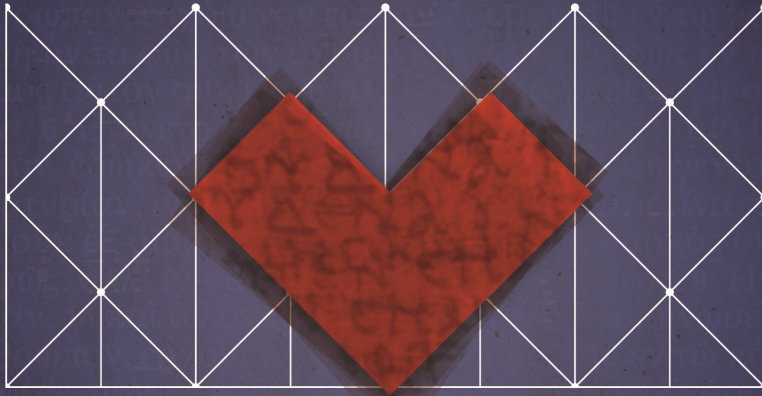


# THE GOSPEL OF JOHN



# BELIEVE

Studies in the book of John

**PART TWO:** Weeks 7-14

Group Applications

Personal Study



We would like to thank our pastors and elders for their leadership,  
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# Week 7

John 1:35-50

*"Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up."*

**Deuteronomy 6:4-7**

## Devotion

At the close of John's first chapter, we see Jesus beginning to call his disciples. A seemingly simple story, though, tells us so much about His claim on our lives when we commit to follow Him. There are three things that I find so interesting about this passage.

**Jesus prioritizes family.** Notice that John records Jesus calling brothers Andrew and Peter as well as close friends Philip and Nathanael. We also know that Jesus called another pair of brothers: James and John (Mark 1:16-20). Was this an accident? Certainly not! That half of the 12 disciples was called in pairs, which speaks to God's purpose in creating family and friendship for the teaching and training of the Word, the encouragement of the body, and the spreading of the gospel.

**The disciples prioritized family.** Immediately after finding Jesus, what was the response of Andrew and Philip? To find, declare, and invite those closest to them to see the promised Messiah. Andrew's enthusiasm for Jesus was such that all he said to his brother was, "We found the Messiah!" Rather than talk more about what he had seen, he grabbed his brother so that he might experience Jesus. In the same way, even though Nathanael expressed initial doubt about Jesus, Philip focused on getting his friend to experience Jesus rather than to debate.

**Jesus called the disciples to prioritize him over family.** When we read this passage, it's easy to do so through 21st century eyes. After all, the "American Dream" is that we grow up to pursue our passion, raise a family, and, after decades of work, retire to a comfortable way of life. What do these three elements have in common? The pursuit of self and finding our identity. We may be inclined to see that Jesus' calling of his disciples was merely that He was giving the disciples a new identity and purpose, yet it was more radical than that. In first century Israel, life was about community and family, not self. The fisherman who labored over waters, the shepherd who protected the flock, and the farmer who planted and harvested crops, did so with the community in mind, not so he could feel fulfilled through pursuits. For these men to receive and accept a call to leave their primary obligations of supporting community and family to follow Jesus would have been a shock to those around them.

What does this mean for us today? If we claim to be followers of Jesus, this passage should convict us and call us to rethink our priorities.

**For the single person** – How does your time at work, in friendships, while dating, and in rest prioritize Jesus? Are your daily activities reflective of godly pursuits?

**For the married couple** – Is Christ at the center of your marriage? Are you idolizing your spouse at the cost of your relationship with the Lord?

**For the family with children** – Are your conversations focused on the Lord? Do you prioritize reading the Word and prayer as a family? Is more time spent on good things like sports, recreation, vacations, and "life" than on the ultimate thing – Jesus?

**For the widowed or divorced** – In your grief and healing, are you pursuing the Lord and making your relationship with Him the priority?

No matter our walk of life, Jesus earnestly desires for us to "come and see" the good and ultimate thing that came out of Nazareth!



[illegible]

# Treasure

1. Read through the passage two or three times.
2. Write down 10 observations about the text. Start by asking who/what/where/when/why/how?

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# Grow

1. Pick out one key verse that explains the heart of the passage. Ask yourself what verse, if removed, would make the passage hard to understand.
2. Meditate on that verse for 10-15 minutes by reading through it slowly and reflecting on its meaning and application. Here are a few ways to meditate:
  - Slowly think through each word of the verse.
  - Ask questions of the verse: Who is speaking? What is he or she trying to say? What truth is being revealed?
  - How would you write the verse in your own words?
  - Turn the verse into a prayer.

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3. Record any observations or applications you gained from your meditation:

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4. What are some ways this passage teaches us about what it means to follow Christ?

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5. Why does Jesus say Nathanael is a man “in whom there is no deceit”?

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## Go

1. What are some ways you can connect to non-believers about the nature of the human heart?

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2. How would you respond to someone who says the Bible is too idealistic?

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## Discussion Questions

1. In this passage, Jesus calls several disciples to follow Him. Think back on a time in your life when Jesus called you to follow Him—maybe it was a particular decision that you made, a sin that you needed to turn from, or a new direction in life. Share the circumstances and what that experience was like.

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2. We see several names of Jesus (examples include Lamb of God, Rabbi, King of Israel). Which one do you most resonate with and why?

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3. Jesus' character is also revealed by what He does (examples include calling the disciples, giving Simon a new name, and seeing Nathanael under the fig tree). Talk about what Jesus did, how that shows His character, and which attributes of Jesus you most admire.

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4. When Jesus meets the disciples, they are changed. How has Jesus changed your life?

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5. Jesus invited the disciples to follow Him. Where is Jesus calling you to follow Him right now? What changes does He want you to make in your life? Be honest about the challenges and risks that might require, and ask the group to pray for you.

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## Additional Reading

From *Our Priorities Are Off When Family Is More Important Than Church* by Joseph Hellerman<sup>1</sup>

Following Jesus meant belonging to two families, a natural family and a faith family. Unlike his surrounding culture, what is most important to Jesus is faith family: "Pointing to his disciples, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother'" (Matt. 12:46–50).

Jesus' call to join a new family generates an unavoidable loyalty conflict: *To which family do I now owe my ultimate loyalty?*

Most of us would rank our relationship priorities like this:

- God
- My family
- God's family (church)
- Others

But both Scripture and Christian history reinforce the idea that the family of God should rank higher than natural family. Jesus did not primarily call individuals into a private relationship with him. He calls us to join a movement, to become part of a new family. The notion that loyalty to God could somehow be separated from loyalty to God's family would have been foreign to Jesus and the early Christians. As third-century theologian Cyprian of Carthage famously said, "He who does not have the church for his mother cannot have God for his Father."

Western evangelicals tend to think of Jesus as a personal spiritual trainer with whom we interact one-on-one, leading us to distinguish between loyalty to God and loyalty to God's family. But for Jesus, the only way to relate to God is within the community of his family. Thus, Jesus' relational priorities look something like this:

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<sup>1</sup>Hellerman, Joseph. *Our Priorities Are Off When Family Is More Important Than Church*. ChristianityToday.com. N.p., 4 Aug. 2016. Web. 01 May 2017.

- God and his family
- My family
- Others

If God and his family take priority over our natural families, the problem of conflicting family loyalty is solved. Because Jesus lived in a culture where family loyalty reigned supreme, if he intended to establish a new faith family—one which would take priority over the natural family—he would obviously have to challenge natural family loyalty time and again during his earthly ministry. This is precisely what we find in the Gospels.

While our natural families are still the most significant earthly relationships we have, we must learn to situate our natural families under the overarching rubric of the family of God—not as distinct social entities competing for time and attention but as members of the same family.

A biblical view of the church that places the family of God as the first relational priority situates both singleness and marriage under the overarching rubric of the family of God. It encourages singles and families from every background, young and old, to cultivate meaningful relationships with each another. And it mobilizes everyone in the community to use their gifts for the benefit of the Body of Christ to advance the gospel in a way that fits their current life situation.

God wants all of his children to grow up into “the fullness of Christ” (Eph. 4:13), and our spiritual wellbeing depends upon rightly prioritized relationships. We need to learn to adopt Jesus’ relational priorities and put the family of God first.

