

# got life?

How John's  
Gospel leads to  
truth and faith  
in an age of  
cynicism and  
doubt



A Bible Study by Stan Key

—Answer Guide—

Volume I



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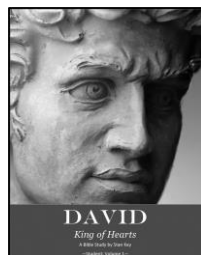
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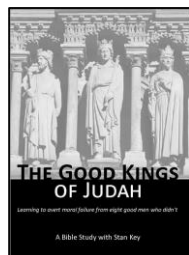
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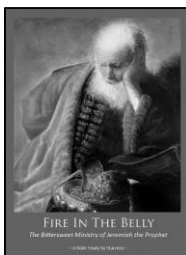
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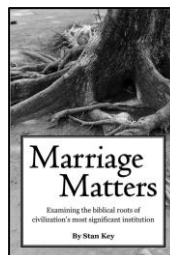
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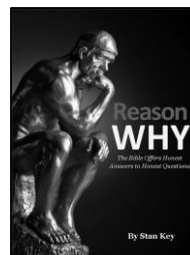
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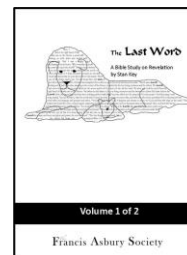
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# got life?

## The Gospel of John A Bible Study with Stan Key

### SIGNS OF LIFE: INTRODUCTION

#### I. Profoundly Simple

##### A. Start here.

Seekers and new converts are often encouraged to read the Gospel of John because “it is the **easiest** to understand.” And yet this amazing book should not be seen as just a collection of stories. Like the ocean, John’s Gospel is shallow enough to delight children playing at the beach but deep enough to cause theologians to bow in humility before the unfathomable truths conveyed in its pages. It is **simply profound**.

##### B. Black and white in a world that loves gray.

Like our postmodern world, many in the first century struggled with the notion of **absolute truth**. Thomas was a skeptic (Jn 20:25), Pilate was a cynic (Jn 18:38), and many simply believed things that weren’t true (Jn 8:43–47). This Gospel highlights the fact that Jesus not only speaks the truth, he *is* the truth. We must **choose**. Neutrality is not an option. We must decide between light or darkness, truth or error, belief or unbelief, love or hatred, freedom or bondage, salvation or judgment, life or death. Jesus is the great **divider** (Jn 7:43; 9:16; 10:19).

##### C. The Gospel of Jesus.

This book is called a “Gospel” (Greek, *good news*), because it has a message that John believes will be of great interest to everyone who reads it. He is not promoting a new religion or a code of ethics. John writes to introduce us to a **Person**. The titles he uses to describe him help us to grasp immediately that this is no ordinary man:

- The **Word** (Jn 1:1, 14)
- The **Messiah/Christ** (Jn 1:41; etc.)
- The **Lamb** of God (Jn 1:29, 36)
- The **King** of Israel (Jn 1:49)
- The Son of **God** (Jn 1:34, 49)
- The Son of **Man** (Jn 1:51)
- The **Bridegroom** (Jn 3:29)

##### D. Outline of the book.

<b>Prologue</b>  Jn 1:1–18	<b>Miraculous Signs</b> Climaxing with the raising of Lazarus “My hour has not yet come”	<b>The Passion</b> Climaxing with the raising of Jesus “My hour has come”	<b>Epilogue</b>  Jn 21:1–25
	<b>Public Ministry</b> Jesus reveals himself to the world Jn 1:19–12:50	<b>Private Ministry</b> Jesus reveals himself to his disciples Jn 13:1–20:31	

#### II. Why this book?

##### A. The purpose of Bible study.

We make a mistake when we imagine that the purpose of Bible study is to learn the Bible! To only learn **what** is written is to miss the point! The real question is **why**?

Jesus lectured the most serious Bible students of his day with words that ought to be foremost in the minds and hearts of all those who study Scripture:

*You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life. . . . Do not think that I will accuse you to the Father. There is one who accuses you: Moses, on whom you have set your hope. For if you believed Moses, you would believe me; for he wrote of me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words?" (John 5:39–40, 45–47)*

The purpose of Bible study is not to know the Bible, but to know Jesus. The written Word is intended to lead us to the **incarnate Word** (Jn 1:14).

B. The key verses: John 20:30–31.

John tells us he wrote not just to share information or to tell a story. His purpose is much more aggressive and invasive. His goal is to confront us with **a decision**.

*Now Jesus did many other **signs** in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may **believe** that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have **life** in his name. (John 20:30–31)*

We need to understand that John's purpose will **rock our world!** Three words help us understand what his intentions really are for us as readers.

1. Signs.

- a. The other three Gospels call Jesus' mighty deeds "miracles" (Greek, *dunamis*) but John never uses this term. He prefers the word "sign" (Greek, *semeion*), using it some 17 times. For John, the miracles of Jesus are not ends in themselves. They are "signs" that **point beyond** themselves. They *sign-ify* something. They convey a deeper meaning. Like a directional sign on a highway, they point us to God.<sup>1</sup>
- b. Although Jesus did "many" signs, John writes about only a few of them. These miracles were all public—visible and verifiable—and demonstrated Jesus' authority over **sickness, nature, and death**.<sup>2</sup>
  - 1) Changes water into wine (Jn 2:1–11).
  - 2) Heals a nobleman's son (Jn 4:46–54).
  - 3) Heals a paralytic (Jn 5:1–18).
  - 4) Feeds 5,000 people with five loaves and two fish (Jn 6:1–15).
  - 5) Walks on water (Jn 6:16–21).
  - 6) Gives sight to a man born blind (Jn 9:1–41).
  - 7) Raises Lazarus from the dead (Jn 11:1–44).

John believes that these particular miracles have the potential to stimulate faith. "Believe me... or else believe on account of the works themselves..." (Jn 14:11). Though these signs make faith **possible**, they do not make it **inevitable**.

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<sup>1</sup> It is helpful to remember that sacraments (Baptism, Holy Communion) are often called "signs" (*an outward sign of an inward grace*). They point beyond themselves to a greater reality that they represent.

<sup>2</sup> Is John deliberately citing seven miraculous signs because he saw significance in the number (see the book of Revelation)? Perhaps. But we should also remember two other signs in John's Gospel: Jesus' own resurrection (Jn 20:1–29) and the miraculous catch of fish in the Epilogue (Jn 21:1–14).

- c. But many who saw the signs missed the **significance** (see Jn 6:26). They did not go to where the sign pointed. Perhaps the clearest illustration of this was when God himself **spoke out loud** from heaven so that all Jerusalem heard him!

*The crowd that stood there and heard it said that it had **thundered**. Others said, “An **angel** has spoken to him.” Jesus answered, “This voice has come for your sake, not mine. Now is the **judgment** of this world....” (John 12:29–31)*

- d. We should not miss the significance of the **claims about himself** that Jesus made. In referring to himself by the phrase “**I am**”, Jesus was giving a “sign” that was impossible to misinterpret.

- I am the bread of life (Jn 6:35, 41, 48, 51).
- I am the light of the world (Jn 8:12).
- I am the door (Jn 10:7, 9).
- I am the good shepherd (Jn 10:11, 14).
- I am the resurrection and the life (Jn 11:25).
- I am the way, the truth, and the life (Jn 14:6).
- I am the true vine (Jn 15:1, 5).
- I am “I am” (Jn 8:24, 28, 58; 18:4–8).

C. S. Lewis famously points out that anyone who makes claims such as these must be placed in one of three categories: lunatic, liar, or Lord.<sup>3</sup>

*I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept his claim to be God. That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a **lunatic**—on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the **Devil of Hell**. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him **Lord and God**, but let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.<sup>4</sup>*

2. Believe.

- a. The call to believe is a primary concept in John’s Gospel. He uses the verb (believe) 98 times. He *never* uses the noun (faith). It is clear that John sees faith as an activity, an action **we do** (“I believe”), not as a thing **we have** (“I have faith.”). To believe is to put our trust and confidence in Jesus, to rely on him and to do what he tells us to do.
- b. Specifically, John writes his Gospel so that the reader “may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.” Note it well: it is not faith that saves us. That would be **faith in faith**. What matters is the *object* of our faith.

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<sup>3</sup> This three-fold possible response to Jesus is often referred to as C. S. Lewis’ “trilemma.”

<sup>4</sup> Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 52.

*Faith is only as valid as its object. You could have tremendous faith in very thin ice and drown. . . . You could have very little faith in very thick ice and be perfectly secure.*<sup>5</sup>

- c. John's emphasis on faith in Christ is so great that he calls it:
- The **work** of God. "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent" (Jn 6:29).
  - The **will** of God. "This is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life" (Jn 6:40).
- d. While John believes that the miracles ("signs") make faith possible, he knows they do not make faith inevitable. The problem is not the **lack** of evidence, but the **suppression** of it (see Rom 1:18). John describes four categories of people who remain in their unbelief:
- 1) Those with **philosophical** problems. Like **Pilate** (Jn 18:33–38): "What is truth?" These people are never able to have life because they don't believe that truth even exists.
  - 2) Those with **intellectual** problems: they need more evidence. Like **Thomas** (Jn 20:24–28): these people may believe, but only when they have enough rational arguments to make faith possible.
  - 3) Those with **emotional** problems: they need inner healing. Like **Martha** (Jn 11:20–27): these people have been wounded by some life experience where they felt God had let them down.
  - 4) Those with **moral** problems: they need to repent. When people **love darkness** rather than light, unbelief becomes a type of excuse to permit a lifestyle of sin without the pain caused by a guilty conscience (Jn 3:19–21).

Blaise Pascal stated the matter succinctly: "There is enough evidence to condemn and not enough to convince, so that it should be apparent that those who follow it are prompted to do so by grace and not by reason, and those who evade it are prompted by concupiscence and not by reason."<sup>6</sup> (*Pensées*, #835).

3. Life.
- a. There are two words for "life" in the Greek language. The word *bios* (root of biology, biography) refers to existence and the duration of time that an organism functions. This word occurs only 11 times in the New Testament and not in John's Gospel at all. John uses the word *zoe* (root of zoo, zoology) when he speaks of life. It refers to **quality** of life, not just quantity (Jn 10:10). "Eternal life" refers to the life that God wants to give us **now**.
  - b. John gives us a definition of the life Jesus offers when he quotes Jesus in his High Priestly prayer: "And this is eternal life, that they know **you**, the only true God, and **Jesus Christ** whom you have sent" (Jn 17:3).

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<sup>5</sup> Stuart Briscoe. AZQuotes.com, Wind and Fly LTD, 2018. [http://www.azquotes.com/author/22083-Stuart\\_Briscoe](http://www.azquotes.com/author/22083-Stuart_Briscoe), accessed May 22, 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Pascal, #835.

- c. Believing in Jesus makes this life possible. And you can recognize the presence of this life by the evidence of **love** (Jn 15:9–17; see I John 3:14) and **joy** (Jn 16:20–24). This is true because Jesus not only offers us life, he is life (Jn 11:25; 14:6)! “Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God, does not have life” (I John 5:12).

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Why are “signs” significant? In what sense are the sacraments “signs”?
2. What is faith? What did the author mean when he warned against the danger of having “faith in faith” rather than faith in Jesus?
3. Miracles in John’s Gospel make faith possible but they do not make faith inevitable. Discuss this.
4. What kind of “life” did Jesus come to bring? How does one obtain this kind of life?
5. Share with your small group the story of how you came to faith and discovered the life that Jesus makes possible.





## got life?

### The Gospel of John A Bible Study with Stan Key

#### IN THE BEGINNING . . .

*John 1:1-18*

##### I. The Blind Men and the Elephant.

John Godfrey Saxe (1816–1887) wrote a **cute** poem based on an ancient Indian parable about the futile efforts of a group of blind men to define an elephant. But like many children’s stories, this poem aims at making a **serious** philosophical point.

*It was six men of Indostan, to learning much inclined,  
Who went to see the elephant (Though all of them were blind),  
That each by observation, might satisfy his mind.*

*The first approached the elephant, and, happening to fall,  
Against his broad and sturdy side, at once began to bawl:  
‘God bless me! but the elephant, is nothing but a wall!’*

*The second feeling of the tusk, cried: ‘Ho! what have we here,  
So very round and smooth and sharp? To me tis mighty clear,  
This wonder of an elephant, is very like a spear!’*

*The third approached the animal, and, happening to take,  
The squirming trunk within his hands, thus boldly up and spake:  
‘I see,’ quoth he, ‘the elephant is very like a snake!’*

The 4<sup>th</sup> blind man took the elephant’s knee and concluded he was like a tree. The 5<sup>th</sup> took his ear . . . like a fan. The 6<sup>th</sup> took his tail . . . like a rope. But it is only in the closing two verses that we discover the philosophy of this dangerous poem.

*And so these men of Indostan, disputed loud and long,  
Each in his own opinion, exceeding stiff and strong,  
Though each was partly in the right, and all were in the wrong!*

*So, oft in theologic wars, the disputants, I ween,  
Rail on in utter ignorance, of what each other mean,  
And prate about the elephant, not one of them has seen!*

Conclusion: God is **unknowable**. We can only make intelligent guesses about what he (she? it? they?) is like. Of course, Mr. Saxe is correct in his **agnosticism** if this is all there is to the story, *but* what if the elephant **spoke**? “Gentlemen, let me introduce myself. I’m an elephant.” This is precisely the point John makes in his prologue.

##### II. How to Know God.

###### A. The “Elephant” Speaks

John begins his Gospel by explaining that God has not left us in **the dark** about who he is and what his purposes are. He speaks! We don’t have to guess or remain stuck in agnosticism. Our knowledge of God is not based on human wisdom but on God’s self-disclosure! The theological name for this doctrine is **revelation**. The theme of John’s prologue is **the Word** (*logos*).

B. John 1:1–18. The word before the word (*pro-logue*).

John begins the story of Jesus with no reference to Mary, the manger, the star, or the shepherds. Rather, he goes much further back to **the beginning**. He tells us who God is and describes how he has spoken to us through the Christ event. In these verses, he introduces the key themes of the book he is writing.

