

## **The Cloud of Witnesses**

### **John the disciple Jesus loved**

#### **Lesson 1: John – In the beginning**

##### **Reading: John 1:1-14**

The story goes that John was sitting down in his chair surrounded by his disciples. They asked him, *“When did it all begin? With Abraham, as Matthew starts his record, or, as Dr Luke suggests, with Adam? The aged John leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes – Go back, way back before Abraham, way back before Adam... Way back, in fact, before the world was created. “In the beginning was the Word...”*

Jesus has always been. He was not created; He has always existed. As John records Jesus as saying later, *“Before Abraham was, I am.”* He is coexistent with God the Father. Eternally existent. He was as much the force and reason behind the beginning of the creation of the cosmos as The Father and Holy Spirit.

Yes, Jesus came to earth in the human form, as a baby – but He has always existed. And that is the dilemma – how could God become man and how could Jesus be God? How could the Divine be represented on earth in a way that the carnal could understand? How could the infinite touch the Finite? How could the Creator God begin a relationship with mankind, His creation?

Yes, the Word became flesh and dwelt for a little while among us. John and his contemporaries saw God in human form. He looked like them, talked like them, lived like them, had similar emotions and equally suffered fatigue and challenges, and yet, was so totally different. He spoke with an unparalleled authority. He lived with an unequalled sense of destiny, and yet showed love and grace beyond description.

Indeed, how does one describe the indescribable? How could John try to portray what he had seen and intimately experienced to those who had neither seen nor heard this Wonder of all wonders? John’s task was unenviable and yet through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, he managed to communicate to us all a glimpse of the Divine Majesty, as seen in the person of Jesus Christ.

John’s whole intent was that through reading his writings we would understand that the man who lived on earth and was called Jesus of Nazareth was none other than God in human form. He was convinced through what he saw, what he heard and what he experienced first hand. John’s is not a handed-down version of the facts. His was not hearsay, nor well documented evidence. John’s testimony is exactly that – his own testimony of what he had both seen and heard.

He had lived in close relationship with this man called Jesus, and after seeing all the evidence as an eye-witness could only come to one conclusion – this Jesus is and was exactly who He claimed to be – God – God living in a human body.

Why would God do that? So we could experience first hand the love of our Creator and realise that He does know and understand the challenges we face. He has been there, done that – to the extremes – so none of us can ever say – God doesn’t care – God doesn’t understand. He does and He did something about it. He came to where we are to lift us up to where He is.

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### **John would say to us today...**

Everything starts with Jesus. What you think of Jesus is the most crucial verdict you will ever make.

### **Prayer**

*Jesus, I realise now that You are the great watershed. I have to make up my own mind – about who You are. Because that settles every other debate. Truth rests on the answer. Either You are who You said You are – God – or You are the worst person that ever lived. Please help me make the right decision and please help me work through the ramifications of that decision because if You are God then You are my Lord. Amen*

### **Additional Readings**

- Colossians 1:15
- Hebrews 1:1-13
- Proverbs 8:27-30

### **Questions**

1. What are the ramifications if Jesus is not God?
2. What are the ramifications if Jesus is God?
3. How will your view of who Jesus really is affect the way you live your life today?

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### **Lesson 2: John – Met Jesus**

#### **Reading: Matthew 4:18-22**

We understand that John was a follower of John the Baptist. His father was Zebedee and his mother Salome, who was probably the sister of Mary, the mother of Jesus. So John and his brother James would have been cousins of Jesus by birth.

Zebedee and his sons were fishermen, which would suggest it was a reasonably sized family business. Like most fathers, Zebedee would have been delighted his sons had joined him in the trade and had no doubt assumed that they would one day take over the family business. However, that was never realised because one day Jesus walked by and invited them to follow Him.

I'm sure Zebedee's face would have been a picture as his two sons just dropped everything and walked off the job in total and immediate obedience to Jesus' invitation. I wonder how Zebedee felt – angry, disappointed, frustrated and hurt? Or I wonder if it was completely different. Maybe he had expected it, and so when it came, he was prepared and delighted.

Obedience to Jesus can cause differing emotions to surface. It all comes down to – who we think Jesus is. You see, if Jesus is God and our Creator, He has every right to ask us to do whatever He likes, whenever He likes and regardless of the consequences to others and us. Our natural reaction is to resist. We like to think that we are in control of our lives, our destiny and our future.

However, if you think about it that is very selfish, if not illogical. There are so many things that happen to us that are completely outside of our control. The weather, the price of fuel, our health and the health of those we love. Then there are interest rates, exchange rates and inflation, let alone financial crashes, domestic and international.

So why would we resist God, who delights to give us His best? The answer is, of course, we don't like to submit to Him as Lord. Jesus is fine being our Friend, Protector, Provider and Saviour, but when He starts making demands on us, that is when He oversteps the mark and we react negatively. But Jesus Christ is Lord.

The statement is made and often used in songs we sing in our churches week after week but we shy away when it 'comes home to roost'. It's fine for Jesus to be Lord of Heaven and earth, the church and government, but I'm not sure I want Him to influence or direct my life and lifestyle choices.

James and John, Peter and Andrew were different. They didn't demure, debate or delay – they left their nets, their employment, their family and their future and followed Jesus. What for? What was the salary increase, what were the fringe benefits and what was the total financial package on offer, securing their immediate needs and long-term security? Nothing – just to become *fishers of men* – whatever that meant.

What was so special about the call to John and the others? What was it that made John leave his father, his job and his future to follow the Rabbi Jesus?

A fisherman was not the archetypical disciple. He was neither a wanderer with nothing better to do nor was he an educated student wanting to further his studies.

No, it wasn't a case of what John would get out of it – but the issue rested solely on WHO made

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the call. John saw in Jesus not only Someone worthy of respect but Someone who had every right to invite him to lay down his life in obedience. Until we see Jesus in the same way we will always follow from a distance and never experience the height of purpose God has for us.

### **John would say to us today...**

Once you meet the real Jesus for yourself, your life will never be the same again.

### **Prayer**

*Jesus, I'm not satisfied with the rat-race. I'm longing for a life of excitement, challenge and fulfilment. At last I surrender totally to You. Please do with me and my life whatever You will and whenever You want. For Your Name's sake and the extension of Your Kingdom. Amen*

### **Additional Readings**

- 2 Chronicles 9:1-12
- Isaiah 6:1-8
- John 20:24-29

### **Questions**

1. What holds us back from full surrender of our lives to Jesus?
2. What needs to happen so we make the change?
3. How will you spend the rest of your life?

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### **Lesson 3: John – Recorded the signs for us**

#### **Reading: John 2:1-11**

Wow, wouldn't we all have loved to be at that wedding? The wine ran out but the best was yet to come. Oh, to have Jesus wherever we go, to meet our every need and get us out of the disasters we get ourselves into. And yet, He never offered to do that, and rarely does. So what's with the wine at Cana?

The wedding was in full swing. The bride and groom were being congratulated. The host and master of ceremonies were enjoying the celebration when suddenly the very worst social faux pas occurred – they ran out of wine. Oh dear – now what?

Mary comes to the rescue. *“Don't worry, tell Jesus what is wrong and just do what he tells you to do.”* So what was the answer? Go and buy some more wine? No. Go and have another look and you will find there are some more bottles of wine stacked away? No. *“Fill the stone jars with water.”* Ah, good idea, the people won't notice – they are pretty well 'stoned' already! *“Fill the jars with water and take them to the master of ceremonies.”*

The servants did so and when the water was presented to the master of ceremonies it had changed into wine. He pronounced it the best vintage of the lot and wondered why the bridegroom had left the best until last when everyone else would have started with the best and then brought out inferior wine at the end.

You see, Jesus always does things differently to us. Yes, it was a miracle and we can't perform miracles anyway. But, as John points out, it was in one sense more than a miracle; Jesus had provided a sign. A sign of what? A sign that He was God.

He had saved the bridegroom from embarrassment on many fronts. He had rescued the bridegroom from the shame of not having provided an adequate supply of wine at his wedding. He had shielded the bridegroom from the panic of having to replenish the supply. He had removed the concern from those who knew of the disaster. He had honoured the servants by producing the wine and had surprised the master of ceremonies by making the wine of superior quality.

Yes, Jesus didn't just turn the water into wine – He sorted all those issues at the same time. However, the question still has to be answered – who has the power and authority to change water into wine? How often have you seen that done? How many of us have that authority? Answer – none. Oh, we may 'play with magic' and create an impressive illusion. Or we may try and explain it all away with platitudes, which don't stack up or satisfy anyone.

No, the answer can only be that Jesus was more than human. He had an authority and power that is beyond anyone else or any human capability, even after two thousand years of technological advances.

As John pointed out – it was a sign. A sign that Jesus is God. But John went further – he declared, *“This, the first of His miraculous signs, Jesus performed in Cana of Galilee.”* Remember, John was there. He went on to say that because of this sign Jesus' disciples put their faith in Him. This first sign was good enough for the disciples, but it was only the first of many.

If we had the evidence of just one miracle, one sign, then we can still deduce that Jesus was certainly able to do things no-one else could do – which would have to suggest He was super-

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human, but there were many more. John's Gospel is full of them. This suggests that the miracle of turning the water into wine was neither a freak one-off instance nor a figment of someone's heightened imagination.

Rather the beginning of a deliberate and intentional revelation of who Jesus was – God in human form. Someone who came to help, love, redeem and save. And what a wonderful way to reveal it!

### **John would say to us today...**

Jesus is not just a man; He is God – the signs I've recorded for you prove it.

### **Prayer**

*Lord Jesus Christ, thank You so much for coming to this earth and sharing in our everyday life. Thank You for turning the water into wine at the wedding in Cana. Please help me to remember that You are the Author of miracles and You care for me. Amen*

### **Additional Readings**

- John 14:8-14
- Acts 3:1-10
- Acts 4:8-20

### **Questions**

1. What miracle do you need Jesus to perform for you?
2. What was the thing that helped you realise Jesus is God?
3. How do you think we can help others come to see Jesus as God for themselves?

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### **Lesson 4: John – You must be born again**

#### **Reading: John 3:1-18**

Nicodemus was a very interesting man. John chose to include a record of his interview with Jesus because it was of the utmost importance. It was not only significant for Nicodemus but it also established a divine principle that all the followers of Jesus Christ would recognise and experience first hand.

Nicodemus was one of the very few religious leaders of the day who sought time out with Jesus with an open mind, seeking to understand the truth of who Jesus really was. Nicodemus was not just a practising Jew, not just a leader of a local synagogue; he was a member of the Jewish ruling Council.

Nicodemus had both religious standing and religious authority. As such it was fitting for him to try and establish the authenticity of this 'new' messiah. Was he the genuine article or just another imposter?

