in Eph. 1, but rather in terms of selection for office and for service. One of these men was the Devil's instrument, and we must note that when many left Jesus this man stayed on to the bitter end. His hellish influence operated all the time, but Jesus knew it, and in the end made it plain that hell never has the initiative (John 13:27).

[Back to Top](#)

6:66-71

In a context of unbelief and disaffection, when popularity and success were significantly on the wane, Jesus presented His chosen twelve with a tremendous challenge. He offered them the opportunity to contract out, and in doing so He gave them a glorious opportunity to reaffirm their faith and commitment. Sometimes we need to be confronted like this, not because our Lord has doubts about us, but because we need to have our spiritual confusion cleared. Peter had no doubts. They may have been out of their depth spiritually (would Peter ever admit that?), they may have had fears, they may have wondered about what discipleship would cost them and

where it would lead, but this much they were clear about, there was no alternative. Where would we go if we turned from Christ? He has the words of eternal life and we also are discovering them. Peter spoke for all the disciples when he said they were coming to know that He was the Holy One of God. Their doctrine of the Person of Christ was still defective. They had not yet grasped the fact and necessity of the Cross (Matt. 16:21-23). But their hearts (Judas apart) were fixed on Christ and from there disciples can go on to greater things.

[Back to Top](#)

7:1-9

The events of the last chapter were connected with the Feast of the Passover in the Spring and now the time is Autumn and the Feast of Tabernacles when the Jews recalled their journeys in the wilderness. The mighty acts of God were remembered and the harvest was celebrated in a way that foreshadowed the final harvest of the Day of the Lord. John says nothing about Jesus' ministry in the six months that have elapsed, save that Jesus kept away from Judea because of the settled determination of the leaders of the Jews to kill Him. From the time of the miracle at the Pool in John 5:16-18 the Jewish leaders, realising that they could not answer Jesus, nor silence Him nor stop the people listening, resolved that murder was the answer. This indicates something of the pressures against Jesus. But there were other painful costs in His ministry. His brothers, whether they were children of Mary born after Jesus (and there is no reason why this should not be so) or cousins or other close relatives, did not share His faith. They chided Him about His reticence, His withdrawal from the public eye, and His apparent reluctance to impress people and to lay claim to their allegiance in terms of a popular movement. This is a sore thing to live with and a temptation to shortcut God's appointed way and it must be seen as a work of the Devil. It should also be a comfort to lonely Christians.

[Back to Top](#)

7:1-9

The opposition of enemies and the cruel expressions of criticism from friends made life hard for the truly human Son of God. His shelter and peace were found in the fact of the perfect plan of God with its equally perfect timing, the details of which are ever in God's sole keeping (Acts 1:7). Our Lord's relatives were essentially worldly in their thinking, feeling that public acceptance would both prove His work and advance it (3-4). But to be in the public eye is not necessarily safe, let alone helpful, and the attitude that simply barges on ahead without waiting upon God for His clear confirmation and sanction is the attitude of unbelief not faith.

There is a right time for doing things and we must learn to wait upon God (Ps. 27:14) for he who believes will not hurry ahead (Isa. 28:16 AV). Now, it is never easy for the man of faith to hold to his settled convictions when those near him seem to be urgent in their advice to barge on, but he must stand his ground, for to go on ahead of God is to go the way of fruitlessness and weariness. See this in the story of Elisha in 2 Kings 2:15-18. Sometimes the only way people will learn that they are wrong is by being allowed to go on their own way. Of course, being proved wrong does not always result in penitence of heart. It can make people bitter and resentful for the rest of their lives, because their lack of understanding and the shallowness of their faith have been demonstrated publicly. Jesus suggested that his brothers go ahead on their own, and they did, perhaps having expressed great impatience with Him. But they did not grasp the significance of v.7. This leads on to the next verses.

[Back to Top](#)

7:10-13

A superficial reading of v.10 suggests that Jesus had been less than honest with his relatives for, after a brief delay, He also went to the Feast. But there was no deception. Jesus could not have explained to them why He must keep Himself out of the public eye, because they were essentially men of unbelief. Even believers at times cannot be trusted with information and explanation because they are not ready to cope with it (John 13:7; 16:12) and it would put pressures on them that would be hurtful. In v.7 Jesus made plain that the persons and presence of His brothers would not bring on *them* antagonism from the world. They were not the kind of people who, without speech at times, bring a conviction of sin to people's consciences. It is one thing to attract people to Jesus and the gospel, but when the challenge of repentance is issued and the call to discipleship made plain, it is then that issues become clear. Note how Jesus' absence (or rather His concealed presence) had an impact and

focused the questioning of the people and revealed the great division of opinion. There was also revealed the deep enmity of the rulers of the people (13) and this highlights the rightness of Jesus' delay and "secret" arrival. If the "Jews" in v.11 and v.13 are the same then right from the time the people began gathering for the Feast the rulers were hunting for Jesus. In v.12 we are told of the whispering about Jesus and we must sense the truculent attitude among people who were there for the big occasion. It was an explosive situation and Jesus' brothers would have lit the fuse. Our Lord's timing was much more effective.

[Back to Top](#)

7:14-24

Half way through the week of the Feast, when all was proceeding with due dignity and reasonable calmness, Jesus broke His silence, going to the Temple and teaching. The Jewish rulers had decided Jesus was not coming to the Feast and now that He was in the public eye they could not do anything to stop Him. Even the rulers of the Jews were astonished by Jesus' teaching but they refused to acknowledge it was from God because this Man was not one of them. He had not been taught and trained in their school, and He did not carry their sanction. This is the same kind of evil blindness and prejudice we see nowadays on the part of the ecclesiastical establishment which can see the validity and fruit of evangelical and biblical ministries (not least in the provision of candidates for the ministry and mission field, to say nothing of standards of Christian giving), but still refuses to accept them as being of God. We must never despise education if we have the opportunity and capacity, nor must we despise church laws and standards, but these do not "ordain" a man for holy service. On the other hand, carelessness and slovenliness in our persons and work are no indication of spirituality. Doing the will of God is what matters, and honest obedience is not only the way to spiritual knowledge (17) but also the way to fruitful service. There is a going on with God, however costly, that is necessary if we are to know the power of God in our witness (Hos. 6:3; Phil. 3:10-11; Heb. 6:1-3). A great part of that "going on" is the self-denying, self crucifying, costly life that Paul speaks of in 2 Cor. 4:7-12, of which life the Pharisees knew nothing (18).

[Back to Top](#)

7:14-24

We criticised the Pharisees yesterday for allowing the "great Pope self"(Luther) to stand between them and their God-given task as teachers of the people, but we must never forget just how prone the disciples were to this same temptation (Mark. 9:33-35; Luke 22:24-27). Jesus' words here bring us all to judgment. It is the response of obedience to spiritual truth that leads us on into the truth. There is no other way to increase in the knowledge of God. And in the business of ministry a preacher must know that the message is given by God and not manufactured by himself (16). In all his preaching he must see to it that his business is to glorify God and not to gain a reputation (18). As Jesus went on to challenge the spiritual falseness of the Pharisees and rulers He made it plain that He knew the murderous intention of their hearts (19). Note carefully that it was the people who protested (20). It seems that they were so hypnotised by the apparent spiritual superiority of their leaders that they would hear no criticism against them. But they did not have the facts, as Jesus knew them, and we see here the cleverness of the Devil in concealing his evil activity. This is something we must note carefully in our own day for there are, as Scripture warns, many false teachers (2 Tim. 4:3-4) and some of them are inside the church (Jude 3-4). When we point this out many religious people think we are mad and indeed bad. We are in good company. They thought that of Jesus.

[Back to Top](#)

7:14-24

Part of the celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles was the public reading of the Law (Deut. 31:9-13) and this would be done with a great show of reverence, although passages like Deut. 31:16-29 would not be unduly emphasised. We must not be too critical for, although we protest our great stand on Scripture, we too tend to be selective and are apt to apply the Word to others rather than to ourselves. Jesus carried the challenge right to their hearts when He referred to the healing at the Pool of Bethesda which was done on the Sabbath (5:1 ff). The leaders of the people were still astonished by this "desecration" of the Sabbath. It was to them a terrible contempt of God's holy Law, but their own planning of murder was a clear breach of the Commandments.

"Look", said Jesus, "Moses gave you the rite of circumcision (although it operated from the time of Abraham) and you devotees of Moses have no hesitation in circumcising a child on the Sabbath." This showed that even the dedicated legalists allowed that some things were permissible on the Sabbath. Now, the point is that circumcision was a token of ceremonial cleansing, and if that was allowable on the Sabbath was not the actual cleansing and healing of a man also permissible? Of course the mean-mindedness of the unbelieving Jews would concentrate (as they had done earlier) on the man carrying his bed on the Sabbath rather than on the miracle of healing. You cannot reason with unbelief. It is totally prejudiced and does not *want* to see light. In v.24 Jesus called on the people to calm down and to consider carefully what was going on before their eyes and to stop jumping to conclusions.

[Back to Top](#)

7:25-31

Public opinion is a varied and fickle thing and subject to many influences. It makes it difficult to know whom to trust. In v.15 we have the clear but private view of the Sanhedrin. Jesus was not acceptable. In v.20 the people, possibly mostly pilgrims from outside Jerusalem, who were very willing to listen to Jesus (Mk. 12:37) thought He was going too far in wild accusations about murder. In v.25 the citizens of Jerusalem, perhaps prominent ones who were "in the know", were clearly aware of the antagonism and evil intentions of the rulers. They were surprised that the rulers had taken no steps to silence Jesus. The Temple guard was there to keep order and no doubt other "wild" teachers were dealt with from time to time. The explanation is found in v.30. There was a sovereign restraining power keeping in check the intentions of evil men until God's time came (Ps. 21:11). In v.26 there seems to have flashed across the minds of some the possibility that the Jewish authorities now recognised that this Man was in fact the Christ. But instantly in v.27 their unbelief was reasserted. Note how dominant an influence the opinion of the rulers of the Temple was. Fear of men, fear of exclusion from the group, fear of taking a minority stand costs many a man his soul's salvation (7:13; 9:22; 12:42-43). But equally, carelessness costs men their salvation when there is no earnest spirit of enquiry. People are told to seek the Lord while He may be found (Isa. 55:6) and to seek with their whole heart (Jer. 29:13). But here in v.27 we are shown the confusion of thought that marks the religion of many. There were facts they had simply not thought about.

[Back to Top](#)

7:25-31

Think of how many people in churches have only the vaguest idea of the facts of the Bible even though they have been "religious" all their lives. It is little wonder they draw wrong conclusions, as these people did in v.27. They accepted the popular belief that Jesus came from Nazareth (Matt. 21:11; John 19:19). But Jesus was born in Bethlehem and in a nation so careful about pedigree and family antecedents there would have been no difficulty in people finding out this fact if they had been sufficiently interested. But of course it is often convenient to be able to plead ignorance. It helps you to excuse unbelief! Note also how general seems to have been the ignorance of the facts of the birth of Jesus attended by so many significant happenings, including the slaughter by Herod of the babies. These things which happened a mere thirty years previously had been forgotten and had left no impression, not even in the Sanhedrin where Herod's enquiry must have been noted in the minute book (Matt. 2:3-6). Unbelief has a very closed mind. Of course, there is a Devil (2 Cor. 4:4) and we must never forget him! The vagueness in v.27b is typical of those who prefer not to be pinned down to spiritual facts. It is an escape to be able to say, "You can't be sure". Some people concentrated on the "mystery" element of the coming of Messiah and others on the clear geographical detail, both of which can be found in Micah 5:2. But then Mary and Joseph were such "ordinary" people that "their" child would never be considered important, and besides, could any good thing come from Nazareth (John 1:43-46)? When you are dealing with people who don't want to know, there is little you can do.

[Back to Top](#)

7:25-31

Concentrate on v.28-31. Jesus cried out in protest, and the tone of His voice would make plain that He was saying they did not know what they were talking about. The fact that Jesus lifted up His voice is significant for

there were few occasions when He departed from the pattern of Isa. 42:2; cf. Matt. 12:19; 27:50; John 12:44. He seems to have had two objectives: to confront the deep unbelief of the Jews and to grasp the opportunity to speak to the crowd round about Him. Our Lord's words, which seem to us both difficult and vague, certainly left no doubt in the minds of the Jewish leaders that He was claiming to have come from God and to have been personally sent by God. Jesus was countering the idea that He was a self-appointed prophet and therefore a fraud. The true God had sent Him and He knew the Father (Matt. 11:25-27; John 1:18). Imagine the resentment when Jesus told these people to their faces that they did not know God. The thing they prided themselves on was this very claim. When Jesus said He came from God He was not simply claiming a prophet's commission. It was much more: "I am from Him by eternal generation, always one with Him, - always equal with Him, - but always a distinct person; - always the only begotten Son, always from Him." (Ryle) We must never allow ourselves to become confused about the person of Christ. This is fundamental to the whole gospel. "The only Redeemer of God's elect is the Lord Jesus Christ, who, being the eternal Son of God, became man, and so was, and continueth to be, God and man in two distinct natures, and one person, for ever." (Shorter Catechism)

[Back to Top](#)

7:32-36

However mysterious Jesus' words were and however much they were beyond people's grasp they made an undoubted impression, as v.31 makes plain. They were impressed by the evidences, even though they may still have been thinking only of a political Messiah to bring them national freedom. Still, Jesus and His claims were a topic of general conversation and that can quickly consolidate public opinion. That is why the Pharisees sent officers to arrest Him. Jesus' words seem to indicate He was aware of this new move but there is no suggestion that His peace was in any way disturbed. God's timing cannot be disturbed and in truth we are all immortal until our work is done, and when the work is done what is the point of staying here any longer? To grasp this fact of being securely in the Father's hand is the source of great peace in the business of life, especially when the Devil and his agents seem to be particularly busy. Note how the chief priests, mostly Sadducees and the Pharisees, who were the orthodox believers, were prepared to sink their differences and their real distaste for each other in order to unite against a common enemy, Jesus. Jesus simply went on with His ministry, addressing these very officers, who may in turn have reported His words to their masters. These words are full of meaning and solemn in their import, but the only response seems to have been exasperation and increased mystification. There is little sign here of any faith at all. Little wonder Jesus wept over Jerusalem (Lk. 19:41).

[Back to Top](#)

7:32-36

When Jesus spoke of the short time remaining there may have been only a mere six months before the Cross and we must sense the sadness as well as the urgency of His heart. He was not sad because of His approaching death for this was the very thing He had come for (John 12:27). The sadness lies in the tragedy of unbelief among a people so signally blessed and privileged. There is no sadness as if His coming death was a defeat, for it was the completion of the work He came to do (17:1-5). Then He would return to the Father who had sent Him. The tragedy is in v.34. When despair came on the nation of the Jews they would seek deliverance but it would be too late. Their house would be left desolate (Matt. 23:37-39). There is an acceptable time (2 Cor. 6:1-2) and a day of salvation, but it passes and gives way to a day of judgment (Prov. 1:24-33; Amos 8:11-12; Matt. 25:1-12). Note carefully in v.34 the solemn words of exclusion. Men of unbelief who reject the Saviour cannot enter God's Heaven, not even when remorse (a different thing from repentance) seizes them and they begin to seek. Jesus' story of the rich man and Lazarus is very pointed (Luke 16:19ff). The words of this passage should have awakened many echoes of Old Testament Scripture in these men's hearts (Ps. 95:6-11) but they had no effect. They listened carefully but gave Jesus' words a literal and geographical interpretation (35). They even suggested that Jesus was going to abandon the Jews and go to the Greeks. What kind of prophet was this? Their foolish hearts were darkened by unbelief and pride. What a warning! How we should listen when God speaks!

[Back to Top](#)

7:37-39

The Feasts of the Jews all in some way portray the truths of God's salvation. In this Feast of Tabernacles, as well as dwelling in booths and bringing offerings on a diminishing scale throughout the seven days (Num. 29:12-34) there was the carrying of water from the pool of Siloam and the pouring it out in the Temple. If the sacrifices speak of a salvation from sin that comes from God, then the pouring of the water speaks of the gift of life by the Spirit. These rituals were carried out on seven successive days and then, on the eighth day (Lev. 23:33-36), the people still being together, Jesus chose some prominent place and in a loud clear voice made the proclamation and invitation in v.37-38. Note that these words were addressed to a crowd that was full of doubts and reservations about Him and with many having already rejected Him. Now, since this was a great feast and a notable religious occasion, the thoughts of the people must have been engaged with many of the great words of the prophets who spoke of the salvation that was to come from God. Some commentators suggest that Haggai 2:1-9 was spoken by the prophet in or near the place where Jesus stood. As the people recalled the water from the rock that brought life in the wilderness, would they not think of Isa. 12:2-6? Would they not think of Messiah in the midst of His people? It is suggested that Ps. 118:19-25 was chanted when the procession of priests carried the water to the Temple. In that context Jesus stood and proclaimed that He was the one all the symbols pointed to.

[Back to Top](#)

7:37-39

Jesus had already spoken of thirst being quenched in 4:13-14 and 6:35. Now He declared in unmistakable terms that He was the answer to the thirsty soul, to the deep longing for life that stirs in the souls of men. Water spoke to the people not only of relief from thirst but of the continuance of life and fruitfulness. Then Jesus went on to emphasise the inwardness of this water supply, a source of life that would not be subject to the vagaries of circumstances and experience. This supply of the water of life, by the indwelling Holy Spirit, not only cleanses and renews, it overflows so that the one blessed in God's salvation life becomes a channel of life and blessing to others. Note the breadth of the invitation. It is to anyone who is thirsty (Rev. 21:6; 22:17; Isa. 55:1). We know, of course, that it is only God by His Spirit who can create thirst and desire, but what we do not know is whose hearts God is in fact working in, and therefore we must proclaim the gospel invitation in its fullest possible sweep. There are many people who do not know that they are thirsty, nor what they are thirsty for, until the gracious Word of God begins to reach them and their eyes and hearts begin to focus on Jesus. Then they hear the amazing gospel proclamation in v.38. But what Scriptures are referred to by Jesus? He seems to be speaking of the general testimony of Old Testament Scripture which points to and is fulfilled in His own Person and Work. Passages such as Isa. 12:3; 35:6-7; 41:17-18; 44:3; 55:1; 58:11; Ezek. 47:1-12; Zech. 14:8, 16 must certainly have been in Jesus' mind and in the minds of many pilgrims.

[Back to Top](#)

7:37-39

Following on the list of references yesterday we need to think of Jesus' promise that the Holy Spirit would in fact do His gracious work of bringing God's truth to our remembrance (John 14:26). This is something we must believe and depend on, for example, in the business of preaching. Without the working of the gracious Spirit of God everything is lifeless. But we must remember that the Spirit is at work even when there is no specific mention of His name or activity. We must never narrow down the working of the Spirit to times when specific "gifts" of the Spirit are manifest. By and large the Spirit is the shy and retiring member of the eternal Trinity for He does not make a fuss about Himself but is ever pointing to Jesus and getting on with His ordained enlivening and creative work. In some of Paul's letters (Ephesians and Colossians) the Spirit is mentioned little but no one would accuse Paul of not believing in the Spirit, His presence and His active power in all the business of salvation. This is a great comfort when we feel hemmed in by circumstances. The Spirit of God is never hemmed in although He can be grieved, quenched and resisted (Eph. 4:30; 1 Thess. 5:19; Acts. 7:51). In the ultimate sense, from the standpoint of Almighty God, the work of the Spirit cannot ever fail. It must be so or else there is some power greater than God. But from the human standpoint we are faced with the mystery, that still leaves people fully responsible, when it is declared that men limited God (Ps. 78:41 AV) and that Jesus did no mighty work because of human unbelief (Matt. 13:58).

[Back to Top](#)

7:37-39

One last comment must be made on v.39. The Holy Spirit is eternal in His Person and His work. There has never been a time devoid of the Spirit. When the worlds were made the Spirit of God was active. Right through the Old Testament He was active, coming upon God's men for powerful service (Judges 6:34) and inspiring God's prophets to speak the Word of God (1 Pet. 1:10-12). By that Holy Spirit men spoke truths far beyond what they knew or could know in their own generation. This note in v.39 is added by John by way of explanation and is expounded fully by Jesus in chapters 14-16. The giving of the Spirit to men in fullness and in a permanent way is grounded firmly in the glorification of Jesus, that word referring to His death, resurrection and ascension. This is how the apostles spoke of the giving of the Spirit when they preached at Pentecost (Acts 2:16ff, 33). But the real emphasis seems to be not on the "timing" of the giving of the Spirit, although we recognise that Pentecost was a significant stage in the revelation and outworking of God's eternal purpose of salvation, but on the "principle" of the giving of the Spirit. He is given on the basis of the finished work of Christ. In practical terms for us in daily life and service the lesson is this: the Spirit is not given until Christ is glorified and it is as He is glorified *in us* that the Spirit's power rests upon our labours to bring forth fruit to the glory of God. It is as we share in His death that we share His resurrection power (Phil. 3:10). There is a death to die, indeed many deaths to die to sin and to self if the power of God is to rest on us.

[Back to Top](#)

7:40-52

These verses are wonderfully illustrative of the various reactions of people and the different influences operating as a result of our Lord's ministry. In v.40-44 there is not just variety, there is confusion resulting from uncertainty about the facts of the story. There is among the people an acceptance of what Scripture taught regarding Christ who was the seed of David and was to be born in Bethlehem (Mic. 5:2; Matt. 2:1-8). But as far as they knew and as they had always thought, this Jesus was from Nazareth. Their assumptions were wrong and Scripture was right, but like many people today they tended to come to a decision on the basis of what they *thought* was right. Many people have grown up believing that everyone goes to Heaven and they resent the gospel that says they are sinners who need to be saved. Many religious folk believe that religion, going to church and trying to follow Jesus' example, is the sum total of being Christian. They do not accept Scripture which insists that even the best of people need to be born again (3:3). It is clear from the passage that many had deep impressions made on them by Jesus but that is by no means the same as saving faith. Such were the mighty claims of Jesus to meet human need that some saw in Him the prophet like Moses promised in Deut. 18:15-18. Some saw in Him the promised Messiah whom even the Samaritans looked for (4:25; Isa. 61:1-3). Something of the varied impressions Jesus made is also seen in Matt. 16:13-14 when He is likened to both the fiery Elijah and the tender Jeremiah. People were forced to think about Him.

[Back to Top](#)

7:40-52

As the people considered this Jesus they were divided about Him. Some, perhaps sympathisers with the Pharisees, wanted to arrest Him because unbelief can never remain negative. It takes up a position of antagonism sooner or later and we must not be taken by surprise when it happens. But at the same time we must not think of unbelief as having total freedom of operation, as if the Devil was an independent agent. The restraint in v.44 can be explained only in terms of over-ruling providence. There may have been secondary explanations. Some may have feared a riot in support of Jesus (Lk. 22:2; Mk. 14:12; Matt. 26:3-5). Some may have been held in check by the innate dignity and authority of the person of Jesus (18:1-8). The officers, who may well have been in the company of Jesus for several days (32; cf. v.37), were also impressed and reported back to their evil masters (who kept behind the scenes) that it was hopeless trying to arrest Jesus because He had the crowd under His influence. Perhaps the officers recognised the uniqueness of Jesus and certainly they felt His teaching had both content and authority that the teaching of the Pharisees did not have (Matt. 7:28-29). Of course to state this so plainly was bound to annoy the Pharisees and they snapped back at the officers in v.47-49. What a display it was of pathetic pride and prejudice and how contemporary it is. When bigoted

religious people are confronted with the truth and the fruit of the gospel, their reaction often is to declare that none of the "best" people (themselves included) have believed this new message, and as for the "common people": their opinion does not count. Read 1 Cor. 1:20-29.

[Back to Top](#)

7:40-52

The Pharisees did their best to quench and cancel out the impression made by Jesus but they could not succeed. They prided themselves on having made special study of the Law and so were its teachers. But study of God's word carried out from a basis of unbelief and disobedience does not give men authority. Rather it signifies that such men are not, as they imagine, the significant leaders of God's cause. Their bitterness of speech condemns them as does the illegality of their procedure. It must have been a shock to the Pharisees to discover that one of their own respected colleagues was sympathetic to Jesus. How much this had already become evident we cannot say, but if Nicodemus was showing signs of following Jesus we can imagine the contempt and ostracism he must have met. We need to be careful before we criticise Christians in high places for not taking as obvious a stand as we would like them to. We may not know how costly it is. A lone voice speaking against the party machine is a moving thing. Some say Nicodemus should have been more "spiritual" and given a clear testimony of his personal sympathy with Jesus but it is doubtful if that would have had as much effect as the words he spoke. He challenged the Pharisees on the basis of their own position as custodians of the Law and in doing so brought conviction to their hearts. Their evil was being exposed. Nicodemus was an instrument of judgment and not of salvation. They had no answer except abuse and a contemptuous insinuation against Nicodemus' spiritual incompetence. How Devilish

[Back to Top](#)

8:1-11

There is considerable debate among scholars as to whether the passage John 7:53-8:11 should be included in Scripture because the oldest and best manuscripts do not have this story. Some say it was inserted here to illustrate v.15. Some say it was taken out from early transcriptions by those who feared it would be used to excuse wrong living. Some place the story at the end of Luke 21 and some regard it as John's story of the prodigal daughter. Some say the story is a clear break in the sequence of teaching arising from the Feast of Tabernacles, since v.12 seems to take up the idea of the candelabra which were part of the celebration of the Feast. Lists of scholarly names are found on both sides of the question of authenticity and that shows the issue is not clear-cut. We take the position that this is the story of an authentic incident in the ministry of Jesus and as such is a very wonderful one indeed. "There is much ground for thinking that some critical difficulties have been purposely left by God's providence in the text of the New Testament in order to prove the faith and patience of Christian people. They serve to test the humility of those to whom intellectual difficulties are a far greater cross than either doctrinal or practical ones. To such minds it is trying, but useful, discipline to find occasional passages involving knots which they cannot untie, and problems which they cannot quite solve. Of such passages the verses before us are a striking instance. That the text of them is "a hard thing", it would be wrong to deny. But I believe our duty is not to reject it hastily, but to sit still and wait. In these matters, 'He that believeth shall not make haste.' "(J C Ryle) These are wise words with regard to many of the difficulties we find in the Bible, its apparent contradictions or seeming historical inaccuracies. We must not jump to conclusions but admit that at the present stage of our knowledge and understanding there are things we cannot explain.

[Back to Top](#)

8:1-11

This is the story of a prodigal daughter (cf. Lk. 15:11 ff) but we are told nothing about the grief of parents or of a possible home situation of godless wrangling that drove a woman into a marriage that was hopeless from the start. We are not told of the husband, whether he was shattered by the discovery of his wife's unfaithfulness or whether his self-centred neglect of his wife had been one cause that drove her to another man. We are not told if this was one isolated case of moral wrong when temptation and opportunity came together or if the woman habitually lived a sensual life. Mercifully we are not told the woman's name and that providential anonymity at

least made it possible for her to be restored to her husband and to society and to reinstate life and home, where, although we are not told, there may have been children. Think of all the hurts and wrongs that are included in this story and let this be a check on our impulses when we are tempted to do wrong. Remember that in Jesus' time society was permissive, as it is now, and divorce had become a convenient escape from responsibility. Remember that it is easy to point the finger at an obvious case of sin and failure, but we never know how often the person has been sorely tempted and has resisted. It could have been that if this woman had met someone who saw her need and was willing to help instead of someone who saw her weakness and took advantage of it, there would have been no story to tell. Read Gal. 6:1-5; 1 Cor. 10:6-13; 1 Pet. 2:11; and remember mature, settled David in the Old Testament whose complacency was his downfall and led to a tangled web of deceit.

[Back to Top](#)

8:1-11

Read Rom. 5:6-8 and Isa. 1:18. This is the story of sin; and the sins of the flesh found pardon but the sins of the mind and spirit were brought to judgment. It is the story of people; the woman who seems to have been afraid and ashamed rather than truculent and impenitent; and the Pharisees who were cold, hard and without pity, regarding this broken sinner as a mere pawn in the war against Jesus. If Jesus took the soft line they would accuse Him of being against Moses. If He took the hard line and pronounced the death penalty He would be in trouble with Rome who reserved that penalty to themselves. The hard line would also set Jesus over against the easy-going standards of many of the people. He would be branded as a hard-line "Puritan". This is also the story of judgment for it declares that sin has no hiding place and brings its own judgment and also God's (Jas. 1:15; Gal. 6:7; Ps. 32:1-5). How thankful we should be that sin disturbs and troubles us. There is hope when that is our reaction. There was hope for the woman but not the Pharisees even though they were convicted. One thing is clear. This story should put us all out of the stone-throwing business for life. The only one who had the right to point the finger at the woman did not do so. But then He was the man who bore our sins in His own body on the Cross and paid their price (1 Pet. 2:24). Do not fail to note that as the Pharisees left, the woman could have made her escape. She stayed. Perhaps she had heard that this Man Jesus received sinners (Luke 15:2).

[Back to Top](#)

8:1-11

Many sinners still meet Jesus and find pardon, peace and hope. There is nothing here that excuses sin. We cannot tell what Jesus wrote on the ground but since He was in the Temple He may simply have been tracing words on the stone paving slabs as if to remind all, and particularly the woman with the downcast eyes, of God's Law written on tables of stone (Ex. 32:15-16). Before God's Law all sin stands exposed (Num. 32:23) and condemned (Rom. 3:19), and God looks on the heart, not just the outward appearance (1 Sam. 16:7). It may have been that Jesus stooped down to hide the look of grief on His face in the presence of what sin had done. It may have been to hide the look of anger at the men, at the lifeless legalistic religion, and the polluted atmosphere of society that had led to this particular tragedy. It may have been that Jesus was compelling all concerned to think of this situation in relation to God. And it is in that context and atmosphere that He, the only one who had the right to carry out the execution since He was sinless, spoke the words of v.7. At that point the Holy Spirit was doing His work of conviction (John 16:8). It is one thing to point the finger at sins which are no temptation to us (as far as we know, cf. Gal. 6:1; 1 Cor. 10:12) but another thing to be challenged to declare our sinlessness and so carry out the command of God (Deut 17:7). Whether the Pharisees were convicted of specific sin, or this very sin, or whether they just knew they had been out-generalised we cannot say, but the oldest men recognised first that the incident could no longer be made use of and led the retreat.

[Back to Top](#)

8:1-11

A final lesson has to be learned from this story and it concerns the gentle wisdom and kindness of God which was shown (and which we must learn to show in our pastoral care) to those who have sinned and fallen. There is a judgment on sin and there are consequences of sin, as this woman would yet live to find out. Her emotions and memories would need healing; a child may have been conceived; her domestic situation had to be restored to balance and both she and her husband would need help. The price of wrongdoing is great. But there is

forgiveness with God and facts which the public do not need to know are kept in privacy between God and the sinner. If Jesus had lectured the woman the people still round about would have heard and would have gossiped and the forgiven sinner would have had a much bigger burden of public shame to carry. In the face of the crowd Jesus did not ask the woman whether or not she was guilty. At the same time His final words made quite plain that He knew the truth and warned her to end that kind of life. Jesus did not say, as He said to some, "Go in peace". (Lk. 7:50; 8:48) But His rebuke was given with utmost gentleness because His concern was to heal and restore (Isa. 42:3). He had come to seek and to save the lost. The time for judgment would come, but not yet. The time had come for this sinner to turn her back on her sins. It is in Christ's name alone we are able to do this for in His death and resurrection He has not only dealt with the guilt of sin, He has broken the power of sin *for us* and we have the promise in Rom. 6:5-14.

[Back to Top](#)

8:12-20

After the interruption we have been studying, Jesus immediately took up again the teaching He was giving in the context of the Feast of the Tabernacles. The candelabra which lit up the Temple area during the feast reminded the people of the pillar of fire which lit the darkness of Israel's journeys. It would remind them also of their calling to be the light of the world (Isa. 42:1-9; 49:5-10), and to be the instrument of God's salvation. But the people had just seen their leaders slink away in guilty disarray while the sinning woman may well have stayed to listen further to Jesus, as they had done. Religion in its cold formality and its mechanical devotion to past tradition has no warming capacity for people whose hearts are more than a little apprehensive about the future and about their own capacity to be good even when desire for righteousness is stirring within them. To such, Jesus' words are glorious in hope. He has already declared He is the bread of life (6:48) and the answer to the thirsty soul (7:37). But there is more to life and salvation than satisfaction. There is the need for direction, guidance and certainty in the midst of the encroaching darkness of the world. Jesus is the light people need, but for light to benefit it must be followed, it must be trusted. A lighthouse is only of benefit if the seaman accepts its warning and guidance. Jesus' words in v.12 are glorious in promise and assurance and lead to the wonder of a life of fellowship with God (1 John 1:5-9). But remember that light reveals dirt as well as dispelling darkness. It is best to have nothing to hide.

[Back to Top](#)

8:12-20

The Pharisees' response to Jesus' words was to argue. They demanded proof of His claim to be the Light of the world. In answer, Jesus stated, He did not argue, for there was no point in debating with determined unbelief. It had made up its mind, but it would not let the matter rest. People of unbelief instinctively take action and wage war against faith. This is why some people remain in a congregation and oppose every basic thing the work stands for. It has become clear in John's account of the gospel that Jesus is indeed the divider of men and the revealer of what they are, no matter how well established their veneer of scriptural religion may be. In v.14 Jesus agreed that He was making clear and definite assertions about Himself, His significance and His work. He declared Himself in respect of His divine nature, origin and mission and He did so without any trace of uncertainty. It was pure proclamation and there is a time for us to speak likewise about Jesus, believing that the Holy Spirit will authenticate the testimony. Of course this will awaken resentment because it will highlight the spiritual ignorance of many. In v.15 Jesus challenged man's right to make assessments of divine things on the basis of mere human calculation. The reference to judgment may be related to Jesus' refusal to condemn the woman who was guilty, in contrast to these Pharisees who were busy condemning Jesus who was totally innocent. In v.16 the fact of judgment is again emphasised as is the inseparable union of Father and Son. Rejection of Jesus is rejection of God. This is indeed judgment.

[Back to Top](#)

8:21-30

Read in from the last verses of yesterday's passage first to see the contemptuous question about Jesus' Father, and then to see the persistence of the Pharisees' rejection. Then we see the equally insistent declaration by Jesus of their total spiritual ignorance and finally another example of the sovereign over-ruling of God for the safety

of the Son so that His work could be done. Now in today's passage the insistent teaching goes on. Jesus was not deflected or deterred by evil unbelief and opposition. Always note the assurance of Jesus. This came from His delight in the Father's will (Lk. 2:46-49), His commitment to it (17:4-5) and from the assurances of Scripture such as Isa. 55:10-11. This must be our peace also. We are not in charge. We simply do what we are told. The issues are with God whose will is dynamically sovereign and sure (Eph. 1:11). Such assurances are necessary if we are to face the truth in v.21 that people may seek Christ in vain. Read Prov.1:28-31. People must seek the Lord while He may be found (Isa. 55:6). Note that v.21-22 are very similar to 7:33-36, but this repeated emphasis produced no spiritual response or enquiry. These Pharisees were anchored to the earth in their thinking. In spite of all their religion they were devoid of any "God-awareness". They were without God and incapable of recognising God, even though He was before them in grace and truth in the person of His Son. They would die in their sins. They would die without hope. And Jesus declared the reason to be their refusal to believe (24). The word "if" ("unless" RSV) indicates that there was still a glimmer of hope.

[Back to Top](#)

8:21-30

The question in v.25 seems genuine yet over against all Jesus had already said they should not have needed to ask it. Were they in fact pressing Jesus to make a clear verbal claim that He was the Son of God so that they could clinch the matter and charge Him with blasphemy? Perhaps they said, "Who are *you* (and who do *you* think you are) to speak the way you do?" Jesus would not be drawn into any statement. What He was saying He had said from the beginning and He declared His right to say it and to say as much more as He was commissioned by God to say. The spiritual blindness of v.27 is repeated again and again down the ages. People hear but they do not understand. They are of the earth, earthy. In v.28 Jesus predicted His death and declared that when they had done this dread act they would be awakened to the realisation of what they had done. Certainly in Acts 2:22-24 they were told what they had done. They crucified the Lord of glory (1 Cor. 2:8). But conviction would not produce faith. It would be an awakening to rejection and judgment. Again in v.29 Jesus spoke of His being sent from God and of the total and intimate one-ness between Himself and the Father.

The Son's obedience was absolute, as was the Father's delight in the Son and His constant presence with Him. There may have been reference in Jesus' words to Isa. 50:7-9, and this may have moved some to believe He was indeed the Messiah. Was this genuine saving faith or not? We cannot tell. We can but hope it was. Certainly if it was it would become evident in discipleship.