The Pre-existent Word	The Forerunner to the Word	The Rejectable Word	The Enfleshment of the Word
He was God and yet he was distinct from God.	John the Baptist was the first to recognize him and urged us to believe in him.	Most failed to recognize him and many rejected him; but some believed.	The Word became flesh and his appearance was glorious: full of grace and truth.
1–5	6–8	9–13	14–18

C. Notes on the text.

- John 1: 5, “The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not **overcome** it” (ESV). Other translations say that the darkness has not understood or perhaps extinguished the light. All the darkness of the universe cannot dispel the one shining light of Jesus. Darkness will **not prevail**.
- John 1:9, “The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.” John speaks of a general illumination that is available to all men everywhere. This speaks of the doctrine of **prevenient grace** which makes salvation a potential possibility for **everyone**.
- John 1:14a, “The Word became flesh . . .” Though the Word is **eternal**, there was a moment in time when he **became** a man. The Unchanging One changed! “Flesh” is an almost crude way of referring to human nature and is intended to have shock value.
- John 1:14b, “The Word . . . **dwelt** among us . . .” The Greek term literally means that he “pitched his tent”; a reference to the dwelling place of God in the Tabernacle in the wilderness.
- John 1:14c, “The only Son from the Father . . .” Older translations say “**only begotten**” (generated, engendered). The emphasis is on Jesus’ **unique** status, but it may also speak to the Son of God being eternally *from* the Father. As the creeds will clarify, Jesus is “begotten, not made.”
- John 1:18, “No one has ever seen God; the only God [the Son], who is at the Father’s side, he has **made him known**.” The Greek term “made him known” is the verb form of the word “exegesis.” It means to **interpret** or to understand. Jesus exegetes God.

D. The Logos: A brilliant way to describe Jesus.

In using the term *logos* (Word) to introduce the person and ministry of Jesus, John chooses a term that resonates deeply with both Greeks and Jews.

- Even for those without Greek or Jewish roots, the term is profoundly rich in meaning. Consider the following:
  - A word **reveals** what someone is thinking, feeling, or desiring. If you don’t speak, I can only guess who you really are.
  - A word is composed of sound plus **breath**.

- c. While animals may have basic communication skills, they don't talk. Only persons communicate with words. This is part of the **image of God**.
  - d. Words make life **meaning-full**. They can interpret facts and events that otherwise would remain mysterious.
  - e. Words make intimate **relationships** possible. It takes more than touch or eye contact to have genuine community.
2. Long before the New Testament was written, Greek philosophers spoke frequently about *the logos*. For the Greeks, the term referred to **reason**, thought, or the divine principle. This explains why so many English terms today have "-logy" at the end. Biology is the study of life, geology is the study of earth, etc. That John would speak of Jesus in terms of "the logos of God" would surely capture the intellectually curious among the Greeks.
  3. The primary source of John's thinking was surely the Hebrew Scriptures (what we call the **Old Testament**). Here we have many rich allusions to "the word" that help to explain John's choice of this vocabulary:
    - a. The **creative** Word. When John says, "In the beginning..." every Jew immediately recognizes this as an allusion to Genesis 1:1 and the story of creation where God created everything with **a word**: "Let there be..."

*By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, and by the breath of his mouth all their host... For he spoke, and it came to be, he commanded, and it stood firm. (Psalm 33:6, 9; see Hebrews 11:3)*
    - b. The **prophetic** Word. When the prophets say, "Thus says the Lord," they are declaring God's purpose, his will, and his commands. The Word of God is **authoritative** and final; non-negotiable. Even when God's voice is only a **whisper**, it is more powerful than storm, earthquake, or fire (1 Kgs 19:12). God's word is like a hammer that breaks the rocks in pieces (Jer 23:29).
    - c. The **eternal** Word. "The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever" (Isa 40:8). Wicked king Jehoiakim tried to destroy God's word by **burning** Jeremiah's scroll, but God's word remained in force, even stronger than before (see Jer 36).
    - d. The **life-giving** Word. The prophet Ezekiel preached the Word of God to a valley full of dead men's bones and new life came to them all (Ezek 37:1-14). God's Word can bring about a **new creation**.
    - e. The **victorious** Word. God's Word cannot fail. What he says, he will do! "So shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose and shall **succeed** in the thing for which I sent it" (Isa 55:11).

John's Gospel shows us how **Jesus** is the Word of God in every one of these dimensions. He doesn't just speak God's Word, he *is* God's Word.

#### E. Creedal Precision.

It took several centuries to get the wording right to articulate the truth of Scripture when it comes to describing who God is (Trinity), who Jesus is (Incarnation), and why he came (Soteriology). The Nicene Creed (325 AD) is a beautiful example of the importance of **precision** in the words we use.

*I believe in one God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible:*

*And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of his Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made;*

*Who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, and was made man. . . .*

### III. The Word about the Word.

It is only in John 1:17 that John clearly tells us the name of the Word: **Jesus Christ**. In calling Jesus “the Word,” John is making claims about his Person and his Work that explode our minds, capture our hearts, and take our breath away.

- A. The Word is **pre-existent**. Although there is a point in time and space when **Jesus** began his life (Bethlehem, 2,000 years ago), it only marks the moment the **Son of God** took on flesh. The Son of God has existed from the beginning. He is uncreated. This is why John the Baptist could say “he who comes after me . . . was before me” (Jn 1:15).
- B. The Word is **with God** (Jn 1:1). The connection between who a person is and what a person *says* is profound, yet the two are **distinct**. In a similar way, John makes clear that God the Son is distinct from God the Father, though they have the closest and most intimate relationship. God and the Word are one, yet they are not identical. The Trinitarian formula is: one God, three **Persons**.
- C. The Word is **God** (Jn1:1). Though distinct from one another, John deepens the mystery by declaring that “the Word was God.” How can they be distinct and yet one? Welcome to the **mystery** of the Trinity. Jesus put it succinctly: “I and the Father are one” (Jn 10:30). Paul put it this way: in Christ “the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily” (Col 2:9). As Dennis Kinlaw loved to say, “All there is of God is in Jesus. But Jesus is not all there is of God.”
- D. The Word **created** everything (Jn 1:3). Paul makes the same point when he says “by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created **through** him and **for** him. And he is before all things, and in him all things **hold together**.” (Col 1:16–17).
- E. The Word is the source of **life** (Jn 1:4). “In him was life.” Jesus is **self-originating** and self-sustaining. This is true of no creature. “For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself” (Jn 5:26).
- F. The Word is the source of **light** (Jn 1:4–5). Jesus is the “light of the world” (Jn 8:12). He enlightens everyone! Light dispels darkness, yet some remain blind (see Jn 9).
- G. The Word became **flesh** (Jn 1:14). Up until verse 14, many Jews and Greeks might have nodded in approval of John’s philosophical and theological insights related to “the Logos.” But in four short words, John drops a nuclear bomb: “The Word became flesh.” God wrote himself into the **script**! He chose to become one of the characters in the drama of human history. It is remarkable that nowhere does Jesus use the prophetic formula, “Thus says the Lord.” Rather he consistently says, “Amen, amen, **I say** unto you.” He is the Word! He did not come to bring a message; he *is* the message (Rv 19:13).

- H. The Word **exegetes** God. Though no one has ever seen God, Jesus gives us a clear **picture** of who God really is! “Philip said to him, ‘Lord, show us the Father and it is enough for us.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father?’” (Jn 14:9).
- I. The Word confronts us with a **choice**. Will we become children of God or will we continue to live in darkness? In these 18 verses, John is not just teaching theology. He is preaching the good news of the gospel that **demand**s a decision for everyone who hears it!
- Will I not **recognize** him (Jn 1:10)? Am I so blind that I can’t see the Light of the world? Am I so deaf I can’t hear the Word of God (see Jn 12:28–29)?
  - Will I **reject** God because I disapprove of the form in which he chooses to come to me (Jn 1:11)?
  - Or will I **receive** him and **believe** on his name, giving me the right to become a child of God (Jn 1:12–13)? The Word will never force himself on anyone! He leaves the decision up to us. Note well what John is saying: The Son of God became flesh so that flesh (you and me) can become sons and daughters of God. While we are not divine and never will be, we are given the opportunity to become his children by being **born of God** (Jn 1:13; 3:1–15).
  - The light that enlightens every man (Jn 1:9) means that there is **no excuse!** He gives us enough light to enable us to say “yes.” If we refuse him, it is our own willful rejection of the truth. For such a decision, we will be held eternally accountable (Jn 3:19, 36).

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What lesson did you learn from hearing the story of “The Blind Men and the Elephant”?
2. What does the Bible mean when it says that Jesus’ coming as light into the world “enlightens everyone” (Jn 1:9)?
3. John says the Word “was with God” and the Word “was God” (Jn 1:1). How can both statements be true?
4. John calls Jesus, the Second Person of the Trinity, “the Word.” What is significant about this title?
5. Jesus has a beginning in time and space, but “the Word” is eternal and has no moment when his existence began. Discuss this.
6. Describe how Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word, “exegetes” God (makes him known) (Jn 1:18).



## got life?

### The Gospel of John A Bible Study with Stan Key

#### THE VOICE IN THE WILDERNESS

*John 1:19–51*

##### I. The importance of pointing

###### A. Pilgrim's Progress.

John Bunyan's classic allegory of the Christian life **begins** when a man named Evangelist has a conversation with a troubled seeker named Christian about the state of his soul. Evangelist asks why he doesn't do something about it. "Because I don't know where to go," replied Christian.

*Then, **pointing** with his finger over a very wide field, Evangelist said, "Do you see that Narrow Gate over there?" "No," replied Christian. Evangelist then asked, "Do you see that shining light there?" "I think I do," answered Christian. Then Evangelist said, "Keep that light in your eye and go up directly toward it. Then you will see the Gate. When you knock on the Gate, you'll be told what you must do."<sup>1</sup>*

His job now accomplished, Evangelist basically **disappears** from the story (though he has occasional moments when he briefly reappears.). Thus, we learn the importance of being **unimportant**; the conspicuousness of being invisible; the greatness of being small.

###### B. The role of the witness.

1. Evangelist served as a **witness** to Christian. Because he had seen and experienced something important for himself **first-hand**, he was able to help Christian by pointing the way, bearing testimony, sharing evidence.
2. No one comes to Christ without first receiving a witness. Someone must first point the way. The witness exists only to **introduce** the seeker to Jesus. Once that connection is made, the job of the witness is done.
3. Seen in this light, it is impossible to overstate the **importance** of the role of the witness, and at the same time it is impossible to overstate its **unimportance**.

###### C. One witness is not enough.

1. To bear witness is to give **testimony**. It is primarily a legal concept. Jews believed that in a court of law, multiple witnesses were required to prove something true. "A single witness shall not suffice...Only on the evidence of **two** witnesses or of **three** witnesses shall a charge be established" (Dt 19:15).
2. John's Gospel places great emphasis on the role of witnesses, using the noun "witness" or "testimony" 14 times and the verb 33 times. This Gospel highlights not only the testimony of John the Baptist (Jn 1:7–8, 29–34; 5:33–36) but also the witness of:
  - a. Jesus' **works/miracles** (Jn 5:36; 10:25; 14:11; 15:24).
  - b. The **Scriptures** (Jn 5:39,46).

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<sup>1</sup> Bunyan, 3.

- c. The Father (Jn 5:31–32,37; 12:28–30).
- d. The **Holy Spirit** (Jn 15:26; see I Jn 5:7–8).
- e. The woman at the well (Jn 4:39).
- f. The writer **John** himself (Jn 19:35; 21:24).
- g. Jesus himself (Jn 8:14, 18; plus all the “I am” statements).

In other words, if anyone doesn’t believe in Jesus, it is not because of the paucity of witnesses or the lack of evidence.

D. John the Baptist.

1. All four Gospels **begin** by telling us how John the Baptist bore witness to who Jesus is and pointed to him. “It’s not me—it’s him!” Without John the Baptist, we would never have realized who Jesus was and what he came to do. But once we caught on, we forgot all about John.
2. Although John knew that he was only a “voice in the wilderness,” Jesus regarded John as the **greatest** “among those born of women” (Mt 11:11).
3. John the Baptist is therefore the prototypical witness. His voice and his finger serve as the supreme **model** for what it means to be a witness of Jesus and bear testimony to the gospel.

II. Come and See! (Jn 1:19–51)

Though our study will focus on the witness of John the Baptist, this entire passage is all about the importance of **pointing** to Jesus, helping others find the Messiah by speaking a word or indicating the path.

The witness of John the Baptist (to the crowds) He is Lamb of God, Spirit-baptizer, Son of God Jn 1:18–34	The witness of Andrew (to Peter) He is the Messiah Jn 1:35–42	The witness of Philip (to Nathanael) He is the one Moses wrote about Jn 1:43–46	The witness of Nathanael (to Jesus) You are the King of Israel Jn 1:47–51
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Notes on the text:

- A. *Are you Elijah?* (Jn 1:21). This is not an easy question to answer. Malachi 4:5–6, the last verse in the Old Testament, prophesied that Elijah would come “before the great and awesome day of the Lord.” Furthermore, Elijah had not died; he had been taken to heaven in a chariot of fire (II Kgs 2:11). John denied that he was Elijah, but Jesus indicated that it was, in fact, who he was (Matt 11:14).
- B. *The lamb of God* (Jn 1:29, 36). John’s description of Jesus as “the lamb of God” is unprecedented. Where did he get such a novel idea? Scholars debate whether the metaphor is rooted in the Passover lamb, the lamb led to the slaughter (Isa 53:7), the lamb of the daily offering in the Temple (Ex 29:38–42), the lamb (really a ram) that God provided in the place of Isaac (Gen 22), or the triumphant horned lamb of the book of Revelation (Rv 5:6–14; 7:9–10).

*Perhaps the best understanding is that the term is used with a general meaning. That is to say, it does not refer to any one specific lamb, but to the lamb as the sacrificial animal par excellence. . . . John is saying that in Jesus we find that*

*divine victim who would perfectly fulfill all that the entire **sacrificial system** foreshadowed.<sup>2</sup>*

- C. *An Israelite in whom is no deceit* (Jn 1:47). The word “deceit” is surely a reference to Genesis 27:35 where Isaac tells Esau that his brother Jacob “came deceitfully” and stole his blessing. Jacob is the classic example of a deceiver. After his conversion, his name was later changed to Israel. Jesus seems to be saying to Nathanael, “You are a true Israel in whom there is no **Jacob!**” This man has a pure heart, ready to respond to the truth; what every true Israelite ought to be!
- D. *Heaven opened* (Jn 1:51). The Bible teaches that heaven is beyond the reach of any mortal (see Gen 11 and the story of the tower of Babel, etc.). But while no man can reach heaven, God may decide to **open the door**. Jesus’ promise to Nathanael that he would “see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man” is a reference to Jacob’s **ladder** (Gen 28:12). Jesus is saying that he is the ladder, the link, the **mediator** between heaven and earth. He makes it possible for God to come to man and man to come to God through himself.