The evidence demanded a verdict. The miracles that Jesus performed were too extraordinary to have been mere magic, deceit, counterfeit or illusion. He was convinced that Jesus was special – special in a good way. Yes, Nicodemus couldn't understand or explain the miracles but neither could he deny them or adequately explain them away. They were so 'other worldly' that the only explanation Nicodemus could come up with was that Jesus had some supernatural contact with God.

There were two overwhelming indications of that connection: the teaching, the ethics and moral code Jesus taught, and the miraculous wonders He performed. The teaching was not contrary to what the Jewish leaders knew was recorded in the Old Testament, but Jesus brought a life and practical application that challenged their rigid and legalistic paradigm. Jesus not only made it simple enough for everyone to understand but also expected His hearers to put it into practice. Worse still, He lived what He preached.

That naturally created a challenge for the religious hierarchy. The best solution was to prove Jesus to be merely another messianic imposter, because a failure to do so would expose their own duplicity.

However, Nicodemus was prepared to seek Jesus out to establish the truth for himself. He went to find Jesus but, not wanting to be seen or caught in the act, decided to make the contact at night.

He began by telling Jesus that he was impressed by what he had heard and seen. Jesus, however, chose to cut through the preamble and get to the real issue. *"No one can see the Kingdom of Heaven of God unless he is born again."* Straight to the point.

Nicodemus countered that he couldn't understand how anyone could be born again. He was far too big to re-enter his mother's womb. Jesus replied that was not the issue. We are all born in the flesh – humanly; however, we also need to be born of the Spirit of God. In other words, when our father's sperm impregnates our mother's egg, we are born naturally. In a similar way, our spirit needs to be impregnated by the Spirit of God for us to come alive spiritually.

That is one of the things that sets Christianity apart from every other religion. Christianity is all about a relationship with God – God as our Father. True Christianity is not about obeying a set of

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rules in order for us to please God. Of ourselves we would never be able to please God.

No, Christianity is all about a relationship with God as Father, through the work of Christ Jesus on the Cross, and empowered by the Holy Spirit of God.

We become born again when we surrender our will to the will of God, acknowledge our selfishness, ask for His forgiveness and invite the Holy Spirit's presence into our lives. It is not a decision to live a better life – it is a request for help. A request for God to invade our lives and to take over so that He lives His life through us. We must be born again.

### **John would say to us today...**

Turning over a new leaf is not enough; changing your thinking patterns is not enough; becoming religious is not enough – you must be born again. You must have a dynamic encounter with Jesus Christ, which will totally and radically transform your whole life through the power of His Holy Spirit.

### **Prayer**

*Dear Jesus Christ, I now realise I need You in my life. I admit I've tried living my own way and it hasn't worked. I now ask You to transform my life. I need to be 'born again'. Please forgive me for everything I have done wrong. Thank You for dying on the Cross to pay the price for my self-centredness and to open the way for me to have a relationship with God as my Father. Please come into my life by the power and presence of Your Holy Spirit to be with me forever. Thank You. Amen.*

### **Additional Readings**

- Colossians 2:6-17
- Galatians 6:14-15
- Acts 9:1-31

### **Questions**

1. Why do people think that becoming a better person will get them into Heaven?
2. What is the major difference we see here between Christianity and all other religions?
3. What reasons might people give for not wanting to be born again?



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### **Lesson 5: John – Meets a stranger**

#### **Reading: John 4:7-26**

There is little as refreshing as a drink of cold water on a hot day. We all know what it is like to be thirsty. The longer we go without a drink, the hotter the day or the harder we work physically, the greater the desire we have for our thirst to be quenched.

Evidently, this woman had little option but to visit the well outside of the communal watering time. She had experienced a hard life. Whether of her own making or not, she had been 'unlucky' in love. She had been in intimate relationships with many men but those relationships had not lasted for long. The current relationship was even more tenuous than the rest.

Her sense of failure, rejection and hopelessness would, no doubt, have laid heavily upon her shoulders. We can almost visualise her walking dejectedly to the well; her hair unkempt, her clothes unpressed and her chin on her chest.

You can almost sense her hesitation before plucking up the courage to approach the well, having noticed that there was a Jew sitting beside it. What was he doing in Samaria? Most Jews would do all they could to avoid going anywhere near the area – let alone sit down by their well.

She had no option – she would have to invade his personal space in order to draw the water she needed. Would he cajole her, would he talk harshly, mock her or treat her with disdain? But then what would it matter; everyone else had been treating her that way already?

To her amazement, the Jew didn't do any of those things – he merely asked for a drink. That caught her off guard – because Jews wouldn't normally have anything to do with Samaritans. So unusual was the request that it prompted her to ask the reason for this break in prejudice.

What unfolded, obviously, initially troubled her even more. A simple discussion turned into a conversation that exposed her of her deepest emotional and spiritual need. She had been carrying so much guilt, failure and hopelessness, and yet, now it was out in the open. Certainly not hidden from this stranger. What sort of man was he? Who was he and where did he come from... and where was he going?

She tried deflecting the conversation away from herself and back to the safety of the Jewish-Samaritan divide. But somehow it didn't work. This stranger knew too much about her. He knew too much about her religion and he knew far too much about God.

And yet what he said made sense. It was not what she expected. He said that God was not as exclusive as the Jews and Samaritans had said and that God was more interested in people than in traditions and rituals and holy sites.

He said God was looking for people who would worship Him in Spirit and Truth. That opened the door for anyone and everyone. It also had a ring of truth about it. So much so that she wondered whether, in fact, Jesus could have been the Messiah her scriptures prophesied would come and explain everything to them.

Jesus replied that He was indeed the One – the true long-anticipated Messiah.

At this point the disciples returned and interrupted their conversation. The woman went on back

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into town – but her life was changed. No longer was she ashamed and a poor victim – she was now the town’s first evangelist.

“Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Christ?”

John records that she was so successful in her new-found role that many townspeople went out to see Jesus and believed in Him. So much so they invited Jesus to stay for a couple of days so that even more became followers of His.

They heard the woman’s testimony and then met Jesus and exclaimed – *“We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Saviour of the world.”*

### **John would say to us today...**

No matter your background, your mistakes or your present circumstances, Jesus wants to meet with you and be the total answer to your deepest emotional and spiritual needs.

### **Prayer**

*Father, thank You so much that You are able to meet me at my deepest need. Thank You so much that I don’t need to be perfect before I come to You but You take me just as I am, with all my failure and selfishness, and make me a whole new person. Thank You that when we are thirsty, You are the One who can satisfy our deepest thirst. Amen.*

### **Additional Readings**

- Luke 19:1-10
- Matthew 11:28-30
- Matthew 8:5-13

### **Questions**

1. What impressed you most by Jesus’ approach to the woman’s need?
2. What was her real problem?
3. How would you have introduced the need for her to have a personal relationship with Jesus into your conversation with her?

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### **Lesson 6: John – Met a woman accused of adultery**

#### **Reading: John 8:1-11**

I always thought it took two to tango! This woman had been caught in the very act of committing adultery – according to the Teachers of the Law and Pharisees who brought her to Jesus. So where was the man?

Jesus had been on the Mount of Olives. A popular place for Him to get away from everyone and a solitary place where He could commune with His Father. At dawn He made His way down to the Temple and was sat down talking to His followers. He wanted to use every opportunity to teach them the way of life. To turn them away from rules and regulations and point them towards a relationship with God, based upon forgiveness, grace and love.

He was to be given a very visual reminder of what the people had been taught and how their offences were to be dealt with.

It was, of course, a simple question requiring a simple answer. The facts had been established; the law had been presented along with the judgment and the sentence. All Jesus had to do was to agree. But it was a trap.

Would Jesus have the woman stoned to death, in front of His very own eyes, and in front of the people who thought He was their hero and Messiah? How could he do that in front of those who thought Him a saint – Someone who cared about them? The people all considered themselves just as guilty. Would He have her killed and, by default, them as well?

Or would Jesus have to blush and say that the Law was wrong and should not be upheld – because He had no stomach for violence? Yet could He deny the Law – when so often He declared that He upheld the Law and His job was not to destroy but fulfil it? How would He answer this one? His whole message and its validity were on the line.

However, it is impossible to trap the Creator of the world – the initiator of the Law and the revealer of the Truth. Jesus challenged them all. First, by silence. That weapon that has a horrible way of eating into our very psyche.

No doubt everyone was waiting expectantly with bated breath. Yet, the silence continued. Indeed, it went on so long that John noticed that Jesus had started writing in the soil at His feet. You can almost see everyone leaning forward to read what Jesus had written. We can only speculate, of course. But it seemed poignant.

The accusers, however, were not to be put off. They considered this their finest hour and were not to be denied their glory. Jesus responded by standing up. I can almost hear Him say quietly but with enough volume for all to hear – *“If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her.”*

Wow, that was risky. These guys could smell blood; what would stop them now?

Jesus just stooped down and continued writing on the ground. What did he write?

Whatever it was, the silence continued. Slowly and deliberately the words of Jesus' challenge made their way into the minds of her accusers. Powered by the pathos of the moment each person came to the realisation and conviction that they, too, were guilty of some misdemeanour. Their

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consciences were, no doubt, screaming out the list of offences, and so one by one, from the eldest to the youngest, they left their rocks and went home – a little sadder and much less confident.

In the end, Jesus was the only one left. He was the only sinless person there. He asked her where her accusers were, but all those who condemned her had vanished. Jesus was able to say, *“Neither do I condemn you. Go and leave your life of sin.”*

Jesus didn’t come to condemn us – He came to forgive us and set us free from our selfishness and sin.

### **John would say to us today...**

Jesus didn’t condemn her. He could have; He was the only sinless person standing there. Instead of condemning the woman, He raised her up and set her free.

### **Prayer**

*Father, thank You so much that I can come to You, confess my sin and walk away free. Sometimes I think it is too simple and yet I thank You that it is the truth. Please help me remember that even though it is simple for me – it still cost Jesus His life. Amen.*

### **Additional Readings**

- Romans 3:21-26
- Romans 8:1-11
- 1 Timothy 1:12-17

### **Questions**

1. What have you done wrong, which is still causing you to feel guilty?
2. What are the things others do that offend you?
3. How can you be set free from the stress both of those issues create?

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### **Lesson 7: John – I was blind but now I see**

#### **Reading: John 9:1-25**

John included this record of events for a purpose. We know Jesus healed many people who were blind and yet John gives us many details about this man. We feel we know a lot about him and his parents, and yet, ironically, John doesn't divulge his name – not that it matters much – everyone seemed to know who he was anyway.

The man was born blind. This posed a quandary for Jesus' disciples and indeed many of the religious people of the time. There was a prevailing view that sickness was the penalty or result of sin. Some people feel the same way today.

Whilst it is true that our chosen lifestyle can certainly result in sickness – for example, addictions of any kind can have severe, dire and often fatal consequences, nevertheless, not all illnesses are a direct result of some specific sin.