# Week Eight

John 2:1-12

*On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples*

*a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine,*

*of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined.*

*And he will swallow up on this mountain*

*the covering that is cast over all peoples,*

*the veil that is spread over all nations.*

*He will swallow up death forever;*

*and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from all faces,*

*and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth,*

*for the LORD has spoken.*

*It will be said on that day,*

*“Behold, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us.*

*This is the LORD; we have waited for him;*

*let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.”*

**Isaiah 25:6-9**

# The Life At The Party

Compared to the awe-inspiring truth claims of John's first chapter, the opening verses of chapter two seem so normal. Jesus, his mother, and his freshly minted disciples gathered for a wedding celebration in a small Galilean town. To the bride and groom and most of their guests, he was just Jesus, the carpenter's son from Nazareth, and they would leave the feast with that impression of him unchanged. The same evening, however, was an entirely different experience for the disciples.

They and the servants at the wedding witnessed what Mary already knew. She had felt him kick in her womb while she was still a virgin. The angel Gabriel had told her, "the child to be born will be called holy – the Son of God" (Luke 1.35). Son of Man, Son of God. Fully human, fully divine. In the obscure backrooms of that wedding, the carpenter's son manifested his glory "as of the only Son from the Father" (John 1:14), and the disciples believed.

There in Cana the disciples glimpsed what Paul would later proclaim: Jesus, "though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men" (Philippians 2:6-7). There's a paradox. He emptied himself by taking something onto himself. Eternal divine nature took on finite human nature. Mary's firstborn had power over creation.

Water is necessary for life, but wine is a celebratory luxury. In the Old Testament, wine was indicative of God's blessing (Deuteronomy 7:13), while its lack was part of a curse (Deuteronomy 28:39, 51). At the wedding, Jesus turned ordinary water into not just a bottle, but 120-150 gallons of exquisite wine. A party that seemed to be drawing to a socially embarrassing close could now go on for days.

We must not overlook the extravagance of this and other signs in John's Gospel because they point to the extravagance of the incarnation, the cross, and the resurrection. Jesus is more than sufficient to meet our need. In Adam we are all dead (Romans 5:12), but Jesus, the Life, redeems us, then keeps giving abundant life and lavish grace, sustaining us until his return, when we will receive an inheritance that will never run out.



[illegible]

# Treasure

1. Read through the passage two or three times.
2. Write down 10 observations about the text. Start by asking who/what/where/when/why/how?

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# Grow

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  - How would you write the verse in your own words?
  - Turn the verse into a prayer.

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3. Record any observations or applications you gained from your meditation:

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4. How have you seen Jesus' power and grace in ordinary circumstances?

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5. Why are Jesus' dual natures as fully human and fully God essential for our salvation?

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## Go

1. How would you explain humility to a non-believer?

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2. How could you use John's account of the miracle at the wedding to help someone understand that following Jesus is not just about following a moral code, but receiving abundant life?

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# Discussion Questions

1. Share about your wedding or someone's wedding you went to recently. What did you enjoy about it? Any good stories to elaborate on?

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2. Jesus seems to have a strange interaction with his mother. Discuss what was going on and why it was significant (see Luke 11:27-28 or Mark 3:32-34 for help).

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3. Jesus' first miracle was turning water into wine at a wedding. What do you think is the significance of this being His first miracle? How might this first sign point to a greater truth about who Jesus is?

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4. Jesus is the perfect bridegroom, and one day His pure, spotless bride will be presented to Him at the marriage supper of the Lamb (Revelation 19:6-10). How might that future reality give us hope and instruction for the present?

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5. Though He did not have to, Jesus graciously answered his mother's request and met a particular need. What is a need that you'd like Jesus to meet today?

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## Additional Reading

From *For Us and for Our Salvation* by Stephen J. Nichols<sup>1</sup>

[The Council of] Chalcedon [451, A.D.] threaded the Gordian knot of expressing the union of the human and divine natures, natures that are diametrically opposed, in a way that avoided diminishing either nature, all the while being true to Scripture.... While the creed benefited from the combined efforts of [520] bishops, the crucial phrase that mattered, resulted from the work of one bishop—Leo of Rome, sometimes called Leo the Great. In a letter just prior to the council, which Leo himself actually did not attend, he expressed what most today take for granted as the orthodox definition of Christ as two natures in one person.

From Leo's *Tome*<sup>2</sup>

III. Without detriment therefore to the properties of either nature and substance which then came together in one person, majesty took on humility, strength weakness, eternity mortality: and for the paying off of the debt belonging to our condition inviolable nature was united with passible nature, so that, as suited the needs of our case, one and the same Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus, could both die with the one and not die with the other. Thus in the whole and perfect nature of true man was true God born, complete in what was His own, complete in what was ours. And by "ours" we mean what the Creator formed in us from the beginning and what He undertook to repair. For what the Deceiver brought in and man deceived committed, had no trace in the Saviour. Nor, because He partook of man's weaknesses, did He therefore share our faults. He took the form of a slave without stain of sin, increasing the human and not diminishing the divine: because that emptying of Himself whereby the Invisible made Himself visible and, Creator and Lord of all things though He be, wished to be a mortal, was the bending down of pity, not the failing of power. Accordingly He who while remaining in the form of God made man, was also made man in the form of a slave. For both natures retain their own proper character without loss: and as the form of God did not do away with the form of a slave, so the form of a slave did not

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<sup>1</sup>Nichols, Stephen J. *For Us and for Our Salvation: The Doctrine of Christ in the Early Church*, Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007. pp. 100-101.

<sup>2</sup>Leo, *The Tome*, letter 28, to Flavian in Schaff, Philip. *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church: Leo the Great, Gregory the Great*, Second Series, Volume 12, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf212.ii.iv.xxviii.html>. Accessed 12 April 2017.

impair the form of God. ...

IV. There enters then these lower parts of the world the Son of God...He whom nothing could contain was content to be contained abiding before all time He began to be in time: the LORD of all things, He obscured His immeasurable majesty and took on Him the form of a servant: being GOD that cannot suffer, He did not disdain to be man that can, and, immortal as He is, to subject Himself to the laws of death. The LORD assumed His mother's nature without her faultiness: nor in the LORD Jesus Christ, born of the Virgin's womb, does the wonderfulness of His birth make His nature unlike ours. For He who is true GOD is also true man: and in this union there is no lie, since the humility of manhood and the loftiness of the Godhead both meet there. For as GOD is not changed by the showing of pity, so man is not swallowed up by the dignity. For each form does what is proper to it with the co-operation of the other; that is the Word performing what appertains to the Word, and the flesh carrying out what appertains to the flesh. One of them sparkles with miracles, the other succumbs to injuries. And as the Word does not cease to be on an equality with His Father's glory, so the flesh does not forego the nature of our race. For it must again and again be repeated that one and the same is truly Son of GOD and truly son of man. GOD in that "in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with GOD, and the Word was GOD;" man in that "the Word became flesh and dwelt in us." GOD in that "all things were made by Him, and without Him was nothing made:" man in that "He was made of a woman, made under law." The nativity of the flesh was the manifestation of human nature: the childbearing of a virgin is the proof of Divine power. The infancy of a babe is shown in the humbleness of its cradle: the greatness of the Most High is proclaimed by the angels' voices. He whom Herod treacherously endeavours to destroy is like ourselves in our earliest stage: but He whom the Magi delight to worship on their knees is the LORD of all. So too when He came to the baptism of John, His forerunner, lest He should not be known through the veil of flesh which covered His Divinity, the Father's voice thundering from the sky, said, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." ... To be hungry and thirsty, to be weary, and to sleep, is clearly human: but to satisfy 5,000 men with five loaves, and to bestow on the woman of Samaria living water, droughts of which can secure the drinker from thirsting any more, to walk upon the surface of the sea with feet that do not sink, and to quell the risings of the waves by rebuking the winds, is, without any doubt, Divine. Just as therefore, to pass over many other instances, it is not part of the same nature to be moved to tears of pity for a dead friend, and when the stone that closed the four-days' grave was removed, to raise that same friend to life with a voice of command: or, to hang on the cross, and turning day to night, to make all the elements

tremble: or, to be pierced with nails, and yet open the gates of paradise to the robber's faith: so it is not part of the same nature to say, "I and the Father are one," and to say, "the Father is greater than I." For although in the LORD Jesus Christ GOD and man is one person, yet the source of the degradation, which is shared by both, is one, and the source of the glory, which is shared by both, is another.

