

DEATH & RESURRECTION: STUDIES IN JOHN 11-21

Notes For Week One: Waking The Dead (John 11:1-44)

Jesus increasingly looks ahead to his death, fully aware of the many spiritual implications that it will have. Yet he also knows that God will raise him from the dead - and in this passage, he provides us with a kind of preview, by raising Lazarus from death. Many of the emotions and perspectives present in this situation are paralleled in Jesus' own death and resurrection.

Review - Overall Ideas From John 1-10

John presents Jesus to us as the Word Of God made flesh (John 1:1-6:24). He is the giver of light and of life itself, and he calls us all to have spiritual rebirth through belief in him. He alone can lead us out of the world's darkness and into the presence of God.

Yet, almost from the beginning of his ministry, Jesus encountered resistance and opposition to the Word of truth (John 6:25-8:59). Often an audience would become excited about his actions or his teachings, only to find that he was not going to give them what they desired - instead, he would offer them what they needed. So too with us, we shall often find Jesus patiently offering us what we need, while we instead persistently seek something else that our flesh desires.

Jesus' relationship with his followers is much like that of a shepherd and his sheep (John 9 & 10). When he compassionately gives a blind beggar his sight, the man faces the hostility of the legalistic Pharisees. But the blind man stands firm and rises spiritually, while the authorities fall, revealing their insecurity and faithlessness. Jesus' sheep listen to his voice, for their souls follow him humbly even when their flesh struggles against the truth. Those who oppose Jesus are not lacking in knowledge or accomplishments, but in humility - they simply are not his sheep.

Lazarus Falls Asleep (John 11:1-16)

Once again, Jesus and his disciples are faced with one of life's sad events - but this time it is even more personal, because it involves a family they all know well. Yet Jesus at first seems not to be deeply concerned, neither for his dying friend nor for his family. Amongst other things, this gives him a chance to see how the disciples react, both to the sickness and to the trip to Bethany.

When Jesus receives a message that, "one you love* is sick", his behavior is at first mysterious (11:1-6). Since he and his disciples are close to the family of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, the two sisters clearly expected that this news would be important to Jesus. And yet he displays a curious lack of concern or urgency. Although he knew that there would be renewed threats whenever he returned to Judea, this was hardly the reason for his lack of activity.

* Although some versions translate the phrase as "the" one you love, this is an interpretation on the part of the translators - there is no definite article in the original text.

Jesus assures his disciples that, "this sickness will not end in death" - but literally, it does indeed end in Lazarus's death. Just as Jesus had done with the blind man's condition (John 9:3-5), he explains that this illness will be used for God's glory. Again, this has nothing to do with God - or anyone or anything else - "causing" Lazarus's illness. It is just another reminder for us to stop

speculating about fault and assigning blame for the world's ills, and instead simply do whatever we can to ease the suffering of others.

Yet Jesus' compassion and his willingness to serve make it even odder that he waits for two more days to leave. Just as his compassion is far greater than ours ever will be, so also his wisdom and his sense of priorities is far better than ours ever will be. He could easily have rushed to Lazarus's side to stop him from dying. But he has in mind a more powerful way of showing his friends what God's heart is like.

After the delay, he calls his disciples to go back to Judea* with him, so that they can "wake up" Lazarus (11:7-16). The disciples have unpleasant (and probably frightening) memories of Jerusalem, because of the deadly threats Jesus has previously faced there. So the disciples cannot help expressing their concern. It seems as if Jesus is needlessly inviting danger now, after carefully avoiding the area for a time.

* See verse 18. Bethany was close to Jerusalem, just east of the city, past the Kidron Valley and the Mount of Olives. Note that this Bethany is different from the town of the same name mentioned in John 1:28.

Using now-familiar imagery, Jesus talks about the need to bring light into the lives of others. He and his disciples are still "walking by day," in that his human lifetime has not yet run out. He knows that there is already a time set for his departure, and the plots and threats of humans cannot change the time his Father has set. When he does lay down his life, it will be entirely of his own free will - no human can take Jesus' life from him unless he and the Father allow it.

The disciples accept Jesus' priorities, but not his confidence. Thomas probably speaks for more than one of them when he pessimistically - but faithfully - says, "let us go, so that we can die with him." The attitudes of the disciples, and their responses to Jesus' unexpected decisions, are always instructive. It would certainly be nice if Thomas could by now understand the powers that Jesus has; but even though he doesn't really understand, he has enough faith in Jesus and love for Jesus to go along with him, no matter how dangerous Jesus' plans may sound.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: How is Lazarus's illness similar to other needs that Jesus has addressed? In what ways is it different? Why didn't Jesus go to visit Lazarus earlier? How might Lazarus's sisters and the disciples have interpreted the delay? What does Jesus mean that he "sees by this world's light"? How might our attitudes parallel that of Thomas? How can we learn from his example?

If You Had Been Here . . . (John 11:17-32)

Eventually Jesus goes to Bethany to see Lazarus's family, and he finds that Lazarus is now quite dead. When Jesus talks with Martha and Mary, he hints at what he will do, but they do not really understand. In these sisters, we see regret that Jesus had not come earlier, mixed with a kind of resigned faithfulness. They are disheartened by what has happened, but still trust in Jesus.

First, Martha comes to talk with Jesus (11:17-27). Always a woman of action, Martha comes to Jesus as soon as she hears that he is nearby. Her first, instinctive comments to Jesus reveal her perspective: a mixture of regret and faith. She is sure that Jesus would somehow have prevented Lazarus's death, if only Jesus had been there in time. All the same, she is sure that "even now" God will grant Jesus any request he may make. In Martha's statements, we can see the same blend of sincere faith and confused uncertainty that so often characterizes us.

Jesus' promise that, "your brother will rise again," is deliberately ambiguous. For her part, Martha hopes for the best, yet is not sure that she should. She decides to understand the promise in the most cautious way, assuming that Jesus is merely assuring her that Lazarus, like all the dead, can hope to be raised* at "the last day"**. Jesus does not clarify what kind of raising he has in mind, but instead asks whether Martha can accept Jesus as "the resurrection and the life."

* Like most Jewish believers of the time, Martha believed in an afterlife that would follow the end of the world, whenever that would come (see also next note). With the exception of certain sects such as the Sadducees, most ancient Jews anticipated a general resurrection of the dead - indeed, it would be strange if God's own people did not, given that almost every other ancient culture believed in some kind of afterlife.

** This phrase was already known before Jesus, but it probably had a much vaguer significance to those who used it. Most of the ancient Jews did not presume to know the details of how the world would end.

For all her sorrow and her imperfect understanding, Martha's belief stands firm. She is with Jesus, and she believes in Jesus - whether or not her brother dies, and whether or not Jesus fulfills her deepest earthly hopes.

Next, it is Mary's turn to talk with Jesus (11:28-32). It is interesting that she does not at once go out to meet Jesus, as her sister did* - she needs to be told that "the Teacher" is asking for her. At this, she eagerly goes to meet Jesus, and now she too expresses the familiar lament that Jesus had heard from her sister: if only he had been there earlier. Though we know how different these sisters were in other ways, we can see spiritual similarities. Both have a deep trust in Jesus' power, and both have complete loyalty to him, even in sadness and tragedy.

* Compare their responses to Jesus here with Luke 10:38-42, where Mary is the one eager to be with Jesus. This is not a contradiction, for in important ways the characterizations of the sisters are entirely consistent - their personalities are just not as easily reduced to stereotypes as we may expect them to be.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What similarities are there in Mary's and Martha's responses to Jesus' arrival? Are they examples to us? Do their differences hold any lessons for us? What did Jesus mean by "the resurrection and the life"? Did Martha understand it? Do we understand it? Why didn't Jesus tell them at once that he was going to raise Lazarus from the dead? What can we learn from this?

Lazarus Wakes Up (John 11:33-44)

Jesus is sensitive both to the sisters and to the ways that others respond to the death of Lazarus. Jesus is much calmer, yet he too is filled with emotion. Jesus first shows us that he has a much deeper understanding of death than we do; and then he demonstrates that he has a power over death that we never can obtain. Both of these will become even more significant later on.

Jesus is deeply moved by the entire situation (11:33-37). The sorrow of the sisters, combined with their still strong faith in him, the spectacle of the mourners* and all of the activity surrounding a death, plus Jesus' own compassion for the dead man all make for an emotional situation. So, "Jesus wept". He lives life to the full, and experiences everything keenly.

* While some of these mourners were doubtlessly family and close friends, it was also common in funerals of the time to find ritualized mourning, practiced by experienced, semi-professional "mourners". This made for an odd combination of 'mourning' at a typical funeral.

Jesus makes no attempt to hide his emotions, which are thus quite noticeable to the onlookers. Some note how much Jesus must love Lazarus and his family, while others wonder - perhaps more cynically than Lazarus's sisters have - why Jesus did not use his power to keep Lazarus alive. These are natural responses, yet simplistic. Jesus' emotions likely come from several sources, not merely the loss of Lazarus; and his perspective on death and life is much more profound than anyone in the crowd can imagine.

For it is time for Lazarus to wake up from his "sleep" and to come out of the tomb (11:38-44). Jesus again makes relatively little ceremony, not even explaining what he is about to do, but simply directing that they take away the stone from the entrance to the tomb*. This makes the practical-minded Martha worry about the unpleasant condition of a body that has been decaying for several days - which in turn prompts Jesus to remind her of her own professions of faith, just as he must sometimes remind us of the implications of the beliefs we profess.

* Like the tomb that would later hold Jesus' body for a time, this tomb has been cut out of natural rock, according to common practice. The usual tomb would hold up to several bodies, wrapped up individually like mummies, though with less permanent wrappings. The tomb entrance would then have a large stone or boulder pushed across it, to discourage grave-robbers and to keep the indications of decay inside.

Before performing the miracle, Jesus does one more thing. His brief request for help from his Father is "for the benefit of those standing here." For this special occasion, Jesus wants to make absolutely certain that everyone ascribes the power behind the miracle to his Father. Jesus' own resurrection will be the most important miracle of all, for it will provide the final proof that his sacrificial death on the cross is indeed effective in cleansing sin (see, for example, Romans 1:4). The faithful Son of God insists that we know his Father to be the giver and preserver of all life.

And so Lazarus comes out, still wrapped in the mummy-like grave clothes, leaving behind an empty grave that will serve as convincing new evidence to the divine power that lives in Jesus. (Indeed, we shall soon see the tumultuous consequences of the miracle.) The waking of Lazarus is a simple but powerful demonstration of God's power of life and death, and it serves as a prelude to the even more momentous raising of Jesus himself.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What might those in the crowd have thought when Jesus went to the tomb and asked for the stone to be removed? Why does Jesus make a point of praying first? What parallels are there with Jesus' own resurrection? What possible responses to the miracle may there have been? What overall lessons should we learn from Lazarus's awakening?

- *Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, June 2011*
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DEATH & RESURRECTION: STUDIES IN JOHN 11-21

Notes For Week Two: The Dead Rises The Raising (John 11:4-12:1)

It is ironic that the gravest threats to Jesus' life come after he raises Lazarus from the dead. It is as if the spiritually dead religious leaders were jealous of life itself. In their blindness, they cannot see anything about Jesus clearly. Meanwhile, the crowds are in a frenzy of anticipation when Jesus enters Jerusalem. Yet they, too, fail to understand the meaning of Jesus' ministry.

Review Of Last Week's Class

Not long before his own death, Jesus wakes the dead (John 11:1-44). His good friend Lazarus "falls asleep", yet when Jesus hears the news, he responds oddly. He is in no hurry to visit Lazarus, telling his disciples only that "this sickness will not end in death." Jesus intends both to glorify God and to teach his disciples. Eventually it is time to go to Judea, and the disciples, remembering the threats Jesus received on previous visits there, expect to die with him.

When they reach Bethany, Lazarus has been dead for several days. Would things have been different if Jesus had been there in time? Both Martha and Mary, though their personalities were different, make this same observation. They are disheartened, but believe in Jesus no matter what. They believe he is the resurrection and the life, though they are unsure what this means.

Ultimately, of course, Lazarus "wakes up." Jesus has been deeply moved by the entire atmosphere surrounding the death of his friend, yet he has a much deeper understanding than the mourners do. His prayer for help is "for the benefit of those standing here", so that the glory for the miracle goes to his Father - and then he performs his greatest miracle to date.

What do we learn from the way Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead? Lazarus later died again, yet Jesus' miracle lives on. We see again his extraordinary power over nature, even death. And we see his compassion and his concern for others. Yet he also sees things much more deeply than we do. He did not rush off, and he did not worry what anyone thought. Jesus never substituted superficial statements or frantic activity for genuine love and concern.

The Authorities Jealous (John 11:45-7)

The raising of Lazarus prompts the religious authorities to renew their efforts to stop Jesus. Once again, they are completely blind to Jesus' compassion and to his power - they can think only of their short-term personal interests. There is unintentional irony in their perspectives, and there is a grim atmosphere of expectation as Jesus prepares to come once more to Jerusalem.

The Sanhedrin* assembles in the aftermath of the raising of Lazarus (11:45-53). Informers have kept them up-to-date on Jesus' activities, and they are disturbed by this latest "problem". With their distorted perspective, the authorities can think only about trying to gain control of Jesus. They have made numerous efforts to slow him down, but have accomplished nothing.

* In different eras, the Sanhedrin took different forms and had varying degrees of power. During Jesus' ministry, its power was at its height. The Sanhedrin in the New Testament was actually the Great Sanhedrin, as many cities had their own Sanhedrin for local affairs. The Great Sanhedrin was a kind of Supreme Court, with near absolute power over everyday legal questions in Jewish society.

The members of the assembly try to justify their murderous intentions with pious-sounding rationalizations that thinly cover over their self-interest. The members of the Sanhedrin wanted to maintain their status as the local authorities that the Romans trusted. The Romans generally gave local governments a fair degree of power if they could keep order* and would demonstrate their loyalty to Rome. But this could bring out the self-interest in local authorities, who often used rationalizations like this one to eliminate rivals in ruthless fashion.

* The Sanhedrin fears that, if the Jews were to recognize Jesus as their leader, then the pragmatic Romans might do the same. Their fear that the Romans would take away the temple ("our place") is not a concern for the temple itself, but rather for the lucrative benefits that the chief priests, the Sadducees, and the Sanhedrin received from being given charge of the temple.

Thus the high priest Caiaphas* takes charge of the proceedings. He says openly what everyone else was thinking - that they could only be certain of protecting their interests if they killed Jesus. Caiaphas adds an additional rationalization. By referring to his own "prophecy"** that one man would die for the benefit of the Jewish nation, he puts a veneer of religion on their plotting, and it probably made a few of the council members feel better.

* Caiaphas's father-in-law Annas had previously been the high priest, and Annas was still accorded the title as a sign of respect. Besides Caiaphas, a number of Annas's own sons would be high priest.

** The high priest's formal prophecies are really no different from the attempts of today's ill-qualified authorities and "experts" to predict things like the stock market, climatic conditions, sports competitions, wars, or the economy. The high priests weren't any worse at it than most of our "experts" are.

As the Passover approaches, the tension between Jesus and the religious authorities will soon be resolved one way or another (11:54-57). For his part, Jesus withdraws once more to an area beyond the reach of the authorities in Jerusalem. At the Passover, a new round of speculation and debate begins. For the most part, it is harmless, with many persons just wanting to know what Jesus will do. But the authorities are on alert, eager to get any reports of Jesus' activities.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What reasons would the authorities give for their desire to eliminate Jesus? What were their real reasons? What are our real reasons for resisting things that Jesus teaches us? What parallels would Caiaphas's "prophecy" have today? How can we learn to see our own agendas and rationalizations more clearly?

A Dinner In Bethan (John 12:1-11)

Just before Passover week, Jesus visits Mary and Martha for a special dinner. Jesus and Lazarus are guests of honor, and each sister demonstrates her appreciation for Jesus in her own way. But we also see the first stages of the final plot that will end Jesus' life. Judas Iscariot's hypocritical criticism will soon form an unholy alliance with the irrational anger of the chief priests.

The two sisters both serve eagerly and generously, each in her own way (12:1-3). Martha did much of the work to set up this dinner in Jesus' honor, and she visibly bustles about during the proceedings. Mary makes her own sacrifice, anointing Jesus* with expensive perfume. True to her character, she is less "practical", yet her gift is valuable too. Besides sacrificing a valuable possession, she shows considerable affection and humility towards Jesus at the same time.

* Matthew 26 and Mark 14 do not identify Mary by name, stating only that this happened in Bethany. Luke 7 describes an event earlier in Jesus' ministry, when a different woman did something similar.

