



The Gospel of John
Victory Through Faith

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Theme & Objectives

Synopsis

WHAT IS VICTORY, AND WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE FOR THE CHRISTIAN? The four Gospel accounts are the single story of Christ's earthly life, each told for one of four different audiences. When compared to the others, John's gospel account is unique in several ways: it is thematic, not chronological as he focuses on people and stories not found in the other accounts and *vice versa*. Also, his long life and service as an elder allows his gospel account to be written not as a purely factual narrative but rather an address to the theological concerns of a community.¹ For these reasons, over time the Gospel of John has been more severely critiqued than the other synoptic accounts. However, the Word of God is undeterred; more current scholarship finds that although the narrative structure of John is different, the account is nonetheless reliable. In fact, John is clearly an eyewitness to the events he writes about, and his central task is not relaying things that Jesus did; rather, he takes it upon himself to write an account laying out the case that Jesus Christ is the organizing principle of all reality.

¹ Origen [1989]

It is in **this** conception of reality that the Christian finds his or her "victory." By framing the historicity of Jesus' life, public ministry, death, and resurrection not as a chronological series of factual events but rather a gradual unfolding of the essence, the nature, of Jesus, we can better understand not just why we follow Him, but how and why He ought to be *the center of our reality*. John sets on his task right from the outset, as he describes Jesus as the Logos (Λόγος) of God.

If Christ is to be the center of our reality, then nothing else can be. Nationality, language, culture, politics, socio-economic status - these are all variables by which we as humans can identify our in-group and out-group; these are frequently the center of our reality. John's account puts these notions to rest: with Christ Jesus as the center, none of these issues can be as important as our status as Christ-followers.

Victory is what we have when we see Jesus in this way. John defines it as:

"For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world - our faith."²

² 1 Jn 5:4

Theme

VICTORY IS FOUND THROUGH FAITH. What does it mean to have faith in Christ Jesus? Is it a belief that He is who He says He is? Is it a statement made through fear of judgment? **What precisely are we proclaiming when we say we have faith in Jesus?** A discussion on the concept of the *Logos* is necessary to answer this important question.

The concept of the Λογος The 1st C. AD was a crucially important time for the diffusion of ideas in the classical world. Numerous years of some combination of Roman administration, Greek philosophy, and Jewish culture all came together in the Judaeen province during the lifetime of Christ. Therefore, even fishermen like John would have been familiar with the pantheism of Greek religious life.³ These swirling factors all come together in the first eighteen verses of John's gospel – a theological masterpiece weaving together 600 years of Greek and Jewish thought. In them, John makes a startling claim: What we have been striving to define, eager to follow, and abstractly grasping at for all these years, was in fact, a person called Jesus the Christ.

Beginning with Heraclitus in the 6th C. BC, the Λογος was the cosmic principle of a shared, rational order, although he suspected most people would not recognize it. John shifts this conception from an impersonal, rational force to a personal divine Being⁴ but does likewise lament that people may be unaware of Him.⁵ Moving forward 300 years, Plato suggests in his *Theory of Forms* that the Λογος is a rational discourse a person has, both with themselves and with others, to guide the soul towards knowledge of eternal realities. What Plato believes to be an abstract means to Truth, John argues is in fact Truth embodied.⁶ Aristotle takes the definition of Λογος as given by his teacher but makes it more concrete: it is a rational faculty that not only separates man from beast; it also serves as the highest form of persuasion - ideals and reason through speech. But for John, Jesus doesn't merely use persuasive words and makes good arguments – He is The Word⁷: divine speech in action, communicating God not just with words but with His very Being.⁸ Finally, in the 1st C. BC, Philo of Alexandria, a Jewish philosopher in the Hellenistic world, portrayed the Λογος as an intermediary between God and the world and an embodiment of God's reason and the Torah. But what Philo thought was an abstract concept, John makes real: Jesus is the link between God and Man, the physical manifestation of God Himself. Christ is the perfect form and the

See Horbury et al. [1999], Hengel [1973], Goodman [2007], Bartlett [2002] for further background on this gradual process.

³ Even more so Saul of Tarsus, whose Jewishness coupled with Roman citizenship made him the perfect candidate to bring Christianity to the Gentiles.

⁴ 1:1-3

⁵ 1:10

⁶ 1:9; 1:14

⁷ 1:14

⁸ 14:9

perfect being – which makes Him the rational center of all that is and that could be. **THIS** is what we proclaim when we say we have faith in Jesus – He is our all in all, the *center* of our understanding of the world around us. These lessons are aimed at increasing our faith by helping us make Jesus the center of our reality.

From this we can better understand one of Paul's quotes (taken from Epimenides of Crete) in his sermon to the Athenians: "For in Him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28)

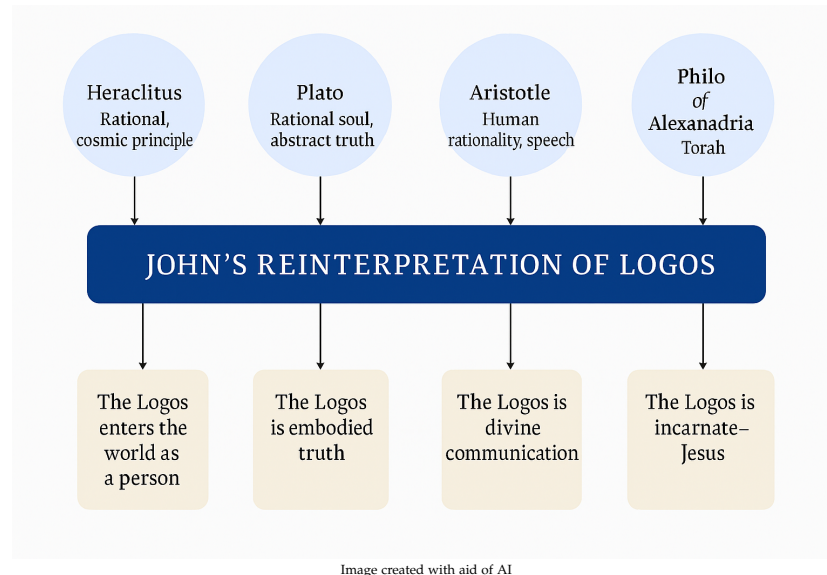


Figure 1: John's concept of Logos

Objectives & Key Takeaways

As we learn more about God's plan for victory, keep these objectives in mind as you prepare your lessons so that participants can:

- **Explain** fully the victory we have in Christ Jesus
- **Demonstrate** that victory on earth is not the same as victory in Jesus
- **Explain** why Jesus was rejected
- **Understand** how Jesus is both fully human and fully divine

As you plan your lessons, use these statements as a guide to focus the participant's thoughts.

