

WHO IS JESUS?

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STUDY TWO: JOHN'S ANSWER - PART 1

SUMMARY:

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- The conversation with Nicodemus - Jesus is the essential focus of faith: John 3
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Towards the end of his Gospel John wrote these words: 'These are written 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 20:31)

As we read through John's Gospel we discover a Jesus who makes radical and exclusive claims, claims that express equality with God, claims that state that in him, and in him alone, spiritual life is to be found; we hear him in heated debate with the Pharisees, pressing them to believe that he is the one he claims to be; warning them that unless they believe that he is who he is they will die in their sins. We find here no 'gentle Jesus meek and mild' but a Jesus who knows that he is the Son of God, to whom the same honour is due as is due to God the Father. We find here in John's Gospel a Jesus who leaves us no room for misunderstanding or doubt about his meaning: he says quite clearly: 'anyone who has seen me has seen the Father' (John 14:9); he says quite clearly: 'I and the Father are one' (John 10:30).

Let us open our minds to hear what the words of this Gospel are saying to us.

JOHN'S INTRODUCTION - JESUS IS ETERNAL, JESUS IS GOD: JOHN 1:1-18

Like Mark, but in an entirely different way, John opens his Gospel with a proclamation of the true identity of Jesus Christ. John goes right back before the beginning of time to Christ's eternal existence with God the Father: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.' (John 1:1)

Before John tells us one word about what Jesus said and did in his human existence he wants us to know that Jesus is God. **He is the eternal one**, whose life cannot be given a starting point; even in the beginning John can only say that he 'was'. He cannot say that Jesus came into existence at some point in the beginning, but simply he 'was'. Already, in the beginning, the Word was.

John calls Jesus 'the Word'. By this title John identifies Jesus with God. 'Word' indicates speech, communication, self-expression, self-revelation. **In Jesus, the Word, we see the thoughts and mind of God**. In the Word, God shows us himself.

But so that we don't assume the Word is merely a non-personal expression of God, John tells us that 'the Word was with God'. The English fails to convey the meaning of the Greek. What is being expressed here is both distinction and unity. There is distinction because the Word and God are placed side by side as two separate entities. There is unity, because the Word is described as being, literally, 'towards' God. That is, in total agreement and empathy with, acutely sensitive to his every thought and desire, **so intimately related to him that he reflects accurately every aspect of his being**.

To prevent us making the error of seeing Jesus as some lesser being who perfectly reflects the glory of God, John tells us 'the Word was God.' The Word was God. John does not say 'the Word was like God'. He does not say 'the Word was divine.' The meaning of the original text is clear: the Word was God.

To give weight to his opening statement John goes on to identify the Word as the creator of all things: 'Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made' (John 1:3). In the Old Testament creation is seen as the work of God. So convinced is John that Jesus, the Word, is God, that he presents Jesus as the creator of all things. Nothing, he says, exists apart from the creative power of the Word. John then adds: 'In him was life', teaching us that **Jesus, the Word, is the origin of and the continuing source of life**.

John could not make his point any clearer. Jesus, the Word, is God; the creator of all things, on whom all things depend; the source and giver of life. John wants us to be very sure about this before he relates what happened, for it is only when we know that Jesus is really God that what he said and what he did can impact us with their full significance.

Yet before he recounts in detail the events and conversations in Jesus' life on earth, John gives us a brief glimpse of both the glory of that life and the irony of people's reaction to it. He tells us

(1) 'He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognise him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him' (John 1:10,11).

The Creator comes to his creation, and is not recognised. Those who have life from his hand do not perceive that before them stands their life-giver. So corrupt is their understanding of God that they cannot see him, even though he is right beside them. In rejecting Jesus, they are rejecting God.

(2) 'Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God' (John 1:12).

There were some who did recognise him - they believed in his name, they understood that here before them stood their God, and they received him as God. They acknowledged that all the claims he made were true. To these he gave the right to be called God's children.

(3) 'The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us' (John 1:14).

John wants us to know that the flesh and blood Jesus who lived with us is the eternal Word he has already identified in his opening verses. John here prohibits any thought that denies or reduces the true humanity of Jesus. The Word, who is God, became flesh. Our flesh. The Word, who is God, lived with us, sharing our humanity.

(4) 'We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth' (John 1:14).

'No-one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known' (John 1:18).

In these two statements John introduces a further concept: Jesus is the 'only begotten' Son of God the Father. He is of the same being, the same nature, the same substance, as God the Father. Because of this, when we see Jesus, we see God. When we know Jesus, we know God. In Jesus we are confronted with the fullness of God's grace, the fullness of God's glory, the fullness of God's truth. He reveals God. Absolutely. Perfectly. Completely. Jesus is as fully God as God is God.

All of this John wants us to have fixed in our minds right from the start. We are not faced in the gospel with the example of a good man; we are not called to be the students of a great teacher. John, in this introduction to Jesus, is preparing us to be challenged by the central question of history: are we going to recognise and receive God when he comes to us in Jesus Christ? If we do not see him there, then we cannot see him anywhere, for it is here in Jesus Christ that God's self-revelation is most clear, most precise, most definite and explicit. If our concept of God is different from his self-revelation in Jesus Christ, then our god is not God. We do not know him. We cannot come to him. We do not believe in him. We believe in **something** but that something is not God revealed in the Bible. This is what John is teaching us.