Jesus was often criticized by outsiders, but now he must contend with criticism from within (12:4-8). Why wasn't the expensive perfume* sold? Mary could have used it as a donation to the poor, or at least for something practical. These questions come from Jesus' own disciples, led by Judas Iscariot (John mentions only Judas, but see Matthew 26:8-9 and Mark 14:3-4). Like the members of the Sanhedrin, Judas allows his opinions to be determined by his self-interest. But his criticism would be misguided even if he truly would use the money differently.

* Nard is a perfume made from the oil of the spikenard plant. Spikenard comes from the Himalayan regions of China, India, and Nepal - in biblical times this made it quite scarce within Roman territory. Today, spikenard is sometimes used in herbal medications.

Sacrificial expressions of appreciation for Jesus are never out of place. Mary makes the sacrifice that God has enabled her to make, and like her sister she expresses her affection for Jesus. It would be different if she were choosing some selfish indulgence and passing it off as an act of appreciation, but she is not using her expensive perfume on herself.

Jesus reminds the disciples that, "you will not always have me." They have made their own sacrifices to show their appreciation of Jesus, and they should not judge the sacrifices of others. We do not have Jesus physically with us anymore, and so we must look for other ways to show our appreciation for him. But there are all kinds of sacrifices we can make, too. It doesn't matter whether anyone else thinks they are worthwhile, or even notices - Jesus notices and appreciates it whenever we give up our time, our resources, or our personal advantage for him or his people.

Meanwhile, the chief priests are busy with their own plans (12:9-11). Noticing that the raising of Lazarus has drawn even larger crowds to Jesus, these religious leaders come to a "logical" conclusion: they decide to kill Lazarus, too! This is what happens when humans are unwilling to re-evaluate and adjust their perspectives. Closed minds and hardened hearts do not always lead to murder, but they can only cause harm, never good.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What motivated Martha and Mary to serve Jesus? Why were both of their sacrifices pleasing to Jesus? What lessons should we learn from Judas' criticisms? Could he have had other reasons besides a desire for money? Is Judas similar in any way to the chief priests? Why would the chief priests want to kill Lazarus? What does this show about their priorities? What warnings should we get from them?

He in Arrives (John 12:12-1)

Jesus' "triumphal entry" is a fascinating event. Most of us would have been fully caught up in the excitement and anticipation, without realizing that Jesus' intentions were completely different from those of anyone in the crowd. Perhaps we would have been on the sidelines, plotting against Jesus. Only Jesus, though, disregarded both the superficial praise and the worldly plots.

On his way into Jerusalem, Jesus is greeted with joyful cries of Hosanna* (12:12-16). Most persons in the crowd are sincere in their joy, but none of them understand what Jesus really came to do. Yet they do inadvertently proclaim the truth when they call, "blessed is the King of Israel", because Jesus is their true king - though not the kind of monarch they desired.

* Literally, "hosanna" means "save", as if it were a request. But it was commonly used as a generic expression of excitement or enthusiasm, the way we might say something like "hurray" or "way to go".

This Messianic arrival was prophesied in detail*, though few at the time realized it. The prophet Zechariah, who gave us several significant prophecies about the Messiah, called for Israel (the "Daughter Of Zion") to rejoice at the sight of her true king coming on a donkey (the original prophecy can be found in Zechariah 9:9-11). Traditionally, a conquering king would parade before his subjects riding a horse - so the choice of a humble donkey instead symbolizes that Jesus' kingdom is one of peace, not war.

* See also Matthew 21:1-6, Mark 11:1-6, and Luke 19:28-35, which bring out aspects of the entry into Jerusalem that John does not mention.

Despite all the enthusiasm, the crowd has misguided expectations. In just a few days, many of them will gladly watch him be crucified, and some of them will be among those demanding his death. Jesus does not allow himself to be carried away by their outward show of support, for, as John told us earlier, "Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all men" (John 2:24).

With all the excitement, word about Jesus continues to spread (12:17-19). The news about Lazarus certainly has helped draw even more attention than usual to him. The frustrated Pharisees are disgusted with the way that everyone has suddenly become so excited about Jesus. They wouldn't have troubled themselves so much if they had understood human nature. Enthusiasms that develop so easily usually also dissipate easily.

What if we had been standing in the crowd as Jesus entered Jerusalem? Would we share the honest but shallow expectations of the crowd? Would we be annoyed at the attention Jesus was receiving? Or would we have enough genuine faith to ignore both the fleshly hype and the fleshly opposition, so that when Jesus revealed his true intentions, we would be ready for them?

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Why were the crowds so excited when Jesus arrived? How could their excitement disappear in less than a week? Why is it significant that there is a prophecy about Jesus riding a donkey? Is there anyone in this scene who really understands what is happening, or who has any genuine faith?

- Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, June 2011

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DEATH & RESURRECTION: STUDIES IN JOHN 11-21

Notes For Week Three: The Word Foresees His Death (John 12:2-11)

Jesus speaks openly of his coming death, indicating how and why it will happen. He alone understands the true significance of what will take place and he alone will not be surprised by the chain of events leading to his death. Speculation and debate about Jesus continue to grow, yet Jesus takes no interest in either - instead, he is concerned about those who have faith in him.

Review Of Revelations

Jesus provides a preview of his resurrection by "waking up" the dead Lazarus (John 11:1-44). The spiritually dead religious leaders then attack the living Christ (John 11:45-12:19). When they hear about Lazarus, the authorities get tough. They are simply motivated by self-interest, but they are full of religious-sounding rationalizations for disposing of Jesus. The ironic "prophecy" of the high priest Caiaphas gives them a further excuse for their murderous plotting.

Meanwhile, there is a dinner in Bethany in Jesus' honor. Sisters Mary and Martha serve Jesus in different ways, but Mary's sacrifice brings criticism from within due to its extravagance. Jesus is pleased with Mary, though, and he reminds the others that they will not have him much longer.

With the Passover now near, Jesus arrives in Jerusalem as a king would enter a city - but with important symbolic differences, as prophesied by Zechariah. The crowd is excited, but their "hosannas" are ironic, and their expectations are misguided. Jesus comes in peace - not to conquer, but to serve and die so that we all might come to his Father and know him. Amongst all those standing in the crowd, none really understood or appreciated why Jesus had come. Do we?

How do our own expectations of Jesus influence how we respond to him? It is difficult to keep returning to the forgiveness of sins, the chance to know God, and the security of eternity as the primary blessings we receive from Jesus. Yet otherwise we shall forever be confused by what God is doing; we are likely to be judgmental or stubborn rather than compassionate and gracious; we shall fixate on fleshly emotions and cravings rather than on the soul's spiritual needs. We can help each other greatly by never forgetting the foundations of grace and hope.

Imagery Of A Faithful Lives Life (John 12:20-33)

Once again, we see Jesus respond to an inquiry with an apparently unrelated lesson. He describes the coming crucifixion with imagery and explanation, knowing that it will take a while for anyone to grasp what he says. Jesus also gives us a glimpse into his own heart, in which a fear of the impending torture is combined with anticipation of the blessings it will bring others.

First we meet some outsiders who are at the Passover feast (12:20-22). A group of Gentiles* approaches Philip - a Galilean who probably had numerous Gentile acquaintances - to say that they would like to see Jesus. When this request is brought to Jesus' attention, he seemingly does not even respond directly, but instead turns the conversation in an entirely different direction.

* In the original text, they are literally referred to as Greeks, but it was also a common figure of speech to call any Gentiles or foreigners 'Greeks'.

Jesus first uses the image of a falling seed (12:23-26). A plant's seed gives new life by dying to itself - that is, by ceasing to be a seed - and so also Jesus cannot give us a full measure of life and grace unless he first dies on the cross. There are several spiritual applications of this idea, most obviously in Jesus' own ministry. He has the ability to do many good things, but none of them will save anyone's soul unless Jesus' life on this earth comes to an end. To do the most lasting good, he must cease to be a healer of damaged bodies and become a healer of damaged souls.

This also applies to those who seek God. We must be ready to give up our lives in this world - not literally, by being killed, but figuratively, by giving up our fleshly goals and ambitions - in order to live the greater, spiritual life that Jesus offers - what he called "life to the full." Only by discarding not only old habits but also old identities can we know God and rejoice in his grace.

Jesus' hour has come, and he is ready to be "lifted up" - an image of crucifixion (12:27-33). Jesus dreads the physical experience that he must endure, but he looks forward to glorifying his Father. Jesus reminds us that to glorify God means giving up self. By being lifted up physically on the cross, and giving up his life voluntarily, he will raise God's name above his own desires.

Hence he asks the Father to "glorify your name" - he calls not for his own will, but for his Father's will, to be done. And his selfless prayer is met by the Father's voice thundering back from heaven* in reply. This powerful phenomenon overwhelms those who witness it, for they seek alternate explanations to the plain fact that God himself has spoken in this rare fashion.

* Compare (and perhaps contrast) this incident with the voice of God speaking at Jesus' baptism (Matthew 3:16-17, Mark 1:11, Luke 3:21-22) and at the transfiguration (Matthew 17:5-6, Mark 9:7, Luke 9:34-35).

Jesus' death, and only his death, can draw humanity to himself, making us one with God and with one another. The goal is no different from the dreams of earthly leaders throughout history, but only Jesus understands how to bring it about- and only Jesus is willing to do what is needed.

We cannot bring humanity together by intelligence, methods, money, or words. The wounds and divisions are too deep to be healed by anything other than 100% grace. So many cultures or nations have hated and killed each other for centuries - not for lack of ideas, good intentions, or knowledge, but for lack of grace. Only by completely forgiving, and completely being forgiven, can humanity's wounds be healed. Such an outpouring of grace can only come about by Jesus' blood. The sacrifice has now been made - will we accept it and be healed? Will we help others to see that salvation is not a matter of doctrine or methodology, but of grace and mercy?

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Why might these Gentiles have wanted to see Jesus? Why doesn't Jesus respond directly? Is it significant that this lesson comes in response to a request from Gentiles? How is Jesus like a seed? Does a falling seed symbolize us too? How will Jesus' death "glorify" God? How will it draw humanity to him? Why did God speak from heaven on this occasion?

How Do We Believe (John 12:34-43)

Jesus' teachings and actions are often hard for others fully to grasp and accept - and his latest comments are no exception. Jesus and his Father knew it would be this way; for the struggle to believe has always been part of God's relationship with his people. This is not a bad thing - God wants us to learn to strive against our fleshly tendencies, so that our faith can be deeper.

Jesus has used the term "Son of Man"* several times, and now the crowd would like to know who this "Son Of Man" is (12:34-36). And once more, Jesus does not respond directly. In part, this is because any direct definition would be misleading and misunderstood, yet the deeper reason is because they are again asking the wrong question. Their struggle is not in accepting who Jesus is, but in accepting the things he is teaching them.

* In reference to Jesus, the name "Son of Man" emphasizes his role as the heir (the one who will receive or bear everything) of humanity's weaknesses, sins, and spiritual needs. See also the notes to John 8:25-30.

Thus Jesus calls them to walk in the light (his teachings and his presence) while they have the light with them. Of course, they can always change and come to him later, after he is gone, but Jesus knows human nature. Those who are ready to follow him should do so now, without delay. He will be patient with the others too - but all of us shall only walk in this world for a short time. Whenever the time comes for a person to choose to follow Jesus, he or she should heed the soul's cry for help without argument or qualification.

John parallels some teachings from Isaiah with the ministry of Jesus (12:37-41). In their original settings, the quotations from Isaiah 53:1 and Isaiah 6:10 come from different contexts*; yet both point out that the struggle to believe and accept God's priorities has always been present in his relationship with his people. Whether under law or grace, whether living in ancient times or modern, it will never be easy or pleasant to set aside our fleshly desires to fulfill the needs of the soul and spirit. Since we are blessed to live in a time of grace, let us accept it freely, and be grateful that we and all who respond can receive a knowledge of God that we did not earn.

* Isaiah 6 covers the occasion of Isaiah's own call to ministry, and the verse John quotes emphasizes the resistance that Isaiah will encounter when he proclaims his prophecies. Isaiah 53 is part of a detailed foretelling of the Messiah's own ministry of atonement and grace.

The prophet Isaiah saw Jesus' glory long ago, because the old covenant and sacrifices - though holy in themselves - never pleased God. So God was already preparing a better covenant and a better, once-for all sacrifice. Isaiah and other prophets realized that they would not live to see this new covenant, but they rejoiced in knowing it would come. How the faithful men and women of the Old Testament would have rejoiced, if they could have been completely freed from the law by Jesus' blood!

In our struggle for belief, we must often choose between receiving verbal praise from humans and receiving unspoken, but genuine, praise from God (12:42-43). John makes the astonishing observation that many of the religious leaders actually believe in Jesus, but they will not say so out loud because they are afraid of becoming religious outcasts*.

* That is, they did not want to be excluded from the synagogue - see also the notes to John 9:18-23.

Both aspects of this are noteworthy. Even as the religious leaders plot Jesus' death, some of them actually believe in him. But they won't say so, even if it could save Jesus' life, because they are afraid of being punished or embarrassed. Yet before we critique them, we should remember how hard it can be for us to acknowledge Jesus openly, and to do so in a way that is sincere and meaningful, and not just an affectation, a political statement, or a social statement.

When we find ourselves struggling to overcome unbelief, we have not done anything wrong; nor does it mean that we are in immediate danger. It is an unavoidable consequence of inhabiting mortal bodies and living in a perishable world while worshiping a spiritual God. The struggle

will not go away or become easy, but there are ways we can make it less complicated. The fear of changing our priorities and perspectives, the resistance to humility, and the insistence on turning the gospel into a doctrine or a method are all unnecessary obstacles. They do us no good at all, and it will not hurt us if we simply discard these things.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Why does the crowd ask about the Son of Man? Why doesn't Jesus answer their question? What does he want them to think about instead? Look up the quotes from Isaiah in their original contexts. How do they relate to Jesus' ministry? How could some of the leaders have actually believed in Jesus but been unwilling to say so? What should we learn from this?

Jesus and the Father (John 12:44-50)

As Jesus approaches the ordeal of the cross, he will put himself completely at the mercy of his Father. Moreover, he hopes to call his followers' attention to the Father as the ultimate source of grace and hope. Jesus is not reluctant to describe and discuss his dependence on the Father, and he wants us also to put our entire faith, hope, and trust in God. His words will show us how.

Jesus reminds us again of the tight bond between him and the One who sent him (12:44-46). He knows we must constantly be reminded that looking at Jesus allows us to see God. This is one more way in which Jesus helps us come into the light. Mortal beings cannot see God physically, and the fleshly mind cannot even sense God amidst the cruder sensations of this world. But whenever we look at Jesus and listen to Jesus, we can see the heart and mind of his Father,

The very words Jesus speaks point us directly to the Father (12:47-50). For Jesus himself came not to judge*, but to save. Really, neither he nor his Father needs to judge anyone, for all of us have already judged ourselves by our sins. We are already self-judged and self-condemned - and the more we profess our innocence, the more we condemn ourselves (recall John 9:41).

* There is no contradiction between this verse and John 5:22-23 or 5:26-27. Jesus does not intend any of these statements to be analyzed forensically, but to be considered in light of our relationship with him and his Father. Such passages are illuminating different sides of these relationships.

This is why Jesus says, "that very word which I spoke will condemn him." God's judgment is impersonal, but Jesus' salvation is personal. And because Jesus' grace is personal, it also makes our knowledge of God personal. All the words that Jesus speaks came from the Father, and all that he does is in accordance with the Father's will. Thus we do not need to prove ourselves to God - we need only follow Jesus' example by humbling ourselves.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What aspects of his relationship with the Father does Jesus mention here? Why are they important to us? Why does Jesus not need to judge anyone? What implications does this have for us? In what sense do his words judge us? Why is it important to know that Jesus' words come directly from the Father?

*- Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, June 2011
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DEATH & RESURRECTION: STUDIES IN JOHN 11-21

Notes For Week Four: The Servants & Their Master (John 13)

On Jesus' last evening with his disciples before the crucifixion, he teaches them some powerful lessons. In washing their feet, predicting Judas's betrayal, and foreseeing Peter's denial, Jesus also leaves some important spiritual lessons for us. The life of a follower of Jesus should reflect Jesus' own life in every possible way, and especially in reflecting his grace and his humility.

Review Of Relevance Classes

The spiritually dead religious authorities are determined to kill the living Messiah (John 11:45-12:19). Jesus, the Word of God made flesh, foresees his death (John 12:20-50). When some Gentiles visit him at the Passover, he teaches them images of a death that gives life. Jesus will be like a falling seed that is transformed into new life. And when Jesus is lifted up on the cross, he will draw humanity to him. Only Jesus' blood and grace can overcome our fleshly divisions.