### The Chalcedonian Creed<sup>3</sup>

We, then, following the holy Fathers, all with one consent, teach men to confess one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, the same perfect in Godhead and also perfect in manhood; truly God and truly man, of a reasonable [rational] soul and body; consubstantial [coessential] with the Father according to the Godhead, and consubstantial with us according to the Manhood; in all things like unto us, without sin; begotten before all ages of the Father according to the Godhead, and in these latter days, for us and for our salvation, born of the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God, according to the Manhood; one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, to be acknowledged in two natures, inconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably; the distinction of natures being by no means taken away by the union, but rather the property of each nature being preserved, and concurring in one Person and one Subsistence, not parted or divided into two persons, but one and the same Son, and only begotten, God the Word, the Lord Jesus Christ, as the prophets from the beginning [have declared] concerning him, and the Lord Jesus Christ himself has taught us, and the Creed of the holy Fathers has handed down to us.

## Resources

Go to [fouroakschurch.com/believe](http://fouroakschurch.com/believe) for links to the following resources:

*ESV Study Bible*

Lloyd-Jones, D. Martyn. *A Superabundance of Blessing*. (Sermon originally preached in Westminster Chapel, London, 1965). Accessed 11 April 2017.

Nielson, Kathleen. *John: That You May Believe*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2010.

Ware, Bruce. *The Man Christ Jesus: Theological Reflections on the Humanity of Christ*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013.

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<sup>3</sup> Schaff, Philip. *The Creeds of Christendom*, Volume II, New York: Harper & Row. <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/creeds2.iv.i.iii.html>. Accessed 12 April 2017.

# Week Nine

John 2:13-22

*"Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men and be crucified and on the third day rise."*

**Luke 24:5-7**

## And They Remembered

As the second chapter of John continues, the apostles have no idea what is in store for them and how much Jesus will change their lives. Just before the events of these verses unfold, they had each decided to follow after Jesus. They have had a glimpse of his power (the changing of water into wine) and know that John the Baptist has called him "the Lamb of God." But is Jesus the Son of God? Over the course of the next three years they will grow to understand that he is indeed who he says he is.

Verses 13-22 will cause the disciples to reflect on the past. First, they will come face to face with the Jesus spoken of by the Prophets. Later, they will hear Jesus talk about his future, and will remember his words after Jesus defeats death (Luke 24:44-47).

### Remembering What The Prophets Wrote

*"Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, and they will bring offerings in righteousness to the LORD."*

**Malachi 3:1-3**



The time had come for Jesus to make himself known to Jerusalem. Passover is at hand, and the temple courts are crowded. Jesus comes to the temple, the house of his Father, and finds a place of commercialization rather than a place of worship. With only a simple cord, Jesus clears the temple of animals, traders, and money-changers. One man clears masses. The disciples had to be gobbled up. What Jesus saw that day in the temple was not an isolated instance of questionable worship support. It was the outworking of greed cloaked with religion. "This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me" (Matthew 15:8-9).<sup>1</sup> He acts swiftly and powerfully. The people took notice, the Jewish leaders took notice, and the disciples took notice. They remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me."

## Remembering What Jesus Spoke

*"These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled." Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things."* **Luke 24: 44-48**

The Jewish leaders were supposed to be the caretakers of the temple, yet had allowed the cacophony of commercialization to take place. They approach Jesus and demand of him, "What sign do you show us for doing these things?" Who was Jesus to come in and drive everyone out? Jesus answers the question by foreshadowing his death and resurrection. "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." Jesus will die at the hands of men, and with power unimaginable, will overcome death and live again. Of course they believe he is speaking of stone and marble. But his followers later remember these words.

*"When therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the Scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken."* **John 2:22**

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<sup>1</sup> Piper, John. "Destroy This Temple, and in Three Days I Will Raise It Up." *Desiringgod.org*. Desiring God Ministries, 21 Dec. 2008. Web. 01 May 2017.

The days were dark for the disciples after the crucifixion of Jesus. They were afraid and were unsure of what they were supposed to do next. In the midst of this uncertainty, Jesus appears to them and opens their eyes to the scripture. They remember. They believe. They are filled with marvel and joy. In the days to come they will receive the Holy Spirit and will come out of hiding, proclaiming that Jesus is indeed the Son of God, He died for our sins, and He conquered death. He is alive.

## This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue or grey ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

# Treasure

1. Read through the passage two or three times.
2. Write down 10 observations about the text. Start by asking who/what/where/when/why/how?

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# Grow

1. Pick out one key verse that explains the heart of the passage. Ask yourself what verse, if removed, would make the passage hard to understand.

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2. Meditate on that verse for 10-15 minutes by reading through it slowly and reflecting on its meaning and application. Here are a few ways to meditate:

- Slowly think through each word of the verse.
- Ask questions of the verse: Who is speaking? What is he or she trying to say? What truth is being revealed?
- How would you write the verse in your own words?
- Turn the verse into a prayer.

3. Record any observations or applications you gained from your meditation:

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4. What does this passage tell us about Jesus' confidence in His power?

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5. Put yourself in the disciples' place. How do you think you would have reacted to the events in this passage?

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## Go

1. How could the idea of Jesus needing to be first in your life be an obstacle to a non-believer?

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2. How does Jesus replace the need for a temple building? Why is it important to understand this in light of evangelism?

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# Discussion Questions

1. Have you ever been really angry? Share the story and what was going on in your heart.

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2. Jesus was clearly angry about the evil works taking place in the temple. What was the situation and why was Jesus so upset? What consumed his heart (see verse 17)?

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3. What's the difference between righteous and unrighteous anger? (see James 1:19-20). Where might you be tempted to anger that is unrighteous? How can you ask for your group to pray for you in this area?

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4. What sign did Jesus give to prove that He was worthy of cleaning out the temple (verses 18-22)? How might this sign be significant for us today?

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5. What priority does Lord's Day worship have in your life? Do you fight to keep it pure the way that Jesus did? How might you grow in this area?

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## Additional Reading

*Thou Art The Way, To Thee Alone* by George Washington Doane (1799-1859)<sup>1</sup>

Thou art the way, to thee alone  
From sin and death we flee;  
And he who would the Father seek,  
Must seek Him, Lord, in Thee.

Thou art the truth—Thy word alone  
True wisdom can impart;  
Thou only canst instruct the mind,  
And purify the heart.

Thou art the life, the rending tomb  
Proclaims Thy conqu'ring arm;  
And those who put their trust in Thee  
Nor death nor hell shall harm.

Thou art the way, the truth, the life;  
Grant us to know that way,  
That truth to keep, that life to win,  
Which lead to endless day. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup>Doane, George Washington. "Thou Art The Way, To Thee Alone." 1824

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## Resources

Go to [fouroakschurch.com/believe](http://fouroakschurch.com/believe) for links to the following resources:

Halley, Henry. *Halley's Bible Handbook*. Zondervan Publishing House: Grand Rapids, Michigan. 1965.

Strong, James. *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*. Bible Hub, n.d. Web. 6 Apr. 2017.



# Week Ten John 2:23-25

*"The LORD sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart."*

**1 Samuel 16:7**

## The Heart of God and the Heart of Man

The Lord spoke the words of 1 Samuel 16:7 to the prophet Samuel as he considered which of the sons of Jesse were to be anointed as Israel's new king. His initial thoughts on this were similar to those of his countrymen—the qualifying standard for a king was great height, strength, charisma and overall appearance. Surely, kings must look and sound impressive if they are to be followed by their subjects and feared by their enemies. But the Lord allowed Saul to rule in order to demonstrate that it was not a man's outward appearance and stance that made him a great king, but rather his faithfulness to and reliance on God. Saul used his strength and charisma to hide a weak, self-pitying and paranoid heart, and Israel suffered as a result. A great heart reveals itself in the body and mind of a man, but what does greatness look like if not in the things we esteem to be great? Strength can be faked and charisma can be forced, but the source where a man draws these things from never can be and eventually reveals itself as he is tested and peered into.

Man judges others by their actions. Man judges himself by his intentions. God judges man by the motivations of his inward being—his heart. Even amid the adulations and wonder of the crowds and His own followers, Christ knew their desires and motivations. Some followed Him to fill their bellies. Others followed Him to crush the Romans. And still others followed Him to extricate themselves from small lives hidden in a scorned and overlooked part of the great, wide world. They desired nothing more than for Christ to fulfill their sinful desires, seeking to camouflage their self-interest with outward acts of piety and religious devotion. Yet they did not recognize their greatest need was to know and be known by the one true God in the face of Jesus Christ. Jesus knew all too well the games men played in order to get what they wanted.