In Jesus Christ, the Word, the eternal God lives among us. Will we receive him? Or will we also be among those who cling to their own concept of god, and receive him not?

THE CONVERSATION WITH NICODEMUS - JESUS IS THE ESSENTIAL FOCUS OF FAITH: JOHN 3

Nicodemus comes to Jesus saying 'We know' We know you are a teacher come from God. We know that no-one can do what you are doing unless God is with him.

Jesus' reply is startling: The truth is, Jesus says, you don't know. You cannot know. You cannot see. Unless you are born again you cannot understand anything about the rule and authority of God. You cannot see God's kingdom. You cannot perceive the reality which is God's kingdom. You cannot enter God's kingdom (John 3:3,5).

In the ensuing conversation Jesus' highlights Nicodemus' ignorance: 'You should not be surprised at my saying ... ' (3:7), 'You are Israel's teacher, and do you not understand these things?' (3:10), 'I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things?' (3:12)

Nicodemus fades into silence as Jesus proceeds to teach him the truth.

Three times Jesus tells Nicodemus that whoever believes in the Son has eternal life. (John 3:15,16,18). This 'Son' is identified as 'the Son of Man' (15), and God's 'one and only Son' (16). To define what it means to believe in the Son, we need to look at what Jesus teaches is the opposite of believing in the Son: the one who has not believed is he who 'has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son' (18).

[Let us pause here a while to ask a question: what is it that Jesus says we must believe to have eternal life? What do these verses in John 3 state? That we must believe **in him** . We must believe **in his name**. Consciously, or unconsciously, Christians have made a subtle but significant change here. We quote John 3:16 with ease: for God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life (KJV), but as we quote it we automatically make a mental substitution: 'whoever believes that he died on the cross for our sins ... '.

But Jesus is not saying here that we must believe that he died for our sins; he is saying that the essential prerequisite for eternal life is believing **in him** , believing **in his name** . Unless we believe that he is the Son of God we are excluded from life. Notice John's comment at the end of the chapter: 'Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him' (3:36).]

In the preceding verses John has identified Jesus as:

- 'the one who comes from above' (31),
- 'the one who comes from heaven' (31),
- 'the one whom God has sent' (34),
- the one who 'speaks the words of God' (34),
- the one to whom 'God gives the Spirit without limit' (34),
- the Son whom the Father loves (35), and
- the one in whose hands the Father 'has placed everything' (35).

Either we reject this Jesus, or we believe in (or on) him or his name. Either we refuse to accept him as God, or we receive him as God. That is the central issue. It is this choice that Jesus puts before Nicodemus.

But what happens when a human being stands in the presence of God? What happens when a sinner stands face to face with the holiness and perfection of Almighty God? He stands condemned. He cannot live. He is doomed to perish.

What will happen then, when we stand face to face with God in Jesus Christ? The promise of these verses in John 3 is that we will not perish, we are not condemned, we have already eternal life, if we believe in him.

How can this be?

It is because in the coming of the Son of God, God does two things. First, God himself comes to us in his Son. Second, in the death of the Son, God the Father reconciles us to himself, laying on his Son our sin, our guilt, our condemnation.

According to Jesus' word here in John 3, it is when we believe the first, that the second becomes ours as a gift. God gave his Son to die on the cross **so that** whoever believes in him will not perish. The Son of Man must be lifted up **so that** whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

Had the Son of God merely come and revealed the Father to us that coming and that revelation would be a terrible thing. To see God in Jesus, to realise that here in our presence God stands, to see his holiness, to see his power and his majesty, and remain cut off from him by our sin, would be death and condemnation, not life.

But, Jesus says, God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. (3:17). The cross of Christ, by which God forgives our sins, makes it possible for him to grant eternal life to those who believe in the name of his Son. For those who reject the Son, the cross is of no effect, they 'will not see life, for God's wrath remains on (them)' (3:36).

Let us make sure that we understand what John 3 is saying. If we believe *in the name* of God's one and only Son we are not condemned, we have eternal life; if we reject the Son, if we do not believe in his name, God's wrath remains on us, we stand already condemned, we perish.

THE FIRST DEBATE - JESUS IS EQUAL WITH GOD THE FATHER: JOHN 5

The first confrontation between Jesus and the Jews occurred because Jesus healed a man on the Sabbath. In response to their persecution of him Jesus stated: 'My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working.' (Verse 17) To our minds that doesn't sound wrong, but to the Jews it was blasphemy: 'For this reason the Jews tried all the harder to kill him ... **he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God** ' (5:18).

The Jews knew that Jesus' simple statement assumed an equality with God. They were acutely aware that a son is of the same nature as his father. In calling God his Father Jesus made out that he was of the same nature, equal, with God.

Rather than back off and let the matter rest Jesus pushed it further. He leaves no room for anyone to believe that he didn't mean his words to be taken that way. He leaves no room for anyone to think that they heard wrongly. He goes on to claim for himself things that belong only to God, and the reason he does this is his deep desire that the Jews be saved (see verse 34). He enters the debate full on, he punches home truth after truth about himself, because he knows that only if they accept him as the one he claims to be can they be saved.

Let's look at some of his points in this debate.

[a] whatever the Father does, the Son does (verse 19). Here we see unity and equality of action.

[b] the Father shows the Son all he does (verse 20). Here we have unity of plan and purpose.