[Back to Top](#)

8:31-33

A profession of faith is a claim of salvation but a life of obedient discipleship is what confirms a conversion. To keep this in mind would save a lot of confusion in the statistics of evangelism and spare many workers a lot of disappointment. We must not lapse into cynicism with regard to professions of conversion but at the same time we must look for evidences of a true work of grace in the life. Not all who claim to be Christians are so (Matt. 7:21). They that endure to the end shall be saved (Matt. 24:13) but those that go back are giving evidence of their lostness (Heb. 10:32-39). We must be careful in making such statements for there are some who, for a season and for various reasons, seem to go back from Christ. For such there is the hope and promise of the gospel as in Hosea 14:4 (AV) and in the story of Peter after his denial of his Lord. But at the same time we must be careful not to entertain false hopes of Heaven. The proof that we are in Christ is that we go on with Christ. Such a going on leads to an increasing grasp of the truths of salvation and this in turn leads to an ever increasing liberation of personality, a grasping of freedom from sin, Satan, worldly bondage, fear and doubt. This is the promise of Matt. 11:28-30, Lk. 4:18, and Gal. 5:1. But such glorious spiritual truth evoked only resentment from these Jews who were professing to have believed Jesus. They recoiled from the suggestion that they were in need of such liberation. This is how many react when you suggest they are not as spiritual as they think themselves to be. It is not a good sign.

[Back to Top](#)

8:34-38

It is difficult to decide the identity of the people in v.31, 33, 37 and 39. This is not surprising because whenever the truth of God is spoken there will be a gathering of different kinds of people whose spiritual perception and response will be difficult to discern. Indeed, when we try at first to categorise people we have difficulty because weeds and wheat are very alike at the early stage of development (Matt. 13:24-30). This is one reason why "gospel" preaching must range over a wide spectrum of salvation truth, and that means the whole Bible. We never know who is listening nor what their immediate and particular need is. God knows, and by His Holy Spirit the Word is applied to individuals as they need. This will bring into evidence those who truly believe and those who do not. The heart that is quickened by grace will receive and respond to the truth, but carnal hearts will not receive it and will not profit (Heb. 4:2). In v.34 we are told what it means not to be a Christian. The unbeliever is not just guilty, he is a slave (Rom. 6:16-20; 2 Pet. 2: 19). Jesus is not referring to individual acts of sin but to habitual living in sin and that attitude of heart that sits lightly to sin. Verse 35 is difficult. Jesus may be speaking of the Jews having had privileges in the Father's house for a time, a long time, but since they show themselves not to be true children (because of their unbelief) their time for rejection is coming.. On the other hand the Son and those who are His have a permanent place which shall never be taken from them. Such are God's free-men. Jesus recognises these critics as physical descendants of Abraham, having all the privileges as such (Rom. 3: 1-2; 9:4-5), but that brings responsibility (Amos 3: 1-2). If we think ourselves privileged sitting under regular biblical ministry (and who in Sandyford can deny it) what is our responsibility?

[Back to Top](#)

8:39-47

This passage, so full and searching, follows on from v.37-38 where Jesus began to speak with increasing severity. Concentrate on today's verses and see the contradiction manifest in these Jews. These people, so proud of pedigree and knowledge in things pertaining to God, were the very people who hated Jesus. This is the same contradiction which made them claim Caesar as their king (John 19:15), and in so doing denying the heart of their own faith. Jesus gives the evidence for His charge against them. His word "finds no place," or "makes no progress", in their hearts. It is sad and solemn when, under the preaching of God's good word people make no advance. That means incipient rejection of Christ is beginning to operate. Our Lord does not argue here, He just states. Yet there seems to be a deliberate veiling of His words, almost as if He was seeking to draw them out and so make them aware of what was happening to them in spiritual terms. He speaks of His Father and their father, but these proud, prejudiced Jews were so busy reacting and so determined to do what they had already decided to do that they did not grasp the spiritual significance of what they were hearing. We need to read Heb. 3:7-8, 12-15 very carefully. We must learn to come to God's Word with prepared hearts.

[Back to Top](#)

8:39-47

There are two battles going on here: that for the souls of these wicked Jews and that for the establishment of the truth of the Gospel and the work of God against all who would oppose or hinder it. There is nothing surprising about the insistence of these men on their own spirituality even though they opposed God's man and God's truth. It is the same in all ages (Acts 7:51-53). They looked at Jesus and said, "We are the spiritual people, and since we disagree with you, you must be wrong." That is the voice of the Devil and Jesus told them so. They were religious but they were not of God because they were so manifestly refusing what God was saying and doing before their eyes The Pharisees reacted in the way bitter people usually do when they have no real case, they resorted to slander. They had already denigrated the person of Jesus (6:42), seeking to reduce Him to the "ordinary", but now their bitter contempt came out, (41). They had heard stories about Jesus' birth and like all wicked people (Christian and otherwise), when their consciences were stung with the accusation that they were out of sympathy with God, their tongues flailed. Note how these wicked men got more and more enraged while our Lord Jesus remained calm, speaking His words of truth and refusing to be deterred. Note also how Jesus ignored the personal slight on Himself and on His "parents" even though it must have hurt Him. What an example He has left us to follow (1 Pet. 2:21-23). That is enough to think about for one day.

[Back to Top](#)

8:39-47

Note how insistently and systematically Jesus sifted the hearts of these men, exposing their radical unbelief and their devilish inspiration and motivation. In Christian work we will meet such men as these and while we will not always have to speak as plainly as this (there is a time for silence Eccles. 3:7; cf. Lk. 23:6-9) we must *think* as clearly as this and see the truth about wicked unbelief. If we don't we will be disheartened and distracted. We do not wrestle against mere flesh and blood (Eph. 6:12) and if we are to cope with the wicked words of unbelieving and disaffected men we must see the inspiration behind them. The unbelief we are dealing with here is not in any sense intellectual difficulty. These men saw only too clearly the practical implication of Jesus' words. If they accepted Him it would mean a radical change in their way of life and a new dimension to their whole concept of religion. This they were not prepared to face and their decision marked them out for what they were, agents of the Devil. They were children of Abraham (members of the church), circumcised according to God's ordinance (baptised), and were regular attenders at the Feast of Tabernacles (always at communion), but in spite of all they were not God's children. There is one infallible mark of a true child of God. He will love Jesus, desire Him, be eager to listen to Him and will obey Him (42). He will recognise who He is and where He came from (42b) and will hear and receive the words of God (47). But these men constantly misunderstood and misinterpreted every word and action of Jesus. The reason is found in v.47b.

[Back to Top](#)

8:48-59

In the bitterness and long continuance of this argument do not fail to see that beyond the battle for these men's souls there are the insistent words of Jesus by which His Divine nature was declared and His work advanced. Part of the advancement called for this confrontation with the agents of evil and unbelief. It may be in our own day that

we will have to learn to speak up (at the right time and in the right way) in the places and on the issues where decisions are being taken that affect the future safety, liberty and well-being of the work of God. The stinging comment of the Jews in v. 48 was, "Everybody says you are nothing but a Samaritan, and whatever spirit motivates you it is certainly not from God." Note how "lying tongues" constantly operate against the servants of God (Ps. 109:1-3). Jesus was not concerned to vindicate Himself for there is One who judges. This is solemn but it is comforting (1 Cor. 4:3-5; 1 Pet. 2:12). Note also how the Father is always concerned for and working for the glory of the Son (17:1-5). In v.51 Jesus made a tremendous statement which seemed designed to bring the discussion to a climax and conclusion. The Jews may have detected some similarity between Jesus' words and Moses' words in Deut. 30:15-20 and they may have recalled Jesus' earlier words in Capernaum (6:44,47). Later in the story we shall read Jesus' words to Martha in John 11:24-26 and see there that there was a general belief in resurrection from the dead. What, therefore, the Jews objected to here was the claim by Jesus that He was the conqueror of death.

[Back to Top](#)

8:48-59

Death is the subject people refuse to think about, let alone talk about. This is understandable for death is an enemy we have to live with (1 Cor. 15:26) and it exercises a tyranny of fear which has to be conquered (Heb. 2:15). The glory of the gospel is this, that Jesus has in fact conquered death and His words here are a statement of this truth, based on the work of the Cross which already Jesus was quite sure He would accomplish. The Pharisees insisted on reducing Jesus' words to the mechanics of dying, which experience believers must go through in common with all other mortals unless the coming of Christ intervenes to make death unnecessary (1 Cor. 15:51,52). But death cannot "touch" or "harm" the believer because its sting has been drawn. For the Christian, to die is to be with Christ, which is far better than mere life on earth (Phil. 1:23) for it is fulfilment not loss (2 Cor. 5:1-5). The question in v.53 reminds us of a similar question in John 4:12, and the answer to both is in the affirmative, even though Jesus did not state this in so many words, at least until v.58 when He used the language which made it totally plain that He was claiming to be none other than "I am" (Ex. 3:14). At the same time note how our Lord refused all thought of self-exaltation or glory from man (Phil. 3:4f f.). He is ever the Son doing the will of the Father (54) and yet, because He is the Son, He would be dishonest if He did not claim to know the Father (55). There is a time for pressing in relentlessly on people and indeed for using

plain language. Remember the issue here was the increasing hardening of these men's hearts. This is no mere verbal battle about theological theories. It is a matter of life and death, Heaven and Hell.

[Back to Top](#)

8:48-59

In the last four verses of the passage there is a glorious testimony to the unity of Scripture and the uniqueness of the gospel. There has never been any way of salvation other than faith in Christ the appointed Saviour. Jesus declared that Abraham saw, by faith, the day when Messiah would come, through whom all the glorious promises of God would be fulfilled. The Jews would be familiar with Abraham's rejoicing in Gen. 17:17 and aware of the promise that the seed of Abraham would be the Messiah they looked for. As plainly as possible Jesus declared Himself to be the fulfilment of Abraham's joyous expectation, a fulfilment Abraham saw and rejoiced in by faith (Heb. 11:13, 17-19). It is almost as if Jesus said that Abraham desired Him when He was yet absent but *they* had no desire for Him even though He was present with them. Immediately these unbelieving Jews put a materialistic interpretation on Jesus.' words, speaking about His age and ridiculing the idea that He could ever have been a contemporary of Abraham. At that point Jesus made the startling claim that He did not have merely a temporal existence. Using the sacred words "I am" (Ex. 3:14), He identified Himself with the eternal God and affirmed His essential deity. This assumption by Jesus of the divine name of the Old Testament was immediately construed as blasphemy by these bigoted and unbelieving Jews and they took up stones to kill Him. The hiding of Jesus and His departure must be seen as miraculous (cf. Lk. 4:30). He was hidden. The Son of God had declared Himself, presented Himself, and had been rejected. But He remains, Jesus Christ the same yesterday, today and forever (Heb. 13:8).

[Back to Top](#)

9:1-12

This story is given in great detail and the spiritual lessons are many. We do not know if this happened as Jesus left the Temple (8:59) or on the first Sabbath afterwards (9:14). It was not uncommon for the blind and lame to be sitting by the Temple (Acts 3:1-10) and it seems they just accepted their unhappy state, perhaps fatalistically, for there was little else they could do. Both Jesus and the disciples saw and noted the man but their attitudes were different. The disciples saw him as an example of the baffling nature of experience. What was the explanation of congenital blindness? Where did the sin element come in to cause this situation? But Jesus saw the man as an opportunity to manifest the glorious power of God. The miracle was remarkable, done in an open and public place and to a man so well known to the people that it was impossible for even the most bigoted critics of Jesus to deny it (cf. Acts 4:13-22). It was a sovereign miracle for no approach was made by the man or any of his friends. Jesus simply entered into the man's situation and by His power brought transformation. Think back over the story John has told and see Jesus in the place of human happiness at Cana (2:1ff); human brokenness in Samaria (4:7ff); human sorrow in the official's family (4:46ff); human bondage at Bethesda (5:1ff); human hunger and lostness in the feeding of the five thousand (6:1ff); human doubt and fear with the disciples in the storm (6:15ff); and now in the bafflement of human experience. In every human situation Jesus is the answer. How comprehensive is His ability. How we should learn to trust Him.

[Back to Top](#)

9:1-12

The opening of blind eyes, whether in physical or spiritual terms, was one of the signs of Messiah (Matt. 11:5; Lk. 4:16-21). Jesus and His disciples were surrounded, just as we are, with evidence of brokenness, misery and the mystery of human experience. Some suffer, some do not; sometimes the godly suffer while the wicked prosper. This has always been a cause of concern to thinking people (Ps. 73:3ff). Babies die and babies are born blind. What is the explanation, if there is one? Must we try to explain every tragedy? Dare we link every physical or emotional condition to specific sin on the part of the person or his parents? Often the sin of a wicked person blights the life of an innocent bystander. The sins of dissolute parents can blight the lives and bodies of their children. When people ask why such things happen, what is the answer? Sometimes we must confess that we do not know and cannot explain. We do not have all the answers! At other times we must try to show people that in a world that has gone wrong and become disordered by the advent of sin all sorts of complications of

experience have to be allowed for, especially death which is the ultimate grim intruder (1 Cor. 15:21,22; Rom. 5:21). When the disciples looked back and sought for an explanation Jesus immediately compelled them to look to God and to look forward to what could be done about it. He declared that there was purpose, even in disasters, and that the explanation is not to be found in the strict attaching of every situation to specific sin. This does not cancel out Exodus 20:5-6; cf. Ezek. 18:1-4,19-32, passages the disciples would know well.

[Back to Top](#)

9:1-12

Jesus' words are meant to turn the disciples away from speculation regarding the origin of evil in specific cases to the thought that every situation of human brokenness falls within the over-ruling providence and permission of God in order that the glory of His mercy and saving power might be seen. The ultimate purposes of God in His providence are often not seen clearly until long after the event, but we must learn to look for and to see the specific designs of God in every human situation, however grievous. It is necessary at times to ask how certain situations have come about, and only by discerning this can we help people, but we can never stop there. We must be concerned with what can be done about it. Note in v.4 that Jesus says "we" must work; He and His disciples were together in this situation, not to discuss a "case" but to help a person in need, especially since the blind man seems to have made no appeal to Jesus at any point in the story. The initiative was with Jesus as it always is in the matter of salvation. The methods Jesus used varied greatly. Before giving the man his sight Jesus declared Himself the light of the world. No mechanical procedure was necessary for Jesus to perform the healing, and we are never in the position of saying that He "always" did certain things such as laying on hands, or giving certain signs, or saying a certain formula of words. God refuses to "toe our lines", and we must refuse to toe other people's lines, however "spiritual" they may seem to be. The man was told what to do and, no matter how perplexed he was, he obeyed and his sight was restored.

[Back to Top](#)

9:13-17

The immediate reaction to the miracle was uncertainty (8-12). People do not know what to think when God's power touches the life of someone they know. This gave the man wonderful opportunity to bear testimony, even though he himself was still more than a little baffled by the whole thing. Perhaps even in the midst of unbelief, uncertainty and superstition the people may have been reminded of the healing of Namaan, who also was told to go and wash (2 Kings 5:1-14). Interest was aroused and since Jesus could not be immediately found they all went to the Pharisees so that the master could be investigated. After all, had there not been a notable example of the working of the power of God? We cannot tell if this was a formal or informal gathering of the Sanhedrin or of some committee with powers to act. They asked their question and the man wisely stuck to simple facts, as all testimonies should. We do wrong if we embellish our story, for that would not increase God's honour but rather draw attention to ourselves, which is an undesirable and unprofitable exercise. The immediate reaction of some of the Pharisees was to denounce Jesus for working on the Sabbath, for to them the ritual of the Law and the tradition of their fathers was more important than God. But others, like Nicodemus, were honest enough to say that a man at variance with God could not work such works of mercy (3:2). There was a division among the Pharisees (7:43; 10:19; Acts 23:6-9), and we must be encouraged to discover that even in such a non-spiritual assembly as this there were men whose hearts God was moving (7:51), men who would yet come out into the open for Christ at great cost (John 19:38,39). Never be quick to write off a situation. We seldom know more about it than a very, very little, and God's ways are past finding out.

[Back to Top](#)

9:18-23

The division among the Jews meant that the whole case had to be gone over again and, of course, repetition is a great way of teaching. As we go through the rest of the chapter do not fail to see how often testimony is given to what God had done. The prejudice of the Jews is seen in v.18 but they could not escape the facts. The parents, in spite of their fear, did not give ground. They may well have been enjoying the embarrassment of these rulers of the Temple who laid such heavy burdens upon them all and showed such little compassion for any of them (Matt. 23:1-4). These wicked men had in fact called the two witnesses best fitted to give evidence as to the

reality of the miracle. This is just an example of how the Devil is constantly over-reaching himself in his antagonism to Christ. The parents did not throw back the question nor did they challenge the Pharisees. Perhaps we are all too keen on firing challenges and thereby setting in motion a train of events we are not prepared to see through. The parents stuck to facts, answered the first two questions and referred the third to the only man who could answer (21). We can understand the parents' fear (22) and must sympathise with it, unless we are people who have always, on every occasion, stood firm for truth and God regardless of the cost. Note last of all that these men had already come to a decision. They were against Jesus and all who stood for Jesus.

[Back to Top](#)

9:24-34

The Pharisees now began to "pull rank" and to use their position to browbeat the man who stood alone. This is the arrogance of those who appoint themselves to places of spiritual authority. They seemed so concerned for God's glory and they were determined that Jesus' person and power should be diminished and discredited. In v.25 the man refused to be drawn into theological argument, which he knew he would lose, but he declared the fact of his experience, which could not be denied (Acts 4:13-18). In doing so he highlighted perhaps deliberately, the power of Jesus compared to powerlessness of the Pharisees. In v.26-29 we see something of the bitter cruelty of these men towards a simple man who had declined to bow to their threatening. This is very akin to the blind prejudice there is in church circles against biblical evangelism, even when its fruits in reviving a congregation are manifest. Of course this cross-examination did no harm to the man whose sight was restored, but it did expose the evil of his critics. The more they railed the more they were seen as men having no part with God. This is one reason why the Lord sometimes allows evil to proceed apparently unchecked. It exposes evil and leaves its condemnation in no doubt. At the end of v.27 the man was perhaps both annoyed and frustrated by his questioners and he stabbed their consciences, at the same time hinting that he himself had become a believer, even though his understanding was still very limited. The contempt in. v.28 is shocking. Their spiritual competence had been challenged and they resented it. It is all very contemporary.

[Back to Top](#)

9:24-34

Unbelief and spiritual fraud give themselves away in v.29. Their contempt for the name of Jesus could not be hidden. Their attitude was that everyone knew that Moses was an accredited teacher but this travelling preacher called Jesus was an unknown character with neither pedigree nor ecclesiastical sanction. This also is contemporary. If a "big name" in the evangelical or ecclesiastical world makes a pronouncement it *must* be true and it is accepted by many as having an authority greater even than the Bible. These men spoke of Moses and their adherence to him, but Moses spoke of Jesus (1:45; 5:45-47; 7:19; cf. Lk. 24:27). The man born blind was quick to see their folly in v.30-33 and even though he spoke in simplest terms his argument was unanswerable. By their fruits men shall be known (Matt. 7:15-20). A great evangelist, challenged and criticised about his methods, asked his critics how they got people converted. When they admitted their singular lack of success he replied that He preferred his methods that brought people to Christ rather than theirs which did not. There is great logic there, provided converts are established in faith and built into the church of Christ. In v.33 this simple, unlettered believer said exactly the same as the religious professor in John 3:2. He had progressed in his grasp of who Jesus was, as v.11 (man), v.17 (prophet), v.33 (from God) make plain. God is no respecter of persons (Acts 10:34) and He chooses the simple to confound the wise (1 Cor. 1:27-29). Do not fail to note in v.34 how wicked these men were, who held high rank in the Jewish church, how they scorned the man, and formally excommunicated him.

[Back to Top](#)

9:35-41

The anger, abuse, contempt and spiritual arrogance at the end of yesterday's reading are the marks of men with no real basis for the position they held. Today's passage begins with a suggestion that, hearing of these happenings, Jesus sought out the man who had had such a stormy and costly start to his spiritual experience. How much time elapsed between v.34 and v.35 we cannot tell, but it was long enough for the man's excommunication to become public knowledge. In a personal way Jesus asked the man about his faith in the

"Son of Man" (not "Son of God" as in AV). The man's answer in v.36 is totally honest and indicates the awakening of desire to know more fully the significance of what had happened to him. This is the work of the Spirit in the man's soul, and such a desire to learn is something we must look for in those who profess conversion. Jesus' words in v.37 are as clear a declaration of His divinity and Messiah-ship as was given to any (4:25-26) and without a moment's hesitation the man confessed his faith and worshipped. Note the methods of Jesus with regard to various different types of people, how He led them to faith. There is nothing stereotyped about the work of the Spirit, save in the fact that when the Spirit of God is truly at work He brings men and women to yield without reserve to the Lord Jesus Christ, and creates in them a desire for Him and a hunger to go after Him. Any spirit that does not do this is not of God.

[Back to Top](#)

9:35-41

The meeting between Jesus and the man must have been in some public place for Jesus' words in v.39 seem to be addressed to more than just the man who had been healed. At the same time the solemn issues of division and judgment which attend the gospel are made plain to the man right at the start of his life of discipleship, so that he would know what to expect. The coming of Christ into the world, whether in person or in the preaching of the gospel, has two diametrically opposite results, both of which are part of the purpose of God. There will be the birth of faith leading to salvation, as in the case of the man, and there will be the exposure and confirmation of unbelief unto judgment, as in the case of the Pharisees. If we do not face up to this we will be greatly disheartened in the business of evangelism, failing to grasp the fact of the inevitability of losses, as in Matt. 13:1-9 and the reality of division seen here and in 2 Cor. 2:15,16. This is part of the reason why we must give a clear witness to Christ and present a truly gracious yet totally truthful message. There is a graceless presentation of the gospel in dull terms by unattractive Christians that does nothing but harden people's hearts. It is not essentially the gospel nor Jesus they are reacting against, but against the offensive and indeed inhuman attitudes of those who are "giving them the gospel". Note how Jesus pointed out to the Pharisees that possession of the truth and a profession of knowledge concerning God constitute a dangerous spiritual condition (cf. Rom. 9:1-5). There is some excuse for the man who is blind and who does not have the truth in his possession, but there is none at all for those who claim both light and truth. To be under constant and consistent biblical teaching is a privilege indeed but it brings responsibility.

[Back to Top](#)

10:1-6

The whole passage down to v.21 seems to follow on very closely after the healing of the blind man and must be considered as teaching emerging from the confrontation in the previous verses. The whole of Jesus' ministry was carried out in the context of criticism and controversy, but in the persistent resistance of the leaders of the Jews you do not ever find Jesus browbeaten. He always retained the initiative and carried the challenge into their camp of his critics in order to reveal the unreasonableness of their unbelief. The evidences were overpowering but they refused them and they were guilty men (9:41). They were also the men who threw out the man from the house of God (9:34), and in direct answer to these things Jesus spoke the allegory of the Good Shepherd in which the true sheep are marked out in that they know the Shepherd's voice. The emphasis in these opening verses seems to be on those who by deceit pass themselves off as shepherds and by threat seek to take possession of what is not theirs and what they have no right to at all. That these words were an open charge against the Pharisees cannot be doubted. At another time Jesus charged these men with having no care for the sheep, with being false shepherds, and with being motivated by sheer self-interest (Matt. 23:1-7, 13-15, 23ff.). Their ecclesiastical "ordination" was in order, but they were not God's men doing God's work. They were not true men and therefore were not fit to be shepherds, and any sheep foolish enough to follow them would only suffer loss. These are solemn words, but the Pharisees did not see their significance or application.

[Back to Top](#)

10:1-6

Since this is allegory, figurative picture (6) rather than parable, we must not try to squeeze spiritual truth out of every point of detail. The picture is of a roofless enclosure with a door locked and guarded by a keeper.

Overnight there would be the flocks of several shepherds who would come, morning by morning, for their sheep to take them to pasture. The sheep would hear, listen to and obey the voice of their own shepherd and he would lead them. There is both recognition and response, because the sheep know to whom they belong, but they will turn away from strangers knowing instinctively that they are not to be trusted. All this should have been very familiar to the Jews but they did not understand (6). Perhaps they did not want to understand because they were very selective with regard to their own Scriptures. Think of the searching rebuke of Isaiah 1:1-6. Think of the denunciation of false shepherds in Jer. 23:1-4; Ezek. 34:1-10; and Zech. 11:15-17. Did these Jews not know these scriptures? Their minds were blinded by unbelief and disobedience. Did not Jesus grieve over the crowds as sheep without a shepherd (Matt. 9:36)? How sad it is to think of so much barren church-going today when "the hungry sheep look up and are not fed." (Milton) Remember Jesus' commission to Peter, "Feed My sheep" (John 21:15-17). Take heed to the flock and stand guard over it is the charge to all ministers, elders, Sunday School teachers and youth leaders (Acts 20:28). But all of us *need* a shepherd, for we tend to stray like lost sheep (Isa. 53:6) and the Lord God Himself is our Shepherd (Ps. 23; Ps. 79: 13; Ps. 95:1-7; Isa. 40:9-11). It is all very wonderful, and sweetly comforting.

[Back to Top](#)

10:7-10

Jesus is here explaining and expanding what He had already said. In v.2 the door is for the shepherd but in v.9 it is for the sheep and this would suggest Jesus is speaking of unlawful men taking oversight of the sheep. It is only by the commission of Jesus that a man has the right to shepherd God's flock and only a "Jesus man" will be able to lead the sheep to pasture. In v.8 "all" cannot refer to people such as John the Baptist and the great prophets of God for they were true and not false. Jesus seems to be referring to the Pharisees standing there among the people and he was charging them with seeking to supplant God's shepherd. Now that the Son of God had come He, and only He, was the door by which people would enter the fold of God. There is in fact no other name by which people can be saved (Acts 4:12) and any voice that denies or obscures this comes into the category of thief and robber - stealing God's sheep and stealing from the sheep their rights and safety. The influence of false shepherds is barrenness and death, but that of the good shepherd is life in abundant measure. What a challenge there is here to all ministers of the gospel! What does it mean if our congregations shrivel up and dry out under our ministry? Does it mean that our hobbies and distractions, our own secret dryness of heart, our poor preparation and even poorer serving of the spiritual meal are all working against the best interests of our people? Are we insensitive to their needs, fears and reactions? The sheep need Jesus and it takes a whole Bible to present a whole Jesus. Fulness of life is in Him (Col. 2:9, 10).

[Back to Top](#)

10:7-10

Concentrate on v.9 and on the three things Jesus promises to any who enter the fold of God through Him. He shall be saved. This is personal salvation in life that is eternal (v.10; 3:16-17; 10: 28). It is salvation from sin, self, shame, fear, guilt, Satan and all others who would threaten the soul. It is not just forgiveness, glorious as that is, but salvation from the power of sin. "He breaks the power of cancelled sin, He sets the prisoner free." (Wesley) But we are not saved from the realities of life, for the fold is not an escape to the monastic life of a recluse. We are saved *in* the realities of life. Our salvation has been secured (Heb. 9:12) and in that confidence we go in and out and find pasture. The life of the sheep under the good shepherd is one of liberty, not frustration. It is activity not indolence. In v.4 (AV) the shepherd "puts out" his sheep, giving them a good shove at times to overcome their perversities, objections and reluctance, making them get on with the business of life. He knows what is best for the sheep and, of course, He goes before them in order to lead them to the water and pasture they need (Ps. 23:2). We could almost think of going into the fold for fellowship, rest, and refreshing, and then out for practical obedience. Finding pasture is a phrase that speaks of both sustenance and satisfaction and the sweetness that marks both. It has to do with enjoying life with Jesus. "How great the joy that Thou hast brought, so far exceeding hope or thought" (Collins). "Something rests in every hue, Christless eyes have never seen, (Robinson). Christ does indeed make all things new (Rev. 21:5).

[Back to Top](#)

10:11-18

These are wonderful truths to be savoured in many different ways. The Good Shepherd gives His life for the preservation of the sheep and to be the life of His sheep. That Jesus is speaking of the death He would die on the Cross is clear from v.17-18. All the blessings that come to the sheep come by way of the Cross. But the heart of the earlier part of the passage (13b-14) tells of the specific and personal care the shepherd has for his sheep. Just as a sheep knows its own lamb and can discern its bleat for help in the midst of a whole flock, so the Lord knows them that are His (2 Tim. 2:19). Think of the story of the one sheep out of a hundred that was lost (Matt. 18:12, 13); or of the shepherd counting in the flock and anointing with oil any head that showed signs of scorching with the sun (Ps. 23:5); or the words of the great shepherd of Israel regarding His unforgetting love (Isa. 49:14-16); or the great protest of anguished love in Hosea 11:8. Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us (1 John 3:1). To be known by name and to be valued for ourselves even when our fleece is rather shabby is encouragement beyond measure. The "good" shepherd is not just morally good. The word in the original signifies beautiful, or excellent, the only one in its class. This is Jesus, who lays down His life. He does not "risk" His life as any good shepherd might do (1 Sam. 17:34-37). He lays down His life instead of, in exchange for, for the benefit of, His sheep. It is a death of substitution that is spoken of here (Isa. 53:6; 1 Pet. 2:24; 3:18).

[Back to Top](#)

10:11-18

Focus our thoughts today on the glorious person of our Lord Jesus Christ, and on His fellowship with and obedience to the Father (14-18). This relationship ultimately cannot be put into words nor can it ever be fully explored or exhausted. It is infinite and eternal, yet it is totally personal and marked by perfect delight on the part of both Persons. The Father delights in His Son and the Son's pleasure is to do the Father's will. There are no secrets between Father and Son, even though the Son gladly accepts and accedes to that which the Father keeps in His own power (Matt. 24:36; Acts 1:7; Matt. 11:25-27). Consider also Proverbs 8:22-30. The close relationship between the Good Shepherd and His sheep is one of mutual knowledge and understanding of the kind that exists between the Father and the Son. The Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep so that they should not die. This is salvation, and it is not confined to the limits of the Jewish race. There are others who are Christ's true sheep even though that fact may not yet be evident (cf. Acts. 18:10). But they will be brought because they are "given" by the Father (John 6:37) and in due time they will hear the voice of the Shepherd (through the preaching of the disciples) and they will follow Him. There is only one flock and it consists of all those who hear and follow Jesus. The particular sheepfolds may vary in style from age to age, nation to nation, and culture to culture. But there is only one flock.

[Back to Top](#)

10:11-18

There is a great depth of meaning in v.17-18 and we are drawn right into the mystery of God's redeeming purpose worked out by means of the death and resurrection of His eternal Son. The "flock" which is the church was redeemed with blood that was God's own (Acts 20:28), by the death of God's Lamb (1:36). He laid down His life freely and He did so when the right moment carne (12:27) in the full assurance of taking up His life again in the resurrection. There were no "loose ends" in the work of salvation. Nor was the work ever, in any ultimate sense, in the hands of wicked men (Acts 2:23) although they stood guilty before God for what they did. The double note of the Son's obedience and the Father's pleasure is emphasised again. The harmony of the eternal Trinity in the work of salvation is a theme that should constrain us to wonder and worship. The Son, by the eternal Spirit, offered Himself without spot to God (Heb. 9:14). This makes salvation something very sure since it is God's doing. Christ was delivered for our offences and raised for our justification (Rom. 4:25), all in accordance with the Father's will and the Son's willingness. He was crucified, but God raised Him m from the dead (Acts 2:24). He freely humbled Himself even to death, and for that reason God highly exalted Him and gave Him the mighty name to which every knee should bow (Phil. 2:8-11). In all this, the Son's joy was to do the Father's will, and this was the dynamic of His obedience (Heb. 12:2).

[Back to Top](#)

10:19-21

We are not surprised by the division among the Jews. The word of the Cross always divides (1 Cor. 1:18, 25-24), firstly because sinful men refuse to accept: its message regarding their need for salvation and secondly because its depths are far beyond their grasp. Of course these men could not accept the thought of the free and willing laying down of life by Jesus because in fact they had already planned His murder. What they could not grasp was the fact that they had no power, as Jesus later declared to Pilate (John 19:10-11), and the fact that all their schemes were doomed to failure under the sovereign providence of God. This was something even the disciples had to learn and to which they had to submit (Matt. 26:47-56). The reaction to Jesus' words was one of division (7:43; 9:16) and a fulfilment of the prophetic words in Lk. 2:34. But even the division was divided! The Devil never gets his congregation to agree! Some were openly scurrilous and contemptuous and wrote Jesus off as having no part with God at all, and made it their business to keep people from listening to Him. But others, though still noncommittal, were more reasonable, having regard to the facts which could not be denied. This man Jesus seemed to have the power of God attending His actions as well as His teaching and such were the benefits coming to many that He just could not be dismissed. But if these men in v.21 followed through their own reasoning they would have to accept that Jesus was in fact what He claimed to be, God's appointed Messiah. That would require them to yield in faith and discipleship, and that is costly.

[Back to Top](#)

10:22-30

It is difficult to say whether or not Jesus had been away from Jerusalem between the Feast of Tabernacles which was held in October (7:2) and the Feast of Dedication in December. What we can say is that time was passing, perhaps all the more alarmingly because people tended not to notice it. But we too need to remember that time is hurrying to its end, taking with it opportunities that can never be recalled. Better read Ps. 39:4-6. Keep in mind with what challenge Jesus walked among the people of Jerusalem. This was indeed their day of visitation (Lk, 19:41-44). Although this Feast did not have a "biblical" institution our Lord seems to have been quite willing to use the occasion when large numbers would be gathered, to continue His ministry. The people questioned Him, using words which seem to indicate a willingness to believe in Him if only there was more specific evidence and a clearer statement from Himself that He was Messiah. These "Jews" (24) were obviously the leaders, the Pharisees, and this fact highlights the solemnity of Jesus' answer to them. They wanted the Christ, or so they said. But what kind of Christ did they want? Was it a political or social Messiah, or even a religious one who would confirm them in their total mastery over the religious life of the people? When Christ comes, it is not to negotiate some democratic common purpose for society, but to present Himself in His uniqueness as the only Saviour, the only way to God, and the mighty Lord who calls for unconditional surrender. He will not be manoeuvred into any camp.

[Back to Top](#)

10:22-30

Note how bluntly Jesus speaks to these men who had come with specious words of acceptance. They pretended their problem was doubt and uncertainty, not insincerity. Jesus declared them to be unbelievers, and to be determined in their unbelief in spite of all the evidences. Having heard Jesus' claim to be the Light of the World, the Bread of Life, the Good Shepherd and the Door of the Sheep, these men, by their unbelief, had made it manifest that they did not belong to Him, and consequently did not belong to the Father. Their unbelief and their distaste for Jesus were the evidences of their separation from God. In v.27-29 in describing the character and experience of His true sheep, Jesus must have given marvellous comfort to His disciples, while at the same time confirming the unbelief of the Jews (27). There are three wonderful statements in v.28, and in v.29 there is a declaration of the mighty hand of God whose grasp is the security of our salvation. Nothing in present or future experience has the power to take us out of the saving, loving keeping of the Father (Rom. 8:35ff). There is the clear suggestion in Jesus' words that the powers of evil are constantly seeking to wage war against true believers but the Father is greater than all such powers even in their combined force (Ps. 2: 1-4). But do not fail to note the comfort given in the clear statement that our salvation and security stem from the free, sovereign and eternal choice and election by the Father (Eph. 1:3-5).

[Back to Top](#)

10:31-39

Following Jesus' clear claim in v.30, the Jews tried yet again to stone Him, and their intentions were clear and immediate as v.32 makes plain. But even stones in their hands and hate in their hearts could not disturb Jesus' peace nor halt His ministry. Of course, the same sovereign power that guarantees salvation also rules over all the progress of the purposes of God (39). There was a restraint placed upon evil men. Only when the time came would they be allowed to act (13:27). Until then they were powerless. The Pharisees made the issue clear in v.33. It was Jesus' claim to be none other than the Son of God. The alternatives are radical. Either He is what He claims to be or He is a total fraud and blasphemer, a man gone mad and not to be listened to. These are still the alternatives today! In v.34 Jesus quoted from Psalm 82:6-7 where mere men are referred to as gods because the word of God had come to them. No one objected to this form of speech because it was Scripture, and Scripture cannot be broken. What a testimony to the inspiration and authority and continuing validity of the Old Testament! If the Pharisees accepted the name "gods" in the Psalm how could they object to Jesus calling Himself Son of God since He was in person the very Word of God? In v.36 Jesus was really answering the request in v.24. He declared Himself to be the One whom the Father had appointed from all eternity to the office of Redeemer and had now sent into the world (Heb. 1:1-3; 3:1-6a). After such a declaration Jesus again appealed (37-38) but it fell on deaf ears.

