

# UNCOVER

SEE FOR YOURSELF

## Follow-on Uncover Studies in John's Gospel

What do you do if you have finished the seeker studies at the end of the Uncover John Gospel and your friend wants to carry on looking at the life of Jesus? This question has been raised quite often by people who have been through the Uncover studies. Their friend has found Jesus compelling and, although they are not yet ready to become a Christian, they want to know more about Jesus.

These studies are designed as a follow-on to the Uncover John Seeker Studies in the Gospel. They follow the same format and are the same length. I suggest printing out a copy of each study for you and your friend so that you can follow the study together. This gives the study the same dynamic as the studies in the Gospel. An Uncover study is designed to help both the leader and the participant discover who Jesus is by examining the gospel text. The leader is not primarily a teacher but a guide, helping participants to engage with the text for themselves.

There is also a Leaders' Guide to the studies, which has outline answers to the questions. The Leaders' Guide is designed to help you understand the passage so that you can help your friend discover more about Jesus. If you can read these notes before leading a study, it will be a great help. The notes are not exhaustive and aim to bring out only the main points of the passage. They should not be followed in a way that makes the study feel wooden or forced.

In preparation, try not to start with the Leaders' Guide! Begin with the text by reading and rereading the passage, taking your time and praying for God's Spirit to help you understand what has been written. Remember to read carefully and imaginatively, as these accounts record Jesus encountering real people.

As you read, write down any questions that you have or that you think participants might have about the passage. This will help you to answer their questions in the study. Then read the questions in the Seeker Study. Try to think of alternative ways of asking the questions in case participants seem confused or baffled. Be ready with supplementary questions that might further open the meaning of the text.

After praying, reading and rereading the passage and working through the seeker study questions, only then use this Leaders' Guide. The aim of the Guide is to help you gain deeper insight into and clarity about the passage. It is not meant to equate to teaching notes, and should not be used as such.

It is not essential to insist on perfect theological precision at every point. Rather, prayerfully trust the Spirit to work through the text. In this way, we believe that the Spirit will open people's hearts to believe as they 'uncover' the truth, goodness and beauty of who Jesus is and what he has done for them.

Above all, pray for participants during the course and enjoy uncovering Jesus in all his grace and truth in these studies.

# John 1:1-18 Introducing Jesus

## Introduction

What visual images come to mind when you hear the name Jesus? Who does academia say Jesus was? Who does Hollywood say Jesus was? How would 'popular opinion' complete this sentence: 'Jesus was...'?

## Historical Context

John tells us at the end of his book that he was an eyewitness to what Jesus said and did (John 20:30–31, 21:24–25). In telling the story of this remarkable person we might expect John to begin by recounting the early life of Jesus, the influences that made him a great man and the ways in which the future course of his life were established. Then we start reading, and John begins by taking apart all our preconceived ideas and stereotypical images of 'gentle Jesus, meek and mild'.

## Questions

### Read verses 1–8

1. Where does John begin his Gospel?
2. John begins by introducing us to 'the Word'. What does he claim about the Word in verses 1–2?
3. What role does the Word play in the creation of the universe? What does the Word have within himself in verses 4–5?

John has introduced us to some astonishing concepts in just a few sentences. In the Old Testament, 'the Word' referred to God speaking and therefore making himself known to the world. Who is this Word, the one who is God and yet is in relationship to God, who is the creator of everything that exists and who brings light and life?

But, rather than answer these questions, John next introduces us to John the Baptist, the older cousin of Jesus, who preached before Jesus.

4. Why do you think John introduces John the Baptist at this point? Why does he describe John the Baptist as a 'witness' and emphasise his 'testimony' (also verse 15)?
5. What was John the Baptist's testimony about the Word (verse 15), and what was the purpose of his witness? What does this suggest about what faith is based on?

John has still not identified the Word, but now makes the breath-taking assertion that the Word is coming into the world. Why does the Word do this and what will the reaction be?

### Read verses 9–13

6. How does the world and 'his own' (probably a reference to the Jewish nation at the time) respond to the Word? How could 'recognise him' in verse 10 be understood?
7. John describes the alternative response to the Word in verse 12. What happens to someone when they believe? What kind of relationship does John's language imply? What is John so keen to emphasise in verse 13?

### Read verses 14–18

8. What do we learn next about the Word in verse 14? What do you think John means when he states that the Word was 'full of grace and truth'? What is the astonishing claim that John is making here?
9. Who is the Word, according to verse 17? Why do you think John has waited so long to identify the Word?
10. Why is Jesus uniquely able to make God known to the world?

### **So what does it mean for us?**

As you review what John has said about the Word, what is he claiming about who Jesus is and what he has come into the world to do? How does this challenge your ideas about him?

Cosmologist Carl Sagan wrote that 'the Cosmos is all that is or was or ever will be'. In contrast, John informs us that the universe is the creation of the Word, who comes into the world full of truth and full of loving grace.

If this is true, what are its implications for the big questions of life – the meaning of life, what happens after death, how we define what is good and evil, how we know what is true, whether love is real?

# **John 2:13–25 When Jesus Confronts Hypocrisy**

## **Introduction**

Most people find hypocrisy deeply unpleasant. Why do you think this is? Are religious people more inclined to be hypocritical, or is it something we are all prone to?

## **Historical Context**

John records Jesus' first miraculous sign in chapter 2:1–12. At a wedding in a Galilean village, Jesus covers the shame of a young couple by providing what they could not hope to provide themselves, an abundance of the most delicious wine. In doing this, Jesus announces that he is the longed-for Messiah, the coming of God to the world to take away our shame and end the scourge of death. We are left with questions 'Who will he do this for?' and 'How will he do it?'

Sometime later Jesus visits the Jewish temple in Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. The purpose of the temple was to symbolise God's dwelling with his people and yet also his inaccessibility. God could be approached only through an animal sacrifice. The system of sacrifices was a constant reminder of the need for the removal of sin if God was to dwell with his people.

The temple was divided into three distinct concentric areas. The outer courts were the areas where Gentiles (non-Jews) could worship. The inner courts were reserved for Jewish worshippers and the innermost part of the temple, the Holy of Holies, was the symbolic dwelling place of God with his people.

This was Jesus' first appearance in the capital, the centre of Jewish religious, political and cultural life – and it was going to be controversial in the extreme!

## **Questions**

### **Read verses 13–17**

1. At Passover, all good Jews were expected to make the pilgrimage to Jerusalem to celebrate God's mighty rescue of his people from Egyptian slavery. What do you think the mood of the people would be as they gathered in their thousands in and around the temple?
2. Jesus does not share the mood of celebration; what does he see that provokes his anger?
3. Describe what Jesus does. How would the mood be changed? Is there anything to suggest that his actions are more calculated than a simple outburst of anger?
4. Do you find it surprising that 'gentle Jesus' gets so angry? Why do you think Jesus is so outraged by what he sees in the outer courts of the temple? What is his overriding passion, and where will it lead him?

5. The temple would have been incredibly busy at this time of year. All temple activities were overseen by the priests and order was kept by the temple guard. Why do you think it is only Jesus who is so angered by what he sees? What does this suggest about the attitude of the religious establishment?

Reflecting on what Jesus has done, his disciples see in his attitude and actions the fulfilment of what Israel's ancient king David had written centuries earlier. The quotation in verse 17 is from Psalm 69:9. Jesus is acting very much like the greatest king the nation had ever had, and his overwhelming concern is that people should not be prevented from worshipping his Father.

### **Read verses 18–25**

6. How do the Jewish authorities react to Jesus' dramatic actions? How do you think they should have reacted?
7. What might be the motives behind their demand for a sign?
8. What sign does Jesus offer them in verse 19? How is he misunderstood by the Jewish leaders? What is their attitude to Jesus?
9. What do you think Jesus is claiming for himself by describing his body as 'this temple'?