### III. A theology of witness.

Looking especially at the prototypical ministry of John the Baptist, we learn what it means to be a witness.

#### A. The **identity** of the witness.

1. John had a remarkable ministry, preaching repentance and preparing the way for the Lord. Many had exalted ideas of who he might be.
  - Are you the **Messiah**? “I am not the Christ” (Jn 1:20).
  - Are you **Elijah**? (Mal 4:5–6). “I am not” (Jn 1:21).
  - Are you **the Prophet**? (Deut 18:15–22). “No” (Jn 1:21).<sup>3</sup>
2. Though Jesus considered John the Baptist to be Elijah (Matt 11:4), John never had such exalted notions of himself. “Let me explain to you who I am,” he said. “I’m only a **voice** in the wilderness (Jn 1:23; see Isa 40:3). “I’m not the Word . . . just a voice . . . nothing more, nothing less.
3. In John 3:26–30, John explains even more about his identity.

*They came to John and said, “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 answered, “You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, ‘I am not the Christ, but I 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**.”*
4. Jesus added a final metaphor to explain John’s identity. Jesus is the light of the world (Jn 1:4–8; 8:12). John is only a “burning and shining **lamp**” (Jn 5:35). Bearing witness to the light of the world is a little like pointing a flashlight at

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<sup>2</sup> Morris, 42.

<sup>3</sup> Notice how John’s responses to these questions become progressively more terse: “I am not the Christ.” “I am not.” “No!” Leon Morris comments: “Since his interest is in Jesus, not in himself, he has no intention of being sidetracked into a discussion about himself. He does not matter. Jesus does.” (*Expository Reflections*, 30).



the sun. But human **blindness** is such that even such a foolish action is helpful.

5. Thus we can summarize the identity of a witness this way. He/she is:
- Not the Word, but a **voice**.
  - Not the Light, but a **lamp**.
  - Not the Groom, but the **best man**.

Jesus must **increase**. I must **decrease**. Once I've helped people meet him, I need to get out of the way.

Illustration: C. S. Lewis' essay "Meditation in a Toolshed." Lewis described entering his dark toolshed one afternoon. A bright sunbeam shone through a crack at the top of the door with specks of dust floating in it. Everything else in the shed was pitch black. He saw the beam of light but nothing else. Then, he moved so that the beam fell on his eyes. He began to **look along** the beam rather than **look at** the beam. He explains that when he stopped looking at the beam but looked along it:

*I saw no toolshed, and [above all] no beam. Instead I saw, framed in the irregular cranny at the top of the door, green leaves moving on the branches of a tree outside and beyond that, 90 odd million miles away, the sun. Looking along the beam and looking at the beam are very different experiences.<sup>4</sup>*

This is a helpful way to think of the role of a witness. Don't look **at** the witness, look **through/along** the witness. To look at the witness is to miss the point.

B. The **place** of witness.

John the Baptist knew that his place of witness was not in **Jerusalem**, not in the **Temple**, not in the normal routines of everyday life. He was a voice "in the wilderness." To receive his witness, people had to interrupt their schedules and go out to a remote location. To be an effective witness often means connecting with seekers in ways that are **unconventional** and perhaps even odd.

C. The **message** of witness.

1. A witness has only one thing to say: "It's not about me. It's about **him**." He points to Jesus. He gives names and titles to Jesus that will immediately connect with his hearers, helping them to understand who he is and what he has come to do:
  - Prepare the way of the **Lord** (Yahweh).
  - **Lamb** of God (sacrifice for sin).
  - Son of God (divine).
  - **Messiah** (the One we've been waiting for).
  - The One Moses wrote about.
  - The **King** of Israel (our leader, Lord, future).
2. John's message, however, also contained two other important elements:
  - a. **Repentance**. Confess your sins and turn from those attitudes and behaviors that blind you to the truth of Jesus. Do this quickly because **wrath** is coming soon! "The axe is already laid to the root of the tree."

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<sup>4</sup> Lewis, *God in the Dock*, 212.

Don't trust in the fact that you are a descendent of Abraham (heritage, orthodox traditions, etc.). God can produce children for Abraham from rocks (Matt 3:7-12). Therefore, turn from evil, do the right thing and be content with your wages (Lk 3:10-14).

A witness knows that preparing the way of the Lord involves clearing out the rubble and debris (repentance).

- b. Baptism **in the Spirit**. John's baptism was with water (for purification). But this symbol pointed to the real need: baptism with the Spirit and fire (Matt 3:11).

A witness knows that his work is not done until the Spirit of the living God has lit a fire in the heart of the seeker through the indwelling Spirit of holiness.

D. The **cost** of witness.

John the Baptist **lost everything** because of his witness to Jesus. He lost his disciples (Jn 1:35-37). He lost his crowds (Jn 3:26). Ultimately, he lost his life (Mk 6:14-29). We must never forget that the early Christians had such a clear understanding of the cost involved in bearing witness to the Name that the term for witness (*martus*) soon came to mean being a **martyr**. To be a witness and to be a martyr were two ways of saying the same thing. A witness finds himself in losing himself!

E. There is no such thing as **second-hand** faith.

For faith in Christ to be genuine it must be first-hand and personal. Believing in Christ through the testimony of someone else is inadequate and will not last. Though many Samaritans believed in Jesus because of the testimony of the woman at the well (Jn 4:39), it was only after they had personally met Jesus and developed a relationship with him over the two days that he stayed with them that they came to authentic faith.

*They said to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves and we know that this indeed the Savior of the world." (John 4:42)*

F. The **power** for witnessing.

Because witnessing involves both character (who we are, not just what we say) and because when done rightly it always leads to some form of martyrdom, we need divine power do it rightly. Perhaps the most succinct statement of the theology of witnessing is found in Acts 1:8, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

Note:

1. We are called to **be** witnesses not to do witnessing.
2. We are to bear witness to **Jesus** ("witnesses of me") not just to share our testimony of how we made a decision.
3. We are called to be **martyrs**. It is in when we lay down our lives that we are the most effective witnesses. "Death is at work in us, but life in you" (II Cor 4:12).

4. Witnessing begins at **home** (Jerusalem) then works out in ever-expanding concentric circles (Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth).
  5. To be a witness requires the **power** that comes only through the infilling of Holy Spirit.
- G. The **victory** in witnessing.

As long as we remain silent about Jesus, we leave our options open. No one is quite sure what we believe. Our silence is a form of **self-protection**. But once we speak out and bear witness, then we are committed. It is naming the Name (Jesus) that both seals our martyrdom and ensures our victory!

*The triumphed over him [the dragon] by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their **testimony**, they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death. (Revelation 12:11 NIV)*

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Describe an experience before you became a Christian when someone witnessed to you in a very positive and effective manner? Describe an experience that was negative? What made the difference?
2. Why is the title “Lamb of God” so important?
3. What is significant about the fact that the Greek word *martus* can be translated as both “witness” and “martyr” in English?
4. What is the difference between being a witness and doing witnessing?
5. Is it possible for someone to be a Christian and no one know it?



## got life?

### The Gospel of John A Bible Study with Stan Key

#### A BOTTLE OF WINE AND A WHIP

*John 2:1–25*

I. What does God look like?

A. Philip's request.

*Near the end of Jesus' ministry, Philip makes a poignant request: "Master, show us the Father; then we'll be content" (John 14:8, The Message)*

*Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you so long, and you still **do not know me**, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father." (John 14:9)*

Jesus' response to Philip's request introduces us to two astounding claims:

1. To see Jesus is to see God. Jesus is the **face** of God.
2. God doesn't **look like** what you think he does. He could move in next door and you might not even realize it!

B. The Old Testament sets the stage.

Biblical history introduces us to the reality that God doesn't look like what we expect him to look like.

1. When God first reveals himself, he does so through his **voice** more than through his appearance. He **speaks** to Abraham and calls him to follow. In other words, the ear (not the eye) is perhaps the first organ to rightly perceive who God really is.
2. God's early appearances are full of mystery.
  - a. To Abraham.
    - "When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between [the divided pieces of animal sacrifice]" (Gn 15:17).
    - "And the LORD appeared to [Abraham] by the oaks of Mamre. . . . He lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, **three men** were standing in front of him" (Gn 18:1– 2).
  - b. To Jacob.
    - "Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, 'Surely the LORD is in this place, and I **did not know it**'" (Gn 28:16).
    - "So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, saying, 'For I have seen God **face to face**, and yet my life has been delivered'" (Gn 32:30).
  - c. To Moses.
    - "And the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a **bush** . . . the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed" (Ex 3:2).
    - "Moses said, 'Please, show me your glory.' . . . [God] said, 'You cannot see my face and live. . . . I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will take away

my hand, and you shall see my **back**, but my face shall not be seen”  
(Ex 33:18–23).

C. The Gospel makes a stunning announcement.

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . . And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory . . . full of **grace** and **truth**. . . . No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known. (John 1:1, 14, 18)*

But this announcement begs the larger question: if and when God does come among us, will we **recognize** him?

*He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. (John 1:10– 11)*

But how, oh, how is it possible to fail to hear and fail to see God? John’s Gospel helps to answer this question by explaining that:

1. We are so **deaf** that we can’t hear the Word of God (Jn 12:27–30).
2. We are so **blind** that we can’t see the Light of the world (Jn 1:8; 9:40–41).
3. God comes in **forms** that we never imagined (Jn 14:9): shepherd, servant, cross, etc.
4. We **don’t want** to hear him or see him because his coming interferes with our plans. We actually prefer the darkness (Jn 3:19).

D. John 1. Before John **shows** us what Jesus does (Jn 2ff.), he **tells** us who Jesus is (Jn 1). In other words, if we are listening (ears), then when God walks into town perhaps we’ll recognize him (eyes). So, listen closely:

1. Jesus is the **Word** (Jn 1:1, 14).
2. Jesus is the **Lamb** of God who takes away the sin of the world (Jn 1:29, 36).
3. Jesus is the **Son of God** (Jn 1:34, 49).
4. Jesus is the **Messiah/Christ** (Jn 1:41).
5. Jesus is the **King** of Israel (Jn 1:49).
6. Jesus is the **Son of Man** (Jn 1:51).

E. John 2. Were you listening? If so, you should recognize God when he walks into the room. Right? That’s what John 2 is about. But what if God shows up with a **bottle of wine** in one hand and a **whip** in the other?

II. Examine the text.

The wedding at Cana: The disciples realize who Jesus is and they believe. Jn 2:1–12	The cleansing of the Temple: The disciples remember this event later and they believe. Jn 2:13–22	Jesus knows that the “faith” of many is superficial. Jn 2:23–25
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A. The wedding at Cana (John 2:1–12).

1. John emphasizes that this was Jesus’ **first** miracle. This was thus the initial demonstration of Jesus’ true identity to the watching world.

2. But almost everything about this event is unimpressive:
    - a. The **location** is a nondescript village in the middle of nowhere: Cana.
    - b. The bridal couple is not even named.
    - c. The occasion is a wedding reception where Jesus' action is aimed at saving the bridal couple from **social embarrassment**: the wine ran out.
    - d. Jesus seems to be forced into this miracle by his **mother**.
    - e. And do we really need **180 gallons** of wine? Even if the alcoholic content is low and there was nothing else to drink, isn't this a bit over the top?
  3. John calls this miracle a "sign." It **points beyond** itself to something else. Don't just look *at* the miracle—look *through* it. This sign signifies that:
    - a. Jesus has come to **bless** and enrich our lives, not curse them. What a contrast to how Moses began his public ministry by turning water to **blood** (Ex 7:14–25)! The six pots contained water "for the Jewish rites of purification" (Jn 2:6). Jesus has brought **new wine** as the prophets foretold (Am 9:13; Jl 3:18). When "the wine runs out," invite Jesus to come and work a miracle. He comes to make life abundant (Jn 10:10).
    - b. We know better how to understand the person and place of **Mary**. Is she sinless? A super-saint? Should we pray to her? Did she ascend to heaven? Is she the mother of God? Or is she just another woman sinner saved by grace like the rest of us? Mary's words to Jesus imply more than "fix the problem." She is telling her son that it's time to get on with his mission. His "hour" has come to reveal his identity to the world. Though Jesus refuses to be manipulated (he takes his signals from his Father in heaven), he agrees to do something about the problem. Mary's words to the servants reveal her true place in history: "Do whatever he tells you" (Jn 2:5).
    - c. **Weddings** are of primary significance. History began with a wedding (Gn 2) and will end with a wedding (Rv 19–22). For Jesus to begin his ministry at a wedding has huge theological significance. This perhaps explains why the name of the bride and groom are omitted. John seems to be implying that Jesus is the **bridegroom** (see Jn 3:29; Mt 9:15). But where is his bride (the church).
- B. The cleansing of the Temple (John 2:13–22).
1. From the wedding in Cana, Jesus goes directly to the Temple in Jerusalem. Why? Could it be that he (the groom) is looking for his **bride** (the church)?
  2. The synoptic Gospels all place the cleansing of the Temple near the **end** of Jesus' ministry but John places it at the **beginning**. Though some believe John ignored the chronology of events so he could force the story into his narrative purposes, it seems more likely that Jesus simply cleansed the Temple twice!
  3. The problem Jesus is addressing can be summarized as:
    - a. Seeing worship as a means to personal **profit** (both for the leaders and for the worshippers). This sin lies at the heart of the so-called "Prosperity Gospel."

- b. Legalism and works righteousness.<sup>1</sup> The money changers insisted that worship be done **correctly** (the right coinage, the right animal sacrifice, etc.). Technique and style became more important than substance.
  - c. Worship leaders began to assume that the Temple belonged to them. Jesus knew who the building really belonged to: “My **Father’s** house.”
4. In speaking of his own body as the true Temple, Jesus was acknowledging the secondary importance of all structures, forms, and rituals. “These are a **shadow** of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ” (Col 2:17). When Jesus rose from the dead, the new temple would be called “the **body of Christ**.”<sup>2</sup>
  5. In cleansing the Temple, Jesus was clearly fulfilling one of the actions foretold that would be accomplished by the messiah.
    - “And on that day there shall be inscribed on the bells of the horses, ‘Holy to the Lord.’ . . . And there shall no longer be a trader in the house of the Lord of hosts on that day” (Zec 14:20–21).
    - “And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. . . . 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. . . . 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. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord” (Mal 3:1–4).