[Back to Top](#)

10:40-42

The thing to emphasise here is not the strict geography of our Lord's journeys from place to place, nor the exact timing and sequence of these incidents, but the fact that in the context of such relentless opposition, prejudice and resistance His work went steadily on. Never is there any suggestion that the powers of wicked men inspired by the Devil himself called the tune. The initiative was always with the Son of God and this is something we need to remember when we come to the story of the Cross and when we consider the developments of our own lives and service. The ministry of Jesus, whether in His own life or through His disciples in successive generations, is a continuing ministry. It has its phases and stages and different locations and varied results, but it is one on-going work. It seems that Jesus here went back to the place where His ministry began nearly three years earlier on the banks of the Jordan when He was baptised by John. There is more here than just recollection of past times of dedication, although that can be valuable and inspirational. The Jews accepted John as a prophet, and John declared Jesus to be the Lamb of God. This was the heart of the truth about Jesus. He was God's appointed Lamb of sacrifice, and He stayed in that area from December right through to the coming Passover when He was arrested and crucified. He was taking His place, ready for death. Many people gathered but still there were the strange shackles of unbelief. John's past ministry was recalled and words spoken by that godly man, now dead, at last began to bear fruit and many believed. One sows, and another reaps but God gives the increase (1 Cor. 3:5-7), for the work is His alone.

[Back to Top](#)

11:1-4

We cannot possibly consider the marvellous detail of this story without first reading the whole chapter right through. For today, without any comment from man that could help or distract, read slowly right through to v.46, then simply ponder it, put yourself into the place of Mary, Martha or the disciples and consider what *your* reactions would have been. Put yourself in the place of Lazarus, lying so ill and wondering why Jesus did not come. We shall study the story section by section but must first affirm in our own hearts that God is a God to be trusted even when His ways are past finding out (Rom. 11:33). One thing is sure: His ways are never wrong.

[Back to Top](#)

11:1-6

This is the story of a wonderful miracle on the physical level, demonstrating the power of Jesus over death and it is also a "sign" or an illustration of the gospel by which men and women are raised to newness of life. These introductory verses set the human scene and the words of Jesus in v.4, which are very similar to those in 9:3, indicate the context of all the experiences of life and the attitude we must take in understanding them and coming to terms with them. Every experience must be related to the will of God and His dealings with us. Apart

from that there is neither interpretation nor relief. But it is not simply the will of God but the love of God that is the key to life, and it is the one thing that enables us to accept the mysterious delays of God even when His beloved children cry to Him in distress and need. The love of the family at Bethany for Jesus was beyond question, as was their total trust in Him. The most natural thing for them to do was to send for Jesus and never for a moment did they think He would not come. There is no suggestion that they resented the coming of illness nor that they thought the close friends of Jesus should be exempt from such affliction. They appealed to their Lord and Friend, whose significance Mary had discerned so wonderfully, and their appeal was based on His love for them, not theirs for Him. They took the highest ground, but even if they had come on lower ground they would still have been heard.

[Back to Top](#)

11:7-10

Keep the wonderful threads of the story together. The sisters knew where to find Jesus. There was open fellowship between them with no secrets. The sisters did not hear the glorious statement in v.4 which lifted the whole issue on to a high level. But they did know the perplexing fact of v.6. Jesus did not come. They did not know the delay was deliberately determined and was to be short but they did not send another message. They were baffled and indeed disappointed as v.21 makes plain but they seem to have accepted Jesus' delay in faith. Remember that by His sovereign power Jesus could have, even at a distance, stopped the advance of Lazarus' illness, but He did not do so. We must accept that death, with all its disappointment and distress, was necessary so that the end of the whole incident might be the glory of God. Here is the mystery of the love of God. It does not always act in the way we expect. The fact of love is often hidden, the delays of love often mystifying, the methods of love often seem to be counter-productive, but in it all love is true and faith is being instructed. In this case it was the disciples who were being both instructed and prepared for the future, as the following verses make plain. But think of the family at Bethany. Had the messenger returned to them and had he reported Jesus' words in v.4? Think of their relief and thanksgiving and how that would turn so painfully to hurt and bafflement as they watched life ebbing away from their dear one. Had Jesus misled them? Faith must hold on desperately at times.

[Back to Top](#)

11:11-16

This conversation between Jesus and His disciples indicates something of the sweet harmony between them. They felt at liberty to express their immediate reactions even if that seemed they were questioning His judgment. It seemed to them that Jesus was courting disaster, for them as well as Himself, and if God is left out, that was in fact the situation. Jesus did not answer them with a direct "Don't worry", but rather spoke a proverb about the hours of the day running their course safely. It was as if Jesus was saying that neither men nor devils could harm Him or interfere with the course of His work. At the time the disciples did not grasp what Jesus said but no doubt, later, the Spirit of God would bring it to their remembrance (14:26). In gentlest of terms Jesus broke it to His disciples that Lazarus was in fact dead (11). How we need to think of death as being asleep in Jesus (1 Thess. 4:14). It takes away the sting (1 Cor. 15:55). But the disciples still misunderstood, and the word "sleep" seemed an escape from the risky business of going to Bethany. They had to be told plainly the fact of actual death but in the same verses (14-15) they were told that this was not the end of the story. There was deliberate intention. There was purpose. But not even the clear settled conviction of Jesus could overcome the natural unbelieving, depressive temperament of Thomas. Why, oh why, do we insist on always looking at the darkest side of a situation?

[Back to Top](#)

11:17-27

The family situation of bereavement had become a public one. The fact of death had been accepted, the body had been buried and now the whole business of readjustment to a reduced family circle had to be faced. One awkward situation had still to be met. What would they say to Jesus when He arrived after it was all over? Of course, there was a "hidden" element in the situation. Jesus had declared to His disciples in v.4 that the glory of God, not death, would have the last word. They, and possibly the messengers from the sisters, assumed that this

meant Lazarus would not in fact die and such a message may well have been taken back to Bethany. Now, it is not easy to trust and hope and then to be so deeply disappointed. Many a Christian has "believed" desperately for healing in answer to prayer and when it has not happened faith has been shattered. No doubt the sisters knew of other miracles Jesus had done, including those done at a distance by His word of power but without His personal presence. But the uppermost thought in their minds at this time was that Lazarus had died, and the fact of the four days, noted in v.17, confirms death and prevents any attempt to explain away the subsequent miracle of resurrection. The news of Jesus' arrival was responded to by the sisters according to their natural temperaments and we must not read too much spiritual significance into this. We are all different and must not expect each other to cope in exactly the same way. Martha may have hustled out to meet Jesus without telling Mary or, knowing Mary's grief made it difficult for her to face the public, told her to wait in the house. Perhaps we have to learn to care more for people when they are not coping well and when their faith is faltering. It is easier to criticise than to care.

[Back to Top](#)

11:17-27

Some suggest that Jesus sent word to Martha (20) so that He might talk with her privately away from the house of mourning where many would have gathered who would certainly not have shared the faith of the sisters. This is understandable because the comments of unbelievers at the funeral of a Christian are often hard to cope with. Martha's words in v.21 are a touching mixture of faith, love and criticism. How often we all say, "If only." If the person had not gone out, if the ambulance had come sooner, if the doctors had done something different, we feel a better issue would have resulted. But subconsciously that can so easily become, "If God had acted differently" and we are at once on the negative ground of unbelief. In many different situations it is not easy to say, "The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away, blessed be the name of the Lord." But this is the submission of faith. Note however that there is no rebuke for Martha for Jesus understands when a loving and devoted disciple says, "Why had it to be like this, Lord?" At the same time we must note Martha's next words (22) in which hope fights against disappointment even in face of what seems impossible. In v.21 Martha seems to go beyond the measure of faith (Rom. 12:3) for she has no real ground for saying this. In v.22, if she had in fact heard the message of v.4, and in faith grasped the possibilities, now in v.24 her faith *seemed* to stumble. Even in v.22 some suggest that Martha's faith is defective since she seems to regard Jesus as a mighty prophet who must ask for a miracle rather than possessing the power by virtue of being the Son of God. But in v.27 Martha is quite clear about who Jesus is and in v.5 we are told of Jesus love for her. After all, who are we to criticise another for allowing feelings to confuse faith? We are in no position to cast stones.

[Back to Top](#)

11:17-27

True faith is learned in the school of experience and that is why we must take time to study these passages in detail. Martha's theology was sound and she certainly believed in the resurrection, unlike the materialistic Sadducees (Matt. 22:23). Now, even though she truly believed in the resurrection and was comforted by the thought of it, it was in measure a blessing postponed until the last day. For many of us, the glorious truth of resurrection does not occupy our thoughts much apart from at a time of bereavement, and we lose a great deal in consequence for we associate Jesus' words in v.25 more with death than with life. We must think of Jesus' statement, but first consider these passages which speak of the fact of resurrection: Job 14:14a; Heb. 9:27; Acts 24:15; and 1 Cor. 15:12-20, 26, 51-58. Note how that last verse relates resurrection to the business of daily life and compare this with Rom. 6:4 and Col. 3:1 which speak of Christian life as being raised to newness of life, and Heb. 6:5 which speaks of believers living in the power of the world to come. Resurrection is not a theory about life after death nor a mere historical fact about Jesus Christ. It is life and power, and the glory of the gospel is just this: that the resurrection life of Jesus Christ is ours inwardly by the Holy Spirit who has been given to us (Eph. 1:19-20). All this should be in our minds, not least to emphasise that in Christ our conversion experience is like that of Lazarus. At the word of the Lord we have been raised from the dead, loosed or unbound, and set free to live. More of this tomorrow.

[Back to Top](#)

11:17-27

Jesus Himself and Jesus alone is the resurrection, for it is He who breaks the power of sin and death and delivers His people from bondage (Heb. 2:15). In Christ we pass from death to life, from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God (1 Pet. 2:9; Acts 26:18). We are raised from the dead. The total miracle of every conversion is seen in Jesus' words in John 5:25. In all evangelism we preach to souls that are dead in trespasses and sin and by the powerful, sovereign, regenerating work of the Holy Spirit people hear and believe. Think of Ezekiel's valley of very dry bones (Ezek. 37). What an unpromising congregation! But they lived! Jesus, right there beside Martha, and us, declares He is the resurrection in whom all the bafflements of experience are resolved. He also is life, life in which the power of sin and death has already been finally and irrevocably broken. We are alive in vital union with Him. This is eternal life, a quality of life and not merely life for ever. And, even though we may still have to go through the mechanics of dying, if the Lord does not return to take us directly to Himself in glory (1 Thess. 4:15-18), death itself has no longer any real power over us nor should it be allowed to exercise tyranny over us. This resurrection life is indeed life that is independent of circumstances and it is to be enjoyed. It is a practical blessing which is the key to present experience and that is why Jesus challenged Martha to believe. He was about to raise Lazarus, but later on Lazarus and his sisters would all have to die. But they would die in the faith of the gospel and the assurance of resurrection to life that is eternal.

[Back to Top](#)

11:28-37

Martha may not have been totally clear about the significance of Jesus' words but her confession in v.27 has all the ring of Peter's in Matt. 16:13-16. Immediately thereafter Martha went, without fuss or publicity, to call for Mary. Even in her personal distress and still not knowing the outcome of it all, Martha was composed enough not to create any adverse publicity that would draw the attention of the Jews from Jerusalem to the presence of Jesus. Nor did she want Mary to be denied that private interview with Jesus she so much needed. You can understand Mary's swift reaction when told that Jesus had called for her. She went to Him, outside the village possibly at or near the cemetery, but she was denied privacy for the official mourners went with her. It is clear from v.32 how the two sisters had been thinking during their brother's illness and how their hopes had centred on Jesus. Their disappointment and distress touched the human, compassionate heart of Jesus and His tears mingled with theirs. How we need to remember that our Lord is ever touched with the feeling of our infirmities and shares the pain (Heb. 4:15; Isa. 63:9). What a picture we have of the Son of God going with the sorrowing women to their brother's grave. Perhaps only those who have stood at an open grave at the burial of a dear one can really understand how truly the Lord stands with His children at such a time. But we have the assurance of the historical fact of the Resurrection. These sad women did not have that. They had the presence of a dearly loved Jesus who had not answered their prayers. But it was the bystanders who were contemptuous of Jesus' tears and critical of Him. Sympathy for the human race mingled with contempt for God's Son is always suspect.

[Back to Top](#)

11:38-44

Note at the end of yesterday's passage that unbelief always considers death to be the worst thing that could happen and something to be avoided at all cost. Note also that unbelief always considers it to be God's "business" to prevent unpleasant things happening to people. You know the kind of talk: "If your God is a God of love, why cancer, why wars, why do babies and good people die prematurely?" There is no end to the questioning. And with people in that frame of mind there is little chance of their listening to explanations of how it was the sin of man that brought disaster into the world (1 Cor. 15:21). The only thing that persuades people is the evidence of Christ's power in the lives and situations and reactions of true disciples. This, through the testimony of Scripture by the power of the Holy Spirit, is the means of conviction (John 16:8). Only God can do it. We are told here and in v.33 that Jesus was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. What does this mean? Is it simply a sympathetic sharing of the deep distress his beloved friends were feeling? It was much more. A similar phrase is found in John 13:21. But the same verb as here is used also in Matt. 9:30 (warned them sternly) and Mark 14:5 (rebuked harshly). What we have to think of at Lazarus' grave is the deep, surging

indignation in the heart of our Lord as He looked on and felt what sin had done. He stood facing death and, as it were, He blazed with righteous anger and strode forward to confront it and the evil power behind it (Heb. 2:14). This was the time to demonstrate, as He would soon do in His death and resurrection, that He, the Son of God, was the conqueror of death and the deliverer of men from its thrall. This is no gentle Jesus, meek and mild. He is the Victor and Conqueror of death.

[Back to Top](#)

11:38-44

See our Saviour first in His wonderful compassion, then in His total command of the situation, His power over sin and death, and His ability to save sinners and to set them free. Think of it following from the sisters' words. If Jesus had not come death would have continued to reign. But Jesus has come and death has lost its kingdom. Death is swallowed up in victory. See how this miracle foreshadows the Cross and resurrection of Christ. Some say that the name of Lazarus was specifically mentioned lest at the command of Jesus all the dead should have come forth, as indeed they will do at the last judgment (John 5:28-29). The time had not yet come for that.

There is much we do not know about the state of the dead and the life after death but Lazarus, wherever he was, heard the voice of the Son of God, recognised its authority and enabling power and obeyed. Think of what we sing in our great Easter hymns. Death's strong castle is stormed. Death's reign is ended. Death is to be defied in the faith of the risen Christ. Here indeed is a demonstration of the gospel. Man is dead. He can take no part in his own salvation. It is Christ who speaks His word with power that raises people from the death of sin. He does the impossible. And, as part of that miracle resurrection to newness of life, "He breaks the power of cancelled sin and sets the prisoner free." Cynical unbelief says, "How could Lazarus come out from the grave since he was bound hand and foot?" Were the bindings so tight he could not even shuffle out? Could the grave clothes not have been left behind as they were when Jesus rose from the grave? There are reasons for God's methods as we shall see.

[Back to Top](#)

11:38-44

Read the passage again and go on to v.45-46 to note the issue of the miracle. Then go back to v.41-42 and see that Jesus' prayer was spoken aloud for the sake of the people. It was witness and testimony to the one-ness of Jesus with the Father. This was not prayer in the face of a crisis with the issue still uncertain, for Jesus knew what He would do right from the start (11). The prayer is one of thanksgiving and it speaks volumes as to the close harmony of fellowship between Father and Son (of which we have the supreme example in John 17). It was Jesus' public testimony that He was the Son of the Father and that what was about to happen was a clear confirmation of this fact, which would challenge the people to faith. When Lazarus came out nothing was left to speculation. The people who had helped to wrap him up for burial were told to loosen the cloths and to reveal not a decomposing corpse as Martha had feared (39) but a living healthy Lazarus. To Martha Jesus said, "Remember what I told you, and let your heart fix on the glory of God and not on the grim fact of death." In this way Jesus checked the rising of unbelief in the heart of a loved disciple just as He stilled the storm on the Sea of Galilee. There is no doubt that the faith of the sisters was strengthened by this miracle in their own family circle and that others who had just become "involved" in the public happening also were brought to faith. But it is equally obvious that the manifest power of Christ turned others away from Him in deliberate unbelief and in commitment to a life against Christ. This is an aspect of evangelism that is seldom faced up to. End this study by thinking of the prayer life of Jesus. It was often with tears (Heb. 5:7).

[Back to Top](#)

11:45-53

This is a solemn and frightening passage which records the fact that the Person, presence and power of the Son of God was, from beginning to end, the confirmation of the unbelief of many. Read 2 Cor. 2:14-17 and see how important it is that we should present a true picture of Christ in all our witness. The issues are very great. People will be softened or hardened. The sequel to the raising of Lazarus illustrates the amazing wickedness and perversity of human nature, especially if it is steeped in formal religion. Miracles do not necessarily serve to convert people. Indeed they may have the very opposite effect, fixing people's attention on the miracle to the

exclusion of God. This is part of the reason why in the Temptation our Lord refused the enticements of the Devil to do wonderful things to win the people (Matt. 4:5-6). Remember Jesus' words also about another Lazarus in Luke 16:19-31, especially the last verse. In today's passage we have that kind of deliberate unbelief and rejection of Christ which caused the assessment and judgment of John 3:16-21. Note that the Sanhedrin made no attempt to deny the miracles Jesus did, but neither did they give any indication they were prepared to countenance the claims of Jesus upon their own lives. Evidence and argument have no effect on prejudiced unbelief which is, of course, Satanic in origin. Note also how angry these unbelieving religious leaders were about the manifest success of Jesus among the common people. But still they had no intention of examining their own attitudes to see whether or not they were in fact the fruitful servants of God. This same blind prejudice is still there against evangelical ministries whose fruit is manifest.

[Back to Top](#)

11:45-53

Note how the Pharisees assessed Jesus' work as being essentially a political and national movement. They did not relate it to God and His kingdom. Of course, in spite of their hallowed traditions, they thought of their own work essentially in terms of an earthly kingdom exercising influence in the political and social realms. This is an abiding temptation to all religious systems which lose the vision of a kingdom that belongs to another world (John 18:36). Consider v.48 and remember that although the Pharisees did not allow Jesus to go on, the Romans did eventually come and destroy their Temple and city, both of which meant more to the Jews than God. How tragic it is even to this day that stone-and-mortar churches become more important to people than God and His Son. But note very carefully that even in this hellish situation of unbelief there is clear evidence of the sovereign control of God. Caiaphas, speaking under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, spoke of the death Jesus was to die as a substitute for the people. He spoke more truly than he knew. Perhaps he actually spoke contemptuously, referring to some of Jesus' own sayings about the Son of Man coming to give His life a ransom, and suggesting that they would gladly help Him on His way to death. In v.50 Caiaphas may have spoken to ease the consciences of some who were demurring at the idea of killing Jesus because, after all, the Law forbade murder. The High Priest's word "better" (expedient) is typical of all "situation ethics" and seeks to make evil good. They decided on the death of Jesus, but little knew that God had decided it first. The powers and persons of evil must serve God.

[Back to Top](#)

11:54-57

The story goes on, as the story of God's redeeming purposes always goes on, in spite of the powers of Hell and indeed by means of these evil powers and all who consent to be their servants. Caiaphas had declared that it was better that Jesus should be done away with than that the Jewish nation should be destroyed as rebels by the Roman government. The decision was made and there was no going back. Jesus' execution warrant was signed, but they knew they had to go carefully. Note that Jesus did not force the issue. His hour was yet to come (John 2:4; 7:30; 8:20; 12:23, 27; 13:1; 17:1). He was no helpless victim. The plans of God are never subject to the veto and control of men or devils and we need to remember this in all kinds of situations. When Jesus withdrew from the public gaze it was into what must have been sweet and significant fellowship with His disciples. We do not know where Ephraim was but it seems to have been a place of seclusion, away from the mainstream of turbulent circumstances, and out of view of Jerusalem and its religious thugs. If Jesus thus "stood back" from things, knowing what was yet ahead of Him, how much more do we need this kind of deliberate detachment from activity from time to time. It is easy to get so absorbed in all the bits and pieces of what we are doing in terms of Christian service that we lose sight of God and His clear plan for us. Just as our Lord at times went aside by Himself (Matt. 14:23) so He also at times chose to be with His disciples. This is also a lesson to us. Solitariness can become exclusiveness and few of us are spiritual enough to be "loners".

[Back to Top](#)

11:54-57

Notice how much detail is given in the last three verses. It was coming near to the time of the Passover, one of the three great pilgrim feasts of the Jewish year, and there would be a massive gathering of the devout to

Jerusalem and to the Temple. It was in memory of the Exodus which, for Israel, was life from the dead and new life in the power of God. No doubt many thought of this in relation to the raising of Lazarus for after all, "life from the dead" is the prerogative of God. Would there not be speculation about Jesus who raised the dead, as some had seen and as others had been told? Who was He? Was He what he claimed to be? A prophet? More than a prophet? Think of His claims to be one with the Father (John 10:30). This kind of "popular" stirring was not acceptable to the Pharisees and Chief Priests who had given instruction (and that carried a lot of weight) that the whereabouts of Jesus was to be reported. People had to be careful because to get on the wrong side of the leaders would mean being "blacklisted" and not allowed to participate in the Passover. There were many pressures operating to keep people from being too interested in Jesus and no doubt many would wish to remain secret disciples. But questions were being asked and the Chief Priests were aware of it. Matt. 22:41-45 tells us that after Jesus came to Jerusalem He put these wicked men on the spot by asking them in public the very questions the crowds were asking. Matthew then goes on with a whole chapter of Jesus' words denouncing the hypocrisy of the Pharisees in respect of their legalistic fastidiousness about cleansing and purity, while they were in the process of planning murder. It was an explosive situation Jesus came to.

[Back to Top](#)

12:1-8

Having set the scene and atmosphere of Jerusalem John now tells us of a very wonderful preparation Jesus had for the beginning of the last week of His earthly life. He was now heading deliberately for Jerusalem and the "crisis" of His death, and we find Him at the home of His friends in Bethany. The last time He had arrived there it was in the context of mourning and the deep disappointment of people He loved very dearly. The disciples were there and that means John speaks as an eye witness of the occasion. It was something of a celebration of the raising of Lazarus which had not been possible before (11:54). Such was their love and gratitude that they ignored the danger to their own persons (11:57). At the same time they were not foolish and it seems the supper was held at the house of Simon the leper who had been healed (Matt. 26:6). There is great drama in this situation. Jesus was aware of the momentous events now beginning to work out. Caiaphas had set his plans in motion. Judas, whose treachery was known to Jesus (13:27-28) but not to the others, was right there among the close friends of the Saviour. We do not think Judas was embarrassed. He was far too insensitive for that. Try to imagine the deep sense of alone-ness and loneliness that must have filled Jesus' heart. He was aware of the frailty of His disciples, their lack of spiritual perception regarding the need for and significance of His coming death, even though they had been told of it again and again (Mk. 8:31; 9:12,31). Jesus was also aware of their quarrelling among themselves as to who should take first place among them (Mk. 9:33-34). There may even have been something of a sense of gaiety among them as if they were going to a coronation rather than an execution. It was to be a glorious crowning, but not the way they thought. This was the context of the anointing by Mary.

[Back to Top](#)

12:1-8

The burden of our Lord's heart had not cast a shadow on the gathered company. No one was aware of the deep anticipation of the agony of the Cross except Mary. She alone among all the disciples seemed to grasp the significance of what was going to happen. She was not the only one who loved the Lord. Imagine the manifest devotion of Lazarus as he sat there by Jesus at the table. Look at Martha, busy serving without a word of complaint even though there must have been at least seventeen for the meal, compared with only four in Luke 10:38-42. Whether Martha was aware of Mary's thoughts and intentions we cannot say. Nor must we conclude that Martha was less spiritual than Mary or less sensitive. She was just different and expressed her devotion in different ways. But none of this detracts from the uniqueness and glory of what Mary did in this spontaneous and extravagant gesture which drew from Jesus a glorious commendation (Matt. 26:6-13) and which became the occasion of a sharp rebuke to the disciples. Jesus' words in v.7 have been variously translated and the RSV, speaking of keeping the ointment, seems strange in view of the fact that Mary broke the box (Mark 14:3). The verse seems to be Jesus' answer to the accusation that Mary had had no right to keep so long such a valuable commodity when it could have been sold for a good cause. Mary had kept it for Jesus' burial whether or not she knew that was very near. The point is that her love for the Saviour who was to die constrained her to give there

and then the most precious thing she possessed. Would we give our children for missionary service? Would we sacrifice the financial benefits of career? Would we even deny pleasure and fun for the sake of Christian duty? We must be careful not to criticise those who do.

[Back to Top](#)

12:1-8

Matt. 26:6-13 and Mk. 14:3-9 both tell this story and Lk. 7:36-50 tells of a completely different anointing which has the same theme of the response of love. Matthew and Mark both tell us that it was immediately after this incident that Judas went to bargain with the priests to betray Jesus. What a curse the love of money can be (1 Tim. 6:10). It afflicts those who have it and those who do not have it and few are good at dealing with it. Judas was not even honest with the funds of the disciples (6) and yet he felt himself very much in charge of all decisions about money. He regarded Mary's action as the waste of a year's wages of a working man. His thinking was all in terms of utility. Was it worth it? Was it good value? Was it a bargain? How many are like Judas, never doing a really generous or extravagant act in the whole of their lives? Many others, like Judas, are always telling others what they should do with their money. Did Judas give sacrificially to the poor? Quite the opposite according to v.6. What he used the money for we do not know, but all dedicated money, be it the offerings of poor or wealthy, must be used in a dedicated way. There must not even be the appearance of evil! Jesus' words in v.8 do not allow us to ignore the needs of the poor for there is social involvement required by the gospel. But the verse states priorities very clearly. Love must go to Jesus first and then, as an outflow, to the poor and needy. The second cannot ever be a substitute for the first and when people make it so they end up preaching "caring for the poor" as the way of salvation. Who are the poor? In the Bible the word "poor" is not used in the exclusive economic sense that we use it, but to denote the humble, poor in spirit, who look to God.

[Back to Top](#)

12:9-11

This is a sinister verse because it indicates how sin multiplies. The chief priests had resolved to kill Jesus. Now they see it necessary to kill Lazarus who was a vital witness to the person and power of Jesus. Soon they would have to kill the disciples who preached the resurrection and they would martyr Stephen. Once you set yourself against Jesus there is no stopping. J C Ryle has these comments to make on the story of Lazarus: "Curiosity is one of the most common and powerful motives in man. The love of seeing something sensational and out of the common way is almost universal. When people could see at once both the subject of the miracle and Him that worked the miracle, we need not wonder that they resorted in crowds to Bethany." Earlier in relation to the miracle Ryle says; "We are not told anything that Lazarus said about his state while in the grave, and nothing about his after history ... As to his silence, we can easily see there is a Divine wisdom about it. If St Paul 'could not utter' the things he saw in the third heaven, and called them 'unspeakable things' it is not strange that Lazarus should say nothing of what he saw in Paradise. (2 Cor. 12:4) But there may always be seen in Scripture a striking silence about the feelings of men and women who have been the subjects of remarkable Divine interposition. God's ways are not man's ways. Man loves sensation and excitement, and likes to make God's work on his fellow creatures a gazing-stock and a show, to their great damage. God almost always seems to withdraw them from the public, both for their own good and His glory."

[Back to Top](#)

12:12-19

At this point in the story we find Jesus, by a deliberate public action, forcing the issue and virtually compelling His enemies to take action to kill Him. He made no attempt to restrain the crowd as on former occasions because the people had no chance now to make Him a political Messiah. Death was too near and too sure. Both Matthew and John make plain that what Jesus did here was in fulfilment of Zech. 9:9. He presented Himself as the king come to deal with the usurping powers of the world of sin and to establish His kingdom of righteousness and life. On the face of it the King was welcomed with a great show of enthusiasm which disturbed and angered the Pharisees but which Jesus refused to silence (Lk. 19:39-40). However, we must note the different reactions to this significant Triumphal Entry. The disciples were bewildered and unperceptive, failing to grasp the spiritual truth being enacted before their eyes. The crowds of enthusiasts were drawn by the

immediate but superficial reaction to the miracle of the raising of Lazarus. Soon some other "event" would hit the headlines and the Lazarus story would be old news. The Pharisees recognised the power of a popular movement and had no desire to be part of it. If this was the King coming to His own for coronation, they had no desire to have Him. Little wonder that Luke records Jesus stopping on the Palm Sunday Road, weeping over the city whose Temple He could see so clearly, and proclaiming its downfall (Lk. 19:41-44). In the moment of His public presentation the King was rejected. He was not deceived by enthusiasm.

[Back to Top](#)

12:12-19

Every aspect of this event was prearranged and deliberate. Our Lord freely and sovereignly delivered Himself up to the Jerusalem situation. If we read Lk. 4:30; John 8:59; 18:6 and consider our earlier comments on John 11:9-10 we will see that no-one had power against Jesus. We see Him here totally in command of the situation and altogether at peace. It was no accident that He found the donkey (14) for we are told of the arrangement for this in Mk. 11:1-10. To ride on a donkey was, for the Jews, traditionally the mark of a great and even kingly man. Yet it is certain that none of the Roman authorities would have considered this man a danger to the political situation. For them it was a demonstration of peace and humility, not of war. To Israel, had they only recognised it, it was a message of comfort and hope, as Zechariah made plain. But note that even John, at the time, did not grasp the significance of what was before his eyes and he was one of the inner circle of Jesus' disciples. How gentle and non-judgmental we must be in dealing with true disciples, especially when they seem to be blind and unresponsive to something that is very obvious to us. John's comment in v.16 is very instructive, for it emphasises the work of the Holy Spirit in bringing to memory and to the understanding of faith things that have happened and sermons that have been heard a long time previously. This is an encouragement in evangelism when after much costly prayer there seems to be no fruit unto salvation. The seed of the Word has life in itself and by the quickening power of the Holy Spirit it can waken into life in the fulness of time. Have faith in God.

[Back to Top](#)

12:20-26

Without comparing the sequence of events as recorded by the other gospels, we note the link between the Pharisees' troubled comment (19) and the specific example of it in the coming of the Gentiles to seek Jesus. Here was the beginning of the new order of things and of the coming in of the "other sheep" Jesus had spoken of in 10:14-18. Here are enquirers brought by the Spirit of God through the influence and instrumentality of a dying system of religion. They were "outsiders" attracted to Jewish religion and coming to the feast. Already influence had touched them for they had learned something of the God of the Old Testament and all His gracious promises. It may not have been much, and it certainly was not "spiritual" but we are commanded not to despise the day of small things (Zech. 4:10). Certainly we underestimate the strategy and the working of God's prevenient grace. That grace is always at work long before we are ever aware of our need, let alone aware of the gospel or of our desire to respond to it. We are saved by grace, and that not of ourselves, it is the gift of God (Eph. 2:1-9). Salvation is all of God and every conversion is a total miracle. Note also the "chain" of instruments. The Greeks came to Philip. He went to Andrew. The two men went to Jesus. No individual except the Holy Spirit could claim the "credit" for bringing these seekers to Jesus. Why were they seeking? Had someone prayed? Had friends witnessed? Had there been earlier influence in their lives? God's ways are past finding out. Think of these things in relation to your conversion and ponder the words of the old hymn, "And while I passed my Saviour by, His love laid hold on me." Many who sing that enthusiastically resent being called Calvinists. But the Bible makes plain that salvation is God's work.

[Back to Top](#)

12:20-26

We are not actually told by John that the Greeks were granted an interview. The words in v.23-26 could have been addressed to the disciples, to the Greeks, or to the crowd in general. If it was to the Greeks it was an unusual "gospel" sermon. When Jesus referred to His being glorified He was not referring simply to His death on the Cross, although He went on to speak of that. If we read John 12:16 and Luke 24:26 we see that the glory

came after the suffering and death. Of course we must never separate the two (Phil. 2:6-11). Death and resurrection go together in the work of salvation and in the life of fruitful discipleship, as Jesus made plain in v.24-26. There is no easy way to the victory of Christ's kingdom. It is by way of willing self-sacrifice. That is the way the Master went and the servants must tread it also. Death works in us and life in others. That is how Paul expressed it in 2 Cor. 4:12. This is what it means to be a disciple. It is costly but it is also the way of fellowship with Jesus. All who walk that road will be with Jesus, and the Father will honour them. Yes, there is rich blessing in the life of discipleship but it is still the way of the Cross and of dying to self in a multitude of ways. Read 2 Cor. 4:7-12 and see this in practical, daily terms. But note how Paul looks at more than the immediate suffering. That is what Jesus does here. It is all about fruitful life. It is not for nothing. It may be that Jesus was thinking here of Isa. 53:10 (AV) which speaks of the Saviour being made an offering for sin *and* seeing His seed. When Jesus saw these Greeks and the joy set before Him He was ready to endure the Cross (Heb. 12:2).

[Back to Top](#)

12:27-36a

John does not record the story of Gethsemane but the words of Jesus here are very similar to His prayer in the Garden. There is no suggestion at all that Jesus wavered even for a moment in His obedience to the Father's will but it does mean that a sense of the deep horror of His approaching death to pay the price of sin bore in upon Him. Remember that in Gethsemane He used the words, "If it be possible ... nevertheless ... Thy will be done." (Matt. 26:39) What does it mean that the Lord of heaven and earth, the healer of sickness and master of death was troubled in His soul? The answer takes us into realms we cannot really understand. He was made sin for us, He who knew no sin (2 Cor. 5:21). It was not His own personal sufferings that caused His agony but the fact that the Lord laid on Him the iniquity of us all (Isa. 53:6). This is the burden of sin, and it is heavy indeed. In our little degree of advance into sanctification we begin to feel the sinfulness of sin. But what can it have meant to Him who knew no sin (1 John 3:5)? Ryle in his commentary points out the comfort to us in this troubled heart of Jesus. Inward conflict is not necessarily in itself a sinful thing. The fact of an inward battle between flesh and spirit is not a sign that we are not converted or not spiritual. It may well signify the very opposite. Consider Jesus, and consider Him well, for this whole passage on discipleship is teaching us deeply about the fellowship of His sufferings.

[Back to Top](#)

12:27-36a

Note here the clear mental grasp Jesus had of His high and holy calling which He accepted so willingly from all eternity, together with the feelings of awe, disturbance and fear. This is true humanity. At times the pressure of pain seemed to blot out everything else. But even here our Lord turned to His Father and yielded to His perfect will. It was for this hour when sinners were in fact seeking Him that He had come into the world and, as He would say later, for their sakes He consecrated Himself, giving Himself to God (17:19). Remember all this when you are going through the trials of experience. He has shared the pain and He points you to the fruitful issue (24). When Jesus prayed, "Glorify thy name," He was saying, "Do what you will and what is necessary so that your name will be glorified." Is this what Paul was thinking about in Phil. 1:20? We cannot explain the miracle of the Father's voice but sense in it the wonderful nearness of the Father to the son and His pleasure in Him. The statement of the Father in v.28b is beyond our understanding. God has been glorified in all the history of creation and right down the story of mankind. Now He was to be glorified in His work of redemption. And in the fulness of time the earth would be filled with the glory of God (Isa. 11:9; 1 Cor. 15:24-28 AV). The crowd were baffled. Some explained the voice in materialistic terms and some in terms of angels. Most people are out of their depth when God is at work.

[Back to Top](#)

12:27-36a

Jesus explained what it was all about (30). The voice from heaven was a sign to the people, who were always asking for signs, rebuking their unbelief and calling them to listen carefully and to take seriously all that was being said. In a very short time Jesus would die and be buried, and it would seem that the world order of evil

had been victorious. We are compelled to think here of the world situation as it really is under a dark and powerful Satanic dominion (1 John 5:19; Eph. 2:2; 6:12). Now, in the death of the Son of God there was to be a final judgment passed on the whole order of things which had prevailed since the disaster of the Garden of Eden whereby sin and death spread to all mankind (Rom. 5:12). But it was not to be judgment merely in the negative sense for there was to be reformation and renewal. The long reign of sin (Rom. 5:21; 6:14) was to be brought to an end and the usurper prince of the world was going to be dealt with fully, finally and openly (Col. 2:15). If we do not grasp these glorious facts regarding the Cross then we fail to grasp the glory of the Gospel. When Jesus died and rose again something decisive and irreversible was done, the issue of which is still being worked out until at last, at the Second Coming of Christ, Satan's final binding and dismissal to his own place will happen (Rev. 20:10; Matt. 25:41). Satan may still operate in the world and is allowed to do so in the over-ruling providence of God, but the fact remains that no believer need live under the dominion of sin and Satan any more. We have the promise of God to this effect in Rom. 6:14. Satan and His kingdom have been overthrown.

[Back to Top](#)

12:27-36a

Do not weary of the detailed study of these verses. Ponder well their significance for they are practical. Some suggest there may be a reference here to Jesus' words in Lk. 11:14-22. Let it be said clearly: Jesus is stronger than sin, Satan, death, the world, the past, the present or the future, and all things visible and invisible (Rom. 8:38-39; Col. 1:15-17). When Jesus spoke of His being lifted up the people seemed clear as to His meaning and would have thought of Num. 21:8-9; cf. John 3:14-15. In the light of all Scripture teaching and Jesus' own words about men dying in their sins (John 8:24) we cannot make v.32 mean universal salvation. All will not be saved, but men and women of all nations will be drawn. Never lose the spirit of expectation, because from the most unexpected places Christ will draw His people for salvation by His sovereign grace. Only He can do it (6:44) and Father, Son and Holy Spirit are at one in the work of salvation (16:8). But it is all done in the context of the preaching of the Gospel and the heralding of Christ as the only Saviour of sinners (Acts 4:12). Strictly speaking there may not be reference here to the "lifting up" of Jesus in the preaching of the Gospel but it is almost impossible not to think about it. How clear we must be that in the business of preaching, witnessing and praying we are in fact involved in the glorious work of salvation. *We do not do the work. It is God alone who has power* (1 Cor. 3:6). But we are His servants and instruments and must see to it that we never get in His way. How we should pray that God would do His regenerating work in the hearts of dead sinners so that they will hear and believe the gospel.