We live in an imperfect world and we are all liable to suffer sickness from time to time. Most of us get colds, headaches, pain and what could be called *general illnesses* – especially when our children bring them home from school.

Most of us become aware that we have a human body, which is not indestructible nor immune to disease, and will suffer from the natural ageing processes of life. Yes, Christians may say that is expected, as a result of the Fall of mankind – and so is a result of our sinful nature. However, there is not much we can do about it – it is just a part of our lot on earth.

This man had been blind from birth. Jesus' disciples asked Him whether the fact that the man was blind was because of his sin or the sin of his parents. The question immediately placed the family under condemnation – the implication being that someone must have sinned for him to have been born blind.

Condemnation is the direct result of that supposition. It creates more pain than is there already and is totally unjustified. But as Jesus pointed out, the reason for his blindness was for the display of God's glory.

We find it almost impossible to accept that God could put up with sickness and yet the reality is that not everyone on earth at the time Jesus was alive was healed of their sickness. There were many at the pool of Bethesda when Jesus healed the man who had been an invalid for 38 years.

How could an unborn baby sin? Did it get its head tied up in the umbilical cord? What an absurd question? What an absurd assumption! No, Jesus was going to do something here, which would cause them all to know that He had the authority and power to heal blind people.

The Gospels record that Jesus healed blind people in unique ways. Some He spoke to, others He touched, and here, Jesus spat on the ground, formed some mud and put it on the blind man's eyes and then told him to go and wash it all off in Siloam Pool.

I love the fact that Jesus made mud and put it on the blind man's eyes, don't you? Wasn't Adam (aren't we all) formed from the dust of the earth? How appropriate that Jesus should use that medium again for this miracle or repair – new sight.

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Yes, the blind man returned seeing. The people were flabbergasted – how could that happen? Surely it can't be the same man – it must be a twin brother...

Then another issue arose. How dare he be healed on the Sabbath! So the religious leaders sought him out and tried very hard to make him blind again. To make him and his parents outcasts. Easy enough – it was their fault he was blind from birth...

The poor man was totally bewildered. He knew he had been healed but he didn't know how or by whom! But can anyone heal who is not God? I love the man's immortal reply – *once I was blind, now I can see.*

That is the story of most Christians – once I didn't believe Jesus Christ is God, now I do. I can't explain what happened but I know the difference He has made in my life. It happened as soon as I asked Him to be my Saviour.

As John Newton, the transformed slave-trader, wrote –

Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound  
That saved a wretch like me  
I once was lost but now am found  
Was blind but now I see.

### **John would say to us today...**

Don't hesitate to tell your story – no one can argue with it. Tell it simply like this man – once I didn't believe – but now I do because...

### **Prayer**

*Thank You, Jesus, for saving me. Thank You that although I don't understand it, how it happened or why, I know that You love me, You forgave all my sin and set me free. Amen*

### **Additional Readings**

- Luke 8:26-39
- Acts 3:1-10
- Acts 26:1-29

### **Questions**

1. What was your life like before you met Jesus?
2. What difference has Jesus made in your life?
3. Who could you tell your story to this month?

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### **Lesson 8: John – The Transfiguration**

#### **Reading: Matthew 17:1-9**

Peter, James and John were there. They had a special relationship with Jesus. They were included as general followers of Jesus. Their names were included in the list of the twelve. However, there were special occasions when Jesus just took the three of them with Him. He obviously had a deeper relationship with them and allowed them to experience situations none of the others did.

Jesus' Transfiguration was one of those experiences. For whatever reason, Jesus did not wish to share it with all His disciples. It would have extraordinary meaning and significance for the three of them, which would set them apart in a new and exclusive way.

Jesus took them away from the crowd, away from the other disciples and away from the humdrum of life. They went up the mountain together. Maybe they even felt they were experiencing something like Moses and Joshua did when they went up Mt Sinai to meet with God. There, Moses received the Ten Commandments.

Jesus, Peter, James and John climbed the mountain. They continued their journey until they were completely on their own and the view had lost its appeal sufficiently for them to sit down and just enjoy one another's company.

Then it happened.

Jesus became completely different. Yes, of course Jesus was always different – but this was totally something else. Something majestic, something eerie, something awesome, something divine. His face shone like the sun. His clothes became iridescent. It defied description and understanding. It was totally overwhelming.

Just as they were becoming accustomed to the amazing phenomenon, God introduced a new dimension – Moses and Elijah arrived and began conversing with Jesus, just as if they were long lost friends catching up on events. They discussed what was going to happen in Jerusalem, Jesus' betrayal and His death.

As they were about to leave, Peter suggested to Jesus that since they were having such a good time he would like to erect three shelters for them to stay and enjoy the experience. At which point a dazzling cloud enveloped them. Moses and Elijah disappeared and the only thing that could be heard was a voice.

The voice said, *"This is My son, whom I love; with Him I am well pleased. Listen to Him."*

Once the voice had finished speaking, the cloud cleared and the disciples could only see Jesus standing there. Jesus went to them and reassured them that there was nothing to fear. He then asked them not to tell anyone what they had experienced until He had risen from the dead.

Just imagine being one of the disciples – imagine being John. John was, by natural family ties, a cousin of Jesus. Yes, John knew Jesus was different. Yes, he knew Jesus was special. Yes, he thought He was God in human form but that didn't mean he really understood – who – Jesus was.

In so many ways Jesus was just an extraordinarily good man who had divine power and authority. But He looked so human. There was nothing about His physique or physical ability that really set

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Him apart. Yes, He had walked on water, but apart from that, the other miracles affected other people more than Him. He didn't fly around like Superman; He didn't display supernatural strength like Samson – He was just naturally supernatural.

So when Jesus was transfigured John was completely gob-smacked. He hadn't expected anything like that to happen to Jesus nor find himself a witness to such an event.

However, John would never be the same again. How could he be? He had witnessed a glimpse of the glory of God. He had seen first-hand the proof that Jesus was nothing less than God in human form, and that experience would rest with him until he died.

### **John would say to us today...**

I was there. I will never ever forget it. He was awesome – totally beyond human description. He was Divine – I saw a small glimpse of His glory.

### **Prayer**

*Thank You, Jesus, for proving to John Your divinity so that he was completely satisfied as to the truth. Thank You that the historical record was made so long ago and stands today as proof of Your deity. Amen.*

### **Additional Readings**

- Luke 9:28-36
- Colossians 1:15-20
- 2 Peter 1:16-21

### **Questions**

1. What would you do if you met Jesus in person today?
2. What would you say to or ask Him?
3. What difference would it make to your life?



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### **Lesson 9: John – The Way**

#### **Reading: John 14:1-14**

I think John loved Thomas! Why do I say that? Because John recorded so much about Thomas.

Most of us remember Thomas because John records the fact that when the disciples told Thomas that they had seen Jesus risen from the dead, Thomas had replied, *“Unless I see the nail marks in His hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe it.”*

Yes, we have all heard of *doubting* Thomas – but few seem to call him – *believing* Thomas, or better still – *the disciple who called Jesus – “My Lord and my God”*.

When Thomas met the risen Jesus for himself, not only did he realise that Jesus had bodily risen from the dead, he exclaimed – *“my Lord and my God.”*

That incident has become one of the most memorable events recorded in the Gospels.

John also recorded an earlier conversation Thomas had with Jesus. Jesus told the disciples that He was about to leave earth and go to Heaven where He would prepare a place for them to join Him in due course. Jesus ended by saying, *“You know the way to the place where I am going.”* To which Thomas replied, *“Lord, we don’t know where You are going, so how can we know the way?”*

That response elicited from Jesus is one of the most profound statements ever made. Jesus replied, *“I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through Me. If you really knew Me, you would know My Father as well. From now on, you do know Him and have seen Him.”*

Then John recorded that Philip also joined in and asked Jesus to show them the Father. To which Jesus answered, *“Anyone who has seen Me has seen the Father.”* This conversation had such an immense impact on John that he had to record it for posterity.

Why did John think it was so significant – so important – so vital? Because it set Jesus apart from every other religious leader and Christianity from every other religion.

The fundamental issue is: *“What do you think of Jesus?”*

John recognised that. It is the watershed of faith. It is the rock on which we either build our faith or our religion is crushed to pieces. Jesus clearly stated that there are not many ways to God – there is only one way.

Jesus was not just a good man. He was not just an amazing human being whose moral and ethical teaching was vastly superior to anyone else’s. He was not just a man with super human or even divine powers. He claimed to be – not a god or another god – He claimed to be God Himself.

He claimed that if anyone wanted to have a relationship with God the Creator of the universe as their Heavenly Father, there was only one way. It is by accepting the fact that Jesus Christ is God and that He alone can grant us access to God.

That is why He is the watershed. There is no middle ground – either He is God or He is not. He is

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not just a good man because a good man would not say the things Jesus said. Since He claimed to be God, unless He is God, He is a liar and deceiver.

That is why this statement recorded by John is so significant – and undoubtedly why John recorded it for posterity. John wanted us to understand that Jesus is God. He is the Way to God. He is the sole arbiter of Truth and He is the only One who can give us life. Life in its fullness on earth, and life everlasting in Heaven.

I like what I heard someone say years ago – *Anyone can know God*. Indeed many religions claim to know who God is. Usually, they see him as a Judge or some Deity, aloof and frightening. However, there is only one way you can know God as Father. That is through Jesus Christ.

When you accept Jesus Christ is God, and recognise and appropriate the fact that He died on the Cross to pay the penalty for our sins and selfishness, which has separated us from God, and ask Him to forgive us – He grants us access to God as Father.

The barrier has been removed – the only way possible – through the death of Jesus. As Jesus said, *“I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. No-one comes to the Father except through Me.”*

### **John would say to us today...**

Jesus is the one True Reality. Christianity is not a sham. It is not a support for weak people. It brings life into perspective and provides a future and a hope. It's for real living in a real world, with real consequences and a real destiny.

### **Prayer**

*Thank You, Jesus, for making the way possible for me to know God as my Father. Thank You for dying in my place to remove the barrier between us. Thank You that I now know You are God. Amen.*

### **Additional Readings**

- 1 Timothy 2:1-6
- 2 Corinthians 5:14-21
- Acts 2:36-41

### **Questions**

1. What are the reasons for rejecting Jesus as God?
2. What are the ramifications of Jesus not being God?
3. How can we be sure Jesus is God?

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### **Lesson 10: John – Jesus is the Vine**

#### **Reading: John 15:1-17**

Fortunately for us John recorded a lot of what Jesus said. John not only wrote a book about the signs Jesus performed to prove that He was indeed the Messiah, the Christ of God and our Saviour, he also recorded for us many of the sermons Jesus gave His disciples. Most of which are unique to John's Gospel.

