

JESUS SAYS, “I AM”
Introduction to the Series
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Who could better tell us about Jesus than Jesus himself? This series focuses attention on the “I am” sayings in the Gospel of John. These “I am” sayings contain Jesus’ own interpretation of who he is and his significance for us.

It is very important that we allow Jesus to describe himself to us; otherwise we may interpret him merely from our own viewpoints, our own likes and dislikes, our own agendas. The people of Jesus’ day were inclined to do that just as we are. In John 6, for example, after Jesus had miraculously fed the multitude, they decided he should be king. But Jesus withdrew from them and their agenda. He had his own agenda, as we will see in Lesson 1. Jesus was not interested in being king of a humanly designed kingdom, not even for the sake of meeting the people’s need for bread. Like the first disciples, we have to allow Jesus to define himself and his mission. We need to let him tell us what kind of savior he is so that we can really understand what kind of salvation we need.

Another thing which should come out in this study is the connection between who Jesus is and what Jesus has done (and does) for us. In nearly every case, people become Christians because of a perceived benefit in doing so. That is all well and good as far as it goes. At some point, however, we need to appreciate Jesus for who he is, quite apart from what he has done for us personally. He is worthy of our worship and praise simply for who he is, although we also rightly praise him for what he does for us.

When we worship him for who he is and praise him for what he does, we can go on to see that what he does proceeds from who he is. This can greatly encourage our faith and trust in him—as we realize that what God has done in the past was not some quirk or unusual circumstance but a revelation of the eternal, unchanging character of Almighty God. What God has done in Jesus is a revelation of who God is—always. That means that what God was like in Jesus’ dealings with people during his ministry is how he is now, how he will deal with us. We can meditate on these deeds and sayings from long ago and know that this is a revelation of the nature and purpose of God for us right now.

Although everything God does for us he does in complete freedom (he is never forced by our prayers), everything God does is an expression of his unchanging character. What God does for our salvation is not “out of character” (in the sense of being inconsistent or a new move or new disposition toward us). Rather what God does for us in Jesus comes right “out of his being” in the sense of being consistent with his essential character. He does what he does for us because of what he is in himself. He has never done and will never do anything to us, for us, or against us that is out of line with his eternal character. His eternal character is that of the holy, loving, just, and all-wise Maker of heaven and earth. Because Jesus is the Word of God made flesh (1:14), because Jesus is God, we can greatly benefit from a study of those statements in which Jesus says, “I am . . .”

Lesson 1: “I am the Bread of Life”	John 6
Lesson 2: “I am the light of the world.”	John 8:12
Lesson 3: “I AM”	John 8:24, 28, 58
Lesson 4: “I am the door” and “I am the Shepherd”	John 10
Lesson 5: “I am the resurrection and the life”	John 11
Lesson 6: “I am the way, the truth, and the life”	John 14:6
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Lesson 8: “I am not of the world”	John 17:14, 16

When we see Jesus, life comes into focus. As we see Jesus more clearly, we see ourselves more clearly. We see the world around us more clearly. We see the future more confidently. In certain respects we can see Jesus more clearly in the Gospel of John than in any other single book of the New Testament. Expect your own life to be built up in positive ways as you study this Gospel. Expect the lives of the people you teach to be changed and strengthened in faith during this coming year. Expect to be blessed and to be a blessing, and give God the glory.

Note that Scripture quotations are from the New International Version (NIV 84) unless otherwise stated.

LESSON 1
“I AM THE BREAD OF LIFE”
John 6:25-59

In John 6:35, Jesus says, “I am the bread of life.” What does that mean to you? How does Jesus explain what he means by that expression?

‘Bread’ is a way of saying ‘food,’ just as in the Lord’s Prayer: “Give us this day our daily bread.” In that prayer ‘bread’ means our food for physical sustenance, but it can also be thought of as whatever is necessary for our lives this day—food or anything else. When Jesus says he is the “bread of life” he means that he is all we need for true life.

There are four verses in John 6 in which Jesus directly says, “I am the bread.” Those verses are the following:

- 35 “I am the bread of life”
- 41 “I am the bread that came down from heaven”
- 48 “I am the bread of life”
- 51 “I am the living bread that came down from heaven”

Because ‘bread’ is such an obvious symbol, it may not require much explanation at all for us to grasp its main significance. We may, however, gain fuller appreciation of Jesus’ meaning if we look at these verses in the context of John 6 and also consider a bit of the Old Testament background, the story of the manna from heaven.

OT background

Manna to feed and to teach

The beginning of the miraculous manna is recorded in Exodus 16. Israel obviously needed food in the desert, and obviously God was meeting their need with the manna. But if you read Exodus 16:4, you see that God was doing more than meeting the need. He was also testing them, especially by the daily way he gave the manna and instructed them to collect only what they needed for that day (except for the day before Sabbath, vs. 5). The manna was God’s way of feeding the Israelites, but it was also his way of teaching them dependence on his ongoing mercies and obedience to his instructions. Sustenance, dependence, and obedience were all at stake—even if Israel mostly thought only of sustenance.

The issues of dependence and obedience are mentioned again in Deuteronomy 8:1-5. Moses says Israel’s experience of God’s leading and supplying their needs was to “test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands” (vs. 2). Specifically about the manna he says it was “to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD” (vs. 3; also quoted by Jesus in the wilderness temptations). In effect God is saying that he gave them physical bread to teach them that physical bread is not enough!

Israel was to learn that life comes from the life-giver, even when he is giving life through the miraculous bread which he sent daily for forty years. God could have met their need in another way, had he so chosen. Regardless of the method God uses, life is always from God and always by his word (i.e., by his express will). For Israel or for us, to live by the word of God means both dependence (on his word, his revealed will) and obedience (to what he says), recognizing that life comes from God and God alone, even though he might use various means to give it.

God gave them bread to keep them alive but also to teach them that life does not come from bread! How paradoxical this sounds, but how true it is. Life comes from God by his word,

but through manna is how he gave Israel life. We will see this same important connection between the word of God and life through the bread from heaven in John 6.

John 6

We do not have time to read it all in class, but the whole chapter provides enlightening context for Jesus’ claim to be the bread of life. The chapter begins with the miracle of the multiplication of the bread and fish to feed the crowds. This demonstrates in a mighty way Jesus’ ability to meet the physical needs of the people (along with his healing ministry which attracted the multitude). This feeding miracle also provided the immediate backdrop for the discourse in vss. 25ff, as the people follow Jesus in the hope of seeing (and eating) still more miracles.

Notice also that the multiplication miracle had so impressed the crowds that they concluded he was God’s appointed “Prophet who is to come” and now was the time to make Jesus king (vss. 14-15). Jesus wanted nothing to do with their plan and he withdrew from them. The difference between their agenda and Jesus’ agenda is another important part of the conversation in vss. 25ff.

The intervening episode of Jesus’ walking on the water was not witnessed by the multitude, but it provides readers of the Gospel with further insight into Jesus’ mastery over the realm of nature. Such insight makes more understandable Jesus’ claims to be able to give life everlasting.

John 6:25-33

Food for a deeper hunger—if you want it

After the crowds caught up with Jesus, they wanted to know when (and probably how) he got there, since they knew he had not left in the boat with his disciples on the day before (vs. 22). Jesus ignores their curiosity about his movements and turns the focus to their motivations. He knows their agenda is not yet his: they want lunch; he wants to give eternal life (vs. 27).

vss. 28-30—Notice the apparent willingness of the people to do some kind of work to gain God’s approval. This willingness proves false (or at least shallow) in light of their subsequent unwillingness to receive what Jesus offers.

When they ask what work they have to do, Jesus replies that the required “work” is “to believe” in the one sent by God. Just like us, they are trying to approach life as something to be achieved rather than as something to be received. They see it as some kind of goal to work toward; Jesus offers it as a gift to receive by faith. This is the beginning already of the offense which the majority of these people will allow to drive them away from Jesus by the end of the chapter. They were so eager yesterday after the healing service and the miracle dinner on the grounds; today things begin to turn in a disappointing direction.

vss. 30-31—It is somewhat surprising that the people who saw yesterday’s miraculous sign should demand another sign before they are willing to do what Jesus says they must: believe in him. Yet the demand for a sign from Jesus can be found many times in the Gospels. Consistently Jesus refuses to do a sign under such circumstances, although he was constantly doing signs every day of his ministry. It seems that Jesus has no interest in doing a sign just because someone challenges him to ‘show his stuff’ (see, for example 7:3-5). He is motivated by

compassion for the hurting and by the Father’s will, not by his ego or his reputation as a miracle worker.

When the people cite the miracle of the manna in vs. 31, they are evidently asking Jesus whether he can repeat yesterday’s miracle of the multiplication of the bread. After all, that was only one meal. The manna went on daily for forty years! Can you match that, Jesus?

vs. 32-33—Jesus makes a correction in their challenge to compare himself with Moses, who was associated with the manna in the wilderness. Not Moses but “my Father” is the giver. Another change he makes in their statement of vs. 31 is more subtle but quite important: not “Moses gave” but “my Father gives.” Along with turning the focus from Moses to God, Jesus turns the focus from ancient history to the present. What happened in ancient history in Moses’ time was important, but what is happening as Jesus speaks is more important—a greater revelation is being given (cf. 1:14, 17); a greater bread is being offered in Jesus’ flesh, which will give a greater life (see vss. 49-50, 58). To receive this greater life, the people need to learn from the past (what God did), but they have to get into the present (what God is doing). (If they learn what they should from the past, they will be open to what God is doing in the present. See 5:46.)

Jesus continues to use the present tense in vs. 33 when he speaks of the bread which “comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” (Note that Jesus has not yet explicitly said that he is that bread.)

6:34-40

The bread which does the Father’s will

Since the people had come looking for bread to begin with (vs. 26), it is not surprising when they express their willingness to receive this bread which Jesus says God is now giving. “Give us this bread,” they say eagerly. But as Jesus proceeds to explain that he himself is the bread which God is giving, they begin to lose their enthusiasm.

vs. 35—For the first time Jesus clearly states, “I am the bread of life.” The way to receive this ‘bread’ is to “come to” Jesus (i.e., in faith, seeking him). ‘Bread’ is obviously being used figuratively to mean ‘that which will genuinely satisfy your true need for life.’ Notice how the metaphor is quite flexible, since the ‘bread’ will satisfy ‘thirst’ as well as ‘hunger.’

vs. 36—It is noteworthy that Jesus tells people who had been listening to his preaching and watching his miracles that they “still . . . do not believe.” They had some level of belief in him, but Jesus knows the faith they have thus far is not the faith they need to have (cf. 2:23-25). He wants them to go on to that faith in him which will allow him to give them what they need. Right now their faith is only enough to ask him for what they want. As the chapter continues, most of them will refuse to go on to that level, at least for now.

vss. 37-38—Jesus indicates his willingness to receive those who come to him in trust, but he also indicates that his will is dependent on the will of the Father (Jesus says this kind of thing many times in the Gospel of John). It is the Father who gives human beings the desire or will to come to Jesus. That means a couple of things which are quite important to us.

First of all, if anyone wants to come to Jesus to receive “the bread of life,” that is evidence that God is already at work in the person’s life. This is what John Wesley would later

call ‘prevenient grace,’ the grace of God which makes it possible for us even to consider Christ and to make a move toward him. If we have a desire to know God, it is because God has given us that desire. Our move toward him is a response to God’s initiative. He loves us before we love him (cf. 1 John 4:10, 19). Even to decide to have faith in God is a decision for which we cannot boast or take credit. We could not have decided this if God had not enabled us. Our decision is very real and very necessary, and we can say ‘no’ to God. But God’s enablement to say ‘yes’ to him is what Jesus is talking about when he says that “No one can come to me unless the Father . . . draws him” (vs. 44).

The second thing it means is that anyone who desires to come to Jesus can come, with assurance that Jesus will not turn such a person away: “I will never drive away.” If the Father, in his will, has caused someone to desire to come to Jesus, then Jesus’ will is to receive that person, not to turn him or her away. The presence of the desire in us is evidence of God’s will toward us, and we need not fear that our desire to know him will be met by his refusal to welcome us. Jesus is a receiver, not an expeller of those who call upon him. Jesus’ will and the Father’s will are always found in agreement with regard to our salvation. That is the personally important meaning of the statement Jesus makes in vs. 38: “I . . . do the will of him who sent me.”

vss. 39-40—Since it is the will of Almighty God which Jesus comes to do, we may be assured that there is adequate power to achieve the will. And what is that will of the Father and of Jesus? To give us eternal life, life which is not defeated even by death. Jesus speaks repeatedly in this chapter of raising us up on the last day. That means that in the end, life wins. The life Jesus gives is stronger than death.

6:41-51

Bread from heaven may be hard to swallow.

The people listening to Jesus did not like his claim to be the bread from heaven. He seemed to claim too much for himself, a man just like themselves (they thought). They thought Jesus came from earthly parents just like everyone else. This was an understandable assumption on their part. Indeed, we could say they were half right. Jesus did have an earthly mother. What they did not recognize, however, was a very important fact: Jesus’ identity as the unique Son of God. More than important, this is a vital fact, a life-and-death important fact.

Jesus’ claim to a heavenly origin must be either true or false. If it is false, he could not have the kind of eternal significance for the life of human beings that he claims in this chapter. On the other hand, if Jesus’ claim to a heavenly origin is true, everything else he claims for himself not only can be true, it must be true. So, in a sense, this question of Jesus’ heavenly origin is the key to everything else. If he is not from heaven, we can dismiss his grandiose claims as delusional. If he is from heaven—if his claim is true to be the Son of God, who alone truly knows the Father—our destinies are in his hand. If Jesus speaks truly, and if we want life, we must come to him.

vs. 44-46—Jesus reiterates the point that coming to him really requires the work of God. It is a miracle when someone makes a move toward Jesus. It takes a revelation from the Father to recognize that Jesus was sent by the Father (cf. Matt. 16:17, Peter received such a revelation). Knowledge of God has to originate with God. On our own, in our fallen and rebellious state, we cannot know God. Heaven has to help you recognize the one who came from heaven.

So, if someone does not come to Jesus, is that because God did not draw them? Does that get them ‘off the hook’ of responsibility? Not at all. While no one who comes to Jesus can rightfully boast of anything but God’s mercy in drawing them, no one who draws back from Jesus can blame anyone but themselves. As Jesus says in vs. 45 (quoting Isa. 54:13), “They will all be taught by God.” God will teach any who are willing to be taught, and any who are willing to be taught will be brought to Jesus by the Father’s will (see 7:17). Those not brought to Jesus refused to be taught by the Father. (I should point out here that I am not discussing, nor was Jesus talking about, those who have never heard the gospel. He was talking to people who had been listening to him and who had even seen his miracles, yet he perceived that their hearts were not with him. In fact they were about to desert him.)

vss. 47-51—First Jesus says that we have to believe him in order to have eternal life. Then he says that we have to eat bread, which he has already identified as himself. ‘Eating the bread’ is here seen clearly to be associated with belief in Jesus. This kind of ‘eating’ could be explained as ‘receiving.’ Just like one has to eat food to survive, one has to receive what Jesus offers in order to live. Furthermore, one has to receive it the way it is offered.

What does Jesus offer? Eternal life. How does he offer it? Through his flesh, “which I will give for the life of the world” (vs. 51). To refuse the way he offers it is to refuse what he offers. You cannot have the life of Jesus without the flesh of Jesus, for that is how the life came into the world (1:4, 14), and that is how the life was given for us and to us.

This is the counterpoint to the issue emphasized earlier. If it is vital to recognize Jesus’ heavenly origin, it is also vital to recognize the conception, birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension of his human body. That body of flesh and blood was how the eternal Word of God, the source of our lives, came to us. If Jesus is the eternal Son of God, he can give us life and he is the only true source of life. If Jesus as the Son of God also became a human, that is how he gives us the life.