[Back to Top](#)

12:27-36a

How blind and hard in unbelief people can be even when they are steeped in Scripture! How easily people can grasp the parts of Scripture that appeal to them and reject out of hand what cuts across carnal wilfulness, calling them to service and sacrifice. These Jews had grasped the eternity of the promised Christ (Isa. 9:7; Ps. 110:4; Ezek. 37:25; Dan. 7:13-14; Micah 4:7) and they perversely concluded that since Jesus had declared His coming death He could not possibly be Messiah. They had failed totally to grasp the idea of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 53. But we too can be very blind about many Bible doctrines; for example, the Second Coming, and live as if they were not true. Like the Jews, we too make use of theological discussions in order to evade the challenge of discipleship. Sometimes when we say we cannot understand, we understand only too well, we see what the implications are, and we retreat into verbal quibbling. Note here that Jesus did not enter the argument but issued a warning not to trifle because opportunity slips away very quickly. Remember what was said earlier about men preferring darkness to light (3:19). To respond to *the* light is to have the light of life (8:12; 9:5) and causes us to become children of light (Eph. 5:8). But to neglect the present opportunities of light leads to darkness overtaking us, and when that happens the whole of life is confusion and uncertainty. Walk in the light (1 John 1:5ff) with nothing to hide. This is life and peace and hope.

[Back to Top](#)

12:36b-43

This marks the end of John's account of the *public* ministry of Jesus. From this point Jesus concentrated on teaching His chosen disciples, preparing them for a future dimension of Christian service far beyond their wildest imaginations. In v.37-41 we have a statement about the deliberate, chosen, hardness of unbelief and its terrible consequences. In v.37 they refused to believe in spite of all the signs and wonders Jesus had done. This is something we must face in all our evangelistic work. From the first time they hear the gospel some will be hardened against it. The same ministry in the same congregation among the same people will draw some gloriously to salvation and discipleship and will seal and confirm others in judgment (2 Cor. 2:15-16). It has always been so. John quotes Isaiah 53 in support of his charge of unbelief and goes on from that same passage to make plain that the refusal to believe leads to inability to believe. Whatever is not of faith is sin (Rom. 14:23) and sin comes to judgment. When people refuse to receive Christ (1:11) they refuse the entry of light and remain in darkness (3:19) and in their state of condemnation (3:18). Persistent unbelief does not invalidate the message or the messenger, for they are authenticated by the fruit they produce. But the arm of the Lord revealed and refused leaves unbelief guilty and without excuse (Rom. 1:20). To think of people, especially religious, favoured and instructed people, living in a. condition of judicial blindness is indeed a solemn thought. Having been given over justly to this state because of persistent sin they cannot now believe.

[Back to Top](#)

12:36b-43

Yesterday's solemn words about unbelief can be linked with Gen. 6:3. God will not always strive and plead, for the time comes when He gives people over to a reprobate mind (Rom.1:21-28). Nevertheless, in that kind of situation, we are told here that many, even among the rulers and leaders, believed in Christ. But they did not confess Him openly because of the possible consequences. They were afraid they would be rejected and be no longer acceptable in the world of religion. What can we say of such people? Are they simply "head" believers rather than "heart" believers? It is not possible for us to judge. After all, Nicodemus was a secret believer for a long time, as was Joseph of Arimathea, and perhaps they were despised by the "disciples". But when the crunch came the two secret believers were the only men who did not run away. Judge nothing before the time and be prepared to believe that there is much going on in people's hearts that we know nothing about. Dare we criticise them for not taking a stand? Have we always stood out clearly for Christ? Have we not let pressures from people important to us influence us unduly? To be put out of the synagogue was a disaster for a Jew and would make him an outcast indeed. Granted these people were too influenced by fear of man which is a snare (Prov. 29:25) and too desirous of man's praise rather than God's. But who are we to cast the first stone? Were these secret disciples happy? They knew too much about Jesus to be at peace in the world, yet loved the world too much to be of use to Jesus in glorious service. They lost out on both accounts. How sad! Perhaps their day came later. We should pray much for the undecided and fearful. It will do them more good than criticism.

[Back to Top](#)

12:44-50

This strong and forthright declaration by Jesus seems designed to encourage and bring assurance to faith, and to rebuke and challenge unbelief. It is a passage so full of theological statement that it is quite beyond the scope of such notes as these to deal with it. In the first two verses there is the declaration of the unity of the Father and the Son. The Jews sought to reject Jesus in His identity and work and still claimed to be one with God the Father. It cannot be so. Everyone who is of God will come to Jesus (6:44-45) and this is the challenge to "nice and kind" people who will have nothing to do with the Saviour. The eternal divinity of Christ is also declared in v.45; cf. 14:8-10. On the one hand no man can ever "see" God but on the other hand God is manifest in flesh (1 Tim. 3:16) in the Person of the Son, who is the exact likeness and full expression of the Father (Heb. 1:1-3; Col. 1:15-20). In v.46 we have the decisiveness of the whole movement of grace in the coming of the Light of the world. Think of this verse in relation to the darkness of immediate experience that would soon overtake the disciples. Note also how this passage which concluded Jesus' public ministry summarises the whole of the gospel thus far. Twelve chapters have been used to expound the prologue (1:1-14). This declaration about the coming of light makes plain that the world, apart from Christ, is in darkness because of the power of sin and Satan (Acts 26:18; 1 Pet. 2:9).

[Back to Top](#)

12:44-50

In v.47 we sense echoes of Matt. 7:24ff. It is possible to hear Jesus' words, to agree with His teaching, to rejoice in it and even to be blessed by it, without ever coming to saving faith. It is spiritual and moral obedience that signify that faith is present. Converts must become disciples, and disciples servants, and servants soldiers. He who endures to the end shall be saved (Matt. 10:22). If we love the Saviour we will keep His commandments (John 14:15). But the person who stands in the disobedience of unbelief stands in the place of judgment, for he rejects Christ. The judgment is not yet come. Jesus stands among people to save them and He calls them to repentance and faith. But the day of final judgment will surely come and on that day the Word of Christ, so full of grace and truth (1:14) and so attractive (Luke 4:22) will be the very thing to condemn and judge. This Word which Jesus spoke came from and is rooted in the authority of the Father. Irresistibly we are drawn into the presence of the eternal God and faced with the question of what we have done with Jesus Christ and His gracious words of salvation. To stand as a disobedient unbeliever is to stand in the place of final judgment with nothing to say. "Let us remember that the holy boldness of this last verse should be a pattern to every minister and preacher of the gospel. Such a man ought to be able to say confidently, 'I know, and am persuaded, that the message I bring is life everlasting to all who believe it; and that in saying what I do. I say nothing but what God has showed me in His Word.'" (J C Ryle)

[Back to Top](#)

13:1-5

From this point on, the story is concerned with Jesus and His chosen disciples. The clamouring crowds, so often thinking only in terms of this world and the answering of immediate needs, fade into the background. The bitter opponents are silenced and out of sight. In material that none of the other gospel writers give, we read of close personal fellowship and communion between Jesus and the men to whom He was about to commit His work on earth. Here then is ministry to believers who are described as "His own" whom He loved. This is marvellous considering the kind of men they were. Jesus knew their complexity, pride and confusion. He knew they would deny and fail Him and in a sense break His heart as well as their own (Lk. 22:61-62). But He loved them without exception, hesitation or qualification. Judas was there. Never forget that. But He was not one of Jesus' "own". We cannot speak of Judas as being given to Jesus by the Father. But turn to the other disciples, all on edge, concerned who should be first, far more aware of each other than of their Lord. There was no thought in their hearts as to what He was about to suffer nor of what they could do to minister to Him, as Mary had done with the box of ointment. Were any of them, apart from Jesus, aware of the proximity of Satan and of the immediacy of his evil action? Would not their insensitivity pierce the heart of Jesus? Had they no sense of His utter aloneness? Did they not see that their attitude to each other was depriving Him of fellowship when He needed it? Did they not sense that they were in need of last minute preparation for an impending crisis? They were in a bad way, but Jesus loved them.

[Back to Top](#)

13:1-5

This seems to be the only reference John makes to the Lord's Supper and his silence is a warning to all who would make the sacrament the foremost and central thing in the life of the church. Judas was there. Judas had earlier been sent out on a mission (Mk. 6:7). Judas was treasurer and possibly caterer to the band of disciples. Judas had already made his decision for the Devil. But the dominant note is that Jesus knew His hour had come. He was aware also (3) of the great dignity and true majesty of His person and work. He was indeed pre-eminent (Col. 1:18), King of Kings and Lord of Lords, and He took the place of the humblest servant and washed the disciples' feet (cf. Phil. 2:5ff). One commentator speculates that when they first sat down Peter washed Jesus' feet (he would want to show off - he always did) and then sat down expecting one of the others to do the rest of the washing. But they all followed Peter's example of pride and grabbed their places. In that atmosphere Jesus rose and without saying anything began to carry out this gracious act of Eastern hospitality. It was the self-emptying act of the One who was the Servant of God. It was a wonderful example of humility that should deliver us from the carnal desire for prominence and make us ever willing to do the smallest service with glad

devotion. Jesus went on to teach His men a great deal about cleansing and that is a great subject. We have spoken of it earlier, referring to 1 John 1:5-2:1 and we do well to read the great penitential Psalm of David (Ps. 51). Lest we get preoccupied with our own spirituality as the disciples did, let us remember that there are those near to us, whose lives are stained and who have no-one but us to help them wash and be clean (2 Kings 5:13).

[Back to Top](#)

13:6-11

Does v.6 suggest that Jesus washed the feet of several of the disciples before He came to Peter? Does that suggest Jesus was showing Peter he was not to think of himself as being the first in importance? Had Jesus knelt at Judas' feet, looking up into his face and meeting the steely look of a hard and impenitent heart? To what extent all the disciples were embarrassed or ashamed we cannot tell, but Peter was the first to speak. His words show how out of his depth he was and how far he was from understanding. He may well have been trying to indicate to Jesus (and to the others) that *he* would not allow the Master to do such a humble service and he seems to have pushed Jesus away. How subtle and persistent is pride! Jesus' words in v.7 are full of grace and apply to so many experiences of life. How we need to learn to trust Jesus, because His ways with us though mysterious are never merciless, and though baffling are never designed to break us but to lead us on into blessing. Peter, seeing and considering only the immediate incident, acted on his assumed spirituality and declared himself in radical protest and refusal. Jesus' quiet answer was stern warning and reproof, for the issue here is not just the feet-washing but the whole humiliation of the Son of God for His work of redemption. To refuse to submit to that is to have no part in God at all. This shook Peter, but instead of being quiet so that he might learn the lesson Christ was teaching, he rocketed to the other extreme and asked for a total physical washing. Poor Peter! He was so genuine, yet his restless emotions caused him to react so often in a way that hindered his spiritual growth.

[Back to Top](#)

13:6-11

Peter first refused what Jesus proposed to do and then he demanded more than Jesus offered. How he needed to let his foolish pride be still. Why should any of us ever try to dictate to our Lord what He should do and how He should do it? Do we not trust Him? But note the teaching here. It is all about washing, a once-for-all washing that makes people clean, and a repeated washing that keeps them clean. In v.8, keeping in mind that it is our Lord's whole work of redemption that is in view, we have the washing and justification which is salvation (1 Cor. 6:9-11), and in v.10 we have that repeated washing away of the dust gathering on the feet in the daily journeys of life (1 John 1:7-9). What a gospel we have: once for all justification and daily cleansing. Once we are in Christ there is no condemnation (Rom. 8:1) but if we say we never sin we deceive ourselves. Yet the word of grace is always "Wash and be clean" (2 Kings 5:13; Isa.1:18). They were sharers in what Jesus had done for them. But not all in that company so close to Jesus were clean. Judas was the exception and Jesus knew it to be so. Think how the disciples would later grasp the truth of what Jesus had said and would realise that all along He knew about Judas and his intentions. This should take away from us all false ideas about the "tragedy" of the Cross. Our Lord died willingly, freely and deliberately. His knowledge of and about Judas, together with His declining here to name him, expose him or stop him should reassure us greatly. The presence of evil, even at the heart of the work, is no cause for panic.

[Back to Top](#)

13:12-17

Jesus now taught His disciples the lesson of what He had just done in taking the place of the humblest servant of all. These were the men destined and being prepared to exercise authority and leadership in the work of the Kingdom of God. Up to a point they were aware of this. They had some sense of destiny but it had gone to their heads for they had been arguing as to which of them was the greatest. They had yet to learn just how weak helpless and hopeless they were in and by themselves. The events of the crucifixion and their defection would do that for them. But here they were given the glorious example of their Lord. If the Son of God humbled Himself to be the servant of those who did not deserve to be ministered to, and if He showed His dedication to the Father's will in such a practical way as this, in caring for others, how much more must the disciples. Only

those who have learned to serve are capable of leading. Only those who are willing to be nothing for Jesus' sake can ever be anything worthwhile. Peter learned this lesson eventually and never forgot it (1 Pet. 5:1-6). It was taught by Jesus (Lk. 18:9-14) and is urged upon us by Paul (Phil. 2:5-8). How important it is not to think of ourselves more highly than we ought (Rom. 12:3). Read Jesus' words in Matt. 20:20-28 and consider the words of Matheson's hymn: "Make me a captive, Lord." It is all very searching and very practical. It is in the common business of daily life that we prove our Christ-likeness, especially when what we do is not appreciated.

[Back to Top](#)

13:18-30

There is everything here; divine assurance and foreknowledge; heavenly reassurance to the disciples; the deep troubled humanity of our Lord and His total aloneness in the outworking of the plan of redemption. We see the close proximity of tender loyal love and the hard calculating ruthlessness of the betrayer and also the specifically timed command to Judas and his departure into the dark night of the soul. This was no time for the disciples to be thinking of thrones and position. But in spite of His disciples' dullness of spirit Jesus made it plain that He knew them through and through and still held them as His own; all of them except one. Did these words chill the heart of Judas? We cannot tell. Did Jesus' words comfort the disciples? We cannot tell. But we are told that the importance of this particular "sermon" was not in respect of the immediate situation but for the future. That is something to remember. You may not feel a sermon or daily study note has anything for your personal situation at the time. Store up the truth in your heart for the time that is to come, and the Holy Spirit will bring it to your remembrance (John 14:26). Jesus was even more specific (19) for He indicated the glorious lesson they would learn. They would fix their hearts on the person of the Son of God and, recognising who and what He was, they would be reassured. They would also realise that they were in fact the personal ambassadors of the King of Kings (20), whose work would decide people's destinies.

[Back to Top](#)

13:18-30

As you read this story of Judas remember that apart from their brief conversation in Gethsemane this was the last time Jesus spoke with this man. Judas was dead before Jesus died, and he died in his sins, full of remorse, but without hope. He went out from the presence of Jesus into the darkness of eternal night. How we need to pray for those who, living in the presence of Jesus and His disciples and hearing His gracious words, yet never come to Him in faith and surrender. God grant that we will never lose the urgency of the gospel. Now is the day of salvation. Tomorrow may be too late. We see in Jesus here confirmation that the Lord has no pleasure in the death of the wicked (Ezek. 18:23,32; 33:10-11). In spite of His full assurance regarding the work He was to do, Jesus was totally human, feeling the agony of Judas' tragedy and treachery and at the same time aware of His own responsibility for His disciples. Our Lord's control over all things is very clear. Judas had not been allowed to know the location of the upper room until now lest he organised a secret arrest and precipitated a premature crisis. Nor were the disciples allowed to grasp the significance of what was taking place (28-29). Their reactions would have been too emotional. Peter was deliberately kept from knowing the identity of the traitor and we can imagine his agitated efforts to discover the information. It was not accidental that Peter was some places away from Jesus, and that alone must have vexed him, especially when he saw the closeness of John (23). But if Peter had known about Judas there would have been a fracas, perhaps even an attempted murder. Peter could never leave things to work out. [Back to Top](#)

13:18-30

We stay with these verses to consider the enemy of our souls, and in doing so we remind ourselves of the glorious, unchanging love of Jesus for His own (1). In the story of Judas we cannot tell exactly by what process he ended up in the clutches of the Devil. There is a tremendous downward movement from v.2 to v.27, and Matt. 26:25 emphasises both the terribleness and the deliberate nature of Judas' actions. How we need to pray with the Psalmist, "Search me, O God ..." (Ps. 139:23-24). All Jesus' warnings and appeals had failed to keep Judas from becoming totally hardened and a willing accomplice of the Devil. We can never say just what Judas' thoughts and motives were and it is best not to speculate. However it is quite clear that there was a blindness in his mind and soul, for when the realisation came as to the true nature of what he had been instrumental in there

was desolation and remorse. We may not say there was repentance, for Judas went to the priests not to Jesus or the disciples, and it is usually significant who we go to in crisis times. Judas was shattered by the way his masters cast him off in total indifference (Matt. 27:3-5). But that is the way of the Devil. He makes use of people, promising all manner of fulfilment as he did in Eden, and then casts them on the refuse heap. Just as there is a progress and confirmation in faith, so there is a process and confirmation in unbelief and disobedience. Matthew, Mark and Luke record Judas' final act of treachery in the kiss (Matt. 26:47-50; Mk. 14:43-45; Lk. 22:47-48). Luke also records the wonderfully comforting words to Peter, "Satan has desired ... but I have prayed for you..." (Lk. 22:31-32).

[Back to Top](#)

13:31-35

Following yesterday's note we could get lost in speculation to no profit at all, asking if Jesus prayed for Judas or if he was a man ordained to destruction, as the others were ordained to life eternal. The mystery of iniquity remains, as does the fact of human responsibility and the comforting fact of eternal election. John, writing here by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit many years after the event, does not disentangle the strands of the mystery but leaves the clear picture of human decision and sovereign purpose. We must accept, both in their biblical context, recognising that to go further in logical deduction than Scripture does is to distort both aspects. One thing is clear. From the moment Judas departed the atmosphere in the upper room changed radically. There was a new liberty and buoyancy and the introduction of some of the most wonderful teaching in the Bible. Jesus spoke of His coming death in terms of glory for both the Father and the Son. Judas had been sent to do his work and the Son of God now proceeded to His work. In doing so He reassured His disciples again by speaking of the Cross in terms of a work of glory. Read Acts and the Epistles and see how the apostles grasped the truth of this eventually (Acts 2:32-33; Phil. 2:9-11; Eph. 1:20-23; Gal. 6:14). When Jesus spoke of the glory of God, would not these men, steeped in the Old Testament, recall passages of significance? Think of the pillar of cloud and fire signifying the presence of the God of redemption among His people.

[Back to Top](#)

13:31-35

At such a solemn and significant moment as this Jesus referred to His disciples by the very affectionate name, "little children". He was aware of their vulnerability but He was neither angry nor impatient. He was asking for their close attention because very soon He would leave them. They must not think He had abandoned them in indifference, nor must they think they could follow Him closely in the immediate things that were to happen. These disciples would be well aware that Jesus regarded them in a different way from the unbelieving Jews. They would miss their Master more than they realised but He was preparing them, giving them final exhortations, and a new commandment to love one another in the way and to the extent that He had loved them. The significance of the words would register later and they would remember that Jesus had loved them in their stupidity, misunderstanding and failure. What an incentive this is to patience and forbearance with one another! But Jesus went further. He declared that by their love for one another it would be evident to society that they were in fact men who had been taught by Jesus and who had walked in His company. All the gifts they might ever have or cultivate, human or charismatic (if such a distinction is valid or necessary); all their activities, personality, popularity or persecution; all their individual or united efforts would count for nothing apart from love. Read 1 Cor. 13, especially J B Phillips' translation. The fruit of the Spirit is a many-sided grace beginning with love.

[Back to Top](#)

13:36-38

How difficult it was for Peter to be quiet. How unwilling he was to accept the gracious discipline of restraint. How constantly he confused his spiritual life of discipleship by yielding to the immediate impulse of his emotions. We know he loved the Lord, wanted to serve Him, had the best intentions, and meant all he said. But he was emotionally immature, unstable and unreliable and he had no idea of his own limitations. He was too sure of himself spiritually. He would not listen to wise counsel. Neither had he any idea of the depth of the issues being worked out, nor any awareness although he had been told so often, that there was a work to be done

which Jesus must do totally and utterly alone. Peter and his fellow disciples just could not grasp that "defeat" and death were vital elements in the great victory about to be accomplished. Very soon after this we find Peter in Gethsemane, first of all asleep when he should have been awake and then waving a sword around when he should have been submissive. How we must all learn that even our best desires must be submitted to the wise over-ruling providence of God. The truth was that Peter was not ready to go the way of the Cross. He was willing, as he declared (37), but he was not ready. There were things he had to go through yet which would teach him a lot. Before we can run we must learn to walk; before that we must learn to kneel. That is a good place from which to survey the wondrous Cross.

[Back to Top](#)

14:1-7

Don't let the familiarity of these verses rob you of their blessing and do not let their application be postponed to Heaven. Jesus was exercising here His private ministry to the disciples in relation to their present situation and future prospects. They were about to move into that desolating day between the Cross and the Resurrection; a day of anguished feeling, personal shame and deep demoralisation. In that context Jesus said, "Let not your heart be troubled." The fact that troubling things were to come does not invalidate the command of Jesus and some commentators suggest there are no less than ten reasons given throughout this chapter to back up the command. It is a comprehensive command, not just a piece of advice. Let not your hearts be any more troubled, agitated, confused and tossed about. Now, one thing that contributed to their unsettled condition was their love for Jesus; and they could not see how things could possibly work out for good. Their faith had to be confirmed, and Jesus did so by challenging them to believe, to trust, to keep on trusting, and to get their minds fixed upon God, His glorious purposes and His sovereign power to accomplish them. Read Deut. 33:27-29; Isa. 26:1-4; 43:1-3. Recall, as the disciples must have done at times, the stilling of the storm on Galilee by the command of the Prince of Peace (Mk. 4: 35- 41). Think of Paul's counsel to let the peace of God rule in our hearts so that it has the final word in every situation (Col. 3:15). Read his words to the church at Philippi about peace which keeps hearts and minds and enables believers to rejoice (Phil. 4:4-7). The disciples were soon to learn that the day would break and the shadows would flee away.

[Back to Top](#)

14:1-7

On the ground of His own triumph Jesus commanded His men to have no fear. He directed their hearts to the Father's house; not to an upper room which a traitor had invaded, nor to a room with doors locked because of fear (20:19), but to the very dwelling place of God. Later, they would remember how He had said there was a place for them, so that they would not be embarrassing guests received and squeezed in just for decency's sake. They would take their places, not with visitors' visas but by right of a heavenly birth-certificate (1:12-13; cf., Eph. 2:18-19). Note how Jesus was telling them that their future would be sure (2-3) because it was in His hands. We tend to speak of the "unknown future" and indeed we do not know what a day may bring (Prov. 27:1; Jas. 4:13-15) nor how many days we have left (Ps. 90:9-10). But the future is not unknown to our Lord and Saviour, whether we speak of ultimate destiny or the various stages and experiences of the journey. In an eastern caravan journey the master, when he had decided they had travelled far enough for one day, would send a scout on ahead to prepare the resting place for the night and then to come back and lead them to it. The disciples might well recall how two of their number had been sent to prepare the upper room and how they had found everything working out as Jesus had said. How quick we are to doubt and fear. There is no need.

[Back to Top](#)

14:1-7

We must still consider Thomas's words of doubt which follow directly from Jesus' statement in v.4, for they express the feelings of all the disciples. In spite of all they had been taught they were still confused and uncertain. What they dreaded most was this coming separation from Jesus and they would have done anything to prevent it. But the thing they dreaded was the very way to blessing. Thomas was naturally despondent, always looking on the black side (11:16; 14:5; 20:24ff), and eventually he had to be rebuked. But here there was

no rebuke, for our Lord seemed aware that Satan had confused their minds and dulled their hearts, not least by human sorrow in the face of His approaching death. If they had only taken time to think they would have recalled former teaching and soon Jesus would speak of the Spirit's work in bringing truth to mind (14:25-26). Here, He declared that He was the way to God and to the place prepared for them. If you know Jesus you know the way; all you have to do is follow. Jesus is the truth, the explanation, interpretation and fulfilment of all things. Even when we feel dry and dead, Christ is our life (Col. 3:3; Gal. 2:20). Jesus is the way of salvation, the truth of salvation and the life of salvation, and without Him no one comes to God. He is the only door and there is no other name by which we can be saved. There is no warrant at all for the modern heresy that all religions teach the same thing. There is only one way to heaven. In v.7 we have a statement of profound truth. All that God is and has and has to say and give is summed up in His Son Jesus Christ (Heb. 1:1-3; Col. 1:15-20).

[Back to Top](#)

14:8-11

If Thomas wanted to be sure about the future, Philip wanted to be sure about God the Father. Here is another confused disciple who should have known better and who was gently teased by Jesus about his poor spiritual perception. We cannot but contrast this picture of Philip with the glorious certainty, obedience and biblical expertise of Philip the deacon in Acts 8:26-40. Do not fail to be encouraged by what the Lord can make of His disciples. Peter the denier became the great apostolic preacher. Here Philip may have been asking for a "theophany", some visible manifestation of God, such as Moses received at the burning bush (Ex. 3:2ff), or some drawing back of the curtain to be shown the glory of God, as Moses asked for in Ex. 33:18ff. There may just be a hint that Philip had heard something of the transfiguration and the wonder of it (Matt. 17:1ff).

Whatever prompted the request the answer was astonishing. Philip's request had already been granted, not in one flash of revelation, but over months in tangible terms as he had walked with and listened to Jesus. Philip was being told to think back over all he had seen Jesus doing: calming the storm, raising the dead, healing the sick, showing compassion to the needy, caring for the children and rebuking hypocrisy and cruelty alike. This is what God is like. Listen to the words and look at the works of Jesus. This is far more the ground of faith than any marvellous revelation that may thrill, stun and overpower the senses. Remember how in the temptation Jesus stood His ground in the written Word. What an example!

[Back to Top](#)

14:12-14

Note how the previous verses have done two specific things: they have emphasised in language quite beyond us the mysterious union between the Father and the Son, and they have called us to faith. In Christ all the fulness of the Father dwells and is revealed. The moment we turn away from Christ we begin to make our own "images" and "ideas"

of God. Jesus declares the truth about the Father and calls His men to believe; to take Him at His word, and if they stumble at that, then to believe Him on the lesser basis of having seen the mighty works He had done. Then, in the next breath, Jesus must have staggered His men who were so full of uncertainty, by declaring that even greater works would be done by them. Just when they were feeling all was virtually finished, Jesus declared things were just beginning. The work was to go on and to increase far beyond what had already been seen and *they* were to be the instruments of it. From now on, because Jesus was going to the Father, there was to be neither localisation nor limitation of His work. His power would take them up and use them, and there was to be no limit to what God would do through them. Think how soon people would say that these very disciples were turning the world upside down (Acts 17:6 AV). The disciples themselves would learn that the Son of God's power was in no way bound to or limited by His bodily presence in the world. They discovered "success" on the day of Pentecost, with thousands converted in a way they had never known before. That work is still going on.

[Back to Top](#)

14:12-14

The call to faith leads on to a summons to prayer. A whole world of Christian service waits for us to learn to pray. Possibilities become actualities only when we pray. No prayer means no power (Matt. 17:14-21 AV) and

fasting is much more of a dying to self than the mere denial of food. To sacrifice an hour's sleep or idle chat in order to pray is more costly than to miss a meal. Jesus' words here are not a blank cheque for self-indulgent spirituality, nor for extravagant petitions. But there must be a spirit of expectation in our prayers and also a willingness to accept that God may answer in ways that we do not expect and also that at times He may not allow us to know that there has been an answer. It has all to do with faith. We must be content to be left in obscurity so long as God is glorified. To pray in Jesus' name is not simply to tag the phrase on at the end of the prayer. We sometimes pray in our own name, prompted by our own feelings, desires and hopes. To pray in Jesus' name is not just to plead all He is for free access to the throne of God (Heb. 4:14-16). It is more to kneel down beside Jesus and pray *with* Him. Taken up with Him and the wonder of His love and the perfection of His purposes, it is not hard to say, "Not my will, but Thine be done." Think of how the Holy Spirit helps us in our prayers, asking according to the Father's will, and lifting our prayers to heaven (Rom. 8:26-27). It is all so encouraging, not least in the assurance that the Lord will, in love, refuse us that which would harm us. However, there is the cautionary illustration in Ps. 106:15 AV.

[Back to Top](#)

14:15-17

Already in this chapter Jesus has spoken of faith and prayer, and a little time previously (13:34) He had emphasised the need for His disciples to love one another. At times we all feel it is easier to love the Lord than to love His people, but Jesus now makes it plain that to love Him is a very practical thing indeed. It has to do with a life of obedience. Protestations of love are not enough in themselves. Doing the will of God and delighting in it, this is true spirituality. Then, in v.16, Jesus seems to go on to say that it is to the obedient in heart and life that the gracious and beneficial blessing of the Holy Spirit is to be given. At the same time the words here are obviously meant to encourage and reassure the disciples who were fearful indeed at the prospect of having to cope with the future without the comforting, guiding and enabling presence of their Lord. In v.13-14 there was reference to the disciples' asking and in v.16 Jesus' prayer or request (a different word from v.13-14) was added by way of reassurance as to the outcome. Note here, as in many other places e.g. Rom. 8:26, 31, 34, that the whole eternal Trinity is involved in our salvation and life. With that kind of interest and backing how can we possibly fail? When Jesus speaks of "another" Counsellor, Comforter, Encourager, He is saying that the Spirit will be to His disciples all He was to them during His earthly companionship with them. But there would be this difference: the Holy Spirit would dwell *in* them.

[Back to Top](#)

14:15-17

There is no suggestion of difficulty in or doubt about Jesus' prayer to the Father for the Spirit to be given. Indeed in 16:7 it is Jesus who sends this "other" Counsellor just like Himself. The Holy Spirit is not a "power" or "influence" but a Divine Person. Therefore if we have Him we have all of Him, and as He is in us, so we are "in Him" (Rom. 8: 9-17). The Holy Spirit is spoken of here as Counsellor but the same word is translated "Advocate" in 1 John 2: 1-2. It is the word "paraclete", and speaks of the person, like Jesus in every respect, who is called to our side to help us in every situation. Of course an earthly advocate must wait to be invited by his client to take action, but his heavenly counterpart has the right of divine initiative. He does not even wait for us to get round to praying about the situation. He goes ahead. Hallelujah for that! It is no denial of human freedom, for He knows best what we truly desire long before our "feelings" about it are sorted out. Nor is the heavenly Advocate "stand-offish" in professional dignity although He is never cheaply common. He is "royal" in His behaviour and methods at all times, yet so "human" that He is indeed comforter as well as wonderful counsellor (Isa. 9:6). Christ is our heavenly Advocate, pleading our cause at God's right hand. And the Spirit is the Advocate within us, pleading the cause of Christ and advancing His interests in us and through us, always giving us "inside" information so that we live our lives on principles and facts the world can neither know nor understand. The Counsellor teaches, instructs, inspires, cautions and leads us on in the right way, always giving the power to obey and follow. To be a Christian is indeed to be a privileged persons.

[Back to Top](#)

14:18-24

These verses are really beyond exposition, rich in blessing, and abounding in sweetest encouragement. Imagine the expression on Jesus' face as He looked on these big strong men who were, in one sense, small frightened boys, and said to them, "I will not leave you desolate, like orphans with no one to look after you." He says again, "I will come to you," and this must refer to the coming of the Spirit for the whole passage is rich with the thought of continuing and ever deepening fellowship between Christ and His people. It is not fellowship dependent on the visible, physical presence of Jesus. It is by faith, and that means it is richer and fuller than the merely physical. Remember in the Emmaus story that the moment the disciples "recognised" Jesus physically, He disappeared, but the "nearness" they had known and the blessing they had experienced without recognising what it was at the time, remained (Lk. 24:28-35). Note the repeated emphasis on love, and the glorious intimacy spoken of in v.23. The Father and the Son not only desire the fellowship of their people, they feel totally at home and have no desire that it should be otherwise. In this sweet and holy atmosphere Judas (not Iscariot) asked a question which may have stemmed simply from confusion about "how" the Messiah would establish His kingdom (cf. Acts 1:6). It seems Judas was worried about manifestation to just the group of disciples. Why not a large-scale revelation? A show of power might even at that late hour turn the tables and eliminate the need for death and disgrace. If these were Judas' thoughts they echo the words of the tempter in Lk. 4:9ff. The Devil is never far away, and sadly disciples can be the mouthpiece.

[Back to Top](#)

14:25-31

Nothing was allowed to deter Jesus from His ministry of comfort, encouragement and preparation in respect of His disciples. After all, the future depended on them, humanly speaking. He urged them to hold seriously to the teaching they had been given, and He reassured them that the Holy Spirit would continue the ministry of instruction, not bringing forward new truth but bringing to remembrance and to practical understanding and application all that Jesus had told them. There is assurance here that we will not be left lacking anything essential in all our life of discipleship and service. The things we need to know we will be told. The truth still to be made manifest would be given by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit through the apostles and in the sovereign providence of God would be written down and preserved for all generations. However much we talk these days of being led by the Spirit into new truth, we must not be beguiled into thinking that there are new Scriptures to be given, nor that the Holy Spirit will ever lead us in a way that contradicts the Scriptures. God speaks with one voice from beginning to end. When it comes to matters of salvation, life and Christian service it is, "Back to the Bible!" If Christians studied the Scriptures more rigorously there would be far less confusion in the church and in evangelism, and far more accuracy in talking about doctrine and practice. When did you last read the Westminster Confession of Faith on the major issues of doctrine, or a Bible Dictionary on the Inspiration, the Authority and the Canon of Scripture? How well armed are we for witness in the unbelieving, scientific, immoral world of today?

[Back to Top](#)

14:25-31

We finished yesterday with a challenge but Jesus ends this section of teaching in the upper room with words of peace, comfort and assurance. To men commissioned to go out into an alien world, Christ's particular blessing is peace. In some ways this is the normal farewell word, as we would say, "God bless you," or "Every blessing". It may even have the thought of peace and prosperity as in Ps. 122:6-9. But it is not peace as the world thinks of it that Jesus gives, for that kind of peace is far too conditioned by and dependent on favourable circumstances. It is peace purchased and sealed by the blood of the Cross (Col. 1:20). It is everlasting peace, sure as Jehovah's name. It is peace with God, which makes the heart glad. It is peace which stands guard over heart and mind (Phil. 4:17). It is the gift of the God of peace who is also the God of power (Heb. 13:20). It is supernatural peace, given by the Prince of Peace, who has power to calm the storms now, just as He did so long ago (Mk. 4:39). There are times when rationally we ought to be anxious and tense, but we are not. This is the peace Jesus gives. At other times the storms roar and we may have no "sense" of peace. But the fact remains that our situation and all its issues are at peace because nothing has the power to separate us from the love of God or to

snatch us out of His good will for us (Rom. 8:37-39; John 10: 28-29). Not even our sins can prove stronger than the grace of the God of our salvation.

[Back to Top](#)

14:25-31

Anxiety always confuses disciples and leaves them at the mercy of their feelings. It is this that makes us fearful, saps our courage, turns us in on ourselves and causes us to lose that spiritual vision which alone is able to keep us going on in obedient service. We lapse into fear because we regard changes as necessarily bringing loss and limitation. But this is not so and Jesus gently challenged His disciples about their desire to hold on to Him and to circumstances as they were, failing to realise that His going away would not be loss but gain. For Jesus, it was a "going home" to the Father which they should not grudge Him. But this going home was not going to make them poorer, for He would come to them, and already He had told them that things were going to be "greater" than they had ever been before. That takes some believing, especially when you are feeling depressed, but it must be so since the work of God always progresses. It is never in reverse. The last part of v.28 has led to much theological argument. It cannot mean that Christ is "less" than God for the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are "the same in substance; equal in power and glory," (Shorter Catechism). Some say it refers to the fact that Christ is "equal to the Father as touching His Godhead, and inferior to the Father as touching his manhood." This makes the verse refer to our Lord's voluntary humiliation when He took the form of a servant (Phil. 2:5-8). There may also be emphasis here on the work of Christ which is to bring people to God (1 Pet. 3: 18; 1 Cor. 15:24). After all, man's chief end (including the Man, Christ Jesus, God's proper man) is to glorify God and to enjoy Him for ever.