The good news is that Christ knew this before coming to Earth. Indeed, this was the point of His coming to earth: "...to seek and save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10). This should encourage us.

Allow it to teach you about His love and patience towards us who were lost. Christ did not expect the world to fall in line behind Him at His appearing, but knew He would be rejected and considered weak and filthy and unacceptable. He came to bear witness to the fact that every person's heart was filthy and would exude whatever sentiments and perform whatever actions it perceived would get it ahead in the world. Jesus revealed Himself and His followers fled, the crowds mocked, and the Romans crucified. But that was expected and necessary. He came to die for us, wretched creatures who could not even recognize God, or worse yet, who hated God, that our hearts might be sprinkled clean by His precious and priceless blood, that we might experience true satisfaction—to know God and pursue Him with all of our being! To shake loose the shackles of self-fulfillment and sinful desires and stare Him full in the face and yearn for forgiveness and a way to come home. And indeed, in Him we have exactly that.

## This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

# Treasure

1. Read through the passage two or three times.

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2. Write down 10 observations about the text. Start by asking who/what/where/when/why/how?

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# Grow

1. Pick out one key verse that explains the heart of the passage. Ask yourself what verse, if removed, would make the passage hard to understand.
2. Meditate on that verse for 10-15 minutes by reading through it slowly and reflecting on its meaning and application. Here are a few ways to meditate:
  - Slowly think through each word of the verse.
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  - How would you write the verse in your own words?
  - Turn the verse into a prayer.

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3. Record any observations or applications you gained from your meditation:

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4. Why didn't Jesus reveal his heart immediately to others?

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5. In what ways does the fact that Jesus knows your heart inform your prayers?

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## Go

1. How would you explain the concept of the heart to a non-believer?

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2. What are some ways you can help a non-believer see that human hearts are sinful?

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# Discussion Questions

1. Jesus made a distinction between those who believed in Him because of His signs and those that truly followed Him. What is the difference?

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2. Some people only sought Jesus for His signs. How might this serve as a warning for us?

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3. Jesus “entrusted” Himself to only certain people. What do you think that means?

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4. Jesus knows the hearts of all people. How does this truth impact you? What areas of your heart might you not want Jesus to see or know about?

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5. This week is about saving faith. Think of a person you know who professed faith in Christ but is not currently following Him. As a group, pray for those individuals and ask that God would rescue them.

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# Additional Reading

From *The Green Letters* by Miles Stanford<sup>1</sup>

## Chapter 10—Self 1

One of the most important factors in Christian growth is the Holy Spirit's revelation of the self-life to the believer. Self is the fleshly, carnal life of nature, the life of the first Adam—"dead in trespasses and sins" (Eph. 2:1); thoroughly corrupt before God (see Gal. 5:19-21); the life in which there is no good thing in the sight of God (Rom. 7:18). Nowhere do spiritual principles mean more than here. Plato, with his "Know thyself," was more right than he knew but still only half right. Paul, with God's "Not I, but Christ" (Gal. 2:20), was all right!

In order for one to get beyond just knowing about the Lord Jesus and enter into a consistent and growing personal knowledge of, and fellowship with, Him, one must first come to know oneself. Introspection is not involved here—the Holy Spirit uses experiential revelation. First, the believer learns "Not I"; then, "but Christ." First, "Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone"; then, "but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit" (John 12:24). First, "always delivered unto death"; then, "that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest" (II Cor. 4:11). In service it is first, "death worketh in us"; then, "but life in you" (v. 12). All resurrection life springs out of death or else it would not be resurrection life—His risen life (see Rom. 6:5,6). We are to yield ourselves to God as those that are alive from the dead (v. 13).

For some years now the scene has been dominated by a conversion known as "commitment," which often, sad to say, amounts to little more than a spiritual miscarriage. When there is a bit of life, it usually blossoms overnight into full bloom and soon becomes heavy with the fruit of "dynamic," "radiant" personality coupled with busy, rushing service. The tragedy of this sort of thing is that self is at home and thrives in the glow of it all and is rarely found out for what it really is. All is indiscriminate "hearts and flowers."

The healthy new birth, based on deep conviction of sin and repentance toward God, starts out clear and strong with love and devotion to the Saviour. But before long there comes the sickening realization of an element within that pulls one back to self-centeredness, to the world, to the rule

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<sup>1</sup>Stanford, Miles J. *The Complete Green Letters*. *Google Books*. Harper Collins, 1983. Web. 01 May 2017.

of the Law, to sin. This learning by heart-breaking experience of the utter sinfulness and reigning power of self in the everyday Christian life is the means whereby we come to know the Lord Jesus beyond the birth phase—as our Saviour; on to the growth phase—as our Lord and Life. "To me to live is Christ" (Phil. 1:21). No believer will truly come to know the Lord Jesus as his life until he knows by experience the deadly self-life deep within for what it is.

At a Spiritual Life Conference many years ago Dr. C.I. Scofield said, "Not everyone, by any means, has had the experience of the seventh of Romans, that agony of conflict, of desire to do what we cannot do, of longing to do the right we find we cannot do. It is a great blessing when a person gets into the seventh of Romans and begins to realize the awful conflict of its struggle and defeat; because the first step toward getting out of the struggle of the seventh chapter and into the victory of the eighth, is to get into the seventh. Of all the needy classes of people, the neediest of this earth are not those who are having a heartbreaking, agonizing struggle for victory, but those who are having no struggle at all, and no victory, and who do not know it, and who are satisfied and jogging along in a pitiable absence of almost all the possessions that belong to them in Christ."

J.C. Metcalfe gives this same fact an added witness: "Many a young Christian, who has not been warned of this necessary voyage of discovery upon which the Holy Spirit will certainly embark him (Rom. 7), has been plunged into almost incurable despair at the sight of the sinfulness which is his by nature. He has in the first place rejoiced greatly in the forgiveness of his sins, and his acceptance by God; but sooner or later he begins to realize that all is not well, and that he has failed and fallen from the high standard which he set himself to reach in the first flush of his conversion.

"He begins to know something of the experience which Paul so graphically describes: 'What I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that do I' (Rom. 7:15), and, in consequence, he feels that the bottom has fallen out of his Christian life; and then perhaps the Devil whispers to him that it is just no good his going on, because he will never be able to make the grade. Little does he know how healthy his condition is, and that this shattering discovery is but the prelude to a magnificent series of further discoveries of things which God has expressly designed for his eternal enrichment. All through life God has to show us our own utter sinfulness and need, before He is able to lead us on into realms of grace, in which we shall glimpse His glory."

Self-revelation precedes divine revelation—that is a principle for both spiritual birth and spiritual growth. The believer who is going through struggle and failure is the Christian who is being



carefully and lovingly handled by his Lord in a very personal way. He is being taken through the experience (years in extent) of self-revelation and into death, the only basis on which to "know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death" (Phil. 3:10).

God works by paradox. Success comes via failure; life springs out of death and so on. The only element in the believer's life that crumbles is that which has to go anyway—the new life can never be harmed or affected. This disintegration is something the believer cannot enter into nor engineer on his own—self will never cast out self. He has to be led into it by the mercy of the Holy Spirit—into failure, abject and total. "For we which live are always delivered unto death for Jesus' sake, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our mortal flesh" (II Cor. 4:11). So often the means utilized by the Spirit is an unsaved mate, or even a saved one! Or poor health; yes, and good health too! A thousand and one things are used by Him—in fact, everything (Rom. 8:28,29), to bring out the worst in us, ultimately enabling us to see that the Christian life has to be "not I, but Christ" (Gal. 2:20). People, circumstances, etc., are never the cause of failure. Self's reaction to them is the cause and the one problem to be dealt with.

"Many of us have probably known what it was to rejoice in the grace of God without having apprehended very much the true character of the flesh. It has often been noticed that where there is the greatest exuberance of joy in young converts, there is often a levity which fails to take into account that the flesh is unchanged. In such cases the grace of God is taken up in a self-confident way; there is very little self-distrust, or sense of weakness and dependence. And the inevitable consequence is a fall, or a succession of falls, that gradually brings home to the consciences of believers their utter weakness and incapacity as in the flesh" (C.A. Coates).

Evan Hopkins shares some important light on our subject: "How infinite are the forms in which self appears. Some are occupied with good self. They pride themselves on their excellencies. Others are just as much occupied with bad self. They are forever groaning over their imperfections, and struggling with the flesh as if they hoped in time to improve it. When shall we be convinced it is so utterly bad that it is beyond all recovery? Our experience, upward, in the power of God, is just in proportion to our experience, downward, in ceasing from self.