Recall now the connection between a heavenly gift of bread and dependence on the word of God which was pointed out in the discussion of the manna (Exod. 16; Deut. 8). Here again, but in a greater way, the life-giving word and the physical instrument used to give life cannot be separated, even if we can make an intellectual distinction. If you believe Jesus’ words, you will take his flesh as the ‘bread’ which gives eternal life. If you receive his flesh as that ‘bread,’ you should know that it is his word incarnate in that flesh which gives life. The Word Himself points to his flesh as the bread of life for the world. The flesh of Jesus is the flesh of the Word Incarnate. To see only the flesh is to miss the Word. To want only the Word without the flesh is to mishear, disbelieve, or rebel against the Word. You cannot take the Word and leave the flesh out of it.

This is like the lesson God wanted Israel to learn through the life-giving manna. Life comes from God’s word (Deut. 8:3), but he told them to gather the manna and eat it, not just think about it or have a Bible study about it. The life which Jesus gives likewise has to be received with more than just an intellectual appreciation.

In pointing out the similarity, we must not overlook the difference, however, since that is plainly indicated in John 6. The miracle manna was wonderful, but it did not give eternal life (vs. 49). The ‘bread’ which Jesus offers gives eternal life. This is a greater miracle by far than forty years of manna. (Notice also that Jesus says he is giving his flesh for the life of the world.

Compare that with vs. 32. Jesus’ gift is the Father’s gift, and also the Spirit’s gift in vs. 63. You might also take note of 10:18—Jesus gives this life; no one takes it from him).

6:52-59

True food and true drink

Already doubting Jesus’ claim to be from heaven, some in the audience now begin to be genuinely offended by his talk of eating his flesh. This sounded like cannibalism! Others were perhaps still trying to discern his meaning, for vs. 52 says they began to “argue sharply among themselves.” They did not agree with one another about what he was saying, but they probably all shared the ‘how’ part of the question in that verse. At this point in the ministry of Jesus, no one could understand that Jesus would give his flesh as ‘bread’ by dying on the cross.

Jesus’ teachings on this would be sufficiently understandable only after his death and resurrection (see 2:19-22). Perhaps we can sympathize with the crowd that day who could not understand how Jesus could give his flesh for our eternal life. It had not happened yet. That is how our trust in his word often gets tested, however. He gives a promise or a command, and we don’t see how he can do it. Can we wait until we understand how he is going to do it before we take him at his word that he is going to do it?

vss. 53-56—Jesus does not soften his message in response to the misgivings of his audience. (My tendency as a teacher would be to back up a bit, and try to make it easier.) Instead of using less offensive language, he proceeds to even more graphic words about eating his flesh and (for the first time) drinking his blood.

If Jesus had been trying to offend their deeply ingrained religious sensibilities, he could hardly have chosen more provocative language. The consumption of animal blood was absolutely forbidden by the Law which God had given them centuries before (see Lev. 17:10-14). Now Jesus talks about drinking the blood of a human, his own blood, as the necessary means of receiving eternal life: “unless you eat the flesh . . . and drink his blood, you have no life in you.”

Especially given the religious training of that audience, we might well sympathize with the offense taken by them. But again, what is the issue? The issue is whether we will live by the word of God or not. When blood was banned from the Israelite diet, obedience to God was the root issue. When God says blood is necessary in receiving life from him, trust and obedience to his word are still the issues (even if the statement is not fully understood yet).

The language is uncompromising. The word used for “flesh” (sarx) is even more inescapably physical than would have been the word “body” (soma) which is used in the accounts of the Lord’s Supper. The use of “flesh” and “blood” together make it evident that Jesus is talking about his real human body in the actual suffering of physical death on the cross. Jesus leaves us no middle position. His teachings as a religious leader (his word) cannot be selectively utilized for our betterment if we miss the way the Word-made-flesh gives us life—through his atoning death.

The offense of this goes beyond the natural Jewish reaction to the notion of drinking blood. We as humans prefer to maintain our pride and independence, which we can do to some extent if all we need are Jesus’ moral teachings to incorporate into our thinking. In that way we can still be in charge of our own lives. We could allow him to instruct us and not lose our sense of self-sufficiency nearly so much as we do when we realize that we need more than a good idea or two. We need the sacrifice Jesus made. If that is what we need, how very desperate our

situation apart from God must be! Words were not enough; the Word had to become flesh and die for us. Words are not enough now; we have to allow Jesus to invade and pervade our very lives.

The startling words about eating and drinking help to convey the completeness of our reception of Jesus. Not just his words but his very person is needed for our life. We need to receive him, not just be influenced by his thinking or his example. This is also indicated by the concept of “abiding” found in vs. 56 (and familiar to us from John 15). To abide in Jesus (NIV uses the word “remain”), we must let him enter into our being. Just as the ingestion of food into our bodies is required for our bodies to remain alive, so the ‘ingestion’ of Jesus into our beings is the means by which we enter into and maintain the life-giving relationship which Jesus alone provides. By receiving him in this radical way, we abide/remain/stay/dwell in him and he abides/remains/stays/dwells in us.

vs. 57—If we are sustained by Jesus, we are sustained by the life of God himself, since that is the life in Jesus. Jesus’ words about having life from the Father also express the orientation of his life toward the Father. If we abide in Jesus, our lives will be oriented toward the Father just as Jesus’ life was (and is) oriented toward the Father and the Father’s will.

vs. 58—This is a concluding restatement of the central contrast between the manna of OT times and Jesus. The manna was a great miracle but is now overshadowed by a greater provision from God.

6:60-69

Responses then and now

When this long chapter opened Jesus had a large and excited crowd following him. Along the way there was even a movement to make him king. But by the end of the chapter the crowd has vanished and apparently only the twelve have stayed with him. It is instructive to ask why the vast number left, and why the twelve stayed.

Certainly, as mentioned earlier, we can sympathize with the people for not being able to grasp Jesus’ meaning. We know he was not talking about cannibalism when he spoke of eating his flesh. From this side of the cross and resurrection it is easier to see what he meant (and what he did not mean). That his words are easier to comprehend intellectually does not necessarily mean the reality is easier to accept, however.

Obviously the people had reason enough to follow Jesus at the beginning of the chapter and reason enough to leave him at the end of the chapter. Had they encountered persecution or hardship which made following him too difficult? Had someone threatened them with bodily harm unless they abandoned Jesus? No, they simply found his teachings too disagreeable, too offensive in language or too difficult in content. This was no longer the person they wanted to hear, because they no longer liked what they were hearing. They liked seeing the miracles (vs. 2), but they did not see what he could possibly mean by ‘eating his flesh.’

And yet some did not leave. Did they understand something which the vast multitude did not? Peter, speaking for the group, indicates that indeed they do understand something, even if not everything yet. Peter knows that Jesus is the Holy One of God, and he recognizes that Jesus has “the words of eternal life” (vs. 68). That doesn’t mean Peter and the others understand what is meant by eating flesh and drinking blood, since we know the crucifixion threw them into

confusion and disarray. Peter does not understand all of Jesus’ words, but he knows he needs to be there to hear them. He knows that life depends on Jesus’ words; therefore he will cling to Jesus and his words and trust that understanding will increase.

vss. 62-65—Jesus is aware that “many of his disciples” (not opponents, vs. 60) are having a hard time accepting his teaching about his flesh and blood. His questions and statements in vss. 62-64 might be viewed as an attempt to explain and make his teaching easier to grasp. If so, the attempt does not seem to work, as the people leave after these words.

On the other hand, vss. 62-63 especially might be viewed as a restatement of the basic premises, which will either have to be accepted or rejected. Those premises are the following: Jesus is from heaven; life is God’s gift; flesh has no power on its own but can only receive life; Jesus speaks with the power and authority of God; not everyone will believe Jesus; those who do believe Jesus should thank God for helping them to grasp enough of the truth to respond with faith.

Jesus’ question (vs. 62) about seeing him ascend again to heaven is essentially a re-affirmation of his previous claim to have come down from heaven (vss. 33, 38, 50, 51, 58). There is probably here an allusion to the fact that much of what Jesus says will be adequately comprehensible only after the resurrection, ascension, and the gift of the Spirit. Especially the gift of the Holy Spirit would seem to be necessary to enable understanding of what it means to abide in Jesus and to have him abide in us (see John 14:15-20, 26). (Also, in the Book of Acts, the infilling of the Holy Spirit is pointed to as evidence that Jesus has indeed ascended to the right hand of God [Acts 2:33, 36]). We could say it this way: the coming down of the Holy Spirit shows that Jesus has gone up; the fact that Jesus has gone up shows he spoke truthfully when he spoke of coming down from heaven. Referring to earth’s gravity we sometimes say, “What goes up must come down.” With regard to Jesus’ heavenly origin we can say, “What goes up must have come down!” (And we can “go up” with him only because he “came down.”)

What Jesus says about the Spirit in vs. 63 is very important but has often been partially misunderstood. In saying that the Spirit gives life, Jesus states a truth found elsewhere in this Gospel, in the teachings of Paul, and, in general, throughout the Bible. See, for example, John 3:5, 8; 7:38-39; Romans 8:10-11; 2 Corinthians 3:6; Genesis 2:7. This truth is clear and not apt to be misunderstood. What Jesus says about the flesh, however, has been misunderstood by some.

“The flesh counts for nothing” (NIV). “The flesh is no help at all” (ESV). “The flesh profiteth nothing” (KJV). These words should not be understood in a way that negates what Jesus said earlier about the vital necessity of his flesh for our salvation. Jesus is not saying that his flesh is worthless or useless or to be despised. He makes the same point here that was made earlier regarding God’s word and the instrument used to communicate that word. The life comes from God’s Word and Spirit; it comes to Jesus’ flesh by the incarnation; it comes through Jesus’ flesh to us by his death and resurrection. Indeed, life comes to our flesh by the work of the same Holy Spirit and same Word of God. “Flesh” on its own is useless for giving life, but flesh can receive life which is given by the Spirit, and flesh can even be used by the Spirit to give life. Always, whatever the instrument used by the Spirit, the life is from the Spirit. (This has implications for the life of God manifested in the church. No matter which human instrument is used, God’s work is done by God alone. But he does use human instruments, and we are not in a position to suggest that God should be more spiritual and not use such instruments of ‘flesh.’ If

God so chooses, he can use mere humans, and he can use things like water, bread, and the fruit of the vine to do his work.)

Jesus also says his words are Spirit and life. Life given by the Spirit and life given by the Word is the same life. The Spirit refers to God’s presence in power. The Word refers to God’s will, God’s purposes. God’s Word and God’s Spirit are always in agreement. What his Word says, his Spirit does. His Spirit does only what his Word expresses.

The revealed will of God is to give us life by giving us Jesus, the bread from heaven, the Word made flesh. The power by which the gift takes effect is the power of the Spirit, who gives life by the bread from heaven, the flesh and blood of Jesus.

LESSON 2
“I AM THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD”
John 8:12

After reading John 8:12, you might ask the class, “What do you think Jesus meant by saying he is the light of the world?” Many things could be said about revelation from God, guidance for living, understanding, knowledge, wisdom, etc. Don’t overlook the fact that Jesus explains part of what he means with the words in the rest of the verse: “Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” Light is associated with life and is the opposite of darkness. Does that mean light gives life? Or does Jesus mean a light-filled life? Does he mean both? Besides asking “What kind of light is this?” we might ask “What kind of darkness is he talking about?”

Like ‘bread’ in Lesson 1, ‘light’ may be an obvious and easily understood figure of speech. In fact we use ‘light’ in a figurative sense in our everyday language more often than we use ‘bread.’ Think of how we say things like “He finally saw the light on that matter,” or “in light of that information,” or similar uses of ‘light’ in which we do not mean the literal, physical phenomenon of light from the sun or from an electric bulb. Rather we mean something like ‘understanding’ or ‘insight’ or ‘perspective.’

Is that what Jesus is talking about in John 8:12? Surely that is part of it, but other questions arise: When we follow Jesus, do we always have full understanding? Is there never a lack of ‘light’ in our understanding? If we lack understanding in some way, does that mean we are walking in the darkness in the sense Jesus means here? Perhaps Jesus is promising that eventually all our intellectual darkness or lack of knowledge will give way to the light of understanding, but what he says in 8:12 is “never” or “by no means.” It would seem that “darkness” and “light” in this verse mean something a bit different from the absence or presence of intellectual understanding.

When we look at the immediate context of John 8 for further help on this, we may not see it right away, since the words “light” and “darkness” are not used again in this chapter. But a look at the immediate context may help us determine what Jesus is saying about himself. After that we will expand the context to include other statements about light and darkness in the Gospel of John. Then we will look at a few of the many other places in the Bible where light and darkness are used in figurative ways.

Context in John 8

There may not be an obvious connection with the passage just before vs. 12 (vss. 1-11). On the other hand, it may contain an example of the difference between light and darkness in the sense in which they are used in vs. 12. I say this because of the difference between the way Jesus treated the adulterous woman and the way the accusers treated her. In reality, it was Jesus they most wanted to accuse; the woman was just their tool in the attempt (see 8:6). Jesus did not excuse her sin; he told her to stop sinning. His attitude toward her was redemptive, not contemptuous and judgmental. Light brings correction but not destruction (unless it is refused, as we will see later).

The difference between Jesus and self-righteous people is emphasized again in vss. 15-16, 40-47. Take a look at these verses. When we re-read 8:12 after looking at the contrast between Jesus and those who trust their own ‘light’ rather than Jesus’ words, we may get a different feel for the meaning of “light” and “darkness” in vs. 12.

Truly Jesus’ opponents were lacking in understanding, so they were in that sense ‘in the dark.’ But their darkness was more serious than lack of knowledge. Their darkness was an evil

intention, a will not submitted to God and, therefore, a will contrary to God’s. Their darkness was not so much an intellectual darkness as it was a moral darkness. Indeed the Pharisees were quite knowledgeable about the contents of the Law. They knew their facts about what should be done with the adulterous woman. Their darkness, which Jesus threatened to expose (8:7), was their own hypocrisy and judgmental attitude. That is abundantly clear by the fact that their interest in the woman’s sin was only the convenient opportunity it gave them to lay a trap for Jesus (8:6). They did not want justice for her, and they certainly did not want to show her mercy and forgiveness. They wanted to use her, to take advantage of her for their own purpose, which was not lust but murder (8:37, 44).

Further context in the Gospel of John

John 9

In the next chapter of John we encounter an intriguing account of Jesus healing a blind man, with the ensuing discussion involving the healed man, his parents, the religious authorities, and Jesus (John 9). We cannot do a detailed study of that whole chapter, but an overview is instructive.

Jesus refused to blame either the man or his parents for his life-long blindness. Instead, Jesus saw this man’s need as an opportunity to do God’s will while it is “day.” Jesus uses “day” to speak of moments of opportunity and “night” as the time when opportunity has passed (vss. 3-4). Jesus will not debate the blame question (“Who sinned?” vs. 2) when the more important issue is to bring light, physically and spiritually, into this blind man’s life. This kind of human need is the very reason Jesus came into the world, a motivation which Jesus asserts with the following words: “While I am in the world, I am the light of the world” (9:5). The intended purpose of the light is to bring light, not blame.

Jesus came into the world to bring light to all who need it (everyone) and to all who welcome it (not everyone). By the end of the chapter, the blind man sees physically and spiritually (see vs. 38), while the religious leaders are actually becoming more and more blind spiritually in their continued opposition to Jesus (vs. 41). That is what happens when light is refused: it gets more difficult to see. That is what Jesus means by the paradoxical statement of vs. 39. Those who admit their blindness can receive sight from him; those who think they see well enough without Jesus “will become blind.”

I want to include a statement I like on John 9 by Raymond E. Brown (The Gospel According to John, vol. 29 in The Anchor Bible, p. 377):

The care with which [John] has drawn his portraits of increasing insight and hardening blindness is masterful. Three times the former blind man, who is truly gaining knowledge, humbly confesses his ignorance (12, 25, 36). Three times the Pharisees, who are really plunging deeper into abysmal ignorance of Jesus, make confident statements about what they know of him (16, 24, 29).