Jesus knows that it is a struggle for mortal beings to believe the gospel of grace. Isaiah foretold not only some details about Jesus' ministry, but also the trouble he would face teaching a world fixated on law, human opinion, and comparisons. Even in Jesus' own time, it was a challenge for believers to set aside the craving for praise from humans, and instead to seek praise from God.

Jesus often reminds us of his relationship with the Father, for in many ways this sets an example for us. When we look at Jesus, we see God, too. Even the words Jesus speaks come directly from the Father - Jesus does not repeat them as an obligation, but rather he gladly teaches them because his will is so closely intertwined with his Father's.

How is Jesus' death essential to the gospel? We might desire to set aside the crucifixion to emphasize the more pleasant aspects of Jesus' life, but the gospel is no gospel without the blood and the cross. Only thus could the grace be obtained to cover the flood of sins humanity has committed. And only by leaving the physical world could Jesus allow his followers to move past their dependence on him as a human, and grow into a dependence on his eternal Father.

An Example For the Servants (John 13:1-17)

As he washed his disciples' feet, Jesus knew that they would not fully understand what he was doing. And it is also easy for us to misinterpret the example he is setting. The emphasis is not on any literal action, but on his attitude and perspective. If it is true that no servant is greater than his master, then we can never claim any privilege or right that Jesus himself did not claim.

We know that Jesus always loved his disciples dearly, but now at the Passover meal* he shows them "the full extent of his love" (13:1-5). Judas Iscariot has already decided to betray Jesus to the authorities, and so Jesus' suffering and death are imminent. But Jesus does not dwell on his own misfortune, and he does not even exclude Judas from the love he shows his disciples. Indeed, he will show Judas some extra grace and compassion.

* Jesus and his disciples were observing the traditional Passover meal described in the Old Testament. Some details would have differed from the original observance, but the main elements were the same.

Jesus makes himself a servant, performing a humbling task* without the slightest reservation or complaint. He washes their feet all by himself, not delegating anything and not holding back anything. Even when he comes to Judas, he shows the same humility and compassion that he shows all the others. This simple incident is a powerful reminder of how deeply Jesus loves everyone, even those we despise or fear. His own example takes away all of our excuses for hating, for seeking revenge, or for feeling that God approves of some of us more than others.

* The job of washing guests' feet would normally have been performed, when it was done at all, by the lowest and least skilled servants in a home. For some studies that further expand on Jesus' example here, see the book *The God Of The Bowl*, by Jim McGuigan.

The relationship between Jesus and Peter often provides insights into the ways Jesus thinks of us, and this is another example (13:6-11). Peter swings from one extreme to another. First he is embarrassed to have the great Teacher serving him; and then, when Jesus explains how important it is, Peter wants Jesus to wash his whole body. His understanding may be poor, but his determination to please Jesus in any possible way is a good example. Jesus' own point is that it was just as important for the disciples to accept the washing as it was for Jesus to perform it.

Jesus uses the cleansing of physical dirt to teach Peter some important spiritual lessons. Just as Peter was uncomfortable with Jesus stooping down and cleaning his feet, so also we as believers can be uncomfortable with the lengths of sacrifice Jesus went to, in order to cleanse our souls. Part of us resists our need for pure grace and forgiveness, and part of us never quite believes that we are completely clean, without the need to perform any meritorious works of our own.

Jesus asks his disciples whether they understand what he has done for them (13:12-17). It is not just a simple act of practical service, or even a demonstration of his care for them. It is no less than a pronouncement of identity. By defining himself as a humbly sacrificial servant, Jesus has also placed an upper limit on the degree of self-importance that anyone following him may have.

No servant is greater than his master, and a messenger is no greater than the one who sends him - this is true then and now. Jesus teaches us that the world's definitions of human greatness and importance are unacceptable for those who live by the gospel (see Matthew 20:25-28, Mark 10:42-45, and Luke 22:24-27). It is easy to come up with religious-sounding rationalizations when we desire privilege or special treatment, but that is all they are. No one was ever more important, more vital to our very survival, than Jesus the Son of God - but he never claimed privilege, authority, or position on this earth. He just served, loved, and sacrificed.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Why was the Passover meal an appropriate time for Jesus to wash the disciples' feet? Why did he do it while Judas was still there? What implications are there for us? Why was Peter uncomfortable? What lessons should we learn from Peter's reluctance? What does Jesus' example teach us about positions of responsibility or leadership in the church? What does it teach to all believers?

He Who Eats My Bread (John 13:1-30)

Because we are so familiar with the accounts of Judas' betrayal, it has lost its shock value. But the disciples' horrified astonishment reminds us of the depths of treachery involved. Of course, it was a necessary step in Jesus providing the redemptive sacrifice for sin. Jesus has no animosity towards Judas, and he even declines the chance to embarrass Judas in front of the others.

Jesus tells the disciples about the betrayal ahead of time, so that it will not catch them completely by surprise (13:18-21). Jesus has known about it all along, and he explains from Scripture how it fits in*. It is a measure of his compassion for the traitor Judas that the other disciples have no idea who the betrayer is - not once in all their time together has Jesus shown any lack of respect or kindness to Judas, even though he knew long ago that he was the betrayer (see John 6:64).

* In its original context, Psalm 41:9 is a description of David's struggles, probably when he was hunted by Saul and had to worry about being given away by someone eager to gain the king's favor. It is not a direct prediction of Judas's betrayal; rather, it is now 'fulfilled' in the broader sense that Jesus exemplifies it more completely. Both David and Jesus were rightful rulers rejected by the establishment, and who were not safe even from their friends. David even faced rebellion and treachery from within his own family.

Thus the disciples, upon hearing the prediction, frantically ask which one of them it might be (13:22-26). The other gospel accounts tell us that some of the disciples even worry that they might be the one, without even realizing it (for example, see Matthew 26:22 and Mark 14:19). As John shows us, even those who may not be as concerned are certainly curious, and they want to know who it is. Jesus actually indulges the curiosity of "the disciple whom Jesus loved"*, yet neither John nor Jesus tips off the other disciples.

* John never uses his own name in his account, and refers to himself as "the disciple whom Jesus loved" several times. See also John 21:20-24.

As for Judas himself, Jesus does not criticize him or debate with him, simply requesting that, "what you are about to do, do quickly" (13:27-30). Jesus graciously protects Judas from having to face the anger of the other disciples, knowing that Satan has already "entered into* him." Throughout the Last Supper, Jesus shows that he cares for the treacherous Judas as much as he cares for the faithful eleven.

* Luke's account adds a detail, saying that Satan entered into Judas somewhat earlier (Luke 22:3-6). So it seems possible that on both occasions Satan in some way provoked or incited Judas to act. Yet we are never told definitively whether or not Judas was at any particular time deprived of his free will. We can only draw our conclusions based on what we know from other Scriptures about God's nature.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Could anyone other than Jesus have realized how appropriate it was to have the Last Supper during the Passover? How might it have helped the disciples to have Jesus foretell Judas' betrayal? Should it mean anything to us? Why does Jesus give Judas so much grace? What should we learn from this?

You anno Follow ow (John 13:31-3)

While the other disciples would remain loyal to Jesus, most of them too would reveal their weaknesses in the coming crisis. Becoming aware of their spiritual frailty is an important part of their spiritual growth. Their mistakes would also add to Jesus' glory. Jesus saves us because of his own compassion and grace, not because he had brilliant advisers or courageous assistants.

Once Judas leaves on his mission of treachery, the final chain of events has been set in action - hence Jesus says that, "now is the Son Of Man glorified" (13:31-35). He does not see the coming crucifixion as an injustice or a tragedy, but as the chance to become glorified along with his Father. It will be the capstone on a lifetime of compassion and service. Jesus knows that godly glory is not found in earthly victories, but in giving one's all to God and his people.

Jesus continues to remind his disciples that he will be with them only a little longer. He knows that these warnings will not make it easy - indeed, nothing could make it any easier for them. Much of what he says now has a different purpose, because later they will remember his words.

The disciples' response is pretty natural - they want to know where Jesus is going (13:36-38). Rather than reiterate what he has already told them, Jesus simply tells them that they cannot come with him now - but they will indeed follow later*. For the disciples, who for many months have spent almost every moment with Jesus, the hardest thing about the crucifixion might not be Jesus' suffering, but their own separation from him.

* That is, their lives too will be imperiled for their faith. They can do nothing now to prevent the crucifixion; they can only remain faithful. Someday they too may be called on to lay down their lives.

Peter, for one, openly claims that he will go anywhere with Jesus, which prompts Jesus to give his prediction that Peter will deny knowing him before the rooster crows - that is, before the night is over*. Peter's determination to be with Jesus is completely genuine, but it is still shallow. Jesus does not want Peter to die with him in a blaze of glory; he wants Peter to live a life of humility for him. Once again, Jesus will allow someone he loves dearly to go through a painful experience, in order to strengthen his faith so that he can know his Savior better.

* Other accounts refer to the rooster (or cock) crowing two times. But the meaning is the same - since roosters routinely crowed at various times of the day, anything happening "before the rooster crows" would happen quite soon.

Nobody finds it easy to accept our dependence on grace. We always hope to prove ourselves to be exceptions to the rule, or at least to prove that we don't need grace as much as someone else does. We want to think that we will be the ones who will get everything right, who will do it all, who will save the world. Many Christians never get past this, and they live all their lives trying to be something Jesus never asked them to be (or worse, they try to force others to be something Jesus did not ask them to be). But we can only be saved by grace completely, or not by grace at all.

We have a Messiah who washed the feet of Judas, and who prayed for the souls of the brutes who nailed his body to a cross. He doesn't want us to try to save ourselves. He wants us to be humble and grateful in accepting the grace that he pours out on us so lavishly.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: How was Jesus "glorified" by being betrayed to death? Why does he keep telling the disciples that he will be going away? How does he want them to respond? Why does Peter want to follow Jesus now? Does he know what it would mean? What did he need to learn? What similar lessons do we need to learn?

- Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, June 2011

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DEATH & RESURRECTION: STUDIES IN JOHN 11-21

Notes For Week Five: Comfort & Counsel (John 14)

As Jesus spends one last evening with the disciples before the crucifixion, he has already given them some momentous things to think about—his example of extreme humility and service, the coming betrayal of Judas, and the coming denial by Peter. But he also offers them some deep comfort for the trying times ahead - and these thoughts will stay with them long afterwards.

Review Of Re-entrances

Jesus, the Word of God made flesh, foresaw his own death (John 12:20-50). Before he died, he taught his disciples some important lessons about the servants and their Master (John 13). He first set an example for them by humbly washing their feet at the table. This and his other actions at the Last Supper showed the full extent of his love. Reminding them that no servant is greater than his master, he called them to live with the same degree of grace and humility.

Jesus would soon be betrayed by one of those who had shared his bread and his life. Jesus told this to the disciples in advance, so that later they would realize it was meant to happen. To the treacherous Judas, Jesus shows only grace, shielding him from exposure and embarrassment. Knowing that Judas has made up his mind, he tells him only to do quickly what he is about to do.

The disciples will not be able to follow Jesus to the cross. It is time for him, the Son Of Man, to be glorified, and even Judas's betrayal and Peter's denial will merely enhance the glory and grace of Jesus. Naturally, the disciples want to know where Jesus is going; but Jesus merely warns Peter, the most eager of them all, that he will shortly deny even knowing Jesus.

Why does Jesus allow himself to be unappreciated, misunderstood and mistreated? All of this glorifies him and God - an idea of glory that contradicts our fleshly concepts of glory. Getting everything we desire does not glorify God - instead, it glorifies God when we show that he means more to us than the things we desire on this earth. Also, the injustice and ingratitude that Jesus faced was part of his redemptive sacrifice. Sinners "deserve" to be mistreated; but Jesus took all this on himself, so that God does not have to impose the penalties for sin on us.

The Father's House (John 14:1-7)

Jesus is about to undergo a horrifying ordeal, and the disciples themselves are going to face some severe trials in the days and years ahead. But all of them have a true home beyond this earth, and Jesus' death is an essential part of preparing that home for them. Once again, he knows that this will be hard for them to understand; yet as always he carefully explains whatever he can.

After Jesus leaves, he will prepare a place* for those who believe in him (14:1-4). Like us, the disciples will soon have to face life without Jesus' physical presence. And so he offers comfort for troubled hearts - both theirs and ours. Jesus' description of a house with "many rooms" is not literal - it simply implies that there is plenty of room for us all to be with God.

* This could refer to Jesus preparing the means for us to be with God (by sacrificing for our sins) or it could refer to him waiting for us in heaven with God. Thus his "going" could mean his temporary absence for the crucifixion, or instead his permanent absence after the ascension. But in all cases the primary meaning is to re-assure us that we can later be re-united with him forever (and we can also be with God).

Thus the comfort comes not from knowing what heaven will be like, but from knowing that we can finally and forevermore be together with Jesus and with the Father. The New Testament consistently points to this as the reason why heaven will be worth seeking. The certainty of God's presence (and the presence of those who love God) is more significant than physical descriptions* or details about heaven. Such other things may pique the curiosity of many humans, but God does not indulge our fleshly curiosity on them, because they miss the point.

* Any physical description of heaven would be misleading or inadequate. Such descriptions that we have (e.g. in Revelation) are figurative, using imagery to suggest what it will be like being with God forever.

Part of the comfort Jesus offers is that he will return to take us home. While being with God is integral to the purpose of the gospel, his promise of coming back is an extra measure of grace. He doesn't really have to give us such a specific sign to watch for, yet he willingly does.

In this context, Jesus reminds us that he is the way, the truth, and the life (14:5-7). This is a response to the disciples' question - and it is a natural question - asking how they can possibly know the way to the place where Jesus is going. Indeed, this is a question asked by almost everyone even remotely interested in seeking God. We want - and we ought to want - to know how to be saved, how to find God, how to know when (or whether) we have found the truth. The world makes all this extremely complicated and mysterious, but in Jesus we can know the way.

We can know the way if we remember that Jesus is the way. He provides the way, and he is the way. Our assurance rests on his divinity, his purity, his grace - not on our understanding of these things, or on our response to these things. Likewise, finding God does not require theological expertise or brilliant scholarship - we just need to look at closely at Jesus. Perhaps the flesh is disappointed with this, for it deprives us of the chance to prove our superiority to others in any way. But it puts us all on equal ground, for we can all be with Jesus and love Jesus.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: When Jesus talks of going away, what specifically does he mean? Why does he say that his Father's house has many rooms? In what sense is Jesus "the way", "the truth", and "the life"? How does this passage compare with others that talk about our eternal home? What points in common do they have?

Jesus ☐ the Father ☐ the ☐ounselor (John 14:☐21)

Responding to the disciples' confusion about these ideas, Jesus reminds them again that he and his Father are one. When we see and hear Jesus, we are seeing and hearing God. Jesus now also mentions the Spirit, or Counselor, who will soon be sent in his place. He is also one with Jesus and with the Father. Notice how Jesus explains all this in terms of relationships, not doctrines.

Philip asks Jesus to show the Father to the disciples, implying that this would answer most of their questions (14:8-14). Again we can identify with Philip's perspective. God's intangibility is one of the biggest obstacles to our faith; and God's intangibility is one of the main reasons why so many humans are tempted to turn to rules, methods, results, and laws for their religion instead of building a spiritual relationship with God. This will always be a struggle for believers.

But it does not have to be as hard as we often make it. Just as Jesus asks Philip, "Don't you know me?," so also he calls us to look at him whenever we wonder about his Father. John's gospel repeatedly reminds us that when we look at Jesus, we see the Father. Faith in Jesus is faith in the Father who sent him - and thus anyone who has faith in Jesus can follow in his steps.

Indeed, Jesus says that we can, in a sense, do even greater things than he did. We cannot do miracles or rise from the dead, yet our own much 'smaller' acts of faith glorify God in a different way than Jesus' miracles did. As long as we are on this earth, we can never have the certainty that Jesus had; and in this sense our own faithfulness is greater, even though our faith is so much more fragile. Once again, it is the relationship that is at the center; and it is also our relationship with Jesus that also give us assurance when we pray* to the Father.

* This also answers any confusion about the apparent 'guarantee' in this verse. Prayer as an action or method is no more magical than any other action. But prayer as communication with God is invaluable.

To this, Jesus adds the new promise that the Counselor is coming (14:15-21). As with his teachings about the Father, Jesus' teachings about the Holy Spirit are founded on knowing one another and being with one another. The Counselor comes first of all to live with believers, to be a constant presence. This is why, for example, Paul refers to him* as a "deposit guaranteeing our inheritance" (Ephesians 1:14), for the Spirit's presence is a reminder and a promise that later we shall live forever in God's direct presence, without any of the hindrances of our mortal form.