In order for people to draw near to God in the temple, a sacrifice was offered. These sacrifices spoke of the need for cleansing from sin if God was to dwell with sinful people. The guilt of the person offering the sacrifice was transferred to the animal, which was 'punished' with death in the place of the guilty for their sins. .

10. Jesus says that his body will be destroyed and then raised in three days. What do you think he is saying that his own death will achieve?
11. In verses 23–25, we see people believing in Jesus because they see the miraculous signs. Why do you think Jesus would not entrust himself to them? What did he know was in them?

### **So what does it mean for us?**

We began by discussing how deeply unpleasant people find hypocrisy. As you observe Jesus in this incident, what is his attitude to hypocrisy?

Given his concern for truth and integrity, what do you make of his claim to be the temple and the one sacrifice that makes us acceptable before God? Is he deliberately misleading us? Is he misguided?

# **John 3:1-21 Losing My Religion**

## **Introduction**

What common answers would people in our culture give to the question, 'How do you think you get to heaven?'

## **Historical Context**

Nicodemus was a member of an orthodox Jewish religious group called the Pharisees, who focused on a strict interpretation of the first five books of the Bible. He was also one of the elite 70 members of the Sanhedrin, who had jurisdiction over Jews throughout the world. Highly educated, a scholar and a politician, Nicodemus was accustomed to being sought out to interpret the finer points of the Law of Moses.

Like other Jews of his time, Nicodemus was waiting for the Kingdom of God to appear, when the prophesied Messiah would come and inaugurate God's kingdom on earth. Nicodemus believed that the Messiah would vindicate and release Israel from the hated Roman domination – but only when faithful Jews began to obey God's commands more fully.

As a strict Pharisee and servant of the people, Nicodemus could feel confident that he would be welcomed into the Kingdom of God. Nevertheless, perhaps wanting to be certain that he had done everything necessary to obtain a favourable judgement from God, he sought out Jesus. But what Jesus tells Nicodemus shakes him to his very core.

## **Questions**

### **Read verses 1–10**

1. Why do you think such a senior and well-qualified man as Nicodemus comes to see Jesus, and why at night?
2. What does Nicodemus already believe about Jesus? What question is implied in his statement in verse 2?
3. Jesus responds with a radical statement in verse 3. How does his response challenge Nicodemus' belief that acceptance by God is based on obedience to the Old Testament law?
4. How does Nicodemus respond to this in verse 4? Is his religion a barrier hindering him from understanding what Jesus is saying?
5. In order to help Nicodemus understand his radical statement in verse 3, Jesus explains being 'born again' by comparing it with physical birth. What differences and similarities does he point to? Why might Nicodemus find this so unsettling (verses 5–8)?

### **Read verses 10–15**

6. Although Nicodemus begins his conversation with Jesus with the confident assertion 'we know', Jesus has tried to show Nicodemus that he doesn't know the answer to the decisive question of how someone can come into a living relationship with God that lasts

for ever. How does Jesus explain why he is able to answer this question, and what reason does he give for Nicodemus' failure to understand (verses 10–13)?

Having established his unique authority, Jesus now answers Nicodemus' question in verse 9, about how someone is given new life and able to enter into God's Kingdom. In verses 15–16 Jesus refers Nicodemus back to a story he would have known well (Numbers 21:5–9). The Israelites had been set free from slavery and death in Egypt through miraculous signs from God. But they refused to believe. In response God sent a plague of snakes as a judgement on their persistent rebellion. Refusing to give up on them, God instructed Moses to craft a bronze serpent, attach it to a pole and lift it up. If anyone looked up at the snake, they would live. The bronze snake was God's remedy for sin. Looking up at it was a sign that they believed.

7. Jesus says that he, the Son of Man, will be lifted up. He is referring to his death on the cross (see 12:32–33). How does this story from ancient Israel explain what Jesus will do on the cross?

### **Read verses 16–21**

8. According to Jesus, what is God's motivation for sending His Son into the world to be lifted up on the cross (verse 16)? What do we have to do to receive eternal life? What does Jesus say we are saved from and saved for?
9. Jesus says that he is the light that has come into the world. What two reasons does he give for people's refusal to believe in him (verses 19–21)?
10. How does this imagery relate specifically to Nicodemus and how this highly moral, deeply religious and intelligent man approaches Jesus?
11. In John 7:45–52 and 19:38–42 we read more about Nicodemus. Do you think his actions suggest that over time he came to accept who Jesus was and what he had done for him?

### **So what does it mean for us?**

The common misconception about religion is that we must seek approval and acceptance from God through our good behaviour. Even today, when many doubt God's existence, we frequently hear people say, 'If there is a God I hope he will accept me because I try to be a good person.'

We don't have the power to meet the demands of our own moral code or change our nature. According to Jesus, no amount of religious devotion or moral goodness will rescue us from condemnation. Only by believing in what he did for us on the cross in dying for our sins can we find forgiveness and acceptance with God.

How do you respond to the idea that we cannot do anything to achieve salvation but that, in love, Jesus has done everything for us? Imagine standing before God and being judged according to what you have thought, said and done. Would you be confident of acceptance?

# **John 5:1-30 Who Does Jesus Think He Is?**

## **Introduction**

If God exists, do you think he should judge between good and evil? On what basis do you think he should decide who is condemned and who is accepted?

## **Historical Context**

Jesus returns to Jerusalem to celebrate one of the Jewish festivals. It is a Saturday, the weekly Jewish Sabbath, and Jesus makes his way to the temple, passing the Sheep Gate and going on to Solomon's Colonnade. The five columns of the colonnade were built around the Pool of Bethesda, meaning 'house of mercy'. There invalids would lie, because it was believed that the waters had healing properties. It was thought that when angelic wings stirred the pool the first person into the water would be healed.

Jesus does not pass by but goes inside and meets a man who has been lying there for 38 years. Jesus does something astonishing for the man, but in doing so becomes embroiled in controversy. People are so angry with him that they devise murderous plots against him

## **Questions**

### **Read verses 1–10**

1. Imagine the scene that confronted Jesus at the Pool of Bethesda. What does he see and hear? The Sheep Gate was not a part of the city that those coming to the festival would visit. What does Jesus' going there suggest about him?
2. What do we discover about the paralysed man whom Jesus heals? What must his life have been like? How might his attitude to life and healing have changed over the years?
3. Why do you think Jesus asks the man, 'Do you want to get well?' Given the man's response, what is he hoping Jesus will do for him?
4. When Jesus commands the man to get up and walk, what is he inviting him to put his hope in? As he has lived by the pool for 38 years, would this be easy for him to accept? Why might he struggle to trust Jesus' offer?

What a memorable day this was for this man. Jesus met him in his utter helplessness and did for him what he could not do for himself – he made him whole again. Such a miracle should have been received with joy.

Perhaps when walking to the Temple to thank God for his healing, the man is stopped by the religious leaders, who want to know who encouraged the man to break the Sabbath. . On the Sabbath the people rested from their work in order to remember and celebrate that God had created all of life and then rested on the seventh day.

### Read verses 10–18

5. The Jewish religious leaders criticise the man for carrying his mat on the Sabbath, which, according to their interpretation of the Old Testament law, was not allowed. How does their approach to the man and the Sabbath contrast with that of Jesus?
6. Jesus meets the man again in the temple. What do you think he means by his statement in verse 14? What could be worse than his life so far? What is Jesus most concerned that he should gain (see verse 24)?
7. In verse 12 the religious leaders ask who told the man to pick up his mat and therefore break God's Law. What is the meaning of Jesus' response in verse 17? Why are they so outraged?