- 1 VICTORY BEGINS WITH GOD'S IDENTITY, NOT HUMAN ACTIVITY.
- 2 VICTORY IS KNOWING GOD'S VOICE.
- 3 VICTORY IS REVEALED AS OBEDIENCE TO GOD.
- 4 VICTORY IS LOVE LIVED IN THE COMMUNITY.

Consider ways to give a preview of the lesson to your class. This way, they can come to class with an idea of what will be discussed, which can help the class flow better and can reduce pauses after a question is asked.

- 5 VICTORY COMES NOT IN AVOIDING SUFFERING, BUT WHAT GOD DOES THROUGH IT.
- 6 VICTORY OCCURS THROUGH INNER, NOT OUTER, TRANSFORMATION.
- 7 VICTORY ISN'T STRIVING WITH GOD, IT'S REMAINING WITH GOD.
- 8 VICTORY IS BEING HELD IN PRAYER BY THE SAVIOR.
- 9 VICTORY IS CLARITY IN A WORLD OF CONFUSION.
- 10 VICTORY IS RESILIENCE, NOT COMFORT.
- 11 VICTORY IS ALREADY AT WORK IN THE LIVES OF BELIEVERS.
- 12 VICTORY DOESN'T END AT THE EMPTY TOMB - IT GOES OUT INTO THE WORLD.

Andragogy

TEACHING ADULTS COMES WITH ITS OWN SET OF CHALLENGES compared to teaching children. Ensure that your lesson is geared at the appropriate level; for example, does your class contain more or less mature Christians? Teach in such a way that they can understand, but more importantly, apply the knowledge you are bringing them. Likewise, generational differences in your classes may cause alterations in how the material is presented. A lecture may be necessary for some to learn, but rather bland for others. Teaching is as much art as science, so be attuned to the feedback (spoken and unspoken) you are receiving. This will help ensure that your lessons are having their intended effect!

Methodology To that end, this curriculum is written to be as flexible as possible while still keeping all adult classes "on the same page." Since we will be moving through different parts of the text to weave in all of the instances in which John discusses a particular theme, a "reminder" section will be given on the margins so that teachers can remind participants of the larger picture John is crafting for us.

Learning Model

To learn most effectively, adults must be able to tie what they're being taught with some type of **applied action**. "What does this mean for me in my life?" is a question that frequently occurs as an adult hears a lesson meant for their education. Of course, faithful adherence to the meaning of the text is a must. However, it is also a "must" that the lesson be applicable. To that end, we will use the "Review, Reveal, and Relate" model. First, remind them what they learned; second, reveal the new lesson and how it ties to earlier lessons, and then apply that lesson into a context that they can understand and use in daily life.

To facilitate this learning model, in these lessons you will frequently see notes on the right hand margin of the page. They will include Scripture references as well as any outside material that we use directly or simply give as a reference. We will also offer "teaching tips" that you are completely free to use or ignore

(see above paragraph; you know your class better than anyone else!). Also, there are numerous examples of artwork that visualize various aspects of Christianity, which can help some in their understanding. We include these in the notes, as well as hyperlinks to their image so that you can use them in your slides should you desire.