[Back to Top](#)

14:25-31

One last study is needed here for each of the last three verses has a message. In v.29 we are told that all instruction is to enable us to stand by faith when the crisis of testing comes. This is when it becomes evident if we have learned our lessons well in the school of discipleship. In v.30 the true nature of all our conflict is pinpointed. We are not fighting against mere human foes or the inner corruption of our nature. It is spiritual warfare (Eph. 6:10ff). Never forget this. Jesus did not refer to Judas, the Pharisees and the Romans coming to kill Him, but to the real enemy of God and man. The Devil is no fiction, and he is called the prince of this world (1 John 5:19), who at one time offered Jesus all the kingdoms on certain conditions (Lk. 4:6-7). The Devil's right to make the offer was not questioned, but the offer was refused in a way that the first Adam failed to do (Gen. 3:1-7). When Satan came for this last, final assault he had no power over Jesus, he found no crack in His armour, no means of accusing or blackmailing Him. Jesus had no sin. What a testimony is here as to the sinlessness of Jesus! If there had been any flaws in Him His enemies would certainly have blazoned the fact abroad. But even Pilate had to admit there was no fault in Him (John 18:38; 19:4, 6). It is our business to see to it that the Devil is not given opportunity to gain ascendancy over us. In the last verse the words, "Come now; let us leave", may indicate that they rose from table and left the upper room or they may signify the initiative of Jesus in moving forward in love and obedience to do the Father's will. He did not seek to evade the issue. He says, "Let us go forward and meet the enemy."

[Back to Top](#)

15:1-11

There is much to be said for reading the whole of this familiar chapter at one sitting before trying to study it in detail. It is also necessary to think of the whole section of chapters 13-17 as belonging together and centred on the Upper Room. If chapters 13 and 14 speak of love, assurance and fellowship, this chapter speaks of service. And yet, the emphasis is on abiding rather than on activity. Jesus speaks of resting and remaining; being what we have been made, living branches together with others of God's vine. Christ Himself is the living, fruit-producing life; we together in Him are the branches whereby the fruit is manifested and from which it is harvested. The branches of themselves are nothing. They are the means whereby the fruit is brought forth. Jesus says two things can be done with branches. They can be cut off because they are useless or cut back because they are fruitful and are capable of producing even more fruit. The branches cannot be left to "go wild". They

need pruning. Dead wood cannot be left, and "suckers" must go because they not only produce nothing, they suck away vital life from the main plant and make the whole thing poorer than it need be. It is all very challenging, yet also encouraging. Think of the thrill of being a living branch in God's vine producing Christ-like fruit. There is no individualism here. All the branches belong together in the one living vine. They have one life and the fruit produced is the expression, through the branches, of the essential life of the vine. Jesus does not say He is the stem. He is the vine. He is everything, hidden roots, vital life, stem, branches, leaves and fruit. Yet Jesus also says we are the branches, necessary and vital. We are one with Him, united in His life, bearing fruit to the glory of God.

[Back to Top](#)

15:1-11

If, at this point, the group left the Upper Room, they may have gone outside the city wall where they would have seen the fields of vines and the fires where the farmers were spending the night. Or they may have gone to the Temple where, on the gate, they would have seen the carved vine, symbol of the national life of Israel. The disciples, well versed in the Old Testament, would have thought of Isa. 5:1-7ff. and perhaps recalled Jesus' words in Matt.21:33-43., Now, these men were being prepared for significant service, but their hearts were slow and the teaching about the indwelling Spirit given in chap.14 was hard for them to grasp. But ministry must not be limited to the immediate appetite or understanding, else the church would remain weak and enfeebled. Jesus went on to elaborate His teaching regarding fruitful service and, wisely, He used an illustration that would have immediate access into the minds of His men. Israel, the Old Testament vine, had failed in her God-given task of bringing life (and light) to the nations. Now, Jesus had taken precedence over Israel. He was the true Vine, and the disciples were grafted into Him to be the branches carrying life. They had no power, save what they drew from Him. This was a necessary lesson for men who were too sure of themselves and their capacities. Being part of the vine, the branches are cultivated by the Father by pruning. Cutting back is sore and severe, but it is the only way to fruitfulness. This explains much of the costly experiences of discipleship but it is encouraging. Only fruit-bearing branches are pruned. The dead wood, which feels nothing, is cut off and cast away.

[Back to Top](#)

15:1-11

We have in these verses the illustration of the Biblical principle that the way of life and fruitfulness is through death. To the world's eyes nothing looked less useful or fruitful than the Cross, but it was the way of life. A despised and persecuted church with "nothing to offer" but the way of the Cross, and nothing "to attract" the young but Christ and His Word tends to be written off as irrelevant. There is always the temptation for individuals and churches to look for and grasp at any exciting way to quick success and overnight fruitfulness. But according to Jesus it cannot be so. The pruning and growing are essential. Being grafted into Christ we must see to it that nothing is allowed to disturb the graft or to loosen it from the vine. If that happens there may be the growth of leaves and wood, but no fruit. Abide (remain seems a poor word) in Christ. But note also how Jesus speaks of pruning and cleansing in relation to the Word (3). We are born by the Word and grow by the Word and are washed by the Word (1 Pet. 2:2 AV; Eph. 5:26). Now, one of the chief means of becoming fruitful is by willingly exposing and submitting ourselves to the discipline, pruning and instruction of the Word, especially as it is spoken to us. To sit under the ministry of the Word is not an incidental activity, and we must be careful how we listen, because otherwise it may be of no profit (Lk. 8:18; Heb. 4:1-2). But as the Word works death to self within us so the fruitful life of Christ works in others and brings forth fruit for God's glory (2 Cor. 4:12; Gal. 5:22-24). Note how Jesus speaks of fruit, more fruit and much fruit as being the authentication of true discipleship.

[Back to Top](#)

15:1-11

There is great assurance in these verses and there is also challenge, because not all who say, "Lord, Lord," are disciples (Matt. 7:21-23). But lest any child of God be disheartened, let it be made clear that once you are grafted into Christ by regenerating and converting grace you cannot be lost. When Jesus speaks here of being cut off, He is speaking of service not salvation. At the same time the proof of the life of Christ within us is the

bearing of fruit in character, constancy and increase. When some "branches" begin to dry up, losing their attractiveness as well as their fruitfulness, there is something very far wrong spiritually. Compare this passage with Matt. 13:1-9 where one lot of seed failed from the start, two lots showed some promise but petered out, and one lot brought forth fruit in different measure. Now, there are differences in disciples and in fruitfulness. The New Testament writers had each a different calling. Some Christians are "out front" people and others "behind the scenes" people, equally important but different in function. We must be careful never to expect from any "branch" more than is reasonable, yet no "branch" must ever underestimate the possibilities, for it is none other than the very life of Christ that flows through them. There must be progress but that progress must be measured in comparing self with self and not with others. Jesus calls us to abide in Him and let Him have His way with our lives, allowing Him to cut back where necessary their outward expression in His wisdom and purpose so that we will be fruitful. That is benefit for us as well as Him.

[Back to Top](#)

15:1-11

"Abiding"(AV) is a quiet word and seems to speak of cultivating a life and fellowship with Jesus. It is the maintaining of a relationship and a recognising of the vitality and dependence of that relationship. What is the fruit? Jesus speaks first of prayer (7). The health of our prayer-life is a good indication of our spiritual condition. In a generation that idolises activity we are slow to accept that the most fruitful and fruit-bearing thing we can do is to pray. If a congregation is abiding in Christ its prayer meeting will be the delight of its people, and prayer will be answered. Verse 7 does not warrant wild and undisciplined asking, which is often motivated more by emotion than faith. Peter insisted on imposing his own interpretation on God's will at Caesarea (Matt.16: 21-23). Paul prayed, earnestly desiring to be of more use to God, that his thorn in the flesh be removed, but it was not to be so (2 Cor. 12:7-10). No-one would suggest Paul was not abiding in Christ when he asked for something that could not be granted. But remember that Paul gladly acquiesced in God's will when it was made clear to him. This is part of what abiding in Christ means and does. We begin, more and more, to see eye-to-eye with Christ and our identification with Him will draw us more and more into alignment with Him so that His will and ours become one. Two people in love "just know" what the other want and needs, and such is love that it denies the desire, if it is necessary, to give what is asked. If we want to learn to pray, stay close to Jesus and learn of Him in the yoke of obedience (Matt. 11:28-30).

[Back to Top](#)

15: 1-11

For our final study in this fascinating passage, whose surface we have only scratched, we consider the next two "fruits" of abiding in Christ. In v.9-10 we are told of love and obedience. Jesus loves us *as* (in the same way and to the same extent) the Father loves Him. This is almost beyond comprehension but it is stated quite clearly. Then when He says "abide (remain) in my love," He is not asking us to maintain that love, since it is His free choice to give it. He is simply telling us to enjoy His love and to make it our sweet and strong resting-place. We must take care not to deprive ourselves of that love. This does not mean He will stop loving us when we do wrong. Read Hosea 11:7-9. He will not give us up. The whole story of Israel testifies to the staying power of the love of God. But when we no longer walk in obedience the heart of God is grieved and a shadow falls on our enjoyment of His love, not least because the gentle Spirit of God within our hearts is grieved in sympathy with the Father. "Holy living and assurance of an interest in Christ are closely connected. Our own happiness and enjoyment of religion are inseparably bound up with our daily practical living," (Ryle) cf. 1 John 2:3. Christ's own obedience to the Father is a theme worthy of deep thought and it leads on to yet another fruit of abiding, namely joy. It was joy that blessed and inspired our Lord in His work (Heb. 12:1-2). His delight was ever to do the Father's will (Lk. 2:49). Joy has a great deal to do with rejoicing in God (Phil. 4:4-7). It is full of glory (1 Pet. 1:8).

[Back to Top](#)

15:12-17

The next fruit of abiding in Christ is fellowship of a wonderfully personal kind. But note how the first and last verses of the passage are in terms of commandment. To love one another is not optional or occasional. It must

be the permanent, practical disposition of life. It has nothing to do with attractiveness, or lovability, or compatibility. God, in Christ, demonstrated His love to us in that while we were still sinners, alienated in our minds, and motivated by a spirit of disobedience, Christ died for us (Rom. 5:6-8; Col. 1:21-22; Eph. 2:1-5). The pattern for such love is Christ who laid down His life for His friends. He became servant to His friends, loved them and ministered to them even when they were manifestly and culpably neglectful of Him. This is how we must walk in love (Eph. 5:2), having Christ as our great example (1 Pet. 2:21). This is the proof of a Jesus' nature within us. We will love as He loved. In his epistle John makes some searching comments on this theme (1 John 4:19-21). Read the great love chapter, 1 Cor. 13, especially in J.B. Phillips' translation. It brings our exalted claims to spirituality and spiritual gifts right down to earth. How we should pray for hearts of love. But there is no need to wait for "feelings" of love. Start acting out love, and in our dealings with one another pause to ask, "What would Jesus do?"

[Back to Top](#)

15:12-17

Challenge and commandment are not the heart of this passage. Ponder v.14-16 deeply. We would not dare claim on our own to be the personal and intimate friends of the Son of God. Even the great apostle Paul referred to himself constantly as the bond-slave of Jesus. But it is Jesus Himself who states that He has chosen us for Himself. Peter never forgot this (1 Pet. 2:9) nor did Paul (Eph. 1:4-5). The writer to the Hebrews, by the same Holy Spirit, states the truth in terms that God is not ashamed to be called our God (Heb. 11:16). That means God is proud of His choice and has no regrets about it. This does not suggest that we are perfect, but it does mean He has chosen us as handpicked fruit and has appointed us to be His producers of fruit, not only in ourselves but in bringing many people to salvation. Here is where we begin to sense the immense privilege that is ours. We are not strangers or mere lodgers in a house not our own. We are members of the fireside family of God (Eph. 2: 13,19), the youngest spiritual babe having as much right to be there as any. Such thoughts make you feel so much wanted and valued and cared for. We are friends of Jesus, by His choice and increasingly by ours. The hymn writers catch the spirit of this when they say, "What a Friend we have in Jesus," or "I've found a Friend, Oh such a Friend, He loved me ere I knew Him. He drew me with the cords of love and thus He bound me to Him." That hymn goes on to speak of ties that nothing can sever because we are His and He is ours for ever. We are chosen, appointed, set. in our places, given the privilege of service in things that are going to last for ever. What a life!

[Back to Top](#)

15:18-21

At the end of yesterday's verses it seems strange that Jesus is talking about perseverance on the part of these men who were soon to desert Him. But then His purpose for them and His grace towards them were far greater than their human limitations and failures. There is tremendous comfort here. Our failures do not disqualify us. God is greater (1 John 3:19-20). Jesus is also realistic and having spoken of the love that should bind the disciples together He goes on to speak of the hatred the world will show towards them for no other reason than that they belong to Him. To be ambassadors of the King of Kings is privilege indeed (2 Cor. 5:20). But if people despise and reject the King, cast Him away and crucify Him and are prepared to deny their whole religious history and background to do so (John 19:6,14-16), they will do exactly the same to the ambassadors. Jesus' words here are so plain they need no exposition. Just as they cast Him outside the camp, so we must go to Jesus outside the camp, bearing His reproach (Heb. 13:13). It is not too much. He bore the curse and price of sin. All we have to bear is the reproach. But it will be real. We must expect it, without going looking for it (1 Pet. 4:12-16). If we remember Jesus' words of explanation in v.21 it will help us to keep things in focus. There are people who are not of God and who will not have God. They crucified Christ. They will be ready to crucify us. We have a death to die with Him in terms of fruitful service. Remember how this chapter began. The outward suffering at the hands of men and the inner suffering of the pruning knife belong together. They both speak of a death that has to be died to sin and to self, for sanctification and for fruitfulness.

[Back to Top](#)

15:22-27

When Jesus spoke in v.21 of His and the disciples' persecutors not knowing God, He was not excusing their actions on the ground that they knew no better. Far from it! Their ignorance was wilful, as is the blindness of people who shut their eyes so that they will not see the light (John 3:19). The true prophet of God had been raised up and had come and had spoken and, since His word had not been received, the people stood guilty and without excuse (Deut. 18:18-19). None could any longer plead ignorance. The light had shone in its full measure and the truth had been spoken in demonstrable power. For those who have enjoyed such privileges there is responsibility (Lk. 12:47-48). This should exercise the hearts of all who sit constantly under Gospel privileges. There is no excuse for unbelief or for disobedience. Jesus was passing solemn judgment on wicked men, bringing out into the open the true nature of their attitudes and actions. Inasmuch as they refused the Gospel as it was brought to them in word and power by Jesus Christ they stood exposed as people who hated God. Think of how that must have infuriated the Pharisees, just as it enrages those nowadays who have so many reservations about the Bible that it ceases in any real sense to be for them the Word of God. People always want to have it both ways: they want to refuse Christ in the glory and uniqueness of His person and work, but still retain the right to call themselves Christians. The test of what people are in relation to God is what they are in relation to Jesus. On the day of Judgment the great question will be what we have done with Jesus and His Word.

[Back to Top](#)

15.22-27

Those who are without excuse for their unbelief are charged with having hated Jesus without a cause. Here we see unbelief in its truly hellish nature. These people looked upon God incarnate; they heard words such as no man had ever spoken (John 7: 46); they saw a man in whom there was no sin, and they hated Him. It was not a case of a friendly difference of opinion or a slightly different theological emphasis. It was simply a rejection of God. They wanted a God made in their own image and conformed to their own wishes and prejudices. This is what ministers and missionaries alike meet in their work. In fallen human nature, however religious it may seem to be, there is an anti-God spirit. Nothing you do, no matter how many concessions you make, no matter how much humiliation you are willing to accept, no matter how often you turn the other cheek and give yourself in kindness to those who have hurt, slandered and stabbed you, it makes no difference. They will not have you. They will hate you without a cause as they hated Jesus. Our Lord seems to be referring to Psalm 35:19-21 or Psalm 69:4. Over against the sore rejection of wicked men Jesus sets the glorious work of the Holy Spirit who is the Divine witness and who operates in wonderful sovereignty, unhindered by the malice of men and devils. Never assess the situation merely on what you can see of the working of God. Always remember the hidden work of the Spirit. Note the sequence of the words. The Spirit... will bear witness ... and you. What a Gospel partnership:

[Back to Top](#)

15:22-27

Before leaving these verses consider what they say about the Person and work of the Holy Spirit, the third Person of the eternal Trinity. It is important to do so, not least to counter the narrowing down of this doctrine to the particular and selected emphases of the modern charismatic movement. We have already heard of the free agency of the Spirit and His operations which are beyond human assessment (3:8). We must always think of Him as a Person, not an influence. As such He is indivisible. We either have Him in His completeness or we do not have Him at all (Rom. 8:9-11; cf. Col. 1:19; 2:9-10). Granted it takes a lifetime to learn to "think what Spirit dwells within thee" (Lyte) but when we use terms like "more of the Spirit" we must not think quantitatively. Nor must we limit the realm and range of the working of the Spirit. We have always to see the Spirit in total harmony with Father and Son in eternal Trinity, working at all stages of redemption from creation to final glory. It is the same Spirit who brooded over the deep at creation who works conviction and conversion in our hearts, inspires our prayers and enables us to call God our Father (Rom. 8:15-16; Gal. 4:5-7). This Spirit is sent by the Son, from the Father, and proceeds eternally from the Father. The total and eternal harmony of the Persons of the Trinity requires us to be very careful about modern language that speaks of the Spirit leading us

into new truth. It will never be truth that contradicts the God-breathed, Spirit-given Scriptures (2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:20-21).

[Back to Top](#)

16:1-4a

The opening words here refer us back to the teaching already given and we must summarise it. In the whole of chap.15 Jesus has given His disciples a threefold word of counsel concerning their life and service. In relation to Jesus, they are to abide (4); in relation to each other they are to love (12); and in relation to the world they are to expect hatred (18) for clear and obvious reasons. The provision for them in all circumstances is to be the Comforter, the Counsellor Spirit (15:26). But what follows immediately seems anything but comforting. The chapter begins with persecution and ends with defeat and desertion. Jesus speaks strong words but He is realistic, and also is encouraging. There is no suggestion that He will need to get a fresh company of disciples. Whatever happens, these are the men who are going to see things through, launch the work of the apostolic church, and open up the world to the message of the Gospel. Now, it is only when you are persuaded that this is the dimension of your work that you are able to cope with the fury of Hell. You understand why life is so costly and you discover that the Lord has in fact been preparing you for such a time and such circumstances as these. Note that what Jesus is speaking of here is not in respect of happenings before the Cross and Resurrection but afterwards. It would be when the disciples were aflame with the thrill of the victory of the Resurrection and eager to tell the message everywhere that these things would happen. All of us are being prepared for the future. That is why we must learn our lessons well.

[Back to Top](#)

16:1-4a

Recall the stories of the Acts of the Apostles and see how accurately Jesus foretold the experience of the disciples (Acts 4:1-4; 5:17-18; 6: 11-15). It takes real faith in the unseen, sovereign God to stand fast (Heb. 11:23-28). This is especially so when it is the religious establishment that persecutes the evangelistic messenger. We have not really begun to grasp how the Christian way was everywhere spoken against (Acts 28:22) and how its apostles were slandered, maligned and persecuted (Acts 12:1-5; 16:19-24). The bitterest persecution came from religion that had degenerated into form and legalism (the Pharisees) and had stopped believing in the supernatural (the Sadducees). Trace in Paul's missionary journeys how the Jewish leaders just would not leave him alone but followed him wherever he went in an attempt to stop his ministry (Acts 14:19; 17:13). Of course, Paul was prepared for this by the risen Christ (Acts 9:15-16) and he taught converts this practical truth in a way that modern evangelists just do not do (Acts 14:22). All who will live for God will suffer persecution (2 Tim. 3:12) and as society degenerates all who live for moral truth and personal and business integrity will be increasingly hated. Discipleship is never easy. We must never go looking for trouble. Indeed we must seek to live at peace with everyone (Rom. 12:18). But if it is necessary that trouble come (1 Pet. 1:6 AV) we must be prepared for it mentally and emotionally so that we will not be shaken by it. This is the preparation Jesus is giving His men in this section of teaching.

[Back to Top](#)

16:4b-11

It is interesting to note here that by His gentle chiding, intermingled with His teaching, Jesus was seeking to bring home to His disciples that they were not nearly so spiritually aware or capable as they were assuming. Nor were they adjusting themselves to the changes that were bearing in on them and of which they had been warned. In a very few days they would be startlingly aware of how much they had depended on the physical presence of Jesus and how devastated they were without it. Some of us are far too dependent on a building and a congregation. How will we cope if the Lord leads us right away from all that is familiar, or if He calls away from the congregation the very people we consider indispensable, as He did when he called Barnabas and Saul away from the church at Antioch (Acts 13:1-3)? If sorrow fills our hearts it is because we have not been asking the right questions as to the developing purposes of God. In one sense it seems Jesus' words in v.5 are unfair because the question had been asked (13:36). But was it asked in curiosity or faith? It certainly had not occurred to the disciples that the departure of Jesus was going to be better for them than His continuing bodily presence.

This is why they were taken up with sorrow rather than joy (14:28). As a result they were not asking eagerly the questions that should have been stirring in their hearts regarding the future that had been prepared for them (14:1-5). Here is an example of privileged disciples being hard to teach (Heb. 5:11 ff). But Jesus does not give up. He goes on. What He was teaching them would *in time* be quickened by the Holy Spirit, the Divine Librarian who brings to remembrance the truth that is needed right when it is needed.

[Back to Top](#)

16:4b-11

Here is a great statement regarding the work of the Holy Spirit in the world in relation to the preaching of the Gospel. The Counsellor's function is not merely to comfort, guide, instruct, bless and sanctify the disciples but to carry into effect the saving purposes of God through them. The only competent and productive worker for God is the Holy Spirit. Without the Spirit's life-giving touch all is vain. In a world where so often it seems that evil goes unchecked and prospers (Ps. 73:1-14), the work of the Spirit is to convince or convict of sin, righteousness and judgment to come. It is surprising how few sermons we hear on this three-fold theme. The world does not think much about sin because that is a word directly related to God and His law, and by and large God is not in people's thoughts (Ps. 10:4). If faced with the fact of God, the reaction of many is simply to say, "Who is God, that I should obey Him?" (Ex. 5:2). Of course, if there is no sense of sin, no awareness of the consequences of sin, no consciousness of how sin separates and alienates from God and brings people under judgment (Eph. 2:11-12), there is no real significance in the idea of salvation. If there is nothing to be saved from, no judgment, no Hell, no being lost for ever, then the humanists are right and people should live for life and try to make the best of circumstances without harming others too much. The trouble with that is that there is an alien, contrary spirit within fallen human nature, and a disposition towards sin that destroys first man and then his society. Sin alienates man from man and man from God. It is only the Spirit, through the preaching of the Word, that can make people cry, "What must I do to be saved?"

[Back to Top](#)

16:4b-11

People are convicted of sin in relation to unbelief which is refusal to believe in Jesus, the only Saviour, whom they need in order to come to God. The Shorter Catechism defines sin as "Any want of conformity to, or transgression of the law of God." But that does not say all that is necessary, because to be a sinner is to be in a certain condition in relation to God. The Catechism goes on: "The sinfulness of that estate whereinto man fell consists in the guilt of Adam's first sin, the want of original righteousness, and the corruption of his whole nature, which is commonly called Original Sin; together with all actual transgressions which proceed from it." We must think of sin in terms of a disastrous condition of helplessness and hopelessness. It is death, alienation, rebellion (Eph. 2:1-3; Col. 1:21). Human nature is mightily unwilling to believe this of itself and feels it is an insult indeed. Only God can bring the noisy sinner to silence and to accept that he is guilty before God (Rom. 3:9-20). People protest that if these be the facts they cannot help themselves and are not to be blamed for their predicament. But no excuses are valid, for God has taken the initiative and has dealt with sin in His own Son Jesus Christ, paying its price and meeting its judgment, and heralding the gospel of free pardon and reconciliation, calling people to repentance and faith. It is right here that the crunch comes and the exposure is clear. People refuse to believe. They refuse the only name whereby they might be saved. As we have read earlier in John 3 they are condemned already and are judged because they have refused the light (3:16-21).

[Back to Top](#)

16:4b-11

The second work of the Spirit is to convict of righteousness, and this is related to Jesus going to the Father. This is difficult to understand. It may refer to the vindication of Christ in respect of all He claimed to be and to do in His resurrection and ascension. This seems to have been part of apostolic preaching at Pentecost (Acts 2:22-24, 32-36). It may refer to the Spirit's convicting people of the need for a perfect righteousness in order to stand before God and that Christ alone is that righteousness (Rom. 5:1; 8:1; 1 Cor. 1:30-31). It is only the Spirit who can bring assurance of salvation. The work of the Spirit is always to point to Christ, and in the gospel that work is not tentative but effective. The Spirit does not merely suggest that we should come to Christ, He brings us to

Christ and without the work of the Spirit we cannot come. The Catechism says: "Effectual calling is the work of God's Spirit, whereby, convincing us of our sin and misery, enlightening our minds in the knowledge of Christ, and renewing our wills, he doth persuade and enable us to embrace Jesus Christ, freely offered to us in the Gospel." It goes on: "Justification is an act of God's free grace, wherein He pardoneth all our sins, and accepteth us as righteous in His sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone." It is God who justifies, and no one can countermand His decision. Read Rom. 5:1-11; 8:1-11. If this is the work of the Spirit then we have a good indication of what our preaching should be.

[Back to Top](#)

16:4b-11

The third work of the Spirit is in relation to judgment, an almost forgotten theme even in evangelical circles. But the emphasis does not fall on the fact of judgment to come (Acts 17:31; Heb. 9: 27), Biblical and inescapable as that is. Nor does it fall on the judgment that believers must face in terms of reward and loss (1 Cor. 3:10-15; 2 Cor. 5:10). Jesus refers to the fact of the judgment of the Prince of this world now, and therefore we are still in the realm of the total saving work of Christ on the Cross. The significance and message of the Cross were the things these disciples had to learn before they could ever be the evangelists of the Gospel. They had to see that, far from being a disaster, the death of Christ was in fact a glorious victory over the entire kingdom of evil (Col. 2:13-15). In the Cross the whole world order of evil was brought to judgment. Death was abolished (2 Tim. 1:10); sin was put away (Heb. 9:26); the Devil was dealt with and his captives delivered (Heb. 2:15); the works of the Devil were destroyed (1 John 3:8); the jurisdiction of darkness was broken (Col. 1:13); and Jesus took His rightful place as King and Lord over all, to whom every knee must bow (Phil 2:9-11). This is practical doctrine. Satan has been judged and his power broken. Evil no longer has the initiative in the world. A new order has been instituted and the proof of this is that all over the world there are colonies of this new order already existing and operating. This is the church of Christ, against which the gates of Hell cannot prevail.

[Back to Top](#)

16:12-15

These are wonderful words about the providence of God, the kindness of Jesus and the work of the Holy Spirit. In v.7 Jesus told the disciples it was to their advantage, for their good (cf. 18:14). It was all in the purpose of God. There was much to be said and done and many vast developments to come in the life and work of these men but they were not able to cope with these truths then. Knowledge might have crushed them or at least knocked them off balance, and the Lord is not the one to crush or quench (Isa. 42:3). He is far too kind and considerate, and we must be like Him, not expecting from people what they are not really able to give. But weakness and limitation were not going to be allowed to become chronic. The gracious working and teaching of the Holy Spirit would lead them on into the truth, not just in explanation and understanding, but also in encouragement and restraint. At this point and in the immediate future these disciples were going to feel that all they needed in order to cope and carry on was being taken away from them. They had already begun to feel bereft. But they were wrong. This was not decline, narrowing down and conclusion. It was the beginning of a life of spiritual service that they had not yet begun to imagine, let alone grasp. And in this future opening up for them they were not to be left to grope their way forward. The Spirit of God with them and within them (14:17) would lead them surely. But note that the Spirit is not an independent agent (13). He speaks what He hears, as the Father and the Son speak together in the counsels of eternity.

[Back to Top](#)

16:12-15

In v. 12-15 Jesus was not specific with regard to the exact meaning of being guided into all the truth and being told of things to come, and we are best not to be too dogmatic. The Spirit of Truth must never be set over against Jesus who said He was the truth. We must always hold to the statement that God has fully and finally spoken in His Son (Heb. 1:1-2) and in that sense the full revelation of saving truth has been given. Jesus' words here regarding the work of the Spirit may refer to the inspiration of the Spirit whereby the apostles were the instruments of God to give us the New Testament writings. We must never set the Gospels and the Epistles

against each other. They are one, and along with the Old Testament they constitute the "revelation" which God has provided and guaranteed for all generations, so that all may know the truth. Those who denigrate and depart from the Scriptures, and those who claim "new revelations by the Spirit", are alike straying from the path. There is a "given-ness" and "completeness" about the Scriptures that must be held to. "New" truth can be nothing more than an opening up and elucidation of the Scriptures. We do not deny or limit the working of the Spirit but emphasise that Jesus made it clear that the authentic working of the Spirit is to make Christ central and totally sufficient in the life of the believer. The testimony of the Spirit is that Christ is everything. Any "spirit" which does not make this perfectly clear is suspect. The work of the Spirit is to take all that is to come and is to happen to us, and to interpret it in the light of Scripture. This is exactly what the apostles did at Pentecost. By the Holy Spirit they grasped the message of *all* the Scriptures and preached Christ crucified and risen.

[Back to Top](#)

16:16-24

The perplexity of the disciples as they tried to take in what Jesus was saying to them should be a comfort to all of us when we are struggling to understand our Bibles. We need to know that two words in the Greek are translated "will see" but how much emphasis is to be put on this is not clear. We could paraphrase v.16, "A little while and you will no longer see Me day by day (because my death on the Cross is near), but again in a little while you will see Me (but in a new way)." It is difficult to decide whether Jesus referred to His Resurrection appearances, or to His Second Coming in glory, or to the ushering in of the age of the Spirit. Verses 5-15 are all about the work of the Spirit in which they would see Jesus in a new light, in a new way. In the epistles Paul speaks of no longer knowing Christ according to the flesh (2 Cor. 5: 16). Certainly after the Resurrection the apostles did not think of Jesus merely as a historical figure but saw Him as the Lord of Glory, the mighty and only Saviour, in whom and through whom all the purposes of God were fulfilled. They certainly saw Jesus in a different light and they lived and worked by faith not by sight (2 Cor. 4:18; 5:7). This does not exclude a possible reference here to Christ's Second Coming. In Scripture the time between the first and second comings can be spoken of as "a little while" (Heb. 10:37). We are told that He comes quickly (Rev. 22:20) and that He is near at hand (Rom. 13:11). We have deprived ourselves of much joy and comfort by thinking of our Lord's victory as very far away. In a little while, every eye shall see Him (Rev. 1:7).

[Back to Top](#)

16:16-24

Note for our comfort, that Jesus knew their perplexity (19) and far from being angry He went on to strengthen them with words of profound comfort which would, in time, be like the shining of a great light on their experience. He did not enlighten them about the little time and possible dates (Acts 1:7) even though their perplexity and curiosity lasted for weeks after the Resurrection. He spoke to them of their experience in the immediate future and the dark hours of the Cross and also of the essential cost and suffering of discipleship throughout the entire Christian dispensation. Disciples of Jesus will always view life and experience in a different way from worldly people. The world is happy with an absent Christ but the believer lives in the light of a world to come, which is far better (2 Cor. 5:1-5; Phil. 1:23; Heb. 6:5). In the life of discipleship there is always the need to hold things in tension. We are in the world to serve but we belong to another world. We sorrow and are sore inasmuch as we are strangers and pilgrims and have here no continuing city (Eph. 2:19; Heb. 13:14. Many times the world will seem to triumph over you and life will be anything but easy (2 Cor. 4:8-12) but you will rejoice (Acts 5:41). And in the end of the day, the servants of the Lord will rejoice in the coming of the One they have waited for (Isa. 25:9 AV). Jesus' words here are far reaching and interpretive of the whole of Christian life, which is a dying in order to live. But their immediate fulfilment was seen in how, after the desolation of apparent defeat in the Cross, the disciples bore witness with great joy to the Saviour.

[Back to Top](#)

16:16-24

We must not be afraid of or annoyed with difficult verses, nor be impatient with the time needed to understand them. We want to learn! Note how in v.21 Jesus used the vivid illustration of a woman's birth travail to describe the disciples' experiences of sorrow and suffering. It was creative travail. So it is with our struggles; our labour

is not in vain in the Lord (1 Cor 15:58). In Gal. 4:19 Paul spoke of travailing in birth until Christ was formed in others and this is a vivid picture of the costly nature of true evangelism. There is no easy way to bring people to newness of life in Christ. Paul spoke in Col. 1: 24 of his struggles being incorporated into the very sufferings of Christ on behalf of people he had never even met. We are all too limited in our thinking about Christian life and service and far too absorbed in our own tiny little area of experience. We need to learn to lose ourselves in the vastness of the work of redemption. It is when we begin to see (by faith and not only by evidence) what the Lord is doing that we find the joy which no one can take from us. It is at this point that Jesus went on to speak of the confidence and trust that gets on with the business of prayer. Think of the time we waste with our doubts and distractions, time that could be used in prayer. And the prayer Jesus spoke of is not wrestling with an unwilling God who perversely makes things as difficult as possible, but asking from the Father in the name of, by the merit of and for the sake of, His own Son. It is like kneeling down with Jesus and saying, "Not my will. You speak for both of us."

[Back to Top](#)

16:25-28

In the opening verse here Jesus seems to have been pointing forward to the time when the Holy Spirit, given in fullest measure, would begin to do His work of leading the disciples into all the truth (v.13). He said that He had been speaking in figures or veiled sayings (and this seems to apply to all the Upper Room discourse and not just the immediately preceding verses) and that, the time would come soon when things would become clear. They, and we, must not undervalue teaching simply because at that stage we cannot understand it. Be teachable and never forget how much we are all still learners. Jesus declared He would teach them of the Father. This may refer to the teaching of the disciples after His Resurrection or to the teaching through the apostles as recorded in the epistles where there is so much emphasis on the greatness and grandeur of the Father's plan of salvation. It will do us good if we consider just to what extent our spiritual life is directed to and focused on the Father. We do not set the Persons of the Trinity in opposition but, in prayer for example, we pray to the Father through the Son by the Spirit. In v.26 we have the astonishing statement that *seems* to deny the continuing advocacy of Christ on our behalf. This cannot be; cf. 1 John 2:1; Rom. 8: 34; Heb. 7:25. The Father's attitude will be such that "He will meet you, and for His great love towards you will anticipate the Intercessor who otherwise would speak on your behalf." (Calvin) Jesus went on to tell of the Father's love in a way that is almost unbelievably personal. It leads us forward to 17:23b. Behold, what manner of love....(1 John 3:1-3).

[Back to Top](#)

16:29-33

We must look back to v.27 and to the word "because" which seems to suggest that God's love for us is dependent on and arising from our love for Him. This would be a contradiction of the whole of the Bible and a denial of the free and sovereign grace of God towards sinners. God commended His love to us in that while we were still sinners, caring nothing for Him and indeed antagonistic towards Him, Christ died for us (Rom. 5:8-10). In 1 John 4:10, 19 we have the same declaration of the primacy of God's love. In Hosea we have the testimony of God regarding His people who had gone back from loving Him (Hos. 11: 7-9). What then did Jesus mean? Was He not speaking of love to Him as being the evidence of their being called by the Father and of their eternal election? In terms of 14:23 Jesus seems to have been speaking of fellowship rather than salvation, and we should be encouraged here to see how Jesus was both acknowledging and confirming the disciples' love for Himself. This may be what caused these men, so much under pressure and so much baffled, to blurt out, "Oh, we understand you now. You know our hearts and we certainly believe you came from the Father." Whether they were aware of it or not, Jesus had caused them to focus their hearts on His sovereign and unquestioned power and authority. The disciples had a sudden bout of cheerfulness and Jesus' words in v.31 were not meant to demolish their confidence but rather to confirm it, as if He said, "You have stated your faith and trust. Hold to it."

[Back to Top](#)

16:29-33

These words are the final counsels of Jesus to His disciples as they faced the greatest crisis of their lives. Nothing but realism is any use. We must know what to expect and be prepared to meet it in faith. We must stand our ground in faith and confidence, as we said yesterday, no matter what the experiences are. Jesus warned His men that they would face very soon what appeared to be defeat on the level of the work. It would seem that the powers of evil had won the day, that the work of the kingdom was confounded and the disciples scattered in confusion and rout. Jesus warned His men that they would be faced with their own failure, and the shallow limits of their faith would be demonstrated since they would all leave Him alone. It would be a terrible blow to their spiritual over-confidence. Almost certainly the disciples did not grasp or accept the truth of what Jesus was saying. They "felt" so sure that their "measure" of faith (Rom. 12:3) was enough. Very soon they would see Jesus totally alone as far as human assessment could tell and they would then remember Jesus' words (v.32) to the effect that He was not alone. In due time this would become a real means of grace to them reminding them that no matter what happened to them they were not alone. This would be confirmed to them after the Resurrection in the great, unfailing promise, "I am with you always." (Matt. 28: 20). How important it is to remember that when Christ and His people are forsaken by all nothing is in fact taken from them. God with us means the El Shaddai, the all-sufficient God, is with us.