### Read verses 19–30

8. In response to their accusation of blasphemy, how does Jesus describe his relationship with God the Father in verses 19–20?
9. What are the works that Jesus says he will do, that will be even greater than healing a man paralysed for 38 years (verses 21–23)? What claim is Jesus therefore making about his identity?
10. According to Jesus, how can people be rescued from condemnation and receive eternal life (verse 24)? Jesus refers to those who are hearing his voice as dead in verses 25–26. What does he mean by this? How does what he says here relate to the healing of the man by the pool?
11. In verses 28–30 Jesus states that there is a judgement to come for all people and this judgement will be based on what people have done in their lives. Does this fill you with confidence? Where can we find a cast-iron assurance that we will be given eternal life (verse 24)?

### **So what does it mean for us?**

The essayist G. K. Chesterton wrote of his surprise and shock when he encountered the real Jesus for the first time: 'I was given the impression that Jesus was a gentle creature... Then I looked at the New Testament. There I found an account, not in the least of a person with his hair parted in the middle or his hands clasped in appeal, but an extraordinary being with lips of thunder.'

We see something of that thunder here. Jesus speaks of being the judge of the world and about our eternal destiny being determined by our response to him. The paralysed man stands for us all. Jesus says that we are 'spiritually dead' and, just like the man, we are helpless. We need Jesus to come to us, to speak to us, to give us life. We need to believe and accept Jesus at his word.

How do you respond to Jesus' claims in this chapter? Like his original hearers, do you find what Jesus says in this chapter outrageous?

# John 6:1-40 What Were You Expecting?

## Introduction

If you were to become a Christian, what expectations would you have of what being a Christian would be like?

## Historical Context

In chapter 5, Jesus finds himself in conflict with the Jewish leaders because of his claim to do the same work as the Father in giving life and judging the world. When he claims to be the eternal Son of the Father, the Jewish leaders understand Jesus to be asserting that he is divine. If God's eternal Son has come into the world, what has he come to do?

In this next incident Jesus explains why he has come to the world. Jesus is no longer in Jerusalem but by the Sea of Galilee in the north. It is nearing the time of Passover, when Jews remember their liberation from slavery and death in Egypt. As they fled from Egypt under the leadership of Moses, God supplied their physical needs by providing a form of bread called 'manna'. The Passover was a time of intense nationalistic zeal because it was believed that God had promised he would send another liberator like Moses, called 'the Prophet', who would lead them to freedom from their Roman rulers.

## Questions

### Read verses 1–15

1. What do we learn about the crowd following Jesus? Why are they following him?
2. Jesus knows what he is going to do, so why do you think he asks Philip (who was from the nearby town of Bethsaida) how the people could be fed?
3. How do Philip and then Peter respond? Do you think their responses are reasonable? Why or why not?
4. What do you imagine the expectations of the crowd were when Jesus sat them down and then gave thanks to God for the small amount of food he had? What do the 12 baskets of leftovers suggest about the life Jesus offers?

It was believed that when the divine Messiah came he would feed people abundantly (see, for example, Isaiah 25:6–8, 49:9–11). It was nearing the time of the Passover, when God had set people free from captivity in Egypt and through Moses had fed his people supernaturally with bread or 'manna' from heaven. The people believed that God had promised to send to Israel a prophet like Moses who would lead them to freedom as Moses had done. Having been fed so abundantly in the wilderness, the crowd conclude that Jesus is 'the Prophet who was to come into the world'.

5. Why do you think the crowd want to make Jesus their king? Why does Jesus refuse and withdraw?

### Read verses 25–40

6. How does Jesus describe the motivation for the crowd following him in verse 26?
7. What, in contrast, does Jesus encourage them to seek? Where can they find what they really need, and why?
8. Do you find the request of the crowd in verse 30 surprising, given what has just happened? By referring to Moses giving them bread in the past, what are they actually asking for?
9. What does Jesus offer them again and what do they ask for again in verses 32–34?
10. What do you think Jesus means when he calls himself ‘the bread of life’ in verse 35?
11. In order to receive the living bread, what do people need to do (verses 28–29, 35–36, 40)? What happens to those who receive Jesus as the ‘bread of life’?

### **So what does it mean for us?**

The expectation of the crowd was that if God were to come to them he would satisfy their hunger and liberate them politically. They were so focused on their immediate needs that they failed to understand that Jesus was offering them something far greater. He was offering himself as their ‘living bread’, which would meet their deepest longings for all eternity.

Responding to the view that human beings are no more than complex biological machines, C. S. Lewis wrote, ‘God designed the human machine to run on himself. He himself is the fuel our spirits were designed to burn, or the food our spirits were designed to feed on...There is no ultimate happiness or peace apart from him’

How do you respond to Jesus’ claim and the assertion that it is only through faith in him that we can find lasting, eternal satisfaction?

# Leaders' Notes

## John 1:1-18 Introducing Jesus

### Introduction

What visual images come to mind when you hear the name 'Jesus'? Who does academia say Jesus was? Who does Hollywood say Jesus was? How would 'popular opinion' complete this sentence: 'Jesus was...'?

### Historical Context

John tells us at the end of his book that he was an eyewitness to what Jesus said and did (John 20:30–31, 21:24–25). In telling the story of this remarkable person we might expect John to begin by recounting the early life of Jesus, the influences that made him a great man and the ways in which the future course of his life were established. Then we start reading, and John begins by taking apart all our preconceived ideas and stereotypical images of 'gentle Jesus, meek and mild'.

### Questions

#### Read verses 1–8

11. Where does John begin his Gospel?

*'In the beginning' refers to a time before the creation of anything, and therefore John claims that before the universe existed, the Word existed. The phrase 'in the beginning' deliberately echoes the beginning of the Bible: 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth...', indicating that John is referring to something that will have an impact on the whole of creation.*

12. John begins by introducing us to 'the Word'. What does he claim about the Word in verses 1–2?

*The Word was 'with God', which means the Word was in relationship with God and is distinct from God. But then John says 'the Word was God'. Therefore the Word is both God and in some way in relationship to God.*

13. What role does the Word play in the creation of the universe? What does the Word have within himself in verses 4–5?

*Then in verse 3 John emphasises that the Word is the creator of all things. Everything owes its existence to the Word, including us! In verse 4 John says that Jesus has life in himself and is therefore the source of all life. All life, again including our own, finds its origin in the Word, the giver of life.*

*John again echoes the beginning of the Bible in that in the beginning God gave life to all things and created the light and dispelled darkness. The Word brings life and light and will not be overcome by the darkness.*

John has introduced us to some astonishing concepts in just a few sentences. In the Old Testament, 'the Word' referred to God speaking and therefore making himself known to the world. Who is this Word, the one who is God and yet is in relationship to God, who is the creator of everything that exists and who brings light and life?

But, rather than answer these questions, John next introduces us to John the Baptist, the older cousin of Jesus, who preached before Jesus.

14. Why do you think John introduces John the Baptist at this point? Why does he describe John the Baptist as a 'witness' and emphasise his 'testimony' (also verse 15)?

*John was an eyewitness of Jesus, as the rest of chapter 1 describes. He testifies or bears witness to what he saw Jesus do and heard Jesus say. Therefore, the Word John is introducing us to is not a speculative philosophical metaphor but a person, who walked in the world in our history, at a certain time and in a particular place.*

15. What was John the Baptist's testimony about the Word (verse 15), and what was the purpose of his witness? What does this suggest about what faith is based on?

*John the Baptist's testimony concerns the eternal nature of the Word. John the Baptist says first of all that the Word came after him. This refers to John the Baptist being born before or starting his preaching ministry before the coming of the Word (see Luke 1:24–26 and Luke 3:1–20). But John the Baptist says that the Word was in fact before him. He therefore testifies to the eternal nature of the Word. And, because the Word is eternal, he surpasses John the Baptist. The Word is much more significant and important. John the Baptist therefore testifies that the one who came after him in time, in the world, was in fact the eternal Word.*

*John's purpose is to bear witness to what he saw and heard so that people might believe. Faith is therefore reasonable, grounded upon sufficient evidence provided by those who witnessed the light.*

John has still not identified the Word, but now makes the breath-taking assertion that the Word is coming into the world. Why does the Word do this and what will the reaction be?