John was the one who seemed both fascinated and challenged by the *"I am"* statements of Christ. *"I am the light of the world."* *"I am the bread of life."* *"I am the way, the truth and the life"*, etc. Here, John begins with Jesus saying, *"I am the true vine, and My Father is the gardener."*

Every time Jesus used the term *"I am"*, He did so deliberately. He was referring to the Name God used when Moses asked for a name to give to the leaders of the Hebrew slaves as Moses' authority to lead them out of Egypt. Moses was able to say, *"I AM has sent me to you."* By using that prefix, Jesus was claiming to be God – the eternal and almighty I AM.

In our meditation for today Jesus used the title in conjunction with a picture of a vine. His disciples would have been very familiar with grape vines. Wine was a very popular drink and there would have been many vineyards in Palestine.

Jesus used what was very familiar to His disciples as an example of His relationship with them. I must admit that now I have a grape vine of my own, the significance of what Jesus said has become far more obvious to me.

The main trunk of my vine comes up from the ground and many branches sprout out from that main trunk. Almost immediately as any growth appears, I can tell which branches are going to produce fruit, since they are visible in miniature.

Some branches produce no grapes but are capable of fast growth. They are the unproductive 'runners'. When I see them I cut them off quickly so that they do not drain goodness and energy from the vine. These runners can prevent the grapes from achieving optimum growth. I don't grow the vines for their leaves but for the fruit. Whilst some leaves are necessary to protect the grapes from becoming sunburnt, too many will divert energy and sustenance from the grapes.

When I see grapes forming on a branch, I will trim that branch so as to maximise the growth of the grapes on it, rather than allowing the branch to extend itself too far. If I allow too many bunches of grapes to grow on a single branch, the multiple clusters of grapes may become too heavy when fully grown, and cause the branch to be severed from the trunk.

Once any of the branches is cut off from the vine it immediately starts to die. The rapidity of its demise is quite dramatic – the leaves go limp almost as soon as they touch the ground.

No wonder Jesus used that analogy to depict our relationship with Him. As a branch attached to Him, I will remain healthy and strong. Conversely, as soon as I am detached from Him, I lose direction, vision and health. I lose my confidence, assurance and faith. I lose my identity and purpose for living.

Just as with the branch of a grape vine once it is cut from the trunk and becomes useless, fit only for the rubbish or compost heap, I can do nothing of eternal value without Christ. Anything I do in

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my own strength is ultimately bound to fail. Only those things that I do through the direction, energy and power of His Holy Spirit have any chance of eternal consequence.

When we feel we are being pruned, we should rejoice. This is because God is in the process of making us even more effective and fruitful than we have ever been. It is a time to let go of the potentially good and let God produce the very best.

### **John would say to us today...**

You can achieve absolutely nothing of eternal value in your own strength. Unless Jesus initiates and sustains it, it will fall over and die.

### **Prayer**

Father, please forgive me for all those times when I have gone ahead and made plans and then wanted You to bless them, instead of seeking Your will in the first place. Please give me the patience to wait until I get a clear signal from You before I rush off to do my own thing. Amen.

### **Additional Readings**

- 1 Samuel 13:1-14
- Numbers 22:1-38
- Isaiah 30:1-15

### **Questions**

1. What are some of the ways God confirms His will for us?
2. Why do we not like waiting for God?
3. How important to you is it to prioritise spending time with God on a daily basis?

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### **Lesson 11: John – Who is the Holy Spirit and what does He do?**

#### **Reading: John 16:7-15**

John spends a lot of time introducing us to the work of the Holy Spirit. He does so because he knows how significant and fundamentally necessary it is that each one of us, Christians, be filled with the Holy Spirit in order to accurately represent Jesus Christ on earth.

John saw the Holy Spirit alight on Jesus the moment He was baptised in water. John recognised the difference the Holy Spirit made to Jesus' ministry. He noted that Jesus was constantly filled with the Spirit and that through many discourses Jesus emphasised to His disciples the importance the Holy Spirit would make to their lives.

We are given a vibrant revelation of the Holy Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – from the Biblical record of Jesus' Baptism in water. Jesus, the Son, the Word was baptised; the Holy Spirit came and rested upon Him in the physical form of a dove; the people there heard the voice of God the Father from Heaven announcing: *"This is My Son, whom I love; with Him I am well pleased."*

From that moment on it became abundantly clear that Jesus was no ordinary man – He was God in human form – the Messiah – the Expected One from Heaven. The miracles declared it; Jesus' words confirmed it. His life was a demonstration of the power of God as released by the Holy Spirit.

Jesus was adamant that the miracles He performed were a demonstration of the power of the Holy Spirit – they were not a result of demonic activity – by Beelzebub – as some of the religious leaders suggested. No, Jesus was definite that His power came only from the Holy Spirit of God – who is pure and holy.

John highlights the fact that Jesus often referred to the Holy Spirit and the necessity for Jesus' true disciples to receive Him. Jesus made the correlation that in order for His disciples to receive the Holy Spirit, He would have to ascend into Heaven before He could send the Holy Spirit to each of His disciples.

On the last day of celebrations at the Feast of Tabernacles, Jesus announced to all the people that He was the source of living water that those who were thirsty should drink. However, as John pointed out for us, Jesus was actually referring to the Holy Spirit who would be sent to His disciples after He had risen from the dead and had ascended into Heaven.

So, who is the Holy Spirit? He is a Person; a member of the Triune God – the Trinity. He is also referred to as "the Spirit of Jesus" since He is sent to us by Jesus.

The Holy Spirit is the representative of Jesus on earth today. When we become Christians, He is the One who takes up residence inside us. And just as God the Father is good, Jesus Christ is good, so also the Holy Spirit is good – supernaturally good.

The Bible uses the word, "Paraclete" for the Holy Spirit. It has two dimensions to its meaning: counsellor, the one who comes along side. Counsellors work along side us to bring us wisdom and righteous insight. The Holy Spirit does that. Another picture is of a boat in trouble. It sends out a Mayday signal and a larger vessel comes along side and assists the distressed boat back into the safety of the harbour.

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Similarly, the Holy Spirit comes along side us to help us reach our destination – Heaven. He is always beside us and will not leave us until we are safely resident with Jesus in Heaven.

What does the Holy Spirit do? He makes Jesus real to us.

Yes, we believe Jesus Christ is God by faith. When we commit our lives to Christ, having acknowledged our need for Him and that He died in our place on the Cross, when we ask for His forgiveness and repent by changing our lifestyle to conform more and more to the way Jesus would want us to live, when we ask Jesus for the Holy Spirit, He sends the Holy Spirit to take up residence in our lives and brings us peace, joy and hope.

God longs for each of us to be baptised in the Holy Spirit so that we demonstrate the power of God on earth – so that the Kingdom of God comes to earth.

### **John would say to us today...**

The Holy Spirit's role is to make Jesus real to you. Why not ask Him to do that for you today?

### **Prayer**

*Thank You, Lord Jesus, for sending Your Holy Spirit to us. Please, Holy Spirit, fill me so that I can release Your power on earth in order that many will come to know Jesus Christ as their Saviour and Lord. Amen.*

### **Additional Readings**

- John 14:15-31
- Ephesians 1:15-23
- 1 John 4:7-19

### **Questions**

1. What is the role of the Holy Spirit today?
2. What experience have you had of the Holy Spirit's power in your life?
3. How can we bring the Kingdom of God to earth?

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### **Lesson 12: John – Prayer for unity**

#### **Reading: John 17:1-26**

John records this prayer as spoken just before Jesus and His disciples left on their walk to the Garden of Gethsemane. It was the night Jesus was betrayed by Judas and subsequently crucified. These were the last words that John heard Jesus pray prior to the events that led directly to Jesus' death.

Consequently, we do well to consider Jesus' prayer and the significance of the time Jesus said it. Jesus was talking to His Father at the end of His mission on earth. His 33 years of human existence were drawing to a climax. His work was nearing its end. Apart from the final act of supreme sacrifice, Jesus had completed all that God had planned for His time on earth.

John describes how at this poignant moment Jesus expressed His most passionate heart's cry. A three-fold desire. Firstly, that His Father would protect His disciples from the Evil One – Satan. Secondly, that His disciples would be united in heart and mission, and thirdly, that they would be filled with the same love that Father and Jesus, the Son, shared.

John reveals how Jesus had no delusion of reality. He knew that His disciples were heading for a really tough time. Just as Jesus would Himself be rejected and crucified, He knew His disciples would suffer mockery, pain, torture and martyrdom. However, Jesus did not pray that they would escape these trials. No, He prayed that they would be protected from the Evil One.

The world system stands against God's Kingdom. It did then and it does today. We are very naïve if we think that the world will ever produce righteousness. All the true disciples of Jesus will endure hardships of one sort or another in this world. It goes with the territory. We are of the Kingdom of Light whereas the world is in the kingdom of darkness – the two cannot be united.

Jesus prayed that His disciples would be protected from the enemy. To me, that speaks of two dimensions – firstly, as we see with Job, Satan's attacks and intents against us are totally at the discretion of God, and secondly, God will protect us from being ultimately claimed by Satan.

The second theme of Jesus' prayer was that of unity among His disciples. It is as necessary today as it was when Jesus first prayed it. That unity is unity in Spirit. We are all different. However, we can live and work in unity of Spirit. God doesn't expect uniformity, but He does expect His disciples to live and carry on His mission on earth in unity of Spirit.

There is an interesting English expression, which says – *whether we like it or not*. I like to use it in the context of Biblical unity. As His born-again disciples, we are – one in Christ Jesus – *whether we like it or not*. Because, that is not up to us – it is entirely up to God and His amazing grace. Furthermore, Jesus Christ is Head of His Church – One Church, One Faith, One Baptism – again, *whether we like it or not*. Every church – if they are a true representation of Christ on earth are One – *whether we like it or not*. It's not up to us – it's Christ's Church; not ours.

However, here is the challenge: Do we act, live and do mission as one? One Lord, one Harvest, one Kingdom. For when we do, Jesus' prayer will be answered – and the world will know and acknowledge Jesus is the true Son of God.

Please also notice that Jesus not only prayed for His disciples living at the time but also for all those who would believe in their message. That means the prayer extends right down to us today

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and, indeed, to all until Jesus comes again.

Lastly, John highlights that Jesus prayed that His disciples might know the love of God – as demonstrated in the relationship between the Father and the Son. I guess this dimension is too wonderful for us to even imagine. How did God love His Son, Jesus – the One in whom was all His delight?

If we knew that I guess our so-called problems would disappear, martyrdom would not be a fear but a delight, and the fullness of the unity within the Church would come on earth next week! Worth thinking about, isn't it?

### **John would say to us today...**

Please take this prayer seriously. Earth will never experience the full power and benefit of the Kingdom of God until the Church of Jesus Christ worldwide dwells in respect, peace and harmony, and works together in unity.