[Back to Top](#)

16:29-33

The last verse seems to refer back to all Jesus had taught since they first gathered in the Upper Room. He had dealt with truth about Himself and His death; about His victory and the coming of the Spirit; truth about fellowship and service and the continuing experience of opposition and persecution in the world. All this had been said in order that they might have peace. But note how Jesus insisted, *in Me* you may have peace. We have peace through Christ who is our peace (Eph.2:14;John 14:27). This peace "is both objective (reconciliation with God, Rom.5:1-2; 2 Cor. 5:20b) and subjective (the quiet and comforting assurance of justification and adoption, Rom.8:16ff.)." (Hendriksen) The truth is that our lives are hid with Christ in God (Col.3:3) and no matter what comes our way we have to see and understand and interpret it all in terms of God's willing and working His good pleasure (Phil.2:12-13). This is why Jesus had already forbidden His disciples to allow their hearts to be troubled, stirred and disturbed (14:1). He has the right not only to promise peace but also to bestow it (14:27). It is the peace given by the Conqueror who has Himself dealt comprehensively with all the enemies of His people (Col. 2:15). The world is a grim place to live in as servants of Christ and even more so as we become aware of the ramifications of a whole kingdom of evil that is set against the Lord and His Christ. But Jesus says, "Cheer up! You are mine, and because of that you cannot lose. I have overcome the world." Read Psalm 2 where God laughs at the petty pretensions of the powers of the world. Read Isa. 40:15 where the nations are spoken of as a drop in a bucket. Read Rev. 17:17 where all the fearsome powers of the world come together in evil consort and are able *only* to carry out the will of God. On the basis of truth we must cultivate a more cheerful attitude to life and cut down our doubts and fears, difficulties and failures to a more realistic size.

[Back to Top](#)

17:1-26

Read the whole chapter before beginning to study it in detail because it is a prayer. It is different from our prayers because it contains no confession of sin at all. There was no sin to confess, for the Son, as "God's proper man" (Luther), had lived in perfect obedience to the will of the Father and had maintained unbroken fellowship with Him in all His life. It is prayer following on immediately after the comprehensive teaching Jesus had given to His disciples, and this teaches us how much we need to undergird all ministry with prayer. This is the real "follow-up" work and it is wonderful to note that the disciples learned this, because in the Acts of the Apostles we see so clearly that the church was a praying church. This is the only long recorded prayer of our Lord Jesus and in His capacity of High Priest He stood in the presence of God on behalf of His people. A first reading of the prayer impresses one with its peace, dignity and assurance. This is all the more remarkable when you consider the circumstances. Judas was already with the High Priests, the arresting party was on its way, Pilate and Herod were standing by to play their part, and all hell was actively straining forward to accomplish the death of the Son of God. But the Son was totally at peace, quite undistracted as He prayed this

prayer of dedication: the dedication of Christ to His death and the disciples to their mission. Now we must go on to consider the details.

[Back to Top](#)

17:1-5

The first section of the prayer deals with Jesus Himself and His work. The second (6-19) deals with the disciples and their experience. The third (20-26) deals with the church and its witness. These opening verses make it plain we are dealing with Someone who was in a special relationship to God the Father Almighty and who had been and was now carrying out a work to which He had been divinely appointed. Here was the Son of God, the great High Priest of God's people, standing in the presence of God on behalf of His people on the basis of a work perfectly accomplished. Read in Hebrews 3:1; 4:14 - 5: 10; 9:11-14,24-28; 10:19-22 and marvel at the provision God has made for us in Christ. Go back to Exodus 28:9-29 and see the picture of the High Priest of Israel with its glorious symbolism. The names of the tribes of Israel were carried on the High Priest's shoulders, signifying the strength of God to carry His people in every circumstance. The names were also on the breastplate, lying on the very heart of God, cared for by Him in every possible experience. All the stones were precious stones, for the Lord sets high value on His people; they are precious to Him. These are some of the thoughts we should have whenever we think of our Lord Jesus Christ who ever lives to make intercession for us (Rom. 8:34; Heb. 7:25).

[Back to Top](#)

17:1-5

The hour for which Christ had come into the world had now arrived. Right from Cana (2:4) we read "His hour had not yet come." His enemies could not touch Him (7:30) and His friends could not hurry Him on (7:1-9). But now, by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God (Acts 2:23), the agent of the Devil had been sent on his way (13:27) and the time had come. It is almost impossible to plumb the depths of the references to glory. In v.5 we have the glory of the eternal Trinity, the eternal Sonship of Jesus, and the incarnation, all of which have been spoken of again and again in this gospel. In v.4 we have the glory of the perfect manhood and absolute obedience of the man Christ Jesus. In v.3 we have the declaration that eternal life consists in knowing God through the Son who has been sent into the world to be the Saviour of sinners. That this salvation is in the keeping and administration of the Son is the clear will of the Father (2). It is those who receive the Son who have the right to be called sons of God (1:12). All power is given into the hand of the Son (Matt. 28:18). But all will not be saved. It is those who are "given" (2) by the Father who come in faith to the Son, as Jesus had already made plain (John 6:37). And the heart of this work of atonement and salvation by which the glory of both the Father and the Son is displayed in time and eternity is the Cross. This is wonderfully expressed in Rev. 5:6-14 and echoed in Samuel Rutherford's hymn,

"The Lamb is all the glory, in Immanuel's land." To glorify Jesus is to glorify God and God glorified the Son by delivering Him up for us all and by raising Him up from the dead and by giving Him the name that is above every name. The glory of God in His Person and work is a theme we spend too little time considering.

[Back to Top](#)

17:6-8

The Son spoke to the Father reporting His faithful obedience in respect of the work committed to Him. But the real emphasis is on the men whom Jesus had taught and in whose hands the future of the work now rested. They were not up to much; they were spiritually over-confident; they were in themselves poorly prepared for what was to come because of their slowness to learn. But look how they are described by Jesus. He recognised them as "given" men, not a casual or incidental group. Long before they were called by and were responsive to the Gospel their destiny was marked out. Consider Eph. 1:4 and Jer. 1:5. They were chosen, hand-picked men (John 15:16). This is very wonderful and is how we should think of ourselves in Christ. In childhood, youth and adolescence with all its frustrations and rebellion, in training and early career, in the mystery of providence and in the electing grace of God we were being kept by the power of God for a destiny of salvation, service and glory. Then, in due time, the "mystery" became plain in our experience, as in that of the disciples. They received the words of Jesus and believed (8) and they kept the word (6), holding to it and beginning to grasp, however

faintly at first, the glory of the divine purpose, initiative, power and action (8b). Think of what it must have meant to these disciples to hear their Lord and Master speaking in prayer in such terms about them. We need to remember this when the enemy of our souls is tormenting us about our failures and limitations and indeed when we are being over-critical of other Christians. It does not yet appear what we shall be (1 John 3:2), but Jesus sees and expresses the truth about us. He has more confidence in us than we have in ourselves.

[Back to Top](#)

17:9-10

"Father I am praying for them." Did these words awaken any response in Peter's mind and heart (Luke 22:32)? What is the explanation of the peace that can fill our hearts at times of crisis? What is the explanation of the desire and determination that urges us on when the battle is hard? What is the explanation of the earnest longing to be purer, worthier and to be a pleasure to God in fruitful service and in filial obedience? The answer is in the prayers of Jesus. He ever lives to make intercession for us - Heb. 7:25; Rom. 8:34; 1 John 2:1. It is not just our initial experience of salvation that stems from the sovereign grace of God but our continuing salvation. Of course we pray for each other, or at least we should do so. Of course we pray for the whole world, even though we know full well that all will not be saved. We do not know who are the "elect". Our prayers are immensely limited in one sense because of the partial nature of our knowledge and yet they are related to, and fed into the prayers of the Saviour. This is part at least of the meaning of Rev. 8:3,4. The prayers of the saints cannot ever "take over" from the prayers of the Saviour yet they are never irrelevant. After all, it is the Spirit of Jesus who inspires and enables our prayers, and His intercessions are of a nature and scope which cannot be put into words at all, not even "extraordinary" words (Rom. 8:26). If we keep Jesus' words in v.9 clear in our minds and hearts we will be kept from unwise and unwarranted expectations and at the same time will be gloriously comforted.

[Back to Top](#)

17:11-12

Our Lord's prayer for His own, who were doubly precious because they were also the Father's (10), is deeply tender because His men were about to be left on their own for the first time. He had them in His heart and He brought them to God whom He referred to as "Holy Father" cf. v.1,25. There is never familiarity in Jesus' communion with the Father but always reverence and a recognition of the righteousness of God. Jesus prayed that His disciples would be kept, kept in His name, and kept in unity like that between Father and Son. The safety of God's people in their persons and work comes from God alone (Ps. 121; 1 Pet. 1:5). God is their refuge and strength (Ps. 46). Whatever experience may be theirs, God will keep them in it (Isa. 43:1,2) because they are precious (Zech. 2:8). But Jesus asked more than that, He asked that the Holy Father, separate from sin, should stand guard over them and subdue all that would militate against them. He asked that they should be kept in the Father's name. Now the name is expressive of the nature, character and purpose of God and therefore Jesus prayed for His disciples to be kept ever in line with all God's purpose of redemption, kept walking closely with God in His good and perfect will. This keeping power of God is not only external and eternal, inasmuch as the Throne of God stands over against all human experience, it is also internal, by the Holy Spirit. Jesus also prayed here for the unity of the disciples, not in an artificially concocted ecclesiastical unity, but in the unity of the faith so that there would be a coherent witness to the truth over against the lies of a crooked generation.

[Back to Top](#)

17:13-17

No one should miss in these verses the immense, personal care Jesus has for His servants. He brought every aspect of their need before God in prayer. The disciples themselves must have been aware by now of how securely they had been kept from all evil by the presence of Jesus. A further example of this will be found in 18:8-9. Soon, these men would be shaken by the appearance of Judas along with the guards to arrest Jesus, and perhaps only then would they see that Judas was the son of perdition, utterly lost beyond remedy. But this does not signify failure on Jesus' part, as if He had lost one out of twelve. Nor does it mean Jesus (or God the Father) was taken by surprise by the defection of Judas. That had been made clear already (Jn. 13:21,27). There was a Devil at the heart of the work but he was a servant of the purposes of God, not a free agent. Already Judas had

been removed and the first readers of John's Gospel would see this very clearly and this obvious over-ruling of incarnate evil would be a source of immense joy and reassurance to the disciples (13). But do not fail to see the colossal contrast between those given to Christ and Judas who was lost, and remember that for a long time not even the disciples had any suspicion about the standing and integrity of Judas. Of course, what men do eventually exposes what they are. Jesus' words do not "mean that Judas was lost in order to fulfil Scripture, but that the Scripture was fulfilled by the loss of Judas." (Ryle) What scripture is referred to? From Acts 1:15-20 it seems to be Ps. 109:8 ff. Compare also Ps. 41:9 with John 13:18. What a comfort it is to see evil's most terrible operations brought thus within the sovereign will and working of God.

[Back to Top](#)

17:13-17

Jesus' concern for His disciples could not conceal the eager anticipation in His heart at the prospect of returning to the Father (13a). He was on His way home and He was both glad and confident. This would come back to the disciples' memories after the Cross and resurrection and would give them quite a new view of, and attitude to, the sufferings which would come to them. These sore experiences would no more be a denial of their service and victory than the Cross was a denial of Christ's victory and assurance. In His prayer Jesus was not giving information to the Father, who knew it all already. He was bringing His disciples to God's throne in prayer and doing so in language that would instruct them in, prepare them for, and interpret for them, the experiences they would undergo. It is always good to know what to expect and why it must be expected. Jesus made it plain in v.14. They would be hated and persecuted for no other reason than they had been made custodians in the world of the Word of God. They would stand over against the world in all its arrogance and pretension and they would proclaim without fear or favour of men the whole counsel of God. Such preaching and such living would be a thorn in the consciences of those who do not believe God and who would not have Christ. They would say, as they said about Jesus, "Away with Him ... We have no king but Caesar." All this Jesus had already said to the disciples in the immediately preceding chapters. "He now says it about them to the Father." (Hendriksen) Note how assuredly Jesus declared that these men were not of the world. He knows us better than we know ourselves. But even we begin to know that we do in fact belong to Jesus. In the world we are the "odd men out."

[Back to Top](#)

17:13-17

The world is neither an easy nor a comfortable place for Christians but it is where they are needed. The "salt" has to be in the "soup" before it does any good. If you are the only Christian in your family, workplace or community, then God must have a high regard for your value. Jesus is no longer in the world (11), therefore someone has to stay, else the world is left without witness, instruction or example. Many are slow to learn, find it difficult to read the Bible and are unwilling to go to a church. But they can read lives, which are living epistles (2 Cor. 3:1-3). We are to stay in the world as lights, salt and signposts, but we must be effective and that depends on purity, savour and clarity (Matt. 5:13-16). That is one reason why Jesus prays that His servants should be sanctified. This is the positive side of being kept from evil. Perhaps the thought is not so much of moral and spiritual purity as of consecration, in the sense of being set apart for God. It is a case of being pure channels and holy vessels for the Lord (2 Tim. 2:20-21). There is no substitute for holy living, and the great instrument is the Bible. Neglect of our Bibles is the greatest barrier to fruitful service. It is by the Word that we grow (1 Pet. 2:2). It is by the Word we are washed (Eph. 5:26). It is by the Word we understand and are inspired to pray (Dan. 9:1-3ff). It is by the Word hid in our hearts that we learn to keep away from sin (Ps. 119:11). How we need a renewed emphasis on sanctification and on the continuing nature of that work right through life. You want to be fruitful? Read 2 Pet. 1: 3-11.

[Back to Top](#)

17:13-17

We must still deal in some detail with v.15. It is no part of God's plan that we should escape the trials, temptations and vexations of life. Nor are we to be immune to the anxieties and hard work of life. But at the same time we have the assurance that in answer to this prayer we will be kept from the evil one. In the Lord's Prayer we ask, "Lead us not into temptation, *but* deliver us from evil." There are times when it is necessary that

we be led into sore and severe trial, testing and even confrontation with evil in order that we might be kept loose from evil. It is in this way that character is forged (Rom. 5:1-5) and our service furthered. Many times the things that happen to us will be beyond our explanation. We will not be able to see why things should be as they are and we will even pray that they will be changed. Think of how Paul cried to God that his "thorn" might be removed and how God explained that it was necessary to make Paul's service fruitful to the fullest extent (2 Cor. 12:7-10). Think of how the young men had to suffer the fiery furnace, accepting the fact that even in faith they could know only in a partial way the methods of God with them (Dan. 3:16-18). But they were kept from the fire just as Daniel was kept from the lions by the power of God (Dan. 6:19-22). Even Jonah, the rebellious prophet, was kept and restored from the evil one by the instrumentality of the great fish that swallowed him. And in the New Testament we read of the hazards of the experiences of the apostles (2 Cor. 4:7-12) and are taught that by these very means the gospel was furthered (Phil. 1:12-14). Read the testimony of 2 Tim. 3:10-13 and the explanation of it in 1 Pet. 1: 3-9.

[Back to Top](#)

17:18-19

Jesus was sent into the world as God's Suffering Servant to do His will and in the same way the disciples are sent into the world as the servants of the gospel. They are not really volunteers who have the right to contract out. They are conscripts by grace, laid hold on by Almighty God and sent out as part of His eternal plan of salvation. Note the words "as" and "so" because they indicate the pattern of life and experience all servants of the gospel will have. In Phil. 2:4ff we have the pattern of the self-humbling of Jesus to the death of the Cross which was the way to glory. In 1 Cor. 4:9-13 we have that pattern exemplified in the lives of the apostles. In 1 Pet. 2:18-23 we are taught that our lives are to be a copy or replica of the example of Christ. Of course, it is not to be simply in terms of suffering and rejection. We are to be among people as Christ was, seeing them as sheep without a shepherd, and having compassion on them (Matt. 9:36). We are to be the friends of sinners, receiving them and giving them hope without ever condoning their sin and wrong (Lk. 15:2). We are to be among people as those who serve (Lk. 22:27) and we are to seek and to save the lost (Lk. 19:10). It is not only a Saviour people need but a shepherd, a teacher full of grace (Lk. 4:22) and a leader to follow (Matt. 4:18-22). This is why we must be the kind of people who can say to others to follow us as we follow Christ (1 Cor. 11:1). That is more than enough to think about for one day.

[Back to Top](#)

17:18-19

The pattern of our lives is tested, instructed and encouraged by Jesus' words in v.18. Service is not a matter of personality and gifts, natural or spiritual. It has to do with following Christ and being identified with Him in His death and resurrection. It is in the fellowship of His sufferings that we know the power of His resurrection (Phil. 3:10) so that death works in us but life in others (2 Cor. 4:12). Our business is always to decrease so that He might increase (John 3:30). None of this can we do in our own strength. It all stems from Christ's "consecration" to the death of the Cross (19). He is our life, strength, sanctification and power (1 Cor. 1:30). It is not just our salvation and forgiveness that come from Jesus' death on the Cross but the gracious power that sanctifies and fashions us to be His people, holy and fruitful. Jesus sets Himself apart unto God and for God so that we likewise might be set apart to serve a holy God in holiness and righteousness of life (Lk. 1:74-75). There is no other way to serve. The vessels of the Lord must be clean (Isa. 52:11). The will of God for His people is their sanctification (1 Thess. 4:3). It was for this Christ died and for this the blessed Holy Spirit works within us. Consider such passages as Titus 2:14; Eph. 5:26 and 1 Pet. 2:14. We noted yesterday the two little words "as" and "so" and today we emphasise "I" and "they" because they speak so wonderfully of the oneness and closeness between our Lord and His people in the business of life and service. How privileged we are! How thankful and willing we should be!

[Back to Top](#)

17:20-23

At this point in the prayer Jesus reaches out beyond the initial group of disciples to the work and witness of the church right down the ages of history. This is the only real way to think about Christian life and service. It is

always "out" and "on" into the future with all the positive possibilities enshrined in God who works all things after the counsel of His own will (Eph. 1:11) and who never leaves His work incomplete (Phil. 1:6). The first impact of these verses must be considered in respect of the disciples who even then were beginning to feel something of their limitation and who soon would be faced with the stark fact of their failure and denial. Here their service was being prayed for in respect of generation's yet unborn and regarding people who were then dogged and deliberate in unbelief. Something of the same encouragement was given by God to Paul in his missionary labours in Corinth. God declared that He had many people in that pagan city but the fact was that they were not yet converted (Acts 18:9-11). On the basis of God's reassurance Paul ministered for eighteen months and saw the fruit of his preaching. Our Lord's disciples were very soon going to see astonishing results through "their message", when thousands were gathered into faith after only one sermon (Acts 2:40-41). Note also the emphasis on the preaching of the Word as the means of bringing people to faith. It pleases God to save by this means (1 Cor. 1:21) and it is by the hearing of the Word that faith comes (Rom. 10:14-17). God has declared that His word will accomplish its task (Isa. 55:10-11) and the prayer of the apostles was constantly for utterance for the Word (Eph.6:19; 2 Thess. 3:1; Col. 4:3).

[Back to Top](#)

11.20-23

The second emphasis in these verses is on the unity of all believers, and that unity as a testimony to the world. This is a passage made use of constantly by the advocates of what is called the ecumenical movement who say that a spiritual unity of all believers in Christ (Gal. 3:28) is not enough and that the first essential in evangelism is to strive for organisational unity so that there will be one monolithic church which will so impress the world that it will believe. Of course, as some point out, there was one church in the Middle Ages, a great sprawling organic unity, but the world did not believe. Rather it lapsed into darkness because it was a church not grounded in biblical truth and salvation. Unity achieved at the cost of truth is fiction, and dangerous fiction at that. Mere unity does not lead to truth, but truth leads to unity, and that is why those who are most set on establishing and proclaiming the biblical doctrines of the faith are the greatest workers for that unity which is glorifying to God, a unity which in fact allows for glorious diversity in appearance and function of the various members of the body (Eph. 4:11-16; 1 Cor. 12:12-27). The unity Jesus speaks of and to which believers must strive is the unity between Father and Son in the eternal Trinity. It is a unity in truth, attitude, desire, purpose and function in which the Father and the Son, though one, remain distinct. There can be unity in "religion" apart from truth, as there was between Pharisees who believed in resurrection and Sadducees who did not (Matt. 22:23). But there can be no unity in "faith" without an acceptance of and commitment to the truth. Common action comes from common belief, and not vice versa.

[Back to Top](#)

17:20-23

It is unity not uniformity that Jesus speaks of. Its objective is that the world may believe, that the world may know that God sent Jesus, and that the world may know that God has loved them *as* He has loved Jesus. God *so* loved the world. But the love of God spoken of here, which is to be a witness to the world, is His love for His own. This is how God demonstrates His wonderful love and grace to the world and to principalities and powers (Eph. 3:10). It is to our shame that we so seldom say, "Why, O Lord, such love to me?" But what does v.22 mean? What is the glory that the Father gave the Son and which the Son gives to His disciples so that they may be one? Does the opening statement of v.23 give a clue? Jesus says, "I in them" and "thou in me". We are told in Col. 1:19 that all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell in the Son, and Jesus taught His disciples about the Holy Spirit who would dwell in them (John 14:16-17). There is reference in 1 Pet. 4:14 to the "spirit of glory and of God" and in Eph. 4:3 to the "unity of the Spirit". In Col. 1:27 we are told that Christ in us is our hope of glory, and that hope is our sure possession now. Some suggest this "glory" refers to the unction or "presence" of Christ with His servants; to the glory that shone in Moses' face when he came down from the mountain (2 Cor. 3:7); or to the grace that was upon the disciples in their ministry (Acts 4:32-33) as it was in the earthly ministry of our Lord (Lk. 4:22). Whatever the "glory" is, it is best that we should not be too aware of it. It would go to our heads and at once be clouded.

[Back to Top](#)

17:24-26

Our Lord prayed that His men should be kept, sanctified and united, and He prayed for their out going and ongoing service. Then He asked finally that they might constantly be with Him to behold His glory. To be with Christ, which is far better than anything else (Phil. 1:23), is something already referred to in John 14:3. Now, this great section of the gospel, chapters 14-17, beginning and ending with this theme, was designed to prepare and hearten the disciples for a lifetime of service and so the emphasis cannot be on being with and beholding Jesus in Heaven. It has to do with now: and that is the emphasis of the resurrection story. Jesus, alive for evermore, is with His people and stays with His people. But in the practical business of life and service we must constantly be considering Jesus in His glorious exaltation. Looking away to Jesus (Heb. 12:1-2), seeing Him as Lord and Christ (Acts 2:36), considering His majesty (2 Pet. 1:16) and glorying in His unique pre-eminence (Col. 1:18) are all practical exercises which do our souls great good. It was the glory of the risen Christ that broke in upon Paul on the Damascus road (Acts 9:3ff) and really left him blind to all but Christ for the rest of his life. Writing to the Corinthian church Paul spoke of how beholding the glory was in fact a transforming experience (2 Cor. 3:12-18), whether or not we are aware of it. There is no doubt that Christians "see" what others cannot see (Heb. 11:27; 2 Cor. 4:18). Even though we can grasp it only imperfectly we do begin to see the glory which was Christ's before the foundation of the world. The plan of salvation was no stop-gap affair. It began in the glory of eternity and ends there also.

[Back to Top](#)

17:24-26

We end our study of this unique prayer confessing gladly that we are quite out of our depth. We ought to be "lost in wonder, love and praise." It is not clear why Jesus used the phrase "Righteous Father" unless it was to emphasise that "the Lord of all the earth is just; holy and true are all His ways." This is our assured ground when we pray in the face of baffling judgments of God upon evil (Gen. 18:25). This righteousness of God remains at the heart of the atonement (Rom. 3:26). The God who justifies the ungodly does so only on the basis of "righteous peace securely made" by the blood of the Cross (Rom. 5:1-2; Col. 1:20). The last verse summarises what Jesus had done for His disciples and still does for us. He made known God's name: that is, He made plain to people the nature, attributes, character and work of God. It is almost as if the Lord was praying that all His people might ever "learn what God is like." This is the basis and dynamic of service and it is the context and blessing of all we mean by fellowship. Note in the last verse how an increasing knowledge of the truth about God is linked with an increasing awareness of love, God's love for us, our love for Him, and through Him our love for others. The words Jesus used remind us of Rom. 5:5 - the love of God poured out into our hearts by the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. It is love beyond all thought and wonder (Eph. 3:14-21). How we need to believe the love God has for us (1 John 4:16). How we need to feel loved, and to sense that we are included in that love. The chapter ends by focusing on Jesus who dwells in our hearts. "The love of Jesus, what it is, none but His loved ones know." (Hymn, Jesus the very thought of Thee.)

[Back to Top](#)

18:1-3

John begins his eye-witness account of the arrest, trial and death of the Son of God. Unlike the other gospel writers he makes no mention of the agony in the Garden of Gethsemane. It may be that, writing later than the other gospels, John assumes there is no need for further detail about this subject. On the other hand it may be that John, portraying the Son of God in His majestic progress to His appointed death, deliberately omits the scene of agony lest it give any suggestion of uncertainty or unwillingness on the part of the Saviour. It seems wrong for us to speculate since John himself makes it plain in 20:30-31 that he has made a deliberate selection of events in presenting his account. Jesus, having ended His work of teaching and prayer, now proceeds, as the true Priest, to the work of atonement. There was no attempt to hide or to delay events, for the garden to which they went was well known to Judas as the most likely place for Jesus to go to. The beginning of the story of mankind and the awful disaster that befell the human race was in a garden; the beginning of the final act of human redemption was in a garden; and the place of the burial of the Saviour was a garden. The Garden of Gethsemane, with its olive trees and oil-press, was a place where Jesus and His disciples often went and there is a clear note of fellowship here which echoes 13:1-2. True fellowship is always found in the realistic situations

of life, indeed in the very presence of the enemy (Ps. 23:5). In penning these words John must have recalled that he, as well as his two friends, fell asleep in the garden (Mk. 14:32-42).

[Back to Top](#)

18:4-6

The reference to the sleeping disciples yesterday indicates that some time elapsed after they entered the garden before the arresting party came. During that time only Jesus was aware of the imminence of evil and of the crisis about to engulf them all. The heaviness which overtook the disciples even though they were spiritually willing seems to have had some measure of satanic attack in it because naturally, in view of Jesus' words and His own attitude, these men should have been keyed up and unable to sleep. Read Mk. 14:32ff again. The arrival of the soldiers was a noisy and inescapable intrusion, no doubt shattering the calm of the disciples. But before anyone could say or do anything Jesus took command. The scene is very dramatic. The soldiers, unlike the chief priests and scribes, did not know Jesus by sight and we have to assume the information given in Mk. 14:43-45. The irrelevance, insignificance and powerlessness of Judas the traitor is manifested in the way Jesus virtually ignored him and addressed the captain of the soldiers. But do not fail to note the terse physical and spiritual description of Judas. He stood with the forces of anti-Christ. The other disciples, failures that they were, stood with Jesus. There is an eternity of difference. We all need to know where we stand, not only for salvation, but in all the issues of life. Judas had known the ministry of Jesus, the friendship of Jesus (Matt. 26:50), and the fellowship of the disciples. He had gone out on evangelistic ventures in close company with someone when they were sent out two by two. But he was a lost soul. What a shock it must have been to the disciples. Give diligence (2 Pet. 1:10). Involvement in Christian activity does not necessarily mean there is saving faith (Matt. 7:21-23).

[Back to Top](#)

18:7-9

Take the story slowly to let it be impressed for ever on our minds and hearts. The reason for the repeated question is found in v.6. When Jesus declared His identity, having strode forward to confront His captors when they certainly expected to have a chase and a fight, they were totally overpowered. Their utter helplessness was made manifest to them. Whatever they did next would be done not by the command of the Priests. Nor was it by the permission of Pilate who must have given consent for the large company of soldiers to be detailed for this job at a time when his security forces must have been on the alert for the time of the Passover. It was all set in motion by the clear permission of this Jesus who was so totally master over them. The use of the words, "I am", was not incidental, for Jesus had used them earlier in His ministry in confrontation with the leaders of the Jewish people (John 8:58). John here is making plain that this Jesus was none other than God, the great I AM, and that He was moving forward into battle against the powers of darkness to work salvation for His people. It makes the heart thrill just to speak of it and it removes from our thinking any lingering feelings of tragedy. Terrible it was that the Son of God was betrayed and handed over, but it was not tragedy. It seems that for a moment there must have been something of the shining forth of the very majesty of God in the face of Jesus, just as there had been on the Mount of Transfiguration and just as there was on the Damascus Road (Matt. 17:1-8; Acts. 9:1ff; cf. John 1:14). What will it be when the day comes and every eye shall see him (Rev. 1:7)?

[Back to Top](#)

18:7-9

The overpowering of the arresting party was miracle. There is no human explanation for it. There is no suggestion that the disciples were overcome but the reference to Judas may indicate that he, along with his chosen associates, was overcome. This may have been the start of his terrible remorse as it dawned on him what he had done and to whom he had done it (Matt. 27:3ff). Jesus' second questioning of the men reveals that their hearts were not opened or changed by the demonstration of power, just as Pharaoh's heart had been unmoved by many miracles (Ex. 7:8-14). But it also made plain that what was going on centred on one single man and not on the "steering committee" of a popular revolutionary group. It was one man they sought; the man identified, not without a little contempt (their minds being poisoned), as Jesus the Nazarene. Jesus gave Himself up quite

voluntarily and in that very moment showed his remarkable love and care for His disciples. This was something they would never forget, and this incident may have been in Paul's mind when he wrote the words in Gal. 2:20. When Jesus said, "Take Me and let them go," He was demonstrating that glorious substitution which is at the heart of His atoning death. Having demonstrated His power over the soldiers, Jesus made His arrest a condition for the freedom of His disciples. The words in v.9 are found also in 6:39; 10.28; and 17:12 and in these places seem to refer to eternal salvation. Here they refer to the immediate circumstances of the disciples. But there is no contradiction. We are kept by the power of God at all times and in all places. Had the disciples been arrested at this point it would have been too much for them, and so they were spared. They were sheltered. Indeed they were being sent away from danger. What a Shepherd!

[Back to Top](#)

18:10-11

Peter, ever impulsive, ever emotional in a way that distorted his spiritual reason, was too proud to submit to the Lordship of Jesus over him and his circumstances. Always over-confident spiritually, and perhaps recalling 13:36-38, Peter reacted to the situation. Now reaction is not faith, and Peter manifested his total misunderstanding of the situation. He assumed that the power Jesus had shown in subduing the soldiers was automatically available for him and he acted on that basis. He was showing off. By his human arm and his petty little sword he was going to win a battle that could only be won on a spiritual level. As Luke 22:47-51 makes plain, Peter was not alone in his attitude, but as always Peter was the first to go blundering ahead. He was always the same: at cross-purposes with God but ever so sincere (Matt. 16:21-23); speaking when he should have been silent; asleep when he should have been praying; active when he should have been submissive; silent when he should have been speaking; and going boldly forward when he should have been running away. We will see more of this as the story proceeds. Peter's rash demonstration of bravery could have started a general brawl. It was totally unnecessary (Matt. 26:53); it could have caused misunderstanding and slander later when Jesus declared to Pilate that His servants were not to fight for His Kingdom (18:36); and it was totally contrary to the plan of God. How often we are like Peter! We act on impulse, never considering what effect our actions will have on the work and people of God. The trouble is that we live for the moment.

[Back to Top](#)

18:12-14

Never read the account of these events carelessly. The Jesus who had overpowered the whole company of soldiers by His word now allowed Himself to be manhandled, bound and led away. He yielded Himself willingly. He was not overcome. He who came into the world to set men free was Himself bound. The first thing that happened was that Jesus was taken to Annas who, though not actually High Priest, was in fact the power behind Caiaphas his son-in-law who held the office at that time. Annas was made High Priest by the Romans (!) in AD 6 and deposed by them in AD 15, but right throughout the life of Jesus and well beyond that, the office was held by five different sons of Annas and a son-in-law (cf. Luke 3:1-2; Acts 4:6). During their time of power the House of God became a den of robbers (John 2:14-16) and religion became a thing of legalistic scruples and manifest hypocrisy (Matt. 23:1-7, 13-15ff). Annas held the reins of power and no doubt had given instructions that Jesus be brought first to him while Caiaphas constituted the meeting of the Sanhedrin. John draws attention to the fact that this Caiaphas (who was High Priest from AD 18-36) was the man who, at the raising of Lazarus, had spoken of the expediency of one man dying for the people (11:49ff). Without knowing it Caiaphas was then stating the secret purpose of God and now he is seen as the instrument of bringing that purpose to pass. This is a tremendous source of comfort and confidence. We must never think of evil (men or devils) being free to do whatever they want. They *must* serve the purpose of God. This in no way excuses their wickedness as the apostles made plain in their preaching (Acts 2:22-23). Evil is always evil and when it has served the purpose of God it is brought to judgment.

[Back to Top](#)

18:15-18

The story of Peter's denial is recorded in all four gospels (Matt. 26:69ff; Mk. 14:66ff; Lk. 22:54ff). Mark, the earliest Gospel writer, got his information from Peter but John wrote his account from the standpoint of one

who was with Peter, who loved him dearly, and who felt in some way responsible for him since it was John who got Peter admitted into the court of the High Priest's house (16). We take John's account as he gives it section by section not least because in this way we get the "feel" of all that was going on. Both Peter and John followed at a distance when Jesus was led away and, although this was a natural thing for them to do, it might have been better for them to have kept out of the way as Jesus seems to have suggested (8). John makes no reference to the scattering of the disciples (Matt. 26:56). For reasons we do not know John was easily admitted to the courtyard of Annas' house. Peter, faced with a closed door, did not accept the guidance of circumstances, perhaps because of the tumult of his feelings, perhaps because of jealousy since John had been admitted. John, for reasons we cannot know, felt constrained to intervene and get Peter brought in, but it seems that almost at once Peter was separated from John. Perhaps he wanted to go his own way and "do his own thing". This situation seemed to be safe for John, and no harm came to him. But it was not safe for Peter. He was on his own, his feelings were jangled, his heart was restless, and he was a sitting target for the Devil.

[Back to Top](#)

18:15-18

Think back to Jesus' counsel to watch and pray (Matt.26:41). It was a warning to be on the lookout for areas of temptation and danger but Peter and John had both forgotten. There was nothing constructive they could do in that place. Remember as the story unfolds that it was Peter's best friend who got him into this situation. Perhaps Peter had sent a message to John through the raid (16) and it is not easy to deny a friend's request. John seems to have hurried away to where the "hearing" was taking place and Peter was left feeling very selfconscious. After all he was the man who had cut off the High Priest's servant's ear. Was he known? Had he been identified? Was the man with the sore ear right there in the courtyard? Was Peter regretting his earlier sword-play? How often we all say, "I wish I had not done it." Well might we pray, "Lead us not into Temptation" or "Keep thy servant from presumptuous sins." The servant maid knew John and knew he was a disciple of Jesus and she seems to have looked closely at Peter, so manifestly agitated and ill-at-ease. There is no need to think the girl was full of malice towards Peter or antagonistic to Jesus. Her question may well have been almost rhetorical, not needing an answer. "You're not another of the disciples, are you?" It was all so simple and, perhaps being already in negative form, it was the easiest thing in the world for Peter to say, "No, not me." That ended the conversation and Peter moved over to the fire. Did Peter recall his protestation of loyalty to Jesus (13:36-38; Matt. 26:33-35)? Was he resolving to be stronger next time? Did he not think of clearing out, for safety's sake?

[Back to Top](#)

18:19-24

While all that was happening to Peter, John was back inside witnessing the cross- examination of Jesus. It is open to question if Annas had any right to act as he did but that would not worry a man so corrupt as he. Annas was not interested in witnesses or in truth, he was concerned only with getting rid of Jesus and stamping out His movement. Jesus refused to incriminate Himself, testifying that there had been nothing secret or underhand in all His ministry. In v.21 He may be referring to the occasion when the Temple guard had been sent to arrest Him and had gone back to their masters with a report that angered them (7:32, 40-52). In v.22 we have the beginning of the brutality and contempt Jesus suffered at the hands of wicked men and it is a vivid comment on the corruption of the whole system of Jewish law that this should have happened. The man who struck the blow may have been angling for commendation from Annas but he would long remember Jesus' quiet reply (22). He declared that there was a correct way to bring wrongdoers to justice and that it must be by accusation supported by witnesses. When a nation's system of law becomes corrupt the life of the nation is degenerate indeed. Note last of all our Lord's calm and gracious manner and bearing in all this. Here is the Man who taught us to turn the other cheek (Matt. 5:39) and He is our example (1 Pet. 2:21-23).