### **Read verses 9–13**

16. How does the world and 'his own' (probably a reference to the Jewish nation at the time) respond to the Word? How could 'recognise him' in verse 10 be understood?

*The world, that is humanity, did not recognise him. 'Recognise' means more than that the people of the world failed to recognise who the Word was; it means that people refused to accept and welcome him they refused to recognise him as their creator and as God. The people of the world were hostile to the Word, not simply confused or lacking in understanding. His own should have received him with open arms as their God and creator, but instead they reject him.*

17. John describes the alternative response to the Word in verse 12. What happens to someone when they believe? What kind of relationship does John's language imply? What is John so keen to emphasise in verse 13?

*There is a second way of responding to the Word, and that is to receive him. This means to acknowledge his claims and his identity and to entrust oneself to Him and worship him as God. Linked to receiving him is believing in his name, which refers again to accepting who he is and entrusting our lives to him.*

*According to John, anyone who receives the Word and who believes in his name is given the right to become a child of God. This means first of all that, although the Word gives life to everyone (verse 4), not everyone is a child of God. This is something conferred on those who believe. Believing, or trusting, in the Word, qualifies us to become children of God. Through believing, we experience a spiritual birth, and a relationship with God as Father begins. Believing changes our relationship and status before God. We become children of God, implying a close, personal and intimate relationship with God as our Father.*

*John emphasises that becoming children of God is not dependent on 'natural descent'. In his mind are probably those who are 'his own' in verse 11. Simply being born to Jewish parents does not make a person a child of God. Spiritual birth is not the result of human decision. Spiritual birth is ultimately a gift of God that we receive through believing in the Word.*

### **Read verses 14–18**

18. What do we learn next about the Word in verse 14? What do you think John means when he states that the Word was 'full of grace and truth'? What is the astonishing claim John is making here?

*The Word becomes flesh, that is, becomes a human being and is born into the world. Astonishingly, John claims that the Word, who is with God, who is God, who is eternal and creates all things, and gives life to all things, has become a human being and has been born into the world. John states that the Word 'became flesh and made his dwelling among us', that is, he lived with us. 'Full of grace and truth' means that the Word came into the world bringing the fullness of truth about God and the fullness of God's kind love. Further, this was witnessed by John, who saw his glory. 'Glory' refers to the essential nature of God's being. John is claiming that he saw the Word in human form and saw that this person was God.*

19. Who is the Word, according to verse 17? Why do you think John has waited so long to identify the Word?

*John now reveals to the reader that the Word is Jesus Christ. John may have delayed so long in telling us this in order to build up the suspense for the reader so that we might grasp the magnitude of what he is saying – the eternal God and creator of all has become human, lived in our time and space, was witnessed by others and came into the world in order to qualify people to become God's children.*

20. Why is Jesus uniquely able to make God known to the world?

*John explains that Jesus, the Word made flesh, can reveal to the world what God is like because he has come to the world from the Father's side. This is the place of closest relationship, literally 'from the chest' of the Father. We saw that the Word has been with God for all eternity. The Word has now come into the world, in human form, and makes God known to us. He can tell us the whole story of who God is. By way of background, no one has ever seen the true God*

*because God is spirit (John 4:24) and because human beings are alienated from God because of their sin.*

### **So what does it mean for us?**

As you review what John has said about the Word, what is he claiming about who Jesus is and what he has come into the world to do? How does this challenge your ideas about him?

Cosmologist Carl Sagan wrote that 'the Cosmos is all that is or was or ever will be'. In contrast, John informs us that the universe is the creation of the Word, who comes into the world full of truth and full of loving grace.

If this is true, what are its implications for the big questions of life – the meaning of life, what happens after death, how we define what is good and evil, how we can know what is true, whether love is real?

# **John 2:13-25 When Jesus Confronts Hypocrisy**

## **Introduction**

Most people find hypocrisy deeply unpleasant. Why do you think this is? Are religious people more inclined to be hypocritical, or is it something we are all prone to?

## **Historical Context**

John records Jesus' first miraculous sign in chapter 2:1–12. At a wedding in a Galilean village, Jesus covers the shame of a young couple by providing what they could not hope to provide themselves, an abundance of the most delicious wine. In doing this, Jesus announces that He is the longed-for Messiah, the coming of God to the world to take away our shame and end the scourge of death. We are left with questions 'Who will he do this for?' and 'How will he do it?'

Sometime later Jesus visits the Jewish temple in Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. The purpose of the temple was to symbolise God's dwelling with his people and yet also his inaccessibility. God could be approached only through an animal sacrifice. The system of sacrifices was a constant reminder of the need for the removal of sin if God was to dwell with his people.

The temple was divided into three distinct concentric areas. The outer courts were the areas where Gentiles (non-Jews) could worship. The inner courts were reserved for Jewish worshippers and the innermost part of the temple, the Holy of Holies, was the symbolic dwelling place of God with his people.

This was Jesus' first appearance as an adult in the capital, the centre of Jewish religious, political and cultural life – and it was going to be controversial in the extreme!

## **Questions**

### **Read verses 13–17**

12. At Passover, all good Jews were expected to make the pilgrimage to Jerusalem to celebrate God's mighty rescue of his people from Egyptian slavery. What do you think the mood of the people would be as they gathered in their thousands in and around the temple?

*There would have been a joyful mood. We read elsewhere in the Bible (see Acts 2:5) that Jews and converts to Judaism came to the Passover festival from all over the world. Since the Passover commemorated the establishing of the Jewish nation, the mood would have been both joyful and boisterous; nationalistic feeling ran high at Passover time.*

13. Jesus does not share the mood of celebration; what does he see that provokes his anger?

*The area of the temple reserved for non-Jews to worship has been taken over by those selling animals for sacrifice. Currency exchangers have also set up their businesses in the outer courts.*

*All Jewish men aged 20 and above had to pay a temple tax, which was used to pay for the work of the temple. This tax had to be paid in a special currency. The currency dealers charged pilgrims exorbitant rates of exchange, thereby lining their own pockets and making it difficult for the poor to worship.*

14. Describe what Jesus does. How would the mood be changed? Is there anything to suggest that his actions are more calculated than a simple outburst of anger?

*Jesus makes his own whip of cords. He takes time to find the necessary cords and bind them together into a whip. He then drives out the animals needed for sacrifice. The doves would have been in cages so he commands those selling them to get them out. He overturns the tables of those exchanging money. The scene would have been noisy and chaotic. The fact that Jesus takes time to make the whip suggests that this is not Jesus flying off the handle but something more deliberate. Jesus is full of 'righteous indignation' at what is happening in his Father's house.*

15. Do you find it surprising that 'gentle Jesus' gets so angry? Why do you think Jesus is so outraged by what he sees in the outer courts of the temple? What is his overriding passion, and where will it lead him?

*We tend to think of Jesus as 'gentle Jesus, meek and mild'. This is the safe Jesus who is nice to everyone. But here his wrath is plain to see. The reason for his anger is that people are being kept from drawing near to his Father in his Father's house. The Gentile courts are taken over for business purposes in verse 16 and the exchange rates make it difficult for the poor to worship.*

*His overriding passion is that people will come to his Father's house and know his Father, both Jew and Gentile. Zeal for this will lead to him being consumed, that is, he will be killed. Jesus is so passionate that people should come to know his Father that on this occasion his anger is provoked by those who are making knowing his Father difficult. And one day in the near future his passion for people to know his Father will result in him being consumed in death.*

16. The temple would have been incredibly busy at this time of year. All temple activities were overseen by the priests and order was kept by the temple guard. Why do you think it is only Jesus who is so angered by what he sees? What does this suggest about the attitude of the religious establishment?

