

The Gospel of John (cont.)

The last sign that Jesus performs in John's Gospel wraps up the section called "the book of signs" and it also leads to "the book of glory." It is the resurrection of Lazarus. That last sign tells us one more time how far signs can go. They do not compel faith, but rather give an opportunity for faith, because when Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, it says in John 11:45 that "many of the Jews put their faith in Him but some went and told the Pharisees what Jesus had done." They in turn called a meeting and said He was performing many miraculous signs and if they did not stop Him, the Romans would come and take away their place and their nation. This is when the Jews first began to decide, in a serious way, that they were going to kill Jesus. They saw the signs, and they saw that He was becoming too popular and too threatening and their envy began to get the better of them.

John 12 begins what is called "the book of glory." One of the unique things about John's Gospel is Jesus' prediction of His death. In John 12:23 Jesus speaks to His disciples about His death and says, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified." And He will be glorified in His death, as He goes on to say, "I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds." So Jesus has to fall to the ground. He has to die in order to produce many seeds. Once He loses His life, it will create abundant life and a universal principle: the man who loves his life will lose it. But it is not an easy choice, as He goes on to say, "Now my heart is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour." So Jesus is glorified by death by being lifted up on the cross and the Father is glorified. And in John 12:32 Jesus says, "I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself." This alludes to His death, being raised from the earth on the cross and lowered to the earth in His death and burial, and His resurrection. So He predicts His death as a matter of His glory and a matter of great suffering. He does not ask for deliverance; He asks that God be glorified and that He might bear much fruit in His death, for that is how He will draw men to Himself.

The next section of John includes Jesus' instructions of His own disciples. It is instruction that prepares them for His death and for His resurrection. The first thing He tells them is how to live among themselves, which is modeled when Jesus washes His disciples' feet. The disciples were in the upper room and there was no servant. It was the preparation of the Passover and there was supposed to be a servant who washes the feet, but there was not one. Whichever disciple would wash the feet of the others would thereby claim or accept the lowest role. But none of them do that, so Jesus does. He gets down and washes His disciples' feet, symbolizing that He is washing the whole person, as He says to Peter, "Unless I wash you, you have no part in me." And they are astonished. Jesus continues to impress upon them His message, saying, "Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you." Jesus did what needed to be done. He humbled Himself and tells us to humble ourselves for Him.

In this way Jesus instructs in community relations. He also tells His disciples that His death shows His complete love for them. Since He loves them completely, He expects them to love Him completely. The way to love Him completely is by loving each other. He shows them His love and expects them to show Him their love by loving each other, by trusting Him, and by obeying Him and His commands. In the following chapters Jesus continues telling the disciples how to love Him and how to persevere in love in the time of coming persecution. He says, "Blessed are you if you do these things." "Love one another as I love you." "Keep my commandments and persevere in them." "Abide in the vine." It is reminiscent of Matthew 24-25, when He urges His disciples to be ready for His return. That's what is happening here. You see a lot of parallels between this part of the Bible and the synoptic Gospels, as John often provides the theology behind the brief statements in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. For example, in the synoptics we

are told to persevere, to be ready, and to watch. But in John, we are told how to persevere. There are many ways to keep the command to persevere: by using Jesus' life as a model, by trusting in God, by abiding in the vine, by prayer, and by being prepared for persecution. Jesus said, "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." We are also promised the help of the Holy Spirit. And we will have the life of the community to help us persevere by abiding together in unity.

So Jesus trains His disciples for perseverance and especially for His death and resurrection. The resurrection narratives of John have three parts. Part one shows Jesus' resurrection being disclosed. The women came to the tomb and could not find Jesus' body. They ran and told Simon Peter and John that His body was gone. They misconstrued the evidence and they thought His body had been taken. Peter and John ran to the tomb. John was first but stopped. Peter was running slower, but he was brasher so he charged right in. Then John went in too and they saw the sign—Jesus had been resurrected. The head cloth was folded up separately. And even though they still did not understand the Scriptures that Jesus had to be raised from the dead, they did see and believe.