* In the text of the New Testament, the Holy Spirit is always referred to as "he", never as "it". In fact, in the original Greek text, the New Testament writers will even refer to the Spirit as "he" when grammatical conventions would normally dictate otherwise. The Holy Spirit is personal, like Jesus and the Father - and many misconceptions about the Holy Spirit can be cured if we remember this.

As the Counselor, the Spirit provides us with the security of love. He is a constant reminder that God wants above all to be with us, and that he asks above all for us to love him. We do not have to learn complex theological formulas to understand the work of the Spirit - indeed, such things lead us away from the Spirit, not towards him. Nor do we have to 'prove ourselves' to the Spirit. He loves us just as unconditionally as the Father and Jesus love us. So, in any ministry that the Spirit may have, he gives freely to all regardless of 'spirituality' or talent or accomplishments.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Why does Philip want to see the Father? How does this parallel our own longings? How does Jesus' answer help us? Can we do 'greater things' than Jesus? How do all these ideas apply to prayer? Why does Jesus call the Spirit the "Counselor"? What does this tell us about the Spirit's ministry? How can we learn to see the Spirit more personally?

I Am \square oin \square Awa \square \square I Am \square omin \square Ba \square k (John 14:22-31)

Knowing that there is a limit to what the disciples will grasp, Jesus still does all he can to explain why he will soon leave them. In the short-term, he must leave to provide forgiveness for sin. In the long-term, he must leave as part of their spiritual growth. In his place will come the Spirit - and although the Spirit's presence will seem less tangible, he will have a powerful effect.

The link between loving and obeying is a frequent topic of discussion, and an even more frequent object of misunderstanding (14:22-24). Jesus often says* (and similar statements are made elsewhere in the New Testament) that if we love him, we will obey his teachings. If we keep these statements in context - seeing them in terms of knowing God, not filtering them through our fleshly craving for results, control, or comparisons - then we see that he is talking about the natural desire to follow in Jesus' steps that comes from knowing him and loving God.

* Here, he says this in response to a question from the disciple Judas the son of James - Judas wants to know why Jesus won't show himself to the rest of the world, the way he has to the disciples. Jesus' answer indicates that the level of information one receives is not what determines faith (or lack of faith) - it is more important to love God, which eventually (not necessarily in the short-term) leads naturally to godliness.

Jesus' point is that living in love makes it unnecessary to harp on obedience or outward behavior. His point is not, "obey me in order to prove that you love me" - this is a childish idea. Rather, he is telling us to learn to love God, to focus on our need to know God and to be with him - and doing this will allow God slowly to guide us into whatever outward paths that he desires for us.

The fleshly mind hates this teaching, and it concocts all manner of rationalizations to defend the 'obedience first' model. But Jesus always tells us to clean the inside of the dish, to focus consistently on the heart, not outward things. So, for those who insist on viewing his wise advice as mere 'commands', it is then his 'command' that we change from the inside, even if it interferes with short-term results or actions that we desire (whether from ourselves or from others). God calls us to give up our desire to control others and our desire to compare ourselves with others.

This too ties in with the ministry of the Counselor, who will teach us what Jesus wants us to know and remember (14:25-27). The gospel is not an academic subject, which we can learn by committing facts to memory and then reciting them at appropriate moments. The gospel is not a mere list of facts - it includes a collection (for lack of a much better word) of principles and ideas that challenge and contradict the most basic assumptions and beliefs of the worldly mind-set. Thus we must constantly learn, re-learn, and remember the teachings of the gospel.

Jesus' promise that, "my peace I give you", can be of considerable help if we let it. He does not give as the world gives, yet we often assume that he does - we project onto Jesus the same desire to control, the same euphemistic way of speaking, the same results-oriented mentality, that we see in worldly 'leaders'. But Jesus does really want, more than anything else, for us to know him and his Father. It truly will never matter to him whether we are worthy or whether we have 'done enough' - it truly only matters whether this is what we also desire.

Jesus will soon go to the Father (14:28-31). He will be absent for a short time, then after a while he will leave for the rest of the disciples' lifetimes. So that they will remember his words when all this happens, he continues to remind them that it will. Although Jesus knows that great suffering lies ahead*, he does what the Father has commanded him, not because he must follow a list of rules, but because he loves the Father and is completely attuned to the Father's will.

* This is because "the prince of this world is coming" - that is, very soon Jesus will be exposed to Satan's will. The horrible tortures imposed on Jesus show us what Satan would gladly do to any one of us if God allowed him to do so. Jesus did not have to endure this, but he chose to do so out of love, grace, and hope.

Jesus, the Father, and the Spirit are distinct personalities, yet they are in complete harmony with each other. They invite us to join them in this harmonious relationship. God wants this, and our souls want this - it is only our flesh that would prefer to indulge in human comparisons and control, rather than simply being with God.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Explain in your own words what Jesus is saying about the relation between loving him and obeying his teachings. What other Scriptures address this? What do they have in common? Why does the Spirit have to teach us and remind us of things? What kinds of things would he tell us about? Why does Jesus keep saying that he will return to his Father? Can we learn anything from this?

- Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, July 2011
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DEATH & RESURRECTION: STUDIES IN JOHN 11-21

Notes For Week Six: The Source of Life & Growth (John 11:1-14)

As he is waiting to be arrested, Jesus spends a good deal of time teaching the disciples about the relationship between him, his Father, and the Holy Spirit or Counselor. Their closeness is also an example to those who want to know God and be with him. Yet our relationship with God has a further dimension, in that we are completely dependent on him, even for life itself.

Review Of Relevant Passages

At the Last Supper, Jesus taught his disciples that they, as servants, should have the humility and compassion that he, their Master, has (John 13). After teaching some hard truths about faithful living, Jesus offers comfort and counsel for the days ahead (John 14). In his Father's "house", there will always be plenty of space for everyone. He must leave to prepare a place for them, but we can always get there if we remember that Jesus himself is the way to know his Father.

Jesus has often spoken of the Father, and now he tells us also about the Counselor, the Holy Spirit. When the disciples express a natural desire to be shown the Father, Jesus re-emphasizes that seeing him is the same as seeing the qualities of the Father. As long as they focus on remaining with Jesus, they can have the security of God's love. The Father, Jesus, and the Spirit all love us and want to be with us - we do not need to prove ourselves in order to earn their love.

Jesus is going away and then coming back. He knows this is confusing to the disciples, and so he assures them that the Counselor will teach them and strengthen them spiritually. The Spirit will always be with us, and will always tell us what Jesus would have told us, had he been here.

What reasons does Jesus give us for keeping our main focus on knowing the Father? He provides positive reasons, and also takes away our reservations by dealing with things we might worry about. He keeps emphasizing how much God wants to know us, so that we know that we really can rely on his grace. When he heals and serves others, he reminds us that this is what his Father is like, too. He consistently appeals to our souls' need for security, love, and peace.

The True Vine (John 15:1-5)

The imagery of the vine and the branches teaches some vital lessons about our relationship with Jesus. Just as branches quickly wither and die if they are cut off from the vine, so also a person not connected with God is dead spiritually. But just as branches need only remain in the vine in order to produce good fruit, so believers need only remain in Jesus, and spiritual fruit will come.

Since Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life, he has every reason to call us to remain in him (15:1-4). He describes his Father as a gardener tending the branches that are part of Jesus the vine. Telling us that some branches will be cut off* is not so much a warning as a simple statement of fact, for no branch will be cut off due to poor performance. The only branches that get cut off will be the ones who did not care to remain in the vine. God won't force them to stay.

* The phrase in the original text can also mean "taken up" (or "pulled up"), but not in a positive sense - only in the sense of being removed from something. Some commentators, because they misunderstand the passage as the whole, do not want to believe that God would actually cut off a branch, and so these commentators erroneously state that the branches are merely being 'raised up'. Observing the context of the passage can help us to avoid this well-meaning but misguided misinterpretation.

The branches must remain in the vine for several good reasons. Most obviously, the branches must remain closely connected with their source of life. We cannot remain spiritually alive without Jesus, because he alone is able to connect us with the Father. We can have 'religion' without Jesus - we can do things that make the flesh feel superior, and we can produce doctrines or activity, without being connected to the vine. But we have no true life without Jesus.

Likewise, genuine growth is only possible by remaining close to Jesus. We can attain numerical results in any number of ways, but we can only produce "fruit that will last" by remaining closely connected to the vine. Worldly self-help courses can produce fleshly self-improvement, but only by remaining in Jesus can we understand the true nature of God, and only by staying in the vine can we learn to see ourselves and others from God's perspective.

Yet this is not meant to be a warning, as much as it is a promise - that if we simply concentrate on remaining in Jesus, we can and shall bear much fruit (15:5-8). Spiritual "fruit"* comes naturally from remaining in him, without the necessity for planning or special effort. Being close to Jesus cannot help affecting the ways we think, talk, and act. If we need to force ourselves to do good things, then instead of figuring out a new method or motivational technique, we should simply set aside such playthings and spend more time with Jesus himself.

* Jesus deliberately avoids defining "fruit", but that unfortunately does not stop us from creating our own definitions. What Jesus means by spiritual fruit cannot be defined in any numerically quantifiable way, for he simply wants us to remain in him and naturally produce good things, which will vary from person to person. A more specific passage would be Galatians 5:22-23 ("the fruit of the Spirit is . . ."), which can be very helpful as long as we do not try to make it also just another restrictive definition.

Compare the branches that remain with the branches that wither away. These are not being "punished" for leaving the vine - they are simply experiencing the natural result of leaving the only source of life and growth. God does not have to punish someone for straying from the truth of the gospel, because such a decision brings its own, natural consequences. These consequences might bring little cost in outward or fleshly terms, nor should we expect them to do so. God does not force us to value the right things, any more than he forces us to know him.

It is to the Father's glory that we bear good fruit, and here too we can see this more clearly from God's perspective. Good fruit does not have to be dramatic, or even visible, to glorify God. God does not perceive glory in the cheap, flashy way that humans do. We've seen this before, when Jesus described his own crucifixion as bringing glory to him.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: In what sense is Jesus like a vine? Is this the same for us as it was for the disciples? Why do we need to remain in him? What does he mean by "remain"? Can we always tell if we have remained in him? Why does remaining in him naturally produce good fruit? What might "fruit" mean? What does it mean for one of the branches to wither? What should we learn from this?

Remain In M□Love (John 1□:□-17)

Remaining in Jesus cannot be reduced to doctrines or results. Jesus simply equates it with remaining in his love - and genuine, godly love is greater than these other things. Jesus showed us what it means to love, and he calls us to do the same. Once we give up our desire to control other persons or compare ourselves with them, Jesus' teaching gives us direction and confidence.

Remaining in Jesus involves above all that we love others as he loved us (15:9-12). When we again encounter Jesus' statement that we will remain in his love if we obey his commands (see also John 14:15-21 and 14:23-24), this time he clarifies what he means. His command is first and foremost that we love one another, with the same kind of selfless love that he has practiced in his life on our earth. Nor should we attempt to turn "love one another" into a mere rule, for it is a 'command' only in an ironic sense. He is not calling us to outward behavior modification, but to a re-evaluation of our priorities.

John later addressed these principles at length in passages such as 1 John 4:7-21. To love one another shows love for Jesus, and it fulfills his 'commands' at the same time. "Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law" (Romans 13:10). If we concentrate on outward behavior or results, then we may well accomplish what we set out to do, but this can be done without the kind of love that pleases God*. Love itself is the priority. If we have to offer proof that we love, then we probably do not love the way that God calls us to love.

* In the discussion on love in 1 Corinthians 13, Paul offers examples of very 'good' things that we can do for others, but that in themselves can still be done without genuine love (see 1 Corinthians 13:1-3).

Jesus tells his disciples that they are his friends, not his servants (15:13-17). His relationship with the disciples - at least insofar as he treats them - is an example to us for our own relationships. Godly friendship is not a matter of mere common interests, and it is certainly much more than the events or activities we may share with one another. It is not measured only by what we do for each other outwardly, but also by the attitudes and perspectives behind this.

Genuine spiritual friendship always involves a mutual commitment, with Jesus' own love being our example. Jesus always loved his disciples, despite all of their misunderstandings and mistakes. For Jesus, there was never an 'option' to start over with a 'better' group. This too is his commitment to us - he is always there, he will always forgive, he will always welcome us. Such a commitment involves a constant risk of pain and disappointment - it can only come from the sincerest love. Jesus calls us to show this same risky commitment to one another.

Spiritual friendship also involves sharing - especially sharing our lives and hearts. Since even Jesus never expected anyone to be his servant, neither should his followers ever take it upon themselves to dominate or evaluate others. This is a key to bearing the kind of genuine spiritual fruit that will last. Jesus does not call us to pursue flashy deeds of daring, but instead to build our relationships on the same ever-patient, ever-persevering, ever-hoping love that he shows us.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Why is Jesus' 'command' simply for us to love one another? Why does he call it a 'command'? How does his idea of love differ from ours? What qualities of love does he show in his relationships with the disciples? How can we develop these same qualities in our own relationships?

Faith in the World's Hatred (John 15:1-16:4)

No matter how much we love God and humanity, we shall still face the hatred that sadly fills this fallen world. Jesus loved more perfectly than any of us can; yet he often faced anger, cruelty, even violence. We neither can nor should expect the world to stop hating - but Jesus teaches us to rise above hate and anger, so that our lives may testify that it is still possible to live in love.

Jesus does not pretend that we won't face opposition from the world - instead, he reminds us that the world hated him first (15:18-25). The world has a strong tendency to love its own - that is, to

love and admire those who adopt its priorities and perspectives. As long as we seek rewards, power, wealth, popularity, or other worldly prizes, then the world will give us attention, even if it does not like us or respect us.

Those who receive attention and gain prominence in this world may be 'good' or 'bad' in the world's eyes, they may be 'successful', 'great', popular, or merely 'controversial', but they all share a devotion to "the basic principles of this world"*: its devotion to things that can easily be measured, its commitment to shallow debates and self-glorifying competitions as a way of allotting its prizes, and other such short-sighted concepts.

* This is the NIV's translation of the phrase that Paul uses in Galatians 4:3, Colossians 2:8, and Colossians 2:20. The NASB translates it as "elemental things of the world" "elementary principles of the world". The KJV uses "elements of the world" "rudiments of the world". This concept is even more basic than beliefs or opinions - it includes the underlying ways that we use to develop our beliefs and opinions.

We have been chosen out of the world, and we are called to leave behind the world and its lifeless ways of doing things. If we do this, then the world will show us the same kind of suspicion, annoyance, resistance, and occasionally outright opposition that it showed Jesus. Since no servant is greater than his master, we should not demand better treatment than Jesus received. Any blessings we do have in this life come through grace, not merit or entitlement.

Those who remain in Jesus testify to the world (15:26-16:4). When the Counselor comes - and for us he has already come - he will testify to us, teaching and reminding us of the things Jesus himself taught. We in turn are called to take this testimony to the world. But our testimony is not in mere words, for he has just taught us to live in love, as a living testimony of Jesus' love.

We must not go astray due to misguided expectations. If we have unrealistic expectations of the world, or even of the church or other believers, then disillusionment will soon cause us to doubt things we ought to be sure of. The worldly will often mistreat us, and even other believers will often disappoint us - and there will usually be little or nothing that we can do to change this. This is not a problem, and it does not mean that something basic needs to be changed.

The world will do such things because they do not know God. Their folly, sin, and hatred do not come from a lack of factual knowledge or theological expertise, nor can we solve their problems through morality, debate, fear, guilt, or other worldly methods. They need to know God. They are by nature no worse than us, and we ought not to treat them as if they were. We have the same deep-rooted need to be with God that they have, but we by grace have undeservedly had this need met, through the compassion and blood of the Messiah Jesus.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Why did the world not accept Jesus? If it does not accept us, what might be the reasons? Are there right reasons and wrong reasons for the world not to accept us as its own? In what sense should we testify to the world? How does not knowing God lead the world to misunderstand or mistreat us? Can not knowing God also cause believers to do such things?

- Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, July 2011

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DEATH & RESURRECTION: STUDIES IN JOHN 11-21

Notes For Week Seven: Grief, Joy & Overcoming (John 13:1-17)

As Jesus describes to the disciples what lies ahead of them, we can see numerous parallels with our own experiences following Jesus. When Jesus left, the disciples would feel grief and confusion, just as we must find our way to Jesus while living in a sad, sinful world. But their joy is also our joy, for God is still with us - and we, like them, can overcome this world.

Review Of Relevant Lessons

At the Last Supper, Jesus offers comfort and counsel for the days ahead (John 14). Jesus is the true source of life and growth (John 15:1-16:4), the "true vine". Like branches of a plant, the disciples must remain in Jesus to have true life. And if they do, then the fruit of remaining in him will naturally follow. His Father, the 'gardener', will remove the branches that do not wish to remain, and he will prune and condition the growing branches as they need it.