*That the religious leadership allowed this trade in the outer courts of the temple suggests that they were utterly indifferent to the Gentiles knowing God and more interested in their taxes and profits. Worship had become commercialised and those who stood to gain most were those in charge of the temple – the priests themselves.*

Reflecting on what Jesus has done, his disciples see in his attitude and actions the fulfilment of what Israel's ancient king David had written centuries earlier. The quotation in verse 17 is from Psalm 69:9. Jesus is acting very much like the greatest king the nation had ever had, and his overwhelming concern is that people should not be prevented from worshipping his Father.

### **Read verses 18–25**

17. How do the Jewish authorities react to Jesus dramatic actions? How do you think they should have reacted?

*Those in charge of the temple ask Jesus for a 'sign'. They want Jesus to do something, probably something miraculous, to show that he has come from God and therefore has the authority to do what he has just done.*

*The Jewish authorities were the guardians of the temple and should have been clearing the courts themselves. Therefore, they should have responded positively, because Jesus was seeking to return the temple to its purpose of providing people from all the nations of the world with a place to worship God. However, they would rather demand that Jesus provide a sign than face the charge of having dishonoured God and lose their profitable trade.*

18. What might be the motives behind their demand for a sign?

*It seems likely that the authorities were calling Jesus' bluff in an attempt to discredit him. If he couldn't produce a miracle then they need not listen to him because he could not be from God.*

19. What sign does Jesus offer them in verse 19? How is he misunderstood by the Jewish leaders? What is their attitude to Jesus?

*When Jesus speaks of the sign he will offer, he speaks about his own death and resurrection (verses 19 and 21). His body will be destroyed in death, but will be raised to life again. The disciples understood this only after the resurrection, but, as John hints, they should have understood Jesus sooner because the Old Testament Scriptures speak about how God's Messiah would not remain in death (see, for example, Psalm 16:9–11).*

*The Jewish leaders respond to what Jesus has said with derision. What he is saying is laughable: it had taken 46 years to build the temple so it would not be possible to raise it in three days. Jesus is here coming to his own, but his own do not receive him (John 1:11).*

20. What do you think Jesus is claiming for himself by describing his body as 'this temple'?

*In response to their challenge that he prove he has authority to clear the temple, Jesus describes himself as 'the temple'. He is the place where people meet God; he is referring to himself as the living God, present with them. He has not come simply to clear out the temple, but to replace it. This is what we saw in John 1:14: the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.*

*In verses 13–17 Jesus shows his outrage that people from all over the world are being prevented from worshipping God. Now he says that he is the place where all people need to come to meet and worship God. This is a huge claim for a human being to make, so huge that he is understood only literally by the Jewish leaders.*

*In order for people to draw near to God in the temple, a sacrifice was offered. These sacrifices spoke of the need for cleansing from sin if God was to dwell with sinful people. The guilt of the person offering the sacrifice was transferred to the animal, which was 'punished' with death in the place of the guilty.*

21. Jesus says that his body will be destroyed and then raised in three days. What do you think he is saying that his own death will achieve?

*Jesus' death on the cross will end the need for temple sacrifices. He is both the living presence of God with us (the temple) and, in his death and resurrection, he is the sacrifice that is*

*'punished' with death in our place so that we are freed from our sins. There is no need for any more sacrifices because he has done it all.*

*Jesus offers no other sign to the Jewish leaders because his death and resurrection are the sign that he replaces the temple as the place where people meet God and are made right with God.*

22. In verses 23–25, we see people believing in Jesus because they see the miraculous signs. Why do you think Jesus would not entrust himself to them? What did he know was in them?

*Jesus did perform miraculous signs in Jerusalem and become popular with the crowds. But he knows what is in their hearts, and it is not real faith but a superficial attraction to something extraordinary.*

### **So what does it mean for us?**

We began by discussing how deeply unpleasant people find hypocrisy. As you observe Jesus in this incident, what is his attitude to hypocrisy?

Given his concern for truth and integrity, what do you make of his claim to be the temple and the one sacrifice that makes us acceptable before God? Is he deliberately misleading us? Is he misguided?

# John 3:1-21 Losing My Religion

## Introduction

What common answers would people in our culture give to the question, 'How do you think you get to heaven?'

## Historical Context

Nicodemus was a member of an orthodox Jewish religious group called the Pharisees, who focused on a strict interpretation of the first five books of the Bible. He was also one of the elite 70 members of the Sanhedrin, who had jurisdiction over Jews throughout the world. Highly educated, a scholar and a politician, Nicodemus was accustomed to being sought out to interpret the finer points of the Law of Moses.

Like other Jews of his time, Nicodemus was waiting for the Kingdom of God to appear, when the prophesied Messiah would come and inaugurate God's kingdom on earth. Nicodemus believed that the Messiah would vindicate and release Israel from the hated Roman domination – but only when faithful Jews began to obey God's commands more fully.

As a strict Pharisee and servant of the people, Nicodemus could feel confident that he would be welcomed into the Kingdom of God. Nevertheless, perhaps wanting to be certain that he had done everything necessary to obtain a favourable judgement from God, he sought out Jesus. But what Jesus tells Nicodemus shakes him to his very core.

## Questions

### Read verses 1–10

12. Why do you think such a senior and well-qualified man as Nicodemus comes to see Jesus, and why at night?

*John records at the end of chapter 2:23–25 that Jesus has performed 'signs' in Jerusalem, making him the subject of interest and debate. 'Signs' may be miraculous but can also be significant events, such as the clearing of the temple in chapter 2. A sign was understood to point to God's work, done through a great leader God uses to rescue his people. The coming of the divine Messiah to save his people from Roman rule was expected to be accompanied by 'signs'. Therefore Nicodemus, a leader of God's people wants to find out more about who Jesus is and what he is teaching.*

*Given what has just happened in the temple, Jesus is a controversial figure. It is likely that Nicodemus comes to speak to him at night to avoid being publically associated with him. It is possible that Nicodemus is experiencing some degree of inner conflict. Could this preacher from Galilee be the Messiah? He wants to find out, but not at the expense of his public reputation.*

13. What does Nicodemus already believe about Jesus? What question is implied in his statement in verse 2?

*Nicodemus approaches Jesus respectfully, calling him 'rabbi' or teacher. The 'signs' that Nicodemus accepts point to Jesus' having a divine calling; sent by God and God is with him. Given the signs Jesus is performing, the question is, 'Who are you?' Is Jesus the expected Messiah, come to bring God's long-awaited Kingdom? Or is he just a young firebrand teacher?*

14. Jesus responds with a radical statement in verse 3. How does his response challenge Nicodemus' belief that acceptance by God is based on obedience to the Old Testament law?

*In response, Jesus is emphatic. The words 'Very truly, I tell you' indicate a saying of the utmost seriousness, spoken with the greatest possible authority. Jesus uses the expression three times in his dialogue with Nicodemus (3, 5, 11). By using this expression Jesus is emphasising to Nicodemus that he doesn't know (despite his claim in verse 2), and that he must listen.*

*Nicodemus has come to discover who Jesus is and whether he has come to bring in the Kingdom of God. Jesus replies by saying that even Nicodemus, with all his learning, moral obedience and religious devotion, doesn't have a hope of even seeing the Kingdom let alone entering it unless he is 'born again' or 'born from above'. Jesus will say more about this phrase; in essence, he powerfully asserts that, without a radical spiritual transformation that only God can effect, entry into the Kingdom of God, that is eternal life, is impossible.*

*This would have shaken Nicodemus deeply because as a Pharisee he believed that scrupulous adherence to the moral law of God would guarantee him entry into the Kingdom of God.*

15. How does Nicodemus respond to this in verse 4? Is his religion a barrier hindering him from understanding what Jesus is saying?