John 12:35-46

As Jesus’ public ministry neared its end, he gave notice that opportunity to respond to the light must not be taken for granted: “You are going to have the light just a little while longer. Walk while you have the light, before darkness overtakes you” (12:35). Jesus was speaking to the people of that generation, but the warning is applicable to everyone. Choosing the light cannot be indefinitely deferred to the future. Delay in choosing the light strengthens the grip of

darkness on our lives. As the Bible teaches clearly, “today” is the day of salvation (2 Cor. 6:2; Heb. 4:7). While the choice between light and darkness, obedience or disobedience, submission or rebellion is presented to us, while we can perceive the option—that is the time to choose light. The time may come (and will come if we delay long enough) when the choice will not be perceptible or possible. Those who resist the light long enough will not be able to resist the darkness; it will overcome them (the same word for “overcome” or “overtake” is used in John 1:5; see discussion below).

Notice also that there is no third choice—light, darkness, or something else. Either you choose to “trust in the light while you have it” (vs. 36) or you will be overtaken or overcome by darkness (vs. 35). Without God’s light, humans cannot withstand darkness. To refuse the light is, in fact, to surrender to darkness and to walk into deeper and deeper darkness (vs. 35). But the glorious option is to “trust in the light” and be changed into “sons of light”—people whose lives are characterized by light, whose destinies are with the light, whose end will not be darkness but everlasting light (vs. 36). Because of Jesus, we don’t have to let darkness rule over us (12:46). Jesus, the victorious light of the world, makes us victorious children of light.

The more opportunity we have to turn to the light, the more responsibility we have if we refuse it. This passage contains a solemn indictment of those who witnessed Jesus’ miraculous ministry but steadfastly refused to believe in him. Because they chose darkness, their capacity for light diminished, thus fulfilling the words of Isaiah: “He has blinded their eyes” (John 12:40, quoting Isa. 6:10). Read in context this does not mean the spiritually blind have God to blame. No, their deepening blindness is the judgment of God on their choice of darkness instead of light (as in 3:19, see later in this lesson).

John 1

After looking at these encounters between “light” and “darkness” in the ministry of Jesus, we can read with appreciation the following words about Jesus from the opening sentences of John: “In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it. . . . The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world” (1:4, 5, 9). What Jesus offers is the light and life that everyone needs, but some do not accept it (vss. 10-12). Verse 5 says “the darkness has not understood it” (NIV). This can also be translated as “the darkness has not overcome it” (ESV; see above on 12:35). In John 1:5, John probably intended both meanings in his choice of this particular Greek word. The darkness does not understand light, and in the rejection of Jesus darkness tried to overcome the light by putting him to death. But in the resurrection of Jesus the light has overcome. The “light of life” is stronger than the darkness of death.

John 3

Darkness cannot overcome the light, but it does resist it. Darkness offers an alternative to light which some choose. We saw this in chapter 9; we can see it also in John 3:19-21. As human beings we have a choice to come to the light or to cling to the darkness. The choice between darkness and light is here depicted as the choice between doing evil and “doing the truth” (vs. 21, literal translation; NIV translates as “lives by the truth”). Again the contrast is not the difference between knowledge and ignorance but the difference between submitting one’s life to God or rebelling against him. Darkness is not so much ignorance as it is rebellion. Light is

not mere knowledge of the truth; it is “doing the truth,” responding with your life to the truth you have been given.

You might see also the connection between “walking in the light” and “doing the truth” in 1 John 1:5-7, and between light and love in 1 John 2:8-11.

Light outside the Gospel of John

There are far too many references to light to look at all of them. The following is just a selection which might be useful to consider.

God or Jesus as the light

Luke 1:77-79—from Zechariah’s prophetic word about the birth of John the Baptist as the forerunner of Jesus:

to give his people the knowledge of salvation
through the forgiveness of their sins,
because of the tender mercy of our God,
by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven
to shine on those living in darkness
and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the path of peace.

Matt 4:16—quoting Isaiah 9:1-2 as fulfilled in Jesus’ earthly ministry:

the people living in darkness
have seen a great light;
on those living in the land of the shadow of death
a light has dawned.

These two passages both link darkness with death. That linkage corresponds with Jesus’ claim to be “the light of life.” The next passage also links light with life, with God as the source of both.

Psalm 36:9—“For with you is the fountain of life;
in your light, we see light.”

2 Cor. 4:6—The same God who created physical light, by speaking the command in the beginning of the universe, has given us spiritual light in Jesus, the Word made flesh: “For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.”

Rev. 21:23-24; 22:5—The light of the heavenly Jerusalem is God himself and the Lamb.

Jesus’ disciples as the light

Matt 5:14, 16—You are the light of the world, and your light should shine in such a way that God gets the glory.

Rom. 13:12-13—Because the “day” is almost here in which our salvation will be complete, we should put aside deeds which are darkness and “put on the armor of light.” The imagery is suggestive of a fight between light and darkness.

2 Cor. 6:14—“Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness?”

Eph. 5:8-14—Once you were darkness, now you are light. Live in a way appropriate to being light. Stay away from darkness (shameful deeds). Wake up, and let Christ give you light.

1 Thess. 5:4-8—similar to Romans 13 above but with more detail about the armor. “But since we belong to the day, let us be self-controlled, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet” (vs. 8).

Finally we can look at still other words of Jesus, in which he exhorts his disciples to let the light pervade our entire being. If we try to hold on to some area of darkness in our lives, we will find it is impossible. Ultimately we must let the light take over, or the darkness will take over. A mixture of light and darkness is unworkable in the end. (I have inserted explanatory comments into the verses.)

Matthew 6:22-24—“The eye is the lamp of the body [*in the sense of ‘giving light’ to all you are and do*]. If your eyes are good, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eyes are bad [*evil, in the sense of greedy; see Matt. 20:15*], your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness [*if what ought to give light, the eye, gives darkness instead*], how great is that darkness! [*for where else can light get in?*] No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money [*or light and darkness, God and selfishness, etc.*].

LESSON 3
“I AM”
John 8:24-59

In a Gospel filled with many high points, perhaps the highest are John 1:1; 20:28; and 8:58. In both 1:1 and 20:28, Jesus is called “God” in unmistakable language. In 8:58, Jesus’ own claim to being deity is likewise unambiguous, although he uses a different expression. Here Jesus says, “Before Abraham was born, I am!” This was far more than a claim to have existed before Abraham, who lived about 2000 years before Christ made this statement. This was a transparent claim to be God. The opponents of Jesus immediately perceived this as blasphemous, which it would be if it were not true. They would have stoned him on the spot if he had not slipped out of the area (vs. 59; see Leviticus 24:16).

The key to recognizing “I am!” as a claim to deity in this context is knowing the Old Testament account of God’s revelation to Moses. When we see the connection between Exodus 3:14 and John 8:58, we might even be justified in regarding 8:58 as the highest of the high points in John’s Gospel, for Jesus claims to be not just any god or supernatural being. He is identifying himself specifically as the same God who revealed himself to Moses and the other prophets of Israel.

Exodus 3

This chapter records God’s revelation of himself to Moses in the burning bush. The burning of the bush out in this desert was not the surprising thing apparently. Moses wanted to take a closer look only because the burning bush was not being consumed (vs. 3). This was an unusual fire, to say the least.

Then an even more surprising thing: a voice comes from the bush, calling Moses by name (vs. 4). The voice comes from someone who knows Moses. The voice identifies himself, first by referring to the history of his previous revelations, later by a new disclosure of a very special name. But even before the revelation of his identity, God puts Moses on notice: “Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground” (vs. 5). The place is holy for one reason only—God is there and is encountering Moses in a very direct way. Moses does right to be afraid (vs. 6).

When God says, “I am . . . the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob,” he identifies himself with a history Moses would know. This is not just for the purpose of being relevant to Moses, however. This is to give content to the revelation—the God who speaks is not just any supernatural being; he is none other than the God who spoke to the persons named; he is the God who entered into covenant relationship with them in their individual histories. He is the God of infinite eternity, but he has revealed himself in time and space to finite individuals. To call himself the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is to use for his ‘I.D. card’ these historical markers of his interventions and revelations in the lives of these people.

After identifying himself by these past interventions and revelations, God proceeds to inform Moses that he is about to intervene again, this time to deliver Israel from their oppressive slavery in Egypt and to fulfill the promises made previously to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. “I have come down . . . to bring them up,” he says in Exodus 3:8. This would be good news for Moses, who was in favor of better treatment for his fellow Israelites (remember 2:11-13). But God’s further announcement that Moses would be God’s agent for this deliverance was not welcomed by Moses.

Moses’ argument with God about this assignment makes an interesting study which we cannot pursue in this lesson (it continues on into Exodus 4). It will be to the point of this lesson on “I AM” to make only a few observations about this discussion between God and Moses.

Moses’ first response to God’s assignment is to ask, “Who am I, that I should go . . . ?” (3:11). God’s answer is interesting. He doesn’t tell Moses how well prepared Moses is, what his unique qualifications are, and so forth, even though those things might be seen as rather pertinent to God’s plan and God’s choice. Rather, God makes a more pertinent point by answering, “I will be with you” (vs. 12). The decisive issue is not who Moses is, but who is with Moses. (The parallel has been observed that God could have used another bush in the desert—“any old bush will do,” it has been said.)

Moses now changes his question from “Who am I?” to “Who are you?” (3:13). If he is going to speak for God to Israel, he wants to be ready to answer any question they might ask about the One who sent him. Remember that “God” is a generic term, a word that can refer to the one true God or to the false gods, the idols of the pagan nations. Moses is asking for a more specific identification of God, for his name.

God’s answer to this request is found in vs. 14: “I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: ‘I AM has sent me to you’” (NIV). This sounds enigmatic, and in fact it has been translated and interpreted in various ways.

Some interpretations have been philosophically profound: God is the self-existent One, the ground of all being, the One who gives existence to all things. Others have been simpler: God is just who he is and you can’t compare him with anyone else; he’s just God, that’s all. An interpretation which I like interprets “I AM WHO I AM” in future tense instead of present tense, as “I will be what I will be,” i.e., “you’ll just have to trust me to be there with you, but if you do, you’ll learn who I am by what I do.”

That means God will reveal himself as the totally adequate One in every possible situation in the future; regardless of what happens, God will be God. When the future gets here, God will still be “I AM.” This was important for Israel then enslaved in Egypt, and it is important for us. God is not just the God who has spoken to our ancestors in the past; he is God here to deliver in the present; he will be there in the uncertain future. When Jesus reveals himself as “I AM” he is giving us this great assurance, too (see Heb. 13:8—“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.”)

We cannot take the time now to explore all that is meant by God’s “I AM.” Eternity will not exhaust the meaning. The one other thing which should be pointed out before we leave Exodus 3 and go back to John 8 is that “I AM” in Hebrew is a verbal form of the name Yahweh (Jehovah in the KJV), which is usually translated in our English Old Testaments as “the LORD” (with the all-caps spelling). Notice that “the LORD” is what God calls himself in the very next verse (Exod. 3:15), and he adds, “This is my name forever, the name by which I am to be remembered from generation to generation.” This is the name which occurs in reference to God thousands of times in the OT. Again, this is God’s name as distinct from the generic description “God.”

For God to reveal his name is more precious than for him to reveal his power, for the revelation of his name means he is making himself known. He is allowing access to himself. He is entrusting himself, in a sense, to the one who is given this revelation. Indeed, it has often been said that this is God’s covenant name, the name by which he commits himself to a relationship

with Israel. The covenant people have the unique privilege (and responsibility—remember the Ten Commandments!) to use this holy name of Almighty God.

For anyone to take this name upon his lips was considered daring by the Jews of Jesus’ day. As a matter of custom and to avoid possible misuse of the holy name of God, they used other expressions to refer to God without pronouncing the divine name. (This Jewish reticence in referring directly to God is why Matthew, for example, tends to use the term “kingdom of heaven” instead of “kingdom of God” as is usual in Luke and Mark.) Nothing was more sacred to the Jews then or now than the name of God. Considering the care with which they treated the use of God’s name, you can more readily see why the response was so quick in John 8 when Jesus said, “Before Abraham was born, I am!” (vss. 58-59).

John 8

The long history of Jewish regard for the sacredness of God’s name provides the necessary background for appreciating the enormity of Jesus’ statement in John 8:58 and the outraged response. We need to see the statement also within the context of the events of the chapter itself, for this chapter is mostly about the growing intensity of conflict between Jesus and his opponents. Also in this chapter we see that some who have started to believe in Jesus end up siding with the opposition.

After Jesus stated that he is “the light of the world” (8:12), the Pharisees pounced on him for bearing witness to himself, i.e., making claims no one else could verify and generally ‘tooting his own horn.’ Jesus defends his right to make statements about himself by saying, in effect, “I know what I’m talking about” (vs. 14). Besides that, Jesus is not alone in his testimony, since the Father also gives witness to the truth of what Jesus is saying (vs. 18). The witness of the Father during Jesus’ ministry are the works of God accomplished through Jesus (compare 14:11). (The greatest vindication of Jesus’ claims about himself is the resurrection.)

With their question, “Where is your father?” (vs. 19), the discussion begins to focus on Jesus’ identity. Jesus says their failure to recognize him is evidence they don’t know his Father either (vs. 19). After their failure to understand his prediction of leaving (vss. 21-22), Jesus tells them again that they will die in their sins (out of fellowship with God) unless they “believe that I am the one I claim to be” (vs. 24; NIV). The English Standard Version translates these words as “unless you believe that I am he.” Most translations read about the same, interpreting the statement to mean that Jesus is saying we must believe what he says about his identity or we will perish in our sins.

That is certainly an acceptable translation and makes good sense in the near context, as the people ask, “Who are you?” (vs. 25). In keeping with the larger context of the chapter, however, Jesus’ words in vs. 24 can be translated as “unless you believe that I AM.” At least in a veiled way, Jesus is already making the claim which becomes transparent by vs. 58. Jesus is saying that salvation ultimately depends on the recognition of himself as the same God who spoke to Moses from the burning bush!

In John 8:28, Jesus says, “When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am the one I claim to be” (NIV). Here again, just as in vs. 24, the words could be translated as “you will know that I AM.” As he goes on to state that the Father who sent him is with him, and that everything he does is pleasing to the Father (vs. 29), Jesus is making his claim to divine status even clearer, if not yet with the same outrageous clarity and force of 8:58.

At this point in his earthly career, Jesus’ true identity was not fully known to any human, even his disciples. Only after the crucifixion (the lifting up on the cross) and the resurrection (the lifting up from the grave), do we hear such words addressed to Jesus as those of Thomas in John 20:28: “My Lord and my God!” Since even his closest disciples did not yet fully grasp Jesus’ identity, it is not surprising that his audience in John 8 did not. But Jesus points to a future event which will make his identity clear to all but the truly rebellious. His “lifting up” by death, resurrection, and ascension will make it clear that Jesus came from heaven and that he is indeed the eternal “I AM.” (On the lifting up of Jesus, see also 3:14-15; 12:32-33; and recall 6:62 from Lesson 1.)

As Jesus spoke these words about the Father being with him (vs. 29), “many put their faith in him” (vs. 30). Just as in chapter 6, however, human faith in Jesus does not mean they fully understand him yet, nor does it mean that the present level of faith will be adequate in the future. In this case, those “who had believed him” (vs. 31) are immediately exhorted by Jesus to continue in his teachings. If they continue, they will “really” be his disciples, and they “will know the truth, and the truth will set [them] free” (vs. 32).

Notice the future tense in that verse. Do they not know the truth yet, these people who already believe in Jesus? They know some truth, and they are attracted to Jesus as a teacher and healer, but they do not know the truth about Jesus’ real identity yet. Jesus is promising them that they will learn the truth if they hold fast to his teachings.

Jesus assures these believers that the truth will set them free. Are they not free yet? We might tend to think they were free if they have become Jesus’ disciples. They objected that they were free already, even before they met Jesus (vs. 33).

They appealed to their status as Abraham’s descendants for their claim to be free already. Jesus’ response (vs. 34) indicates that being a descendant of Abraham does not keep one from being “a slave to sin.” Jesus offers to free them from this slavery if they continue in his teaching and receive the liberating truth (vs. 32). Their present level of faith in Jesus is a start in the right direction, but they have not received enough truth yet. Jesus wants them to be free from slavery to sin, but the only way he can make them free is to reveal his true identity and their true need (which is also our true need). This he will do not only by words such as 8:58 but also by the cross and resurrection—8:28.