C. Jesus knows that the faith of many is **superficial** (John 2:23–25).

These powerful actions (turning water to wine, cleansing the Temple, etc.) caused many to believe in Jesus. However, faith that is based on the presence of outward impressive actions of power is superficial faith. Jesus is not impressed. He knows that followers who have this kind of faith will **fall away** when the going gets tough.

III. A bottle of wine and a whip.

John puts two stories side by side: turning water to wine and cleansing the temple. Why? He is comparing and contrasting two actions of the Messiah that he knows will cause many to **struggle**. Some may even stumble and fall. Does the Son of God really look like this?

A. The **party** Jesus.

1. Throughout his earthly ministry, Jesus was accused of associating with the **wrong people** and hanging out in the **wrong places**.

*Jesus called Matthew sitting at the tax booth, and said, “Follow me.” And he rose and followed him. And as Jesus reclined at table in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and were reclining with Jesus and his disciples. And when the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” But when he heard it, he said, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are **sick**. Go and learn what this means: ‘I*

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<sup>1</sup> Jesus had already “overturned” Jewish religious practices when at Cana the water he chose to turn into wine was precisely water used in religious purification rituals (Jn 2:6). By turning *this* water into wine, he was boldly proclaiming that the old order of things was indeed passing away.

<sup>2</sup> The fact that the physical temple in Jerusalem was actually demolished in 70 AD by the Roman army only underscores that absolute nature of this reality.

*desire mercy, and not sacrifice.’ For I came not to call the righteous, but **sinner**s.’ (Mt 9:9–13)*

*For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a **demon**.’ The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look at him! A **glutton** and a **drunkard**, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is justified by her deeds.” (Mt 11:18–19).*

2. Imagine Jesus at a wedding reception. Did he mingle? Did he tell a joke? Did he talk about sports? Did he dance? Is this picture of Jesus jarring to your senses? Why?

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3. Many contemporary churches highlight the fact that Jesus was a “friend of sinners.” This “party Jesus” provides the rationale for much of what they do (informal worship, contemporary music, seeker sensitive activities, small groups that meet in bars, wine served at church events, etc.

When are these activities proper and right?

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When do these activities cross the line and become harmful to the purposes of God rather than helpful?

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B. The **angry** Jesus.

1. When Jesus encountered profiteering in the Temple, he became very upset. Taking a whip, Jesus drove out the money changers. The disciples explained such violence by quoting Psalm 69:9: “**Zeal** for your house will consume me.”
2. Related to the word “jealous,” to be zealous is to **burn** with passion; to have intense emotion and fervor. The Zealots were a political group devoted to armed revolt. To describe Jesus as zealous is to describe him in terms of hot passion (flushed cheeks, veins standing out on his neck, an edge on his voice, swinging a whip, etc.).
3. Anger, when practiced by most of us, is usually **sinful**. It is prompted by petty hurts and snubs, motivated by hatred and expressed in destructive ways. Paul tells us: “Be angry and do not sin” (Eph 4:26–27). Because Jesus was sinless, we can be certain that his anger was righteous. On at least four occasions Jesus got angry.
  - a. Mark 3:1–6. Jesus heals a man with a withered hand on **the Sabbath**. “And he looked around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart” (v. 5).



Jesus gets angry when people see religious **ritual** and **tradition** as more important than the needs of those around them.

- b. Mark 10:13–16. When parents were bringing their **children** to Jesus so that he could bless them, the disciples rebuked them. Jesus was “indignant.” When Jesus said, “Let the children come to me,” there was an edge on voice and his cheeks were flushed with anger.

Jesus gets angry when the persons for whom he came (children, widows, sick, poor, the marginalized, etc.) are **hindered** from coming to him.

- c. John 2:13–17. Jesus cleanses the temple.

Jesus gets angry when the worship of God is seen as a means of making money and **self-advancement**.

- d. Revelation 6:12–17. When the sixth seal was opened, the unrepentant kings and generals, and the rich and powerful hid in caves and among the rocks saying, “Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the **wrath** of the Lamb” (Rv 6:16).

Jesus gets angry when people **refuse** to turn from their sins and come to him for grace and mercy.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Discuss the significance of the Biblical teaching that God seldom looks like or performs like we think he should.
2. Describe your reaction to “the party Jesus.” Describe your reaction to “the angry Jesus.” Which Jesus is more difficult for you to accept? Why?
3. Jesus came to save us from our sins so that we could imitate him. Ask God to show you one area in your life where you need to be more like the “party” Jesus. Now ask him to show you another area where you need to be more like the “angry” Jesus.



## got life?

### The Gospel of John A Bible Study with Stan Key

#### LOST IN CHURCH

*John 3:1–21*

I. Can human nature be changed?

A. This is a **deep** question.

Most attempts to define human identity and explain human behavior seem to focus on two unchangeable realities that seem to be determinative:

1. Our **genetic code** (nature). Not just the color of our eyes and the size of our feet, but what we like, what we desire, how we react to danger, what skills we excel in, etc. These all seem to be predetermined by our chromosomes.
2. Our **environment** (nurture). Our parents, our socio-economic culture, and events that happened to us during our formative years (war, abuse, illness, etc.) all have a profound influence in determining who we are.

Conclusion. Nature + nurture = **destiny**. With effort, we may be able to **modify** our behavior and make incremental improvements, but changing our nature? Such a thought is preposterous. Right?

B. This is a **contemporary** question.

Postmodern culture is quick to look to nature/nurture to explain human behavior. “I was born this way.” “He was abused as a child.” “She has a disorder (illness, chemical imbalance, syndrome, etc.).” “My parents were divorced.” “She is from a minority group.” Conclusion: We are not accountable for our actions; we are **programmed** this way. Change is impossible.

The last chapter of C. S. Lewis’ book *The Abolition of Man* is entitled “Men without Chests.” Here Lewis describes the chest as the “liaison officer” between the head (intellect) and the belly (appetites). If man was pure intellect (the head), he would be a spirit. If he were pure appetite (the belly), he would be an animal. It is the chest that makes the head and the belly work properly; it makes man, man.<sup>1</sup> Our educational system has produced men without chests. Yet we continue to demand from men the very qualities (honor, character, self-sacrifice, etc.) we have rendered impossible. We have removed the organ and yet demand the function. We have laughed at honor but are shocked when we find traitors in our midst!

C. This is a **biblical** question.

1. On several occasions, the Bible asks the question and seems to leave the answer dangling.
  - “Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots? Then also you can do good who are accustomed to do evil” (Jer 13:23).
  - “O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter has done [with the clay]?” (Jer 18:6).
  - “Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” (Rom 7:24).

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<sup>1</sup> Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, 34–48.

2. More to the point, this is the question that burned in the soul of Nicodemus when Jesus told him that he must be born again: “How can a man be born when he is old?” (Jn 3:4). Can human nature be changed—in a Pharisee?

II. John 3:1–21. Notes on the text.

<p>You must be <b><u>born again!</u></b></p> <p>Without a work of the Spirit you can't even see the Kingdom, much less enter in.</p> <p>Jn 3:1–8</p>	<p>Why can't you <b><u>understand</u></b> this?</p> <p>Religious activity is only behavior modification. Look and live!</p> <p>Jn 3:9–15</p>	<p>The Son of God has come as light in a world of darkness.</p> <p>You will be saved or condemned depending on how you <b><u>respond.</u></b></p> <p>Jn 3:16–21</p>
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- A. In John 4, Jesus will invite a known **sinner** to change. But in John 3, Jesus is offering life to a very good man. It is instructive to highlight the **contrast**:

Nicodemus	Woman at the Well
A Jew	A Samaritan
A <b><u>man</u></b>	A woman
An orthodox Pharisee	A member of <b><u>a cult</u></b>
In Jerusalem	In Samaria
A <b><u>moral</u></b> man	An immoral woman
Initiated by Nicodemus	Initiated by Jesus
He is curious	She is <b><u>thirsty</u></b>
Not sure of the outcome	She came to <b><u>radiant faith</u></b>

- B. The word used to describe birth (*anōthen*) can be translated either born “again” or born **“from above”**. Both renderings fit the context.
- C. The text gives a lot of information about Nicodemus.
1. He was a **sincere** Pharisee (Jn 3:1). He is no hypocrite.
  2. He was a **ruler** of the Jews (Jn 3:1); probably a member of the Sanhedrin.
  3. He was **curious** to know more about Jesus (Jn 3:2). His interest was based on the signs (miracles) Jesus had done (see Jn 2:23–25).
  4. He was a **teacher** (Jn 3:10); perhaps a theologian, a seminary professor. He was a serious student of the Scriptures.
  5. He was **rich**. We know this because of the large amount of spices (75 pounds of myrrh and aloes) that he offered in burying Jesus (Jn 3:19:39).
  6. He came to see Jesus at **night** (Jn 3:2) probably to avoid being seen. Was he embarrassed? Afraid? Ashamed? In John’s Gospel, night is often symbolic of ignorance, spiritual darkness and sin (see Jn 13:30).
  7. He seems to have come to faith in Jesus, but his testimony is somewhat **foggy** and the outcome less than clear:
    - He stands up for Jesus before his colleagues by reminding them that no one should be judged without a trial (Jn 7:50–52).
    - Like Joseph of Arimathea, he was a secret disciple. After Jesus died, he brought spices to prepare for burial (Jn 19:38–39).

- D. The new birth Jesus is talking about is “of **water** and the Spirit.” Some think water refers to natural birth (as when a woman’s water breaks). Others think it refers to cleansing. Probably it is a reference to **baptism**; the kind of pre-Christian baptism practiced by John the Baptist (Jn 1:31–34; 3:22–23). In other words, Jesus is telling the Rt. Rev. Dr. Nicodemus: “Unless you have submitted to the ministry of John the Baptist and been dunked under water as a sign of repentance for your sins, you couldn’t see the kingdom of God if it were staring you in the face!”
- E. When Jesus speaks of being “**lifted up**” (Jn 3:14), he speaks with double entendre. On the one hand, the word means “exalted,” “elevated in glory,” “lifted high in royal majesty.” On the other hand, he is talking about **the cross**. Both meanings are true at the same time! See also John 8:28; 12:32; etc.
- F. In his conversation with Nicodemus about **inner transformation**, Jesus seems to allude to three important passages of Scripture from the Old Testament:
1. In speaking about water and the need for a new beginning (Jn 3:5–7), Jesus was surely making an allusion to Ezekiel 36:25–27.

*I will sprinkle clean **water** on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a **new heart**, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.*

2. In speaking about new life brought about by the **Spirit/wind/breath** (Jn 3:8), Jesus was surely making an allusion to Ezekiel 37:1–14.

*The hand of the Lord was upon me, and he . . . set me down in the middle of the valley; it was full of bones. . . . Then he said to me, “Prophesy over these bones, and say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord . . . And as I prophesied, there was a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. And behold, there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them. But there was no **breath [Spirit, wind]** in them. Then he said to me, “Prophesy to the breath; prophesy, son of man, and say to the breath, Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may **live**.” So I prophesied and the breath came into them, and they lived and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army. Then he said to me, “Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. . . .*

3. Whereas the allusions to the passages from Ezekiel were indirect, Jesus made sure that the reference to Numbers 21:4–9 was direct and unavoidable (Jn 3:14).

*Then the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. And the people came to Moses and said, “We have sinned... Pray to the Lord, that he take away the serpents from us.” So Moses prayed for the people. And the Lord said to Moses, “Make a fiery serpent and set it **on a pole**, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.” So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would **look** at the bronze serpent and **live**.*

### III. How can I experience deep change and be born again?

The Gospel is emphatic: human nature can be **changed!** The leopard *can* change his spots! But *only* by an operation of God's Spirit working deep in the human heart; *never* by human effort! Jesus did not come to help us modify our behavior. He came to raise us from the dead! He came to transform the very core of our (twisted) being:

- “Be **transformed** [metamorphosed] by the renewal of your mind. . .” (Rom 12:2).
- “If anyone is in Christ, he is a **new creation**. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come” (II Cor 5:17).
- “You have put on the **new man**, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator” (Col 3:10).
- “He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of **regeneration** and renewal of the Holy Spirit” (Ti 3:5).
- “So that you may become partakers of the **divine nature**. . .” (II Pt 1:4).

The dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus shows us how such an inner transformation becomes a reality; not just for immoral Samaritans (John 4) but for moral, orthodox, pious worshippers like Nicodemus.

#### A. **Admit** my need.

This may be the hardest step. It takes **humility** to acknowledge that all my righteous deeds are no more than **filthy rags** (Is 64:6). It's not just the murderers, thieves, and sexual perverts that need the new birth. It's church-going, Bible-believing, traditional-values, law-abiding people like us! It all begins when we as individuals **confess** our sin and poverty of spirit and come to Jesus.

#### B. **Believe** in Jesus.

When we realize we've been bitten by the serpent of sin and will die from the poison, there is only one remedy: **look** and live. “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life” (Jn 3:14–15). “While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8).

#### C. **Receive** the gift.

God so loved the world that he **gave** his only Son. “Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life” (I Jn 5:12). There is nothing we can do to earn this life or purchase it by our good works. It is a gift, free and undeserved. “But to all who did **receive** him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God” (Jn 1:12). New life is not dependent on what we do but on what he has already done!

#### D. **Love** the Light.

The offer of free salvation includes a **warning**. Many today think that faith in Jesus is **passive** and that receiving the gift of salvation has little or no impact on behavior. This is not just bad theology, it can lead to **self-deception** (lost in church). To believe in Jesus and receive the gift of life means that now we are finally able to turn from the darkness and walk in the light. “This is the judgment: the light has come into the world. . .” (Jn 3:19). Jesus' coming **divides** the world into two groups: those who love the light and those who hate the light (Jn 3:19–21). To pretend to believe in Jesus yet continue to willfully walk in darkness is to be deceived.

## **QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. Has this lesson affected how you answer the question “Can human nature be changed?” How?
2. Describe what it means to be “lost in church.” How is this similar to being lost outside of church? How is it different?
3. Using this passage of Scripture, describe how deep inner change comes to a person.
4. Without using names, describe someone you know who hates the light. Now describe someone you know who loves the light.