*Nicodemus seems to be confused and appears to take Jesus' words literally. He appears to be persuaded that as a devoted and obedient Jew he must be acceptable to God and part of his people. He is stuck within his own belief system and this explains why Jesus is being so forceful and challenging, he wants to shake him out of his preconceived ideas.*

16. In order to help Nicodemus understand his radical statement in verse 3, Jesus explains being 'born again' by comparing it with physical birth. What differences and similarities does he point to? Why might Nicodemus find this so unsettling (verses 5–8)?

*'Flesh' in verse 6 refers to physical birth. Physical and spiritual birth are similar in that, as flesh gives birth to its own substance, so the Spirit gives birth to new spiritual life. Physical reproduction is possible for human beings; flesh gives birth to flesh – we can give birth to other humans. But we cannot make ourselves spiritually alive. No matter how devoted we are, or how morally disciplined, we have no spiritual life unless God's Spirit gives it to us. Spirit gives birth to spirit. The work of God's Spirit is compared to the wind ('wind' and 'spirit' are the same word in Greek and in Hebrew). The wind cannot be manipulated or controlled by human action. We cannot generate in ourselves the work of the Spirit in response to our good works or moral devotion. Spiritual life is something given by the Spirit as he pleases. This would deeply unsettle Nicodemus, as this has been his life's work.*

*When Jesus refers to being born again by water and the Spirit, he is most likely referring to Ezekiel 36:25–27, where the prophet sees a time to come when people will be washed of their sin and the Spirit will transform their hearts (both are symbolised in Christian baptism). This is why*

Jesus can say to Nicodemus in verses 7 and 10 that none of this should surprise him; as Israel's teacher he should know what was promised in the Old Testament. This is the promise Jesus has come to fulfil.

### Read verses 10–15

17. Although Nicodemus begins his conversation with Jesus with the confident assertion 'we know', Jesus has sought to show Nicodemus that he doesn't know the answer to the decisive question of how someone can come into a living relationship with God that lasts for ever. How does Jesus explain why he is able to answer this question, and what reason does he give for Nicodemus' failure to understand (verses 10–13)?

*Jesus claims a unique authority to be able to speak on these matters in verses 11 and 13. In verse 2 Nicodemus begins his conversation by stating 'we know'. He came with the thinking of his day, that being Jewish, being holy and being devoted were all that was needed to enter the Kingdom. Jesus has shown him that he doesn't in fact know.*

*Now Jesus mirrors his claim by saying 'We speak of what **we know** and have seen'. What Jesus is saying is not speculative. He states in verse 13 that he knows what is required to enter the Kingdom because he has come from heaven. He therefore has unique first-hand knowledge of how to enter the Kingdom. However, Nicodemus fails to understand because he will not believe (verse 12).*

Having established his unique authority, Jesus now answers Nicodemus' question in verse 9, about how is someone given new life and able to enter into God's Kingdom. In verses 15–16 Jesus refers Nicodemus back to a story he would have known well (Numbers 21:5–9). The Israelites had been set free from slavery and death in Egypt through miraculous signs from God. But they refused to believe. In response God sent a plague of snakes as a judgement on their persistent rebellion. Refusing to give up on them, God instructed Moses to craft a bronze serpent, attach it to a pole and lift it up. If anyone looked up at the snake, they would live. The bronze snake was God's remedy for sin. Looking up at it was a sign that they believed.

18. Jesus says that he, the Son of Man, will be lifted up. He is referring to his death on the cross (see 12:32–33). How does this story from ancient Israel explain what Jesus will do on the cross?

*Israel was rescued from slavery and death in Egypt by God's performing signs on their behalf, miracles to rescue them. But they consistently refused to trust God and openly rejected him. The punishment for their rejection of the God who gave them life was death. Nevertheless, in love God gives them a saviour in the form of the snake lifted up.*

*Jesus is saying that what keeps even Nicodemus out of the Kingdom of God is a deep inner rebelliousness. The only way he can enter into eternal life is by God's providing a way of saving him, as he did in providing the bronze snake. Just as people were saved from death when they looked up at the snake, so people will be saved when they trust what Jesus does for them when he dies on the cross. It is only by trusting in what he does at the cross that anyone can experience eternal life. The implication is that our rebellion will be forgiven and we will experience new spiritual birth by trusting in what Jesus did at the cross.*

## Read verses 16–21

19. According to Jesus, what is God’s motivation for sending his Son into the world to be lifted up on the cross (verse 16)? What do we have to do to receive eternal life? What does Jesus say we are saved from and saved for?

*The Father sends his Son into this rebellious world because he loves people. Jesus emphasises the greatness of the Father’s love by stressing that he gives his ‘one and only’ or unique and eternal Son to be killed on the cross in order to rescue people from perishing and to give them eternal life.*

*In order to receive this eternal life Jesus says that we have to believe in him and what he will do for the world at the cross. To believe means to trust and accept what God will do for us. It is saying “Please let what Jesus did at the cross count for me.”*

*Believing saves us from perishing. This is the opposite of eternal life. If eternal life is spending forever in the presence of the Father and the Son, then perishing means spending eternity apart from the Father and the Son and all their life and love. Refusal to believe in what Jesus has done at the cross results in our condemnation. God sent his Son to save people because people are rebellious and stand condemned. All who receive him are welcomed into eternal life. But rejecting God’s salvation means that people remain condemned.*

20. Jesus says that he is the light that has come in to the world. What two reasons does he give for people’s refusal to believe in him (verses 19–21)?

*People are in darkness and under condemnation already. But Jesus says people prefer darkness; they do not want to let go of their sin and their rebellion and submit to Jesus. . Secondly, in verse 20 people fear exposure: they do not want to acknowledge their sin and admit their need of a saviour.*

21. How does this imagery relate specifically to Nicodemus and how this highly moral, deeply religious and intelligent man approaches Jesus?

*Nicodemus comes to see Jesus at night probably because he fears exposure. He doesn’t want to admit his interest in Jesus. Jesus is saying that Nicodemus, despite all his religion and good works, is in darkness and doesn’t want to be exposed to the light.*

22. In John 7:45–52 and 19:38–42 we read more about Nicodemus. Do you think his actions suggest that over time he came to accept who Jesus was and what he had done for him?

## **So what does it mean for us?**

The common misconception about religion is that we must seek approval and acceptance from God through our good behaviour. Even today, when many doubt God’s existence, we frequently hear people say, ‘If there is a God I hope he will accept me because I try to be a good person.’

We don’t have the power to meet the demands of our own moral code or change our nature. According to Jesus, no amount of religious devotion or moral goodness will rescue us from

condemnation. Only by believing in what he did for us on the cross in dying for our sins can we find forgiveness and acceptance with God.

How do you respond to the idea that we cannot do anything to achieve salvation but that, in love, Jesus has done everything for us? Imagine standing before God and being judged according to what you have thought, said and done. Would you be confident of acceptance?

# John 5:1-30 Who Does Jesus Think He Is?

## Introduction

If God exists, do you think he should judge between good and evil? On what basis do you think he should decide who is condemned and who is accepted?

## Historical Context

Jesus returns to Jerusalem to celebrate one of the Jewish festivals. It is a Saturday, the weekly Jewish Sabbath, and Jesus makes his way to the temple, passing the Sheep Gate and going on to Solomon's Colonnade. The five columns of the colonnade were built around the Pool of Bethesda, meaning 'house of mercy'. There invalids would lie, because it was believed that the waters had healing properties. It was thought that when angelic wings stirred the pool the first person into the water would be healed.

Jesus does not pass by but goes inside and meets a man who has been lying there for 38 years. Jesus does something astonishing for the man, but in doing so becomes embroiled in controversy. People are so angry with him they devise murderous plots against him.