### **Prayer**

*Father, thank You for reminding me that Jesus died so that we might live in harmony – one Church, One Body of Christ. Please help me do all I can to preserve that unity and foster a greater unity in Your ongoing mission on earth. Amen.*

### **Additional Readings**

- Ephesians 3:14-21
- Colossians 1:3-20
- 1 Corinthians 1:10-31

### **Questions**

1. What are some of the potential barriers to church unity?
2. What does it mean to be protected from the Evil One?
3. How would you describe the love God the Father had for Jesus?



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### **Lesson 13: John – The Last Supper**

#### **Reading: John 13:1-30**

I find it fascinating that John describes these events for us rather than what has become the model of our modern day Communion Service, recorded by Matthew, Mark and Luke – and later Paul. There can be very little doubt that all these events took place on the same night.

Since God is the final Author, and the Holy Spirit the total inspiration of the Holy Scriptures, there must be some significant issues for us to consider.

I love the way John introduces the scene. He doesn't get straight into describing what happened – he takes time to set the scene. For John, that was as important as what took place. Remember, John looked for signs that Jesus was the Messiah, the Promised One, and what took place after the meal was as important as the meal itself.

John makes it very clear that he was looking back on the events. Yes, with the benefit of hindsight, because that enabled him to dig deeper than the actions ostensibly demanded. It was a normal meal but it was also the last supper they shared together on the night before the Passover Sabbath.

John looked back and eternity dawned in his mind. For John, those events occurred at a sacred moment in time. It was Jesus' last opportunity to reveal to His disciples His divinity prior to Calvary. Not only would Jesus institute a feast of remembrance but also establish a way of life – a life of love.

John tells us that Jesus did what He did, fully knowing the ensuing paradox. Jesus, the majestic, omnipotent Creator of the Universe, knew He was going to die for the sins of the world – yes, even including those friends He was now sharing a meal with. From a natural perspective they were a mixed bunch of uninspiring, disparate sheep. Lacking much imagination or leadership. Protective, jealous and insecure. Yet, Jesus saw something that most people couldn't. He saw in them His eternal impregnable Church.

I am indebted to the Bible Institute of Jerusalem, Israel, for illuminating the events for me. My family and I had the incredible privilege of attending their re-enactment of the Last Supper one day, and it was indelibly written upon my memory. I was in for many surprises.

They said that the famous western-style Michaelangelo painting was misleading. The supper was at night, not during the day. The participants, Jesus and His disciples, would have been lying beside a tri-clinium table (3 sided and 'U' shaped), resting on the floor, and not sat in chairs in a row at a long table facing the audience.

John's description of reclining at the table and being able to lean against Jesus becomes all the more accurate and logical. The positions reserved for the 'higher' participants were at one end of the upright of the 'U'. The MC, the Host and the chief guest were followed by the rest of the guests in descending order; the very lowest at the end opposite the MC. In this instance, John, who with Peter prepared the feast, was at the MC position. Jesus, the Host, was next. Then, instead of allowing Peter the next spot – that of most honoured guest – Jesus chose the betrayer, Judas.

John's narrative suggests that, upon being ignored and with Judas given preference by Jesus, Peter went off in a huff and positioned himself in the lowest place, no doubt hoping to be called

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higher. Unfortunately, on this occasion, he wasn't. From that position he could have mouthed the question, "Who will betray Jesus?" to John, without anyone seeing. Equally, John could have secretly motioned the reply to Peter.

Protocol demanded that everyone should have had his feet washed on arrival at the house prior to the meal, and, as no other servant was there, that duty would have been delegated to the person in the lowest place. However, Peter was in no mind to do so. And if Peter wasn't prepared to do so, why should any of the other disciples do it instead? Well, they wouldn't, would they? Would you? Would I?

Into this vacuum stepped the Almighty, Omnipotent Son of God! He laid aside His majesty (again), stripped to the waist as a slave, picked up the towel and began to wash the disciples' feet. He eventually arrived at Peter, who protested – probably emoted by a sense of guilt from not doing it himself. Jesus chided Peter and continued to wash his feet.

*"You call me Teacher and Lord and rightly so... I've set you an example. Now you know these things, blessed are you when you do them."* John records that through this action Jesus showed the full extent of His love.

Yes, it truly was the greatest Love Feast of all.

### **John would say to us today...**

It was a feast, in the Presence of God's anointed Messiah. It's right we celebrate the feast – but please don't overlook the demonstration of His love. The Last Supper was a true Love Feast in every way.

### **Prayer**

*Father, please forgive me from living so selfishly. Please help me to be more like Jesus – others-centred. Amen.*

### **Additional Readings**

- Romans 16:1-16
- 1 Corinthians 12:12-26
- 1 Corinthians 13:1-13

### **Questions**

1. What was Jesus teaching the disciples by washing their feet?
2. What do you think would equate to washing someone's feet today?
3. How should we show our love to our spiritual leaders?

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### **Lesson 14: John – Was there when Jesus won the Victory of Gethsemane**

**Reading: Matthew 26:36-46**

John was with Peter and James when Jesus withdrew from the other disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus knew that the time of His betrayal and sacrifice was near. He was feeling the spiritual pressure and burden of the price He would pay for the redemption of the world. Whilst He would have to carry it alone, He longed for His closest friends to be there to support Him as He wrestled with the enormity of the decision He was going to make.

It was make or break time for the Son of God. It was make or break time for humanity, for you and me, and it was make or break time for the devil, Satan. Gethsemane represented the goal of Christ's life on earth. Everything hung on those last few moments of liberty. The eternal question was suspended in time and space – would Jesus go all the way? Would He be able to satisfy the righteous demands of a Holy God? Would He go further than Abraham and Isaac – would He be the Ram caught in a thicket so long ago or would He pull out at the last second through sheer abhorrence to the task ahead?

It's good for us to reflect sometimes on the humanity of Jesus. We seem so eager to forget it and bask in the fact that He was the divine Son of God. But Jesus was also the Son of Man – that title that Jesus used and that John recalls so often for us. Jesus was fully God and fully human. We can't get our heads around that; however, we need to accept it by faith and from the signs and evidence that are presented to us from the Holy Scriptures.

Yes indeed, Jesus was the divine Son of God. That poses problems for us – not the least of which is: Since He was God how could He die? I don't understand it but there is overwhelming evidence that He did!

However, let's consider His humanity for a moment. From a purely human point of view, the situation did not look promising. The disciples whom He had tried, for 3 years, to train and prepare for this moment, were hardly the earthmovers and shakers that you and I would have chosen. They still seemed a disparate group, with their own puny and self-centred agendas. Thomas seemed totally unsure of anything, Peter wanted to do everything his way, which was often totally contrary to the ways of God, and Judas had just left to complete his conspiracy.

The religious leaders who should have been there to support, encourage and cheer-lead were the opposite: they were jealous, threatened and protective. They had determined to rid themselves of what they considered to be a dangerous and self-appointed Messiah.

Even John, James and Peter, His closest allies and friends, hadn't fully grasped the significance of who Jesus was or what His mission on earth was really all about. Right now, in the midst of Jesus' ultimate trial, they were disinterested, weary and aloof.

Jesus was, however, in the centre of it all. Surrounded by disbelief, miss-belief and hatred. But these were only the symptoms – there was a war a-waging. Jesus was involved in His own Armageddon. Not only was He fighting Satan – the great deceiver – but in His humanity He must have wondered if He was fighting God as well.

Whilst Jesus was in His majestic glory as God in Heaven, the Plan of Redemption was not only necessary but totally logical. There was no alternative – The Sentence had been passed and there

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was no going back. Justice had to be done and be seen to be done. Now as a human on earth it took on a new, very deep and personal significance. The time had come. The clock, which had started ticking in the Garden of Eden, was now striking down the minutes and seconds – it had become irrevocable. It was as if the final challenge was thundering from Heaven – *Will You do it? Will You actually carry out the plan? Will You pay the price?*

No doubt the enemy's sneers could be heard above the beating of His heart – *They are not worth it? Why sacrifice Yourself for a load of rebellious, selfish and wicked people who don't think twice about You now, let alone follow You after You are dead. Let me get my hands on them and teach them the lessons they deserve. They hate You – let me deal to them for You.*

Praise God, Jesus was resolute. Yes, He did utter that heart and Heaven rending cry – *If it is possible, let this cup pass from Me.* However, He added immediately: *Nevertheless, not My will but Yours be done!* That was the cry of victory and that was the cry that set us free. For true freedom is found in submission to God and Christ alone. The model was given and the battle won. The disobedience of Eden swallowed up eternally by the obedience of Gethsemane.

Hallelujah, what a Saviour!

### **John would say to us today...**

Jesus won the Victory in Gethsemane. Calvary and the Empty Tomb were the signs that confirmed the eternal efficacy of that Victory secured in the Garden. Adam lost the battle to Satan in the Garden of Eden but Christ conquered Satan totally in the Garden of Gethsemane.

### **Prayer**

*Lord Jesus, thank You for reminding me that true victory and success in life come from submission to the authority and the perfect will of Your Father. Please help me, by Your Holy Spirit, to come 'back to the Garden' everyday, for Your glory and the extension of Your Kingdom. Amen.*

### **Additional Readings**

- Genesis 3:1-24
- Galatians 4:21-31
- Psalm 51:1-19

### **Questions**

1. What is the significance of Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane?
2. What issues was Jesus struggling with?
3. How can we revisit the Garden in our spiritual experience on a daily basis?

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### **Lesson 15: John – The Victory of the Cross**

#### **Reading: John 19:19-27**

The Victory of the Cross is all-embracing. It reveals God with His arms outstretched to welcome and embrace each one of us. How could that be – a pure and holy righteous Judge embracing a wicked, dirty, rebellious and independent wretch like me?

The Scriptures tell us that Jesus, the innocent One, took the sin, selfishness and self-centredness of the guilty, the condemned – me and you – upon Himself and paid the ransom. He satisfied the sentence that was ours; He opened up for us direct access to God, no longer as Judge but now as our loving Heavenly Father.

There was absolutely nothing we could do to help ourselves. We were dead in our tracks, incapable of rescuing ourselves – for none of us is perfect. Only the spotless Lamb of God, Jesus, was able to satisfy the demands for our redemption.

With unconditional love, Jesus laid down His life for us. His death on the Cross sealed our pardon and set us free. The impregnable barrier between God and us caused by our selfishness and sin was removed through the shedding of Christ's blood on the Cross.

The power and effects of Adam's Fall were nullified. The curse that was upon us because of the effects of the Fall was broken – because Jesus was hung on a Cross. The Scriptures tell us that anyone hung on a Cross is cursed of God. So Jesus took the curse that was upon us and destroyed it forever.

My sins were paid for and forgiven – and the power to heal all my sicknesses was released. Guilt and failure no longer have the authority to ensnare and dis-empower me. Like a butterfly, I am released forever from the chrysalis to enjoy my true destiny.