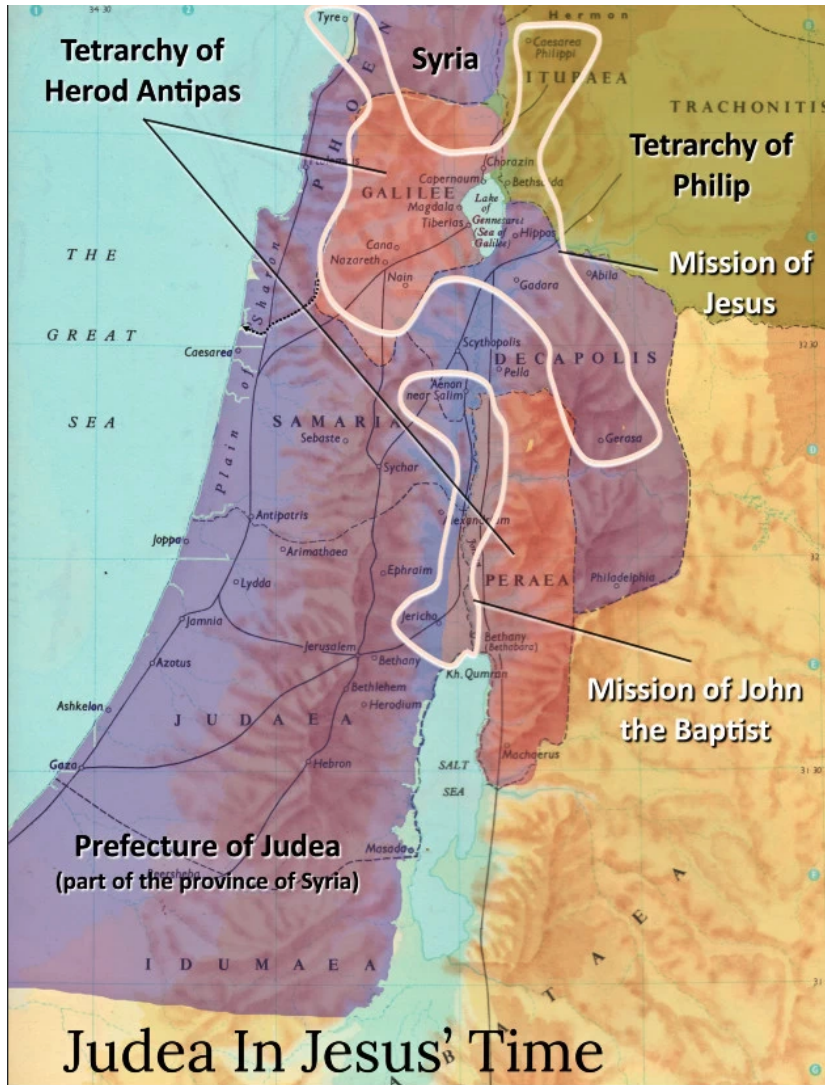


Figure 2: Judea during Time of Jesus

Found at: History in the Bible

Lesson 1. Victory of The Word: the Light that Shines in Darkness

Text: John 1:1–14; 3:19–36; 8:12–59; 10:22–39

Synopsis

VICTORY BEGINS WITH GOD’S IDENTITY, NOT HUMAN ACTIVITY. Consider the statement “I worship God” – something we’ve all thought, said, and believe. Those three simple words however yield a great insight into how our theology works. “I” serves as the subject and “God” serves as the object of this simple yet powerful sentence. If “God” is the party receiving the action (in this case, worship), then by definition He must *precede* the party performing the action, which in this case is us. Therefore, as we consider any aspect of our relationship with God (in this case, victory), it **must** start with the understanding that when comparing God and man, God always comes first, not only in the temporal but also the spiritual sense. Understanding victory means that we first must understand God. Furthermore, one cannot see without light. God sends out Light so that we may find Him through the Son of Man who was sent to be that Light. God wants us to find Him, not because He needs us, but because we need Him.

Review

The teacher for the combined class can use the information found in the introduction (particularly the discussion of the *Λογος*) as well as various facts regarding the book’s authorship and dating (if desired) to set the stage for the study. It may also be helpful to instruct all participants that the curriculum will not follow a traditional, linear path since that is not how John wrote his account.

“The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.”
(Jn. 1:5, NASB)

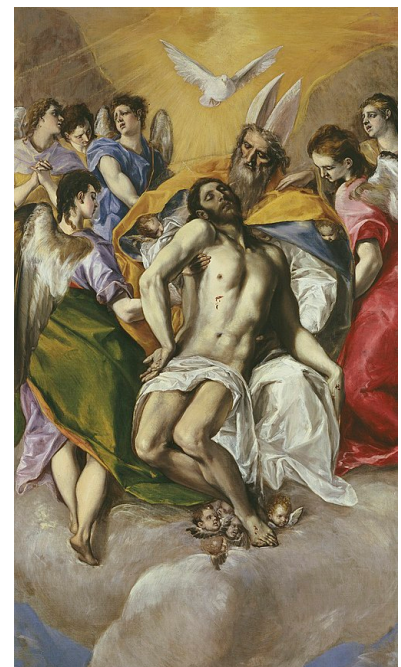


Figure 3: Holy Trinity
Greco [1577]

Reveal

Have you ever been in a completely dark room? It's a terrifying situation because the lack of ability *to see* anything sets us on edge. Is there something in the room that could cause harm? How long will the room be dark? Our brain begins to work overtime in a dark room because the darkness creates a vacuum of information; we do our best to fill in the missing information with whatever we may have. But what happens when the light turns on? All of our questions, worries, and concerns go away because we can now *see* what is in the room with us.

However, the longer one stays in darkness, the easier it becomes to stay there. A comfort arises in the not knowing; perhaps the information light could bring wasn't that important. Adaptation to the darkness becomes not only feasible, but the clear correct course of action. Yes, light would have been nice, but at this point, perhaps that would be more unbearable than darkness.

This is the choice God brought to us when He designed His plan of salvation. The man He sent brings Light to the world. But His own people did not receive Him – the teachings were too challenging, too radical. The lives of the Jews ⁹ were imbued with so much success, power, and pleasure that they wanted nothing to upend it. However, those still in fear of the dark were crying out for relief, mercy, forgiveness, grace, and Truth. What then was the purpose of the Man whom God sent? It was, for *all who received Him and believed in His name*, to gain the right to be called children of God ¹⁰ and to bring judgment to those who love the darkness. ¹¹

⁹ This work will use the term in the same manner John used the term - to represent the Jewish elite and the authorities who had the most to lose from Jesus' divinity and message.

¹⁰ 1:12

¹¹ 3:19

John the Baptizer As the chosen witness of Light, John emphatically informed his disciples that no one can receive anything unless it is given to him by heaven, and He who comes from heaven is above all. Finally, the Father has given all things to the Son and whoever believes the Son has eternal life. For John's disciples, the choice was clear – believe or do not believe. Walk in the Light or walk in the darkness. Therefore, God's identity was the cause of the victory, not the choice.

The Pharisees As part of the elite, they were quite happy to continue following the law of Moses. For in it was found the Law; God's relationship with a sinful mankind was complicated yes and the sheer amount of sin made full compliance impossible, but surely God understood and was on their side. However, those thoughts were challenged by Christ when He suggested they follow the Law to better understand His claim that he was Light. Once He equated

Himself with the Father, the Pharisees wanted him arrested and killed.

The Jews They gave Jesus a simple, direct task: If you are the Christ, tell us plainly. He sums up His answer with a simple, direct statement: I and the Father are one. For this, they attempted to kill Him.

Relate

As we reflect on what true victory is and looks like, consider these open-ended questions as a method to get participants involved or as a way to further refine your lesson.

Questions

- 1 Why were the Pharisees so opposed to Jesus? Answer in term of light and darkness.
- 2 How does John 3:19-21 show us that victory on earth is not the same as victory in Jesus?
- 3 Based on the answer to Question 2, explain why Jesus was rejected as the Logos of God.

Teaching tip: Please keep in mind the different levels of Christian maturity. Assuming a certain level of knowledge when asking questions may be unfair. Also, a useful tactic when asking questions is to keep quiet for a few moments after asking. People need time to think and if you immediately answer your own question, people will stop thinking, which is not the goal.

VICTORY BEGINS WITH GOD'S IDENTITY, NOT HUMAN ACTIVITY.