# got life?

The Gospel of John  
A Bible Study with Stan Key

## WELL-LEARNED LESSONS

*John 4:1-42*

### I. An unforgettable story.

Jesus had to pass through Samaria. Tired and thirsty, he sits down at a well. Jn 1-6	Conversation about <b>water</b>  “Are you greater than Jacob?” Jn 7-15	Conversation about <b>worship</b>  “I perceive you are a prophet.” Jn 16-26	The woman tells her village about who she met. “Can this be the Messiah?” Jn 27-30	Conversation about the <b>harvest</b>  “My food is to do the will of my Father.” Jn 31-38	Many Samaritans believe in Jesus. “This is the Savior of the world.” Jn 39-42
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A. It would be difficult to find a Bible story that is richer in layers of meaning or more fertile for **application**. For example, this story could be used for teaching about:

1. Racial and **ethnic** divisions.
2. Principles of **evangelism**.
3. The identity of Jesus.
4. Attitudes toward **women**.
5. The living water that quenches our deepest thirsts and **desires**.

This study will focus primarily on what I believe is the primary focus and purpose of this text: **worship**.

B. Well-loved stories.

Jewish readers of this story in John’s Gospel would readily recognize numerous themes and images from at least three other stories that also took place at **a well**:

Reference	Story
Genesis 24:10-61	<b>Isaac</b> & Rebekah
Genesis 29:1-20	<b>Jacob</b> & Rachel
Exodus 2:15-22	<b>Moses</b> & Zipporah

Notice how each of these stories has echoes that are repeated in John 4:

1. A man of influence is traveling in a **foreign land** and stops at a well for a drink.
2. At the well, the man encounters a woman (or group of women).
3. Someone draws **water** from the well to satisfy someone’s thirst.
4. The woman rushes home to **tell her family** about the one she has just met.
5. The woman’s family extends hospitality to the man, inviting him to stay awhile.
6. Each of the Old Testament stories ends in a betrothal and **marriage**.

C. Who is this Samaritan divorcee really?

The allusions in John 4 to these Old Testament stories cannot be **accidental**. It invites us to meditate deeply on the ultimate identity of this Samaritan divorcee. This question becomes even more poignant when one remembers that John has just told us about the wedding at Cana (Jn 2:1–11) and John the Baptist identified himself as the best man helping the groom prepare for his **wedding day** (Jn 3:28–29). John may be using this Samaritan divorcee as one of his signs. Don't look *at* her, look *through* her! Her **identity** and her **character traits** enable us to better understand the bride that Christ is seeking.

II. Notes on the text.

A. This story emphasizes how Jesus crossed at least four significant barriers to reach this woman:

1. The **racial** barrier.

Jews and Samaritans had a long history of division and **prejudice** that began when the Northern Kingdom (Israel) separated from the Southern Kingdom (Judah) after the reign of Solomon. When the Assyrians conquered Samaria, they deported most of the population and resettled the region with foreigners who intermarried with the remaining Jews. Thus, Jews in Jesus' day tended to view Samaritans as **half-breeds**.

2. The **gender** barrier.

The disciples' surprise that Jesus was talking with a **woman** (Jn 4:27) reflects the stigma that such a conversation would have had. Today, with all the sexual harassment allegations being flung about, it is easy to understand why Jesus being alone with a divorcee of questionable character could have been in a very **compromising** situation.

3. The **moral** barrier.

Women typically came to a well in groups late in the day when it was cool. The fact that this woman came **alone** at **noon** indicates that she probably was ostracized from the other women in town. Having had five husbands and now living with a man (was he married?), undoubtedly made her a moral outcast.

4. The **doctrinal** barrier.

Though the Samaritans worshiped the one true God, their religious practice was **unorthodox**. For example, their Bible consisted only of the Pentateuch, and they had their own temple on Mount Gerizim. For orthodox Jews, such a dilution of truth would be **worse** than a complete falsehood (a half truth is worse than a lie). Little wonder that John says, "Jews have no dealings with Samaritans" (Jn 4:9).

B. The **contrast** between this woman (Jn 4) and Nicodemus (Jn 3), could not be more stark.

Nicodemus	Woman at the well
A Jew	A Samaritan
A man	A woman
An orthodox Pharisee	A member of a cult
Moral	Immoral
Needs new birth	Needs living water



Nicodemus	Woman at the well
At night	At noon
Unsure of outcome	Comes to radiant faith
Initiated by Nicodemus	Initiated by Jesus

- C. The statement that Jesus “**had to** pass through Samaria” is interesting (Jn 4:4). Orthodox Jews traveling from Jerusalem to Galilee would typically cross the Jordan River and travel north thus avoiding ceremonial uncleanness by contact with Samaria. Though some think Jesus “had to” pass through Samaria because he was in a hurry, the probable meaning is that he was on a mission! He was being very intentional about making a point. Specifically, he wanted to illustrate to the world what **true worship** really looked like: “the Father is seeking such people to worship him” (Jn 4:23).
- D. Note the irony in the fact that while Jesus met open **hostility** in Jerusalem (Jn 2–3), he was received warmly in Sychar. While the pious Bible-believing Pharisee Nicodemus was so **blind** he couldn’t see the Light of the world, an immoral divorcee with a partial Bible and an unorthodox faith recognized him almost immediately!
- E. John’s comment that Jesus was “tired” and needed to sit down to rest and drink (Jn 4:6–7) underscores the fact that Jesus, though fully God, was also **fully man** (Jn 1:14; 10:30; etc.).
- F. When Jesus asked the woman to call her husband (Jn 4:16), the woman may have interpreted this to mean that he was fishing, trying to find out if she was **available**. When she responded that she had no husband (Jn 4:17), she may have been signaling, “I am available. Wanna take it to the next level?”
- G. The term “**living water**” (Jn 4:10–11, 13–14) has a double meaning. It can mean “running/flowing water,” which in Jewish rituals was essential for purification. Wells were not places for running water (unless there was an underground stream). But Jesus is also talking about “life-giving water,” the “water of life” (see Ez 47:1–12; Rv 22:1, 17). Later, at the Feast of Booths, Jesus will explain:
- On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’” Now this he said about the **Spirit**, whom those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified. (John 7:37–39)*
- H. John notes that in the woman’s haste to tell her village about Jesus, she forgot her **water jar** (Jn 4:28). John is suggesting metaphorically that you don’t need a jar if you have a bubbling well within you.
- I. When Jesus reveals himself as the Messiah, his words are dramatic: “**I am**” (*ego eimi*, Jn 4:26). This fits in with the other references in John to times when Jesus said, “I am”. It also refers to the **burning bush** when God revealed himself to Moses as “I am.”

### III. Lessons at the well.

The real message of this amazing story concerns **worship**. Jesus had to go to Samaria so that he could illustrate what genuine, authentic worship looked like. This is the only teaching that Jesus ever gave on the subject of worship. In six short verses (Jn 4:19–24), the word “worship” or “worshipper” is used ten times.

*The woman said to him, “Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship.” Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.” (John 4:19–24)*

God is **seeking** worshippers. He will go to any length and take any risk to find them. In fact, his thirst for worshippers is as great as the woman’s thirst for water! What he couldn’t find in Jerusalem (at the Temple or with Nicodemus), he found at Jacob’s well. This story reveals seven characteristics of true worship:

1. True worship recognizes that salvation is from **the Jews**.

While theological precision on every fine point of doctrine is not essential, there are some things that are **non-negotiable**. Worshipping in ignorance (“You worship what you do not know”) is inadequate. Jesus is being honest with the woman, reminding her that faulty theology (based on a partial Bible and worship on Mount Gerizim) is a very shaky foundation for worship.

For salvation, one must have a **complete** Bible and a **living** Savior. One cannot bring a consumer mentality to worship: “I’ll take this and this, but not this.” To add to or take from God’s revealed Word is to put our salvation in jeopardy (see Rv 22:18–19). “If your concept of God is wrong, the more religion you get, the more dangerous you become to you and to others” (William Temple).

2. True worship recognizes that externals (location, liturgy, ritual, style, theological precision, etc.) are only of **secondary** importance.

The woman believed that worshipping on Mount Gerizim was what made her worship legitimate; the site was sacred and therefore her worship was authentic. Jesus tells her that the important thing is not **where** you worship but **how**. The question is not whether you worship in Gerizim or Jerusalem but whether you worship in spirit and truth!

False worship always accentuates **style** over substance. Is the liturgy correct? Is the music to my liking? Are we in the right location? Is this the right time of the day? Is this the right day of the week? Screens or hymnals? KJV or NIV? Piano or guitar? Raise our hands or not? God is seeking worshippers who are **thirsty**, not those who have all the stylistic questions figured out.

3. True worship brings the worshipper face to face with **personal sin**.

“Go call your husband,” Jesus said to the woman. Jesus knew that she would never be able to drink living water or to worship rightly as long as she was living in willful, continual, **unconfessed** sin. Worship that fails to confront worshippers with their sin is simply a lot of liturgical noise, full of sound and fury, but signifying nothing.

False worship comforts worshippers in their sins and reassures them even when they are on the pathway to hell. The goal is **happiness**, rather than holiness. True worship turns on the light! It both comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable! Those who hate the light will either change the subject or change churches (see Jn 3:19–21).

4. True worship engages both **heart** and **head**.

God is seeking “true worshippers,” those who will worship him “in spirit and truth.”

- “In spirit” indicates worship that is **inward**, prompted by and expressed through the Holy Spirit. True worship is thus something that is **felt** and experienced. Our emotions are involved.

*I am bold to assert that no change of a religious nature will ever take place unless the **affections** are moved... nothing significant ever changed the life of anyone when the heart was not deeply affected... The duty of singing praises to God seems to be given wholly to excite and express religious affections... In summary, those who have little religious affection have very little religion.<sup>1</sup>*

- “In truth” indicates that emotion in worship must be rooted and grounded in biblical **doctrine**. To be intense in worship while being misguided about the truth (God, man, salvation, sin, judgment, etc.) is to make things worse rather than better.

*Truth without spirit leads to **formalism**, ritualism, and pharisaim. It is having a form of godliness without the power (II Tm 3:5). Spirit without truth leads to **emotionalism**, sentimentalism, and fanaticism. It is having a zeal for God but not according to knowledge (Rom 10:2). What a tragedy that most people today seem to be forced to choose between one or the other: between a cemetery or an insane asylum. Jesus says that worship must be in spirit and truth. What God has joined together, let no one **separate!***

5. True worship satisfies our **deepest longings**.

Though the woman at the well had “worshipped” all her life, she was still thirsty! But once she got a sip of the living water that Jesus offered, she was never thirsty again. It’s not that our longings and desires cease to exist. It is that Jesus promises an inner spring of life-giving water that will be with us always through his **Spirit** that meets every desire as it is felt (Jn 7:37–39).

6. True worship always turns us **outward**, toward the needs of those around us.

The woman’s encounter with Jesus turned her immediately into an **evangelist**. She ran back to her village and told everyone about the One who was offering living water.

7. True worship reshapes us into the **image of God**.

The woman’s thirst led her to worship Jesus. But once she worshipped Jesus her thirsts became transformed so that she began to desire the things God desires. We **resemble** what we worship.

*Worship is the “imagination station” that incubates our loves and longings so that our cultural endeavors are indexed toward God and his kingdom. If you are passionate about seeking justice, renewing culture, and taking up your vocation to unfurl all of creation’s potential, you need to invest in the formation of your imagination.... You need to worship well. Because you are what you love. And you worship what you love.<sup>2</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Edwards, 10–26.

<sup>2</sup> Smith, xii.

## **QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. How does the woman at the well help us to better understand the Bride of Christ and the coming Wedding of the Lamb?
2. Describe the Sunday worship in your church. What is its purpose? Is it about style or substance?
3. How does the woman at the well illustrate authentic worship?
4. How does thirst lead to worship? Then how does worship change our thirsts?
5. Name one thing that you intend to do to become a true worshipper.



# got life?

## The Gospel of John A Bible Study with Stan Key

### WORKING ON SUNDAY

*John 5:1–29*

#### I. What’s this passage *really* all about?

##### A. Jesus at work.

This story, like all the stories in John’s Gospel, has **multiple layers** of meaning. The challenge in preaching/teaching from this passage is choosing which angle to emphasize. This study will focus on John 5:17 as the key verse through which to interpret the entire passage: “My Father is working until now, and **I am working.**” A quick look at some of the references in John to “work” is instructive:

- “Jesus said to them, ‘My **food** is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his *work*’” (Jn 4:34).
- “They said to him, ‘What must we do, to be doing the *works* of God?’ Jesus answered them, ‘This is the *work* of God, that you **believe** in him whom he has sent’” (Jn 6:28–29).
- Jesus answered, “We must *work* the *works* of him who sent me while it is day; **night** is coming, when no one can *work*” (Jn 9:4).
- “The Jews answered him, ‘It is not for a good *work* that we are going to stone you but for **blasphemy**, because you, being a man, make yourself God’” (Jn 10:33).
- “I glorified you on earth, having **accomplished** the *work* the you gave me to do” (Jn 17:4).

##### B. For Jesus, doing the Father’s work was the single **driving passion** of his life. If we are children of God, then we should learn from Jesus’ example and seek to **imitate** his thoughts, words, and actions. Henry Blackaby emphasized this principle in his book *Experiencing God* when he said, “Watch and see where God is *working* and join him.”

*But Jesus answered them, “My Father is working until now, and I am working.”... So Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise. For the Father loves the Son and **shows** him all that he himself is doing.” (John 5:17, 19–20)*

#### II. Examining the Scripture

The Sign	To What Does the Sign Point?
Jesus chooses one lame man (38 years), with questionable faith, heals him, telling him to carry his bed—on the Sabbath!  Jn 5:1–9	1. Jesus gives life to whom he chooses. 2. Jesus judges the world. 3. Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath.  Jn 5:11–29

#### Notes on the text:

- A. The present tense “is” (Jn 5:2) makes some scholars wonder if the Gospel of John was written before **70 ad** when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem.
- B. The fact that John tells us the man had been an invalid for **38 years** may be significant. This is precisely the number of years the Hebrews wandered in the wilderness (see Dt 2:14), referring to a disobedient generation under God’s wrath.

- C. Parts of verses 3 and 4 are not included in some manuscripts. These verses allude to a **superstition** that explained the popular belief in the healing powers of the waters.
- D. This was not the only time that Jesus was accused of being a **Sabbath-breaker**. This was a recurring issue between Jesus and the Pharisees. See John 9:14; Mark 2:23–28; 3:1–6; Luke 14:1–6; etc.
- E. The Pharisees were often guilty of keeping the letter of the law but violating the spirit, of straining out a **gnat** but swallowing a **camel** (Mt 23:23–24). Perhaps the most poignant illustration in John is when the Pharisees refused to enter Pilate’s house during Jesus’ trial lest they defile themselves and not be able to eat the Passover (Jn 18:28).
- F. In John 5:27, Jesus is referred to as “the **Son of Man**” in describing his role in the Final Judgment. This title comes from Daniel and refers to his identity as King of kings.