The plan, the purpose and the execution were all God initiated. That is why the veil of the temple was torn in two – from the top to the bottom. Torn in two to open up an intimate relationship with God through direct access into His awesome Presence. And torn from top to bottom to prove that it was God's idea and intent, not my attempt to reach Him.

Just as with the brass snake in the desert that Moses put on a pole so that all who were bitten and dying could look and live and have their relationship with God restored, so we look to the Cross of Christ and live in an open relationship with God as our Father. God the Father embraces us – He embraces all who come to Him through faith in Jesus Christ as their Saviour and Lord.

However, Jesus did not die on a pole. He died on a Cross. He achieved two impossibilities. Yes, there was an upright dimension that achieved all we have considered so far – but there is more. Christ achieved far more than the brass serpent, far more than what Adam lost. Not only did Jesus open the way for us to have our relationship with God restored, He also opened up the way for us to have our relationships with one another restored – hence the horizontal beam of the Cross.

As soon as Adam and Eve disobeyed God's commands, not only did they hide from God, they started blaming each other. And that began the trend that has haunted our families and personal relationships ever since. We became protective, fearful, ambitious, self-seeking and determined to maintain superiority, whatever the cost to friendships or family ties. That created rejection, depression and loneliness. We replaced responsibility with rights, concern with callousness,

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kindness with self-centredness, and team-work with independence and isolation.

We long to live in unity but our basic interests of self-preservation and self-protection mean we no longer have the emotional energy to constantly look out for others. We hide in a crowd whilst longing for intimacy. We negotiate for the best we can for ourselves, rather than for the benefit of all or others. We prefer ourselves rather than the other person. We submit to the tall-poppy syndrome – cutting others down to our level or below so we could feel better.

Jesus gives us the power to consider others rather than ourselves; He gave us the supreme example. Whilst hanging on the cross, not only did He ask God to forgive His executioners, He looked down and saw His totally distraught mother. He cried out: *Mary, look at John. John, look after Mary.* And John tells us that from that moment on he took Mary home to live with him. Through the Cross we can embrace one another.

Yes, the Victory of the Cross is the greatest victory ever accomplished and it was won through unconditional love – the greatest power in Heaven and on earth.

### **John would say to us today...**

Jesus didn't die on a pole – He died on a Cross – and so we are reconciled, vertically, to God as Father, and, horizontally, to one another as brothers and sisters of Christ. Because of Gethsemane, Golgotha lost its sting and power. Christ bellowed in victory – *It is finished!* I was there and I heard that everlasting, darkness-dispelling, doom-shattering roar.

### **Prayer**

*Father, thank You so much for revealing more of the significance of the Cross to me. Please help me become more like Jesus, more forgiving of others and definitely more caring and respectful of others. For Your Name's sake, I pray. Amen.*

### **Additional Readings**

- Isaiah 53:4-17
- Colossians 1:15-22
- Hebrews 1:3-13

### **Questions**

1. What issues does the victory of the Cross raise for you?
2. How will the victory of the Cross affect your life today?
3. Why can't we have human reconciliation outside of the Cross?

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### **Lesson 16: John – The picnic on the beach**

#### **Reading: John 21:15-23**

Earlier in the chapter John describes how Jesus set the scene for Peter to be fully restored in his relationship with Jesus after that horrific triple denial. After Jesus had been kidnapped by the soldiers of the chief priests and taken off to Annas and Caiaphas, Peter followed at a discreet distance, hoping to remain incognito (especially as he had just cut off the High Priest's servant's ear).

As Peter watched, he joined the servants and high priests' officials gathered around a fire warming themselves. John was quite specific: it was around a fire of burning coals. It was while Peter was there that he was challenged, and each time he denied that he was a follower of Jesus or even knew Him. It was obviously indelibly etched on John's mind, because the first thing John noticed once they had hauled in that mighty catch of fish, which Jesus had miraculously provided for them, was fish being cooked on a fire of burning coals.

A fire of burning coals in the courtyard of a stone building as a means of warming people was natural enough – but a fire of burning coals on a beach? That was special. Normally one would use driftwood – but no, Jesus went to a lot of trouble to achieve what He had planned.

Jesus wanted to take Peter back to the same setting where he had denied Him so Peter could be restored. The setting was similar but this time the challenge was different.

The question was not being asked by a bystander, or third-party observer – this challenge was made directly by the One Peter had offended.

The fire and fish were designed to make Peter think as well as represent a welcome back. Had I been Peter I think I would have stopped dead in my tracks as soon as I saw the fire. All the guilt and shame would have come flooding back. But how could he raise the issue with Jesus – it was far too embarrassing and a whole world away. No doubt he tried to erase it from his mind.

Jesus dealt with the physical needs of the disciples first. They enjoyed their breakfast and glowed in the warmth of His presence. However, Jesus had more on His agenda than breakfast. He had set the scene – then the time for the main event arrived.

In front of all the other disciples Jesus asked Peter – *Simon, son of John, do you truly love Me?* What a strange question – wasn't that obvious? Hadn't Peter jumped overboard immediately when he realised it was Jesus – in order to be with Jesus as soon as he could? What other than love had prompted him to do so? *Do you love me more than these?* Why add that qualification? They stayed in the boat – didn't they? *Yes Lord, You know I love You.*

But Jesus didn't stop there – He asked Peter again – *Simon, son of John, do you truly love me?* And again, *Simon, son of John, do you truly love me?*

Jesus addressed him as Simon three times. That was Peter's original name. Jesus had changed Simon's name to Peter when he exclaimed – *You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.* Now Jesus had gone back to using Peter's original name.

Peter, the spiritual person who had the divine revelation of who Jesus was; Simon, the natural person who had denied even knowing who Jesus was. So Jesus asked the natural person if he

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loved Him. And Jesus asked him three times – the very same number of times Peter had denied knowing Him.

Three times Peter denied knowing Jesus; three times Jesus asked Peter if he loved Him. Why? Did Jesus not know? Of course, He did. Just as much as Jesus knew that the man was blind when Jesus asked him what he wanted Jesus to do for him.

But Jesus had the highest motive as His goal. He wanted to expose Peter's failure. Why? To make Peter feel worse? No, He wanted to break the power of Peter's guilt. Once an issue is confessed it ceases to have the same hold over us. Jesus wanted Peter to acknowledge his failure, realise Jesus knew all about it BUT LOVED HIM JUST THE SAME. Jesus exposed the guilt, and helped Peter overcome the shame by confessing in public, once more, his unreserved love for Jesus. Yes, it was in public but it was also in front of his friends.

And yet there was more – not only was Peter forgiven, set free and restored in his relationship with Jesus – one other incredibly gracious and significant action took place. After each new confession of love, Jesus commissioned Peter to feed, take care of and nurture His flock; His followers; His Church. Yes, Jesus is into full and complete repentance and restoration. If He went out of His way for Peter, He will do the same for you and me.

### **John would say to us today...**

Jesus is fully determined to fully restore those who deny Him, given half a chance.

### **Prayer**

*Father, thank You so much for making John record this moment in Peter's life. Thank You that it sets a precedent for each one of us, because we all fail from time to time. Thank You so much that You are eager to restore all those who let You down. Please do it again for me. Thank You. Amen.*

### **Additional Readings**

- Luke 15:11-32
- Philemon
- Acts 7:57-58
- Acts 9:1-18

### **Questions**

1. Why does Jesus want to expose our sins?
2. What are the consequences of hiding our failures?
3. How do you think Peter felt once he was restored and commissioned?



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### **Lesson 17: John – How to expose the spirit behind Gnosticism**

#### **Reading: 1 John 4:1-21**

Jesus is an enigma. So much so we could almost say God is not the problem – Jesus is. Which is the reason that the first session on the Alpha Course considers *Who is Jesus*. Many people claim to believe in God but would never claim to believe in Jesus, particularly not Jesus as God. Though some might accept Jesus as one of the gods.

Many feel that Jesus was a good man, exceptional even, but definitely no more than a great moral teacher who went about doing good things. Like other gods, saints and ancestors, someone to whom you can pray or at least talk with in the hope of getting burdens off your chest when life becomes particularly stressful.

But who is Jesus? The records that show Jesus going about doing good and teaching great moral ethics are the same records that suggest He was more than a mere human being. If we accept the good deeds report, should we not also seriously consider the other claim that He is God?

Moral ethics do not emerge from a subjective view. Like a ship's anchor, which is only of real use when connected to the outside of the boat, the morals that shape our lifestyle need to come from somewhere else, outside of us; from a higher moral standard. Jesus gave that standard to us. If He were merely a man, His teaching would most probably have been lost to antiquity, like most of the other religious teachers. Especially because most of Jesus' teachings were very hard to put into practice.

So, who is Jesus? Ignoring the possibility of His being either mentally unstable or an evil deceiver, which most people tend to reject anyway, we are left with the enigma I raised at the start. Was He merely a man; part-man and part-God; a man with supernatural powers; one with just the appearance of God in human form or is it possible that He was God Incarnate?

There was no doubt that Jesus was a man. He looked like one, talked like one, acted like one – got tired, hungry, angry, sad, joyful, frustrated and lonely. Yet, there was obviously more to Him than mere humanity. He healed the sick, gave sight to the blind and performed miracles. He didn't display the usual self-centred and self-preservation traits of mankind. He was more concerned about others than Himself. So there was more to Him than mere humanity.

Was He part-man and part-God? He certainly showed aspects of both but not in any freaky way, like some half-man, half-goat example from mythology. In fact, if anything, He seemed more fully man than any other human has ever been. Although Jesus seemed to display some obvious limitations to His Divinity, it did not appear to limit the message He delivered or the work He came to do. The jury may be out on that; however, it looks unconvincing.

Is it possible, therefore, that He was a mere human being with supernatural powers? Again, possibly, but as we have already seen, the evidence suggests that His character was beyond normal human integrity and ability.

Here we come to Gnostic theology – Christ was only the appearance of God in human form. In simple terms, the Gnostics believe that God is spirit and pure and holy, as is the intellectual mind, but, matter and by implication, the human body is vile and sinful. Consequently, God the pure spirit could not take upon Himself a fully human form. They claim that the spirit left Jesus before He died

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and that is why He was able to cry: *My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?* It is almost as if they wanted Jesus to be God but not human, whereas most people living at the time of Jesus wanted Jesus to be human and to stop claiming to be God.

Let's consider the ramifications for a moment.

- Let's agree that Jesus was a great moral teacher and had supernatural powers that allowed Him to perform the healing miracles. Why then did He die?
- He was crucified, died and laid in a tomb in the cliff face. But we all know the body went missing. So where did it go? Who took it away and why? Why has no one been convicted of grave robbery, and why did they not produce the body to eradicate the spread of Christianity?
- If Jesus were merely a man, there would be no forgiveness for wrong thoughts and actions. There would be no future, except death. There would be no hope for an after-life, just mere speculation and a pipe-dream.