Lesson 2. Victory Through Belonging: Following the True Shepherd

Text: John 10:1-21; 15

Synopsis

VICTORY IS KNOWING GOD'S VOICE. The concept of *belonging* is critical to human understanding. We are individuals, but we are also part of families, groups, and/or clubs: all different ways in which we as humans can feel we belong somewhere, even to the point of death. As described beautifully by Donne,

"No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend's or of thine own were. Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee." [Donne, 1624]

It is that sense of belonging that shapes our actions. Why do we follow laws? Why are we nice to people? To what or to whom one belongs can go a long way to understanding why they act the way they do. For us, belonging to God means we think, believe, and act in certain ways, and those ways are *different* than the actions of someone who belongs to something or someone else.

Do we know God's voice? The text for this week recounts Jesus' teachings about Himself and how He is the link to the Father. Therefore, if we want to belong to God, Jesus is the person to follow.

Review

Recall that victory is found in God's identity, not in our own. He predates us, and He shows His Light to guide us back to Him. Our choice is: do we follow that Light or not? If we do, we ought to say that we belong to Him and we have fellowship with one another. ¹²

"Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber. But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. To him the gatekeeper opens. The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, **and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice.** A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers." (Jn. 10:1-5)



Figure 4: The Good Shepherd

¹² 1 Jn. 1:5-7

His mercy and grace allow us to be reconciled to Him through His Son. Nothing we do or say can reconcile us to Him; He reconciles us to Himself. How did God show His mercy and grace? By sending His Son Jesus to die for our sins.

Reveal

Do you remember your favorite teacher? I had several, but one thing they all had in common was they had the ability to teach the same lesson in a different way to different people so that all understood. Jesus had the same ability, and in these verses we see Him make the case to three different groups of people what they needed to do to follow God. But would they choose to follow the voice of God?

Calling the first Disciples John the Baptizer was sent to prepare the way for Christ, and as such, he had disciples before Christ began His earthly ministry. Once John called Christ The Lamb of God, Andrew followed Him, and brought along Simon Peter his brother. Next, Phillip (perhaps a fellow follower of John) who lived in the same town as Andrew and Peter, was convinced by Christ to follow with a simple command - "Follow me." Finally, he was able to convince Nathanael to follow Him by describing him as a man with no deceit who was seen by Him under a fig tree.

Imagine the power those few words must have had on those men - to drop everything in their lives to follow this Man, whom they would call Rabbi but who had no formal qualifications for such a title. They believed those words, and Christ promised much more. Compared to them, how much more to we have to inform our decision on whether to follow God?

The multitudes, including the Jews Following Jesus' miracle of giving the blind man sight, the multitudes were amazed and the Jews were confounded. All who knew the man knew he was blind from birth. Yet after meeting Jesus and following His instruction, he could now see. But did this Man have a demon? How did He perform this work? and why did He perform this work on a Sabbath? Given the plainness of the miracle, they now had to choose who they were going to follow. The blind man himself called Jesus a prophet, and the Pharisees themselves were quite split on the matter. They hounded him and hounded him, but he would not yield: "[w]hether he is a sinner I do not know. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." ¹³

Against this backdrop, Jesus speaks to all assembled and teaches the parable of the Good Shepherd. In it, He first tells them a plain

Teaching Reminder: John's central point in his gospel account is that Jesus is the center of our understanding of the universe; all of His words and deeds are to be examined through that lens. All of our words and deeds are to be judged through that lens. Victory is found in Jesus because He overcame Satan through His death on the cross. To access this victory, we must believe in Him, be born again through water and the Spirit, and we must love another as Christ has loved us.

¹³ 9:25

truth they would already know: sheep follow their shepherd and go where he leads them. Because *they know the voice of their shepherd*, they will not follow a stranger. While the story made sense, the people didn't understand what it had to do with the events of the blind man's healing. So He continues and calls Himself the Door and the Good Shepherd. Anyone else who speaks as if he is God is a thief seeking to steal, kill, and destroy the flock.

Jesus then separates Himself away from other religious leaders by claiming that the shepherd dies for the sheep, and that this quality is why the Father loves Him. He summarizes this teaching by equating Himself with God:

"I lay it [His life] down on My own initiative. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This commandment I received from My Father."¹⁴

¹⁴ 10:18

Once again, this caused differing opinions to arise about Jesus and who He says He is. Is He a demon, or is He who He says He is? Like the multitudes and the Jews, we have this exact choice before us today. Do we believe Him and follow His voice, or do we dismiss Him?

The Apostles In the upper room, John recounts a lengthy lesson that Jesus gave to His disciples as He knew the hour of His betrayal was at hand. With Him soon to be ascended back to the Father, the disciples would have to lean on each other to spread His message. The key mechanism to that trust is to **abide in Him**; believe in Him. Just as sheep rely, trust, follow, listen, and abide in their shepherd, they are to do the same. Abide in love, keep the commandments, and love one another. Because of this, the world will hate them, but the Helper will be coming.

The apostles heard the voice of God through Christ Jesus, and they followed Him as a sheep knows its shepherd. They belonged to Jesus, and therefore they belonged to God. Can we say the same thing? Do we abide in Him? Do we keep his commandments? Do we love one another?

Relate

As we reflect on what true victory is and looks like, consider these open-ended questions as a method to get participants involved or as a way to further refine your lesson.

Questions

- 1 Why were some unwilling to believe Jesus' words?

"I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him [that is, Christ]: 'I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept His claim to be God.' That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic – on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg – or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse... You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come up with any patronising nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to." [Lewis, 1952]

Teaching tip: Please keep in mind the different levels of Christian maturity. Assuming a certain level of knowledge when asking questions may be unfair. Also, a useful tactic when asking questions is to keep quiet for a few moments after asking. People need time to think and if you immediately answer your own question, people will stop thinking, which is not the goal.

- 2 Why do you think Jesus spent so much time preparing the disciples for the fact that the world would hate them?
- 3 Why didn't the Jews simply believe that Jesus was who He said he was?

VICTORY IS KNOWING GOD'S VOICE.