Then Mary encountered Jesus, thinking at first that He was a gardener. He tells her that she cannot hold on to Him, but she should go tell the disciples that He is returning to His Father and their Father, to His God and their God. So she goes back and says she has seen the Lord. A bit later we read, "On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you!' After he said this, he showed them his hands and side." He then blesses them with the Holy Spirit to equip them for their task.

Not all the disciples were there; two were missing—Judas and Thomas. We know where Judas was, but we do not know where Thomas was or why he was not there. So when Thomas came back, one of the disciples reported that they had seen the Lord. We call him 'doubting Thomas' but it is far too mild of a word for him. Thomas said, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it." This is bold and brash unbelief. He is very emphatic; in the Greek, he uses a double negative. This actually fits Thomas a bit, though. In John 11:16, when Jesus was traveling to Judea, Thomas says, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." Thomas shows that he has something of a pessimistic streak—pessimism with dogged loyalty.

Of course Jesus heard him, since He is God. And so a week later, they are in the house again and Thomas is there. Then Jesus comes and says, "Peace be with you." Look at the places where Jesus says "fear not" and "peace be with you." When He says, "Fear not," it is because people are afraid. When He says, "Peace be with you," it is because peace is not with them. This time He has some business with Thomas. He says to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side." Jesus is being literal. The NIV says, "Stop doubting," but the original says, "Stop unbelief and believe." It is not a problem of doubt; it is a problem of unbelief.

John does not say that Thomas actually reached his hand into Jesus' side. Maybe his bluster was reduced somewhat when Jesus showed up because Thomas does not seem to take that approach. He says something different. He says, "My Lord and my God." In some ways, that is the apex of all human utterances in John. Thomas changes in a flash. There are several things to think about with regard to this personal confession. Thomas now knows that "the Word was God" and He honors the Son. But there are a couple of things happening in Jesus' response, "Because you have seen me, you have believed." First, we have to realize Jesus' immense tenderness and patience with Thomas. Jesus is always patient with doubters, but this is patience with an astonishing statement of unbelief from someone who should have known better. These are, after all, His friends. The disciples saw Him, so why should Thomas doubt? Besides, Jesus predicted that He would rise again. Thomas has no good reason to fail to believe. And yet

Jesus, who would have every right to give the sternest of rebukes, instead gives him all the evidence that he foolishly demanded. It was an incredible act of humility, along the lines of washing their feet again. He gave them exactly what they needed even though they did not deserve it.

There is a rebuke in Jesus response too, though. He says, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." John goes on to say that Jesus did many other miraculous signs that are not recorded. These are written that you might believe. The day of seeing signs is coming to an end. Now we are entering a day in which you have to read about the signs. This was on John's mind. Remember, he is an old man when he writes. John is the last of the living disciples and he sees it as extremely possible that he is going to leave this earth soon, and with him, the last witness will be gone. When John disappears, what will be left? People will need to rely on the reports of eyewitnesses. So the story of Thomas encourages us that Jesus will meet us, not halfway, but all the way. Incredibly, He goes further than we deserve. But Thomas is also showing us exactly how we should not respond to the day when the eyewitnesses are gone, because once John dies, that ridiculous, unbelieving request of Thomas cannot be answered anymore. We are now in that day, and we have been in that day for 1900 years, of relying on the written testimony of the eyewitnesses. The eyewitnesses are gone, but what we now have is the book. So Jesus meets Thomas' ridiculous demands, but He even uses them to instruct us that it is better by far to believe without seeing.

Some people today think it would have been better to be alive during the time of Jesus. They think it would have been easy to believe if they had been there. John's answer to that is, no, the great majority of people who saw the signs did not believe, but rather misconstrued them. Instead it is better by far to believe without seeing. It is not cursed, but blessed. Our generation and all the intervening generations, anyone who was not there, we are all blessed. John says on a couple of crucial occasions that at first Jesus' disciples did not understand what was happening, but only after Jesus was glorified did they understand these things that were happening. It took years of reflection and meditation to understand what was really happening in His ministry. One of the blessings for us is that we have the event and the interpretation. We are not like Nicodemus; we are not left confused. We have the sign of bread and its interpretation, written not to make things obscure but to make things clear, that we might believe. We have the sign of Lazarus and the interpretation. This is so that we might believe that Jesus is the Christ. The Christ is Jesus.