## Questions

### Read verses 1–10

12. Imagine the scene that confronts Jesus at the Pool of Bethesda. What does he see and hear? The Sheep Gate was not a part of the city that those coming to the festival would visit. What does Jesus' going there suggest about him?

*It's like Christmas in Jerusalem, but Jesus seeks out the homeless shelter. Verse 2 states that a large number of people would lie by this small pool, including the lame, the blind and the paralysed. It would have been a scene of hopelessness, misery and destitution. This is in contrast to the general mood of festivity in Jerusalem at the time. Jesus deliberately seeks this place out; he doesn't just walk by. He goes inside because he cares for those who are there.*

13. What do we discover about the paralysed man whom Jesus heals? What must his life have been like? How might his attitude to life and healing have changed over the years?

*This man has stayed by the pool for 38 years. For most if not all of his life he has stayed by the pool. But his wait has been hopeless; when the water is stirred (probably by an intermittent spring feeding the pool), he cannot get into it quickly enough. Day after day, week after week, year after year, nothing has cured him. His life must have felt utterly hopeless.. He is utterly alone; he has no one to help him get into the pool.*

14. Why do you think Jesus asks the man, 'Do you want to get well?' Given the man's response, what is he hoping Jesus will do for him?

*This seems like a strange question, given the man's obvious need. But this is a sensitive approach by Jesus; he doesn't enter the man's life without being invited. The man does want to*

*get well, but even after 38 years his only hope seems to be the pool and getting some help to get into the water when it is stirred.*

15. When Jesus commands the man to get up and walk, what is he inviting him to put his hope in? As he has lived by the pool for 38 years, would this be easy for him to accept? Why might he struggle to trust Jesus' offer?

*When Jesus commands the man, he is inviting him to trust his offer of healing. Will he trust Jesus, or continue to cling to the vague hope of being healed by the pool? Jesus doesn't offer to help him to get into the pool but challenges the man to make the focus of all his hopes what he offers.*

*This would not have been easy. It is likely that many 'healers' had passed by over the years the man had been lying there. And Jesus was a stranger. Jesus doesn't invoke the name of God in his healing; he doesn't even pray. He simply commands the man to get up and leave the place where he had put all his hopes for so many years.*

What a memorable day this was for this man. Jesus met him in his utter helplessness and did for him what he could not do for himself – he made him whole again. Such a miracle should have been received with joy.

Perhaps when walking to the Temple to thank God for his healing, the man is stopped by the religious leaders, who want to know who encouraged the man to break the Sabbath. On the Sabbath the people rested from their work in order to remember and celebrate that God had created all of life and then rested on the seventh day.

### **Read verses 10–18**

16. The Jewish religious leaders criticise the man for carrying his mat on the Sabbath, which, according to their interpretation of the Old Testament law, was not allowed. How does their approach to the man and the Sabbath contrast with that of Jesus?

*Jesus clearly cares for the man by seeking him out, speaking to him and healing him. The religious leaders could not be more different. They have no interest in celebrating the man's healing. Rather, they criticise him for carrying his mat on the Sabbath and therefore carrying a 'heavy load', something they considered to be working and therefore breaking the Sabbath.*

*Healing the man on the Sabbath and relieving him of his heavy burden of illness is the true fulfilment of the Sabbath (see Mark 2:27–28).*

17. Jesus meets the man again in the temple. What do you think he means by his statement in verse 14? What could be worse than his life so far? What is Jesus most concerned that he should gain (see verse 24)?

*In this second meeting with the man, Jesus again takes the initiative. He encourages the man to turn away from a life of sin. Jesus doesn't link his illness with sin, either his own or that of another in a previous life. Rather, Jesus is concerned that something even worse than a lifetime of paralysis, hunger and poverty could happen to the man if he doesn't turn from sin. That something worse is eternal perishing that comes from being alienated from God, which had spoken of to Nicodemus. There is something more important than being made physically well and that is listening to Jesus and believing in him. Only then can the man enjoy eternal life. Jesus*

*is not threatening the man but is concerned that he might simply think that physical health is all that matters. To stop sinning sounds an impossibility, but Jesus does not mean never to sin again, but in verse 24 to believe.*

18. In verse 12 the religious leaders ask who told the man to pick up his mat and therefore break God's Law. What is the meaning of Jesus' response in verse 17? Why are they so outraged?

*The Jewish leaders accuse Jesus of encouraging the man to break the Sabbath, a serious charge because it meant a complete disregard for God and his Law. But Jesus' reply to their accusations results in murderous outrage. Jesus calls God 'my Father'. This doesn't seem shocking to us, but the Jewish leaders knew what he meant by it. Jews might refer to God as 'our Father', recognising God to be the Father of all humanity and especially of the Jewish nation. But in calling God 'my Father' Jesus claims for himself an utterly unique relationship to God; as the Jews understood it, he was making himself equal with God.*

*The Jews were strict monotheists, believing in only one God. Therefore, Jesus' claiming to be equal with God and in unique relationship with God was considered blasphemy. Hence they seek to kill him for making such an outrageous claim.*

### **Read verses 19–30**

19. In response to their accusation of blasphemy, how does Jesus describe his relationship with God the Father in verses 19–20?

*In these verses Jesus describes his relationship with the Father in three ways. Jesus claims that he is not independent of God the Father: 'The Son does nothing by himself.' Secondly, 'Whatever the Father does, the Son also does.' This is a claim to be equal with God, to do the same work as God. Thirdly, the Son has a unique relationship of love with the Father: 'The Father loves the Son.'*

20. What are the works that Jesus says he will do, that will be even greater than healing a man paralysed for 38 years (verses 21–23)? What claim is Jesus therefore making about his identity?

*Jesus says that he will do greater works than what they have just seen, and they will be amazed. He will raise the dead and give life to the dead. Jesus says that he will be the judge of all people. These were activities that were reserved for God alone. Jesus is again therefore claiming to be equal with God. Jesus will demonstrate just what he describes here in chapter 11, when Lazarus is raised from the dead and given life. Therefore, according to Jesus in verse 23, he should be given the same honour as the Father. In fact the Father and the Son are so united that to honour the Son is to honour the Father and to dishonour the Son is to dishonour the Father.*

21. According to Jesus, how can people be rescued from condemnation and receive eternal life (verse 24)? Jesus refers to those who are hearing his voice as dead in verses 25–26. What does he mean by this? How does what he says here relate to the healing of the man by the pool?

*The Son gives life and rescues from condemnation all those who hear his words and believe that he is from the Father. It is hearing and believing that guarantee eternal life. Jesus says that the*

*time has come when the dead will hear his voice and those that hear will live. The dead in this verse are those he is speaking to. We need to hear the Son now and believe, and then we will live. We are dead spiritually and the only way to receive life is to listen and believe. Then the Son will give us life and we will escape his judgement. We are all like the man by the pool, helpless unless Jesus helps us. The good news is that, he comes looking to help us!*

22. In verses 28–30 Jesus states that there is a judgement to come for all people and this judgement will be based on what people have done in their lives. Does this fill you with confidence? Where can we find a cast-iron assurance that we will be given eternal life (verse 24)?

*In these final verses Jesus speaks about a judgement to come. At that judgement, life will be awarded to those who have consistently done what is good. However, we have seen that even the best, such as Nicodemus, fail. What hope is there that we might escape condemnation? Our one sure hope is to hear the Son and believe that he is from the Father (verse 24).*

### **So what does it mean for us?**

The essayist G. K. Chesterton wrote of his surprise and shock when he encountered the real Jesus for the first time: *'I was given the impression that Jesus was a gentle creature... Then I looked at the New Testament. There I found an account, not in the least of a person with his hair parted in the middle or his hands clasped in appeal, but an extraordinary being with lips of thunder.'*

We see something of that thunder here. Jesus speaks of being the judge of the world and about our eternal destiny being determined by our response to him. The paralysed man stands for us all. Jesus says that we are 'spiritually dead' and, just like the man, we are helpless. We need Jesus to come to us, to speak to us, to give us life. We need to believe and accept Jesus at his word.