[Back to Top](#)

18:19-24

Annas, having failed to make any progress in this private hearing, now sent Jesus to Caiaphas and the gathered Sanhedrin. It is the other gospels, not John, that give us the details of the "formal" hearing. Read the account in

Matt. 26:57-27:1; Mk. 14:53-65; or Lk. 22:63-71. It seems from Matthew's account that the whole Council had gathered and there is some doubt if this was a legal thing to do. The members must have been summoned personally and we wonder if people such as Nicodemus, Joseph of Arimathea and Gamaliel had been "accidentally" missed out. The rigging of committees and courts is always an evil thing, more so when it is in the realm of religion. John makes no mention of the organising of false witnesses because in his eyes truth did not enter the situation and he may well have been aware that dark Annas held the power and his decision had been made. These "religious" leaders were very aware that this Jesus was making them irrelevant in the political sphere of the nation. They had heard Him saying the kingdom would be taken from them (Matt. 21:43) and they had no intention of letting power slip from their hands. This is the cruelty and ruthlessness of prejudice. You cannot reason with it nor can you plead with it. It has all the marks of Hell.

[Back to Top](#)

18:25-27

Aren't you glad John says so little about Peter's denial? It is so easy to hammer someone who fails and to make sure that it is never forgotten. How different is Jesus. "To those who fall, how kind Thou art." The pattern for all of us is stated in Gal. 6:1. We are not concerned to try to reconcile the details of the four accounts of Peter's denial in terms of exactly where and when and in what form of words each took place. Keep in mind that the house of Caiaphas was a vast affair and Annas may well have stayed in one wing of it. John emphasises that it was while all these agonising things were happening to Jesus that Peter denied Him. It is Luke who tells us that at the critical moment of the third denial the Lord heard Peter's words and looked right into his eyes (Lk. 22:61-62). But remember that in the moment of his monumental failure Peter looked to Jesus. Had he not done so he would never have seen the love and compassion and rebuke in the eyes of Jesus. Luke tells us Peter wept, but later it is John who tells us of Peter's restoration. Still later, it is Luke who tells of Peter's mighty preaching at Pentecost (Acts 2:14ff). We shall see later that there is a strong possibility that it was John who looked after Peter in his time of desolation and took him home to care for him (20:2). John had learned love from Jesus.

"There is no place where earth's sorrows

Are more felt than up in heaven;

There is no place where earth's failings

Have such kindly judgment given."

(Faber)

[Back to Top](#)

18:28-32

We have learned from the other gospels (Matt. 27:1-2) that it was now early morning and that the Sanhedrin was irreversibly committed to the murder of Jesus (Matt. 26:65-66). They had come to their decision as custodians of the spiritual good of the nation but they had done it by means of bribery and false witnesses. Now they went with all spiritual decorum to Pilate under whose Roman rule they were forced to live. They refused to accept that their subjection to Rome was in any way a reflection on their spirituality. They did not believe their national predicament was a judgment of God on their sinfulness. They were obsessed with their own importance and could see nothing else. They could not or would not see their own hypocrisy, for which Jesus had flayed them publicly. At Pilate's house they would not cross the threshold lest by being in contact with "unclean" things they became defiled, that is, unholy in the sight of God. It seems these men had been so preoccupied with organising the murder of Jesus that they had not had time to eat the Passover. But they were keeping themselves "clean" so that once their enemy was safely on the scaffold they could catch up on the "holy things" of the memorial meal. It seems also that the messengers, or agitators, of the Sanhedrin were already at work among the crowd of pilgrims in Jerusalem, fomenting feeling so that when the crisis came the people would "vote" with loud clamour against Jesus. It was all the work of Hell done in the name of holy religion.

[Back to Top](#)

18:28-32

Pilate, ever the compromiser, went *out* to the priests. He knew Jerusalem at the Passover was liable to be difficult. He knew an early morning deputation spelled trouble, and he wanted to avoid that at all cost because

his own position with Rome was not too secure. He hoped the Jews would be softened a little by this gesture. But conciliation is seldom effective in dealing with deep prejudice. Pilate asked the appointed question which could set in motion the process of Roman law (29) and received an answer that was evasive of the issue and contemptuous of the governor and all he represented (30). They seemed very sure of themselves and were determined not to be frustrated. It seems Pilate was equally determined not to get involved. He must have known about Jesus' ministry and miracles and nothing so far had impelled him to take action as he would have done if he considered Jesus a threat to the state. The other gospel records add details indicating factors that influenced Pilate (Matt. 27:18-19; Mk. 15:10). He passed the issue back to the Jews as being an issue only of religion and not of politics, but they were not disposed to be thus frustrated. It seems that at this stage they spoke the words recorded in Lk. 23:1-2 and it was this issue of kingship that Pilate was forced to take up with Jesus in the following verses. Here (31b-32) it seems that although set on Jesus' death the Jews were determined that the public decision and act would be carried out by the Romans. But there is more significance than that and we return to it tomorrow.

[Back to Top](#)

18:28-32

With Jesus in their power why did these wicked men not just do away with Him privately? Such an "accident" could have been camouflaged easily in a crowded city at the time of the feast. But Jesus' enemies wanted Him and His "movement" discredited as well as ended and this indicates something of the extent and depth of Jesus' influence. What was happening was indeed a major confrontation between the saving purposes of God and the powers of "anti-Christ". It may be that even these wicked men had some apprehension about the evil thing they were doing and wanted to be able to point back later to the fact that it was Pilate who took the decision. Even when Satan holds men in his power there are flaws in his dominance and a terrible awareness can come on men, as it did to Judas (Matt. 27:3ff). There may be a hint of this in Paul's words in 1 Cor. 2:8 and this may shed light on Jesus' words in Lk. 23:34a. But John indicates a deeper and more glorious truth. At best the Jews could have killed Jesus by stoning. But this was not how it had been ordained. Jesus had to die in a certain way. He had to be "lifted up" and He had to die as the "accursed one" hanging on the tree. Read Matt. 20:17-19, with the emphasis that Jesus had to be handed over to the Gentiles, and read also John 3:14 and 12:32 which emphasise being "lifted up". What was happening was not "accident" nor simply the wickedness of vicious men, but the carrying out of the specific design of God. In Deut. 21:22-23, quoted in Gal. 3:13, we have the clear reference to death on the Cross. This is also Peter's emphasis (1 Pet. 2:24). It is little wonder that we sing of "the wondrous Cross, on which the Prince of Glory died."

[Back to Top](#)

18:33-38

The issue of kingship having been raised (Lk. 23:1-2), Pilate had no option but to investigate it. He retreated from the clamour of the Jews and questioned Jesus in private to see if He was a politically dangerous man. The emphasis could be put on either of the first two words of Pilate's question because he would be well aware of Jewish talk of a King and Messiah. He was also, no doubt, aware of mock-Messiahs with nationalistic aspirations who caused a lot of trouble to the authorities (Acts 5:33-39). Pilate had to be careful, but the question he asked was too vague. Did he mean "king of the Jews" as the Sanhedrin accused, or as Jesus Himself claimed to be? It seems that Jesus was giving Pilate (whose background and career He no doubt knew about) an opportunity to discuss the whole issue on a spiritual level. But already Pilate was evading the personal issue and he rebuffed Jesus, raising again the thorny question of kingship. If Jesus was a king in any sense and Pilate dealt unwisely with the troublesome chief priests they would certainly report him to Rome as they had done before. Pilate's political position was too precarious for that risk to be taken. He really had two issues to face. What was he going to do with Jesus and what was he going to do with the Chief Priests? It was a bad day for Pilate and he decided (in spite of his wife's plea - Matt. 27:19) to deal with it on an official rather than a personal level. He must have been baffled by Jesus' statement that He was a king but that His kingship (so different from Pilate's) did not derive from earthly power nor did it employ worldly means (36). Pilate was interested in spite of himself.

[Back to Top](#)

18:33-38

Pilate, like many today, was out of his depth when Jesus began to speak of a world order of power different from this present, materialistic, military and political one. Jesus had baffled the Jews with the same emphasis in John 8:21-25 and later Paul would encourage Christians by emphasising that their citizenship was in heaven (Phil. 3:20). Believers always look for a better world with stable foundations (Heb. 11:10, 13-16) and they live in the power of that world which is to come (Heb. 6:5). In v.37 Pilate grasped at the fact that could be the key to his dilemma. Jesus' reply confirmed that He was a king. Paul holds this up as an example of good witness (1 Tim. 6:13). Jesus then went on to make plain to Pilate that He was born to be a king in the hearts of men and not to found a kingdom that would challenge and interfere with the political authority of Rome. This is something which the church in our day must remember because organised religion is becoming more and more politically enmeshed. That, said Jesus, is not the way to establish His kingdom. Note in v.36 Jesus speaks of being handed over to the Jews, not the Romans, and this is not surprising for false religion is a greater enemy than wrong government. Jesus' kingship has to do with truth: the truth about God, man and salvation. His business is to be King over men in their hearts to bring them into obedience to the truth. All who are of the truth come to Him. Pilate's response was one of cynicism. If it was all to do with religion then he was not interested for he regarded all religion as discredited. That is as good a way as any to evade the issues of life.

[Back to Top](#)

18:38-40

We cannot say with any authority just what Pilate's reactions were to the conversation with Jesus. He may have been cynical and disdainful about all religious things, or angry at the suggestion that he was deficient in his grasp of truth, or even patronisingly sympathetic to Jesus. On the other hand his conscience may have been pricked. Whatever the reason, he ended the interview quickly, going out to the crowd and declaring in official terminology, "No cause of indictment." That should have ended the matter. But Pilate was concerned to keep relations with the leaders of the Jews favourable to himself and had already, with his quick compromising mind, thought up a solution to get him "off the hook". Considerations of justice were laid aside and expediency was now the rule. We do not know who had arranged the "custom" of releasing a prisoner at the time of the Passover, but it is suggested it was asked for by the Jews by way of remembering how the Israelites had been released from the prison of Egypt at the Exodus. Of course it cannot be right to release a guilty, convicted criminal simply to appease popular opinion. But Pilate had done so before and now the Jews clamoured for the "custom" to be continued. The choice was theirs. That was the "tradition" and Pilate, who had agreed at the beginning, had no escape. He seems to have been confident of the issue. Pilate may have reckoned that the Triumphal Entry demonstration signified sufficient popular support for Jesus to guarantee He would be the people's choice. He had misjudged. They chose Barabbas.

[Back to Top](#)

18:38-40

There is something quite diabolical here as we see a bad man confronted by bad men who knew they had the upper hand because of past events. Pilate had been governor for seven years and right at the start he had asserted his authority by setting up in Jerusalem Roman standards/flags carrying the image of the emperor. Such was the protest of Jewish leaders he had to back down, but a confrontation situation had been established. Pilate had full powers of life and death, and he appointed the High Priest and also controlled the Temple treasury. At one point he used Temple funds to build an aquaduct and when large scale protest resulted, he sent in his troops and killed large numbers of Jews (Lk. 13:1-2). He alienated Herod and had to be careful in dealing with him (Lk. 23:6-7). Caesar himself was beginning to be more than critical. Pilate was a weak character, but when such men get power they are both ruthless and foolish, insisting on their own way no matter what people say. But such men are overtaken by the consequences of their own actions and find themselves trapped and undermined. Their foot slides in due time (Deut. 32:35 AV). Read Psalm 73 carefully, and remember that we sow what we will reap (Gal. 6:7-8). When the crisis came, Pilate naturally tried to resolve things by compromise but the moment he made the offer in these verses the Jews knew they had him in their power so long as they maintained the pressure. There was nothing Pilate could do about it except to take a radical moral stand. But his past actions

and attitudes had so weakened him, he could not do it. We all do well to consider what we are *becoming* as we make the daily decisions of life.

[Back to Top](#)

19:1-11

There is an interesting comment on these events in Acts 3:13-15 which gives Pilate the benefit of the doubt. But if he really wanted to release Jesus he went about it in the wrong way. In 18:39 he referred to Jesus as King of the Jews, a name guaranteed to infuriate the chief priests. Some suggest that if he had offered them Jesus of Nazareth instead of Jesus-Barabbas the crowd might well have chosen Jesus (Matt. 27:15-23; Lk. 23:18-23) but this seems unlikely. But Pilate was mishandling the whole thing from his own standpoint. He had Jesus scourged, hoping that the ghastly sight might satisfy the crowd and persuade them to let things settle. But the crowd assumed Pilate had given in: why else would the upholder of justice punish an innocent man? We cannot say for certain if Pilate ordered the mockery after the scourging or if it was done in his presence. He certainly did not try to stop it. It may have been that he was aiming to present Jesus to the crowd in such a pitiable condition that they would realise they had made a mistake in thinking Jesus was a king. When Pilate took Jesus outside again and said, "Behold the Man," he was reducing him to a mere man, despised and devalued. He was also appealing to the humanity of the crowd, hoping some fellow feeling might stir pity in them. But humanity in its rejection of Christ is diabolical and not so moved. We need to read Isaiah 53, for there was no beauty in Jesus that men should desire Him. Possibly some in the crowd were already saying that if Jesus really was who He claimed to be this would not be happening to Him. God would not allow it. But it was God who was delivering Him up.

[Back to Top](#)

19:1-11

Never try to make this a civilised or ordered picture. It is hellish in every sense. Think of the chanting crowd. Think of the roar of voices all demanding blood. Think of Pilate's fear and anger, as he spat out the words in v.6. Note how twice over he declared the innocence of Jesus. There was to be no doubt about it. People must see that this Man was not dying for His own sins; He died the righteous for the unrighteous (1 Pet. 3:18). But again Pilate riled the Jews. The one thing they could not do was execute without the permission of Rome. It almost seems Pilate was taunting the Jews, rubbing in the fact of their national disgrace as a subject people. But this was not likely to help his situation. It is a soft answer that turns away wrath (Prov. 15:1). The Jewish leaders were in no mood to negotiate. Stung by Pilate's contempt they said, "We have a law," and in saying so they left Pilate in no doubt as to the explosive nature of the situation. They moved the whole charge from the political to the religious and seemingly Pilate was obliged to protect their religious scruples. The Jews here declared they had understood Jesus only too well right through His ministry. He was claiming to be the Son of God and His mighty works had confirmed this. But the Jews were not prepared even to be cautious enough to consider the claim might be true. Pilate, however, was afraid. It was bad enough to have to deal with bitter Jews but was he being drawn into dealing with God (whatever he meant by "god")? Being a Roman he had superstitious ideas about the gods but knew they were not to be trifled with; that would be even worse than alienating Caesar. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (Prov. 1:7; 9:10). It is sad that so many of us are more concerned to keep on the right side of men than to be right with God.

[Back to Top](#)

19:1-11

Note that Pilate, afraid from the start, was now more afraid. He confronted Jesus again and in asking where He was from was really asking who He was. Was He a "God"? Was his wife right about this man (Matt. 27:19)? But Pilate was not a spiritual enquirer. He was just looking for an escape. There was no repentance in respect of his unlawful scourging or his bitter contempt of Jesus' person. He got no answer. There was nothing more to say. This was the same treatment that Herod got (Lk. 23:6-12). Trifling talk about spiritual things with people who are not in earnest is not only folly, it is wrong. Pearls are not for swine (Matt. 7:6). Sometimes our witness is more powerful when we do not speak than when we speak. But Pilate was stung in his pride and the petty little dictator asserted himself in v.10 and at the same time condemned himself. He said, "I can release you if I

choose." That meant the decision he was making was his alone and not the Jews'. All the hand washing in the world would never cancel out the fact, which will be testified to the end of history, that Jesus was "crucified under Pontius Pilate" (Matt. 27:24). Jesus' reply to Pilate shook the man to the core. It reminded the governor that his power was delegated and for it he was answerable. No doubt Pilate's first thought was of answerability to Caesar, but who is to deny that he had a vague sense of being also accountable to God? Without doubt Jesus was thinking of the sovereign plan of God for "His hour". But this does not cancel human responsibility. At the same time Jesus made plain that Caiaphas and the Jews had the greater guilt because they had greater light and knowledge. This is a solemn thought for privileged people (Lk. 12:47-48).

[Back to Top](#)

19:12-16

These verses tell of the third confrontation Pilate had with the Jews (18:38; 19:4; 19:12) and each time the governor compromised because the pressure against him was carefully and ruthlessly increased. After the first examination Pilate sent Jesus to Herod only to have Him sent back (Lk. 23:6-12). Pilate stood totally alone. He could not escape the decision he had to make about Jesus. His manoeuvring and manipulation left him with his own question (Matt. 27:22-26) and his angry gesture of hand-washing simply confirmed his weakness and wrongness. In today's verses the Jews struck home at Pilate's weakest point. They knew that any more trouble reported to Caesar would finish Pilate's political career. To make their own position sure, if the matter did come to Caesar, the Jews, denying all their past history, made a public declaration of loyalty to Caesar. When that happened Pilate knew he was finished (15-16), and Jesus was handed over. But do not fail to note v.12. Pilate had reached the stage when he had resolved (as far as a weak man can so resolve) to release Jesus. This decision he stated to the Jews and it was when they saw the possibility of being frustrated in their plan that they took the side of Caesar, protesting their loyalty to the man and the system they hated with proud passion. We must learn here a deep lesson in the business of serving Christ. We must face the fact that wicked unbelieving people will stop at nothing and will stoop to the lowest in their opposition to Christ and the gospel. Think of how, later in the story, these same Jews harried and hunted the apostles wherever they went. Be prepared.

[Back to Top](#)

19:12-16

In the midst of the tumult of the rabble Jesus stood every inch a king. Trapped though Pilate was and committed to doing wrong, the governor, with formal actions sat down to pronounce judgment on the case. John dates the occasion in v.14 and if we compare Mk. 15:42 we see that it was on the Friday, the day before the Sabbath of the Passover week that Jesus was crucified. This was Good Friday, or God's Friday for it was all His doing. It is difficult, if not impossible, to state precisely what is meant by "about the sixth hour" but the difficulty in reconciling the various times given in the other gospels is no argument against the inspiration of the gospel writers. It simply means there are things we cannot understand. Pilate seemed determined to hammer home to the Jews that they were crucifying their king and that they were asking him, a hated Roman, to execute the King of the Jews. Was there contempt in Pilate's words, "Behold your King"? Or was he appealing again to the Jews in the hope that the sight of this bleeding man would subdue their savagery? Right to the end Pilate refused to let them escape from the fact that they killed their own King (21-22). These Jews, proud of their independence (8:33), who had hated Jesus because He would not attack Caesar (Matt. 22:17), now renounced their hope of Messiah's kingdom and bowed to Caesar. Little did they know then that within forty years the powers of Caesar would raze Jerusalem to the ground as Jesus foretold (Matt. 24:1-2). From that day until now the Jews have had neither Temple nor King. Pilate gave sentence as they asked (Lk. 23:24) and the next stage began.

[Back to Top](#)

19:17-22

There is a brevity and simplicity about John's account of the crucifixion, yet it is very accurate and profoundly theological. When in v.16 John speaks of Jesus being "handed over" he uses the same Greek word as in 18:2 (translated "delivered"); cf. Acts 2:23; 1 Cor. 11:23. The emphasis is not on betrayal, nor on the action of men but on the "delivering up" of the Son of God by the Father (Rom. 4: 25; 8:32) to deal with our trespasses. When Jesus was handed over it was the Roman soldiers who took charge and marched Him away carrying His own

Cross. He was led as a Lamb to the slaughter without protest (Isa. 53:7). Not even the enthusiastic crowds of Palm Sunday protested, and while this may be explained by fear of the High Priest, fear of Rome, and by the fickleness of human popularity, the true reason is simply that God would not allow anything to interfere with His sovereign purpose of salvation. Jesus was led away outside the city wall (Heb. 13:12). John alone tells us that for a spell Jesus carried His own cross and then, possibly because He stumbled or was going too slowly, Simon was conscripted to do the job. After all, to the soldiers it was just another routine execution. John simply mentions the other two who were crucified, thinking no doubt of Isa. 53:12. The exact site of the cross must remain uncertain but it was near the city; outside the wall for the "sin offering" had to be made there (Lev. 16:27); and in a public place, possibly near a main road, for many passed by (Matt. 27:39). It may have been within sight of the high Roman fortress of Antonia near the Temple precincts so that the authorities could keep watch. It seems the Son of Man was in fact "lifted up" for all to see.

[Back to Top](#)

19:17-22

The Gospels do not emphasise the physical aspects of death by crucifixion, possibly because everyone knew what it was like. It was a long-drawn-out agonising process but the physical suffering is but a shadow of the spiritual cost of meeting the judgment of God upon sin. Our Lord was crucified with criminals because He was "God's criminal", the sin bearer who not only carried sin but was made sin for us (2 Cor. 5:21). He was crucified between the other two and right to the end His saving ministry continued. As the other gospels make plain, one guilty sinner at the end of a wasted life was saved when he looked to Jesus. This assures us that none need despair. But only one was saved, therefore none dare presume. In the conversation with the thieves (Lk. 23: 39-43), which John does not mention, we see wonderfully the kingliness of Jesus, so sure in His right and power to admit men to God's kingdom. Pilate left the matter in no doubt by his insistence on the clear inscription written in Hebrew, the language of Jewish religion; in Latin, the language of law and government; and in Greek, the language of education and commerce. This thing was not done in a corner (Acts 26:26). It was placarded for all to see (Rom. 5:8). This was no common criminal, and the eyes of all were drawn to the Suffering Servant of God, Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews. The reactions of the people varied from indifference (Lam. 1:12; Matt. 27:39) to mockery, but it is the bitter anger of the chief priests of the Jews that John records. Pilate's action charged them publicly with having demanded the death of the King of the Jews. From that charge they could not escape. It was the beginning of their day of judgment.

[Back to Top](#)

19 23-24

One commentator says that when we think of the inscription on the Cross we should think also of the other handwriting which was against us which Christ took away, nailing it to His Cross (Col. 2:14AV; the "bond against us" RSV). Once Jesus was nailed to the Cross the soldiers proceeded to do what they always did when a common criminal was executed. They claimed the clothes as part of their wages. It seems most of the garments were simply divided into four shares but the seamless tunic was gambled for. This, says John, was a precise fulfilment of the ancient prophecy in Ps. 22:1-2, 6-8, 14-18. It is amazing to see the "little" incidents of life as part of a plan of eternal dimension, even when the people concerned had no idea of the significance of what they were doing. This emphasis in John on the detailed fulfilment of Scripture is seen right through this chapter (24, 28, 36, 37). It is as if John was making plain that the death of Jesus was not an accident and certainly not a mistake, but something which had been foretold, prepared for and carried out by the sovereign purpose of God. Never forget that it is not the simple *story* or narrative of the Cross that constitutes the Christian gospel. It is the theology or significance of the happening that is the message. Christ died for our sins according to, in the pattern of and with the significance of, the Scripture testimony about Him (1 Cor. 15:1-4). The seamless coat may symbolise the sinless humanity of Jesus. We may see in the stripping of Jesus a contrast to the first Adam who, when he sinned, was covered by God's provision. John's clear emphasis seems to be on the fulfilment of Scripture and he testified, as an eye witness, that he saw it happening.

[Back to Top](#)

19:25-27

It seems that John alone of all the disciples had not forsaken Jesus (Matt. 26:56) and he was there at the Cross. Also present, and sufficiently near for conversation, were Mary, the mother of our Lord, and three of her companions. There were other women folk there also (Matt. 27:55; Mk. 15: 40; Lk. 23:48-49). It was a dangerous place to be because feeling was running high against this Jesus. The faith of these women, including Mary, may not have been all it should have been but there was no doubting their love. Mary, still pondering the angel's words in Lk. 2:34-35, 51, was there. She must have been about fifty years of age. Mary's sister seems to have been the mother of James and John (Matt. 27:56; Mk. 15:40). The third Mary was wife (or sister) of Clopas, and the fourth woman was Mary Magdalene who, more than any other, seems to have felt and shown a deep and lasting gratitude to the Lord for all He had done for her (Lk. 8:1-3). It seems that all of these women, deeply grieved as they were and in personal danger, manifested a wonderful composure. Not all are able so to cope and we must all learn to avoid situations that would prove too much for our human capacity. Peter failed in this and assumed that because John could cope in the High Priest's house he could do so! He was wrong. But note now the truly wonderful love of Jesus in all its tender compassion and understanding. From the midst of His agony He looked upon, spoke to and provided for His mother. Do not fail to note that the disciples of Jesus had homes and family cares just as we have. Jesus knows and cares, and calls His people to care for each other.

[Back to Top](#)

19:28-29

Of the seven "words" Jesus spoke from the Cross John records only three. The sequence of these seven words seems to be: Father, forgive them ... (Lk. 23:34); Today you will be with Me in Paradise (Lk. 23:43); Woman ... your son ... (John 19:27); My God, My God ... (Matt. 27:46; Mk. 15:34); I thirst (John 19:28); It is finished (Jn. 19:30); Father, into your hands ... (Lk. 23:46). At the heart of these utterances we have this tender moving message to Mary and to John. Here is a son honouring his mother in accordance with the Ten Commandments.

He had promised not to leave His disciples as orphans (14:18) and He would not leave His mother to bear the piercing of her heart alone (Lk. 2:35). This is love indeed. We assume that by this time Joseph was dead. Were there other children in the family? Some say that we cannot be dogmatic but there seems no reason why not. The miracle of the virgin birth did not cancel Mary's humanity nor the reality of her marriage. But we are told our Lord's family did not believe in Him (John 7:5). Jesus spoke to His mother but called her tenderly "woman" as if to remind her that there was a relationship far greater than that based on mere flesh and blood (Mk. 3:31-35). Note also here that in commanding Mary to John's care, because she needed to be looked after, there is a corrective against any thought of Mary being the patron, protector or intercessor that some would make her. But concentrate on Jesus' love shown here. There is an old hymn that begins, "Does Jesus care ...?" The answer is a glorious affirmative. And it is the care of one who is infinitely greater than we are.

[Back to Top](#)

19:28-29

The second "word" from the Cross that John records (but the fifth that Jesus uttered) was, "I thirst." John alone records this word and we remind ourselves that it was John who spoke so much about Jesus being the fountain of living water to others. This is the most personal word Jesus spoke, expressing His own need and it may indicate something of the physical suffering He had undergone. It may also be that He desired water to clear His parched throat so that the next word might be uttered clearly and confidently, in triumph and not in weakness. Some commentators suggest that there may be a reference here to the story Jesus told of the rich man and Lazarus where thirst was a symbol of the torment and loss of being eternally separated from God (Lk. 16:23-24). John gives his own comment. Jesus knew that His work was finished. It may be that the three hours of darkness (Matt. 27:45) were now ended and in the full light of day, witnessed by countless numbers, Jesus was about to lay down His life. It was not being taken from Him (Jn. 10:18) and no-one must think that the mere business of dying had proved too much for Him. In fact, no one expected Jesus to die as soon as He did (v.31ff). Death by crucifixion usually took much longer. His death was a free choice. But it was a real death from whose agonies He was not divinely protected. He suffered in His death, as this declaration of thirst made plain. His words were a fulfilment of Scripture in detail (Ps. 22:14-15; Ps. 69: 19-21). We are not sure who gave Jesus the drink and we do not ignore the words of Matt. 27:48 which speak of mockery. But we would like to think that

one of the soldiers, touched by the Holy Spirit, was moved to this act of kindness. Never underestimate the working of the Spirit. Even the Roman centurion was moved (Matt.27:54).

[Back to Top](#)

19:30

Jesus received this drink of sour wine either because it was given in a spirit of kindness or because it was not drugged as was the former one (Matt. 27:34). We cannot be dogmatic. In v.28 we were told that Jesus knew that all He had come to do was finished and now, in one glorious declaration from the Cross, He declared publicly to heaven, earth and hell, "Finished!" It is one word in the original and means, "It has been completed." All that was necessary to save sinners and reconcile them to God had been done. All the promises of the Old Testament regarding a Saviour and Deliverer had been fulfilled. All the mighty debt of sin had been paid and its judgment met. The great kingdom of evil and its master strategist had been faced and conquered and cast down. Death itself was conquered because a sinless man was about to enter its stronghold and prove that He could not be held by it. There is nothing of weakness, distress, or resignation in this cry. It is triumph. Full atonement had been made. Jesus had, by Himself, made purification for our sins and was about to take His seat at God's right hand (Heb. 1: 1-3). The work of atonement was accomplished once for all, never to be repeated (Heb. 7:27; 9:23-26). Having made the Gospel declaration Jesus, in a clear act of will, bowed His head and dismissed His spirit. He chose the moment of His death. He gave up His life for us. It was not taken from Him.

[Back to Top](#)

19:31-37

The murderous, blasphemous Jews were very scrupulous about strict observance of the Sabbath and they did not want corpses hanging on crosses because that would defile the land (Dent. 21:22-23). We may rightly criticise such hypocrisy but are we totally free from such a selective attitude towards God's laws? The request for the breaking of legs was normal in this form of execution and it was this that finally killed the two thieves, bringing to a swift end what could have lingered on for hours or even a day or more. But there was no need to do this to Jesus for He was already clearly dead. By His own will He had given up His life. He had not simply died nor was He just killed. His death was His own action giving up His life freely as a full and perfect atonement for sin. But not a bone of His body was broken. This was required of the Passover Lamb (Ex. 12:46) and right at the start of his gospel record John had identified Jesus as the Lamb of God. Some commentators point out that the religious scruples of the Jews, seeing to it that Jesus was buried the day He died, guaranteed the fulfilling of Jesus' own words about rising on the third day (John 2:19). Is it not amazing that even in such hellish circumstances as these we see the clear sovereign over-ruling of God? All things will be as He alone determines. Men and devils cannot ever have the initiative. The arrangements for burial were made and God did not suffer His holy One to see corruption (Acts 2:22-28). Bishop Ryle points out that the final killing of the penitent thief fulfilled Jesus' promise that he would that day be with Him in paradise. Ryle also points out that the forgiven thief had still to pay the consequences of his wrong doing in his judicial execution.

[Back to Top](#)

19:31-37

The thrusting of the spear into Jesus' side is noted by John, the eye-witness, as a further proof that Jesus had already died. It was not the spear that killed Him. Much has been written from a medical standpoint to confirm that the details of blood and water are authentic results of the accurate sword thrust on the body of a man who had died by crucifixion. John was not concerned as to whether it was natural or miraculous. He reported what he saw, affirmed that it was true, and by this element in the story he would confirm the faith of all who read it (35). His account confirms that Jesus really did die as a man and that His death was gloriously significant in terms of the fulfilling of Scripture. John refers to Zech. 12:10; 13:1; cf. 1 John 5:6-8. The blood is a symbol of atonement and the water of cleansing.

"Let the water and the blood,
From Thy riven side which flowed,

Be of sin the double cure,
Cleanse me from its guilt and power." (Toplady)

How wonderfully John brings to us the theology of the Cross. The blood shed makes atonement (Heb. 9:22) and peace with God (Col. 1:20). The water cleanses and in its life-giving aspect refreshes, revives (John 7: 37-39) and purifies (Titus 3:5). It is indeed a full salvation. Christ brings us justification and sanctification, and the two must never be separated.

[Back to Top](#)

19:38-42

In the story of the burial of Jesus we must think of Joseph and Nicodemus as God's emergency men. At a time of crisis and danger, when the disciples had fled, when the fury of the Sanhedrin was at its height and when taking sides with Jesus was likely to cost everything, these two secret disciples come right out into the open. Joseph has not been mentioned before by John in his gospel and we know nothing about him, although some suggest in total speculation that he was the rich young ruler. It would be nice to think so, but there is no evidence at all. Nicodemus is an old friend to us who never in his lifetime, or right through history, lost the tag of being the man who came to Jesus by night. Perhaps both of these men were despised by many of Jesus' disciples and criticised for not taking their stand earlier. Perhaps no one ever knew that Joseph was even interested in Jesus. We need to remember that the Lord has hidden disciples in all sorts of strange places and often it is only a real crisis that brings them into view. Some who may never become publicly identified may well exercise a ministry of prayer and provision that counts for more than a great deal of excited verbal service. Nicodemus had been a struggling and hesitant man for years, seemingly not able to come to real commitment to Christ and yet at times seeking to speak up in His defence (John 7:50-52). Now we see these men taking their stand for Christ. How we need to learn not to judge others too soon or too harshly. We also need to be a bit more cautious about our own dedication and dependability. After all, the "official" disciples fled.

[Back to Top](#)

19:38-42

It is interesting to consider further the emergence of this man Joseph. In John 7: 13 and 12:42-43 we are told of a hidden work of God's grace and of a tremendous tyranny of religious power and influence. It is never easy in these circumstances to take a stand because the power of the establishment is virtually total. Yet we are told in Lk. 23:50-52 that Joseph had refused to cast his vote against Jesus. It was not a secret ballot and in that particular meeting of the Sanhedrin the atmosphere must have been intense. Matthew 27:57-60 tells us Joseph was rich and that Jesus was buried in his tomb. Isaiah 53:9 foretold that the Saviour would have a grave with the rich. Mark 15:42-46 tells us Joseph was a devout man looking for the kingdom of God. We cannot but wonder if he was present at the Cross and if his reaction to the death of Jesus was that his eyes were finally opened and he took courage and went to Pilate. All the details confirm the fact that Jesus was really dead. There was to be no false resurrection story. Pilate and his soldiers, Joseph and Nicodemus all had ample opportunity to be convinced that death had taken place. It may have been that it was Joseph's bold action in taking a stand for Jesus that prompted and encouraged timid Nicodemus to do the same. What power there is in example! What opportunity there is for all of us in daily life to take a stand for God and for truth! Some may be willing to follow who cannot of themselves take the lead. Note finally that it was the death of Jesus that worked the change in these men.

[Back to Top](#)

19:38-42

Read the whole of Isaiah 53 and then consider here the simplicity, tenderness and reverence of the burial of our Lord Jesus Christ. It was a heavy task in every way for these two men and there was little time to do it, for the Sabbath began at sundown. The grave was near the place of the Cross and it was in a Garden. It was hewn out of rock with only one entrance which was closed by rolling a round slab of rock over it. The Pharisees demanded a formal seal to be placed over the opening and Pilate may have granted their request either because he knew their precautions were useless or because he was afraid Jesus might return to confront him (Matt.

27:62-66). Another bad man had a similar uneasy conscience (Matt. 14:1-4). It was a sad and simple funeral. Only the two men and a few women were there. The embalming spices were costly, perhaps more costly than any gifts brought to Jesus since the wise men brought theirs to Bethlehem. When He was born, the King of Glory was laid in an outhouse. In His life He had no place to lay His head, and in His death he was laid in another man's grave. Though He was rich for our sakes He became poor (2 Cor. 8:9). John's reference in the last verse to the day of Preparation seems to indicate that Jesus was crucified at the time when the Passover Lambs were being slain in Jerusalem for the celebration of the great Exodus from Egypt. Paul looked back to this day of crucifixion when he spoke of Christ our Passover having been sacrificed for us (1 Cor. 5:7). For Joseph and Nicodemus it may all have seemed very final but it may also be true that they had some glimmering of faith in respect of the resurrection. The story is certainly not ended.

[Back to Top](#)

20:1-2

Before getting caught up in the thrill of the Easter story set the context and feel the atmosphere. The other gospels tell us that the tomb was hewn out of rock (Matt. 27:60; Mk. 15:46; Lk. 23:53) and this eliminates the possibility of someone tunneling through to steal the body. To make sure there was no theft the Chief Priests themselves got the tomb sealed. John tells us (19:41) that our Lord's body was the first and only one to be laid there. There was to be no doubt about what happened on the third day. The reality of the resurrection was further confirmed by the fact that none of the disciples expected it. Just exactly what the Jewish Sanhedrin expected we cannot tell. After the crucifixion these men who were nothing but corrupt murderers went to celebrate the Passover with due pomp and ritual as befitting "spiritual" leaders and then in strict "obedience" to God they kept the Sabbath. We would like to think that their consciences were troubled by the convicting power of the Holy Spirit, but Scripture speaks of those whose consciences are so seared and de-sensitised that nothing of God reaches them (1 Tim. 4:2). Certainly, as Matt. 28:11-15 makes plain, there was not the slightest indication of regret let alone repentance. It was not convenient for them to allow the story to circulate about the resurrection of Jesus and with unprincipled bribery they silenced the "media", being quite confident that they had the "government" in their power. Pilate would not dare now to let this corrupt trial and execution come to light. When you have a corrupt religious system or a false religious (or secular) philosophy able to manipulate government and administration you have Hell at work.