*I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed. (Daniel 7:13–14)*

- G. The text explains that final judgment will be based on the **works** we have done (Jn 5:28–29). Leon Morris comments:

*It puzzles some Christians that final judgment is linked with our deeds, when the New Testament is so insistent that our salvation is all of God’s **grace**. But while the New Testament always regards salvation as springing from grace, it just as consistently sees judgment as proceeding on the basis of works.<sup>1</sup>*

### III. Working the works of God.

“My Father is working until now, and I am working” (Jn 5:17). So, what does it mean to **work** in the kingdom of God? This is important not only in our understanding of Jesus but also in our understanding of what it means to be a disciple.

- A. Redeeming our concept of work.

After sin entered the world (Gen 3), work became associated with **toil**, fatigue, **stress**, anxiety, **heavy** burdens, etc. However, because Jesus was without sin, his work had none of these qualities. He worked like the Father worked (Gen 1–2, etc.). While it was indeed work; his yoke was **easy** and his burden was **light** (Mt 11:28–30). Our work should be the same because it is based in the fundamental truth that our primary work is to **believe** in the one God has sent (Jn 6:28–29).

- B. A watchful eye.

Jesus did not create his own work. He kept his eye on the Father and simply **discerned** where he was already at work—and joined in. As in chapter 4, when he “had to” pass through Samaria (Jn 4:4), so in this chapter Jesus is very **intentional** about *where* he goes, *what* he does, *who* he works with, and *when* he does it. His actions are not random. He looks where his Father is already at work—and gets involved there.

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<sup>1</sup> Morris, 191.

C. So, what can we learn from Jesus' work that will help us in *our* work?

1. He is working among the **invalids**. Jesus intentionally visited the Pool of Bethesda where there was a "multitude of invalids [Greek: strengthless]—blind, lame, and paralyzed [Greek: dried up, withered]" (Jn 5:4). When he visited the Temple (Jn 2:13–22), God seemed to be absent, but somehow Jesus knew that God would be present and active here at Bethesda among **the broken**.
2. He is working to expose **motives**. At first, Jesus' question seems silly, even hurtful: "Do you want to be healed?" (Jn 5:6). But upon reflection, we discover what a penetrating and insightful question it is. Jesus knew the human heart very well (see Jn 2:23–25). He knew that not everyone wants to be healthy and whole.

*Maybe his sickness had become his haven, his lover, his overlord... He's been there thirty-eight years... thirty-eight years of monotony, futility, self-pity, of poisonous envy and secret pride, of never being able to work, travel, make love, cook, care for children, or fix an oxcart. Thirty-eight years of life without options, life without obligations... And then Jesus shows up and changes all that... Now the man can work and pay taxes. Now he can marry and take on domestic responsibilities. Now he can build a home and fix its roof when it leaks... Now he can relinquish the unique status suffering bestows and enter the anonymity that comes with being well. Now he can lose the strange privilege of sickness and take up the everyday obligations of health. He's just like everybody else now. We expect things of him. "Do you want to get well?" Do I want to get well?<sup>2</sup>*

3. He is working on **Sunday [Sabbath]**.
  - a. The Jews took the **fourth commandment** very seriously. Historically, one could say that not only did Israel keep the Sabbath, the Sabbath kept Israel. Breaking Sabbath was thus a very serious offense.
  - b. The Fourth Commandment simply said, "you shall not do any work" on the Sabbath without **specifying** what that meant (Ex 20:8–11). Jesus healed a man and told him to take up his bed and walk. Jesus is not breaking the Commandment (see Mt 5:17) but he is breaking the Pharisees' **traditions!**

*If on the Sabbath a man receives circumcision, so that the Law of Moses may not be broken, are you angry with me because on the Sabbath I made a man's whole body well? Do not judge by **appearances**, but judge with right judgment. (John 7:21–24)*
  - c. Though Jesus did not break the Mosaic Law, he did indeed challenge the traditional Jewish notion of **sacred time** (Sabbath, feast days, seasons, etc.) In chapter 4, he had challenged the notion of sacred **space** (Jerusalem, Temple, etc.) by telling the woman at the well that true worship is not so much about *where* we worship but *how* (see Jn 4:21–24). Here in chapter 5, Jesus is showing that God is not so interested in **when** we worship but the inner state of our hearts.
4. He is working to explore the relationship between sickness and **sin**. When Jesus told the man to "sin no more, that nothing worse may happen to you" (Jn

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<sup>2</sup> Buchanan, 151–52.

5:14), he was implying a **direct** relationship between his paralysis and his sin. Later, when Jesus healed a blind man, he explicitly said that in this instance, the disease had nothing to do with sin (Jn 9:1–3). The relationship between sin and sickness is **complex**. Jesus heals the lame man because he wants us to think deeply about the connection between sin and disease in our own lives and in the lives of those we love.

5. He is working to reveal his true **identity**. The Pharisees accused Jesus of blasphemy (making himself equal with God), not realizing that Jesus had intentionally healed the man on the Sabbath to **provoke** this very accusation! His actions are “signs” (see Jn 20:30–31); they point beyond themselves. By healing on the Sabbath, Jesus was forcing people to look beyond the miraculous act and ask the question: who is this man? As John’s Gospel unfolds, Jesus becomes increasingly clear:
  - “Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father” (Jn 5:23).
  - “Before Abraham was, I am” (Jn 8:58).
  - “I and the Father are one” (Jn 10:30).
  - “I am the way, the truth, and the life...” (Jn 14:6).
  - “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (Jn 14:9).
6. He is working to **judge**. In the conversation that followed the healing, Jesus emphasized that his Father had given him **authority** to execute judgment, not just today but in the future at the Final Judgment when the dead will be raised (Jn 5:22, 27–29). But how does the healing miracle point to Jesus as the Judge of the world? This question is even more poignant when we remember that Jesus states emphatically, “I did not come to judge the world but to save the world” (Jn 12:47; see also 3:17; 8:15). Though the **purpose** of Jesus’ coming was not to judge the world, that was its **effect**. The healing of the paralytic is indeed a *work* of present judgment and an anticipation of future judgment in several respects:
  - a. He chose **who** he wanted to heal. “You didn’t choose me but I chose you...” (Jn 15:16).
  - b. He chose **how** he wanted to heal. He exposed the man’s motives by asking if he wanted to be healed (Jn 5:6). Though the man had enough faith in Jesus to make the miracle possible, he is a questionable disciple at best.<sup>3</sup>
  - c. He chose **when** he wanted to heal. In healing on the Sabbath, Jesus divided all Jerusalem into two groups by “forcing” a decision on them: Is this a good action or a bad one? Is Jesus from God or from Satan? Did Jesus break the law or keep the law? This illustrates perfectly what John had said earlier:

*And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people **loved the darkness** rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it*

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<sup>33</sup> He doesn’t even know who Jesus is! And when the leaders in Jerusalem begin to persecute Jesus, he actually betrays him by telling the authorities who he is and where to find him (see Jn 5:12–15). There is little evidence that this man ever became a real disciple.



*may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God.”  
(John 3:19–21)*

7. He is working to bring **life**. Not only does Jesus’ act of healing demonstrate that he has authority to judge the world but also it beautifully demonstrates that he has authority to give life to whomever he chooses (Jn 5:21). Not only is this true now in this life, but the day will soon come “when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live” (Jn 5:25–26). Lazarus will be the most dramatic illustration (Jn 11:38–44). He came to give us all abundant life (Jn 10:10). The offer of life is extended to everyone (Jn 3:16). **Whoever** comes to him will never be cast out (Jn 6:37).

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Have you ever known someone who was more interested in *when* we worship (days, times, seasons, etc.) than how we worship? Describe what they were like.
2. Have you ever known someone who did not want to be healthy and well?
3. John’s Gospel speaks not only of a future judgment but also of a present one. Jesus judges the world now, just by his presence. Describe what this looks like in actual practice.
4. Jesus chose to heal only one of the sick people at the pool of Bethesda. How do you think the other sick people felt? Does this mean they were not among the elect? Discuss this and how it relates to election, predestination, sovereignty, etc.
5. Discuss Blackaby’s teaching: “Find where God is working and join him there.” What does this mean for you today?
6. Why does the Bible seem to send different signals when it comes to the relationship of disease to sin? Discuss this.



# got life?

## The Gospel of John A Bible Study with Stan Key

### TOO MUCH TO SWALLOW

*John 6:1–71*

#### I. The Bread Sermon

- A. Nothing is more basic than **bread**. While other cultures may use other staple foods (rice, corn, cassava, etc.), Israel and much of the world use bread as the essential core of daily nourishment. Whether made from wheat or the cheaper barley (Jn 6:9), bread is essential for survival. Jesus insisted that trusting God for daily sustenance was to be part of our regular prayer life: “Give us this day our **daily** bread.”
- B. But the Bible recognizes what everyone already intuitively knows: **man** does not live by bread alone. An animal can be fully satisfied if he has enough to eat. Not so a human person! Our tummies can be full and yet our souls remain empty. “Bread” then is a **sign**!<sup>1</sup> It points beyond itself to a deeper hunger, a deeper need. God gives us bread so that we realize that we need more than bread!

*And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with **manna**...that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by **every word** that comes from the mouth of the Lord. (Deuteronomy 8:3)*

- C. At the beginning of his ministry, as Jesus considered what sort of Messiah he was to be, he stood firm against the **temptation** to be a “bread king.”

*Then Jesus was led up by **the Spirit** into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And after fasting forty days and forty nights, he was **hungry**. And the tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” But he answered, “It is written, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’” (Matthew 4:1–4)*

- D. John 6 begins with a bread miracle, moves to a bread sermon, and ends with a strong personal application. This is one of the most **offensive** sermons Jesus ever preached.

Two Signs that Show What Jesus Can Do	One Sermon that Shows Who Jesus Claims to Be	Two Reactions that Show How People Respond
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Feeds 5,000 (1–15).</li> <li>• Walks on water (16–21).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• You saw the sign but missed the point.</li> <li>• I am the bread of life.</li> <li>• Eat my flesh and drink my blood.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This is a hard saying; we’re leaving!</li> <li>• I’m offended but staying anyway.</li> <li>• You are the Holy One! We’re staying.</li> </ul>
Jesus Gives Bread Jn 6:1–21	Jesus Is Bread Jn 6:22–59	Too Much to Swallow? Jn 6:60–71

<sup>1</sup> John emphasizes signs throughout his Gospel. Thus, bread *signifies* Bread, birth *signifies* Birth, life *signifies* Life, word *signifies* Word, water *signifies* Water, light *signifies* Water, vine *signifies* Vine, and door *signifies* Door.

## II. Examining the text

### A. What can Jesus do? (Jn 6:1–21)

#### 1. Jesus can **feed hungry people** (Jn 6:1–15).

a. Notice, that this situation is designed by Jesus as a **test** for his disciples (Jn 6:6). The test involves several questions:

- What are we to do about **human need** (hunger, poverty, etc.)?
- Do we have **resources** to handle this situation?
- What kind of **Messiah** is Jesus?

b. This is a **sign** (Jn 6:14). The miracle points beyond itself to something more *significant* than the miracle itself. Jesus cares about human need and he can do something about it. But is this what his kingdom is all about?

c. The result of the miracle is twofold:

- 1) The people conclude Jesus is “the **Prophet**.”<sup>2</sup> Jesus can do what Moses did in the wilderness with manna.
- 2) The people want to take Jesus “by force to make him **king**” (Jn 6:15). Jesus is a hero and the masses love him. This is wonderful. Right?

Notice how Jesus responds to his popularity: he **withdraws** to a mountain to be alone. Mark tells us that after the miracle, he “made his disciples get into the boat and go... to the other side” (Mk 6:45). That night, a **storm** hits!

d. Textual notes:

- 1) This is the only miracle of Jesus that is mentioned in **all four** gospels. Obviously, it had very special meaning for the early disciples.
- 2) There were 5,000 men (males) (Jn 6:10). This means Jesus probably fed perhaps **15,000** people or more.
- 3) A denarius was a day’s wage. Two hundred denarii would thus be equivalent to a salary for eight months of work.
- 4) Andrew was always bringing people to Jesus: his brother (Jn 1:40–42), the Greeks (Jn 12:20–22), and here, the boy with the picnic lunch (Jn 6:8–9).
- 5) The Greek verb for “give thanks” (Jn 6:11) is *eucharisteo* (from whence we get the term **Eucharist**). Some believe John is making a reference to Communion here (and also later in the passage when Jesus speaks of eating his flesh and drinking his blood).

#### 2. Jesus can **walk on water** (Jn 6:16–21)

a. The storm is also a sign; it is *significant*. Don’t just look *at* it, look **through** it. The storm points beyond itself to a crisis that is brewing that has the potential to sink the apostolic mission!

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<sup>2</sup> See Deuteronomy 18:15–18, “The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen...”

- b. The disciples are in a boat without Jesus—making no progress. Rowing **against the wind** is hard. Working at cross purposes with the Creator is impossible!
- c. Jesus comes walking on the water; he comes to his disciples in a way that they **never expected** him to come. He does not conform to their expectations. This “frightens” them (Jn 6:19).
- d. When Jesus reaches them, he says, “I am” (Jn 6:20). This is the language of **deity**.
- e. With Jesus in the boat all is well and immediately they reach their destination.

B. Who does Jesus claim to be? (Jn 6:22–59)

These verses describe a dialogue between Jesus and his audience but we can call it a “**sermon**” because of the important message that he is teaching. Jesus is explaining the *significance* of the signs he has just performed. His message has two parts:

- 1. Your interest in me is all wrong (Jn 6:26–33).

Like the Samaritan woman at the well, these followers of Jesus “worship what [they] do not know” (Jn 4:22). They are clueless and blind to who Jesus is and the nature of the life he is offering them. Jesus wants them to wise up to their **ignorance**. They will never see the truth until they acknowledge their **blindness**.