"Is it, Reckon yourself to be weak in reference to sin? No, it is lower than that. Is it, Reckon yourself to be dying? No, lower still. 'Reckon yourself to be dead—(Rom. 6:11)—indeed unto sin.' Some believe they are very weak. But what does that imply? That they have some strength. But when a

man is dead he has no strength. We must act on the fact that we are dead in reference to sin. We shall not then speak of difficulty as to resisting temptation in reference to ourselves. We shall take the lowest place, and say it is impossible. But we shall know that what is impossible with self is possible with God. We shall take our place on the resurrection side of the cross, and in so doing we leave behind the old self-life for the new Christ-life. To live in Him who is our Life, is to be in the power of God."

Someone has rightly said, "There are many 'separated from the world' Christians who are not 'separated from themselves' Christians."

# Week Eleven John 3:1-8

*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.*

**1 Peter 1:3**

## Radical Renewal

### The Necessity of Regeneration

To rightly understand what Jesus is laying out for Nicodemus in John 3, we have to go all the way back to the Garden of Eden. Adam was an upright or righteous man created in the image of God. When he fell, all of humanity fell in him and became corrupt. What does this mean for us? It means that every faculty of our being is affected by sin. Apart from Christ we are in a sad and hopeless condition. Thankfully God has not left us without a cure—Jesus Christ, the only hope for humanity. In Christ, we are promised a future resurrection of our bodies and a present resurrection of our hearts. To see the kingdom we must not only be forgiven, but transformed internally as well. We must be born again.

### The Nature of Regeneration

Simply stated, regeneration, or the “new birth,” can be defined as *an internal, immediate, and radical act of God upon the whole person, imparting to them a new principle of life*. Let’s unpack that a little. First, regeneration is *internal*. It is the change of a person’s heart. Because it is internal, it may not be immediately obvious, though it is very real. Second, regeneration is *immediate*. Sanctification is a progressive lifelong *process* of inward change, whereas regeneration is an *initial event* that happens at the point of conversion. When someone becomes a Christian, they are being born again. Third, regeneration is *radical*. It is a major shift that affects the whole person. According to scripture this is God creating someone new (Eph.2:10), making them alive (Eph.2:5), and operating in them a heart transplant (Ez.36:26). They move from the realm of death to the realm of life. It is also radical because it affects every facet of our humanity. Our thoughts, affections, desires, and emotions change, and our sin-enslaved wills are liberated to obey and serve the living God. When

someone loves God and hates sin, that is the evidence that the core of their being has radically changed. Finally, regeneration is *an act of God*. It is God and God alone who causes this to happen. In John, the Spirit is described as the wind which blows where it wishes. God in his free will determines and operates this into being. Man is entirely passive, like a baby in childbirth. And that's the picture, right? What plans does a baby make before he or she is born? What name does a baby choose for himself? What season does he or she decide to come? In birth the one birthed is entirely passive. This means that regeneration is the sovereign activity of God. For our friends, family, and even our own selves, if this born again experience has not occurred, we should seek the Lord and not cease until we know that he has done this work in us.

## This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue or grey ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

# Treasure

1. Read through the passage two or three times.
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# Grow

1. Pick out one key verse that explains the heart of the passage. Ask yourself what verse, if removed, would make the passage hard to understand.

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2. Meditate on that verse for 10-15 minutes by reading through it slowly and reflecting on its meaning and application. Here are a few ways to meditate:

- Slowly think through each word of the verse.
- Ask questions of the verse: Who is speaking? What is he or she trying to say? What truth is being revealed?
- How would you write the verse in your own words?
- Turn the verse into a prayer.

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3. Record any observations or applications you gained from your meditation:

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4. How can knowledge of your newness encourage you in your daily struggles?

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## Go

How does Jesus help us to engage with people who, like Nicodemus, think they are saved and are not?

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# Discussion Questions

1. Share the circumstances surrounding your “new birth.” Where, when, who was there, etc.

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2. How does Jesus describe being born again to Nicodemus? What can we learn from His description?

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3. Why do you think God uses the concept of being born again to illustrate becoming a Christian? Read Ezekiel 36:24-28 for help.

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4. Looking back on your “new birth,” how did the Holy Spirit work in and through you around the time of your conversion?

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5. Talk about the Spirit’s work in your life right now. How is He continuing to change your heart?

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6. Who are people you desire to be born again? How might you intentionally share the gospel with them and be available to answer questions the way Jesus did with Nicodemus?

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# Additional Reading

*Are You Born Again?* by J.C. Ryle <sup>1</sup>

Are you born again? This is one of life's most important questions. Jesus Christ said, "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3).

It is not enough to reply, "I belong to the church; I suppose I'm a Christian." Thousands of nominal Christians show none of the signs of being born again which the Scriptures have given us—many listed in the First Epistle of John.

## No Habitual Sinning

First of all, John wrote: "Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin" (1 John 3:9). "Whosoever is born of God sinneth not" (5:18).

A person who has been born again, or regenerated, does not habitually commit sin. He no longer sins with his heart and will and whole inclination. There was probably a time when he did not think about whether his actions were sinful or not, and he did not always feel grieved after doing evil. There was no quarrel between him and sin; they were friends. But the true Christian hates sin, flees from it, fights against it, considers it his greatest plague, resents the burden of its presence, mourns when he falls under its influence, and longs to be completely delivered from it. Sin no longer pleases him; it has become a horrible thing which he hates. However, he cannot eliminate its presence within him.

If he said that he had no sin, he would be lying (1 John 1:8). But he can say that he hates sin and that the great desire of his soul is not to commit sin at all. He cannot prevent bad thoughts from entering his mind, or shortcomings, omissions, and defects from appearing in both his words and his actions. He knows that "in many things we offend all" (James 3:2). But he can truly say, in the sight of God, that these things cause him grief and sorrow, and that his whole nature does not consent to them. What would the apostle say about you? Are you born again?

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<sup>1</sup>Ryle, J. C. *Are You Born Again?* Bible Bulletin Board, 1986. Web. 01 May 2017.

## **Believing in Christ**

Second, John wrote: “Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is born of God” (1 John 5:1).

A man who is born again, or regenerated, believes that Jesus Christ is the only Saviour who can pardon his soul, that He is the divine Person appointed by God the Father for this very purpose, and beside Him there is no Saviour at all. In himself he sees nothing but unworthiness. But he has full confidence in Christ, and trusting in Him, he believes that his sins are all forgiven. He believes that, for the sake of Christ’s finished work and death on the Cross, he is reckoned righteous in God’s sight, and he may look forward to death and judgment without alarm (Romans 4:20-5:1; 8:1).

He may have fears and doubts. He may sometimes tell you that he feels as if he had no faith at all. But ask him if he is willing to trust in anything instead of Christ, and see what he will say. Ask him if he will rest his hope of eternal life on his own goodness, his own works, his prayers, his minister, or his church, and listen to his reply. What would the apostle say about you? Are you born again?

## **Practicing Righteousness**

Third, John wrote: “Every one that doeth righteousness is born of him” (1 John 2:29).

The man who is born again, or regenerated, is a holy man. He endeavors to live according to God’s will, to do the things that please God and to avoid the things that God hates. He wishes to continually look to Christ as his example as well as his Saviour, and to prove himself to be Christ’s friend by doing whatever He commands. He knows he is not perfect. He is painfully aware of his indwelling corruption. He finds an evil principle within himself that is constantly warring against grace and trying to draw him away from God. But he does not consent to it, though he cannot prevent its presence.

Though he may sometimes feel so low that he questions whether or not he is a Christian at all, he will be able to say with John Newton, “I am not what I ought to be; I am not what I want to be; I am not what I hope to be in another world—but still I am not what I once used to be, and by the grace of God I am what I am.” What would the apostle say about you? Are you born again?

## **Loving Other Christians**

Fourth, John wrote: “We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren” (1 John 3:14).

A man who is born again has a special love for all true disciples of Christ. Like his Father in heaven, he loves all men with a great general love, but he has a special love for those who share his faith in Christ. Like his Lord and Saviour, he loves the worst of sinners and could weep over them; but he has a peculiar love for those who are believers. He is never so much at home as when he is in their company.

He feels they are all members of the same family. They are his fellow soldiers, fighting against the same enemy. They are his fellow travelers, journeying along the same road. He understands them, and they understand him. They may be very different from himself in many ways—in rank, in station and in wealth. But that does not matter. They are his Father's sons and daughters and he cannot help loving them. What would the apostle say about you? Are you born again?