[Back to Top](#)

20:1-2

These verses introduce the sequence of events on the third day. In trying to harmonise the details of the four gospel accounts Bishop Ryle's commentary is of great value. "The order of Christ's eleven appearances between His resurrection and ascension, I believe to be as follows: (1) to Mary Magdalene alone (Mk. 16:9; Jn. 20:14); (2) to certain women returning from the sepulchre (Matt. 28:9-10); (3) to Simon Peter alone (Lk. 24:34); (4) to two disciples going to Emmaus (Lk. 24:13); (5) to ten apostles, and some other disciples, Thomas being absent (Jn. 20:19); (6) to eleven apostles, Thomas being present (Jn. 20: 26-29); (7) to seven disciples fishing at the sea of Tiberias (Jn. 21:1); (8) to eleven apostles on a mountain in Galilee, and perhaps some others with them (Matt 28:16); (9) to five hundred brethren at once (1 Cor. 15:6); (10) to James only (1 Cor. 15:7); (11) to all the apostles, and possibly some others on Mount Olivet at His ascension." The last reference seems to be to Lk. 24:50-51. In today's verses Mary Magdalene is portrayed as coming alone but the other gospel writers make plain other women were also there and this seems most probable. Ryle goes on to suggest that, on arriving at the tomb and seeing the stone rolled away, Mary Magdalene immediately assumed that the body had been stolen (20:13-15) and ran to tell Peter and John. It was a natural reaction on the part of one who loved Jesus with such immense gratitude. It seems that the other women drew nearer the grave, saw the angels, heard the message of the resurrection, and ran off in different directions to spread the news as they had been instructed. Then the two disciples and Mary returned and the story continued.

[Back to Top](#)

20:3-10

Following yesterday's comments note that Mary said, "We do not know where the body now is." The reaction of the two men was one of zeal and excitement and enquiry even though their faith was exceedingly small and their understanding very limited (9). Note also that Mary, mother of our Lord, was staying at John's house (19:27) but there is no mention of her in the various narratives. However we explain this it is clear that giving undue prominence to Mary is not part of the gospel. Imagine the two men walking smartly and then breaking into a run. John, loving and reverent as always, simply stooped and looked in but Peter went right in. Was Peter's boldness exaggerated? Was he trying to assert himself? Was he right into the tomb almost before he knew what he was doing? Remember that Mary had stated that the body had been removed (2) assuming that their enemies had done so. The thing that John and Peter wanted to be clear about was whether or not this was so. The emphasis on the linen cloths and napkins confirmed that both men were quite clear that the body had gone. Peter made the thorough investigation, came out and told John who then went in to see clearly for himself. The cloths being left made it plain that the disappearance of the body was not the work of thieves for they would not have wasted time on such unwrapping of a corpse, unless it had been friends of Jesus who took the body and left "proof" of a "resurrection" behind. But we have already seen that such interfering with the grave was impossible. Besides, as John makes plain, the friends of Jesus had not expected a resurrection (9). But there in the tomb John believed that his Lord had risen (8). Peter had not reached that stage yet.

[Back to Top](#)

20:3-10

The scene described in v. 6-7 is a very orderly one. The resurrection had been ever so quiet and simple with no sign of struggle or upheaval. Peter made this plain in his preaching at Pentecost. It was not possible for death to hold Him, for death had no claim. It was totally baffled (Acts 2:24). Standing there in the empty tomb John believed. There dawned at last upon his mind and heart all he had been taught, not only in the past three years with Jesus, but throughout his life as he had been brought up under the influence and instruction of the Old Testament Scriptures. We can grasp this slowness to believe if we think of how many of us attended church from childhood, reverencing holy things, and yet having no clear grasp of the truths of salvation even when we reached adulthood. It is amazing how upbringing, circumstances and life's experiences forge attitudes and prejudices which are very hard to shake free from. This is why we need to see to it that we always come to the Word of God in an attitude of faith, reverent expectation and willing submission (Heb. 4:2). Just how much John at that point grasped of the significant power of God in the fact of the resurrection we cannot say. It had indeed been simple and quiet, but it was an act of glorious power, as Paul makes plain in Eph. 1:12-23. Did John realise that this was the power that was to be in the disciples by the promised Holy Spirit (John 14:16, 17)? We cannot say. But soon it was to dawn on all the disciples that God had declared Jesus to be His Son with power and that this was indeed the commission to evangelise (Rom. 1: 1-6).

[Back to Top](#)

20:11-18

Only John gives us this particular narrative and it is both touching and instructive. It seems Mary either returned to the grave after the men left or stayed after they had gone. It is pointless to speculate. We accept the fact that she was there alone, perhaps glad to be alone with her sorrow, which was expressed in distressing tears. Perhaps she could not understand why the others had gone away, wondering if they did not really care about Jesus or about the fact that His body was missing. We cannot tell if the men had taken time to explain to Mary what *they* had grasped about the significance of the empty grave. It is so easy to overlook the very people close at hand who need our care, help and encouragement. Perhaps the men thought they had "bigger" things on their minds than the emotional display of this sobbing woman who had in fact brought them the first message of the resurrection. They owed her a tremendous debt but they left her alone with her sorrow. The mighty God of salvation is not so inhuman. He sent two angels. How wonderfully God the Lord condescends to our frailty and limitation, making such glorious allowance for us when we are shattered. He will never crush the broken reed (Isa. 42:3) and we need to learn that harshness of attitude, even when what we say is true, is quite inexcusable when dealing with someone whose feelings are lacerated. When someone is "down" the Christlike thing to do is to get right down there beside him or her and to minister as Jesus did. The angels knew their job. They were

there to reassure. They spoke with gentle enquiry although they already knew the answer. Their words and their tone had the immediate effect of calming Mary, making her ready for further revelation.

[Back to Top](#)

20:11-18

The angels seem to have had the appearance of young men (Mk. 16:5) and their position at the head and foot of the grave suggests the thought of being on guard over the body. It does not seem to have surprised Mary that Peter and John had not mentioned them. Angels can be there without being seen. But some need to see them, and that sight is an encouragement to weak faith rather than a sign of strong faith. We must not ask for such reassurances because they tend to make our faith dependent on them and in every crisis we will look for a "sign". This is not the way to strengthen faith nor is it the way blessing, as Jesus would later make plain to Thomas (26-29). Do not fail to see that the angels were seeking to correct Mary's wrong sorrow. She would indeed have had cause to sob bitterly if the body had been there. That would have proved she had indeed "lost" her Master. But Mary's sorrow had so taken hold on her that even angelic ministry did not turn her thoughts to what she had certainly been taught by Jesus about His death *and* resurrection. At this point something made Mary turn round. We are not told what it was and speculation is usually dangerous. Some suggest that the angels either stood or bowed down at the approach of their Lord whom they certainly recognised. Some suggest Mary was impatient with the angels, and was not disposed to continue the conversation. She seems to have been quite at home with the idea of angels: perhaps too much so! Perhaps it was the sound of a脚步声 that drew her attention and she may have thought it was the return of those responsible for removing the body. One thing is quite clear. Mary had no thought of ever meeting Jesus alive. Unbelief was dominant.

[Back to Top](#)

20:11-18

The man Mary saw was so totally "ordinary" in appearance that she assumed he was the gardener. Even though his question, "Whom do you seek?" indicated a person Mary still was concerned with a corpse. There is no doubt about her devotion, but her wrong dependence on the physical presence of Jesus was a hindrance to her and to her service. Her clinging to Jesus was understandable. Think of the transformation of her life, her deliverance from the bondage of evil, and her fearful thoughts in earlier days, "What if He ever goes away?" But faith that is wrongly tied to people and places is weak, and Jesus had already taught His disciples that it was not only good but better for them that He should go away (16:7) because that would lead into a newer and fuller life of salvation by the indwelling Spirit. Note how both the angels and the risen Lord gently rebuked Mary's tears. It may be that after v.15 Mary had turned again to look at the grave and then Jesus addressed her by her own name, in her own language and with a tone of voice that was immediately recognisable. Mary's reaction was natural. She either fell at His feet (Matt. 28:9) or clasped His hand or even embraced Him. Now there was nothing inherently wrong in touching the risen Jesus (20:27). What Jesus seems to have corrected was Mary's excessive demonstration of emotion which indicated that her thoughts were only of holding on to the presence of Jesus in the way she had known it before. But things were not going to revert to the former limited physical presence of the Saviour. Following the ascension, the presence of Jesus and fellowship with Him would be by the Holy Spirit, and would be both personal and with the whole church. At this particular point Mary had forgotten about everyone but herself.

[Back to Top](#)

20:11-18

There are many more thoughts and lessons in this passage. Ryle delicately points out that Jesus was in the garden alone with a young woman and therefore any demonstration of affection that could be misunderstood had to be restrained. *We also* do well to abstain from all appearance of evil (1Thess. 5:22 AV). Calvin suggests that Mary was satisfied with resurrection without ascension and of course, this would be a ghastly loss. We need to know that the risen Christ is seated in total triumph and continuing intercession at the right hand of God (Eph. 1:22-23; Phil. 2:9-11; Rom. 8:33-34). This is our comfort and assurance. Other commentators suggest there is a lesson here on how indulgence of our spiritual emotions tends to make us forget the priority and urgency of spiritual service. Mary was told to re-channel her joy and delight into service for others by going to

tell them, not just about the resurrection but the ascension. People need to be told that Jesus Christ is Lord. The gospel does not speak simply of death being cheated but of its being conquered and of all the issues of life being in the hand of One we know and with whom we can have fellowship. Note how Jesus now called the disciples His brothers (15:15). He also indicated a new intimacy of fellowship. His God is our God; His Father is our Father; there is a difference, for He is *the* Son and we are the adopted sons and daughters. But we are the household family of God (Eph. 2:19). Mary went and told, and it may be that on hearing her words Peter slipped away and returned to the garden and met with Jesus in that interview that remains beautifully private (Mk. 16:7; 1 Cor. 15:5).

[Back to Top](#)

20:19-23

The first verse is very dramatic. It was evening and dark. Already Jesus had appeared several times to various people in different places (Matt. 28:9; Lk. 24:13, 34; John 20:16; 1 Cor. 15:5) and this may be the reason why they were gathered together and not in their own homes (20:10). But their attitude was not one of faith or expectation. They were afraid, dreaded the arrival of an arresting party from the Sanhedrin, and had bolted the doors. After all they may have heard of the crafty plan of the Jews to blame the disciples for stealing the body (Matt. 28: 11-15). Then Jesus came and stood amongst them. How He came we cannot tell. It was miracle. It was the real Jesus with a real body that could be recognised and touched and yet it was a supernatural body. How He came into the room, through the closed door or by opening the door we cannot tell, just as we cannot tell how He drew near to the two on the road to Emmaus without being recognised, or how He disappeared from view so swiftly after the meal (Lk. 24:28-31). What we must not do is to limit the Lord. of creation and redemption to the dimension and capabilities of ourselves, nor must we "spiritualise" the whole thing away. Jesus rose with a glorious body similar to, yet transcending His earthly body (1 Cor. 15:35ff; Phil. 3:21). We believe in the resurrection of the body not just the immortality of the soul, and whatever else the other world is, it is not narrower or poorer nor less real than this world we now live in. We are not dealing with ghosts nor with non-substantial existence but with the Man, Christ Jesus, who by his death and resurrection has opened the Kingdom of Heaven to all believers.

[Back to Top](#)

20:19-23

When Jesus came to these frightened failures of disciples He spoke peace to them, not blame. The first resurrection sermon was one of peace, hope, forgiveness, love and fellowship. After all *He* came to them. His was the glorious initiative. How the disciples must have recalled the words spoken by Jesus in John 14:27 and 16:33. Can we imagine the reaction of the disciples as they realised there was to be no word of rebuke, let alone rejection? They had failed (they did not need to be told that) but they were not finished. When Jesus then showed His hands and side (cf. Lk. 24:36-43) it was not only to confirm that He was not a ghost but to remind them of the death on the Cross whereby peace had been made by virtue of the blood that had been shed, the blood of the Lamb of God (John 1:29; Col. 1: 20). It is wonderful to think that in Heaven there will still be those "rich wounds yet visible above, in beauty glorified". The Lamb slain is at the very heart of the glory of God (Rev. 5:6). Some question why there is no mention of these wounds in the story of the road to Emmaus and we have no real answer. Mark 16:12 speaks of Jesus in another form and Luke 24:16 says "their eyes were kept" from seeing. It may have been the sight of the nail prints as He broke bread that brought recognition. One thing we are sure about is the gracious condescension of our Lord Jesus in coming down to the level of the disciples when they were so shattered that they could not have accepted the truth in any other form. How kind He is! What a Saviour! Little wonder the disciples were glad when they saw Him. On the basis of the resurrection of the body their hopes were raised (1Pet.1:3-5). They were soon to grasp that in Christ they were in fact raised to newness of life (Rom. 6:4-5).

[Back to Top](#)

20:19-23

Resurrection fact, resurrection joy and resurrection peace are not ends in themselves nor are they for private and personal enjoyment. They are the introduction to a great and glorious commission. In words that recall the

prayer of John 17:9-11 Jesus declared that His men were sent out as servants and instruments of God's purposes of salvation in the same way as the Father had sent the Son into the world to seek and to save the lost and to be servants of all in costly, self-denying service (Matt. 20:26-28; Lk. 19:10). Jesus' atoning death made the gospel message possible. His men were sent to proclaim it. In order to assure them that they would have the strength and capacity for their task Jesus did something that was symbolic and then explained the meaning and the practical implications. He breathed on them or He blew on them. What did that convey to these men? They knew Gen.2:7 referring to the life-giving breath of God. They knew Ezek. 37:1-10 and the promise of the reviving power of God. They recalled Jesus' words to Nicodemus (3:6-8) about the mystery, sovereignty and regenerating power of the Spirit. Now they heard Jesus saying, "Receive the Holy Spirit," and they must have understood it at least in terms of being equipped and empowered for service, and at the same time they must have been reminded that the life-giving power of the Spirit is the beginning and continuance of all fruitful service (1 Cor. 3:5-7; Jn. 15:5). It may be also that the disciples, recalling the prayer of David in Ps. 51:11-12, were being assured that their failures had not disqualified them for service. Jesus' next words made it plain that they were being commissioned and empowered to carry on the work He Himself had begun.

[Back to Top](#)

20:19-23

In a day when there is much careless talk about the Holy Spirit we need to be careful in studying John's words here lest we fall into the snare of separating all we mean by justification and salvation from the receiving of the Holy Spirit. There can be no salvation without the work of the Spirit regenerating the soul that is dead, and working justifying faith in Christ. We spend the rest of our Christian lives discovering the far-reaching significance of the indwelling Spirit and at times the realisation may come to us with powerful impact. But we must not elevate *our* "experience" into a doctrine and make it necessary for others. Some have felt a "breath" blowing on them and have concluded that this must necessarily have been an experience of the Spirit. But few, if any, even of those most preoccupied with charismatic gifts, insist that there should be visible tongues of fire and audible rushing wind accompanying the coming of the Spirit in every case (Acts. 2:3). John here is giving a theological statement of the unity of the death and resurrection of Jesus and the giving of the Spirit, indicating that there is no necessary time lapse in our experience of knowing Christ in the saving power of His death, being raised to newness of life in Him by his resurrection, and receiving the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit. In Luke and Acts we have all this told in historical sequence. John gives it in terms of spiritual experience. Think back to 7:37-39 where the giving of the Spirit was linked to Christ being glorified in death. Think of all Jesus had said so recently in chaps. 14-16 about the coming of the Spirit, much of it spoken in terms of peace and assurance. Think of the impact on the disciples of the words, "Receive the Holy Spirit." Now read Rom. 5:1-5: the Spirit has been given to us; Rom. 8:9-11 - the Spirit is within us. This is what it means to be a Christian. And remember, the Spirit is a Person not an influence or power. He is indivisible. If He is there, He is there in his fullness.

[Back to Top](#)

20:19-23

With regard to v.23 keep in mind that this was spoken to a company of disciples, not just the apostles, and has to do with the church rather than with any individuals or groups of individuals within it. Keep in mind also that no one can forgive sins but God Himself and that there is no indication in Scripture that this power is delegated to any person. But just as the High Priest in the Old Testament had the power to *declare* who had been cleansed and who had not, according to the prescriptions of the Law, so the disciples were commissioned to proclaim the forgiveness of sins. This is indeed the gospel commission (Lk. 24: 46-47) as it was the apostolic gospel (Acts 2:38-39; 10:43; 13:32, 38). But just as forgiveness can be declared to the penitent believer so, in like manner, judgment must be declared to the impenitent and hardened of heart (Acts 13:44-47; cf. Acts 8:14-24). Jesus' words in today's passage recall those in Matt. 16:19; 18:15-18 and remind us that we are never entitled to be our own judge and jury, deciding all spiritual issues according to our own limited light and understanding. We are also reminded that in all our ministry of the gospel the issues involve judgment as well as salvation (2 Cor. 2:15-16). We can hold out no hope or comfort to those who will not part with their sins. After all, the evidence of a new heart is a new life motivated by new desires. At the same time do not fail to grasp the astonishment of

the disciples when they were told that the proclamation of forgiveness was to begin in Jerusalem among the very people who had crucified the Lord of Glory (Lk. 24:47; 1 Cor. 2:8).

[Back to Top](#)

20:24-29

Even after nearly two thousand years, doubting Thomas still has not lost his name. It is a permanent reminder of the unjustified and unreasonable nature of unbelief. We are not told why Thomas was not there but his absence emphasises the warning of Heb. 10:25. However desolate he felt, even if despair was beginning to take hold on him, he should have been among his fellow disciples, who also were full of doubts and uncertainties. His absence not only robbed him of the blessing the others received but also seemed to bring out in him an extra degree of unbelief and cynicism. Of course, we also react badly if everyone is enthusing about a service and we feel cold and unblessed. Whatever the background to Thomas's absence it is marvellous to see how Jesus accommodated Himself to the "terms" stipulated. The risen, glorious Son of God came right down to Thomas's level. Perhaps Thomas needed this because he was by temperament a gloomy and even depressive character. We must never despise such for we know not what influences have made them so susceptible to depressive tendencies. Jesus came down to Thomas because His concern was to restore him and to lead him into fruitful service. But note that although Jesus was so tender with the man He had no intention of being weak with him nor of leaving him in his defective frame of mind and disposition of unbelief. Thomas was rebuked and reminded (as Mary Magdalene had been) that there was no need for constant physical and visible reassurances to bolster up faith. Thomas had really fallen into the trap of setting conditions for Jesus to fulfil, and only if these were met would he believe. This is not trusting faith, and even if the Lord consents to give us "signs" (as He did to Gideon) these are a concession to weakness rather than a sign of spiritual maturity.

[Back to Top](#)

20:24-29

Faith is fundamental and living life in the attitude of faith is of the very essence of Christian life. It is important to emphasise this because in our day unbelief has come to be regarded as almost a virtue. People, in the name of intellectual honesty, feel free to refuse any or all of the tenets of the Christian faith requiring, as Thomas did, proof upon proof before they are willing to accept the truth of the Gospel. But their so-called honest enquiry is seldom prepared to examine the integrity of the Scriptures, the historic Person and speech of Jesus Christ nor the living testimony of the church and its influence in every realm of society. The fact of the resurrection is vouched for (1 Cor. 15:1-8) but the testimony is refused. Much of what passes as intellectual honesty is nothing other than unbelief in respect of what God has spoken (Heb. 1:1-3). The facts of the gospel are not fables (2 Pet. 1:16) nor were they carried out in surreptitious secrecy but on the open stage of history (Acts 26:26). Everything calls for faith, just as the testimony of the other disciples urged Thomas to believe. It is by faith that we come to understanding (Heb. 11:1-3). We do not come to faith by having all our questions answered. Faith sets its mind and heart on things unseen and eternal (Heb. 11:27; 2 Cor. 4:16-18). We may not have seen Jesus but we believe and rejoice (1 Pet. 1:8-9). Let us see to it that we guard against the tendency to become sceptical, because if we do we will doubt everyone as well as God. The whole incident was a deep shock to Thomas and it needed that shock treatment to awaken him to a public declaration of what he really believed. He had appeared like an unbeliever but he had simply let his natural gloomy temperament bury his faith. What has God to do to bring as to our senses?

[Back to Top](#)

20:30-31

At the beginning of his gospel record John made a marvellous declaration as to the deity of Christ and the nature of His atoning death (1:1-18, 29, 35). Now, with Thomas's confession, "My Lord and my God," he comes to the end of his specific purpose. He has taken a selection of the words and works of Jesus (by no means a complete list) and has put them on record as sufficient ground for people to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and have life through His Name. In using the words "these are written" John directs us all to the Scriptures, God-given and God-inspired (2 Tim. 3:16-17; 2 Pet. 1:20-21). We must never allow people to drive a wedge between the written word and Christ the eternal Word. The two belong together and it is only by means of the written

Word that we can know Christ as He really is. John knew that the other three gospels had already been written and there is no suggestion that these should be laid aside. The story is one story and its significance is preached in Acts and expounded in the Epistles. This is why we seek by such notes as these to encourage ourselves to search the Scriptures (John 5:39) because *all* the Scriptures reveal Christ (Lk. 24:27, 44-48). John's concern is to show Christ in His uniqueness. He stands pre-eminent. He is not one among many ways to God. He is *the* way (14:6) and His is the only name given whereby people may be saved (Acts 4:12). This would have made a very tidy end to the gospel record of John but he goes on to give us another chapter. Perhaps this is to remind us that the story of Jesus and His church goes on. John knew the words of the great commission in Matt. 28:19-20 and in Acts 1:6-8. He knew also that the work had been left in the hands of very frail men and women.

[Back to Top](#)

21:1-8

There is much scholarly debate about this "extra" chapter of John's gospel which seems to be "added" after a fully satisfactory ending in John 20:30-31. But if these two verses are one of John's customary comments on the history he has been recording there is a natural follow through to this chapter with its glorious and sweeping conclusion. It is clear from 20:26 that eight days after the resurrection the disciples were persuaded of the facts of Christ's glorious victory and they may well have counted themselves ready for service. But they were uncertain as to what they should be doing. They had been told to make their way to Galilee (Matt. 28:7, 10; Mk. 16:7; Matt. 26:32) and they had travelled the 100 miles from Jerusalem to the Sea of Galilee. We are told by Luke in Acts 1:1-12 that Jesus appeared to His disciples frequently over a spell of forty days and at the time of the Ascension they were all back in the area of Jerusalem. We are not sure at what point in the six weeks this chapter occurred but its historicity is not in doubt (Acts 10: 39-42). The disciples had made their way to Tiberias and must have been remembering the ministry and miracles of Jesus that had taken place by the shore of the lake. But so far, Jesus had not come to them. Where He was and what He was doing we simply cannot tell. A group of seven men were together, and Thomas was named next to Peter as if to emphasise his determination not to be missing again. Where the other disciples were we do not know. People do different things while they are waiting for an appointment whose exact place and time they do not know. Waiting can be a problem, and it can also be a revelation of character and of spiritual preparedness.

[Back to Top](#)

21:1-8

Peter is undoubtedly the focus of this chapter but the lessons on Christian service are for all to learn. Peter was the man who had so recently fallen disastrously but we find him here exercising influence and taking the lead among his fellow disciples. They all felt reassured and ready for service. They could well recall their days with Jesus and with the crowds and it would not have been easy for them to be just a small group of ordinary men largely ignored by people. Nothing at all was happening and they were all eager for visible results. They were restless and that always militates against faith and obedience. They had time on their hands, it was early evening, the boats in the harbour reminded them of their former way of life in which they had been successful, and on impulse, led by Peter, they all set sail. You can imagine their excitement. Fishing was something they were good at. They were confident. They were not doing anything morally wrong, but it seems that in their absorbing activity they forgot Jesus. But more than that they were baffled. They knew the sea and where shoals of fish were to be found. They fished all night casting and hauling their nets and they caught nothing. In the very realm where their competence was not in doubt they failed totally. It was a weary crew who came to the shore in the bright morning light and the restlessness and flatness that had sent them on their trip would certainly have returned. Now, there is nothing wrong in working and earning your living while you wait for God to show you the next step. Work is better than idling! The real issue is whether or not we are learning the lessons necessary to become useful servants of the gospel.

[Back to Top](#)

21:1-8

Keep in mind that it was the long term future service of these men that was at stake. The whole exciting story of spiritual revival in the Acts of the Apostles was waiting to happen. These men had to be ready for God's use.

The first result of their abortive night at sea was that they failed to recognise Jesus as He waited for them on the shore. This dulling of our spiritual awareness is the first thing that comes when we are out of touch with God. Then the disciples were made inescapably aware of the fruitlessness of their night of hard work in that realm where they were so confident of their own capabilities. Had they ever grasped John 15:5? Have we grasped it? It is really miraculous to read that those fishermen obeyed the advice of the stranger on the shore and cast their net in shallow water in the bright light of morning. How could there be fish there when in the "right" places they had caught nothing? The net came up full and what the disciples must have learned was how near you can be to being wonderfully fruitful and yet miss it all because of a wilful restlessness that has not been brought into submission to the word and will of God. When they finally recognised Jesus, would not all the disciples have said "We should have waited for Him"? The fact of the great haul of fish tells us that Jesus was not in any sense forgetful of the human needs of His men. We see this tomorrow. But that night of weary work taught them the lesson that every Christian worker must learn in order to be fruitful. Our natural gifts and capacities are of no avail. It is only as we live in obedience to our Lord that we are of any use at all.

[Back to Top](#)

21:9-14

We saw in yesterday's verses that it was John who first recognised Jesus. Love usually sees most clearly. But it was Peter who acted with the same impulse as at the beginning of the story when he took the lead in organising the fishing trip. Now Peter was undoubtedly a man of spiritual perception (Matt. 16:13-17) and capacity, but it is tragic that he came so often to the wrong conclusions. He was still like this in (Acts. 10:9-16) where he was to argue the point with God about what is spiritual. Here he made his usual extravagant display of loyalty to Jesus, possibly to impress his fellows. He left his colleagues to do the hard and messy work of bringing the fish and boat to the shore. He was, of course, excited, perhaps embarrassed and even a little ashamed. But if all the men had acted like him (and they all loved the Lord and wanted to be with Him) then the miracle catch would have lost and wasted. Here is a lesson to learn. Too many Christians dive off to the exciting business of "being with Jesus" and "being the first there" and leave the hard and necessary work to others. Peter was about to learn that he was not nearly so spiritual as he thought. Was he trying to say that "things" did not matter to him; only Jesus? He had spoken that way many a time in the past (Lk. 18: 28; Matt. 26:35) and he was not being allowed to forget it. The last time we read about a coal fire it was in the courtyard of Caiaphas' house (18:18). Peter would remember. He would also remember that it was on the shores of this very lake that he had first been called to follow Jesus (Matt. 4:18-22). Would they not all remember the events of Lk. 5:1-11 and Jesus' words in Matt. 13:47-51? Remembering is a good and profitable exercise, especially when we have gone astray.

[Back to Top](#)

21:9-14

There are many lessons to learn from these fascinating verses and we do well to put ourselves into the disciples' place. What would have impressed us most? Jesus was with them, in charge of them, organising things to meet their need and in fact doing the work of a servant preparing and serving the meal. This Jesus who had fed the multitude by miraculous means in Matt. 14:15 ff. and in Matt. 15:32 ff. now feeds His own with food they had not themselves provided. Had it occurred to the disciples that this great catch of fish could be sold to provide money for their needs in coming weeks? Were they aware of the naturalness of Jesus' association with them? The risen, glorious Lord was not making it difficult for them to feel at home. Indeed He was easing the tensions in the very business of a picnic meal. Would they recall Jesus' words in John 14:18,23; cf. Rev. 3:20? But no matter how Jesus ministered to these men they were quite awed by His presence, and at the same time by His ministering to them their troubled hearts were being stilled. They were learning that nothing can take the place of being right with Jesus. On their own they had worn themselves out to no purpose. They ended with nothing for themselves and nothing to offer to the Stranger on the shore. How sad it is that many Christian lives are like that. Now the disciples proved that Christ-directed lives bring in more fruitful blessing than they can cope with, yet never tearing the net or spoiling the vessel. But even more, that fruitful blessing becomes food and satisfaction in company with Jesus Himself. Never forget that Jesus was there waiting for His men when they came back from their fruitless venture,

[Back to Top](#)

21:15-19

This is the first phase of our Lord's dealing with Peter. The crestfallen, grieved Peter is seen in great contrast to his brashness in the earlier verses and his over-confident inquisitiveness in the later verses. Peter may have learned something of the lesson about being fishers of men but he had still to learn about being a shepherd of God's flock. These two go together and those who win people to Christ need to see to their feeding and nurture. Jesus first dealt with the man and seemed to ask him questions in the hearing of or at least in the presence of the others. John certainly seems to have been close enough to Jesus to hear what was being said. Peter may not have known just what Jesus was doing with Him or why His words had to be sore and searching. But Jesus was looking for a shepherd, and an impulsive man who barged into situations thinking only of the immediate solution was no use for that. A shepherd must be a man at peace within himself and that will never be until he has learned to sit at Jesus' feet. Peter had to be subdued, not to devalue him nor to show how limited his usefulness and service were, but to make him ready to be the sure-footed preacher of Pentecost. It was as if Jesus asked Peter if He really was the centre and focus of his love and loyalty. Right at the beginning Jesus had said Simon was to be Peter, the rock (John 1:42), and Jesus was not going back on His word. But what about Peter? Was the shifting uncertain part of his personality becoming stable? Later history testifies that Peter had a continuing problem when it came to standing sure for Jesus' sake (Gal. 2:11ff). Trusted and fruitful man as he became, he could never take chances. He needed his heart fixed on Jesus.

[Back to Top](#)

21:15-19

Many sermons (long ones) have been preached on Jesus' questions to Peter and daily notes are a limited vehicle for exposition. Peter was upset by the repeated use of his old name, Simon. He was disturbed by the threefold challenge corresponding to his threefold denial. He was searched by the specific reference to his claim to have a better and fuller love than any of the other disciples (v.15; cf. Matt 26:33). You can imagine Peter feeling that Jesus was going back on His word of forgiveness spoken to him after the resurrection, and wondering if this public cross-examination was the prelude to his being dismissed from the disciple band. He was terribly wrong. Jesus' objective was to give Peter the opportunity in a new spirit of humility to confess his Lord publicly and thereby be reinstated to his place and his service. It is best for us to follow the conversation as it is given. Jesus asked if Peter loved Him more than these other men and He used the word "agape" which usually speaks of divine love but also of human love with a deep seated commitment of life and loyalty. It is love inspired by and grounded in the great value of the one loved. When Peter answered immediately (but without comparisons) he used a different and lesser word for love (phileo), a word that speaks more of natural, spontaneous affection and attraction. It is genuine (for Peter was not a fraud) but it has more to do with the emotions than the clear decisiveness of the will. Jesus accepted Peter's confession and thereupon gave him the charge to feed Christ's lambs. A care for a new and unsteady disciple is a truer mark of love to Jesus than a desire to be an important leader who is always talking about his spirituality.

[Back to Top](#)

21:15-19

Jesus again asked Peter about his love and the same two words for love were used. The comparison was dropped but Peter was still challenged about that love which is costly and sacrificial and he answered in terms of that love which seems more concerned with getting than with giving. Think of it on a human level. Some people we like because being with them gives us pleasure and makes us feel better and even inspires us to want to be better people. This is right and proper but it is not truly a deep relationship. In spiritual life love must learn to give and indeed to suffer for the sake of the one loved. Again Jesus accepted Peter's genuine confession and again charged him with work. This time he was told to tend or shepherd Jesus' sheep. It was a wider and fuller remit. The sheep are precious and belong to the Master, not to the under-shepherd. They would need care, provision, and would have to be led surely and securely to pasture and to shelter. That was not what Peter had done when he took his companions away on a fruitless fishing trip. Peter was learning even as Jesus spoke to Him and the proof of this is in Peter's own words later to others about the care of the flock that belongs to God. (1 Pet. 5:1-5). He was beginning to see the demand of true ministry. It can be fun looking after lambs but in spiritual terms when the sheep grow so do their appetites and their capacity for straying. The good shepherd lays

down his life for the sheep and the sheep must know that they have a shepherd they can follow safely. If the shepherd gets lost, what hope is there for the sheep?

[Back to Top](#)

21:15-19

The third time Jesus questioned Peter He used Peter's own word for love, as if to say, "Are you really my friend? Do I really mean something to you? Could you go back on it or is your heart in it?" Peter's answer was in stronger terms, for he was grieved. But his hurt was not with Jesus but with what he had seen of his own heart which Jesus refused to cover up. Peter no longer boasted about his love but simply laid bare his heart to this wonderful Saviour. It is as if he said, "I may not love you with the love I ought, nor the love you call for and deserve, nor with the love you have shown me, but Lord, I am yours and I want to be." When Jesus said again, "Feed My sheep," He was reminding Peter that the sheep must be able to recognise the authentic voice of the shepherd and would not follow any other (10:1-5, 27). It was a great and solemn commission, and Jesus' next words confirm the challenge to Peter. So far in his three years of discipleship he had been what he had been by nature in his fisherman's life: self-willed, independent and going his own way. But in days to come he would be a suffering servant of Christ and the gospel. John adds the comment in v.19a which suggests that by the time the gospel was written Peter had in fact been martyred. Tradition has it that he was crucified head down at a time when the gospel was being persecuted by the Emperor Nero. Jesus said, Follow Me and be willing even for suffering and death. Peter did, and it is wonderful to read in his epistles counsel and encouragement to those about to suffer for Jesus' sake (1 Pet. 1:3-9; 4:12-19).

[Back to Top](#)

21:20-23

The Bible record is very honest and tells us that. Peter was almost immediately distracted by undue curiosity about what would happen to John. It may be that Peter had taken Jesus' words about following literally and walked after Him as He moved away from the

Group. On the face of it Peter was expressing natural concern for the friend who had been so good to him at the time of his denial. But Jesus' reply indicated that Peter was already being distracted from his spiritual commission to care for the sheep of God's flock. Perhaps Peter assumed that he had been appointed to lead people like John. How easily at times we assume that we are capable of taking charge of the very saints of God. We need the caution of Rom. 12:3. It is all too easy to hide from our own spiritual barrenness by spending all our time trying to manage and manipulate the lives of others. What is happening here is a reflection of the earlier incident at Caesarea Philippi when Peter, immediately after a great confession for which he was commended, had to be rebuked as an agent of Satan because he presumed to correct Jesus on a point of spiritual interpretation (Matt. 16:21-23). Jesus answered Peter curtly and told him there were things that did not concern him and that it was best he should not know. Is it not true that one of Satan's effective snares is to get us preoccupied with comparing ourselves with other Christians? This simply takes our eyes and our hearts off Jesus, and when that happens our imaginations and jealousies run riot. We need to keep clearly in mind that all the disposing of our lives is in God's hand alone. Our best prayer is, "Your will be done."

[Back to Top](#)

21:20-23

Note the comment John makes in v. 23 and learn how easy it is to read into the Scriptures things that simply are not there. It happens when we read carelessly and fail to grasp what is said and what is not said. In this way some amazing "doctrines" have been invented and whole religious movements have begun on the basis of error. The same kind of thing can happen with human words when it is "reported" to us that someone has made a certain statement. Without waiting to check the truth or otherwise we rush ahead into our own reactions and before long a whole fellowship can be hurt in confusion and tension. What others say and do, and what is in God's plan for them, must never be allowed to take us away from following Jesus in sweet and humble obedience. We will have more than enough to do if we get on with our own work and do it faithfully. Of course, Jesus' words do indicate that some will still be alive and working when the Lord comes in the glory of His eternal kingdom. This is made plain in 1 Thess. 4:13-18. It is also made plain by John that the saying of Jesus

had been misunderstood. The important thing is the will of God. When will we really begin to believe that God's will for us is good, perfect and altogether acceptable, something to be welcomed and enjoyed and not something to be submitted to in a stoical spirit of resignation or fatalism (Rom. 12:1-2)? Whatever the experiences that come to us, our God has promised to do us good. His will is our peace. Happy indeed are we if we are like Paul and learn to be content (Phil. 4:11-13; 1 Tim 6:6).

[Back to Top](#)

21:24-25

These verses are John's signature and concluding comments. He was the disciple who was still bearing witness to the truths of the gospel and he verified his written account of them. It seems that others ("we") were associated with him, adding their testimonial to the accuracy of what had been recorded. Who these others were we cannot say. It is suggested they were the elders of the church at Ephesus from which place John wrote his gospel. The final verse is glorious. It would be quite impossible to place on record every little thing Jesus had said and done in His life and ministry. But the point is that everything that needs to be known has been made known. God has spoken fully and finally in His Son (Heb. 1:1-3). By His sovereign grace and providence that "speaking" by God has been placed on record, the Word of God in the words of God, given by inspiration of the Holy Spirit. All that is to be known of Christ and His salvation comes from Scripture and the more we study the Bible, the more we learn Christ and discover the limitless depth of His love and grace. As John has taught, the Spirit has been given to lead us into all the truth, but we must be careful indeed about those who claim to bring us "new" truth by the Holy Spirit. If the new truth is not in accord with Scripture then the "spirit" that brings it is not the Holy Spirit of Truth (Isa. 8:18-20 AV and NIV). Read the solemn words of Rev. 22:18-19. The Word of God stands sure and by this Word we live.

[Back to Top](#)

George Philip Bible Reading In John