[c] Just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it (verse 21). Here Jesus claims for himself the life-giving power that belongs to God alone.

[d] The Father judges no-one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son (verse 22). In the Old Testament God is the Judge (Genesis 18:25; Judges 11:27; Psalm 7:11; 50:6; 68:5 (KJV); 75:7; 94:2). Jesus here claims that God has given that role to him. (See also verse 27).

[e] It is the Father's purpose that everyone should honour the Son with the same honour that is given to the Father (verse 23). Jesus is here saying that the same honour is due to him (the Son), that is due to God. To Jewish ears this is a terrible statement. All the praise, all the worship, all the thanksgiving, all the obedience - everything that is owed to God is owed to Jesus. That is Jesus' claim.

[f] Whoever does not honour the Son does not honour the Father (verse 23). The implications of these words are immeasurable. Hear what they are saying! Jesus has just said that the same honour is due to the Son as to God. Now he adds that whoever does not give that honour to the Son is not honouring the Father. Let us think of all the praise, all the worship, all the obedience that people right round the world sincerely believe they are giving to God. These words of Jesus mean that unless these people are honouring him, the Son, they are not honouring God at all. These words of Jesus mean that the only way to honour God is to honour God's Son. To the Jews listening to Jesus these words meant that he was accusing them of not honouring God because they failed to honour **him**.

[g] Those who hear (= believe and obey) the words of Jesus have eternal life, escape condemnation, and have already crossed over from death to life, because just as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted to the Son to have life in himself (verses 24-26). Jesus is not claiming here simply to have the power to restore a dead person to life. The mention of 'eternal life' and 'condemnation' indicate that what Jesus is claiming here is to have the authority to reverse God's judgement on sin. Like his claim to have the power to forgive sin in Mark 2, his claim here also goes right back to Genesis 3. There, as a judgement on their sin, Adam and Eve are barred from the tree to life, lest they should eat its fruit and live for ever. Their condemnation bars them from eternal life. Jesus here claims that those who 'hear his words' cross over from death to life, eternal life, and are not condemned.

(Let us note in passing that in John's writings 'hear', 'believe' and 'obey' are frequently used synonymously or as parallels. Often when one is used we are meant to include the other two in our understanding, for that is the way John understands true Biblical hearing, true Biblical believing, and true Biblical obedience. Each one is true only if the other two are also present.)

[h] The Scriptures testify about me Moses wrote about me. (Read John 5:37-46.) There is great sadness in these words. For generations the Jews had been studying the Scriptures, for generations they had been committed to the Law of Moses. Because of this they, of all people, should have been prepared for the coming of the Christ. But they had not understood. They had not believed. The Christ stands before them now in this man Jesus, and they do not recognise him, they do not believe him. It is as if he says to them 'Look, I'm the one you've been reading about! I'm the one you've been hoping for for so long! Look at me! Don't you see! Can't you recognise me!' In their failure to see past his humanity, in their failure to see their God in this man, the Jews demonstrate that they haven't understood God's word at all. They demonstrate that they do not know God at all. The very Scripture in which they looked for salvation has become their condemnation. That is what Jesus told them.

In this first debate with the Jews Jesus has left no room for misunderstanding. He claims for himself equality with God. He makes himself the pivotal point of every person's eternal destiny. He emphasises that everyone's relationship with God is determined by their response to himself.

The Jews are silent.

THE SECOND DEBATE - JESUS IS THE BREAD OF LIFE: JOHN 6

John 6 opens with the record of Jesus' feeding of the five thousand. This miracle becomes both the background and the kick-off point for the second debate between Jesus and the Jews. Whereas Mark omits any comment about the immediate response to this feeding miracle John relates that the people responded with 'Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world' then tells us that Jesus knew that they intended to make him king by force (John 6:14,15). They had, as Mark tells us later, failed to perceive the real meaning of the miracle. They see Jesus purely in earthly terms. They see him as the one who has the potential to set them free from the tyranny of Rome and re-establish Israel as a nation. As we saw in chapter five, they have failed to understand the Scriptures. They are mistaken on two counts: firstly in thinking that this kind of national hero and deliverer is what the prophets promised in the Messiah, and secondly in assuming that Jesus is merely this kind of deliverer.

Jesus attacks this mistaken notion: 'I tell you the truth, you are looking for me, not because you saw miraculous signs but because you ate the loaves and had your fill.' (John 6:26) The miraculous sign should, as we have seen in Mark, have pointed them to the fact that Jesus is God, but their focus is on the earthly, on the physical. Jesus exhorts them: 'Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life ...' (6:27). The bread they ate has become a symbol for their physical, national aspirations, for their mistaken concept of the Messiah, contrasted to the eternal, spiritual significance of Jesus Christ.

The conversation goes just the way Jesus wants it to go. The Jews ask 'What must we do to do the works God requires?' His answer faces them with the central issue: 'The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent.' (6:29). The Jews realise that Jesus believes himself to be the one God has sent, for they ask him to tell them what he will do to prove it, so they can believe in him (6:30). They refer back past the miracle of the loaves and fishes to the miracle of the manna, the 'bread from heaven', provided for their ancestors in the desert. (See Exodus 16.) It is if they said 'This is what Moses did: he gave us bread from heaven. What can **you** do to prove yourself to us?'

Jesus in reply again points to the earth-bound nature of their understanding. He tells them

- Moses doesn't give you the bread from heaven
- it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven
- the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world (6:32,33).