No wonder John was so adamant. John says: Listen, if anyone tries to con you, be very careful. Unless the speaker affirms that Jesus is God Incarnate (God in human form), don't follow their teaching – it is treacherous and leads to despair. Jesus is God. That is how He is able to forgive us for our sins and set us free. He came in human form and died on a Cross. He arose again from the dead, when He assumed a new sort of body, the kind of body we will get when He comes again. You can trust the Biblical record more than the ideas of people.

### **John would say to us today...**

beware of Gnosticism in all its forms. It is subtle and can be very effective in deceiving even Christians, but apply my test and it will reveal the real truth.

### **Prayer**

*Father, please give me the gift of discernment so I may be attuned to Your truth and able to detect the deception of the enemy. Amen.*

### **Additional Readings**

- 1 Corinthians 12:1-11
- Matthew 12:22-37
- 1 Corinthians 15:12-19

### **Questions**

1. What are the issues that we need to be very wary of, because they can so easily distort our true faith?
2. What are the results of absorbing Gnosticism into our culture?
3. How can we ensure our faith is a true representation of Biblical Christianity?

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### **Lesson 18: John – A prisoner on Patmos**

#### **Reading: Revelation 1:9-18**

Just imagine being John, incarcerated on the Isle of Patmos for being a Christian. It's a tiny Greek island in the Aegean Sea, just off the coast of Turkey – and the area where the seven Churches were situated.

Here John was banished from all those he loved and the church where he was an elder statesman. Friend-less, isolated, and undoubtedly frustrated and discouraged. Yet, into that very milieu Christ appeared. Yet not in the way John had seen before. Let's not forget – John walked with Jesus, talked with Jesus, and was privy to many exclusive and intimate moments with His Lord.

John was there at the Transfiguration, the Last Supper, in the Garden of Gethsemane and at Calvary. John was also there when Jesus first appeared to His disciples behind locked doors, and again when Jesus specifically returned to see Thomas. John was the first one to recognise Jesus that morning they had all gone fishing in Galilee – he had personally seen the resurrected living Christ.

But Jesus did not come and physically visit John on Patmos as in previous occasions. No, this time Jesus chose to reveal a whole new dimension of His character to John.

John explains that it was on the Lord's day that he had the vision. He was obviously deep in worship when everything changed. The trumpet blew and he received instructions to write a letter to the seven churches in Asia Minor. No doubt, they had already been on John's mind. Nevertheless, it was in response to that caring pastoral heart of John that Jesus came to give divine insight and instruction.

I love the way Jesus is totally unpredictable at times, don't you? Yes, He is totally dependable and constant in character; yet Jesus seems, so often, to go out of His way to be special. Not usually in huge ways, more often in the mundane and regular. He does something to prove to us again that He loves us, knows what is going on, and will bring a positive conclusion in the end. (Albeit requiring a greater dose of patience on our part in the meantime!)

I'm sure a resurrection-type visit from Jesus to John in prison would have been a fantastic thrill for him, but Jesus had a bigger plan. Jesus wanted to reveal something John had not witnessed before. It needed to be more than a personal encounter; this was to be shared not only with all those involved in the churches at the time, but down through the millennia, to you and me. It would become not only the source of songs, choruses, hymns, operas and dramas, but also the source of all our hope.

By faith we can all hear that fear-shattering roar – *Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the Keys of death and Hades.* I am sure you and I read those words from the pages of our Bibles and still get a shiver down our spines.

Imagine John. Cooped up in a cell, possibly shaking with the damp and cold. He had been contemplating his Lord and Saviour and, no doubt, remembering their special times together, especially the ones since the resurrection.

Suddenly, John was awoken sharply out of his reverie by a shout like a shrill trumpet blast. He

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obviously had difficulty recognising the voice as he turned to see who it could be. It was then that he had the most amazing vision he ever had. This was greater than the resurrected Lord, even greater than the Transfigured Christ – though both of these had also made him spellbound at the time.

The vision before John now was of an exalted Jesus, in resurrected and ascended glory. Brilliant in splendour, almost defying description. Here was His radiant Jesus, surrounded by golden candlesticks that reflected the blinding light of His dynamic Presence. As the light emanated from Jesus, it made His hair appear pure white, like freshly-fallen snow – and His eyes just blazed like fire. It poured its radiance down His raiment to His feet.

His voice was not only loud and beautiful, it also demonstrated total authority. His hands shone with the brilliance of the stars and the sword of the Spirit protruded from His mouth – a truly awesome sight.

That was the vision John saw as he heard that mighty exclamation:

*Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the Keys of death and Hades.*

As you read them again today – remember Who it was who said these words, and then go and enjoy your day even more!

### **John would say to us today...**

Please never forget Jesus is not just a man. Yes, He died but He didn't remain dead – I saw Him alive after His resurrection. More than that, I saw Him in my vision as the Eternal Almighty Glorified Lord and Master. I'll let you into a secret – I am with Him now.

### **Prayer**

*Thank You, Lord Jesus, for allowing John to see that awesome vision and for ensuring he recorded it for us. It is hard for me with my finite mind to visualise, let alone, accept or understand it. Please help me receive the vision by faith and base my whole life and purpose upon that awesome sight. For Your Name's sake. Amen.*

### **Additional Readings**

- Matthew 17:1-13
- John 20:19-31
- 1 Peter 1:3-9

### **Questions**

1. Why is the fact that Jesus is the Almighty Creator God so important?
2. What difference will that fact make to the way you live your life today?
3. How do we maintain that poignancy, that significance, in our lifestyle?

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### **Lesson 19: John – An open Heaven**

#### **Reading: Revelation 5:1-14**

Surely this is one of the most fantastic sections of John's revelation, isn't it? For me, it encapsulates the whole Gospel Story.

It begins in Heaven – where the Plan of Redemption was drafted. There, in His Divine Righteous Majesty, is God the Father, sat on His Eternal Throne. And He is not alone. He is surrounded by the hosts of Heaven, thousand upon thousand of angels, the elders and all of Heaven's authorities.

He has a scroll in His hand. It is a scroll of supreme importance – it has the ability to do something nothing else can – reveal the future; reveal the end of time. However, it needed to be opened and the cry had gone out requesting the right person to open it – but none was found worthy. John was distraught.

Out of that dark despair came a bright shaft of light. Yes, it was true that none had been found worthy, none pure and holy enough, none righteous and clean. The verdict was obvious – all had fallen short.

Then came a voice of hope. An elder spoke to John and told him he could stop weeping because there was Someone who was worthy after all. He told John to look out for the Lion of the Tribe of Judah, from the Root of David, who had won the victory and proved totally worthy to open the scroll and break the seals.

John would have remembered the Scriptures. Jacob prophesied over Judah that he was like a lion's cub. Isaiah prophesied that the Messiah would come from David's hereditary line. This proclamation pointed to the Promised Messiah – Ruler of the earth and rightful Prince of Heaven. Jesus Christ was from David's line and had proven Himself to be the promised Messiah. He alone had triumphed over sin and death, and won the victory over Satan. He was the One who held ultimate power and ultimate authority.

However, when John turned to look for the victorious Lion, he saw, instead, a Lamb. In total contrast from a Roaring Lion, John saw a small gentle Lamb. And not only was it a small gentle lamb, it was a lamb that showed the signs of sacrifice. Yes, it was Jesus. Yes, it was the Lamb of God who took away the sin of the world. The marks of the Sacrifice were as vivid to John, in the vision of Heaven, as they had been there on that fateful day at Calvary.

There is no escaping the Cross. Jesus bore the marks of our rebellion against God in His body – those signs are still there in Heaven. In a way they represent the proof, the trophies of His victory. As He stands to take the scroll, none can argue, none can doubt, that He alone has the Omnipotent Power and Authority, and that He alone is totally worthy.

Yes, the Lamb may have been slain; however, in so doing He paid the ultimate price to secure forever the Ultimate Power and Authority over every living thing in Heaven or on earth.

There was no argument in Heaven, for, as soon as He was revealed, a triple wave of spontaneous praise ascended to the Throne. It began with the elders and the Church. Then the myriads of angels joined the swelling chorus and, finally, the whole of creation – every part of the universe, every corner of the cosmos – broke out into adoring worship.

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Yes, everything that has ever been created, every person from every nation in each succeeding generation has been created for that purpose – to worship Jesus Christ as Lord. John had the awesome privilege to see a vision of what will be the greatest event of all time.

We may sing, “*Jesus Christ is Lord*”, we may say, “*Jesus Christ is Lord*” – we may even go so far as to say, “*Jesus Christ is my Lord*”. Wonderful as they may be – one day we will see that True Reality – when every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. Wow, what a day that will be! I can’t wait, can you?

### **John would say to us today...**

Be open-minded. You may look and see a lamb that had been slain. However, in reality it is the Lion of the Tribe of Judah who has triumphed over sin and death and Hell.

### **Prayer**

*What an amazing sight! Thank You, Father, for revealing to me, yet again, the amazing paradox – meekness and majesty – a Lamb that is, in fact, the Lion. Thank You so much for Your plan of redemption that caused Your beloved Son to become the Lamb to take away the sin of the world. Thank You that His sacrifice was both perfect and complete, and so, today, He stands as the all-conquering Lion of Judah. Hallelujah. Amen.*

### **Additional Readings**

- Genesis 22:1-14
- Genesis 49:8-12
- Psalm 2

### **Questions**

1. What is the significance of this vision?
2. What does the name, Lion of the Tribe of Judah, mean to you?
3. How does Jesus fulfil both roles – Lamb and Lion?

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### **Lesson 20: John – A New Heaven and a New Earth**

#### **Reading: Revelation 21:1-7**

It's what we all long for, and yet, at the same time, it can seem quite scary, can't it? We all long for freedom from sickness, pain, drudgery and evil, and yet, they are the issues we constantly live with and are most familiar with. Consequently, we seem to be trapped by the feeling of being safer with 'the devil we know' than the glorious vision we don't know. John's amazing vision.

I have shortened our Bible study reading specifically because the vision before us seems to become more and more difficult for our finite minds to grasp the further we read in the chapter.

So let's stick with the concepts that are more realistic and appealing...

A new Heaven and a new Earth. Whilst that is also beyond our experience or ability to describe, it is, nevertheless, something that seems inherent within the human soul. There must be more to life than this. There must be a better ending than the one that confronts us everyday.

We all long for improvement, better conditions and an easier way of life, but is that realistic in this life? Probably not. Yes, there will be small gains but the cry within our hearts is for far more. Even disregarding the materialistic world, we still seem to have within us that drive for new experiences and greater thrills.

The concept that this life could be extended indefinitely, however, is not very attractive. If you ask most people whether they would want to live forever, their enthusiasm quickly wanes when the conditions are fully explained. No one really wants life, as we now know it, to form the basis of everlasting life. If we were to live forever and ever, there would need to be some fundamental changes.