### **Overcoming the World**

Fifth, John wrote: "Whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world" (1 John 5:4).

A man who is born again does not use the world's opinion as his standard of right and wrong. He does not mind going against the world's ways, ideas, and customs. What men think or say no longer concerns him. He overcomes the love of the world. He finds no pleasure in things which seem to bring happiness to most people. To him they seem foolish and unworthy of an immortal being.

He loves God's praise more than man's praise. He fears offending God more than offending man. It is unimportant to him whether he is blamed or praised; his first aim is to please God. What would the apostle say about you? Are you born again?

### **Keeping Oneself Pure**

Sixth, John wrote: "He that is begotten of God keepeth himself" (1 John 5:18).

A man who is born again is careful of his own soul. He tries not only to avoid sin but also to avoid everything which may lead to it. He is careful about the company he keeps. He knows that evil communications corrupt the heart, and that evil is more catching than good, just as disease is more infectious than health. He is careful about the use of his time; his chief desire is to spend it profitably.

He desires to live like a soldier in an enemy country—to wear his armor continually and to be

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prepared for temptation. He is diligent to be a watchful, humble, prayerful man. What would the apostle say about you? Are you born again?

## **The Test**

These are the six great marks of a born again Christian.

There is a vast difference in the depth and distinctness of these marks in different people. In some they are faint and hardly noticeable. In others they are bold, plain, and unmistakable, so anyone may read them. Some of these marks are more visible than others in each individual. Seldom are all equally evident in any one person.

But still, after every allowance, here we find boldly painted six marks of being born of God.

How should we react to these things? We can logically come to only one conclusion—only those who are born again have these six characteristics, and those who do not have these marks are not born again. This seems to be the conclusion to which the apostle intended us to come.

Do you have these characteristics? Are you born again?

**Resources** Go to [four Oaks Church.com/believe](http://four Oaks Church.com/believe) for links to the following resources:

J.C. Ryle (1816-1900), *Are You Born Again*, Tract

Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, Banner of Truth Trust, 1958

# Week Twelve

John 3:9-15

*The hand of the LORD was upon me, and he brought me out in the Spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of the valley; it was full of bones. And he led me around among them, and behold, there were very many on the surface of the valley, and behold, they were very dry. And he said to me, "Son of man, can these bones live?" And I answered, "O Lord God, you know." Then he said to me, "Prophesy over these bones, and say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: Behold, I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. And I will lay sinews upon you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live, and you shall know that I am the Lord."*

**Ezekiel 37:1-6**

## How Can These Things Be?

What does it mean to be a Christian? According to Jesus, it means that you have been "born of the Spirit" (John 3:6). Nicodemus was a Rabbi, which meant he knew his way around his Old Testament. From a young age he would have memorized large portions of the Bible and taught crowds of people about God. Yet when he encountered Jesus, he got the surprise of a lifetime—that being part of God's kingdom is completely an act of God. Was Jesus inventing a new form of theology? Not at all. In fact, Jesus' point to Nicodemus was that the Old Testament itself pointed to the reality that apart from the Holy Spirit working in the heart of a person, no one can enter the kingdom of God.

In Ezekiel 37, God gave Ezekiel a vision of a valley of dry bones representing Israel. At the time, Israel had turned away from the Lord and Ezekiel's mission was to call them to repentance. However, God informed Ezekiel that the only way dry bones could live was if the Spirit gave them

life. God's point was clear: Ezekiel in his own strength cannot change a person's heart. If he wanted to see Israel come back to life, he needed divine intervention. In the same way, Jesus wanted Nicodemus to know that it has always been by the power of the Spirit that sinners could be brought from death to life. When we trust in our own efforts to change people, we are set on earthly things, but when we recognize everything is a result of God's grace and power, we glimpse into the heavenly realm.

What does this mean for us? God does not expect us to cause people's hearts to change. We cannot manipulate, argue, persuade, or coach a person into moral transformation. All we are required to do is to be faithful to do what God commands and entrust the results to him. It is only when people see Jesus that they receive eternal life. It is only when they gaze upon the Son of Man lifted up do hearts change. We do not need to show them our perfect lives. We do not need to have the right answers for everything. What we do need is to show them Jesus.

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# Treasure

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# Grow

1. Pick out one key verse that explains the heart of the passage. Ask yourself what verse, if removed, would make the passage hard to understand.
2. Meditate on that verse for 10-15 minutes by reading through it slowly and reflecting on its meaning and application. Here are a few ways to meditate:
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  - Ask questions of the verse: Who is speaking? What is he or she trying to say? What truth is being revealed?
  - How would you write the verse in your own words?
  - Turn the verse into a prayer.

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3. Record any observations or applications you gained from your meditation:

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4. Why do you think Nicodemus had such a hard time with what Jesus said?

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5. Why does Jesus refer to Moses lifting up the serpent in the wilderness?

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## Go

1. In what ways did this passage help you understand the purpose of evangelism?

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2. Is there someone in your life who does not know Christ that you are fearful of witnessing to? Write down reflections on how this passage applies to your fears.

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# Discussion Questions

1. Share a time when you were trying to explain something and the person just didn't get it. What were the circumstances? How did that make you feel?

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2. Nicodemus was a person who just didn't "get it." What were some different ways Jesus explained the good news to him? How can we learn from Jesus when we talk with people about the gospel?

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3. There are many redemptive stories that foreshadow the coming of Christ, with one of them being the serpent in the wilderness (see Numbers 21). How does this story help us understand who Jesus is and how to respond to Him?

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4. How might you look to Jesus and believe in Him for healing right now?

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5. Later, it appears Nicodemus does "get it" when he helps bury Jesus with Joseph of Arimathea, another member of the council who was a secret follower of Jesus (John 19:38-40). How might this fact encourage you with someone you've witnessed to who does not yet believe? Spend some time praying for that person right now.

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## Additional Reading

From *You Must Be Born Again* by Keith Mathison<sup>1</sup>

I distinctly remember the birth of both of my children. Although they were born six years apart, I remember the preparation for each trip to the hospital. The drive there. Escorting my wife to the elevator. The rooms, the monitors, the nurses, doctors, and family members. The anticipation and waiting. Most of all I remember seeing my children for the first time and seeing the look on my wife's face when the nurses handed her this tightly bundled little person. I look up now and see a photograph taken of me holding my newborn daughter twelve and a half years ago. The birth of a child is truly an amazing and unforgettable experience.

As amazing as the birth of a child is, it pales in comparison to the miracle of spiritual birth. You see, my children were born physically healthy, and for that I thank God. But they, like every descendant of Adam, were spiritually stillborn. They were born spiritually dead, and they are not alone. You and I and every other person were born dead—dead in sin (see Eph. 2:1). We were born dead because of the sin of our representative head, Adam. The apostle Paul teaches us that “sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned” (Rom. 5:12). And spiritual death is not the end of it. Even if we are born physically healthy, our spiritual death will be followed at some point by our physical death: “For you are dust, and to dust you shall return” (Gen. 3:19). In our natural Adamic state, we are not on our sick beds. We are in the grave.

It is for this reason that Jesus told Nicodemus, “You must be born again” (John 3:7). The spiritually dead cannot enter God's holy presence. “Unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3). In order to see God's kingdom, then, the spiritually stillborn must be brought to life. There must be spiritual resurrection. There must be new life, eternal life. “You must be born again.” Jesus' words befuddled Nicodemus. He said to Jesus, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?” (John 3:4). Here Nicodemus gives us a textbook example of missing the point.

Nicodemus is not alone. There are a large number of professing Christians who miss the point. To

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<sup>1</sup>Mathison, Keith. "You Must Be Born Again." *Ligonier Ministries*. N.p., 6 Feb. 2015. Web. 02 May 2017.

hear some tell it, you would think Jesus merely said, "You must be well again." According to many, we are not spiritually dead but are simply sick. We are on our death beds, and Jesus offers us the cure. All we have to do is reach out and take it. Or we are drowning and Jesus offers us a life buoy, and all we have to do is grab it to save our lives. The picture painted by Jesus and the apostles, however, is much more bleak. In our natural Adamic state, we are not on our sick beds. We are in the grave. We are not flailing about on the surface of the sea. We are lifeless at the bottom of the ocean. We are dead.