The Jews are interested. 'Sir,' they said, 'from now on give us this bread.'

Jesus responds with an unexpected, startling declaration:

'I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty.' (6:35).

If they had not heard it in verses 32 and 33, they cannot escape it here. Jesus himself is the true bread from heaven, the bread of God, the bread of life. He is not saying that he **gives** us the bread of life, but that he **is** the bread of life. Apart from him we die. Apart from him we hunger. Apart from him we thirst. Just as physical life depends on food (symbolised by bread) so spiritual life depends on Jesus Christ.

This is the first of the exclusive claims made by Jesus Christ in this Gospel. It is exclusive in that it rules out all other 'breads' of life. Jesus says 'I am **the** bread of life' not 'a bread of life' or 'one of many breads of life'. He is here claiming to be the one and only bread of life. He is claiming that he alone sustains spiritual, eternal life. But it is not the exclusiveness of the claim that offends the Jews; they are quite happy with exclusivism. What bothers them is that Jesus claims to have come down from heaven (see verses 32, 33, 38, 41, 42; also verses 29, 38 and 39 where Jesus claims to be sent by God). The Jews cannot accept this. They think they know who he is. They think they know where he comes from. (6:41,42)

Again in response to their doubts and questions Jesus reinforces his argument. In the ensuing conversation he makes the following claims:

- the Father sent him (44)
- I will raise (the one who comes to me) up at the last day (44)
- no one has seen the Father except the one who is from God, only he has seen the Father (46)
- I am the bread of life (48)
- I am the living bread that came down from heaven, which a man may eat and not die (51)
- if a man eats of this bread he will live for ever (51)
- whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life and I will raise him up at the last day (54)
- my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink (55)
- whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him (56)

- the living Father sent me (57)
- the one who feeds on me will live because of me (57)
- he who feeds on this bread will live for ever (58)

If we take verses 51 to 58 by themselves we can easily be persuaded that these verses are referring to partaking of the Lord's supper, especially if we read them superficially. We can also be easily persuaded that they are pointing us to the crucifixion, the benefits of which are ours through faith. The broken flesh and poured out blood of Jesus Christ are certainly not far away from this passage, as verse 51 tells us: 'which I will give for the life of the world.' But an analysis of the above verses, and a comparison of them with some of the earlier verses in this chapter, indicates that the primary focus of Jesus' argument is not his death, but his identity.

Jesus has already made clear in chapter five that he is claiming equality with God. Here in chapter six he reaffirms that claim and pinpoints the stumbling block to that that claim is. Had he come with great glory, displaying the aweinspiring majesty of the Lord, quite evidently **not** human, these Jews would have received him. They would have recognized that brilliant, glorious figure of Ezekiel's and Daniel's visions. They would have bowed to him in adoration and praise.

But, as they say, 'Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, 'I came down from heaven?'" (6:42) His very evident human reality is the stumbling block to their belief. He is one of them. Just the man from down the road. They cannot believe that he comes from heaven. They cannot believe that God has taken upon himself human flesh and human blood. For this reason Jesus says 'Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.' (6:53) Unless they can accept the fact that this flesh and blood person is the Lord of glory, they have no spiritual life. But this is the very fact that they cannot stomach. It is this very fact that they are rejecting with such vehement opposition that it makes them want to kill him. They will not accept that standing before them in real human flesh and blood is their God.

If we tabulate Jesus' statements in this chapter we can readily see that this is the key issue:

Human response	Verse	Leads to
Comes to me	35	Never go hungry
Believes in me	35	Never be thirsty
Comes to me	37	Never be driven away
Looks to the Son/believes in him	40	Eternal life/raised up on the last day
Come to me	44	Raise him up on the last day
Believes	47	Has everlasting life
Eats of this bread	51	Live for ever
East my flesh/drinks my blood	54	Has eternal life/raise him up on last day
Eats my flesh/drinks my blood	56	Remains in me and I in him
Feeds on me	57	Lives
Feeds on this bread	58	Lives for ever

We see from the above that what is promised to those who eat Christ's flesh and drink his blood is the same as what is promised to those who 'believe', that is, the promise of eternal life. Back in verse 27 Jesus told the Jews to work for the food that endures 'to eternal life'. They asked 'What must we do to do the works God requires?' In reply Jesus said: **'The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent' (6:29).**

But the Jews do not want a flesh and blood God. They do not want to accept that the Son of God stands here sharing their humanity. They will not believe in this one whom God has sent. Even many of his disciples, on hearing the debate of John 6, couldn't swallow his teaching. 'Who can accept it?' they asked each other (verse 60). John tells us (66) that 'from this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him.' Perhaps these were those apparent believers to whom Jesus had not committed himself earlier (John 2:23-25), because he knew what was in their hearts. All that remains here at the end of this debate in John 6 are the twelve. Peter's reason for their remaining is 'You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God' (6:68,69). Yet just as Jesus did not commit himself to the many apparent believers in John 2, so here he knows that one of these twelve who remain does not believe.