The problem then arises – who is going to decide what those changes are going to be? You probably have a whole different set of values and expectations from me. On top of that, we experience change in the world of nature as it is. We can't control the climate, however clever we think we are. Yes, we may become more astute as to how to become better stewards of this earth's resources and reduce the pollution of the atmosphere, but we still don't control the elements. The expectation to do so is no more than an illusion.

Thus, for most of us, we would like to fall back upon what the Bible says. It is here that we have a glimmer of real hope. Within John's vision there is a time foretold when Jesus Christ will return to the earth and reign for 1000 years. However, there is, as we have read, the promise also of a new Heaven and a new Earth.

The first element of the new Heaven and new Earth is the declaration that God would be there dwelling with His creation – you and me. No longer would there be a separation by time and space, nor of relationship – for by then we would have been redeemed and made pure and holy in His sight. God's desire, shown initially in the Garden of Eden where He had an open and intimate relationship with Adam and Eve, would be restored.

The next element is that of God wiping away every tear. Who wouldn't want to 'buy in' to that? Can you imagine that? No more tears – ever. How many people are there, I wonder, who cry themselves to sleep every night? Not in Heaven. Not on the new Earth.

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No more death. Wow, how can that be? No more war, no more terrorism, no more fatal car crashes, no more ageing, and no more famines, fires, floods and earthquakes devastating communities.

No more mourning. Well, there is no more death – so we live forever. There is no more death so there is no need to mourn those who have gone on before us – no, we are all together again, forever. And no more mourning over separation through divorce, etc.

No more crying or pain. Nothing to hurt or maim. No sickness, no injury, no addictions. Just love.

The old order has passed away. What we experience today, gone forever. No regrets, no lost dreams, no broken promises, no financial burdens, no guilt or feelings of rejection. No fear, no abuse, no pain. Just unconditional love. The old order has passed away.

Hold on to the Bible, hold on to Jesus – they are our only hope.

### **John would say to us today...**

This earth is passing away – don't hold on to it tightly. Rather, keep your eyes on the goal to come – your eternal destiny.

### **Prayer**

*Father, it is hard at times to remember that we are but pilgrims passing through this wonderful earth of Yours. Please help me to focus on true reality rather than the transient images before me. Please help me prepare myself for Your eternal Presence. Amen.*

### **Additional Readings**

- Revelation 21:22-27
- Isaiah 65:1-18
- 2 Peter 3:1-14

### **Questions**

1. What are you looking forward to in the new Heaven and new Earth?
2. What will you be pleased to leave behind?
3. How will you prepare yourself for eternity?



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### **Lesson 21: John – The River of Life**

#### **Reading: Revelation 22:1-17**

In the Garden of Eden there was a river together with two trees: the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and the Tree of Life. In the Garden of the New Throne, there is the River of Life, and on either side is the Tree of Life. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil has gone forever. The leaves of the Tree of life maintain the health of the nations. The Tree bears fruit constantly, fruit that may be freely eaten.

The Garden of Eden became a representation of man's throne, our disobedience against God. Here, in Heaven, we have the original plan – God's Throne. The Throne of God and the Lamb. We 'met' the Lamb of God earlier. The One who was able to open the scroll. The Ultimate Authority in Heaven and on Earth. The One before whom every knee shall bow.

*"His servants will serve Him."* This is an interesting statement, isn't it? Where is the bit about sitting on clouds strumming harps? Not here. No, here we are to serve God. That makes Heaven an even more exciting place, doesn't it? Not a place of inactivity but a place of inexhaustible possibility. The future looks bright, to say the least. Having served God for the last 40 years and enjoyed the most exciting life I could ever imagine, I can only think Heaven is going to be the most mind-blowing experience any human could ever dream of. Hollywood would not be able to conceive anything that could, in the minutest way, compare with Heaven.

*"They will see His face"*. Can you remember those times when after a brief separation from a loved one – through them going away on holiday, business or whatever – you caught sight of them once more. Maybe in an airport waiting area, you saw them in the distance and couldn't wait to go up and hug them. What a fantastic feeling that was. There you were, the two of you, together again.

Heaven will be like that, only far greater. Yes, we will meet our Christian loved ones again, but more than that, oh so much more than that – we will meet Jesus and Father face to face. Wow, we can't even begin to imagine what that will be like, can we? But that is the promise. We won't feel we are in a crowd – we will be face to face. Face to face with God.

There is no night in Heaven. John tells us that one of the qualities of God is that *He is Light and in Him there is no darkness at all.* *"The Lord God will give them light."* In fact, there will be no sun in Heaven, since God will provide all the light we will need.

John tells us that Jesus said He is coming soon. Yes, we don't know when it will be and trying to speculate would be futile. However, this world is not going on forever. We see evidence that the natural resources are being extinguished, and species are becoming extinct. We need to be prepared for change, whether by death or Christ's return.

That preparation includes acknowledging who Jesus is. If we think of Jesus as just another human being, we will have missed the most significant truth in history. We all need to be forgiven. We all need a Saviour. We all know, deep down, that we are imperfect people. We aren't the people we would like to be – we keep missing the mark of our own standard, let alone God's perfect standard. Yes, we need a Saviour. We need to cry out to God for forgiveness and for Him to take our selfishness and sin away.

John's vision warns us that the imperfect and the wicked will not enter Heaven. So, we can only get into Heaven in the way the Bible prescribes. Jesus said, *"I am the Way, the Truth and the Life,*

## **The Cloud of Witnesses**

*no one comes to the Father except through me.*” If Jesus is the only way, we must accept the fact that He is God and our only Saviour. Then we will get to go to Heaven – as simple and as profound as that is.

John reveals the cry of Heaven – *“Come! Whoever is thirsty, come. Whoever wants to, come. Take the free gift of the water of life.”* Are you? Are you thirsty? Do you want to “Come”? You can now – don’t delay it any longer. Ask Jesus for that life-giving water and seal your place in Heaven.

### **John would say to us today...**

Whoever is thirsty may come. Are you thirsty? If so, you are welcome. Take the free gift of the water of life. You will never be the same again.

### **Prayer**

*Father, I am so glad that You did not wait for me to become perfect before You allowed me back into an intimate relationship with You. You just waited for me to be thirsty. Thank You, Lord Jesus, for quenching my thirst, removing my sin and welcoming me home. Amen.*

### **Additional Readings**

- Revelation 1:9-18
- Isaiah 55:1-13
- Zechariah 14:4-9

### **Questions**

1. What does it mean to be thirsty?
2. What are the qualities of living water?
3. What things can stop the living water from flowing freely?

## **The Cloud of Witnesses**

### **Lesson 22: John – The disciple whom Jesus loved**

#### **Reading: John 13:21-30**

What a title – *the disciple whom Jesus loved*? We call him, John. Yes, we call him John but he calls himself – *the disciple whom Jesus loved*. Was that arrogance? Was that favouritism? Or was it a dynamic revelation?

Did John think he was the only disciple that Jesus loved or was John so overwhelmed by the love of God that he thought he had received more grace than all the others put together?

We don't read anywhere else that the other disciples or, indeed, John's own disciples called John *the disciple whom Jesus loved*. So we must infer that it was a description that only John used about himself.

What was John trying to convey to us? Did he think he was a unique person who had a special and more intimate relationship with Jesus than the other disciples? A title that reflected his superiority to all the others? Was that 'son of thunder' arrogance being revealed once more? Or was it a humble expression of unmerited favour?

When we examine the events that prompted John to use that title, they are far from times of self-elevation. On each occasion it was Jesus whom John was highlighting. So whilst we know John was one of the three who appeared to have had the closest relationship with Jesus – James, Peter and John – John nowhere seeks to suggest he was the greatest of the three.

On the contrary, John seems to adopt John the Baptist's position – *He must become greater, I must become less*. So why did John adopt this title and, in doing so, what was he trying to describe?

I would like to suggest that John had a dynamic encounter with Jesus and also with the Holy Spirit. John's Gospel was written towards the end of his life. He was looking back on those amazing events that occurred whilst Jesus lived on earth. However, he was writing post Calvary, post the Resurrection, post Pentecost and after a full life – a life filled with the Holy Spirit and full of the experiences of the Holy Spirit's power flowing naturally through his life.

He would have pondered the awesome privilege he had of being there at all those events. He must have marvelled at the grace of God towards him, allowing him to live at the time when God invaded earth. More than that, he was given the most enviable position of a close friend of the Son of God. He walked with Jesus, talked with Jesus and experienced some of Jesus' most intimate and emotionally extreme moments. He saw Jesus suffer for the sins of the world.

He also had the awesome privilege of seeing Jesus in the flesh and risen from the grave – both dead and alive again. He witnessed Pentecost and the indescribable power of the Holy Spirit, and the evidence of healings and the changed lives that followed.

Even as I write this I can almost sense John thinking – *How can I describe what I have seen? It is beyond human understanding – beyond human description? Who am I to have witnessed all these things? Why did God choose me? What have I ever done to deserve this awesome privilege? God really must have especially loved me. Jesus was so very, very kind to me; His love was overwhelming.*

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Maybe that was it. Maybe that was how it happened. As John was contemplating the enormity of the grace and love God and Jesus had shown him, his heart responded by overflowing in gratitude and praise. It was a natural reaction, having realised just how much love Jesus had shown him, despite John's own recognition of his total unworthiness. *Wow, I've received a glimpse of how much Jesus must have loved me. Yes, I'm the disciple Jesus loved, no doubt about it.*

I am quite sure God longs for all of us to claim the same. We can use the same title for ourselves. The amazing thing is that it is entirely up to us whether we do so or not.

Can I encourage you? Look again at the Cross. See the Darling of Heaven dying in your place while you were totally incapable of pleasing God or calling Him Father. Review again all that the Lord has done for you and through you since you became a Christian. Then ask yourself – *Am I a disciple whom Jesus loved?*

### **John would say to us today...**

I long for you to know what it means to be loved by Jesus. His love for you is unconditional and unending. Nothing you can do can make Him love you more and nothing that you've done will make Him love you less. There is nothing you can do to earn His love; all you need do is accept it. Please open up your heart and mind and receive it right now.

### **Prayer**

*Lord Jesus, thank You for showing me a glimpse of what John was trying to reveal to us. Thank You that he had such a precious revelation of Your great love to each one of us. Please help me grow in my appreciation and gratitude until I, too, am prepared to call myself – another disciple whom Jesus loved. Amen.*

### **Additional Readings**

- John 19:23-27
- Luke 7:36-50
- Galatians 2:15-21
- Ephesians 3:14-19

### **Questions**

1. What can stop us reaching out for God's love?
2. What do you think caused John to call himself *the disciple whom Jesus loved*?
3. How can we position ourselves to be able to say the same?