This is the point that Nicodemus and we must understand. When Jesus tells Nicodemus he must be born again, He is indicating that this is not something Nicodemus can do himself. Just as we had no control over our physical birth, we do not control our spiritual birth. It is the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit. Those who say that we are only spiritually wounded will say that we can be regenerated, born again, by placing our faith in Christ. This, however, puts everything precisely backwards. We do not believe in order to be regenerated; we must be regenerated in order that we might believe. Regeneration precedes faith. Jesus commands us to believe in Him, but we cannot respond unless God first gives us spiritual life.

Our spiritual situation is similar in some ways to that of Lazarus in the grave (see John 11). Lazarus was dead. He could do nothing in and of himself to gain new life. Jesus commanded Lazarus to come forth from the grave, but Lazarus could not respond unless God first gave him life. In the same way, we are spiritually dead and can do nothing to gain spiritual life. Jesus commands us to believe in Him, but we cannot respond unless God first gives us spiritual life. Jesus gives us this new life because he has overcome death, once and for all. As Peter explains, "According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" (1 Peter 1:3).

If you are a Christian, consider what God has done for you. Consider the fact that you were born dead in sin. Jesus came to your grave. He commanded you to come forth and gave you spiritual life and faith. Now you have been born again and are an adopted child of God (John 1:12). You are a co-heir with Christ. And although your physical body will still die, you can rest secure in the hope of the resurrection. Those in Christ will be made alive (1 Cor. 15:22). Our present body is perishable, but it will be raised imperishable, never to die again. When God raises us, death will finally be swallowed up in victory.

# Week Thirteen

John 3:16-21

*What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?*

**Romans 8:31-32**

## For God So Loved

John 3:16 is one of the most famous verses in all the Bible. You see it on posters, billboards, and even painted onto the faces of football players. Yet many people fail to see how offensive and counter-cultural John 3:16 really is. In order to understand John 3:16-21 in its proper context, we have to unravel some of our modern day assumptions about God. First, we must realize that we have a problem: we love darkness rather than light, and our works are evil (John 3:19). What this means is that our thoughts, actions, and intentions are motivated by selfishness and rebellion towards God. We may think that we are decent moral people, but what we really believe manifests itself when we encounter God in Jesus Christ. Second, we must realize that we cannot help ourselves. Why did God have to send his Son into the world? Because we needed saving. We need more than a few motivational sayings and communication tips; we need new hearts and minds. We need to be “born again” (John 3:7). God has sent his Son in order to bear our judgement so that we may not be condemned but justified by his grace. Third, we must realize that God has only provided one way for us to be saved—through his son Jesus Christ. In our modern age, we are offended by the fact that there can only be one path to salvation. It seems rigid and intolerant to say that people from other religions do not have access to God. Yet John makes it explicit that “whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.” God is God and we are not, and we do not get to set the terms for our salvation. Jesus Christ is the only hope for sinners because he is the only true God.

When we grapple with the offensive nature of these verses we can begin to appreciate their glory. Why did God send his son into the world in order to save it? Because he loved the world. God in his mercy and compassion has made a way for sinners to be reconciled with him and to enjoy eternal life. And this eternal life is not just a quantity of time, but a quality of life. It is life with God under the reign of God. It is a life of loving and being loved by Jesus Christ and being transformed in our character into his image. That is why those who come to the light carry out the works of God (John 3:21). Is this a reality in your life? Are you captivated not only by the depths God was willing to sacrifice in order to save you, but also the breadth of his salvation in remaking you into a completely new person? Do you see your life as folded into the grand story God is weaving through the incarnation, death, resurrection, and ascension of his Son? If you do not, be encouraged because John's Gospel is here to refresh and renew your heart so that as you approach the light that has entered into the world, you may find yourself reflecting his glory.

## This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue or grey ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

# Treasure

1. Read through the passage two or three times.

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2. Write down 10 observations about the text. Start by asking who/what/where/when/why/how?

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# Grow

1. Pick out one key verse that explains the heart of the passage. Ask yourself what verse, if removed, would make the passage hard to understand.
2. Meditate on that verse for 10-15 minutes by reading through it slowly and reflecting on its meaning and application. Here are a few ways to meditate:
  - Slowly think through each word of the verse.
  - Ask questions of the verse: Who is speaking? What is he or she trying to say? What truth is being revealed?
  - How would you write the verse in your own words?
  - Turn the verse into a prayer.

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3. Record any observations or applications you gained from your meditation.

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4. Why does John say those who do not believe in Christ are condemned already?

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5. What does it mean that our “works have been carried out in God?”

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## Go

1. What are some common misconceptions you hear about John 3:16?

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2. How would you explain to a non-believer why Jesus came to die?

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# Discussion Questions

1. John 3:16 is one of the most famous verses in all of the Bible. Why do you think that is?

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2. What aspect of John 3:16 most resonates with you right now?

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3. In this passage, Jesus describes two paths for people to follow. Describe each path and where it leads. How might this description serve as both an encouragement and a warning?

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4. As believers, we are called to live in the light and love the light. Yet, if we're honest, we sometimes would rather stay in the dark and not have our deeds exposed. Why is that?

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5. In 1 John 1:6-8, the apostle tells us that those who walk in the light have fellowship with one another and the blood of Jesus cleanses us from sin. As a result, he exhorts us to confess our sins, so that we may receive forgiveness and cleansing. What is an area of your life that you need to bring into the light to receive forgiveness and cleansing from Jesus and deeper fellowship with your community group?

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# Additional Reading

From *Speaking Truth in Love: Counsel in Community* by David Powlison<sup>1</sup>

## Four Facets of Christ's Grace

Will you be able to counsel another? You must know the facts of life about people and the mercies of God in Christ. When Jesus opened the minds of his disciples to understand the Scriptures, he explained to them the gracious things concerning... himself. The Bible is about Jesus Christ, Savior and Lord. Therefore, counseling must be about Jesus Christ if it is to be true, biblical, and helpful. The grace you offer people has many facets. Let me mention four.

First, God's past grace to sinners demonstrates that he is for us. How do you know God is for you? He did not spare his own Son (Rom. 8: 31-34a). This good news is not simply for giving birth to Christian life and experience. What Jesus once did continues to reshape what we do. For example, 2 Corinthians 5: 14—15 identifies past grace as the power at work in transforming our present Christian life: "The love of Christ controls us, having concluded this, that one died for all, therefore all died; and he died for all, so that they who live might no longer live for themselves, but for him who died and rose again on their behalf." Do you want to face yourself, change, and learn to live a new life? Past grace gives you the ability to fearlessly see yourself in the mirror of God's gaze, and gives you a reason to become different. You don't have to avoid looking or candy-coat your failures. You don't have to wallow in them either. Past grace never lets you forget that God the merciful Father is for you. Past grace keeps inviting you to trust him. It gives you confidence that today's sins will be freely forgiven too. It assures you that God will help you change now, and will someday finish what he has begun.

Second, God's present grace to sinners demonstrates that he is with us and in us. How do you know he is with you? The love of God has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us, by whom we cry out, "Abba, Father" (Rom. 5: 5, 8: 15). The good news is not simply what happened long ago and far away. What Jesus does now reshapes what we do. For example, Ephesians bases the transformational power of the Christian life on the oft-repeated promise of power and presence now: "the surpassing greatness of his power toward us who believe, in accordance with the working of the strength of his might ... strengthened with power through his

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<sup>1</sup>Powlison, David. *Speaking Truth in Love: Counsel in Community* (pp. 42-44). New Growth Press. Kindle Edition.

Spirit in the inner man, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith... him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us... Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might." God is present with us and works powerfully in us. Our Father gives wisdom for the asking. The Holy Spirit comes for the asking. Good gifts are for the asking. The Bible repeatedly invites us to need, ask, receive, and live on present grace. Would you die to yourself and live a new life? Present grace gives you the confidence to seek help, to question those old felt needs, desires, opinions, and lifestyles, to put to death what is not beautiful. Present grace nourishes faith working through love.

Third, God's future grace to sinners demonstrates that he will come to us. How do you know that he will come for you, that he will make right all the wrongs that rise up within you? "We know that when he appears, we will be like him, because we will see him just as he is" (1 John 3: 2). The good news is not simply past and present. What Jesus will do reshapes what we do. For example, 1 Peter bases the transformational power of the Christian life now on what will happen in the future. "Fix your hope completely on the grace to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. As obedient children, do not be conformed to the former lusts which were yours in your ignorance" (1: 13—14). How will you hang in over the long haul, growing wiser until the end? Future grace beckons you.