Freedom from slavery to sin depends on knowing who Jesus really is, knowing he is the eternal God who earlier revealed himself to Moses and Israel as YAHWEH, the LORD, the great “I AM.” (Recall Jesus’ words in 8:24). Freedom from slavery to sin also depends on recognizing that we are slaves to sin and need to be delivered. In John 8 these who have begun to believe in Jesus are not yet ready to recognize him as God, nor are they willing to recognize the true nature of their need for Jesus.

There is an interesting connection between recognizing one’s true need and recognizing who Jesus is. Perhaps one recognition cannot really happen without the other. The parallel with Isaiah’s confession in the midst of his great experience of God’s glory in Isaiah 6 is worth noting.

Jesus has already risked offending these people “who had believed him” (vs. 32) by telling them they were not yet free. Their answering claim to being Abraham’s descendants (which they literally were in a physical sense) misses the point, so Jesus becomes more blunt in his language (just as he did with a group of disciples in John 6). Without denying they are Abraham’s physical descendants, Jesus says the real problem is another “father” (vs. 41), their ‘spiritual father’ in the sense that they do his will and act like him. When they claim God as their

father (vs. 41), Jesus denies it (vs. 42). No, he tells them, “You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father’s desire” (vs. 44).

I keep pointing out that Jesus is talking to people “who had believed him” (vs. 31), because this is the kind of thing you might expect Jesus would say to opponents. But just as large numbers of “disciples” were willing to abandon Jesus because of difficult teachings in John 6, many who have believed Jesus ‘so far’ don’t agree with him that they are slaves to sin. Jesus says they may be physical descendants of Abraham, but they are not following Abraham’s spiritual example (vss. 37, 39-40). He tells them they are not children of God because they want to do the will of the devil—the devil is their father! He tells them they have difficulty with his teachings because they really don’t belong to God yet (vs. 47).

Jesus says they have murder and falsehood in their hearts (vss. 37, 44). Because of falsehood in their hearts, they have difficulty accepting the truth which Jesus speaks—about themselves and about himself (vs. 45). Jesus gives them the choice: believe me or believe yourselves. They cannot remain in a state of partial belief. Is it possible for us to be caught in a similar ‘partial belief’ in Jesus—not willing to accept everything he says about himself and (especially) about us? What if Jesus told you that you had murder in your heart? (See Matthew 5:21-22!) Is it possible that Jesus is saying anything like this to us and we just don’t hear it?

Look how Jesus talks (in John 8) to people who have started to have faith in him! He seems determined to put them in a position to make a more radical commitment or else to abort their discipleship. Yes, they believe ‘so far.’ But will they believe in Jesus when they don’t like what he says about them? Jesus seems to give those “who had believed him” an opportunity to stop believing in him or else to move on to a greater level of belief. What will they choose? What will I choose when he does the same to me? What will you choose? Just like them, we will not be given the leisure to remain forever in superficial or partial belief. Just as Jesus did for them, he will give us opportunities to receive more of the liberating truth—truth about himself and truth about us. Will we receive it?

Some in the crowd that day concluded that the opinion already held by some of their fellow Jews must be right—Jesus was a “Samaritan” (a despicable heretic) and “demon-possessed” (vs. 48). His teaching was just too bizarre! Does Jesus back off, compromise to change their opinion of himself? Not in the slightest! Rather, he proceeds to affirm that the person who keeps his word “will never see death” (vs. 51; compare the earlier promise to those who would continue in his word—vss. 31-32). This is absolutely the last straw for some: “Now we know that you are demon-possessed! . . . Are you greater than our father Abraham? He died, and so did the prophets. Who do you think you are?” (vs. 52-53).

Notice how the debate keeps revolving around who Jesus is. If Jesus is an ordinary mortal, he has no right to offer eternal life. But if he is I AM, he is the source of all life and can offer it to whosoever believes in him (John 3:16).

Jesus either is or he isn’t who he claims to be. Jesus acknowledges that some verification is required before his claim should be believed. That is what he refers to in vs. 54—“If I glorify myself [just make claims for myself], my glory means nothing. My Father . . . is the one who glorifies me [by the works of Jesus but especially by the resurrection]. (Recall 8:28; also 7:39; 17:1, 5.)

As for Abraham—whom they proudly claimed as father, and the reason they were not slaves and did not need to be set free—he was a great person, Jesus agreed. Abraham, he said, “rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad” (vs. 56). But “before

Abraham was born, I am!” (vs. 58). There finally are those two words, “I am,” with the veil of ambiguity (in vss. 24 and 28) pulled away. This is the clearest revelation of who Jesus is or else the most offensive blasphemy if he is wrong! It comes at the climax of this tense discussion about Jesus’ identity and the debate about the needs of those “who had believed” thus far.

Truly this is an uncompromised revelation of Jesus’ identity. If he falsely claims to be “I AM,” he should not be trusted for his moral or religious teachings in any way. Such a claim, if false, is the worst blasphemy, and Jesus should either be ignored or held in contempt by all sincere worshipers of God. On the other hand, if Jesus rightly claims to be “I AM,” all sincere worshipers of God should worship him. If Jesus rightly claims to be “I AM,” eventually all will respond as the mob did (involuntarily) in John 18:6—when Jesus said “I am,” they “fell to the ground” (see also Phil. 2:10). But right now, while it can still mean salvation, all sincere worshipers of God should receive and respond to all the truth Jesus offers us—the truth about himself and the truth about our need for him.

LESSON 4
“I AM THE DOOR” and “I AM THE GOOD SHEPHERD”
John 10:1-30

This lesson from John 10 focuses on Jesus’ statement, “I am the good shepherd,” and on another figure of speech which he uses about himself: “I am the door.” The two expressions are related ways of speaking of the same realities: Jesus is the true provider of the safety and sustenance needed by “the sheep.” The “sheep” obviously stand for Jesus’ disciples, but the main focus is really on the expressions which are applied to Jesus. The “good shepherd” and “the door” are used in vivid contrast to Jesus’ opponents, whose effect on “the flock” is destructive.

The preceding context for Jesus’ teaching in John 10 is helpful to observe. Recall from Lesson 2 (“I am the light”) the contrasts found in John 9: Those who claim to see are becoming more blind because of their refusal to believe in Jesus; the man born blind, on the other hand, illustrates how Jesus meets acknowledged needs. Refusal to acknowledge our need for Jesus is a kind of blindness. In this week’s chapter, 10, we will find that refusal is a kind of deafness. Those who are not willing to be led by Jesus, not willing to be his “sheep,” cannot hear his voice.

John 10:1-6

The words which open chapter 10 might be seen as a continuation of the end of chapter 9. Those who reject the light Jesus brings are trying to live on their own terms, rather than those prescribed by Jesus. They are like the thieves described in 10:1, trying to go in by some way other than the prescribed way, the way provided by the owner of the “sheep.” Especially since Jesus is talking to those who felt themselves to be the “spiritual shepherds” of Israel, he is directly challenging their legitimacy as leaders. How can they lead God’s people when they refuse to follow God?

Jesus does not directly say he is the true shepherd or the only door in vss. 1-5. If you took these words out of their context, they would be a harmless observation about a common sight in Palestine. Sheep follow their shepherd, whose voice they recognize. The sheep know the shepherd and the shepherd knows the sheep—each one by name. The sheep do not recognize the thief or robber who climbs over the wall or breaks into the sheep fold. No one would have disputed the truth of what Jesus said in these first five verses, since everyone would know he was describing commonplace truth. When we read in vs. 6 that Jesus’ listeners did not understand him, it means they did not get the point as it applied to them and to himself.

10:7-10

“I am the gate.”

Since they did not understand the figure of speech, Jesus makes his point more transparent in vss. 7 and 9: “I am the gate.” By this statement Jesus claims to be the exclusive way to salvation and sustenance (vs. 9). He alone provides what we (the sheep) need, and he provides it “to the full” (NIV; “more abundantly,” KJV). In contrast to Jesus’ provision for the sheep, those who oppose Jesus seek to prey on the sheep. They are thieves and robbers, whose purpose is “to steal and kill and destroy.”

“All who ever came before me” (vs. 8) is how Jesus refers to those who had made false claims about themselves, who had falsely represented themselves as having the right (or the right answers) to be the shepherds of God’s people. Jesus is not saying that no one had ever before legitimately led God’s people. Obviously Moses and the other prophets and righteous kings like David and Josiah had been faithful ‘shepherds’ of Israel. But they were faithful leaders precisely

because (and only to the extent that) they obediently followed God’s leading. In this context of John 10, Jesus is in dispute with the presumed leaders of Israel who refuse to follow the direction God is giving them now—Jesus himself.

There had been false ‘shepherds’ in the past, false prophets and faithless kings (see the denunciations of them in Jere. 22-23 and Ezek. 34, along with God’s promise to remedy the situation by his intervention). There were false ‘shepherds’ in Jesus’ day—false because their interest in being leaders was selfish and not true concern for the wellbeing of the flock, false because they desired the praise of men more than the glory of God (see John 5:41-44). Jesus warned us that false prophets and false Messiahs would come after him just like they had come before him (Matt. 24).

10:11-18

“I am the good shepherd.”

Jesus has already contrasted himself with the false leaders (the thieves and robbers) by claiming to be the gate through which all legitimate spiritual leaders must come. Now he changes the figure and says, “I am the good shepherd.”

How can Jesus be both the shepherd and the gate through which the shepherd goes? Some commentators have suggested that the shepherd can be “the door” by lying down in the breach of the stone wall. To get into or out of the enclosure the sheep or any predator would have to go over the shepherd, who was thus serving as “the door.”

This may be what Jesus had in mind, since he talks about laying down his life (although he says he does that as the shepherd; he does not say, “As the door, I lay down my life.”) On the other hand, all of this may be beside the point entirely. If we simply appreciate figurative language for what it is, we will not insist that each metaphor fit together neatly with all related metaphors. Jesus makes one point by saying he is the door, another point by saying he is the shepherd. Both points are true, and two different metaphors express the truth about Jesus without expressing the same exact truth about Jesus. (For example, the Holy Spirit is spoken of as fire and as water (compare Matt. 3:11 and John 7:38-39). Both are useful figures of speech.)

By calling himself the door or gate for the sheep, Jesus claims he is the only legitimate access into the “flock.” By calling himself the good shepherd, Jesus claims to be the true leader of the “flock.” Jesus is able to say even more with this figure of speech than with the “door” imagery. As the “good shepherd” Jesus has qualities which stand out in contrast to “hired hands” and in contrast to “wolves,” in addition to the contrast already made with the “thieves and robbers.” In some important ways, however, what Jesus has to say about himself goes beyond the capacity of the shepherding metaphor.

What effect do thieves and robbers have? What about wolves? Thieves, robbers, and wolves take from the flock and destroy individual sheep. Why do they do it? For their own selfish interests.

Well, what about a hired hand? He’s not destroying the flock, or at least he does not mean to do so. His fault is not his badness but his inadequate goodness. He does not destroy the flock, but neither does he stop it from being destroyed. Why? Self interest, the same motive at work in the thieves, robbers, and wolves! If the hired hand’s personal benefit is at stake, the flock can be sacrificed (vss. 12-13).

In contrast to the hired hand, Jesus repeatedly affirms that he is “the good shepherd” who “lays down his life for the sheep” (vss. 11, 15, 17, 18). Since we know Jesus speaks here of his

death on the cross, we can see how Jesus’ comparison of himself with a good and faithful shepherd really goes beyond what the best of literal shepherds would do.

A shepherd of literal sheep might be willing to endure hardships and face predators such as wolves for the sake of his sheep, but would he really give his life for them? And if he were to be so incredibly heroic, what would happen to the sheep, left without a shepherd? For a literal shepherd to give his life for literal sheep would be poor judgment but also counterproductive, since the surviving sheep would be worse off than if the shepherd had sacrificed one sheep instead of himself to save the flock.

Of course the “sheep” of which Jesus speaks are not mere animals but human beings. Human beings might be considered worthy of saving by sacrificing oneself, whereas literal sheep would not be. But wouldn’t it still be the case that a heroic, dead “shepherd” is of less value (in the future, anyway) than a living but not quite so heroic leader?

The importance of Jesus’ resurrection is immediately seen. If Jesus, in his selfless concern for his sheep, lays down his life for them, will they be left without a shepherd? No, because Jesus has “authority to lay it [life] down and authority to take it up again” (vs. 18). The comparison with the best of literal shepherds is immeasurably exceeded, for no mortal shepherd has the power to be this kind of shepherd. This “good shepherd” can give his life for the sake of his “sheep” without abandoning them to future threats. Having given his life, he is still there to shepherd. Both by his willingness to give his life and by his power to keep on living, Jesus is better than the best shepherds. (This illustrates the limitations of illustrations.)

Verse 18 is an important part of a consistent theme in the Gospel of John, which presents the death of Jesus not as a human tragedy but as a divine strategy. Jesus is not the helpless victim of human opposition but the deliberate and purposeful agent of the Father’s will. Even when the mob comes to arrest Jesus, it is made clear that he goes willingly (see 18:4-11).

There are other points in this section (10:11-18) which are worth noting. Among them is the repeated emphasis on Jesus’ knowledge of his sheep and their recognition of his voice. Mentioned in vss. 3 and 4, this is brought up again in vss. 14-15, this time in relation to Jesus’ intimate knowledge of God the Father. (See also vs. 27 below.)

Jesus’ words about “other sheep that are not of this sheep pen” (vs. 16) refer to the numerical growth of his disciples, but especially the addition of Gentile believers as we read about in the Book of Acts.

10:19-30

Responses and Reassurance

As noted in previous lessons, there is a distinct division among Jesus’ hearers. Some think he must be crazy, even demonized (vs. 19); others try to make sense of Jesus’ words because they are profoundly impressed by his deeds (vs. 21).

The words said to Jesus in vs. 24 may seem like an open invitation, but Jesus, knowing human motives (recall 2:24-25; 7:3-6), regards the words as an expression of unbelief. Why should he tell them anything more about who he is when they haven’t believed what he has said and done already (vs. 25)? Jesus knows that they are afflicted with an impediment to belief—they have not trusted themselves to Jesus to become his “sheep” (vs. 26). Unless and until they become his sheep, they will not believe him, whatever he says.

This could raise a serious theological question which we cannot deal with thoroughly in this lesson: If you have to be one of the “sheep” to recognize Jesus’ voice, how do you get to be one of the sheep? The short form of the answer is that you have to be willing (or willing to become willing) to become a disciple even before you are sure that you will be a disciple. In other words, you at least have to have an open mind toward the truth about Jesus. Jesus’ opponents had already made up their minds not to believe in Jesus. More talk, more miracles might persuade them to reconsider, but the effect might be just the opposite (as indeed it was for many of them in chapter 11). Whether one sees many miracles or none, whether one hears many words or only a few, the issue is really the same: Is there a willingness to recognize and respond to the truth about God? (See John 7:17.)

To those who are willing to listen to Jesus, to receive the truth and be changed by the truth (remember 8:31-32), Jesus gives the wonderful assurance of being personally known by him and being permanently kept by him unto eternal life (vss. 27-28). The good shepherd who has the authority to lay his life down and take it up again (vs. 18) has the authority and power to give eternal life to all who are willing to receive it from his hand. Those who are not willing to receive the truth from Jesus’ lips will not be able to receive the life he gives.

Jesus’ ability to keep safe the sheep who have trusted themselves to his care is dependent on the truth about who he says he is. He says he is the good shepherd, but he cannot be as good as he claims to be unless he is who he claims to be as eternal, divine Son of God. Unless he has the authority of God Almighty he cannot offer the kind of security he speaks of in vs. 28. If he indeed has that authority, then it is just as impossible to be taken away from Jesus (against his will and against ours) as it would be to defeat Almighty God. The assurance Jesus gives to his disciples in vs. 29 is profound—those who trust Jesus find him utterly trustworthy. Nothing and no one is stronger than the good shepherd who watches over us.

By issuing such a bold claim for his authority to give eternal life and overcome all enemies, Jesus has already claimed divine prerogatives and power (not for the first time in this gospel!). With a terse sentence in vs. 30, this claim is made in astonishing clarity: “I and the Father are one.”