Remaining in Jesus means remaining in his love. This is the 'command' (in an ironic sense) his followers need to obey. Jesus wants to establish spiritual friendship with his followers, so he asks us to make a mutual commitment to him and to one another, and to share our lives as well.

We shall need the spiritual strength and security of Jesus when we must face the world's hatred. The world loves its own - it gives its prizes and its attention to those who follow its rules for competing. Jesus instead promises the Spirit, who will counsel us and testify to Jesus, enabling our lives to be living testimonies to a world that needs above all to know God.

What blessings in this life are available only if we remain in Jesus? The world's most sought-after rewards do not require this; and in fact a genuinely Christ-like perspective will usually hinder us from obtaining them. But remaining in the vine allows us more fully to appreciate the good things we have now, for we can accept them by grace. And Jesus allows us to rejoice in the things others have and enjoy, without the envy that worldly perspectives produce. Moreover, we have the chance to know real love, real security, and a real purpose in life.

Filled With Grief (John 16:1-16)

For a while, it will be hard for the disciples to think about anything but Jesus' departure. So too, we all go through periods when we just cannot seem to get past some basic discouragements, confusion, or struggles. The Counselor comes to be with us so that he can help us through such things. His presence strengthens us, even as his testimony calls the worldly to repentance.

Knowing the trauma that his departure will cause, Jesus repeats that unless he goes away, the spiritual growth of the disciples can never be complete (16:5-11). Although they won't realize this now, it is for their good that the Spirit will come to live with them, instead of having Jesus remain with them physically.

Before explaining this further, Jesus tells them that the Spirit will also have a ministry to unbelievers. The Spirit's presence will convict the world of its sin, will remind them that God is present even if Jesus' earthly body is no longer on this earth, and will point out to them the inherent emptiness of worldly living* - that is, he will condemn "the prince of this world" as a

fraud. The disciples will soon be grieving for the loss of Jesus, but because of their love for him, they will never have to endure the far worse grief that comes from never knowing God.

* Jesus does not say explicitly whether the Spirit will directly influence unbelievers, or whether it is his presence within believers who will bring these things about as we follow the Spirit's guidance. The ambiguity is deliberate, for Jesus has said (see 15:26-27) that the Spirit and believers will testify together.

As for Jesus' disciples, they will be guided into all truth (16:12-16). Their relationship with Jesus will continue with the help of the Spirit; and this relationship is also a model for us. The disciples have learned only a fraction of what they will someday come to know about God, and Jesus is in no hurry to tell them the rest - for the simple reason that it is "more than you can now bear." This is good to remember whenever we are in a rush to figure out everything all at once, to get all the answers today. The nature of the gospel makes this impossible and unnecessary.

If we slow down, and realize that Christianity is not about getting all the answers, then we can learn to appreciate the Spirit's ministry to believers. Of course, the Spirit could tell us all kinds of things to satisfy our curiosity, but like Jesus, he* too puts our soul's needs ahead of our idle curiosity. When he teaches us, he will above all help us to understand and appreciate the unity of Father, Son, and Spirit. The Spirit loves us, and he knows that this is the best way to heal us of the grief we suffer in this ungodly world. If we can understand the security and peace of knowing God, then we'll never have to lash out at the world when it hurts or frightens us.

* Notice again that the Holy Spirit is always referred to as "he" (not "it") in the New Testament. See also the notes John 14:15-21.

Thus Jesus emphasizes that the Spirit will not speak on his own - he will not indulge himself in an independent plan of ministry, any more than Jesus himself would have. The Son and the Spirit are perfectly in accordance with the Father's own priority of helping us to know him. The Father entrusted to Jesus the responsibility of bringing humanity into his presence, and the Spirit is now with us to remind us of this and of its implications, as often as we need these reminders.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Why is it for the disciples' good that Jesus is leaving? Is it for our good, too, that he did not remain here physically? Why will the Spirit convict unbelievers of sin? How might he do this? Why does he not speak on his own, even to believers? What should we learn from this? What things will he teach us?

□rief Will □urn □o Jo□(John 16:17-24)

Jesus compares the struggles of this world to the labor pains suffered by a woman giving birth. The same analogy is also used in Scripture for other aspects of spiritual struggles on this earth. In our fallen world, new life can only come about as the result of sacrifice and suffering. But we do not have to endure the full weight of these labor pains, because Jesus has done that for us.

The disciples are understandably a bit confused by Jesus' description of the Spirit's ministry, and they instead focus on his statement that, "in a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me" (see verse 16) - they want to know what Jesus meant by this (16:17-18). They are honestly trying to understand, but their perspective is muddled, so that even the ambiguous but innocuous phrase "a little while" confuses them.

In fact, Jesus is being pretty straightforward in telling them what will soon happen to him*. But we can sympathize, because to us also the simplest spiritual truths can become confusing when we are trying too hard to obtain outward results or to put things into an earthly perspective.

* This time, Jesus' statement (in verse 16) seems to refer specifically to the short-term, looking ahead to the crucifixion and the resurrection. Elsewhere in his Last Supper teachings, he has also previewed his subsequent, permanent departure to the Father.

Jesus then uses the experience of labor and childbirth as a parallel for the ways that upcoming events will affect the apostles (16:19-24). Because Jesus has aroused so much worldly opposition, his few true followers are going to mourn while the world rejoices over Jesus' sufferings. But Jesus' enemies will then have an unpleasant surprise when he rises from the dead, while the disciples will see him again - to their own great surprise.

The imagery of childbirth* reminds us that intense pain can be followed by great joy - and indeed, as in childbirth, pain is sometimes necessary for producing the joy that follows it. There is sometimes no other way to get to the joy without first experiencing the sorrow. This is not punishment, nor is it harshness on God's part - it is an inevitable consequence of living in a perishable, fallen world. Jesus does not lie to us, nor does he try to pretend that it will be easy.

* The imagery of childbirth is also used for other spiritual truths that involve the theme of necessary suffering followed by joy. Other examples include Matthew 24:8 (and its parallel in Mark 13:8), Romans 8:22, Galatians 4:19, and Revelation 12:2.

What he does promise is that, if we remain in him, then our joy will be lasting. The worldly too must suffer for their prizes, but they usually find to their sorrow that their rewards and their joy are short-lived. Believers truly have "life to the full": we shall feel the world's sorrows more keenly, but we shall experience spiritual joys that the worldly cannot even know.

These ideas help us understand what Jesus means when he talks about asking the Father in Jesus' name. This has nothing to do with a method or a technique in prayer*, nor does it refer merely to the spoken words "in Jesus' name" (though those certainly are appropriate). Jesus is telling us that through him we have our relationship with the Father. Through Jesus' blood, the barrier of sin is removed, and through Jesus' life on this earth, God understands what it is like to be human.

* Similarly, John 14:13-14 - which, if viewed as a technical statement, can seem somewhat inconsistent with John 16:23-24 - becomes much clearer when we see it in terms of a statement about our relationship with the Father and the Son, rather than as a procedure or a legal contract.

So this teaching about prayer - like so many other things Jesus teaches - is best understood in terms of knowing God, not in terms of actions or even beliefs. If we follow Jesus, then the Father sees us above all else as Jesus' friends - "Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need" (Hebrews 4:16). This aspect of our relationship with God can bring us both joy and security once we grasp what Jesus is saying.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What exactly did Jesus mean in verse 16? Why did he say it this way? Why did the disciples not understand it? How is the analogy of childbirth appropriate for what the disciples will experience? How is it a parallel for our own spiritual experience? What kind of joy is Jesus talking about here? How does this help us to understand what he means by asking the Father for something in his name?

Overcoming the World (John 16:2-33)

Jesus promises a victory over the world, but not on the world's terms. Those who follow Jesus do not conquer the world or subdue the world; rather, they overcome the world. And we do not

overcome the world with superior intelligence or force, but with faith and compassion. Jesus himself sets the example for us, by rising above the world's fleshly cravings and rivalries.

Jesus tells the disciples that he desires to use plain language to talk about the Father (16:25-30). He uses figures of speech because some of the most important aspects of God's nature simply don't make sense in terms of strict human logic. Elaborating on his previous comments, he emphasizes that the Father himself loves the disciples. Because of this, the disciples can speak directly to God, and can appeal directly to God, in Jesus' name - again, referring not to a verbal formula, but to the basis on which we have the chance to know God and to be in his presence.

Jesus also restates his itinerary in a slightly different way, and this time it suddenly makes sense to the disciples. He really doesn't significantly change what he says, but they are slowly coming to grasp that his emphasis on knowing the Father can help them to sort out a lot of other things.

And so Jesus continues to elaborate on events that are coming soon (16:31-33). To the disciples' excited statement that they now believe that he came from God, Jesus expresses ironic astonishment*. For they really have believed in him all along, but they have been slow to put together the realities he has taught them. And this is not a bad thing - they are actually building their relationship with him the way that he has called them to do. They have always loved him, and they are slowly overcoming their confusion and their limited earthly perspectives.

* Jesus' statement in verse 31 can be translated either as, "you finally believe" or "do you finally believe?"; or it could also be rendered "so you believe now!". (Compare the translations in the NIV, NASB, and other versions.) In all cases, he is trying to point out that the real change is not as much in their acceptance of him as coming from God, so much as in their slowly growing awareness of his purpose in being with them.

Jesus does not hide the fact that his followers are going to have some trouble in this world. And we too will be healthier spiritually if we resist the tendency to assume that God's main agenda is to make us successful on the world's terms. If we follow Jesus and adopt his perspectives, then we shall always feel the weight of the world's sorrows, needs, and hurts. Jesus never hardened himself to these things, nor should we.

Yet we can take heart, not because God will fix everything in this world, but because we can overcome the world by our faith. We can be certain of a permanent home with God, in a place unstained with sin that will never crumble or perish. To overcome the world is far different - and far greater - than conquering the world. We are neither to leave the world nor to defeat it - like Jesus, we are to rise above it; and by so doing we can also point the way for others.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Why might the disciples have suddenly understood more clearly what Jesus was telling them? Are there any parallels for us? What kind of "trouble" should we expect in this world? How did Jesus overcome the world? How does this help us to understand how we are to overcome the world?

- Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, July 2011
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DEATH & RESURRECTION: STUDIES IN JOHN 11-21

Notes For Week Eight: The Word's Prayer (John 11)

With his arrest and crucifixion imminent, Jesus turns from teaching to praying. His prayer illustrates the closeness and oneness he has with the Father, and his prayer also shows us how he feels towards those who believe in him. As he prepares to become the once-for-all sacrifice for human sin, Jesus prays about the hopes he holds for his followers.

Review Of Relevant Passages

At the Last Supper, Jesus explains that he is the source of life and growth (John 15:1-16:4). The disciples' spiritual experience will combine grief, joy, and overcoming (John 16:5-33). There are times when Jesus' followers will be filled with grief in this world; but we can always count on the Counselor to provide guidance and comfort. The Spirit has a ministry amongst unbelievers, to help them see their sin and their need for God. The Spirit also has a ministry to believers, helping us to become one with God in ways only possible if we look beyond the physical.

Although we shall often grieve because of the world's sorrows and hurts, our grief can turn to joy. As the disciples struggle to grasp all this, they openly wonder what Jesus meant, even by straightforward phrases such as, "a little while." Jesus uses the imagery of labor and childbirth to explain that some of the greatest spiritual joys can come only after earthly struggles and sorrow.

Jesus' followers are not to conquer or rule the world, but to overcome the world - to rise above its anger, despair, and prejudice. Jesus wishes to use plain language about his Father, but we struggle to grasp it because of our worldly perspectives. A time is coming when the disciples will scatter in fear, just as there will arise times for all of us when the world threatens to crush us. But we can take heart, because Jesus overcame the world, and he enables us to do so as well.

How can an "average" Christian know what it is like to overcome the world? Few of us will ever be acclaimed by the world, yet we can enjoy spiritual victories every day. When we hear the world's anger or panic, and decline to give in to it, we have overcome the world. When the world wants us to give in to prejudice or blame, and we choose not to, we overcome the world. When we rejoice in someone else's blessings instead of giving in to jealousy, we overcome the world. These things do not impress the world, but they put the world to shame and glorify Jesus.

Read For Honor (John 17:1-10)

Jesus has consistently lived to bring glory to the Father, and he is now ready to share in the full measure of the Father's glory. But his prayer* shows us that his glory and his victory are far different from the things that the world would consider glorious or victorious. In his prayer, Jesus also speaks of his disciples as part of his glory - and in this too there is an instructive irony.

* John is somewhat ambiguous as to whether Jesus offers this prayer in the hearing of the disciples, or whether he prays privately in this passage. On the other hand, we can see that the prayer in John 17 is not the same prayer that Jesus offered shortly afterwards in Gethsemane (and which the other gospel accounts describe). The content is different, and Jesus has not yet gone to Gethsemane (he does this in John 18:1-2).

Jesus opens his prayer by asking his Father to, "glorify me in your presence" (17:1-5), through the crucifixion and resurrection. Jesus will be glorified by abandoning all thoughts of self-

interest - his glory will be of another kind altogether. The greatest glory is God himself, and to be one with God - in his presence, completely in accord with his will - is to know true glory*.

* This and other aspects of spiritual glory can be seen throughout John - see also John 1:14, 2:11, 5:41-44, 7:18, 8:50-54, 11:4, 11:40, 15:8, 17:10 and 17:22-24 (see also below).

Jesus' Father has enabled him to be the giver of eternal life. This is one of the greatest promises Jesus gives us, yet what does it mean? We have a few New Testament descriptions of heaven*, yet they are primarily (sometimes completely) figurative. Jesus clarifies it here: "now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God . . ." Eternal life, like Christianity itself, is first and foremost about knowing God, living in his presence, and being made one with him.

* See also the notes to John 14:2. Descriptions of heaven such as those in Revelation 21 and 22 are figurative, not literal. They use physical imagery to help us think about certain aspects of what it will be like to be with God forever. The nature of eternity makes it impossible to describe solely in literal terms.

Jesus' promise is that we can know the father; his calling is for us to seek to know the Father; and our "very great reward" (as God also told Abraham in Genesis 15:1) is to know God. This too was Jesus' motivation - he already had the glory of being divine (verse 5), so his time on earth was spent to bring us into the glory that he already knew.

Jesus has completed his work on this earth. In one sense, there is so much unfinished - the world is still full of sick, suffering, frightened persons who could be healed by Jesus' powers. But he has met their needs more fully by making the Father known through his life and words. It is now time to meet humanity's deepest need. Jesus will no longer concentrate on meeting earthly needs, but will sacrifice himself to meet our universal need for forgiveness, grace, and mercy.

With his own path known to him, Jesus prays for the followers his Father has given him (17:6-10). The belief of the disciples has been a joy to Jesus, because it has been the kind of belief he and his Father seek. The disciples are often wrong and often make mistakes, but they have always loved Jesus and have always remained with him, no matter what. These qualities are much more valuable spiritually than any human talent, genius, or method could be. The disciples belong to Jesus and also to his Father, again emphasizing the oneness he values so highly.

Glory has come to Jesus through the disciples, because each one of them has personally decided to leave behind his old way of life - and the disciples came from a variety of backgrounds - to follow Jesus and to be with him. They have not done anything dramatic, and have very little in the way of results to boast about - but those are not necessary in order to glorify God. The things that most glorify God are the things that any of us can do, the things that put us all on equal ground - humility, compassion, love, and selflessness.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What does Jesus mean by being glorified in God's presence? Why does he desire it? Why does Jesus equate eternal life with knowing God? Why was it now time for Jesus to leave the earth? How have the disciples brought glory to Jesus? What lessons can we learn from this?

□piritual □afe□(John 17:11-1□)

Just as Jesus' concept of glory is much different from ours, so also his idea of safety and protection is not the same as that of the world. He cares deeply for those who seek the truth and follow him, yet he knows that problems must come to all of us in this world. Instead of eliminating all trouble, he prays for his Father to protect our souls and spirits from spiritual harm.

Before requesting his Father's blessing on the disciples, Jesus reflects on the time he has been with them (17:11-12). While he has been here on earth, he has given them spiritual protection - they have been exposed to many physical hardships, but he has always kept their spirits safe with him, by virtue of his own oneness with the Father*. Only Judas has been lost, and that of his own choosing** - and even at that, Judas' treachery became part of the process of redemption.

* This is essentially what Jesus means by keeping them safe through a "name". He does not refer to some kind of ritual pronouncement, but rather points to the fact that Jesus and his Father share an identity, a "name", with which the disciples have willingly associated themselves.