WHO IS JESUS? - THE LONG-EXPECTED DELIVERER: JOHN 7

Jerusalem is crowded. From all over Judea and Galilee people have come to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles, and as they mingle together in the streets, as they come together at the Temple to offer their sacrifices and observe the age-old rituals involved in this Feast, questions are buzzing, questions about Jesus. John has recorded some of them for us:

- Where is Jesus? (Verse 11)
- Is he a good man? (12)
- How does he know so much when he never went to school? (15)
- Can it be that they really know that he is the Messiah? (26)
- When the Messiah comes, will he perform more miracles than this man has? (31)
- Where is he about to go so that we shall not find him? What does he mean?(35,36)

The most significant of these questions are those focusing on Jesus as the Messiah. Is he the long expected Anointed One, or is he not? (The word 'Christ' is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew 'Messiah'. Both words refer to the deliverer God had promised to send. For the most part the Jews were looking for a political/national human deliverer, whose actions would set them free from the tyranny of the Romans and re-establish Israel as a prosperous, independent nation ruled by a descendant of David, the greatest king in Israel's history. In so limiting their concept of the Messiah the Jews were overlooking those portions of the prophecies which depict the work of the Messiah as encompassing the whole world, and the person of the Messiah as far more exalted than a national hero and a Davidic king.)

The Feast of the Tabernacles, while commemorating the historical experiences of the Israelites under the leadership of Moses (Leviticus 23:33-36, 39-43; Deuteronomy 16:13-17) was also a prophetic anticipation of the coming of the Messiah. On the great day of the Feast a water-pouring ritual occurred. This ritual was a symbolic, prophetic prayer for the coming of the Messiah who would be the source of God's blessings. It is in this setting of Messianic expectation that Jesus makes his declaration in John 7:37,38: 'If a man is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him.' It is as if Jesus said: 'You are, in this pouring out of water, anticipating and longing for the coming of God's Messiah and of all the blessings associated with him. You need pour this symbolic water no longer: I am the Messiah. Come to me, believe in me, for it is in me that your expectations are fulfilled and your prayers are answered. He who comes to me, he who believes in me, will receive all the promised blessings.'

On hearing Jesus' words some in the crowd were inclined to believe, some were sceptical, others antagonistic, but they all realised what it was that Jesus was claiming. So vehement are the Pharisees in their refusal to admit the possibility of Jesus' right to make this claim that they consider those who believe in Jesus to be under a curse (verse 49).

As we read through this passage of John's gospel let us not fail to notice where the central focus is: it is on the question of the true identity of Jesus of Nazareth. This is the all-important question. Our answer to this question determines everything else.

THE THIRD DEBATE - JESUS' INCREDIBLE CLAIMS ABOUT HIS IDENTITY: JOHN 8

Already as we have seen Jesus' statements and claims have provoked antagonism in the Jews. They have seen clearly what he is claiming, and they have rejected those claims. But Jesus does not give up. In chapter eight he presses his statements to their ultimate significance, making his claims even clearer. He knows, as only he could know, how imperative it is that they see **and** believe who he really is. He is unstoppably persistent in his presentation of himself as God.

(1) Jesus claims to be the light of the world (John 8:12)

Here we have the second of Jesus' absolute, exclusive claims. He said: 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.'

This statement, like those Jesus made in preceding chapters, is rich with Old Testament images. In the exodus from Egypt the Israelites are accompanied by a pillar of fire and cloud, encompassing them with physical light, and symbolising the presence of the Lord (Exodus 13ff). During the Feast of the Tabernacles, which was probably just finishing when Jesus made this statement, the Temple was illuminated, drawing attention to its significance as the earthly 'dwelling place' of God. In the Psalms light is associated with God:

- Psalm 27:1: 'The Lord is my light and salvation';
- Psalm 36:9: 'for with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light';
- Psalm 43:3: 'Send forth your light ... ';
- Psalm 56:13b: 'that I may walk before God in the light of life';

- Psalm 118:27: 'The Lord is God, and he has made his light shine upon us.' (This last Psalm is filled with joyous anticipation of the coming Christ.)

Isaiah identifies God as the 'Light of Israel' (10:17), identifies the coming Servant of the Lord as 'a light for the Gentiles' (42:6), and in 60:1-3 and 19-20 looks ahead to a glorious time of salvation when the light of the Lord will enlighten and draw to himself people from all nations.

As Jesus stood in the Temple, where the brilliant lights of the Feast of the Tabernacles had recently been extinguished, claiming 'I am the light of the world' all of this richness of meaning pulsed through his words. By these words he identifies himself, not only as the prophesied Messiah/Suffering Servant, but also as God. The symbolic, prophetic lights have gone, but he whom they both symbolised and prophesied is here. Just as they need no more the symbolic, prayerful pouring out of the water, so also they need no more the brilliant illumination of the Temple. What purpose in gazing at a mere symbol when he whom it symbolises is here? What purpose in rejoicing in a prophetic hope when the subject of the prophecy has arrived? There is no more darkness for those who recognise and believe what Jesus is claiming when he says 'I am the light of the world'; those who believe in him, those who follow him both see and know God. 'Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.' **No longer is God hidden in inscrutable darkness: he has come to us in this man, Jesus. Here in this man we see God.** 'If you knew me,' Jesus said, 'you would know my father also' (John 8:19) but those to whom he spoke knew neither him nor his Father.

We must not lose the profound, far-reaching significance of Jesus' simple words. **Knowledge of God is inseparably bound to knowledge of Jesus Christ**. Jesus is making it unquestionably clear that it is impossible to know God apart from knowing who Jesus really is. **He** is the Light of the world. All other supposed lights are not true lights at all; they are either inadequate, inaccurate or false. No matter how enlightened they may suppose themselves to be, Jesus makes it clear that those who do not follow him walk in darkness. Those who do not know God by knowing Jesus Christ do not and cannot know God.