Lesson 3. Victory Over Expectations: The Misunderstood Messiah

Text: John 2:1-22; 6:14-15; 7

Synopsis

VICTORY IS REVEALED AS OBEDIENCE TO GOD. The Jewish understanding of God centers around the Law and the Prophets. God spoke, and His directives were Law, so they could know how to obey God. He spoke to the Prophets so they would know what would happen to them in the future. The central character of the prophecies was the Messiah, who would come into the world and make all things right. After John calls Jesus the Lamb of God and His public ministry begins, His teachings and His dealings with the downtrodden were seen by many as confusing. This simply wasn't what they had in mind when they were thinking about the Messiah. He would be strong, He would kick Rome out of the Holy Land, He would raise up the religious leaders who sacrificed so much to shepherd the people to God. But that's not what happened. Obedience to God wasn't about following laws as much as it was about seeking mercy, giving forgiveness, and loving others.

Review

Recall from last week we are led to the path of victory by God's voice. His Son came down to be that voice, available to all, so that we can be reconciled to Him so that sin would no longer have dominion over mankind. But God's voice, Jesus' message, doesn't necessarily sound the way we want it to sound. So do we follow as servant sheep, or do we disobey and attempt to find our way to God without his voice?

"And there was much muttering about him among the people. While some said, 'He is a good man,' others said, 'No, he is leading the people astray.' ... When they heard these words, some of the people said, 'This really is the Prophet.' Others said, 'This is the Christ.' But some said, 'Is the Christ to come from Galilee?'" (Jn. 7:12, 40-41)



Figure 5: Wedding At Cana

Murillo [2013]

Reveal

In 1905, Albert Einstein proposed a theory of relativity that suggested Newtonian physics didn't adequately explain space-time. He was a nobody; he held no university position at the time of his writing because his professors thought he wouldn't amount to anything and wouldn't recommend him. Experimental physicists considered his work too abstract; only Max Planck understood the ramifications of the paper. But by 1919, further empirical research confirmed his theory, and he became a household name within science.

People can be misunderstood for several reasons: they may be unlikely, they may be crazy, they may not be able to articulate their position, or they may simply have caught on to something that others don't have the vision to see. Such is the case of Jesus; His insight into the Father's will allowed him to preach the Good News properly, but in a way that others would dismiss because the ramifications of the teaching were simply too radical, too off-putting, or too dangerous. This lesson will cover several instances where people didn't understand what Jesus was saying, what it meant for them, and how they were supposed to act as a result of the teaching.

The Wedding at Cana While in Galilee before His mission began, there was a problem: the wine had run out. This was a social disaster for the parents of the groom. The inability to properly host a wedding feast would lead to derision and shame, but Mary had a solution: Jesus could prevent the embarrassment by creating more wine. Though hesitant, He obeyed the Law of Moses ¹⁵ and did as His mother wanted. This action resulted in a welcome surprise: the expectation of increasingly diluted wine as the party continued was upended; instead, the good wine was saved until the last. John tells us in this story that what Jesus is bringing will far surpass any expectation one can have!

The Passover John continues the theme of misunderstanding in the next verses of Chapter 2, although the time and space has shifted to Jerusalem during the Passover. Here, Jesus is overcome with zeal for God's house. ¹⁶ The low exchange rate, the inflated prices, the usurious approach that His people were taking with each other was too much to bear. ¹⁷ The Jews were indignant – by what sign did He cause this uproar? The answer was misunderstood; how can a Temple which took 46 years to build be rebuilt in three days? Not until He was raised from the dead on the third day did the disciples understand what He meant.

Teaching Reminder: John's central point in his gospel account is that Jesus is the center of our understanding of the universe; all of His words and deeds are to be examined through that lens. All of our words and deeds are to be judged through that lens. Victory is found in Jesus because He overcame Satan through His death on the cross. To access this victory, we must believe in Him, be born again through water and the Spirit, and we must love another as Christ has loved us.

"My time has not yet come."

¹⁵ Ex. 20:12

Teacher's tip: The lesson objective for this week is about obeying God, not ascertaining whether it is acceptable to drink alcohol or what kind of wine Jesus made. Please do what is necessary to sidestep this area of potential division. Here are several Jewish and Hellenic sources that can be consulted if you desire further study on the issue for your own edification: [Danby \[1933\]](#), [Epstein \[1936\]](#), [Neusner \[1999\]](#), [Holmes \[2007\]](#), [Martyr \[1997\]](#), [of Alexandria \[1999\]](#), [the Elder \[1938\]](#), [Athenaeus \[1927\]](#), [Josephus \[1960\]](#), [of Alexandria \[1993\]](#)

¹⁶ Ps. 69:9

¹⁷ Numerous theories within public economics tell us the approach the sellers took towards the visitors to Jerusalem made rational sense; the lesson here is that just because something *can* be done doesn't mean it *should*. Treating people fairly is to be a greater ethical duty than making money.

Obedience and estrangement John recounts in Chapter 7 several examples of confusion leading to disobedience. By this point in Christ's ministry, the Jews were seeking to kill Jesus because in their mind He was guilty of blasphemy in making Himself God. Their social pressure was bearing fruit; His own brothers believed He needed to be out in the open, defying the Jews, while Jesus understood the world hated Him because of their evil works. The people were afraid of the Jews and divided about Jesus.

By the middle of the Feast of Booths, He taught in the Temple. He glorifies God, not Himself, and asks the Jews why they do not keep the Law and why they want Him dead. The crowd does not understand why the Jews would want Him dead, but others were convinced that something was wrong in how Jesus was being treated. Concerning His divinity, we see one of the greatest questions asked: "When the Christ appears, will He do more signs than this man has done?" ¹⁸

¹⁸ Jn. 7:31

Victory over Expectations Our perceptions of reality lead us to certain expectations. For First Century Jews, the Romans were a strange and brutal people that needed to be defeated. They were waiting for a Messiah like David, who would slaughter the enemies of God and recreate the Promised Land that had been squandered by forefathers long dead. Instead, Jesus claims to be the Son of God, speaks in confusing parables, and doesn't seem interested in Rome or violence at all. But He also heals people, especially the downtrodden. So should He be followed, or not? Such is the question we must ask ourselves in the modern day. His story hasn't changed; the inspired authors of God's Word wrote what they wrote. Do we believe it or not? Do we believe God, or not?

Relate

As we reflect on what true victory is and looks like, consider these open-ended questions as a method to get participants involved or as a way to further refine your lesson.