** As with the Pharaoh in Exodus and other similar examples, the Scripture does not tell us exactly how far their own free will carried them along their path to destruction before, for example, God hardened Pharaoh's heart or Satan entered into Judas (see also the notes to John 13:27). We do know that in all such cases these persons had considerably hardened their own hearts in resistance or rebellion against God's will.

When Jesus prays for the disciples he will leave behind, he asks his Father to sanctify them by the truth (17:13-19). They cannot follow him now (recall John 13:36), for they must stay in this world. Jesus prays neither for them to be removed from the world nor for God to make their lives here free of confusion or problems. He prays for God's spiritual protection to continue, so that the devil cannot pull them away from God. They belong to God, and so are holy (regardless of their behavior); Jesus now wants them "truly sanctified", permanently given to God.

He calls for this 'true' sanctification to take place not by sacrifice or offering, but by the truth, the Word of God. This is not so much a body of teachings from God, as it is the awareness that God's will and God's presence contain absolute truth. The more that the disciples experience the presence of God, the less likely they are ever to fall. The more that the disciples desire to know God and be with him, the more they will avoid any spiritual snares that Satan can devise.

Their spiritual safety - and ours - does not come from knowing a lot of facts, even from knowing how to 'deal with' or 'respond to' every possible problem - their spiritual safety comes from living in God's holy presence. We cannot ever know a particular tactic to use against every possible specific problem or attack, but we can know that God's words and will are always the truth, so that we never allow anyone to make us question or doubt them.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: How has Jesus protected the disciples during his time with them? From what has he protected them? Does the loss of Judas reflect on the ways he has cared for them? Why does he pray for his Father to sanctify the disciples? How does the truth sanctify them? What kind of truth does Jesus refer to? How does Jesus keep us safe? What, if anything, do we need to do?

ha All Of hem Ma Be One (John 17:20-26)

Finally, Jesus prays for all those who will believe in him, in every place and time. He wants us to experience the oneness and closeness that he has with the Father and the Counselor. We know from sad experience that this type of unity does not always characterize those who believe in Jesus; and none of us can change this by ourselves. But is there anything positive we can do?

Jesus is eager for his followers to share in the oneness he has with his Father: "may they be in us" (17:20-23). He desires this not only for the group of disciples who have been with him during his earthly ministry, but also for all those who will come to believe in him in the days and years ahead. It is implicit in Jesus' thoughts that his current followers will do what they can to

help others come to know God through Jesus, so that to Jesus it is a certainty that there will be many more who believe in him, even though they will never know his physical presence.

Jesus prays to his Father with the same kinds of imagery that he has taught to others, praying that Jesus could be "in" the disciples just as the Father is "in" Jesus. As when he has used this language before*, the 'direction' of the word "in" makes no difference. We can be in Jesus and in the Father, while the Father is in Jesus and Jesus is in us. The point is not geometry but oneness and identity, union and unity.

* Compare this passage with others such as John 13:31-32, 14:10-11, 14:20, and 15:4-5.

Christians throughout the ages have longed for unity with one another, only to find this ideal foiled by the fleshly loyalties and personal preferences that are endemic to human nature. And so, throughout the ages Christians have given up on finding true unity, and have settled for the superficial unity of denominations, creeds, methods, human leaders, and the like.

But true unity is not something that humans can create with their own devices. True unity comes from sharing in the desire above all to know God, the willingness to give up personal preferences and agendas out of love for God, and the humility that brings us to see how our own plans, ideas, and methods are never absolutely true or right. In one important sense, the less we try so hard to 'create' unity, the easier it is for God to bring it about in spite of ourselves.

Jesus has always done everything he could to make God known (17:24-26). In his love and reverence for the Father, he wants to share God's glory with everyone. He knows that it will never be possible to persuade every soul to seek God, but he would like for every soul to have the chance. Like Jesus, we should put these priorities ahead of our own activities and agendas (even if we are able to support our own desires with spiritual-sounding logic). When we try too hard to attract others to our church or our doctrines, it just gets in the way of them seeking God.

Then too, sharing God's glory should call us all to be equal. God's glory so far outshines any human talent or accomplishment that it makes our attempts at self-promotion or self-glorification look shabby and foolish. If we desire to make God himself known, and if we long to share in God's own glory and to see others share in it as well, then we do not need to rely on human methodology or human heroism, since these glorify only the humans who practice them.

To be together in Jesus is a blessing that transcends our individual personalities and needs. It does not take away our individual identities, but rather fulfills the best that God has put within each of us. Genuine unity - as opposed to mere conformity - is a treasure that calls for us to sacrifice things that, by comparison, are of negligible value.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Why does Jesus so strongly desire that we be one with him and his Father? Why are our human attempts at unity so often unsuccessful? How can God's glory give us a basis for unity? What role can the Scriptures play in bringing us together? What must we set aside in order to experience genuine unity?

- Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, July 2011
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DEATH & RESURRECTION: STUDIES IN JOHN 11-21

Notes For Week Nine: On Trial (John 11)

The arrest and trial of Jesus are notorious for the abuses of authority on the part of Jerusalem's leaders, and for the mockery of justice that Jesus must endure. All the while, it is not really Jesus who is on trial, for no one on earth was fit to pass judgment on him. It is really everyone else who is on trial - so too, our own responses to Jesus reflect less on him than on ourselves.

Review Of Relevance Classes

Following Jesus brings times of grief, times of joy, and the opportunity to overcome the world (John 16:5-33). As he waited to be arrested, Jesus the Word of God offered a prayer for himself, his disciples, and all those who would come to believe in him (John 17). Jesus is ready to be glorified, not in a worldly sense, but through sacrificing himself. His Father has allowed Jesus to become the giver of eternal life, offering to us the chance to know God. Glory has already come to Jesus through the humble love and faith of his disciples, who have accepted his message.

Jesus is greatly concerned about their spiritual safety. He has personally kept them safe, but now he is going home and they are staying in this world. We can understand their vulnerability, and thus we can benefit from his prayer for them. He did not pray for God to remove them from the world, but to sanctify them by the truth - by knowing God's Word, will, and presence.

Jesus' desire for his followers to be one is, sadly, rarely fulfilled in practice. It helps if we can remember that Jesus is not seeking a pattern, but a relationship: Jesus in us, God in Jesus, and all of us becoming one, so that we can share God's glory. The true glory of God is so overwhelming that it ought to help us see the folly of trying to build on human methods, doctrines, or leaders.

What does it mean to glorify God? What does it mean to be glorified by God? Here too, a closer look at what Jesus teaches us can help us avoid some wrong turns. We have seen several times now that earthly forms of glory mean little or nothing to God. And to Jesus, glory often involves sacrifice and even suffering. But above all, the true meaning of glory revolves around knowing God, for it is by knowing God that we see and experience what glory truly is.

The Arrest (John 11:1-11)

The arrest of Jesus is hardly a great moment for human justice. The cowardice, treachery, and brutality of Jerusalem's leaders are easy to condemn, yet they also bring us face-to-face with our own spiritual weaknesses. In the chain of events that follows, only Jesus - who has the most to fear - truly puts his trust and hope in God. There is much we can learn from his calmness.

The story of Jesus' arrest is so familiar that its sordid details often escape us - beginning with the callous setup that can be credited to Judas (18:1-6). Jesus comes to a predictable meeting place*, a site he has often used while staying in or near Jerusalem. Jesus calmly and willingly goes there "like a lamb to the slaughter" (Isaiah 53:7), ready for what comes next.

* The grove (or "garden" in the NASB) would be Gethsemane, which is mentioned by name in other gospel accounts. See also the notes to John 17:1.

In contrast with Jesus' sincerity and courage, Judas comes to meet him guiding a formidable collection of armed goons. His sinister retinue includes both religious officials and Roman troops*, so as to minimize any possible resistance. Jesus willingly steps forward, but not out of any respect for this shabby crew. Unlike worldly leaders, Jesus does not rely on force, threats, or intimidation - nor does he put his personal safety ahead of his responsibilities.

* Some translations don't make this clear, referring to the soldiers as a "detachment" or a "band". The word in the original text is a technical term, the Greek equivalent for the Roman military term "cohort", referring to a specific type of Roman unit.

True to his nature, Jesus goes quietly, courageously, and peacefully - the true Lamb Of God (18:7-11). His captors are much more frightened than he is, and even when they find him, they are uncertain how to proceed. Jesus' ironic question, "are you looking for me?", not only protects the disciples, but is also an implicit call for the officers to 'do their duty'. The scene is remarkable as a reminder of the stark differences between Jesus and the authorities of this world. Jesus' openness and integrity contrast sharply with their sneaky, covert actions. His compassion for others contrasts with their selfish agendas and dishonest methods.

Peter now decides to fulfill his promise at the Last Supper. He launches a desperation sword attack, sincerely ready to go to a heroic death in a vain attempt to protect his beloved Lord. He manages to deprive an unlucky servant of an ear*, before Jesus intervenes out compassion - both for Peter and for his intended victims. It is time for Peter to put his sword away - not just now, but forevermore. Jesus' kingdom is not of this earth. Jesus does not want Peter or any other disciple to attack the world by force; he wants us to live in this world by love and grace.

* Although John does not mention it, we know from other accounts that Jesus healed the man whom Peter had struck - another extraordinary act of compassion and grace by a man about to suffer horrible torment.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Why does Jesus so willingly go someplace where he would be vulnerable? Why does he twice ask whether he is the man the authorities want? What should we learn from these things? What does the manner of Jesus' arrest show us about Judas and the authorities? What lessons should we learn from this? Why was Jesus not pleased with Peter's defense of him? What example does this set for us?

What? (John 18:12-27)

After arresting Jesus with surprising ease, the authorities have difficulty figuring out what to do next. Meanwhile, Peter and the other disciples are trying to respond in their own way to what has happened. The resulting strange assortment of characters and incidents makes us appreciate even more Jesus' own great faith and his patient endurance of injustice and mistreatment.

The initial reactions to Jesus' arrest show us that there is a lot of uncertainty and anxiety about what it means (18:12-18). Jesus' first stop is with Annas*, an old high priest who clearly has no idea what to do with Jesus, and who will soon shuttle Jesus across to his more decisive son-in-law Caiaphas. Meanwhile, Peter and John are cautiously trying to watch events as they unfold.

* Annas was a former high priest whose abilities deteriorated to the point that he was eased out of office. Outside sources differ as to his status at this time: either he was technically still the high priest, with Caiaphas exercising the actual responsibilities of the office, or else he was still treated as a form of emeritus high priest, with the other religious leaders allowing him to retain some measure of privilege and prestige.

John apparently has "friend of a friend" status giving him access to the high priest's courtyard, and Peter comes with him. But Peter has attained notoriety with his swordplay in the garden,

and the doorman recognizes him. Peter is quick to deny it, and his overall anxiety plus the chilly evening are such that he does so without even realizing that he has fulfilled Jesus' prediction.

In any case, things soon get more serious (18:19-27). Caiaphas*, probably skilled at causing frightened witnesses to make mistakes, grills Jesus about every possible topic. Jesus, for his part, reminds him that he has lived an open life. He has not stealthily built up a following, and he has not disseminated his beliefs in secret. He has always been glad when anyone of any status took an interest in his teachings, regardless of anyone's reason or motivation.

* Verse 24 is slightly awkward in its phrasing and its position at the end of the passage, but it is meant to imply that the exchange in verses 19-24 takes place after the weaker Annas had sent Jesus on to Caiaphas.

Since this explanation refutes most of the possible charges against Jesus, by clearing him of being involved in any kind of cabal or conspiracy, the authorities react by having Jesus struck in the face by one of their toadies. It is worth remembering that all this time Jesus is restraining his tremendous power, and he continually resists the temptation to give these foolish men what they deserve. He merely continues to speak the truth plainly and even respectfully. He knows that his persecutors are not strong, powerful super-villains - they are mere lost, sad, pathetic souls.

Meanwhile, there are further denials from Peter. There are more persons who saw him with Jesus - one is even related to the man whose ear he had impulsively sliced off. Peter can only give even stronger denials about knowing Jesus. After the third one, a rooster crows, and (as other gospels tell us) Peter realizes what he has done. The denial is sad, but there is another side to it - this is hardly the end of Peter's relationship with God. Our own spiritual mistakes and weaknesses, likewise, never need to stand in the way of knowing God and serving him.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Why did the officials shuffle Jesus from one authority to another? Does this have any spiritual parallels? Why did Peter feel that he had to deny knowing Jesus? What similar choices might we make? Why did the officials react violently to Jesus' statements about his life and teaching being open? Does their reaction have spiritual parallels? What should we learn from Peter's denials?

the Main Trial (John 18:28-40)

Everything so far has merely been preliminary, because the real authority in Jesus' case is the Roman governor Pilate. Initially, Pilate has no particular vested interest in the result, and at times we see in him a genuine desire to grasp what is going on. He makes an effort to dismiss the whole 'case' against Jesus, but he is surprised by the determined opposition he encounters.

After all the preliminary rigmarole*, Jesus is finally brought to the Roman governor Pilate, the only one with authority to execute Jesus - the goal of the religious authorities (18:28-32). Their unintentionally hilarious response to Pilate shows that they realize this - when he asks what the charges against Jesus are, they simply assure him that they would not bother with bringing Jesus to him if he were not definitely guilty! Yet this ridiculously self-serving logic is no worse than our own contortions when we are emotionally committed to a position that makes no real sense.

* The hearings before Annas, Caiaphas, and Herod (see Luke 23:6-12) had no real purpose, as the leaders had already decided to execute Jesus, and everyone knew all along that only the Romans could authorize this. Were the other trials a public show, indecisiveness, or the leaders trying to convince themselves? We do not know - we can only try to be a little more self-aware when we waste time with similar nonsense.

Pilate and the religious leaders have an impromptu debate, with Pilate's reluctance to take any action coming out very quickly. Pilate is known from secular ancient history to have been short-tempered and often impulsive*, and it is likely that he found their request merely irritating, without any regard to whether Jesus really was a criminal or not.

* Pilate had already on at least two occasions needlessly angered the public opinion of the Jews. His political career would come to an abrupt end not long after this, because the Romans realized that his basic character flaws made it impossible to give him any significant authority or important responsibility.

Pilate inadvertently asks the most important question: what is truth? (18:33-40). All Pilate knows about Jesus is that he is popularly called the King of the Jews. So Pilate naturally begins with this, and after some ironic comments, Jesus flatly tells the governor that "my kingdom is from another place." Jesus plainly and openly rules out any kind of fleshly or earthly kingdom in his name - he is not interested in competing with Rome or any secular nation, neither in the 1st century nor at any other time. Jesus' followers have to adjust their own perspectives accordingly.

Jesus and his followers testify to the truth. This echoes some of his earlier promises about the Spirit or Counselor. Believers in Jesus should above all testify to Jesus' grace and compassion by their lives, perspectives, and words. Testifying to the truth does not give us a license to judge, to punish, to make rules, or to do anything else that a kingdom of this earth would do.

Pilate's famous rhetorical question is enigmatic, and it is less important to guess what he meant by it than to learn something from it ourselves. The right questions for Christians - individually and as a church - should never be "how can we accomplish our goals" or "how can we get someone to do what we want them to do". They are always: What is truth? Who is God? What is his nature? Such questions are always worth asking, even though in this mortal body we shall never be able to answer them perfectly or completely. As long as we simply have the faith to ask them instead of the things our flesh wants to know, then we can keep drawing closer to God.

Pilate is impressed enough to try to come up with a way to free Jesus. Mistakenly thinking that the crowd favors Jesus, he offers to free him as the traditional Roman gift of grace for the Jewish Passover. But the crowd - pushed by the religious leaders - makes a troubling choice, calling for the notorious Barabbas* to be released instead. Their choice is appropriate - Jesus is about to be substituted on the cross for all the sinners who have ever lived. To allow his blood to be poured out for our sins, there is no amount of pain or humiliation that our Savior will not gladly endure.

* From what we know about Barabbas, he seems to have been a quasi-revolutionary, probably of the kind who uses public grievances as an excuse to indulge his own desire for violence and crime. For an interesting perspective on Barabbas, see Pär Lagerkvist's Nobel Prize winning novel, *Barabbas*.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Are there spiritual parallels to the religious leaders' using a Roman official to fulfill their desires? Why does Pilate act as he does? Can we say anything positive about him? Why is Jesus so restrained in his answers? What does he mean that his kingdom is from another place? How should this idea influence us? What should Pilate's question about truth mean to us? What spiritual significance is there to the crowd choosing Barabbas? Should this mean anything to us personally?