(2) Jesus said: 'if you do not believe that I am the one I claim to be, you will indeed die in your sins.' (John 8:24)

In verse 21 Jesus told his hearers that they would die in their sins. Here in verse 24 he explains **why** he said that. In the intervening verses he has made an emphatic distinction between himself and his hearers. **They** are from below: **he** is from above. **They** are of this world: **he** is not of this world. It is essential that they realise this. If he goes away, if he leaves the earth, and they have not realised and do not realise who he is, then they will die in their sins. This fate is the ultimate disaster. To die with one's sins unrepented of and unatoned for, to die still under the curse of one's sins, this is the epitome of horror. One's eternal destiny depends on this one point: do I, or do I not, believe that Jesus is who he is? Do I, or do not, believe that he is the one he claimed to be?

Jesus uses here in this critical statement the Greek equivalent for the Hebrew words God used in Exodus 3:14. There Moses had asked God what was his name, so he would be able to tell the Israelites who the God was who had commissioned him. God's answer to this request was: 'I am who I am. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: "I AM has sent me to you."' Here in John 8:24 Jesus says: 'unless you believe that I AM, you will die in your sins' (literal translation).

In the two exclusive claims seen so far (John 6:35 and 8:12) this 'I AM' expression of deity was also used by Jesus. It is used also in those claims we have yet to consider. The significance of it is comprehended in these claims, for he says that those who do not believe in or follow him in terms of these claims are excluded from eternal life. But here in John 8:24 Jesus comes straight out and leaves no room for failure to understand: unless a person believes that he is who he is they will die in their sins. In other words, if a person does not believe that Jesus is the Son of God, so equal to God the Father that he has the right to use God's self-identifying name, that person will die in their sins.

(3) 'He who belongs to God hears what God says. The reason you do not hear is that you do not belong to God.' (8:47)

In this section of the debate (John 8:42-47) Jesus answers his own questions about why those listening to his words do not hear or obey what he is saying. The statement above is his final answer. Tucked into it is Jesus' knowledge of his oneness and equality with the Father. In verse 43 he had reasoned: 'Why is my language not clear to you? Because you are unable to hear what I say.' They are unable to hear what he is saying because their father is the devil, not God. Jesus tells them the truth, but they do not believe him. Why do they not believe him? Because he is God, and only he who belongs to God hears what God says. The reason they do not hear what Jesus, that is, God, says, is that they belong not to God, but to the devil. The whole force of this section is that Jesus identifies himself with God.

The Jew's response to this line of debate is to classify Jesus as a Samaritan and demon-possessed.

(4) 'If a man keeps my word, he will never see death.' 8:51.

This statement has much in common with the statements in 8:24, which we have already considered, and 3:36 which we will consider later. The response it brought forth from the Jews indicates its considerable significance: 'Now we know that you are demon-possessed! ... Who do you think you are?'

(5) 'I tell you the truth, before Abraham was born, I am!' 8:58.

Jesus has just said to the Jews: 'Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad.' The Jews responded 'You are not yet fifty years old, and you have seen Abraham!'

So clearly did the Jews grasp the significance of Jesus' words 'before Abraham was born, I am!' that they immediately picked up stones to stone him. For a man to say what Jesus said here, was blasphemy of the grossest kind. It was claiming for himself the attributes and the name of God. It was a claim to be God. Not only has Jesus clearly used for himself the divine name of Exodus 3:14, he has also ascribed to himself eternal existence. He did not say 'I was' or 'I existed', or even 'I came into existence'. He said 'I am' - he speaks of himself as one existing in an eternal present, without beginning, without ending. He speaks as God. **It is God alone who inhabits eternity, yet here is a man, Jesus of Nazareth, claiming eternity.**

THE FOURTH DEBATE - 'I AND THE FATHER ARE ONE': JOHN 10

(1) Jesus is the gate: 10:7-10.

In Matthew 7:13,14 Jesus said 'Enter through the narrow gate. for wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.'

The same word, variously translated 'door' or 'gate' is used in John 10:7-10, where Jesus identifies himself as the 'door' or 'gate' through which we must enter for salvation, for life, for security. We must not think here that Jesus is simply saying that he is *like* a door. Nor is he saying that he is one of several doors. We must take his claim just as he put it. He is *the* one and only, exclusive entry point, the only valid entry point, the only effective entry point to salvation, security and eternal life.

This claim renders invalid all other offers of spiritual life and salvation. It categorizes them as 'thieves and robbers' whose intent and effect is 'only to steal and kill and destroy'. The exclusiveness of this claim of Jesus is abhorrent in our society, where a live and let live, 'all roads lead to god' mentality dominates. It was equally offensive to the Pharisees to whom it was originally spoken. In this exclusive claim of Jesus Christ every person in every nation, no matter what their existing creed or philosophy, is challenged to rethink their beliefs, to re-evaluate their traditions. In this claim he calls each one of us out of the belief system we have inherited or adopted, and into a positive, responsive relationship with him.

By his own words Jesus Christ here claims that he, and he alone, is the entry point to life. He has no tolerance for any other supposed door, for any other promise of life. He knows their end is destruction, not life.