Just as they had in 8:58-59, in response to another bold claim by Jesus, the crowd picks up stones to execute Jesus for the apparent blasphemy (vs. 31). The ensuing discussion is complicated by issues of interpreting both Jesus’ words and the Psalm from which he quotes. Therefore, for the purposes of this lesson, we will stop with vs. 30, but not without making at least some comment on what Jesus meant by saying he is one with the Father.

First of all, Jesus is not saying he is the Father. He does not say, “I am the Father,” but “I and the Father are (plural verb) one.” Furthermore, to get a bit more technical, the Greek form that is used here for “one” is neuter in gender rather than a masculine form. If Jesus had been saying he was the same person as the Father, the masculine form of “one” would have been used. In other words, Jesus and the Father are one “it,” not one “he” (in a manner of speaking). What does Jesus mean?

Jesus’ unity with the Father means, at the very least, that Jesus is one with the Father in purpose. The Gospel of John bears repeated witness to this. But there is more to the unity than agreement. In this context, Jesus claims to be one with the Father in power. What God can do, Jesus can do (give life). What you cannot do to God, you cannot do to Jesus (defeat him).

Jesus’ claim to be “one” with the Father was not misunderstood by those who started to stone him. He was in fact claiming divine status. He was claiming more than being completely

obedient to the will of the Father; he was claiming divine existence along with the Father. Later in the development of the church’s theology, we would use terms like “one in essence” to describe the indescribable unity of the Incarnate Word with God the Father.

Jesus is distinct from the Father in the sense that Jesus was loved, sent, and glorified by the Father. Also Jesus prayed to the Father and was not talking to himself when he prayed! But Jesus is also one with the Father; thus he is to be worshiped and glorified as God himself. In terms of the imagery on which we have focused in this lesson, this means that Jesus the Good Shepherd is the same shepherd celebrated by David in Psalm 23: “The LORD [Yahweh] is my shepherd” If we go back and read that famous passage after a thorough study of John 10, many connections could be easily observed, which we will not take the space to do here.

Is the Shepherd a Threat as Well as a Comfort?

For Christians, Jesus’ self-description as the “good shepherd” may be the most comforting image of any we study in this series. One reason for that is Psalm 23, the most popular of all psalms, which inevitably is connected in our thinking with John 10. Another reason, perhaps, is the popular depiction of Jesus as a shepherd in paintings and pictures in books, which many of us have as part of our religious memory from our earliest years. The picture of Jesus as the kind, strong, and protective shepherd is an attractive and comforting image indeed. I hope this lesson affirms that comforting image. We have found, however, that Jesus’ role as the “good shepherd” and as “the door” has its challenging aspect as well as its comforting ones. The challenging aspect is found especially in Jesus’ claim to be the shepherd and the door.

The claim to being unique and absolutely necessary for the lives of others was offensive in Jesus’ day, and it is certainly offensive in our day. Ours is a very tolerant culture, willing to let you call upon God however you want to (“whatever works for you”). The main point of intolerance in our society is directed toward anything or anyone perceived as threatening or questioning the relativistic mindset. If I say “Jesus is my shepherd,” that’s okay. If I say, “Jesus must be your shepherd, or you will be lost,” I have trespassed one of the few remaining taboos in our country. I am intolerant and narrow-minded.

If I say “Jesus is my shepherd,” my secular neighbor may even be glad for me, in the same way I might be happy to observe someone else’s family having genuine fun together. I don’t want to be part of the family, but it’s nice to see a family having fun. It affirms the goodness of life, etc. But that’s their family, not mine. Their family is for them, not for me. In the same way, my neighbor might be sincerely glad that religion is a positive value for me, that “it works” for me. But this same neighbor might be truly offended by the notion that he needs a shepherd—Jesus or anyone else!

Does Jesus say, “I’d like to be your shepherd, if you think you need one”? But lest we use such a question only to show the foolishness of our cultured neighbors who have no convictions except for believing that convictions are dangerous, let us direct other questions toward ourselves, those who claim to be the sheep of the good shepherd: Do we hear his voice? Do we follow? Do we rest in the assurance that his power is greater than anything which might threaten to destroy us? Do we, by attitude, word, and deed, demonstrate our trust in him? Or do we act as though the wolves are stronger than the shepherd? And finally, would our cultured, convictionless neighbors be more likely to be convinced that Jesus really is the good shepherd by a good argument or by a good example of a confident sheep?

Other relevant Scripture passages

Besides the passages discussed in this lesson, here are some of the many other places in which God is said to be the shepherd, or in which his people are compared to sheep. Some of these, such as Micah 5 and Ezekiel 34 are significant messianic prophecies. (I'm not suggesting you use these in the lesson, but I thought you might be interested.)

Psalm 80:1

Psalm 95:6-7

Psalm 100:3

Isaiah 40:11

Isaiah 53:6-7

Jeremiah 31:10

Ezekiel 34

Ezekiel 37:24

Micah 5:2-5a

Zechariah 13:7/Matthew 26:31

Matthew 9:36

Matthew 18:12-14/Luke 15:3-7

John 21:15-17

Hebrews 13:20

1 Peter 2:25

1 Peter 5:4

LESSON 5
“I AM THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE”
John 11

Previous lessons in this series have dealt with Jesus as the giver of life. He is the bread from heaven, giving his flesh for the life of the world (ch. 6); he is the light of life (ch. 8); he is the “I AM,” the source of life for all life; he is the good shepherd who gives eternal life to those follow him (ch. 10). Especially in ch. 6 Jesus repeatedly promised to raise up “on the last day” those who received the gift of life through his flesh and blood. In another chapter of John which we do not deal with in this series (ch. 5), Jesus offers life *now* and in the *future* (5:24-29). Later in this series, we will look at Jesus' statement that he is the way, the truth, and the life. Thus the topic of this week's lesson overlaps considerably with material from the other lessons.

Despite the considerable overlap, we need not apologize for devoting an entire lesson to this “I am” saying. Since death is the “last enemy” for all human beings, Jesus' identity as the resurrection and the life is of supreme importance. The fact that he is the *resurrection* and the life means he gives life now and will continue to give life even after our physical deaths.

Context for John 11

Recall that, toward the end of chapter 10, Jesus made a claim for himself which seemed blasphemous to some—“I and the Father are one.” He also said he would give his disciples “eternal life, and they shall never perish” (10:28). Here in chapter 11, one of those disciples—one of his best friends—dies. Jesus' response to this situation will prove the truthfulness of the claims he made in chapter 10.

As John tells the story of Jesus' public ministry, the raising of Lazarus is the climactic miracle of all the signs he performed. The people's responses are divided along the same lines as previously, but the opposition becomes more convinced of the need to arrange Jesus' death (vss. 45-53; see also 12:10-11). Ironically, the raising of Lazarus from the dead is, in a manner of speaking, the triggering event which leads to Jesus' own death and resurrection.

We know about Mary and Martha from another gospel, Luke 10:38-42, but that passage makes no mention of Lazarus. Mary, Martha, and Lazarus are found again in John 12:1-11.

John 11:1-16

Jesus' deliberate delay

From the accounts in Luke and John, we know that Jesus regarded this family as special friends. This is reflected in the message the sisters sent to Jesus: “the one you love is sick” (vs. 3). Since they were special friends, we can assume they expected Jesus to come as soon as possible. The fact that they sent a message indicates their concern that the illness was serious.

Jesus' initial response to the message (vs. 4) is to say that Lazarus' sickness “will not end in death.” Rather, the purpose is that “God's Son may be glorified through it.” Based on everything Jesus' disciples had seen thus far, surely they would have understood this to mean that Jesus was going to heal his friend. Verse 5 would strengthen that expectation. But then vs. 6 comes with a jolting effect: “*Yet* when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days.” (NIV; actually the wording in Greek is even more disconcerting, as reflected in the RSV: “*So* when he heard . . . he stayed two days longer.” Compare the NASB: “When therefore he heard . . .”) After reading “Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus” (vs. 5),

I would have expected to read, “So Jesus left right away,” not “So Jesus stayed two more days before going.”

Jesus’ delay is clearly deliberate but also clearly based on his love for Lazarus and his sisters. How can the delay be consistent with the love? Only if the delay is for the purpose of a greater expression of his love. Only if the delay makes possible something which would not be possible otherwise. Only if Jesus knows something about the end of the story which will not be apparent while the family and friends are mourning the death of Lazarus.

When at last Jesus announces that it is time to go back to Judea, Lazarus’ home, the disciples express doubts about the wisdom of doing so (vs. 8), since Jesus’ life had recently been threatened there (10:31). Jesus reminds them (and us) that the threats of the enemy are not as important as walking in the light of God’s will (11:9-10).

Jesus announces that he intends to wake Lazarus from ‘sleep’ (vs. 11). The disciples take him quite literally and interpret ‘sleep’ as a good sign (vs. 12), until Jesus changes the wording to remove the ambiguity: “Lazarus is dead” (vs. 14).

Jesus goes on to say he is glad they weren’t there at the time Lazarus died, “so that you may believe” (vs. 14). How the disciples could have understood this at the time I do not know. From our perspective after the event, this statement makes perfectly good sense. Jesus is indicating why he had delayed the trip. He wanted to arrive well after Lazarus’ death, not before or even just after (as he did in a couple of other cases in which he raised someone from the dead; see Luke 7:11-15 and 8:49-56).

By the time Jesus arrives at Lazarus’ tomb, the body will have been “in the tomb for four days” (vs. 17). Given the time consumed in sending the message to Jesus, the two days in delay before starting, and the time required to get there, perhaps Jesus would not have arrived before Lazarus’ death even if he had left immediately upon hearing of his sickness. At any rate, Jesus’ delay in coming allows time for Lazarus to be ‘good and dead’ (if you’ll pardon the expression).

The number of days Lazarus had been dead takes on added significance in light of a current folk belief (i.e., not based on Scripture) that a human soul remained close by after death until the body actually began to decay, which would certainly be evident after four days. The signs of decay would include the odor to which Martha refers in vs. 39.

The point for our purposes is that there would be absolutely no question that Lazarus was dead, whereas the widow’s son at Nain and Jairus’ daughter (Luke 7 and 8 respectively) might have been explained as recovering from unconsciousness rather than from death. With not just a motionless body but a decaying body, Lazarus’ death would be indisputable by the most skeptical opponents of Jesus. Therefore, Jesus’ delay in responding to Lazarus’ sickness is a key element in setting the stage for the greatest miracle in his earthly ministry.

Although the text does not say so, Jesus’ disciples might have wondered about the delay in going to see Lazarus except for what Jesus had said: “This sickness will not end in death” (vs. 4). Surely they did become puzzled over the disclosure that “Lazarus is dead” (vs. 14). They might even have become alarmed over Jesus’ words: “Let us go to him” (vs. 15)! Perhaps Thomas expresses the fear others felt: “Let us also go, that we may die with him” (vs. 16).

Have you ever been puzzled by what seemed like needless delay on the part of God? Perhaps you have even felt confusion and dismay over what seemed to be wasteful delay or cruel inactivity on God’s part. The old gospel song says, “We will understand it better by and by.” Sometimes “by and by” is by the end of the chapter; sometimes it is longer.

Even when we know the end of the story—a glorious resurrection miracle—we might be troubled that Jesus allowed his dear friends to suffer grief which he could have spared them.

While we know Jesus’ compassion is strong, we need to remember that he was first of all devoted to the Father’s will (including the timing of everything) and to the Father’s glory (vs. 4). For the Father’s glory, there is sometimes a cost of suffering, a cost which Jesus was willing to bear and which sometimes even his dearest friends have to bear.

Despite the natural and healthy human instinct to avoid pain, the biblical perspective is that suffering is sometimes a mysterious privilege, redeemed by the eventual unfolding of God’s plan. (See John 9:3; 21:19; Acts 5:41; Phil. 1:29; Col. 1:24; 1 Pet. 1:6-7; 3:14, 17; 4:12-19.) In a surprising way, Jesus allowed his good friends, Lazarus, Mary, and Martha, the painful privilege of playing key roles in the greatest miracle of his earthly ministry. We need to be realistic about this: the pain they suffered was real, but so was the glory which followed. The pain was real but it had an end; the glory is forever.

John 11:17-27

I am the resurrection and the life.

A combination of factors heightens the drama of the raising of Lazarus. One factor is the length of time Lazarus was buried (vs. 17). Another is the proximity to Jerusalem (vss. 18-19), which means the raising of Lazarus presents an inescapable dilemma to the opponents of Jesus (see vs. 48 and 12:9-11). Still a third factor is the close personal friendship of Jesus with Lazarus and his grief-stricken sisters.

When Martha and Mary speak to Jesus, you can hear the pain and disappointment in the words both of them speak to him: “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died” (vss. 21 and 32). Yet you can also hear the pain mingled with continuing trust in Martha’s words: “But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask” (vs. 22).

Was Martha hinting at the possibility of raising Lazarus even now? Perhaps, but her protest in vs. 39 seems to indicate she was *not* considering such a possibility. More likely, her words in vs. 22 are meant to affirm continuing belief in Jesus’ ministry; it’s just too bad Jesus wasn’t there to minister in time. He could have helped if he had been there, but the opportunity has passed. What Martha is about to learn is that the one who is the resurrection and the life does not run out of opportunities. Since he is the source of life itself, he is the source of opportunities! (This is not to say that *we* don’t sometimes miss opportunities. We do, but when we serve the Lord who is the resurrection and the life, even missed opportunities are not the end of the story. The end of the story is always the glory of God.) God may act too late for our comfort, but never too late for his glory (and our eventual, eternal joy).

Martha expected a resurrection for Lazarus eventually (vs. 24; the reference to the “last day” is like John 6:39). She affirmed this belief which was shared by the Pharisees and most of the common people of the day (remember it was the Sadducees who denied the resurrection altogether—Matt. 22:23; Acts 23:8). There was nothing wrong with Martha’s belief in the resurrection in the future; in fact it probably provided some comfort to her and Mary at the time. But Jesus wanted to re-focus her belief in the resurrection—from belief in a future event to trust in a present Savior. That is why he said to her, “I *am* the resurrection and the life” (vs. 25).

Whether Lazarus would be raised sooner (today) or later (the last day) is not the most important point. The most important thing to know is that Jesus is the one who will do the raising. Martha’s belief in the eventual event can be strengthened by being focused on a present Savior whose power and goodness she already has experienced.

The biblical hope for resurrection/eternal life is consistently presented in this way. We do not expect to live forever because of something inherent in *human nature*—many religious

and even non-religious people believe that. The distinctively biblical understanding of hope for eternal life is based on *the nature and will of God* already revealed in his dealings with us in this life. (See Psalms 16; 17; 73:25-26; also Rom. 8:16-17, 23; and 2 Cor. 5:4-5.) According to the Bible, those who know they are going to live forever with God are those who know God now. (See John 17:3.)

So Jesus says 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. Do you believe this?” (John 11:25-26). The question is the invitation to re-focus belief for the future on the Lord who stands before her. Martha says ‘yes’ to the invitation and confesses that Jesus is “the Christ, the Son of God” (vs. 27). Her confession is remarkable for how much it sounds like Peter’s words in Matthew 16:16. Perhaps more impressive is that Martha says this while still in grief over her brother’s death, before Jesus raised him back to life.

Observe carefully Jesus’ announcement about himself in vss. 25-26. “I am the resurrection” correlates with “he who believes in me will live, even though he dies.” “I am . . . the life” correlates with “whoever lives and believes in me will never die.”

I am the resurrection . . . he who believes in me will live, even if he dies.

I am the life he who believes in me will never die.

For the faithful who have died, Jesus is the assurance of resurrection. For the faithful who have not yet died, the promise is that they “will never die.” That does not mean we won’t die physically; it means that physical death will not separate us from Jesus, the giver of life.

Our relationship with Jesus gives us life now and forever, life which cannot be taken away and which cannot, finally, be diminished by the loss of the physical body. Believers still die physically, and will do so until the Second Coming and the bodily resurrection. But since the First Coming of Jesus we have had the assurance that physical death cannot separate us from the source of all life—spiritual and physical. (See also Rom. 8:38-39—“neither death nor life . . . will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Also see Phil. 1:21-23.)

John 11:28-37

Jesus wept.