- Mark Garner, *Northland Church Of Christ*, August 2011

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DEATH & RESURRECTION: STUDIES IN JOHN 11-21

Notes For Week Ten: The Word Is Crucified (John 11)

The crucifixion of Jesus, the Word of God, combines the horror of human sin with the glory of divine grace. In the crucifixion, human self-will is apparently triumphant, and godly love is apparently destroyed - yet the spiritual reality is exactly the opposite. The crucifixion always gives us an emphatic reminder that Jesus understands humanity and that he cares about us.

Review Of Relevance Classes

At the Last Supper, Jesus the Word of God prays in preparation for leaving this earth (John 17). He will first be put on trial (John 18). First comes the arrest, with Judas leading the authorities to Jesus. Although in great danger, Jesus steps forward and offers no resistance. When Peter zealously launches an armed attack, Jesus tells him to put his sword away - the time has come for Jesus' followers to give up aggression and fighting, and to live instead by grace and truth.

After the sudden arrest, everyone wonders what to do next. The authorities shuffle Jesus around from one official to another, while Peter makes his first denial. Things soon get more serious, as the authorities are harsher and more threatening, while Peter's denials get more desperate.

The main trial is with Pilate, who alone has power to execute Jesus. Asked if he is the king of the Jews, Jesus explains that his kingdom is not an earthly one, so he will not compete with other earthly rulers - he is devoted to truth alone. Pilate's ironic question, "what is truth?" reminds us to set aside worldly perspectives and loyalties, to help others see Jesus' grace, truth, and love.

How do the arrest and trial of Jesus teach us to respond to problems in this world? Jesus remains peaceful, not judging and not repaying evil for evil. He entrusts himself to God, renouncing worldly aggression or anger. Since we are unlikely to be crucified, we can practice these values more easily. We can bring glory to God and can overcome the world simply by renouncing the self-interest, bitterness, competition, and envy that characterize so many worldly affairs. Such spiritual victories cost us only our fleshly craving to control others, and a bit of our fleshly pride.

The Agonizing Preliminaries (John 18:1-11)

Even before the actual crucifixion, Jesus endures a series of horrifying torments. The Roman soldiers gleefully torture Jesus without regard to whether he is guilty of anything. Meanwhile, Pontius Pilate agonizes over the case - but he cares less about justice than he does about his own political interests. Amidst it all, only Jesus remains faithful to God and to the truth.

Jesus is first subjected to flogging, ridicule, and other painful abuses that provide diversion for the Roman soldiers (19:1-5). Even if this were someone other than Jesus, it would be shockingly unfair to inflict such punishment on someone not yet found guilty*. Jesus is paying the price for our sins - he does not deserve this at all. Nor does he deserve to be mocked by the soldiers, who aggravate his physical suffering with their crass ridicule of his identity as "the king of the Jews."

* This was common in the Roman judicial system. The Romans valued 'keeping order' more than true justice, and their system reflected this. They saw nothing wrong with inflicting 'undeserved' punishment if it served a purpose. Since Jesus is a source of dispute and controversy, he is a problem, and so neither Pilate nor other Romans would have been bothered by the brutal treatment he receives even if not guilty.

This extensive physical and psychological torture illustrates the nature of human sin. The whole series of events has a double parallel. The gleeful cruelty of the Romans is merely an expression of the fleshly desires for superiority and retribution that we all share to some degree. And Jesus endures it as the rightful punishment for the world's accumulated sins - our selfishness, envy, prejudice, and callousness merit this kind of punishment; but now we don't have to endure it.

After these preliminary torments, Pilate shows Jesus to the crowd, announcing, "here is the man*." He hopes these bloody sufferings will soften the crowd's attitudes, so that he will not have to make a tough decision himself. Like most of us, Pilate is not "evil"; he is just very weak. He knows what the right thing to do is, but he will not do it unless he can do so without trouble.

* This scene has long been popular with artists and authors. The Latin phrase *ecce homo* ("behold the man") is also used in a broader context, to call attention to the world's senseless violence and suffering.

Pilate makes a last stand before giving in (19:6-11). The authorities' loud, repeated loud calls for crucifixion cause Pilate to fear for his own interests. He is frustrated by the obstinate religious authorities, and baffled by Jesus' peaceful silence. And so he points out to Jesus that as governor he holds the power either to release his prisoner or to inflict upon him the horrors of crucifixion. But Pilate's power, like all human power and authority, is an illusion. Many humans do have the ability to inflict pain and suffering on others, but this is not genuine power or authority.

Using force is often tempting - but it is always contrary to the Spirit and the gospel. Whether seizing something we desire, inflicting punishment, or forcing others to do what we think they should do, force is not God's way. Whether we use weapons, credentials, guilt, or the weight of numbers, force is force, and believers should renounce it. Pilate actually realizes - temporarily - that Jesus is right. Sometimes we, too, briefly see through the world's haze of fear and lies to perceive the deeper truths of the gospel of grace. Such moments are quickly followed by fleshly doubt and rationalization - will we waver like Pilate, or remain true to God's grace and peace?

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Why did Pilate allow Jesus to suffer even if he was not guilty? Why would the soldiers willingly torment someone who might be innocent? What should we learn from this? What does Jesus' response teach us? Why does Jesus say Pilate's power comes "from above"? How does this connect with Romans 13:1-7?

he crucified in (John 1:12-24)

After some final wavering, Pilate gives in once for all to the religious leaders' calls for Jesus to be crucified. The gruesome process of crucifixion itself is made even worse by the many dehumanizing practices that accompany it. Meanwhile, Pilate himself deliberately continues to promote Jesus' identity as a king, little realizing just how true this is.

Sensing that Pilate is close to giving them what they want, the religious authorities clinch things with their bold statement that they have "no king but Caesar*" (19:12-16). Their direct appeal to Pilate's patriotism and his loyalty to Rome** overcome any remaining resistance he may have had, and he goes through a public show of judgment to satisfy anyone's desire for legality.

* The name Caesar was used by all the Roman emperors, regardless of their own name. The emperor at the time of Jesus' crucifixion was Tiberius, whose reign lasted from AD 14 to AD 37. See also the next note.

** This was especially important during the reign of the deeply paranoid Tiberius. The slightest suspicion of disloyalty could ruin even a capable administrator - and Pilate was already considered a bungler.

Pilate ironically proclaims, "here is your king." He alone acknowledges Jesus as Lord of Israel, yet he has no understanding of the implications. The chief priests' proclamation that Caesar is their only king is ironic in a sadder way, for they don't even mean this. In truth, these officials worship themselves, and they offer outward allegiance to anyone who allows them to pursue their true goals. Yet we should not harshly criticize, for we too have the habit of casually saying that Jesus is our Lord or king, only to speak and act in ways hardly consistent with the gospel.

And so we come to the Place Of The Skull* (19:17-24). Jesus undergoes the usual public procession**, adding to a prisoner's humiliation prior to his execution. The Romans designed the procedures surrounding a crucifixion so as to minimize someone's humanity, and they devised details in the process of crucifixion so as to maximize and prolong physical suffering.

* This is certainly an appropriate name for a site often used for executions. The text refers to it by the Aramaic name of Golgotha. Calvary, from its equivalent name in Latin, is also commonly used.

** Condemned men were required to carry their own crosses through a gauntlet of jeering spectators. Jesus weakened partway through the walk, and the cross was carried the rest of the way by Simon of Cyrene (see Matthew 27:32, Mark 15:21, and Luke 23:26).

The sign above the cross has a dual significance. Though intended to annoy the Jewish religious leaders, mocking their desire for independence, the sign also inadvertently tells the truth about the crucifixion. It was the custom to write a person's crime on his cross - and Jesus is dying precisely because he is "the king of the Jews*." Yet there is more - Jesus is the true king of true Israel: his death not only announces him as king, but also shows what Israel's true king is like. He is not a king who conquers by worldly means, but a king who lays down his life for others.

* The initials INRI, from the initials of the Latin phrase for "Jesus Christ King of the Jews", are often used as a symbol or shorthand for the sign or the proclamation on the sign.

Also in keeping with Roman practice, the soldiers divide up Jesus' few personal possessions, as he watches and suffers. This practice further dehumanized the victim; yet here it continues the powerful symbolism of the crucifixion. Jesus gladly gave everything he had to a world that did not deserve his compassion, just as these soldiers randomly and undeservedly acquire his clothes.

Jesus shows us that he truly is both Son of Man and Son of God. We sometimes share in the human nature of the soldiers, accepting blessings from Jesus without acknowledging his grace in our hearts. Yet we are called to emulate the divine nature of Jesus - and indeed we do this on occasion - by not resenting or hating those who are blessed while we must struggle or grieve.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What should we learn from the behavior of the religious authorities and Pilate? What does Jesus' endurance of these sufferings teach us? How should we follow in Jesus' steps? How is the written charge against Jesus significant? Is it significant to us that his possessions were divided so callously?

□ *ea*h □ **Burial (John 1□:2□-42)**

After a few last words, Jesus dies on the cross. Subsequent events seem ordinary in some ways - first there is the routine Roman practice of making sure that a crucified person had actually died, and then there are the time-honored Jewish burial customs. It is hard for us to place ourselves in this brief period between Jesus' death and resurrection, yet it holds some worthwhile lessons.

Death comes as the end of the awful ordeal of crucifixion, and for the moment few realize that things are going to be any different this time (19:25-37). Jesus' last acts and words provide

further meaning to his sacrifice. In his perfect compassion, he entrusts his mother to John, and in his complete humanity, he expresses his desperate thirst. Throughout the ordeal, "Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps" (1 Peter 2:21).

Jesus' words to his Mother and to "the disciple whom Jesus loved" remind us of his concern for his followers, as he expressed in his prayer in John 17. Despite his own pain, he is more concerned with those he loves. Yet he still feels the full measure of human weakness: "I am thirsty" is a poignant addition to the "I am" statements throughout John. The wine vinegar* he now drinks also adds a small further measure of prophetic fulfillment to the symbolism.

* This is probably the cheap, sour wine often used by Roman soldiers. The exact drink and its purpose are uncertain, but it is most likely a mocking gesture to provide something bitter to someone in such agony. In any case, it was probably not a compassionate gesture. It is usually seen as being a prophetic fulfillment - more thematic than predictive - of Psalm 69:21. Jesus' expression of thirst probably came about the same time as he called out in Aramaic "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me" (not mentioned in John).

So as not to cause offense by leaving the bodies hanging on the crosses during Passover, the Romans end the crucifixions earlier than usual. The pain and gore from the nails was only part of the suffering of crucifixion. The position of the body made it impossible to breathe normally, so a victim repeatedly had to push up on his legs to get a breath. Eventually the victim would weaken and die from suffocation. When expediency necessitated a quicker death, the Romans would break the victims' legs* so that they could no longer support themselves to breathe.

* Other gruesome practices were often added to crucifixion. Sometimes victims would use such foul and angry language that the Romans would forcibly silence them, using various ghastly methods.

But Jesus was already dead. John remarks on the surprising flow of blood and water that comes when a soldier pierces Jesus' side with a spear instead of breaking his legs. The sight of the dead Lamb of God is filled with new symbolism. Like the original Passover lamb (Exodus 12:46), Jesus' bones will all remain unbroken even in death. John also reminds us of the prophecy in [Zechariah 12:10-13](#) that associates an outpouring of grace with mourning for a pierced victim.

Jesus is given a respectful burial (19:38-42). Two sincere followers, Joseph and Nicodemus, accord his dead body a full level of reverence and care, wrapping it in spices and placing it in a new tomb in a garden. They needn't have gone to such trouble, of course, but it is yet another reminder that even the most faithful do not always understand Jesus priorities or perspectives. The story of Jesus will by no means end with this simple, sincere funeral.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What should we learn from Jesus' words to his mother and John? Why is it significant that Jesus was thirsty? Are there important symbols or other lessons in the soldier piercing his side? Why did his followers observe all these burial rites? Was it necessary? What should we learn from it?

- *Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, August 2011*

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DEATH & RESURRECTION: STUDIES IN JOHN 11-21

Notes For Week Eleven: Raised To Life (John 20)

The crucifixion of Jesus opened the way for our sins to be forgiven, yet it was still not the end of the story. Jesus raised to life and showed us that his Father has power even over death itself. In so doing, Jesus proved that his blood sacrifice did have the power to remove sin and at the same time he showed his followers the way to his kingdom, which by its nature is not of this world.

Review Of Relevance Classes

Jesus, the Word of God, was arrested and put on trial (John 18), then crucified (John 19). Even the preliminaries to the crucifixion were agonizing. But Jesus' suffering was symbolic, not senseless. It illustrates the true nature of sin, in all its devastation; and it shows God's deep desire to forgive sin rather than punish it. Pontius Pilate guides events, thinking he has the power to release or crucify Jesus - but Jesus reminds him of the illusory nature of human power.

The crucified king is a somber sight. Pilate openly calls him "the king of the Jews", but only to annoy the religious leaders. The priests ironically claim Caesar as their only king, to get Pilate to do their will. Jesus' life ends at the "Place Of The Skull", where he is subjected to more humiliation plus the horror of crucifixion. He endures it all for the sake of the world's lost souls.

Jesus' death and burial seem to end the story. His last acts and words remind us who he is. In his great compassion, he is more concerned for his mother than with his own pain. But being fully human, he also suffers from thirst along with his other woes. The Lamb of God is dead even before the Romans finish the crucifixions, so that the Passover Lamb's bones will not be broken. Two caring believers reverently bury him in a new tomb, thinking the story is over.

What should we learn from the extreme suffering Jesus endured at the cross? The horrors were both physical and psychological, both gruesome and humiliating. Jesus endured them without complaint or retaliation, in his great desire to shed blood for our forgiveness. His innocent body and soul took the full punishment for humanity's sins. No one is good enough to earn or deserve salvation, yet no one is bad enough not to be fully welcome to share in Jesus' grace.

Martha and Peter John Visited the Tomb (John 20:1-14)

Although Jesus' closest friends did not expect him to rise from the dead, their devotion to him remained. First Mary, then Peter and John, visit his tomb and find it empty. They gradually realize that something astounding has happened. The surprise of these sincere, faithful believers is similar to our own astonishment when we too grasp that Jesus really did raise from the dead.

When Mary Magdalene goes to the tomb early in the morning the day after the Sabbath, she soon comes running to the disciples with some news (20:1-2). The stone has been removed from the entrance*, and she urgently seeks out the disciples hoping to figure out who moved the stone**.

* The tombs used at this time were above ground, and resembled small caves cut out of rock. After bodies were placed in a tomb, a huge stone would be pushed across the front of the entrance.

** *Who Moved the Stone* is a book by Frank Morison, a journalist who sought to disprove the story of the resurrection. Instead, his investigation made him a believer, and his book describes the reasons why.

Mary's response reminds us that the resurrection is not a mere doctrine, nor is it a mere 'proof' to be analyzed forensically. It is the good news that proves the truth of the good news, and every believer ought to be eager to understand it. It can be helpful to know some logical evidence to support the resurrection, but it is even more important to see how the cross and the resurrection fit together in perfect harmony with God's character of righteousness and grace.

Not only has the stone been moved, but the tomb itself is also empty (20:3-9). Peter and John hurry to the tomb with Mary, and look inside it. All they can see is the burial clothes in which Joseph and Nicodemus had wrapped up Jesus' body with the traditional spices - the burial clothes are now neatly folded up. Jesus is no longer there*.

* Each of the gospels provides a different selection of the events that took place after Jesus rose from the dead. In our study, we shall focus only on the ones that John mentions - reading the other gospel accounts can make a good study supplement. For a comprehensive summary and harmony of all the events following the resurrection, see *The Fourfold Gospel* by J.W. McGarvey and Philip Pendleton.

As Peter and John look at the evidence and remember what Jesus had said, they start to put it together. They realize that Jesus has risen from the dead, yet they do not yet understand the prophecies in Scripture. They wrestle with spiritual truths while acknowledging facts and logic.

We should not be reluctant to admit that it is hard to believe the resurrection and its implications. It is an extraordinary event that flatly contradicts logic and science. In fact, it is essential that we see how illogical and unscientific it is - the resurrection shows us that Jesus' death was the death of God himself, not that of a mere moralist or philosopher. Likewise, its spiritual implications refute all human attempts to concoct theological systems or methodologies. The resurrection's extraordinary nature rules out the effectiveness of such things in seeking the living God.

Meanwhile Mary, still overcome by her emotion and her affection for Jesus, looks for her Lord - that is, his body, for she still does not realize what has happened (20:10-14). She is the first to notice that she has more company in the tomb, for there are two angels now standing where Jesus used to be, trying to comfort her and help her. And Jesus himself is also now standing by in plain sight, though for the moment she does not recognize him in her grief.