How do you respond to Jesus' claims in this chapter? Like his original hearers, do you find what Jesus says in this chapter outrageous?

# John 6:1-40 What Were You Expecting?

## Introduction

If you were to become a Christian, what expectations would you have of what being a Christian would be like?

## Historical Context

In chapter 5, Jesus found himself in conflict with the Jewish leaders because of his claim to do the same work as the Father in giving life and judging the world. When he claims to be the eternal Son of the Father, the Jewish leaders understand Jesus to be asserting that he is divine. If God's eternal Son has come into the world, what has he come to do?

In this next incident Jesus explains why he has come to the world. Jesus is no longer in Jerusalem but by the Sea of Galilee in the north. It is nearing the time of Passover, when Jews remember their liberation from slavery and death in Egypt. As they fled from Egypt under the leadership of Moses, God supplied their physical needs by providing a form of bread called 'manna'. The Passover was a time of intense nationalistic zeal because it was believed that God had promised he would send another liberator like Moses, called 'the Prophet', who would lead them to freedom from their Roman rulers.

## Questions

### Read verses 1–15

12. What do we learn about the crowd following Jesus? Why are they following him?

*The size of the crowd is very large. There were 5,000 men. Together with women and children, some estimate the crowd to be up to 20,000. The crowd have gathered around Jesus because they have seen the signs he has performed, particularly his healings*

13. Jesus knows what he is going to do, so why do you think he asks Philip (who was from the nearby town of Bethsaida) how the people could be fed?

*Jesus asks Philip how the people might be fed in order to find out what he believes about him. Having seen the signs, does Philip believe that Jesus is who he claims to be? Will he show any sign of faith in Jesus as the one who does the works of God? It was God who had fed the people in the wilderness during the time of Moses.*

14. How do Philip and then Peter respond? Do you think their responses are reasonable? Why or why not?

*Philip responds with a quick calculation but doesn't include Jesus' identity in that calculation. At this point he doesn't image that Jesus is able to feed the crowd. Neither does Peter. He points to the packed lunch of a poor child (bread made of barley was the bread of the poor) and focuses on its inadequacy: 'How far will they go among many?'*

*Initially we might think this is a reasonable response, as they had never seen someone feed such a huge crowd with virtually nothing. But they had seen the signs, and the signs Jesus performed pointed to his being divine. God had provided for a crowd in the wilderness at the time of Moses. If Peter and Philip had understood the signs correctly, they would have understood that Jesus, the divine Son of God, could easily feed the crowd.*

15. What do you imagine the expectations of the crowd were when Jesus sat them down and then gave thanks to God for the small amount of food he had? What do the 12 baskets of leftovers suggest about the life that Jesus offers?

*Given the way Philip and Peter have responded, it is unlikely that anyone expected Jesus to feed the crowd and to do so to such excess. The baskets of leftovers suggest that the life that Jesus has come to offer is one of abundance.*

It was believed that when the divine Messiah came he would feed people abundantly (see, for example, Isaiah 25:6–8, 49:9–11). It was nearing the time of the Passover, when God had set his people free from captivity in Egypt and through Moses had fed his people supernaturally with bread or ‘manna’ from heaven. The people believed that God had promised to send to Israel a prophet like Moses who would lead them to freedom as Moses had done. Having been fed so abundantly in the wilderness, the crowd conclude that Jesus is ‘the Prophet who was to come into the world’.

16. Why do you think the crowd want to make Jesus their king? Why does Jesus refuse and withdraw?

*Having just been fed by Jesus, the crowd may well believe that he is the one who could bring them national liberation. At the very least a king that could feed them so well must have been deeply attractive. Jesus refuses to be made king and withdraws from the crowd because his purpose is not to bring liberation from Rome. Nor is his purpose to fill their stomachs. His purpose is to bring a far greater freedom and satisfaction. This is explained in the next section.*

### **Read verses 25–40**

17. How does Jesus describe the motivation for the crowd following him in verse 26?

*The crowd are concerned to find Jesus because their stomachs have been filled by him. They do not perceive the significance of the miracle Jesus has performed and they are not interested in the true identity of Jesus that the sign points to.*

18. What, in contrast, does Jesus encourage them to seek? Where can they find what they really need, and why?

*In contrast to food that spoils, Jesus encourages them to seek eternal life. He is trying to get them to think beyond their physical appetites, to stop being materialists. They are interested only in Jesus’ feeding them. This will leave them hungry again. But what he offers them is something far greater: eternal life. He can give this to them because of who he is, the one whom God the Father approves of. This is what he has said in chapter 5: the Father has given him the authority to give eternal life to all who come to him.*

19. Do you find the request of the crowd in verse 30 surprising, given what has just happened? In referring to Moses' giving them bread in the past, what are they actually asking for?

*Jesus has just done an incredible miracle and the crowd were so impressed they wanted to make him their king, believing him to be the fulfilment of the Old Testament promises. Now their request for a sign and the reminder of what Moses had done in giving them bread suggests they are asking for bread.*

*More deeply by asking for another sign like that done by Moses, they only want a Messiah or saviour who will satisfy their physical and political needs.*

20. What does Jesus offer them again and what do they ask for again in verses 32–34?

*The crowd are focused on Moses and the physical bread he offers. They need to focus on the giver who will give them the 'bread of God' that will give 'life to the world.' But their implicit request in verse 30–31 now becomes explicit: be a king who gives us bread and meets our material needs. But Jesus points them to a much greater need, that for eternal life. This eternal life through faith in Jesus is what will really satisfy them.*

21. What do you think Jesus means when he calls himself 'the bread of life' in verse 35?

*Jesus is trying to help them understand that the true food that satisfies our deepest needs and does so eternally is not physical food, but Jesus himself. Our deepest needs are satisfied in him. He doesn't simply provide satisfaction, he is our satisfaction.*

22. In order to receive the living bread, what do people need to do (verses 28–29, 35–36, 40)? What happens to those who receive Jesus as the 'bread of life'?

*We receive the bread of life, this true satisfaction, by receiving his offer of eternal life. If we come to Jesus and believe in him, we will never be hungry or thirsty again. Faith in Jesus is our true satisfaction for all eternity. This is what the Father wants to do through his unique Son (verses 37–40).*

## **So what does it mean for us?**

The expectation of the crowd was that if God were to come to them he would satisfy their hunger and liberate them politically. They were so focused on their immediate needs that they failed to understand that Jesus was offering them something far greater. He was offering himself as their 'living bread', that which would meet their deepest longings for all eternity.

Responding to the view that human beings are no more than complex biological machines, C.S. Lewis wrote, 'God designed the human machine to run on himself. He himself is the fuel our spirits were designed to burn, or the food our spirits were designed to feed on... There is no ultimate happiness or peace apart from Him...'

How do you respond to Jesus' claim and the assertion that it is only through faith in him that we can find lasting, eternal satisfaction?

*This resource is produced by UCCF: The Christian Unions. UCCF is made up of hundreds of university Christian Unions across Britain. We exist to give every student on campus an opportunity to hear about Jesus. This resource has been developed to help you engage with the narrative of John's Gospel. To find out more about Christian Unions, visit [www.uccf.org.uk](http://www.uccf.org.uk)*

**uccf:thechristianunions**  
*making disciples of Jesus Christ in the student world*

UCCF: The Christian Unions  
Blue Boar House  
5 Blue Boar Street  
Oxford  
OX1 4EE

[www.uccf.org.uk](http://www.uccf.org.uk)

[email@uccf.org.uk](mailto:email@uccf.org.uk)

Registered Charity number 306137