Martha left Jesus to call Mary to the place outside the village where the previous conversation had been going on. Mary’s movements get the attention of the other mourners, who follow her, expecting to join her grieving (vss. 28-31). These people will become the audience for an unexpected and unprecedented miracle. They were expecting mourning and got a miracle!

Mary’s first words to Jesus are identical to those of Martha (vss. 32, 21). But the response of Jesus is different. Rather than a discussion of the resurrection, we find weeping—by Mary, the other Jews following her, and then by Jesus himself (vss. 33-35). The language of vs. 33 is strong: “he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled.” One of the Greek terms used here is often translated as “became indignant” or “got angry” (the word is used again in vs. 38). Jesus is obviously not angry with Lazarus for dying, nor with the mourners for weeping, since Jesus weeps, too. Jesus’ anger is anger at death, for he is the resurrection and the life, and death is the

last enemy (1 Cor. 15:26). Death is contrary to his nature. He encounters it as opposition, an enemy which stirs him to the depths (“in spirit”).

Jesus knew he would defeat death—temporarily by raising Lazarus, permanently by his own resurrection, comprehensively by raising all believers “on the last day.” Although Jesus knew all this, he did not laugh at death. “Jesus wept.” The shortest verse in the Bible (vs. 35) is one of the most profound. Surely this little verse is weighty reassurance that Jesus feels what we feel. Although he is greater than our problems, he is not above them in the sense of being unable to share the trouble with us (Heb. 2:14-18; 4:15). Jesus is not waiting for us at the end of the difficult journey; he travels with us. He knows already the glorious end of the story, but he is fully involved in the painful middle.

The weeping of Jesus is noticed by those present: “See how he loved him!” (vs. 36) Their understanding of Jesus’ tears is superficial, but accurate to a point. Jesus did love Lazarus, and his tears reflect that love. But Jesus is about to reveal the power of his love, which goes beyond the power to evoke his tears. Jesus’ love can bring tears to his eyes, but Jesus’ love can also bring a dead man out of the tomb. That is the power which assures us of eternal life, now and forever. (John 3:16—“For God so loved . . . have everlasting life.”) These people know about Jesus’ power to open blind eyes (vs. 37); they are about to see his power to open the grave and let the prisoner of death go free!

John 11:38-44

Lazarus, come out!

Jesus was “deeply moved” again (vs. 38; as in vs. 33), perhaps because of the question asked in vs. 37, or perhaps because he was now at the tomb of Lazarus.

Martha, always the practical one (Luke 10:40), objected to Jesus’ command to remove the stone from the mouth of the cave. She must not have been expecting a resurrection, for she clearly expected a stench (vs. 39). Jesus asked, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” (vs. 40) By this question he apparently refers to his earlier statement that Lazarus would rise again (vs. 23). The expression “the glory of God” is difficult to define in a satisfactory and simple way, but in this context it refers to the fact that only God can give life, new life even to the dead, even the dead which should be stinking by now!

That is just one way to describe ‘the glory of God,’ by referring to the event or deed which gives him glory. Such a work of power and love causes people to have a ‘good opinion’ about God. A ‘good opinion’ is one way to define glory, and certainly the raising of Lazarus would give people a good opinion about God and about God’s power at work in Jesus. (‘Good opinion’ sounds like an understatement, but it has the advantage of association with the root idea of the Greek word for ‘glory,’ which is *doxa*, from which we get ‘doxology.’) When Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead, God is glorified—by the deed and by those who witness it.

Jesus’ prayer in vss. 41-42 is interesting, for it is evidently spoken aloud only for the benefit of the human audience. Notice that Jesus says to the Father, “I thank you that you *have heard* me.” Jesus knows what is about to happen because he has already prayed about it, but he prays aloud now so that the witnesses will know the miracle is an answer to prayer and that Jesus has indeed been sent by the Father. Jesus is not trying to get glory for himself by this deed; he wants to glorify the Father. Later he will ask the Father to glorify him, just as he has glorified the Father (17:1, 4, 5).

Jesus’ next words are spoken directly to the dead man, “Lazarus, come out!” (vs. 43). Someone has said that Jesus had to call him by name or everyone else buried there would have

come out! Whether that is the case I don't know, but it is true that Jesus spoke in the same direct way on the other occasions when he raised the dead, although he did not use the persons' names (Luke 7:14; 8:54). This raising of Lazarus by name is a foretaste of the fulfillment of John 5:28-29.

We are not told how Lazarus managed to get out of the tomb still wrapped in the grave clothes, which others had to remove from him (vs. 44). That's a good question, perhaps, but the really hard part was getting back from the dead, not getting out of the tomb! Perhaps the infusion of power which gave him new life stood him up on his feet? Wouldn't it be interesting to ask Lazarus what he remembers of the experience?

We should remember we are not talking about a 'near-death' experience, where someone's spirit or soul floats above his body, goes down a tunnel of light, encounters a glowing and all-wise presence and then returns to the mortal body to tell about the experience. In recent years many have reported such experiences, and they are interesting, but they are not to be compared with the length of time Lazarus was dead. Lazarus' spirit returned to his mortal body after four days of being dead, after the body had already begun to decay.

While Lazarus' experience is not really to be compared to someone who has been 'clinically dead' for a matter of moments or even hours, neither is his resurrection to be compared with Jesus' resurrection, not in the strictest sense. Both resurrections are by the power of Almighty God, but Jesus' resurrection is the beginning of a new kind of existence for humanity. Lazarus' resurrection was a return to the kind of life he had lived before, in a mortal body which would eventually die. All that we are told about Jesus' resurrection body indicates that it is very different in kind, especially in the fact that it can never again be subject to death. See Revelation 1:18—"I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades."

John 11:45-53

Responses and resolve

Our familiarity with this biblical scene blunts our reaction to it. But try to imagine being at a cemetery (not at a funeral but later). Imagine seeing and hearing someone stand over the grave and call out the name of the person buried there, and then seeing the person actually emerge from the grave, alive again—even after corruption had begun. What would be your reaction to the person exercising such power, even to call the dead back to life?

Some who saw Lazarus raised responded by placing their faith in Jesus (vs. 45). As hard as it may be to understand, the reaction of other witnesses (and those to whom they reported) was to resolve that the giver of life must die! The words of Caiaphas are unwittingly prophetic: the one must die so that many will not (vs. 50). Later we are told the plot to take Jesus' life (vs. 53) was expanded to include Lazarus (12:10-11), because Lazarus, by his very life, was just too great a testimony for Jesus.

Except for being a tragic example of human blindness, the plotting of Jesus' enemies would be funny: They are going to kill the one who says he is the resurrection and who proves it by raising people from the dead. Also they are going to kill the proof (Lazarus). Did it not occur to them that if Jesus can raise the dead once, he might do it twice? By killing Lazarus or Jesus himself, would not his enemies be giving him another opportunity to prove the truth of his claims? If you were trying to discredit Jesus, is this the right strategy? Can you beat him with death, when death seems to provide him with his best opportunities to show who he is? Is it ever possible, after all, to defeat someone who can defeat death?

LESSON 6
“I AM THE WAY, THE TRUTH, AND THE LIFE”
John 14:6

In studying the previous “I am” sayings in the Gospel of John, we have often noted controversy and division of opinion in the context. From the first lesson in this series (“I am the bread”), we have found some people accepting and some rejecting what Jesus says about himself. Jesus simply does not offer us the comfortable alternative of being neutral about him. The “I am” sayings put us in the position of having either to embrace Jesus as the unique source of life, as eternal deity, or else to regard him as a blasphemous impostor. He does not leave us the space to say he is a great (but only human) teacher, or to regard him as a good moral example but not as divine Lord. The “I am” sayings are uncompromising. This uncompromising quality is especially evident in this week’s saying: “I am the way, the truth, and the life.”

Jesus does not claim to be a way but the way. He is the truth, not just one possible interpretation. He is the life; outside of him, death rules. Since we have dealt with Jesus as “the life” in lesson five, we will focus on “the way and the truth” for this lesson.

Context for John 14:6

Compared with earlier “I am” sayings, this one has a significantly different context. Previous “I am” sayings were spoken in public. Here Jesus speaks in the company of his disciples alone, just hours before his arrest, trial, and crucifixion.

John 14:6 is part of the extended teaching known as the “Upper Room Discourse” or “Farewell Discourse,” which includes all of chapters 13-17. In this setting Jesus tells his disciples he is about to leave. He gives them re-assurance that they will not be abandoned, and he gives further instruction in carrying on his mission. But he also interprets for them the significance of the dramatic events which are about to happen. As we hear Jesus’ words from this side of the events, we hear Jesus’ own interpretation of his death and resurrection.

In chapter 13, Jesus predicted the betrayal by Judas (vs. 21) and the denial by Peter (vs. 38). The disciples were shocked by these predictions but especially troubled by his prediction that he was leaving (vs. 33). For disciples who had invested their lives and their hopes for the future in Jesus as the Messiah of Israel, this would have sounded like the dashing of all their dreams, the failure of the mission they thought they were on. Jesus explains (in chs. 14 ff.) that his going away is necessary to the success of God’s plan for our salvation, for our restoration to full fellowship with God. Jesus is leaving (through death, resurrection, and ascension) so that he (and the Spirit and the Father) will be more powerfully present than before (see 14:15, 18, 20, 23).

John 14:1-3

A palace, a place, or a person?

By the predictions made in ch. 13 the disciples’ hearts would naturally be troubled and confused. Jesus gives a command not to be troubled, but he also gives an alternative. Instead of having troubled hearts, “trust in God; trust also in me” (14:1).

The disciples would be troubled by the prospect of being abandoned by their teacher, their hoped-for Messiah. Jesus reassures them: you are not being left out, left alone, or left behind; you are being brought in. “In my Father’s house are many rooms . . . I am going there

to prepare a place for you” (vs. 2). The plan of God (which requires Jesus to leave physically) provides a place for Jesus’ disciples in the “Father’s house.”

The “Father’s house” is usually understood as a reference to our home in heaven, which we will enter when Jesus comes back to “take you to be with me . . . where I am” (vs. 3). The word which NIV and ESV translate as “rooms” is translated by the KJV as “mansions.” That traditional rendering still influences our interpretation and makes us think of heaven as a city filled with palaces. Whether there are “mansions” to live in is not the important point, I think. The more important issue is the assurance that we are included in whatever heaven has to offer. We have a future, we have a place forever, with God.

The application of this verse to our future is reassuring—that we can know for certain we are going to heaven when we die or when Jesus returns to earth—and we should include that in our understanding of this passage. But Jesus meant more than that. He was also referring to a “place” in the Father’s house which we can enter now, without dying first.

The Greek word used here for “rooms” is *monai*, the plural form of the noun *mone*, which is derived from the verb *meno*. *Meno* means “to dwell, stay, abide, live, endure, remain, continue, last.” The noun, *mone*, means “room” in the sense of “the place to dwell, stay, abide, live, endure, remain, continue, last.” When Jesus promises to make “a place” (Greek: *topon*) for us (vs. 2), that’s what he is talking about, a place to be with God and stay with God.

The way these words are used elsewhere by John will shed light on 14:2. The verb, *meno*, is used in too many places to look at them all, but it might be helpful to see the following verses (the English translations vary a lot; I use the word “abide” for the sake of consistency):

John 6:56—by eating Jesus’ flesh, we abide in him
8:31, 35—not a slave, but a son abides in the house forever
14:10—the Father, abiding in Jesus, does the miracles through Jesus
15:4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, 16—abiding in Jesus, the true vine, who
abides in the Father’s love; bearing fruit that abides

This verb is frequent also in 1 John. Some of the verses where it is used are the following:

2:17—the one who does God’s will abides forever
2:27, 28—the Spirit’s anointing abides in us, and we should abide in God
3:24; 4:13—God abides in us, which we know by the Spirit
4:12, 15, 16—abiding in God is the source of Christian love,
which is evidence that we really do abide in him

Especially in the famous vine and branches passage (next week’s lesson), the concept of abiding is central. It may be true that ‘heaven’ is the place where we will ultimately “abide” forever, but abiding in Jesus, abiding in God, is what we are told to do now. In this present world we can get into the abiding place and stay in the abiding place because of Jesus’ death and resurrection and the subsequent gift of the Spirit.

The related noun, *mone*, “abiding place” is only used in two verses in the New Testament—John 14:2 and 14:23. The latter verse is most enlightening. In 14:23, Jesus says that the Father and he will “make our home” (*mone*) or “dwelling, abiding place” with the one who loves Jesus and obeys his teachings. Clearly Jesus is not talking about something that has to wait until heaven or until his second coming. In fact, verse 23 is the complement to 14:2.

In verse 2, Jesus promises to make a place with God for us; in verse 23, he promises to make a place for God in us! The fellowship with God now is the assurance of fellowship with God forever. His presence in and with us now is the surety of our presence with him eternally. This reassuring and eternal-life-giving presence is what Jesus’ death, resurrection, and gift of the Spirit made possible. The “room” or “dwelling place” Jesus makes available is the presence of God. The place Jesus promises and provides need not be a palace (“mansion”). Really it is not so much a “place” in a physical sense as it is a personal presence—now and forever. Wherever you are physically, you can be in this “place” spiritually.

When Jesus says he wants us to be with him where he is (vs. 3), that certainly can be applied to heaven and “life after death.” But Jesus wants us to be with him in his fellowship with the Father in life before, during, and after death. As we know from John 17:3, knowing God is eternal life. This knowledge of God will be greater in “the next life” but it cannot be delayed until then. Indeed, Jesus invites us to an intimate relationship with God now (see 14:20, in the context of experiential knowledge of God brought to us by the Holy Spirit).

John 14:4-7

The way to the place you really need to be

Jesus tells the disciples that “you know the way” to this place he is speaking of, this place where Jesus is going and where he makes “rooms” for us (vs. 4). Thomas is confused by this but not too proud to ask a question: “Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?” (vs. 5) Jesus’ answer is our text for this lesson: “I am the way” (vs. 6).

If we think of the “Father’s house” as “heaven,” then Jesus is saying he is the way to heaven. On the other hand, as pointed out above, the “Father’s house” and the “place” Jesus prepares for us have important application in this present life—Jesus provides a place for each of us to have fellowship with God. In that light, Jesus is saying he is the way into that fellowship with the Father now. If you continue reading the rest of vs. 6, you see that is exactly what Jesus is emphasizing: “No one comes to the Father except through me.”

Is Jesus talking about coming to the Father after life on earth is over? Surely we have to include that, but notice what Jesus says in vs. 7. In truly knowing Jesus, we truly know the Father, and “from now on” those who have a relationship with Jesus already “have seen” the Father. Thus, Jesus is the way to the place he provides.

Jesus provides the destination and the way to get there. In another sense, however, you don’t have to go anywhere to get there! You just have to go with Jesus and you are there already. If you know the way, you’re not going to some place you don’t know. Because once you know Jesus, who is the way, you know the Father’s presence, which is the destination, the place prepared for us by Jesus.

Among other things, this means we don’t have to find the way; the Way found us. But since he is “the Way,” he doesn’t leave us where he found us. He takes us somewhere. The Way came to us, so that we could go with him. In another sense, however, when the Way came to us, he brought to us the destination to which the Way leads. He both brings us to the destination and brings the destination to us!

What a surprising development this is! Religiously inclined people have often compared life to a journey, and have often said, in effect, “This world is not my home, I’m just passing through.” There is much truth in that perspective. We are on a journey. We have set out to find our true home, sensing that it is not here and that it beckons us from afar. Along the way with Jesus, however, we begin to find that the journey home discovers home along the way

instead of just at the end of the way. The Way home turns out to be home. The Guide who invited us to the journey and who accompanies us as we travel turns out to be the destination.

The journey analogy begins to be inadequate to say what needs to be said. But Jesus has told us, in other texts, that he is “the Alpha and the Omega,” the beginning of everything and the true destination (Rev. 1:8, 17). He has also told us: “surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matt. 28:19-20). We do not need to wonder about the end or dread it, we have already met him and he walks with us. The Way is the Omega.

Other implications of Jesus as the Way are multiple and more obvious. Jesus is not just a teacher of doctrine; he brings a “way of life.” In fact Christianity was called “the way” before it was ever called “Christianity” (see Acts 9:2). And “the way” is not just imitation of a pattern; it is fellowship with the one who is the way.