[There is much that could be said about the symbolism used in John 10:1-21. Two facts are significant here (1) verses 1-6 envisage a large sheepfold in which there is a paid doorkeeper and in which there are flocks belonging to several shepherds. (2) in smaller sheepfolds, which were the property of one shepherd, it was common for the shepherd himself to sleep in the doorway at night, and thus become, to all intents and purposes, the door. In this way the dual images of door and shepherd combine in the one person.]

(2) Jesus is the Shepherd: 10:11-21

In John 10:11-21 there are several elements that the listening Jews found both hard to understand and hard to accept.

a. The claim to be the good Shepherd.

For the listening Jews when Jesus said 'I am the good shepherd', he identified himself as God. The shepherd concept was part of God's self-revelation in the Old Testament.

In Psalm 23 we read: 'the Lord is my Shepherd.' In Psalm 80:1: 'Hear us, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock.' In Ezekiel 34: 'For this is what the Sovereign Lord says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock ... so I will look after my sheep ... I myself will tend my sheep ... I will shepherd the flock with justice ... I will save my flock ... You my sheep, the sheep of my pasture, are my people, and I am your God.'

In addition, the good shepherd claim is a claim to be the Davidic Messiah: 'I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them; he will tend them and be their shepherd.' (Ezekiel 34:23).

b. Jesus states that he, the good Shepherd, will lay down his life for the sheep. (10:11,15b).

This conflicted with Jewish Messianic expectations of a conquering national, political hero, who would reestablish Israel as a nation, ruling as King on the throne of David.

c. Jesus states that his sheep know him and listen to his voice (10:14,16).

Jesus repeatedly draws attention to the Pharisees' ignorance of his true identity. It is the focus of the last few verses of John 9. It is assumed in 10:1-6, and here, in John 10:14-16, Jesus points out that those who belong to him know him and listen to his voice. The significance of this cuts deeply. They have just excommunicated the man of John 9 from membership of the people of God. They assume that they know God. They stand here in the presence of one who identifies himself as God - and they do not recognize him; they refuse to listen to his voice. The only conclusion is that they are not his sheep, as he points out in 10:26,27. Had there been any authenticity to their traditions, their ritual, their piety, their obedience, it would have manifested itself here as they stood face to face with God. But they do not know him. They cannot see God here in this man. By their refusal to hear his voice they identify themselves as not his sheep.

d. Jesus calls God his Father (10:14-18)

We have seen the reaction elicited by this claim in John 5:16-18. Despite this aggressive response Jesus persists in relating himself to God in this way, and using this relationship as the validation and authority for all that he says and does. He refuses to back off and dilute this expression of equality with God. Indeed, he will shortly make a statement so blasphemous to Jewish ears that it effectively brought his public ministry to an end and sealed his death warrant. (See 10:30 below).

e. Jesus claims to have the authority to lay down his life and retrieve it again. (10:18).

In verse 18 Jesus makes four statements that portray him as having complete authority over death:

- no-one takes my life from me
- I lay it down of my own accord
- I have the authority to lay it down
- I have the authority to take it up again.

Jesus is not speaking about his death as some unfortunate, unpremeditated death by accident; nor is he speaking as a depressed suicide; nor is he speaking as one who will die because of the wickedness and brutality of others. He speaks here of a deliberate, authoritative, purposeful laying down of life, in an action fully under his own control. This deliberate dying is followed by an equally deliberate, authoritative and purposeful restoration and resumption of life. Death is merely an instrument in the hands of Jesus Christ, an instrument whereby he obtains forgiveness and salvation for his sheep.

[By saying 'merely' I do not reduce the significance or the suffering of Jesus' death, but indicate the completeness of his authority and control over it. He is at no time the helpless victim of death or of those who engineered his death. It is he and he alone who is in control right through the trial, committal and crucifixion, and burial. His claim here in John 10 is validated by the resurrection.]

Confronted by this barrage of transcendental claims those listening are confused and divided (10:19-21). There are many who think that he is either demon-possessed or raving mad. They cannot consider that anyone in control of his senses would say the blasphemous things that Jesus is saying. On the other hand there is a quality to Jesus' words and to his miracles that makes this conclusion questionable.

(4) Jesus said: I and the Father are one (John 10:30)

Jesus said these words in the context of the security of his sheep. His sheep are those who believe (25,26), listen to his voice (27), and follow him (27). Jesus knows his sheep (27); he gives them eternal life, and they will never perish (28); no-one can snatch them out of his hand (28); his Father has given them to him (29); and no-one can snatch them out of his Father's hand (29).

We will pass over, as the Jews did, this reassuring teaching of the security of the genuine believer, and focus with them on the relationship Jesus Christ claims to have with 'the Father'. Not only does Jesus again call God 'my Father' (29), thus making himself equal with God (refer back to John 5:16-18), he also describes the security believers (his sheep) have in **his** hand in the same terms that he describes the security his sheep have in **his Father's** hand. Then as confirmation and affirmation he makes the statement 'I and the Father are one.' (30).

This brings forth an immediate response. The stones are instantly in the hands of the Jews, ready to be thrown, ready to put the perpetrator of such blasphemy to death. 'You, a mere man,' they say, 'claim to be God' (10:31-33).

How accurately they perceive the true meaning of his words! They realise precisely the implications of his claims! But they reject utterly his right to make those claims. They refuse to acknowledge that in this man they are face to face with their God.