- a. They are seeking him for the **wrong reasons** (Jn 6:26).  
Their motivation is wrong. They are seeking Jesus because he gave them free food and they “ate their fill.” Their interest in spirituality and religion is motivated by greed and selfishness. They want the gift but have no interest in the Giver. They saw the sign but missed the whole point of the miracle!
- b. They are hungry for the **wrong bread** (Jn 6:27).  
The food they are working so hard to obtain is “food that perishes.” Such food will one day turn rotten and those who eat it will one day die. Why do you labor so hard for something that produces such meager results?
- c. They are working in the **wrong way** (Jn 6:28–29).  
They think religion is about *doing* something rather than **believing** something! What they are hungry for cannot be obtained by human effort. It is a gift and can only be received by faith. But believing is not easy. The “work of God is that you believe in him whom he has sent.”
- d. They are seeking for the wrong kind of **evidence** (Jn 6:30–31).  
They pretend that if Jesus would only show them a “sign” (like Moses did with manna) then they would believe in him. Really? Jesus has just fed 5,000 people and walked on water and yet they ask him for a sign so they can believe! Jesus is showing them that faith is ultimately a matter of **the will**, not a matter of the evidence (see Jn 7:17). These are people who will not believe even though someone rises from the dead (Jn 11–12; see Lk 16:31).
- e. They have the wrong understanding of **Scripture** (Jn 6:32–33).

They give Moses credit for the manna in the wilderness. Jesus corrects their interpretation of Scripture by reminding them that it was God, not Moses, who gave them bread to eat.

How clueless these people are! When they finally say, “Sir, give us this bread always” (Jn 6:34), they have **no clue** what they are asking for.

2. The bread you really want (Jn 6:34–59).

The people are hoping for a new Moses to bring more free manna. But Jesus reminds them that this kind of bread is limited in what it can do. Those who eat it will still die (Jn 6:49). Jesus is offering them a **new kind** of bread, something infinitely better than manna, even better than the bread he had miraculously provided.

a. What the bread is.

The important thing in the two signs (miracle feeding, walking on water) is not what Jesus does but **who Jesus is!** The signs point to the Giver—not the gift.

- “I am the bread of life” (Jn 6:35, 48).
- “I am the bread that comes down from heaven” (Jn 6:41).
- “I am the living bread” (Jn 6:51).

Then, more specifically, Jesus says:

- “The bread... is my **flesh**” (Jn 6:51).
- “My flesh is **true food** and my blood is true drink” (Jn 6:55).

b. What the bread does.

While the manna had limited benefits, the bread that Jesus is offering has amazing properties!

- When you eat it, you will never be hungry or thirsty again (Jn 6:35).
- This bread gives life (Jn 6:53, 57).
- This bread gives eternal life (Jn 6:40, 47, 54) and those who eat it will never die (Jn 6:50, 51, 58).
- Those who eat this bread will be raised on the last day and will live forever (Jn 6:40, 44, 54).

c. How the bread is to be consumed.

1) We must “eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood” (Jn 6:53–54). The gift cannot be separated from the Giver.

2) Eating Jesus is not to be taken literally (cannibalism). It means we must:

- “Look” to Jesus (Jn 6:40).
- “**Come**” to Jesus (Jn 6:35, 37, 39, 45).
- Especially it means that we must “**believe**” in him (Jn 6:35, 40, 47).

3) Strangely, not everyone wants this bread. But why? Only those can come who have been “drawn” by the Father (Jn 6:44, 65). Salvation is **all of grace**. We contribute nothing. And yet, we are fully responsible for our actions. This does not mean some are excluded

from the possibility of salvation. Jesus says the bread he gives is “for the life of **the world**” (Jn 6:51; see Jn 3:16; etc.).

- C. How will people respond to Jesus? (Jn 6:60–71)
1. On hearing this sermon, there was consensus among all his followers: “This is a **hard** saying; who can listen to it?” (Jn 6:61). It was not hard to understand; it was hard to accept! This was hard to swallow. They can’t stomach what Jesus says.
  2. Jesus asked, “Do you take **offense** at this?” (Jn 6:61). The work in Greek is *scandalizo* and means “to cause to stumble.” Are you scandalized by what Jesus claims about himself? Will his claims cause you to turn away in unbelief?
  3. There are three reactions to Jesus’ sermon:
    - a. Many disciples **turned back** and no longer walked with him (Jn 6:66). This is just too much to swallow!
    - b. **Judas** stays but apparently can’t accept what Jesus is saying; he stumbles but remains among the disciples (Jn 6:70–71).
    - c. **Peter** also struggles with what Jesus has said and has considered leaving. But, speaking for the other disciples, he does “the work of God” (Jn 6:29) by affirming his **faith** in the One God has sent.

*Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God.” (John 6:68–69)*

III. Three reasons why this sermon is so offensive.

- A. Jesus exposes the **hypocrisy** among his followers.

Their motivations are impure (Jn 6:26). They want free food. They are hungry for the wrong kind of bread. They pretend to need more evidence before they will believe. Their understanding of Scripture is flawed. Their spirituality is based in works not in faith. They are not willing to do God’s will (Jn 7:17).

- B. Jesus **questions** their salvation.

In fact, he pushes so hard that many turn on him and walk away, thus proving the validity of Jesus’ questions.

- C. Jesus makes such startling **claims** about himself.

It wasn’t what Jesus *did* that caused the scandal; but who he **claimed to be**. My flesh is real food! Unless you eat my flesh, you have no life in you. For many, this is just too much to swallow.

*If not true, (these claims” are those of a megalomaniac, compared with whom Hitler was the most sane and humble of men. There is no half-way house and there is no parallel in other religions. If you had gone to Buddha and asked him, “Are you the son of Bramah?” he would have said, “My son, you are still in the vale of illusion.” If you had gone to Socrates and asked, “Are you Zeus?” he would have laughed at you. If you had got to Mohammed and asked, “Are you Allah?” he would first have rent his clothes and then cut your head off. If you had asked Confucius, “Are you Heaven?”, I think he would have probably replied, “Remarks which are not in accordance with nature are in bad taste.” The idea of a great moral teacher saying what Christ said is out of the question.*

*In my opinion, the only person who can say that sort of thing is either God or a complete lunatic suffering from that form of delusion which undermines the whole mind of man... We may note in passing that he was never regarded as a mere moral teacher. He did not produce that effect on any of the people who actually met him. He produced mainly three effects—hatred, terror, adoration. There was no trace of people expressing mild approval.<sup>3</sup>*

### **QUESTIONS FOR SELF-REFLECTION**

1. In worship, is my motivation pure? Do I seek his gifts or am I seeking him?
2. Am I working for the wrong food? Am I laboring to obtain something that simply cannot satisfy the longing in my soul?
3. Am I working or believing? Is my spirituality grounded in what I do or in what he has done?
4. Am I willing to do God's will? Do I demand that God show me a sign before I make an act of total commitment to him?
5. Do I interpret Scripture rightly? Do I conform my life to Scripture or do I try to make Scripture conform to my own expectations and experience?
6. Am I wise enough to recognize my ignorance? Can I see well enough to know how blind I really am?

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<sup>3</sup> Lewis, *God in the Dock*, 157–58.



## got life?

### The Gospel of John A Bible Study with Stan Key

## THE PSYCHOLOGY OF UNBELIEF

*John 7:1–53*

### I. The Great Divide

#### A. The Continental Divide

In the Rocky Mountains, there is an invisible line that **divides** North America into two parts, separating those river systems that drain into the Pacific Ocean from those that drain into the Atlantic Ocean. Theoretically, **every drop** of water on the continent is destined for one ocean or the other. There is no third option.

#### B. The Eternal Divide

1. God also has established a line that cuts through human history, **dividing everyone** into one of two camps. This division has nothing to do with race, gender, economics, education, politics, or even religion. It has everything to do with how one responds to **Jesus Christ**.

*Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather **division**. For from now on in one house there will be five divided, three against two and two against three. They will be divided, father against son... mother against daughter...mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law... (Luke 12:51–53)*

2. John 7–8 makes the “eternal divide” obvious for all to see. People begin to line up on one side or the other. Jesus himself is the one pushing the issue!
  - a. Many **believe** in Jesus and follow him (Jn 7:31; 8:30).
  - b. Many are **hostile** to Jesus and don’t believe (Jn 7:5). Some suggest he has a demon (Jn 7:20; 8:48; 10:20).<sup>1</sup>
  - c. The result is a **division** among the people concerning Jesus (Jn 7:12, 43; 9:16; 10:19). This is apparently the result the Jesus wanted.

### II. Examine the text

#### A. “Jesus, just **prove** who you are, then we will believe in you” (Jn 7:1–9).

1. In saying “show yourself to the world” (Jn 7:4), Jesus’ brothers (who don’t believe in him) are apparently **baiting** him. They want him to prove his claims to messiahship by going to Jerusalem and performing a few miracles. That’s all it takes to cause people to believe in Jesus. Right?
2. In saying that his “time” (*kairos*) had not yet come (Jn 7:6), Jesus is stating that he will not be rushed into his mission.<sup>2</sup> Jesus is **in control** of timing. His “time” (or “hour”) refers to that climactic moment when he will die on a cross for the sins of the world. This will happen only when he determines it.

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<sup>1</sup> Jesus said that to attribute his works to the devil is to blaspheme against the Holy Spirit, an eternal sin that can never be forgiven (Mk 3:22, 28–30).

<sup>2</sup> On numerous occasions in John, the text underscores that Jesus’ “hour” (*hora*) had not yet come (Jn 2:4; 7:30; 8:20). But when it comes time to give his life for the sins of the world, we read that the hour had indeed come (Jn 12:23, 27; 13:1; 16:32; 17:1).



*No one **takes my life** from me, but **I lay it down** of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father. (John 10:18)*

- B. But you are **confused** about what constitutes proof (Jn 7:10–36).
1. “Do not judge by appearances, but judge with **right** judgment” (Jn 7:24). Their thinking is fuzzy concerning faith. Jesus goes to the heart of the reason for unbelief. The problem is *not* with the **evidence**, as most people think. Jesus has already turned water to wine, healed the sick, miraculously fed 5,000 people, and walked on water. Soon he will heal a blind man and raise Lazarus from the dead! The problem is not with the evidence, but with **the will!**  
*If anyone’s will is to do God’s will, he **will know** whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own authority. (John 7:17)*
  2. Two great thinkers about faith:
    - “Do not seek to understand in order to believe; but **believe** so that you may **understand**” (Augustine).
    - “There is enough evidence to **condemn** and not enough to **convince**, so that it should be apparent that those who follow it are prompted to do so by grace and not by reason, and those who evade it are prompted by concupiscence (strong desire, lust) and not by reason” (Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, #835).
- C. The real problem in the human heart is lack of **thirst** (Jn 7:37–39).
1. At the Feast of Tabernacles (Jn 7:2), there was a climactic water ceremony where the priests would pour water at the base of the altar in the Temple. This was probably a prayer for rain and the blessings of God. For Jesus, however, this was symbolic of the coming of the **Holy Spirit**, which he would make available for all who believed in him. For Old Testament references to water as a symbol of the Holy Spirit, see Isaiah 44:3; Joel 2:28; 3:18; and Ezekiel 47:1–12.
  2. The Bible is a **food-driven** book. Sin entered the world through food. The exodus journey was determined by whether the appetite for milk and honey was stronger than the appetite for leeks and onions. Jesus is the bread of life and offers living water. When our appetite is fixed on the wrong thing, faith is **impossible**. The question that will determine whether you believe or not is this: are you **thirsty** for God?
- D. There is a **division** concerning Jesus (Jn 7:40–53).  
The passage ends with the remark that “there was a division among the people over him” (Jn 7:43). Some believed Jesus was indeed **the Messiah**. Others were convinced he was possessed by **a demon**.

### III. Unreasonable Doubt

In a courtroom, the outcome of a case is often determined by “reasonable doubt” (not enough evidence to bring about a conviction). But when it comes to the claims of Jesus Christ, the nature of the case is different. Most doubts are **unreasonable** (i.e., irrational). John’s Gospel mentions six hindrances to faith. Most of these are illustrations of unreasonable doubt.

A. **Philosophical** difficulties. Read John 18:33–38.

Pilate’s problem is not with the evidence but with the very concept of truth. *What is truth?* As a politician, his concern is with **power**, not truth. He is a **cynic**, doubting the very existence of truth. Like many post-moderns today, Pilate believes in a form of **relativism**. There are no moral absolutes. He is **certain** that everything is uncertain.

*There is one thing a professor can be absolutely certain of: almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative... Some are religious, some atheist; some are to the left, some to the right; some intend to be scientists, some humanists or professionals or businessmen; some are poor, some rich. They are unified only in their relativism and their allegiance to equality.... The danger they have been taught to fear from absolutism is not error but intolerance.... The true believer is the real danger. The study of history and of culture teaches that all the world was mad in the past; men always thought they were right, and that led to wars, persecutions, slavery, xenophobia, racism, and chauvinism. The point is not to correct the mistakes and really be right; rather it is not to think you are right at all.<sup>3</sup>*

To reach people like Pilate typically demands a philosophical challenge to their most basic assumptions (relativism). Before such a person can believe that Jesus is the truth, he/she must discover the truth about **truth**.

B. **Intellectual** difficulties. Read John 20:24–28.

Pilate is a cynic, but Thomas is a **skeptic**. His problem is not with the concept of truth but rather with the need for evidence. He needs a reason to believe. He is an **honest** doubter. Until believing in Jesus becomes a **plausible** intellectual option, he remains stuck in his doubts and skepticism.

To reach people like Thomas (honest doubters), we may first have to help them find honest answers for **honest questions** so that their intellectual obstacles can be overcome and faith becomes possible. Common intellectual difficulties include the following:

- The Bible is full of myths (like the resurrection).
- Being a Christian an anti-scientific.
- But what about the crusades, the Inquisition and slavery?
- Why do Christians hate homosexuals?
- Why is there so much suffering in the world?
- \_\_\_\_\_.
- \_\_\_\_\_.
- \_\_\_\_\_.

C. **Emotional** difficulties. Read John 11:20–27.

1. Martha and Mary struggle to believe in Jesus not because of intellectual or philosophical difficulties. Their problem is **grief** and **loss**; their brother had died! “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died...” (Jn 11:21). Martha is a hero because she **chose** to believe in Jesus even when life was falling apart!

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<sup>3</sup> Bloom, 25f.

2. Jesus made an amazing statement to Martha: “Did I not tell you that if you **believed** you would **see** the glory of God?” (Jn 7:40). Most people think that seeing is believing. Martha helps us to understand the deeper truth that *believing* is seeing!
3. Sometimes a traumatic life experience makes faith “impossible”: *I can't (won't?) believe in a God who would let my baby die... who permitted my father to sexually abuse me... who didn't protect me from bankruptcy, etc.* As a child, C. S. Lewis prayed that his mother would be healed. She died. So, he became an agnostic. William J. Murray “explains” the atheism of his mother (Madalyn Murray O’Hair):

*It is my opinion that my mother's maniacal campaign to remove all reference to God in public schools and government, plus her heated atheistic campaigns over the years, stem back to this issue. [She] was **mad at men**, and she was mad at God, who is male. Rather than confront her conscience, she determined to deny God's existence.<sup>4</sup>*

4. To reach people struggling with emotional hindrances to faith often demands that we **weep** with them (see Jn 11:33, 35, 38), pointing them to the cross of Jesus Christ where he too experienced evil: “My God, my God, why....?”