Mary too is a sort of parallel for us. While Peter and John grasped the facts of the resurrection and struggled to put them into an overall picture, Mary senses spiritual reality (the angels and Jesus), yet in her sadness and anxiety she cannot quite see them clearly enough to calm her spirit. Jesus understands how hard it can be for us to see and understand spiritual reality with our mortal minds. He doesn't ask us to see it all clearly - he just asks us to open our hearts in faith.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What might Mary, Peter, and John have expected to find at the tomb? What do we expect when we study the resurrection? What are the immediate implications of the empty tomb? Do they mean the same thing to us as they would have meant to these three believers? What struggles do each of them have in believing the resurrection? How do these parallel our own struggles to believe?

The Risen Jesus (John 20:1-23)

The risen Jesus now begins to reveal himself openly to his followers. He shows himself first to Mary, then to his disciples, and he convinces them that he is again alive. Jesus also helps them to understand what has happened - and he starts to hint at the things that lie ahead of them. Now that he is risen, many other things will also change in the days ahead.

Mary is the first of them to meet her Lord, and at last she recognizes him (20:15-18). At first she thinks he is working in the garden, and because she is still certain that the body has been moved, she asks this "gardener" where he put Jesus' body. But when Jesus speaks to her by name, suddenly she sees what has happened. She must have instinctively taken hold of him, for Jesus' next words are a request that she not cling to him just now, for he has to return to his Father*. Soon, he will be back, and for a time his friends and followers will again be able to touch and hold him - but for now, this is just an extra blessing of grace for Mary, who gets to see him first.

* Since the verb in verse 17 can sometimes mean "touch", there are a variety of strange theories that have been concocted to explain Jesus' request. But if we understand it to mean "hold on to" (NIV) or "cling" (NASB), then the reason is exactly what Jesus says - he needs to go back to his Father before he comes back and does anything else. He does not explain why he must first go, but he says clearly that he must.

So Mary excitedly returns to Jesus' other followers with the news that she has seen the Lord and has spoken with him. No doubt this was hard for most of them to believe (see, for example, Mark 16:11). There's no reason why our own belief in the resurrection should easily convince anyone else, yet we can always tell others, as best we can, what we know and why we believe.

Next comes Jesus' appearance to the disciples (20:19-23). Appearing suddenly in their midst despite their location in a locked room, he lets them see his pierced hands and his side where the spear had poked a hole. He lets them satisfy themselves that he is alive, and he also has come to fulfill his promise. They can now receive the Holy Spirit*, who will remain with them even after Jesus leaves this earth for good. The Spirit will guide and teach them in the days ahead, especially in helping them to teach others about the forgiveness of sins**.

* Recall John 14:15-17, 14:25-26, and 16:7-15. Later (Acts 2:4) they would be "filled with the Spirit" and enabled to speak in many different languages - but here in John, they are already given the Spirit as the Counselor; and he can begin his work with them at once.

** In verse 23, Jesus does not give the apostles authority to make decisions as to whether a person's sins are forgiven. Context is more helpful here than forensic analysis or language study, for such an interpretation would be fundamentally at odds with all that Jesus teaches about grace. No human can ever decide whether God will forgive someone else. But if we teach the gospel truthfully, then Jesus assures us that all who respond to this teaching respond to him - their sins are forgiven as surely as if Jesus had spoken himself.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Why might Jesus have appeared first to Mary? Why did it take so long for her to recognize him? What can we learn from this? Why did Jesus choose this specific occasion for appearing to the disciples? Why is this the appropriate time for them to receive the Spirit? How can they receive the Spirit now and later be "filled with the Spirit"? Do Jesus' words to the disciples mean anything to us?

Those Who Have Seen and Those Who Have Not (John 20:24-31)

Jesus' next appearance is to Thomas, who had been absent when Jesus appeared to the others. Jesus gives Thomas the assurance that he desires, yet he also reminds us that he will not be making a personal appearance to every believer. The resurrection brings assurance of the truth of the gospel, yet it also brings a call to a greater faith, based not on the seen but on the unseen.

Jesus' encounter with Thomas is known for Jesus' admonishment to the disciple to "stop doubting and believe" (20:24-28). Because Thomas did not get to see, hear, and touch the risen Jesus, he insists that he will not believe the news unless he can personally see the marks that the crucifixion had left on his Master's body. Almost every believer has at one time or another expressed a similar desire - we would all like some tangible sign, whether a miracle, a vision, or an emotional experience, to make it a little easier to believe the gospel.

Jesus is gracious to Thomas, and gives him what he asks for. Once his doubts are removed, Thomas fervently worships Jesus. No doubt, Jesus was glad to relieve Thomas's doubts and anxiety; but he will not always do this - for the sake of our spiritual health, we must all learn to rely on the unseen, not only on the seen. Thomas, though, like all of the apostles, had left behind everything in his old life to follow Jesus. He had remained loyal even when the crowds deserted Jesus or turned against him. And he was still a follower of Jesus, even after the crucifixion. We should not be envious because Jesus decides to be gracious to him.

The narrator John shares these things with us so that we too may believe in Jesus (20:29-31). Thomas and the other disciples believed because they saw firsthand the risen Jesus and other miracles*. But "blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." Peter later told us that, "Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls" (1 Peter 1:8-9).

* Yet Thomas and the other apostles also would soon have to do without the physical Jesus. After his ascension, they would have only the Holy Spirit, with no visible manifestation of God's presence.

And so John makes no attempt to list all of the many other miracles that Jesus did. It is characteristic of God that he gives us many reasons to believe, yet he never turns belief into a mere logical exercise. God never asks for blind faith, yet he always asks for an element of faith.

Seeing a miracle does not in itself produce faith, and seeing a miraculous sign is not necessary for faith. Of the many who witnessed Jesus' miracles in person, most of them never came to believe in him as the Messiah. Fleshly human nature is remarkably resourceful in coming up with reasons to explain away all the evidence that God has left us. We too see plenty of miracles, even if we do not usually acknowledge them as such.

God's call to us is neither intellectual belief nor factual certainty. The goal is to know Jesus and to have life in his name, to have eternal life by knowing God. Knowing God cannot be reduced to a system or a method or a set of morals. It is a relationship - with all of the inherent challenges and responsibilities that any relationship involves. God's Word is neither a textbook nor a rulebook - it is a communication from our Creator, who wants us to be with him.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Why might Thomas not have believed the other disciples? In what ways are we like him? Why was Jesus so gracious to him? Did Thomas still have to have faith? Why doesn't Jesus do the same thing for all of us? Does God give us anything "miraculous" to help us believe? Do we know exactly what God means by "believing"? How much evidence or 'proof' should we expect?

- Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, August 2011

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DEATH & RESURRECTION: STUDIES IN JOHN 11-21

Notes For Week Three: New Beginnings (John 21)

The crucifixion and the resurrection complete Jesus' earthly ministry of grace and atonement, yet this is not the end of the story. The gospel offers everyone who hears it a chance for a new beginning, and the gospel is retold and re-enacted every time someone comes to Jesus. Yet it is never easy for anyone to accept the change in perspective and attitude that the gospel brings.

Review Of Re-encounters

Jesus, the Word of God made flesh, suffered and was crucified for humanity's sins (John 19). But then he was raised to life - for the resurrection is the good news that proves the good news (John 20). Mary, Peter, and John each went to the tomb; they all saw the stone removed and the body missing. As the two apostles tried to put things together in their minds, Mary kept looking for her Lord, thinking simply that someone had moved his body.

But soon each of them sees the risen Jesus. First Mary meets her Lord, at last recognizing him when he calls her by name. Later, Jesus appears to the disciples and fulfills his promises that they would receive the Holy Spirit. Just as God breathed life into Adam, so now Jesus breathes the Spirit into his disciples, emphasizing the personal, intimate relationship God desires with us.

Jesus knows that there are those who have seen him personally and those who have not. He shows grace to us all - he gives Thomas the reassurance he asked for, and he also gives us many forms of re-assurance. The apostles got to see miraculous signs firsthand, yet we too live in a world full of miracles great and small - and we can see this any time that we allow God to choose the miracles for us. Belief in the gospel of Christ is never blind faith, yet it also can never be based on logical certainty. The heart of the gospel is always personal, not forensic or doctrinal.

How does the resurrection change (or clarify) the meaning of the rest of the gospel? It is of particular importance in verifying and emphasizing the important features of the crucifixion. In his great compassion and grace, Jesus willingly endured the horrors of the crucifixion - and the resurrection proves that he didn't have to, for he had power over death itself. Jesus' gruesome sufferings show us the true, awful nature of human sin - and the power of the resurrection proves God's authority both to object to our sin and also to forgive it according to his will.

A New Full Of Fish (John 21:1-14)

Although all of the disciples now understand that Jesus has risen from the dead, they still need plenty of assurance and direction. Jesus provides these in an unusual way, and in so doing he also teaches us some additional lessons. This miraculous catch of fish foreshadows the days of 'fishing for souls' that the disciples soon, by God's grace, would experience.

After the experience of the risen Jesus has come and gone, for the moment Peter and the other disciples can't think of anything better to do than to go fishing (21:1-6). When we recall Jesus' earlier promise that the disciples would become "fishers of men" (Matthew 4:19, Mark 1:17), there are some spiritual parallels to their wasted night of fishing and the events that follow. The

disciples were, of course, doing nothing wrong by going out to fish on their own - but Jesus will give them a reminder that true fruitfulness can only come about by his initiative and his will.

In the morning, when Jesus stands on the shore and asks them, "haven't you any fish?", the disciples - like Mary earlier - do not recognize him. Even when Jesus gives them a suggestion as to where they might throw their nets for better results*, they simply take this as a helpful gesture from a stranger, for they are intent on their own activities and the chance to improve their results.

* As a number of commentators have pointed out, it was not uncommon for a helpful observer on the shore of the Sea of Galilee to call out such a suggestion to local fishermen. It sometimes happened that a school of fish could more easily be seen from the shore than from a boat. Therefore there was no reason, based on this alone, for the disciples to think that this was anything unusual.

But after an unexpectedly huge haul of fish, the disciples realize that it is the Lord (21:7-14). Characteristically, perhaps, John is the first to recognize him - and characteristically it is Peter who is the first to act, jumping into the water and swimming earnestly towards Jesus. It is an unusual scene, and in some ways a humorous one, with Peter swimming ahead of the boat and the others no doubt feverishly rowing towards shore.

When they all reach shore, it is time for a fish breakfast with Jesus. After a fruitless night of fishing on their own power, in one moment Jesus has brought them a lavish catch*. This is just a simple symbolic reminder to us of how much more Jesus knows than we do, of how far superior his perspectives and viewpoints are than ours, and of how much different things can be when we have the humility to let Jesus direct us.

* There is no special (numerological) significance to the number 153. The precise number is given so that we can appreciate the scope of this minor "miracle" - in moments, Jesus has brought them a haul of fish that even under good conditions would normally have taken much longer to obtain.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Why might the disciples have decided to go fishing? Was there anything else they could (or should) have been doing? Why might Jesus have appeared to them in this way? Why might Peter have jumped into the water? Is there special significance to the breakfast they shared? What overall lessons are there here?

Feed M□□heep (John 21:1□-1□)

Although Peter is now fully convinced about the resurrection, he has not really gotten over his denials on the night of the crucifixion. Jesus knew how much Peter really loves him, and so he now takes the time to teach Peter some valuable lessons. In his characteristic manner, Jesus combines compassion with teaching, and assurance with exhortation.

After the breakfast, Jesus finally talks with Peter alone, and he asks Peter whether he truly loves his Lord (21:15-17). Jesus knows this - as indeed Peter acknowledges in his answer that, "you know that I love you." Jesus makes a point by asking three times* for Peter to affirm this, as a deliberate echo of the three times that Peter was asked whether he knew Jesus, and denied it.

* Commentators often point out that Jesus uses the verb αγαπαω ("agapao", to love selflessly) in his first two questions, while the third time he uses the verb φιλεω ("phileo", to love as a brother), suggesting that this 'downgrade' is the reason why Peter was hurt. But in practice, the two verbs were used more-or-less interchangeably in ordinary conversations. All three times, Peter answers with the verb φιλεω (to love as a brother). So the verbs are not the real point here. Jesus is not asking Peter - or us - to analyze the degree of his love, but simply to confirm it again and again.

Jesus reminds Peter of this previous incident not to make him feel guilty, but to heal him - he knows that Peter still has not gotten over this, while Jesus never had condemned him to begin with. Peter cannot undo his denials, but henceforth he can simply re-affirm his love for Jesus again and again - and this will be more than enough for his gracious Lord.

Jesus adds a further point too - and it is a point worth remembering in our own ministries. One of the reasons for Peter's denials was his confusion about the ways that Jesus wants his followers to show their love for him. In the garden, Peter was sincerely ready to launch a suicide attack to protect Jesus, yet for this apparent devotion he was corrected, not praised, by his Lord. Jesus teaches him now that a truer way of expressing love for Jesus is to tend, feed, and care for his sheep. Thus Jesus heals Peter of the guilt of his denials while also teaching him how to build a stronger foundation for the future.

Yet there is also a warning for Peter, because when he is old, he will indeed glorify Jesus with a martyr's death (21:18-19). He will no longer be so eager to do so, but will be led where he does not want to go. And yet this death* - unlike his impulsive sword attack in the garden - will truly glorify God. "Martyrdom" in itself does not glorify God if it merely arises as a result of our own aggression or belligerence. Jesus' death on the cross is our example of selfless, humble sacrifice.

* Ancient non-biblical sources record that Peter died in the persecution against Christians that emperor Nero launched in the aftermath of the great fire of Rome in AD 64. It is likely that he was crucified, and this would fit in with Jesus' comment that Peter would stretch out his hands. Medieval church legends state that Peter was crucified upside down, but this cannot be verified historically.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What spiritual needs might Peter have had at this time? Why did Jesus address them with these questions? What lessons did Peter learn as a result? What should these lessons teach us? Why does Jesus add a preview of Peter's death? How does this fit in with the rest of the lesson? Does it mean anything to us?

Follow Me (John 21:20-23)

While listening to Jesus, Peter becomes curious whether these same lessons might apply to the others as well. As happens so often, Peter is honestly expressing a thought that we all have from time to time. The impulse to compare our lives with the lives of others is a human tendency shared by believers and unbelievers alike. Jesus' reply is concise, spiritual, and conclusive.

Seeing John walking behind him and Jesus, Peter asks, "Lord, what about him?" (21:20-23). It is human nature for us to compare our blessings with the blessings God has given others, our struggles with the things others struggles with, and our successes and failures with the ways others have succeeded or failed. This can become a compulsion when we get our comparisons tangled up with our fleshly views of 'justice' and with distorted views of God. The compulsion for comparisons can lead to numerous worse problems such as envy, rivalry, and malice.

Jesus makes no attempt to explain to Peter why God's plans for Peter were 'fair' or 'deserved'. He simply says, "If I want him (John) to remain alive until I return, what is that to you?" Peter must simply follow Jesus one way or another; and he should not concern himself with the plans God has for John or for anyone else. This cuts through all of the false human logic that we use to convince ourselves that God owes us something, or to justify our resentment against those who

have something that we desire. It also reminds us not to try to set 'standards' for the faithfulness of others. Jesus and Jesus alone will decide the best ways for each of us to serve him.

True to human nature, the other disciples pay less attention to the real lesson than they do to the superficially intriguing detail that suggests that John might not die*. As for us, it is not important to be able to explain why they were in error in this interpretation, but it is important for us to realize the fruitlessness of our own silly speculations on minor details of Scripture or on 'controversial' issues. None of these things ever matters nearly as much as Jesus' call: follow me!

* In fact, historical sources indicate that John did live to be quite old, surviving into the decade of the 90's of the first century AD, probably living long after the deaths of all of the other original disciples.

John himself has no interest in pursuing secondary matters, no matter how interesting they may seem - for he acknowledges that the whole world would not have room to write down all the things he has seen Jesus do and has heard Jesus say (21:24-25). John has given us a healthy sampling of reasons to believe, and now he leaves us with the clear, simple call to follow Jesus.

The apostle fully understands that we must combine his testimony with our own faith. John does not expect us to believe solely based on his testimony, nor does he think that he has proved the gospel beyond any doubt. He has shown us the Christ whom he knew and loved; he has shown us the struggles that he and the other disciples had in developing faith and belief in Jesus; and he has offered to us the same hope of grace and the same call to follow Jesus in which he himself has been so blessed to share.

And now John leaves us with the opportunity to build our own relationship with Jesus - and he leaves it to us and to Jesus to find out the path that our lives and ministries may follow in the days and years ahead.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: In what ways might we think in the same way as Peter did when he asked what would happen to John? How can Jesus' answer help us? In this context, is there anything especially important about his call to, "follow me"? Why does John emphasize how many other things about Jesus he hasn't written down? In what way is this comment a suitable closing to the book?

- Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, August 2011

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