Questions

- 1 How do we have victory in Jesus when our daily struggles are still plainly evident?
- 2 Why do you think Jesus was so upset at seeing the economic activity in the Temple?
- 3 Does confusion usually lead to rejection? If so, why? How does that apply to Jesus?

Teaching tip: Please keep in mind the different levels of Christian maturity. Assuming a certain level of knowledge when asking questions may be unfair. Also, a useful tactic when asking questions is to keep quiet for a few moments after asking. People need time to think and if you immediately answer your own question, people will stop thinking, which is not the goal.

VICTORY IS REVEALED AS OBEDIENCE TO GOD.

Lesson 4. Victory Through Love: Serving, Not Being Served

Text: John 13:1-35

Synopsis

VICTORY IS LOVE LIVED IN THE COMMUNITY. The events that occurred in the upper room were pregnant with emotion – love, impending doom, confusion, and disbelief, just to name a few. Why was the Messiah telling the disciples so plainly that He was about to die? Why did Judas leave so abruptly? And why is Jesus washing feet? John records more dialogue shared in the upper room than any of the other Gospel writers combined. He also refers, for the first time, to “the disciple whom Jesus loved.”¹⁹

This episode, in which Jesus personally washes the feet of His disciples, gives an example of love for each other. It likewise informs how we are to treat each other, and how we can be a Christian example to others.

Review

Recall from last week obeying God can be difficult if we do not have the proper expectations. Jesus came not to destroy, but to fulfill. He came not to defeat Rome, but to defeat sin and death. This caused confusion because He was not what people, certainly the Jews, expected. We too must overcome and cast aside our own expectation and instead obey God as He has determined.

Reveal

Self-sacrifice is not something that comes naturally. Our instincts kick in; we fight or we flee when faced with danger, physical or otherwise.

Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, **having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.** “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” (John 13:1, 35)

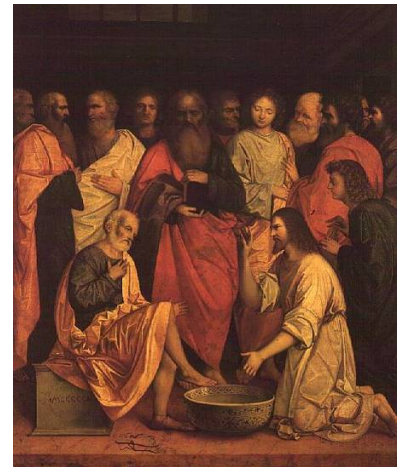


Figure 6: Christ Washing the Disciples' Feet

Boccaccio [c. 1500]

¹⁹ Jn. 13:23; also occurs in 19:26, 20:2, 21:7, , and 21:20. No other writer makes this reference, leading most scholars to believe John was referring to himself.

Teaching Reminder: John's central point in his gospel account is that Jesus is the center of our understanding of the universe; all of His words and deeds are to be examined through that lens. All of our words and deeds are to be judged through that lens. Victory is found in Jesus because He overcame Satan through His death on the cross. To access this victory, we must believe in Him, be born again through water and the Spirit, and we must love another as Christ has loved us.

Loving others too is fraught with conflicting emotions. Why do we love? How do I know when I love? Do I only love because I'm loved in return? Exactly which type of love is being discussed? This confusion makes it difficult to understand and implement the imperative "For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'." ²⁰

This confusion permeates the Upper Room. The disciples thought they were gathered together to share the Passover. Instead, Jesus prepares Himself and starts washing their feet. The lesson was clear. If He, the Teacher and Master, washed their feet, then how should they treat each other? This story gives us, as Christ-followers, a master class in love: how it's revealed, misunderstood, resisted, and commanded.

Jesus: Love through humility and self-giving The Son of God knows that time is short. The forces of darkness *must* win in the short-term so that God's plan of salvation for all who obey Him will win in the long-term. It will not be easy; it will be painful. After three years, surely He can have the restful enjoyment of one last Passover before being arrested, tried, and killed. Instead, during their final time together, He washes the disciples' feet, even those of the one who would betray Him that very night. Here the traditional power structure inverts: humble service in a servile task is love, not dominance or even protection. John starts the story with the declarative statement that He "loved them to the end." ²¹ After completing His task, he gives a new commandment to love as He has loved: to love not as reciprocity or from emotion, but rather sacrifice.

Peter: Love, zealous but uncomprehending "Lord, why do you wash my feet?"; no doubt an understandable question - one that we might ask if we were in his place. Jesus' answer wasn't good enough; it simply could not be that the Master would perform such a lowly task. However, his refusal to accede to Jesus' wish was quickly shut down, and he pivots to the opposite extreme: now he wants his hands and head cleaned too so long as he can be with Jesus! How many times do we treat Jesus in a similar manner? Our love for Jesus is strong, but the exact reason why may be vague or unclear. We promise to do all in Jesus' name, but when that moment comes, we vacillate. Peter's doubts and reactions in this story help us ask questions like: Why do we love? Do we understand the depth of Jesus' love? How do we replicate that level of love? What type of love are we thinking of? Here is a case (there will be others!) where Peter is sometimes judged by us for not understanding what was going on, but his responses are all too human, and even someone with his faith still

Dickens masterfully crafts the Sydney Carton character in *A Tale of Two Cities* to build up a Christ-like love story. In it, Carton's *πηλεο* for Lucie Manette drives him to sacrifice his life for the man whom Lucie loves, thereby redeeming his cynical wasted life while allowing the family to live in peace. His final words ring as a testament to self-sacrifice: "It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest that I go to than I have ever known."

²⁰ Gal. 5:14

²¹ Jn 13:1

The final phrase "to the end" is in Greek *εις τελος*, meaning to the fullest extent: complete and perfect love.

misunderstood what Jesus was truly bringing.

Judas: Love rejected and betrayed Breaking bread is one of the closest acts a person can do with another; sharing a common meal means, at a minimum, a truce to current hostilities, a hope that misunderstandings can be rectified; a touchstone to give peace a chance. Jesus offers bread to Judas. John records that he took the bread before leaving to betray Him, but it is unclear if he ate it. In any case, Judas rejected the bread and he rejected the Bread of Life. At that point - that exact point - darkness and Satan enter him. We aren't told how it could be possible that Judas could have walked with Jesus for so long, saw miracle after miracle, only to betray his Master for thirty pieces of silver. However, Jesus said it best: "The Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that man if he had not been born."²²

It is not enough to simply be in proximity to love; nor can it be forced - we must actively participate in love. There is no osmosis by which we can learn to love if we simply surround ourselves in it. We must be willing to sacrifice, but humble ourselves, to allow ourselves to be vulnerable to feel the love Christ has for us.