Another implication is that, since Jesus is the way, the Christian is never left without a way. We sometimes feel there is no way out, or no way to do the job, or no way to meet the challenge, or no way back to health, no way into the fullness of life. But Jesus is the way, so there is always a way to get to the place you really need to go. Even through death, Jesus is the way through to new and everlasting life. (See also Psa. 23.)

The truth you need

If Jesus is the way we need to go, he is also the truth we need to know, even if we don’t have all the answers yet. In our text, Thomas certainly did not have all the answers. He confessed, “Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?” Even after Jesus answered his question, did Thomas understand fully? Did he have all the facts he could have used? Of course not. We do not know all there is to know, but we can know all we need to know about God, life, our purpose for being, etc., in knowing Jesus.

When Jesus says he is the truth (14:6), he indicates that the whole of knowledge and understanding finds its true focus in him. Does he mean to refer also to such things as scientific truth? Yes, but not in the sense that if we pray we won’t need to do experiments in the laboratory. Every field of human learning discovers parts of the truth by asking the “what” questions and the “how” questions. Science is very good at asking “what” and “how” questions, but not “why” questions. Human beings, however, have to ask “why” questions, because the parts cannot be fitted into a meaningful whole without asking “why?” By “why” questions I refer to questions like “Why are we here?” and “What is the meaning of human life?” and “Why should I live one way and not another?”

There are ways in which Jesus answers “what” questions, such as “What is God like?” and “What does a human life look like when lived in obedient fellowship with the Father?” He also answers important “how” questions such as “How can I be reconciled to God?” and “How can I know God loves me?” and similar questions. But he also answers the most important “why” questions with such words as these: “For [because] God so loved the world . . .” (John 3:16).

It turns out that love (defined by the Holy Word and not by Hollywood) is the “why” that holds the universe together in a meaningful whole. Humans were created to be loved (by God and one another) and to love (God and one another). We know this not simply by intuition (although intuition may agree); we know this because God’s Word reveals it. Most definitively we know it in God’s Word made flesh, in Jesus.

On earth Jesus lived before our eyes a life dedicated to pleasing to God the Father, because he is loved by the Father and he loves the Father (see John 14:31 and 15:9, but also

3:35; 10:17; 13:1; 14:21, 23; 17:23-26). We see this love from God and for God in Jesus’ life, but we see this love most decisively in Jesus’ death. He willingly accepted death because of love—love for the Father and love for us, the world the Father loved. This love not only inspires us by its example; it transforms us by the deed. This love does more than teach us, it touches us in the core of our being.

This was supposed to be a discussion about Jesus as the truth; how did it get to be a discussion about love? Because this is the truth about God (remember 1 John 4:8); this is the truth we need to know. The truth about God cannot be separated from the love of God. Having said that, however, we must go on to say that the love of God cannot be separated from the truth about God and about his will for human beings, or from the uncomfortable truth about human disobedience to God and the consequences of disobedience. To put it another way, God loves us enough to tell us the truth.

You might use the following multiple-choice question as a little quiz:

- God loves us so much he
- a) accepts us as we are.
 - b) wants to change us.

This is a bit of a trick question since both “a” and “b” are true. God accepts us as we are but not to leave us as we are. Our problem is that we want “a” to be true but not necessarily “b.” But truth is not up for a vote; truth is not decided by an opinion poll.

In our culture most people believe in God’s existence, even if they don’t pray. Most also believe in the “love” of God, which, ironically, is one reason they don’t pray! Many believe in God’s love in such a way that they think it doesn’t matter whether they are obedient and responsive to God. Since God is love, he can be counted on to go easy on us, to understand and accept us no matter what. This is a view of God’s love which has become separated from the revealed truth about God (revealed in Scripture and in Jesus).

The kind of love revealed in Jesus cares mightily about people but also about the truth concerning God and his will for human beings. This love and truth are not seen as contradictory to one another; they are not even in “tension” with one another. The love is the truth, and the truth is the love. It hardly needs to be said that our culture loves “love”; does it love truth? If we don’t love truth, we don’t really love love, since true love and true truth are both found perfectly in one person, Jesus Christ.

This is what is meant by John 1:14, 16-17. The grace (which everyone wants) is inseparable from the truth (which we sometimes want and sometimes don’t). They are inseparable because both grace and truth are found in Jesus, the Word made flesh. Jesus is “full of grace and truth.” Those who speak only “grace” or “love” and have no concern for truth are not fully following Jesus, who is full of grace and truth. Those whose concern for “truth” is devoid of love and grace toward others are not fully following Jesus either.

We see the truth—comforting and discomfiting—in Jesus. We see it in his life, ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension. We not only see the truth, we experience the truth which Jesus is in the gift and work of the Holy Spirit, who is called “the Spirit of truth” in the chapter we have been studying. Because this lesson has become long enough already, we cannot look at this in detail, but it will be useful to notice briefly a few things said about the ministry of the Spirit in this context.

The Spirit of truth makes the truth of Jesus more than a content to acknowledge intellectually (although our intellect is involved). By the Spirit’s transformation of our lives, the truth of Jesus becomes living reality. The world which does not accept Jesus cannot accept

the Spirit of truth (14:17), because to do so would mean changing the stance toward Jesus and the relationship with Jesus. For Jesus’ disciples, on the other hand, the Spirit reminds us of his teachings and gives us growing insight into his significance as a person, as The Truth (14:26; 15:26; 16:13-15). The testimony of the Spirit of truth agrees with the testimony of Jesus. When Jesus says, “I am the truth,” the Spirit says, “Amen” (see 1 John 5:6).

Other useful passages in John to study in connection with this very large topic of truth would be the following:

John 8:31-32—knowing the truth and being free depend on following Jesus.

John 17:17, 19—the truth which sanctifies

John 4:23-24—worship in spirit and truth

John has a lot to say about “doing the truth” or “living by the truth,” especially as contrasted with empty claims to know the truth. On this, see John 3:21 and 1 John 1:6; 3:18, 19; 4:6.

LESSON 7
“I AM THE TRUE VINE”
John 15:1-17

Each of the “I am” sayings tells us something important about Jesus but also something important about ourselves. The fact that he is the light, for example, tells us that we need help to see. He is the shepherd, which means we need guidance. Of all the “I am” sayings, the one studied this week may put the clearest emphasis on the fact that we need what Jesus is. When he says, “I am the vine” he tells us about himself and his relationship with the Father (“the gardener” or “vinedresser”), but his relationship with us is expressed by telling us that we are “the branches.” It is difficult to imagine a more vivid way of saying that we are utterly dependent on him.

Context

As in the previous lesson, the setting is Jesus’ Farewell Discourse (or Upper Room Discourse), just hours before his arrest. Jesus has told his closest disciples that he is about to leave. He says their hearts should not be troubled by this, for in a true sense he is going to be more present than before. Because of the coming of the Holy Spirit, Jesus’ disciples would have a new experience of the presence of Jesus: “you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you” (14:20). This new experience of “abiding” in Jesus was discussed in last week’s lesson in connection with the “place” in the Father’s house. In this week’s lesson, “abiding” will be viewed in the imagery of the vine and branches. The “abiding place” is Jesus himself, “the true vine.”

There is some OT background worth mentioning for this passage. The people of Israel had earlier been called God’s “vine” or “vineyard.” (See Isaiah 5:1-7; 27:2-6; Ezekiel 19:10-14; Psalm 80:8-19; Hosea 10:1.) When Jesus says he is “the true vine” (vs. 1), it indicates he is the perfect fulfillment of what Israel had been in an imperfect way. This is similar to Jesus’ saying that he is “the true bread” in contrast to the wilderness manna (John 6; Lesson 1).

John 15:1-2

Jesus and the Father

Before we get too quickly into a consideration of our relationship to Jesus as the vine, it is important to realize that Jesus begins this illustration with a description of his relationship with the Father: “I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.” Now we already know Jesus is going to describe us as the “branches” (vss. 4-5), but let’s put off thinking about that for a moment, while we pay attention to what is being revealed about God.

In vss. 1-2, Jesus expresses complete dependence on the Father. This is all the more remarkable when we remember that Jesus has already claimed to be eternal deity with the words “I am” (8:58). This paradox is frequently encountered in the Gospel of John—Jesus is truly and eternally God but is also our model of dependence on the will and power of the Father.

Jesus presents himself as God’s vine, tended by the Father as the “gardener” or “vinedresser.” And in vs. 2 he expresses complete confidence in the Father as he tells us

that the Father assures the fruitfulness of everything connected with Jesus. Jesus expects to be fruitful, because of God’s activity. We need to let this perspective influence our reading of the rest of the passage. Jesus has assured us in these first two verses that the outcome of his life is assured by the power which created and sustains the universe. In Jesus, fruitfulness is assured. Therefore, if we want fruitful lives, the place to be is in Jesus, where God’s power and care assure fruitfulness.

If we are confident about Jesus’ relationship with the Father, we have a foundation for our own confidence. Jesus invites us into a relationship with him, which he provided by his death, resurrection, and the gift of the Spirit (i.e., he made a place for us to abide). If we know what Jesus tells us in vss. 1-2, we know our lives can be assured of significance in Jesus. That is why it is important to read vss. 1-2 as being about God first, before we get too focused on what the rest of the passage has to say about us. Of course we need to know what the Bible has to say about us, but we will never rightly understand what Scripture says about us if we do not pay careful attention to what it says about God.

The Bible is a revelation from God about God before it is about us. God reveals himself to us, not just what he wants us to do or be. Especially we need to know that the gospel is about God doing God’s will before it can be about us doing God’s will. This is significantly in contrast to the ‘religious impulse’ present in so many religions and even in many Christians—the impulse to think that if we just do what God wants, everything will work out, now and forever.

You might try this test on yourself. Which of the following incomplete sentences best describes your attitude?

(a) “I will be okay if only I . . . (fill in the blank).”

(b) “I will be okay only if God . . . (fill in the blank).”

Which of these two best describes your attitude toward the challenges of the present and future? Whom are you trusting? On whom are you depending? Perhaps we could rightly pick statement (a) if we completed the sentence with “trust God”! Unfortunately we usually complete the sentence with something else, perhaps at a subconscious level: “I’ll be okay, if only I get through this crisis.” “I’ll be okay if only I land this next big deal.” “I’ll be okay if only I can marry that special person.” “I’ll be okay if only my children will straighten out.” In a strictly religious or spiritual sphere, this attitude sounds like this: “I’ll be okay if only I do more good than harm, or keep the rules better than most people, or have good intentions.” Even the most sincere Christians can be trapped in an attitude of “I’ll be okay if only I am faithful, obedient, and sufficiently consistent.” This kind of thinking is sometimes called “performance mentality”—the feeling that God’s acceptance is conditioned on our performance, which means we can never be completely sure of God’s acceptance and have to keep striving to earn it.

Now, it is good to want to do God’s will, and it is good to want to be faithful, obedient, and consistent. But the energy to do these good things comes only by knowing first of all that only God is completely faithful and consistent; that only Jesus is completely faithful, obedient, and consistent. The place of faithful, obedient consistency is in Jesus. We cannot produce this consistency out of ourselves, but we can enter into it and abide in it in Jesus. We can be sure of the ultimate outcome of life, because Jesus assures us of it. God’s will is done in Jesus.

The gospel truth is that God’s will cannot be done by anyone but God, and anyone in whom God dwells and works. When we think it depends on us, our confidence can only be as good as we are. When we know it depends on God, and we know God is the kind of God revealed in Jesus, our confidence can be as strong as Jesus’ confidence—in fact it is confidence in Jesus!

These two verses tell us that God guarantees the fruitfulness of everything and everyone connected with Jesus. Therefore, to be fruitful, strengthen the connection with Jesus. While it is true that unfruitful branches are removed, why would they be unfruitful? Because of not receiving life from the vine. Remember how a branch becomes a branch: it is not by bearing fruit that one becomes a branch; rather, by being a branch one bears fruit.

If we start reading the passage as being about us without understanding Jesus’ relationship with the Father, we end by trying to bear fruit out of fear—fear that we won’t be branches unless we produce. In fact, the opposite is true, we won’t bear fruit unless we are branches, drawing life from Jesus. By his grace—not because we have earned it—God has made us branches in Jesus. If we willingly accept that relationship of dependence, we can grow and bear fruit with confidence. We will bear fruit, not out of fear but out of gratitude and because of the relationship. We don’t have the relationship because we have been fruitful; we bear fruit because we have the relationship.

John 15:2-17

Commands and Promises

With the foundation laid by the above discussion of Jesus’ relationship with the Father, we can now proceed with a consideration of our status as “branches” and God’s will for our fruitfulness. One way of approaching this is to observe the commands and promises found in these verses.

It may come as a surprise to note that there is no command here for us to bear fruit. There is, however, a promise that we will bear fruit if we keep the commands that are given (vss. 5, 7, 8, 16). What are the commands? In the English text, you will find the word “command” in vss. 10, 12, 14, and 17 (if you are using the NIV). But you have to look more carefully than that. What things does Jesus actually tell us to do in this passage?

First and foremost, Jesus tells us to “abide” in him (vs. 4). When he tells us to “abide in my love” (vs. 9), we may understand that as essentially the same thing—abiding in him with confidence of his love for us. Jesus also gives us a command to “ask whatever you wish” (vs. 7). This command is based, however, on the fulfillment of the first command to abide in Jesus. These three commands—abide in me, abide in my love, ask—are expressed in the Greek text with imperatives. They are clear commands. Less directly expressed in Greek but still obviously intended as commands are the instructions to “love each other” (vss. 12, 17). Certainly we are directly commanded to love God and one another in other parts of Scripture, but here the command to show love is actually subordinated to the command to receive and abide in God’s love for us. Within the context of the vine and branches illustration, this is perfectly logical. We cannot show forth the life and character of the vine unless we stay connected to the vine. By abiding in Jesus’ love, we will be able to show love to others.

The passage does not say, “If you don’t produce, you can’t abide.” Rather, it says, “If you don’t abide, you can’t produce.” Not “produce in order to abide,” but “abide in order to produce.” Jesus says that the one who does not “abide” or “remain” in him cannot produce fruit. That is the branch that will be burned (vs. 6). The burning can be said to result from the lack of fruit, but the lack of fruit is caused by the failure to abide. So fruit-bearing is not commanded in this passage, but fruit-bearing is promised to those who follow the command to abide in Jesus, the “true vine,” whose productivity is guaranteed by the power and will of Almighty God.

What does Jesus mean by “fruit” in this passage? We may think of Paul’s words about the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23. Certainly those qualities would be appropriate to mention here, but Jesus’ disciples had not read Galatians yet! Just within the context of John 15, without the cross-reference to Galatians, we could say that the “fruit” is the result of our relationship with Jesus. It is the difference made in our lives by our relationship with Jesus. It is also the difference our lives make in others’ lives and in the world because of Jesus. The fruit Jesus promises is quite simply the result of his presence in our lives, of our “abiding” in him, depending on his life for our life in this world.

Apart from this relationship with Jesus, will we bear inferior or less abundant fruit? No, we will bear no fruit (vs. 4). The whole point of this passage is not how to have a better life but how to have the only life that finally counts for God’s purposes. Only in Jesus will we bear “much fruit,” lasting fruit which will glorify the Father, the vinedresser (vs. 5, 8, 16).

Jesus also promises answered prayer (vs. 7). This is part of how our lives bear fruit. Remember that asking in prayer is commanded here, as it is elsewhere in Scripture (see Matt. 6 and 7). We are not commanded to have “successful” prayer lives; we are commanded to pray.

The pressure is not on us to pray successfully, for God has already promised to hear and answer prayer within his will for our lives. If we are abiding in Jesus and his words are abiding in us, certain things we will not ask for. And if we are abiding in Jesus and are living a life of dependence and confidence, we will continue to trust and look to him when our prayers have not been answered as we would have liked. He is the vine; we are the branches; the Father is the vinedresser who guarantees the fruitfulness of everyone connected to Jesus. If our prayers have not been answered yet or have been answered in a way which disappoints us, we should know that the maximum fruitfulness of our lives is not dependent on the success ratio of our prayers but on the Father’s commitment to Jesus’ fruitfulness. Ultimately the result of all of this is our fullness of joy (vs. 11).