(5) Jesus said: The Father is in me, and I in the Father (10:38).

In these simple words Jesus states the significance of his miracles. Even though the Jews will not believe him when he claims equality with God, the very miracles he did should have been sufficient to convince them. 'Believe the miracles,' he said, 'that you may learn and understand that the Father is in me, and I in the Father.' (John 10:38). Had he stopped with the first part, 'the Father is in me', they would perhaps have excused him, supposing that he meant that he allowed God to control him; but he goes on with the second part: 'I in the Father'. The miracles are visible, tangible evidence of the validity of Jesus' claims to be the Son of God, equal to the Father, each mutually indwelling the other.

Again the implications of Jesus' words make their impact. Again the Jews try to seize him, but he escapes from their grasp.

[Some may be puzzled by the line of argument Jesus used in John 10:34-36, and conclude that here Jesus was saying that he was, after all, just a man. This is not at all the case. What he is pointing out is that if, as in Psalm 82:6, judges who are mere men are referred to as "gods", then how much more right has he whom "the Father has set apart as his very own" and "sent into the world" to say "I am God's Son"? The issue of the argument is the **right** of Jesus Christ to use the title and claim the relationship.]

THE FINAL MIRACLE - JESUS IS THE SOURCE OF LIFE: HE IS 'THE LIFE': JOHN 11

As we have already seen right through the Gospel of John Jesus Christ is associated with life:

- 'In him was life' (1:4);
- 'Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life' (3:36);
- 'The water that I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life' (4:14);
- 'those who hear (the voice of the Son of God) will live' (5:25);
- 'as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son to have life in himself' (5:26);
- 'I am the bread of life' (6:35);
- 'whoever believes in me ... streams of living water will flow from within him' (7:38); 'Whoever follows me ... will have the light of life' (8:12);
- 'I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full' (10:10); and
- 'I give to them eternal life' (10:28).

We have been left with no room for doubt: Jesus Christ, and he alone, is the source of eternal life. Apart from him there is only death and judgement (see John 3:18,36).

The death of Lazarus gave Jesus the opportunity to press this home one more time. He said to Martha: 'I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die.' Then he asked her: 'Do you believe this?'

A first glance her answer seems to be side-stepping the issue. But let us look again. Her 'Yes, Lord' answers his question. Yes. She believes what he has just said. Then she goes beyond that and gives the reason **why** she believes what he has just said: 'I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world.' This confession of faith, this acknowledgment of the true identity of Jesus Christ, is the foundation apart from which all additional confessions cannot stand. The promise of life is only for those who believe **in him**. Martha perceived this subtle but essential distinction between believing **in him** and believing **in his promises**. Throughout our study in John's Gospel we have seen this same distinction: Jesus calls people to believe **in him**, to believe that he is the Son of God, sent by the Father into the world.

Here in John 11:25 the promise to those who believe **in him** is two-fold:

- (1) that those who believe in him and die physically, will continue to live spiritually,
- and (2) those who are alive physically and believe in him will never die spiritually.

This promise is based on yet another exclusive claim of Christ: 'I am the resurrection and the life.'

Jesus Christ is the one who has 'life in himself' (John 5:26); he is the one who has 'the power of an endless life' (KJV Hebrews 7:16); he is the one of whom it is said 'in him was life' (John 1:4). It is he who later said of himself: 'I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever.' (Revelation 1:18.)

In this final miracle of the raising of Lazarus Jesus validates all of the claims he has made so far, and anticipates both his own resurrection and the spiritual regeneration and physical resurrection of all believers. In and through this trauma of the death of Jesus' friend God's purpose is that he, **and his Son**, be glorified. In God's divine economy the death of Lazarus has occurred

so that the Son of God would be glorified (John 11:4). And here in this miracle God presents the Jews with one final opportunity to believe in the Christ whom he has sent (11:40-42).

Time and again Jesus has shown by word and action that he has the authority and ability to undo the condemnation and curse of Genesis three. Time and again he has taught that he is the pivotal figure in that liberation, that redemption, that salvation. Here now is a man who believed in him, and he has died. The curse, the condemnation, have been meted out. In this dying of Lazarus we are each confronted with our own dying, with our own subjection to and involvement in that curse.

Can this man, Jesus of Nazareth, face to face with this inescapable result of our rebellion against our Creator, reverse and undo it **here**, in its most feared, most final expression? Yes. He can, and he does. Because he is the resurrection, and he is the life. He stands before the grave. His voice commands the one who is dead. By his word he calls forth life out of death. Just as in the original creative act at the beginning of time the word of God summoned into existence all that is, so here the living Word, the Son of God, calls into life he who was dead.

He reconstitutes the putrefying flesh; he renews the dehydrating blood; he restores the body fluids; he reverses the cold, hard stiffness of death; he resuscitates the heart and the lungs. All of this and more, simply by the power of his word.

And it is done. Lazarus comes forth out of the grave. And Jesus says: 'Take off the grave clothes and let him go.' Jesus is the resurrection and the life, the Son of God, possessed of all the life-giving creative power of the Father, with the authority to recreate, to regenerate, even those who are dead. Even those who are dead in sin. To each one who believes that he is who he is he says: take off the clothes of death, and live. And the creative power of his command effects his purpose.

May we each one with Martha confess:

'I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world.'