Fourth, God's past, present, and future grace to sufferers demonstrates that he hears the cry of the afflicted. Grace is not only a mercy to sinners, but a mercy to sufferers. Jesus dies for the wicked; he also defends the innocent, feeds the hungry, gives refuge to the broken, and heals the sick. How do you know that you are safe? "Moses said to God, 'Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh?'... And [the LORD] said, 'Certainly I will be with you'" (Ex. 3: 11— 12). At the center of the Christian life is our need and God's protection. In the past, he showed such mercies, in part to give us hope today (1 Cor. 10: 11; Rom. 15: 4). Right now he helps, comforts, heals, and encourages. Someday he will act decisively to remove all heartache and bring joy to pass (Rev. 20: 4). His mercies to the broken change the way you face whatever afflicts you.

# Week Fourteen

John 3:22-36

*"Truly, I [Jesus] say to you, among those born of women there has arisen none greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he."*

**Matthew 11:11**

## A Right View

In the beginning, God was the focus of men's hearts. The man and the woman beheld God; they walked with him. At some point the liar entered, with him the lie, and misplaced trust in that lie. The happy couple now beheld their nakedness instead of God; they ran away and hid instead of communing and focusing on God. What was the lie? The lie was that they could be like God and not die. In a sense, the lie was that they could be the center of everything: self-centeredness and self-consciousness instead of God-centeredness and God-consciousness. Herein lies the fall from the glory of God.

The philosophers and scholars of John's age coined an illuminating name for this misplaced trust: hamartia — the tragic flaw in a character that leads to their downfall: a self-centeredness that wreaks havoc and leads to annihilation. It literally means to miss the mark. A more popular term may be hubris: a fatal flaw in the personality that enjoys a seemingly powerful position; as a result of which, he overestimates his capabilities to such an extent that he loses contact with reality: insanity. The Bible teaches that all are given over to this insanity. The annals of history, literature, and Hollywood are full of such tragedies.

John the Baptist has a rap for being "crazy," but the sanity of John the Baptist is desperately needed. What is there to perceive in this man known for yelling, "Behold!" John was and is always reorienting God's people to turn and consider the person and work of Christ. In this narrative, we see his radical response when confronted with a temptation to view Jesus as a rival. John's once vibrant ministry was shrinking, and all were going over to Jesus. How is John able to joyfully, not jealously, declare, "Christ must increase and I must decrease"?

First, John beheld that everything was from God. He believed that God was the source of all. “A person cannot receive anything unless it is given him from above.” He was able to view his life and ministry rightly out of his view of the infinitely wise sovereignty of God. “What do you have that you did not receive?” (1 Corinthians 4:7) guided John’s thinking. The crowds he was baptizing were from God for Christ — not him. The crowd going to Christ simply fulfilled his purpose in life: to point to Christ.

Second, John beheld that Christ was the most needful thing. Repeatedly, his testimony was, “I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.” John knew that all had gone astray and needed to return to God. John knew that he existed to point to the glory of God in the face of Christ. He was content in this. He beheld the Lamb of God, and continually invited others to do the same.

Third, John beheld the joy of the Lord. Again, instead of the temptation to compare himself to Christ and mope, or view him as a rival, as folks were suggesting, he gives us the story of the wedding feast. John knew that the lost sheep of Israel (as well as those coming outside of the flock) belonged and were betrothed to Christ, not himself. Therefore, when Christ comes to be united with his bride, John’s joy is fulfilled. He stands by and rejoices to hear Jesus’ voice and see others coming to their Savior. He beheld the Savior of the world, and rejoiced at others coming to see, too. He shares this joy with the angels who rejoice to see one sinner saved.

We live in a shamelessly self-promoting culture. The question of whether all of our attention and liking and following and comparing one another helps us become less self-conscious and more Christ-conscious is worth considering. Are we beholding things that stir up arguments, jealousy, and unbelief? Like John, what we behold and love is what we will point others to. The good news is that we are capable of the same vision as John.

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# Treasure

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    - How would you write the verse in your own words?
    - Turn the verse into a prayer.
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3. Record any observations or applications you gained from your meditation:
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4. What does this passage tell us about John the Baptist's view of God?

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5. From this passage, describe the source of John's joy from the wedding illustration (John 3:29).

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## Go

1. In what ways can your social media presence point an unbelieving world to Christ?

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2. How would you explain the reality behind, "*Christ must increase, and I must decrease.*" to an unbeliever or new Christian?

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## Discussion Questions

1. Have you ever known a really joyful person? Describe that person and why you think he or she was so joyful.

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2. John the Baptist was joyful. What gave him so much joy? How might his example spur you on?

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3. John was content to decrease as Jesus increased. Describe John's humility and contentment. What might you learn from him?

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4. In verses 31-36, "Jesus is held up before us as coming from God, full of God, and speaking and ruling as God" (from John Piper). Talk about each of these attributes that demonstrate Jesus' divinity and where they are revealed in the passage. Why is each attribute important?

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5. Verse 36 says that those who *believe* in the Son have eternal life and those who do not *obey* remain under the wrath of God. How are faith and obedience tied together? How are they separate? To what extent do your works currently reveal your faith in God?

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## Additional Reading

*He Must Increase, But I Must Decrease* by Jon Bloom<sup>1</sup>

It was all a bit hard to comprehend.

John's disciples had understood his mission. He had come to prepare the way for the Hope of Israel. It had been thrilling. The long-expected time was so close—that climactic day when Jesus appeared and John publicly proclaimed him the Messiah. The wonder could yield no words.

But they hadn't expected to feel marginalized by it. The past year had been a heady one. John had blazed across Judea like a shooting star; the first real prophet in Israel for four centuries. All eyes had been on him from king to peasant. And he called them all to account, including the self-righteous Pharisees. When John spoke, God moved and people repented and were baptized. No one had spoken like this man. From all over Palestine people had flocked to hear him. The oppressed, weary people of God, living under Tiberius's thumb and Antipas's corruption, had hope again. These disciples had seen revival. And they had been in the middle of it.

Then abruptly they weren't. The surge had moved past them toward Jesus. Of course, it was wrong to be envious of the Messiah. But still, how could their beloved rabbi—and they with him—suddenly be relegated to the periphery after all that God had done through them?

They couldn't help but express their perplexity to him: "Rabbi, he who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you bore witness—look, he is baptizing, and all are going to him."

John, who had been staring at the water, turned his intense eyes to them. They were filled with joy.

He said nothing for a moment. He felt compassion for them. He understood. He knew their inner conflict. He knew their sincere godly ambition for the kingdom. And he knew their selfish ambition to have prominent roles in it. He knew how the latter insidiously wove itself into the fabric of the former and how difficult it could be to discern one from the other. This was a moment of sifting for them, of heart-exposure.

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<sup>1</sup> Bloom, Jon. "He Must Increase, But I Must Decrease." *Desiring God*. Desiring God Ministries, 11 May 2012. Web. 02 May 2017.

He had spent a lifetime being prepared for his brief ministry of introduction. Those years in the wilderness God had worked him over, ruthlessly laying bare his deeply entrenched and multifaceted pride and training him to die to it. This discipline had brought about the peaceful fruit of the righteousness of faith. He had learned to anticipate his Replacement more than his own prophesied prophetic role. He had learned to love the Bridegroom's appearing and not love the celebrity of being the Bridegroom's best man. But that had not come easily.

Learning to love the Great Wedding more than their part in it would not come easily to them either. He knew they loved the Bridegroom. But they were just learning that when the blessed Lord grants one a role to play, one must perform it faithfully, but never grasp it. For the Lord also takes away. The role is not the reward. The Lord is the Reward.

With affectionate empathy John replied, "A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven." He waved them to sit down beside him. "You yourselves bear me witness that I said, 'I am not the Christ,' but have been sent before him. The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete. He must increase, but I must decrease."

We must remember that our role is not our reward. Jesus is our reward. Roles will begin and they will end. And the only way for us to end well is if in our heart Jesus has increased and we have decreased.

What rises in your heart at the thought of Jesus giving another a more prominent role in his wedding? How much do you long to have a more prominent one? How well are you prepared to end the role he has given you? What if he gives your role to someone else?

The wedding is not about us. It's about him. And we never want to compete with the Bridegroom for the bride's attention and affection.

**Resources** Go to [fouroakschurch.com/believe](http://fouroakschurch.com/believe) for links to the following resources:

Kevin Otsuji, *He Must Increase, I Must Decrease*, sermon









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