D. **Biblical** difficulties. Read John 5:39, 46.

Ironically, studying the Bible sometimes **creates doubt** rather than faith! This is certainly true for “liberals” and “higher critics” who search the Scriptures looking for errors or human explanations for what it says. But more poignantly, it can also be true for orthodox believers who study the Bible in the wrong way. This was true of the Bible scholars in John 5. They searched the Scriptures thinking that they could find life in the book! They failed to recognize that the purpose of Bible study is not to know **the Bible**, but to know **Jesus**.

E. **Social** difficulties. Read John 5:44 and John 12:42–43.

Faith is simply impossible as long as we care more about the **opinions of others** than of God. If such persons do, in fact, claim to believe, you can be sure it is very shallow and unstable. Paul speaks of this obstacle to faith when he says: “Am I now seeking the **approval** of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ” (Gal 1:10).

F. **Moral** difficulties. Read John 3:19–21.

1. When someone “**loves the darkness** rather than the light” (Jn 3:19), you can be sure that no amount of proof is going to bring them to faith. In fact, the more such a person is confronted with the moral claims of the Gospel, the deeper their unbelief becomes. In exasperation Jesus said to some Jewish leaders, it is “**because** I tell you the truth [that] you do not believe me” (Jn 8:45). Atheistic philosopher Thomas Nagel at least was honest enough to admit it:

*I want atheism to be true... It isn't just that I don't believe in God and, naturally, hope that I'm right in my belief. It's that I hope there is no*

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<sup>4</sup> Quoted by Strobel, 109.

*God! I don't want there to be a god: I don't want the universe to be like that...<sup>5</sup>*

2. No one can know the truth of Jesus until they are “**willing** to do God’s will” (Jn 7:17). The fact of the matter is that if Jesus is Lord, our lives will have to **change!** For the one who is unwilling to give up his self-centered activities, stop watching pornography, cease cheating on his income tax, sleeping with his girlfriend, or getting drunk on the weekends, faith in Jesus will simply be impossible. Bonhoeffer said: “only those who believe obey, and only those who obey believe.”<sup>6</sup>

#### IV. Steps to Faith

- A. We need **more than** evidence. God gives enough evidence to make faith **possible**; not enough to make faith inevitable. When God spoke in an audible Voice from heaven so that all Jerusalem could hear, it still was not enough to bring the nation of Israel to faith in Jesus!

*The crowd that stood there and heard it said that it had **thundered**. Others said, “An **angel** has spoken to him.” Jesus answered, “This voice has come for your sake, not mine. Now is the **judgment** of this world...” (John 12:29–31)*

- B. The Eternal Divide is a reality today even as it was 2,000 years ago. But how to get on the right side of the line? How to ensure that my destiny lies in the right “ocean”? For the **honest seeker** these steps can make a difference:
  1. “Doubt your **doubts**. By this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our heart before him; for whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything...” (I Jn 3:19–20).
  2. “Surrender your **will**. If anyone’s will is to do God’s will, he will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own authority” (Jn 7:17). “It is not certain that everything is uncertain” (Pascal, *Penseés*).
  3. “Receive **Jesus**. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God” (Jn 1:12).
  4. “Allow God to give you the **gift of faith**. For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God” (Eph 2:8).

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What is the most important thing you have learned in this lesson?
2. Think of someone you know who is a confirmed atheist (or agnostic, cynic, skeptic, etc.). Has this lesson helped you to better understand their unbelief? Explain.
3. Think of your own spiritual journey. Which one of the “difficulties” to faith was the hardest for you to overcome? (Philosophical, Intellectual, Emotional, Biblical, Social, or Moral).
4. Has this lesson caused you to think differently about the way you currently witness to those around you?

<sup>5</sup> Quoted by Keller, 119.

<sup>6</sup> Bonhoeffer, 63.



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## ANSWERS

### Signs of Life: Introduction

- I. (A) easiest; simply profound; (B) absolute truth; choose; divider; (C) Person; Word; Messiah/Christ; Lamb; King; God; Man; Bridegroom
- II. (A) what; why; incarnate Word; (B) a decision; signs; believe; life; rock our world; (B1a) point beyond; (B1b) sickness; nature; death; possible; inevitable; (B1c) significance; spoke out loud; thundered; angel; judgment; (B1d) claims about himself; "I am"; lunatic; Devil of Hell; Lord and God; (B2a) we do; we have; (B2b) faith in faith; (B2c) work; will; (B2d) lack; suppression; (B2d1) philosophical; Pilate; (B2d2) intellectual; Thomas; (B2d3) emotional; Martha; (B2d4) moral; love darkness; (B3a) quality; now; (B3b) you; Jesus Christ; (B3c) love; joy

### In the Beginning . . .

- I. cute; serious; unknowable; agnosticism; spoke
- II. (A) the dark; revelation; the Word; (B) the beginning; (C1) overcome; not prevail; (C2) prevenient grace; everyone; (C3) eternal; became; (C4) dwelt; (C5) "only begotten"; unique; (C6) made him known; interpret; (D1a) reveals; (D1b) breath; (D1c) image of God; (D1d) meaning-full; (D1e) relationships; (D2) reason; (D3) Old Testament; (D3a) creative; a word; (D3b) prophetic; authoritative; whisper; (D3c) eternal; burning; (D3d) life-giving; new creation; (D3e) victorious; succeed; Jesus; (E) precision
- III. Jesus Christ; (A) pre-existent; Jesus; Son of God; (B) with God; distinct; Persons; (C) God; mystery; (D) created; through; for; hold together; (E) life; self-originating; (F) light; (G) flesh; script; I say; (H) exegetes; picture; (I) choice; demands; recognize; reject; receive; believer; born of God; no excuse

### The Voice in the Wilderness

- I. (A) begins; pointing; disappears; unimportant; (B1) witness; first-hand; (B2) introduce; (B3) importance; unimportance; (C1) testimony; two; three; (C2a) works/miracles; (C2b) Scriptures; (C2d) Holy Spirit; (C2f) John; (D1) begin; (D2) greatest; (D3) model
- II. pointing; (B) sacrificial system; (C) Jacob; (D) open the door; ladder; mediator
- III. (A) identity; (A1) Messiah; Elijah; the Prophet; (A2) voice; (A3) friend of the bridegroom; decrease; (A4) lamp; blindness; (A5) voice; lamp; best man; increase; decrease; look along; look at; at; through/along; (B) place; Jerusalem; Temple; unconventional; (C) message; (C1) him; Lord; Lamb; Messiah; King; (C2a) Repentance; wrath; (C2b) in the Spirit; (D) cost; lost everything; martyr; (E) second-hand; (F) power; (F1) be; (F2) Jesus; (F3) martyrs; (F4) home; (F5) power; (G) victory; self-protection; testimony

### A Bottle of Wine and a Whip

- I. (A) do not know me; (A1) face; (A2) look like; (B1) voice; speaks; (B2a) three mean; (B2b) did not know it; face to face; (B2c) bush; back; (C) grace; truth; recognize; (C1) deaf;

- (C2) blind; (C3) forms; (C4) don't want; (D) shows; tells; (D1) Word; (D2) Lamb; (D3) Son of God; (D4) Messiah/Christ; (D5) King; (D6) Son of Man; (E) bottle of wine; whip
- II. (A1) first; (A2a) location; (A2c) social embarrassment; (A2d) mother; (A2e) 180 gallons; (A3) points beyond; (A3a) bless; blood; new wine; (A3b) Mary; (A3c) Weddings; bridegroom; (B1) bride; (B2) end; beginning; (B3a) profit; (B3b) correctly; (B3c) Father's; (B4) shadow; body of Christ; (B5) refiner's fire; (C) superficial; fall away
- III. struggle; (A) party; (A1) wrong people; wrong places; sick; sinners; demon; glutton; drunkard; (B) angry; (B1) Zeal; (B2) burn; (B3) sinful; (B3a) the Sabbath; ritual; tradition; (B3b) children; hindered; (B3c) self-advancement; (B3d) wrath; refuse

## Lost in Church

- I. (A) deep; (A1) genetic code; (A2) environment; destiny; modify; (B) contemporary; programmed; (C) biblical
- II. [Column 1] born again; [Column 2] understand; [Column 3] respond; (A) sinner; contrast; [Nicodemus column] man; moral; [Woman at the Well column] a cult; thirsty; radiant faith; (B) "from above"; (C1) sincere; (C2) ruler; (C3) curious; (C4) teacher; (C5) rich; (C6) night; (C7) foggy; (D) water; baptism; (E) lifted up; the cross; (F) inner transformation; (F1) water; new heart; (F2) Spirit/wind/breath; breath [Sprit/wind]; live; (F3) on s pole; look
- III. changed; transformed; new creation; new man; regeneration; divine nature; (A) Admit; humility; filthy rags; (B) Believe; look; (C) Receive; gave; receive; (D) Love; warning; passive; self-deception; divides

## Well-learned Lessons

- I. [Column 2] water; [Column 3] worship; [Column 5] harvest; (A) application; (A1) ethnic; (A2) evangelism; (A4) women; (A5) desires; worship; (B) a well; [Story column] Isaac; Jacob; Moses; (B1) foreign land; (B3) water; (B4) tell her family; (B6) marriage; (C) accidental; wedding day; identity; character traits
- II. (A1) racial; prejudice; half-breeds; (A2) gender; woman; compromising; (A3) moral; alone; noon; (A4) doctrinal; unorthodox; worse; (B) contrast; (C) had to; true worship; (D) hostility; blind; (E) fully man; (F) available; (G) living water; (H) water jar; (I) I am; burning bush
- III. worship; seeking; (1) the Jews; non-negotiable; complete; living; (2) secondary; where; how; style; thirsty; (3) personal sin; unconfessed; happiness; (4) heart; head; inward; felt; affections; doctrine; formalism; emotionalism; separate; (5) deepest longings; Spirit; (6) outward; evangelist; (7) resemble

## Working on Sunday

- I. (A) multiple layers; I am working; food; believe; night; blasphemy; accomplished; (B) driving passion; imitate; shows
- II. (A) 70 AD; (B) 38 years; (C) superstition; (D) Sabbath-breaker; (E) gnat; camel; (F) Son of Man; (G) works; grace
- III. work; (A) toil; stress; heavy; easy; light; believe; (B) discerned; intentional; (C1) invalids; the broken; (C2) motives; (C3) Sunday [Sabbath]; (C3a) fourth commandment; (C3b) specifying; traditions; appearances; (C3c) sacred time; space; when; (C4) sin; direct;

complex; (C5) identity; provoke; (C6) judge; authority; purpose; effect; (C6a) who; (C6b) how; (C6c) when; loved the darkness; (C7) life; Whoever

## Too Much to Swallow

- I. (A) bread; daily; (B) man; sign; manna; every word; (C) temptation; the Spirit; hungry; (D) offensive
- II. (A1) feed hungry people; (A1a) test; human need; resources; Messiah; (A1b) sign; (A1c1) Prophet; (A1c2) king; withdraws; storm; (A1d1) all four; (A1d2) 15,000; (A1d5) Eucharist; (A2) walk on water; (A2a) through; (A2b) against the wind; (A2c) never expected; (A2d) deity; (B) sermon; (B1a) wrong reasons; (B1b) wrong bread; (B1c) wrong way; believing; (B1d) evidence; the will; (B1e) Scripture; no clue; (B2) new kind; (B2a) who Jesus is; flesh; true food; (B2c2) Come; believe; (B2c3) all of grace; the world; (C1) hard; (C2) offense; (C3a) turned back; (C3b) Judas; (C3c) Peter; faith
- III. (A) hypocrisy; (B) questions; (C) claims; claimed to be

## The Psychology of Unbelief

- I. (A) divides; every drop; (B1) dividing everyone; Jesus Christ; division; (B2a) believe; (B2b) hostile; (B2c) division
- II. (A) prove; (A1) baiting; (A2) in control; takes my life; I lay it down; (B) confused; (B1) right; evidence; the will; will know; (B2) believe; understand; condemn; convince; (C) thirst; (C1) Holy Spirit; (C2) food-driven; impossible; thirsty; (D) division; the Messiah; a demon
- III. unreasonable; (A) Philosophical; power; cynic; relativism; certain; truth; (B) Intellectual; skeptic; honest; plausible; honest questions; (C) Emotional; (C1) grief; loos; chose; (C2) believed; see; (C3) mad at men; (C4) weep; (D) Biblical; creates doubt; the Bible; Jesus; (E) Social; opinions of others; approval; (F) Moral; (F1) loves the darkness; because; (F2) willing; change
- IV. (A) more than; possible; thundered; angel; judgment; (B) honest seeker; (B1) doubts; (B2) will; (B3) Jesus; (B4) gift of faith





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The Gospel of John  
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**NOTES**







## Where Shall My Wondering Soul Begin

By Charles Wesley<sup>1</sup>

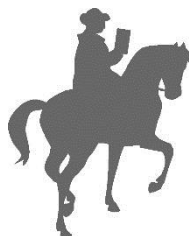
*Where shall my wondering soul begin?  
How shall I all to heaven aspire?  
A slave redeemed from death and sin,  
A brand plucked from eternal fire,  
How shall I equal triumphs raise,  
And sing my great deliverer's praise?*

*O how shall I the goodness tell,  
Father, which thou to me hast showed?  
That I, a child of wrath and hell,  
I should be called a child of God!  
Should know, should feel my sins forgiven,  
Blest with this antepast of heaven!*

*Outcasts of men, to you I call,  
Harlots and publicans and thieves;  
He spreads his arms to embrace you all,  
Sinners alone his grace receive.  
No need of him the righteous have;  
He came the lost to seek and save.*

*Come, O my guilty brethren, come,  
Groaning beneath your load of sin;  
His bleeding heart shall make you room,  
His open side shall take you in.  
He calls you now, invites you home:  
Come, O my guilty brethren, come.*

*For you the purple current flowed  
In pardon from his wounded side,  
Languished for you the eternal God,  
For you the Prince of Glory died.  
Believe, and all your guilt's forgiven,  
Only believe—and yours is heaven.*



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