John: Love that rests securely The disciple whom Jesus loved does very little in this chapter, but what he does is incredibly important. Similar to Mary "choosing the good part"²³ John records himself in the Upper Room as only reclining at Jesus' side, listening to Him. Not questioning Jesus himself (only repeating Peter's question), not wondering why He would wash his feet - just listening. He doesn't need Jesus to prove His love, nor does he feel the need to one-up the other disciples in showing love. Instead, his is a confident love, based on his nearness to Christ, and not his performance. Do we listen for God? Do we rest in the confident knowledge that He will provide? Do we feel that God only loves us if we're performing our part?

Relate

As we reflect on what true victory is and looks like, consider these open-ended questions as a method to get participants involved or as a way to further refine your lesson.

Questions

- 1 How does Christ's love as demonstrated in the Upper Room help us understand His victory?

It is a fair assumption that the chief priests used the Tyrian shekel in their daily transactions. Calculating the weight of it compared to a denarius suggests that thirty pieces of silver would have equated to four months' wages - enough to tempt Judas but not enough to put the Temple treasury into any sort of hardship. It is also of note that thirty pieces of silver was the price an owner of a slave was owed if another's ox were to gore their slave. (Ex. 21:32)

²² Matt. 26:24

²³ Lk. 10:42

Compare this behavior to his actions in Lk. 9:54 when he asked for fire from heaven to consume some Samaritans or in Mk. 10:35 when he asked to be at the right hand of God.

Teaching tip: Please keep in mind the different levels of Christian maturity. Assuming a certain level of knowledge when asking questions may be unfair. Also, a useful tactic when asking questions is to keep quiet for a few moments after asking. People need time to think and if you immediately answer your own question, people will stop thinking, which is not the goal.

- 2 Compare what the world teaches us about love to what Christ taught us about love. How are they different?
- 3 What are some reasons Judas may have had for rejecting Him?

VICTORY IS LOVE LIVED IN THE COMMUNITY.

Lesson 5. Victory Over Weakness: From Illness to Healing

Text: John 4:46-54; 5:1-47; 9:1-41; 18:1-11

Synopsis:

VICTORY COMES NOT IN AVOIDING SUFFERING, BUT WHAT GOD DOES THROUGH IT. Why is there suffering in the world? Why do we seek to avoid suffering? While these questions may have easy answers, that doesn't it make it easy to understand. Metaphorically, I know how to use a car, but that doesn't mean I understand how a car works. Suffering is all around us – health concerns, economic loss, hurt feelings, injustice – these aren't new and they aren't going anywhere. So it may be natural to think (or hear another say): Where is God when all of this is happening? In this section of Scripture, John gives us four stories of suffering, but more important, what Jesus does as a response to that suffering; He points the way toward God. What can we learn from the four suffering actors in this story?

Review

Recall from last week that the love Christ showed in the Upper Room was one based on *sacrifice* and not reciprocity or emotion. At the same time, Judas, John, and Peter all had to wrestle with what Christ was doing and saying, and they all reacted in different ways. Love through self-sacrifice isn't easy to understand or employ, but it is the example Christ gave us.

Reveal

John discusses how Jesus handles various levels of physical suffering in these four stories. In these four examples, the characters who

"He therefore answered, 'Whether He is a sinner, I do not know; one thing I do know, that, **whereas I was blind, now I see**.'" (Jn. 9:25, NASB)



Figure 7: Christ Healing the Sick at Bethesda
Bloch [1883]

In the song *The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald*, Lightfoot sings a beautiful line right after describing the ship's sinking: "Does anyone know where the love of God goes when the waves turn the minutes to hours?"

needed healing reacted to Jesus in different ways – where can we place ourselves in these stories as we consider our own suffering?

The Royal Official: Faith without Sight Simply imagining that a child of yours is close to death is difficult, much less having to go through that awful level of suffering. We don't know what made the royal official seek out Jesus: Did he believe in Him beforehand? Was he desperate? In any case, the official asked Jesus to heal his son, and Jesus responded by telling him that people want to see instead of believe. The official asks again, and Jesus heals the son who is some indeterminate distance away. Upon returning, the official hears the good news - the son is alive and well! Without seeing his son healed, the official believed Jesus. Do we believe without sight? That is the definition of faith ²⁴, but many times it is difficult to believe without seeing. This episode can help us see suffering through a different lens - as an opportunity to ask the Spirit to work, to intercede, on your behalf. Your suffering isn't a time that God has disappeared, it is a time for you to more closely seek Him.

The Man at Bethesda: Helpless Suffering Our modern sensibilities have shifted how we see and discuss those who live with various deformations of the physical body, so John's description of Bethesda ²⁵ as a place with "a multitude of invalids" (5:3) can strike us as harsh. However, he paints quite a picture regarding the level of suffering that was *always* in this place. People who, for whatever reason, were unable to care for themselves or had no family to care for them; whatever the case, if there was ever a place to show compassion, this was it. Jesus sees a man who has been at Bethesda for thirty-eight years. Notice his response to Jesus' question about wanting to be made well: he says that there is no one to put him in the water. After thirty-eight years of trying to get into the water before another, it seems likely he had simply given up on his dream of being made well. No one was coming to help, and there was no longer any sense of trying to make it himself. There's no statement of faith in Jesus from him, just a resignation about his sad state of affairs. But Jesus showed compassion, and healed him. As a result, he told the Jews about his healing, which was done on a Sabbath, which further upset those in power and pushed forward God's plan of salvation.