The foremost promise here is that our lives will be productive and significant in Jesus—we will bear fruit. There are other promises in the passage worth noting as well. In fact the first promise Jesus makes in this passage is that we will experience “pruning” (vs. 2). Pruning is part of the necessary process of maximizing the productivity of the plant. Pruning is a picture of extraneous things being removed so that only the genuinely productive is left. It is “less for the sake of more” [fruit]. God’s pruning may not be

pleasant at the time we are going through it, but his purpose is not to diminish us but to increase our fruitfulness.

How does this pruning take place? We may think of circumstances or experiences which force us to focus on the truly essential, those things which compel us to put life into proper perspective. Such pruning by circumstances forces a focus on our relationship with God and his purposes for us. But Jesus does not explicitly refer to such experiences here. Rather, he refers to another instrument of pruning—his word. “You are already clean [pruned] because of the word I have spoken to you” (vs. 3).

This kind of pruning by the word of God puts as much emphasis on what is put into our lives as on what is taken away, although the imagery of pruning tends to make us think of removal of the extraneous. In fact the removal of non-productive or hindering factors will not, in and of itself, make us productive. Something has to be added to our lives, from a source other than ourselves.

Imagine a dead apple tree. How many limbs would you have to cut off to make the tree bear fruit? Only what comes into a living tree from its root system and its living contact with the proper environment can enable the tree to produce fruit. In the same way, having things taken out of our lives or giving them up voluntarily will not make us more productive as Christians. The removal or self-denial may remove hindrances or enable more focused concentration, but the power actually to bear fruit is not the power of self-denial. Rather it is the power of God’s life communicated to us by his Word and his Spirit.

Our capacity to bear fruit may be enhanced by the removal of non-productive aspects in our lives, but the power to bear fruit is always only the power of God himself. Being “clean” or “pruned” by the word of God means being able to bear fruit because of his communication to us. The merest infant of a disciple has already been “pruned” or “cleaned” to some extent by the effect of God’s word in his or her life (vs. 3). As more of God’s word is received and responded to, there will be more fruit as more difference is made in our lives by the power and purposes of God. Even the most mature Christians can still be empowered to bear more fruit by receiving more of what God offers, by letting one’s life be more and more affected by the presence of God.

LESSON 8
“I AM NOT OF THE WORLD”
John 17:14, 16

The last saying of Jesus to be treated in this series is different from all those preceding in a couple of respects. For one thing, it is a negative statement (“I am not . . .”) in contrast to the positive declarations Jesus made about himself in the previous lessons. For another, it is a declaration which Jesus makes about himself and us. He did not say that we should be the bread, the light, the door, the shepherd, the resurrection, the way, the truth, the life, or the vine. He does say, however, that his disciples are “not of the world” just as he is not. This indicates that the earlier “I am” sayings were about Jesus’ unique identity and function, but this week’s saying is about a relationship to the world which Jesus shares with his disciples. (Jesus did say that we are the light of the world, in Matt. 5:14, but not in the same context where he said, “I am the light.”)

Although this week’s “I am” saying is a negative statement and is not uniquely applicable to Jesus, it contributes important perspective to our understanding of those earlier sayings and to our general understanding of Jesus’ purpose (and ours). After identifying the context in ch. 17, we will concentrate on the paragraph (vss. 13-19), in which Jesus says, “I am not of the world.”

Context

As in the previous two lessons, the context continues to be the Upper Room or Farewell Discourse of chapters 13-17. Jesus now addresses his words, however, directly to the Father in prayer, shifting from the teaching style of chapters 13-16. The focus continues to be on the significance of the momentous events about to happen (Jesus’ death and resurrection), and on the results of those events for Jesus, his disciples, and the world.

In the immediate context of John 17, Jesus prays that the Father would glorify him in the coming events (vss. 1-5). He prays for his disciples, who are remaining in the world after Jesus goes back to the Father (vss. 6-12). He prays especially for their protection from the evil in the world and for their unity in relationship with Jesus and the Father (vs. 11).

In the verses which follow vs. 19, Jesus goes on to pray for all his disciples from all times, including us (vss. 20-26). The emphasis continues to be unity among the disciples. The unity is important in and of itself but also for the sake of the world: “to let the world know that you sent me” (vs. 23). The prayer concludes with Jesus’ desire for his disciples to be with him, to see his glory, and to continue in the knowledge and love of God (vss. 24-26).

John 17:13-19

Not of the world

Jesus is leaving the world (physically), but he desires that his disciples, who are remaining in the world, be filled with his joy (vs. 13). Such joy is needed to withstand the opposition of the world, which hates Jesus’ disciples (vs. 14). But why does the world hate Jesus’ disciples? Jesus says it is because the disciples have received Jesus’ words.

“The world” is used here with a negative connotation, as it is in John 16:8 (the world will be convicted of sin) but unlike the positive connotation in John 3:16 (God so loved the world). Depending on the context, “the world” can mean either the people Jesus came to save or the people who reject him, his word, and his disciples. Of course the world who rejects Jesus is also precisely the world he came to save. Using both senses of the term, we could say that Jesus came to save “the world” from being “the world,” but if “the world” refuses to be saved, refuses to stop being “the world,” then “the world” will perish. (See 1 John 2:15-17, where we are told not to love the world, which is passing away.)

We have to interpret "the world" according to the context in which we find it. But even in those contexts in which it is used in a negative sense, we need to remember that God's ultimate purpose for the world is not to destroy it but to redeem and renew it (see John 3:16-17; also 2 Peter 3:10-13). This will be important as we look at the rest of John 17:13-19.

Jesus' disciples, those who receive and adhere to his words, are thereby placed in opposition to "the world," which refuses Jesus' words. Because they have received Jesus' words, Jesus says about his disciples that "they are not of the world any more than I am of the world" (vs. 14). He emphasizes this thought by repeating it in vs. 16: "They are not of the world, even as I am not of it."

Of course Jesus is not "of the world" because he has a divine, heavenly origin, just as he had earlier said he was "the bread which came down from heaven" (John 6:51). But what does it mean for the disciples not to be "of the world"? After all, we cannot claim that we have "come down from heaven."

Jesus' point of origin is heaven; our is the earth (see John 8:23). But the real issue here is not point of origin but source (and resource) for life. There is a life which begins on earth—our human, mortal life. There is also a life which comes from heaven, which does not and cannot come from the world. This second kind of life can be received only by being "born again" or "born from above" (John 3:3, 7). This second kind of life is from the Spirit of God, life everlasting. This kind of life is not "of the world" or "from the world." It is, however, life which can be lived "in the world."

We can live now as those who are "in the world but not of it." That is why Jesus does not pray to the Father "that you take them out of the world" (John 17:15). Life from God's Spirit is not something we have to go somewhere else to get; life from God's Spirit comes to us where we are. We do not have to change our location to receive this life, but we do have to change our orientation. We have to stop looking to "the world" as our source and direction for life. We have to start looking to God as our source, as our reason and goal for living. This is the real issue of being "of the world" or "not of the world": what or who is your resource and reason for living?

We do not have to be taken out of the world to be saved, but we do have to be protected from "the evil one" (or "the evil" that is in the world, vs. 15). The evil one, Satan, is a rebel and promotes rebellion against God. This rebellion is the source of all the evil that is in the world. Those who give up their rebellion and become obedient to Jesus' words become enemies of the evil one and they need God's protection ("Deliver us from evil").

How might the evil one try to destroy us? There are any number of ways, but the most common way is to lure us back into the ways of "the world," in which we look to the world as our source for life or we let ourselves be captivated by the same desires and aspirations which enslave the world. Reverting to being "of the world" is a danger as long as we are in the world. That perhaps is the reason Jesus repeats the words, "they are not of the world."

Being influenced or deceived by "the world" is a danger, but it is not inevitable or irresistible. To the extent we allow ourselves to be shaped by the word of God, we can resist the shaping influences of the world (cf. Rom. 12:2). In fact, the purpose of God is that the stronger influence go in the other direction. The purpose of God is that Jesus' disciples not only should be different from the world, we are to make a difference in the world. That difference, in us and through us, is expressed by the concept of holiness or sanctification. An important insight into the purpose and process of sanctification is to be found in vss. 17-19.

Jesus prays for his disciples, "Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth" (vs. 17). "Sanctify" is usually defined as "set apart for divine, holy purposes" or "make holy" (in the sense of purifying from sin). Certainly both aspects (set apart and purify) are vital components of sanctification. Both aspects are God's will for us (Lev. 19:2 and many other passages in both Old and New Testaments). Jesus' prayer could be legitimately interpreted as asking for both aspects—that his disciples be separated from sin and set apart for God's purposes. In this particular context, however, the setting apart for God's purposes is clearly the emphasis.

Three facts especially indicate that devotion to God's purpose is the chief emphasis of sanctification here. The first is that the agency or instrument of sanctification is the truth, God's word (vs. 17). God's word is the revelation of his purpose. When God's word is received and responded to, our lives begin to be shaped by his purposes and we begin to serve his purposes. This is sanctification by God's word, the effect his word has on our living as we respond (see John 15:3 in last week's lesson).

The second fact is the sentence which immediately follows verse seventeen: "As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world" (vs. 18). The sanctification in view here is not taking us out of the world but sending us into it. Why are we sent into the world? For the same reason Jesus was sent ("As you sent me . . ."). Jesus was sent into the world, not to condemn the world but that the world through him might be saved (3:17). He was sent not to do his own will but the will of him who sent him, and the one who sent him is with him (8:28-29; 14:10; see also 20:21-23).

The third fact which indicates that sanctification in this passage is focused on serving God's purposes (rather than on moral purity per se) is the most conclusive. In verse nineteen, Jesus continues his prayer with these words: "For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified" [literally, "sanctified in/by truth"]. Does Jesus need to purify himself from sin? Of course not; he has never sinned. Rather he is praying a prayer of dedication to the Father's purpose, the purpose which requires his death on the cross. Jesus' devotion to this purpose is necessary to enable his disciples to be sanctified (in all the senses of "sanctification" but, in this context, especially the sense of serving God's purpose). By Jesus' faithful serving of God's purpose, Jesus' disciples are enabled to be likewise faithful.

Jesus did not need to become more holy, but he did have to choose and act with devotion to the purposes of the Father. We know about the struggle involved in this from the accounts in the other gospels of his prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, which would have come after this prayer of John 17. We know that Jesus had to be deliberate and persistent in his obedience, as three times he prayed: "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will" (Matt. 26:39).

Jesus' prayer in the Garden is a prayer of sanctification in the sense of devotion to the Father's will. Jesus' prayer in John 17 reveals that this devotion is for the sake of his disciples' empowerment to be likewise devoted. His sanctification enables ours. This quality of his sanctification also sheds light on what it means for us to be sanctified.

Sanctification

Jesus is not of the world, but he was sent into the world. We are not of the world, but we are sent into it. Sanctification in one sense means separation from the world, but in another sense it means to give one's life for the sake of the world. Look at the sanctification of Jesus in this passage. Was his sanctification away from the world or for the purposes of the Father toward the

world? Is our idea of "sanctification" like that of Jesus? Do we even think about sanctification, despite our Wesleyan heritage? Does "sanctification" sound altogether too pious to be in our vocabulary? Do we even think about holiness?

For many Christians, "sanctification" is pious jargon, and "holiness" is something to which they do not aspire, thinking it is for those in the cloister, shut off from contact with the world, or for the truly exceptional person (like Mother Teresa). "Sanctification" and "holiness" sound disconnected from the everyday world in which most Christians have to live. That everyday world, however, is precisely the place where sanctification needs to happen. And it is the place into which God sends us. That should be clear from the passage we are studying here, but it can also be observed as God's will by noting the wording of the Lord's Prayer.

Jesus taught his disciples to pray, "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name." "Hallowed" means to be treated or regarded as holy, sanctified. Where? In the same place for which we ask, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." We do not need to pray for God's name to be treated as holy in heaven; it already is. We do not need to ask for his reign to be effective in heaven, nor for his will to be done in heaven. We are instructed to ask that these things become the reality here on earth that they already are in heaven. If we are asking for God's purposes to be carried out on earth, we are asking for earth ("the world" in a neutral sense) to be transformed. Putting it another way, we are praying that "the world" will be "sanctified."

How can this happen? The total answer is too big to address now, but the starting place has to be the instruction and example of Jesus. Jesus taught us to pray for God's holiness, kingdom, and will to become reality "on earth as it is in heaven." Sanctification of the planet is thus revealed as God's will, and we are instructed to seek it. And by his own example, Jesus sanctified himself so that his disciples would be sanctified (17:19). Jesus expected his sanctification to be contagious, to have a sanctifying effect on others.

Jesus' sanctification in this passage was for the purpose of doing something holy on earth, something which would make it possible for others to be holy. It was not for the purpose of escaping earth. Likewise our sanctification is not merely for the sake of our own spiritual wellbeing (although it includes that); our sanctification is for the sake of others.

Who are the others? Everyone we influence, directly or indirectly, deliberately or incidentally, knowingly or unknowingly. Everyone whose life is touched by ours. Seen this way, it becomes clear that the motive for true holiness is not being better than others. It is rather love for God and love for one another. It must be admitted and lamented that sometimes those who have most loudly preached holiness have not shown this motive in very obvious ways. Instead, some who have taken pride in their personal holiness (defined especially by activities they shun) have shown hatred and contempt rather than love for the world. That is not the kind of holiness or sanctification we see in Jesus, however.

True holiness will not make us hate the world's people, but will cause us to love them for the right reasons. Holiness will mean hatred of sin and its destructive effects but love for the sinners. It will mean compassion, not contempt, for those hurt by sin and sinning. This is God's holy attitude toward us, a holy attitude which is not antithetical to his love, but which is one with his love. His love is holy, and his holiness is loving.

If we are holy in the way that God is holy, in the way that Jesus sanctified himself for our sakes, we will have this same loving, redemptive attitude toward "the world." We will be set apart for God's purposes, which are not world-destroying but world-redeeming and world-

sanctifying. True, in one sense, "the world" is the enemy, but Jesus sanctified himself to go to the cross to save his enemies—us. Enemies can be transformed into friends (see 15:14) if those enemies allow themselves to be affected by the sanctified.

As with Jesus, our sanctification is not removal from the world but the re-orientation of our lives so that the world is no longer our source for living. Nor are we trying to gain the world for ourselves. Instead, the source for our lives is the God of heaven, and the goal of our lives is to gain heaven for ourselves and to gain the world for God.

Not of but for

The world is not the source for Jesus and cannot be our source, if we want to be like Jesus. But he is the Savior of the world, and in that sense he is for it. The question is which is the source of which? If the world looks to him as source, it will be saved. If we look to the world as source, we will perish.

We might go one step further and observe that Jesus can be for the world in this sense only if he is not of the world. If he were of the world, he could not save the world, he could not be for the world in a saving sense. Remember the first lesson in this series, in which Jesus said that he would give his flesh "for the life of the world" (6:51). That is the same chapter in which he repeatedly claimed to have "come down from heaven" (6:38). As the bread of life, Jesus is not of the world but he is for the world.

The world on its own will perish (1 John 2:17), but the will of the Creator of the world is that we not perish (John 3:16). So he sends life into the world, life which is not of the world but life which is for the world, for all those in the world who will accept it. Christians have often said that we are "in the world but not of it." We need also to say that we are "for the world" in the same sense that Jesus is.

We have to define our terms carefully if we say this, because true sanctification is not compromise with evil even while it is compassion for those caught in the web of evil. If we are to be effectively used by the Holy Spirit to continue and spread the sanctifying presence of Jesus in the world, we will have to be separated from the world (in one sense) and yet devoted to the blessing of the world (in another sense). We can fail our Christian responsibilities just as much in two different ways: (1) by not being separated from the world (in the sense of compromising with evil), or (2) by being separated from the world (in the sense of not being and giving a witness and influence). The balance to be struck is expressed in this paradox: **We must be separated from the world for the sake of the world.** "Separation from the world for the sake of the world" summarizes the two aspects of sanctification identified earlier—purification from sin and dedication to the Father's saving purposes.