What do we do when the suffering is so all-consuming that we have given up? When we've stopped trying, we've stopped asking for help, and even our prayers have an air of resignation to them? **God is still working**, even in those cases. How much easier is it now to "get the word out" concerning a person or group that has suffered? How much compassion is stirred? How many resources can be marshaled

Teaching Reminder: John's central point in his gospel account is that Jesus is the center of our understanding of the universe; all of His words and deeds are to be examined through that lens. All of our words and deeds are to be judged through that lens. Victory is found in Jesus because He overcame Satan through His death on the cross. To access this victory, we must believe in Him, be born again through water and the Spirit, and we must love another as Christ has loved us.

²⁴ Heb. 11:1

²⁵ "house of mercy"

As of the time of this writing, thirty-eight years ago was 1987.

in a short time to address suffering? It happens all the time, and that is the power of God.

The Man Born Blind: The Silent Example and Convert In the case of the blind man, Jesus uses the opportunity to teach the disciples as well as the Jewish leaders a lesson about the power of God. The disciples, upon seeing the man, ask Jesus if his blindness is the result of sin. No, his blindness was specifically allowed by God so that God would work through him. In this case, neither Jesus nor the blind man talk to each other before the healing – Jesus simply places the clay over his eyes and tells him to go to Siloam. No questions asked, no statements of faith procured, no parables on faith over sight. Jesus just heals him on the spot with the disciples and the multitudes watching. But after his healing, he couldn't stop telling the story – to his parents, to the Jews, anyone who would listen. He was healed by Jesus! After being cross-examined roughly by the Pharisees, they throw him out of the synagogue. It is there Jesus begins His teaching. The formerly blind man, who now sees in more ways than one, professes his belief in Christ Jesus, who replies with

“For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind.” (9:39)

With what do you see? Eyes can deceive, but the Word of God will prevail in all cases. Did you come to Christ after a season of suffering? Of blindness? How did you share that story? God's power was demonstrated in a mighty way, all through the blindness of a random man on a random street at a random time. But for God, those events were anything but random. So when you are in a season of suffering and it seems like bad luck, who knows what God may yet do through that suffering?

Malchus: A Servant Caught in the Machinery of Power In the previous three scenes, Jesus faced opposition without danger because His hour had not yet arrived. But now, in Gethsemane, the moment of darkness descends. The Passover meal has been eaten. The prayer in the garden has been offered - “yet not My will, but Yours be done.” And Judas arrives leading a mixed detachment of Roman soldiers and temple officials.

Peter, full of zeal and confusion, is standing on the edge of panic. He has been warned of his coming denial.²⁶ He has two swords among the disciples.²⁷ He has failed to keep watch in prayer.²⁸ And now Jesus is insisting that the disciples be allowed to leave unharmed. In a surge of misguided courage, he draws his sword and strikes. But the blade falls not on a soldier, but on Malchus, servant

²⁶ Mk. 14:29–30

²⁷ Lk. 22:38

²⁸ Mk. 14:37

of Caiaphas the high priest. His title tells us much: he is not a volunteer in a lynch mob, nor a man thirsting for Jesus' death. In the social world of first-century Judea, servants of the high priest acted as assistants who were bound to obey the orders of their superiors. Malchus is part of the arresting party, yes, but he is also a man swept along by the decisions of those far above him.

And Jesus heals him.²⁹

²⁹ Lk. 22:51

Even as His own suffering begins - betrayal behind Him, arrest upon Him, crucifixion ahead - Jesus stops everything to restore the man harmed by Peter's violence. The contrast is startling: Peter's sword brings injury; Jesus' touch brings wholeness. Peter reacts out of fear and confusion; Jesus responds out of unbroken compassion. In this moment we glimpse a Lord who is never too burdened, never too preoccupied with His own agony, to act in mercy.

Suffering is often like this - sudden, undeserved, and entangled in forces we did not choose and cannot control. Sometimes we are caught, as Malchus was, in the machinery of others' ambitions or failures. Yet even in these moments, the character of Christ remains the same. He meets us not with condemnation, but with healing. He reminds us that our lives are never abandoned to chaos, even when the circumstances feel random and the wounds seem senseless. Do we believe this? When suffering overwhelms us, when help feels distant, when the pain is not of our own making, do we trust that God still provides? Jesus' healing of Malchus whispers the answer. The Servant-King goes to the cross for sinners, and He tends to the wounded on the way there. And if no servant is above his Master,³⁰ then our suffering, too, will not be met with neglect, but with the compassionate attention of the One who redeems every wound He permits.

³⁰ Matt. 10:24

Relate

As we reflect on what true victory is and looks like, consider these open-ended questions as a method to get participants involved or as a way to further refine your lesson.

Questions

- 1 How did Jesus treat each of these situations differently?
- 2 How can suffering be seen as victory?
- 3 Have you ever been stuck on "following the rules" instead of focusing on how a good thing has happened?
- 4 Why doesn't Jesus appreciate Peter's defense of Him in the Garden of Gethsemane?

Teaching tip: Please keep in mind the different levels of Christian maturity. Assuming a certain level of knowledge when asking questions may be unfair. Also, a useful tactic when asking questions is to keep quiet for a few moments after asking. People need time to think and if you immediately answer your own question, people will stop thinking, which is not the goal.

VICTORY COMES NOT IN AVOIDING SUFFERING, BUT WHAT GOD DOES THROUGH IT.

Lesson 6. Victory Over Emptiness: Living Bread and Water

Text: John 4:1–42; 6:1–71; 7:37–39; 19:28–30

Synopsis:

VICTORY OCCURS THROUGH INNER, NOT OUTER, TRANSFORMATION. Think about the question “What are you hungry for?” Depending on the meaning of the word *hungry*, the question could be answered in several ways. Are you physically hungry or are you spiritually hungry? This word “hungry” serves as the main focus of the lesson this week. Jesus came into contact with several people who were physically hungry and/or thirsty. He used those situations to teach those people how their search for physical fulfillment was keeping them from understanding spiritual fulfillment.

We are in a constant state of needing nourishment. We eat, then within eight hours we usually feel the need to eat again. We drink, but we thirst again. We are happy, and then we need more happiness. We pray, we worship, and then we worry. On and on it goes; all people, all cultures, all times. Is there a way to permanently fill this constant emptiness?

Review

Recall last week that suffering is a part of life; instead of using it as a method to doubt God, we should instead marvel at His ability to transform lives as a result of it. In all cases, the suffering person that Christ interacted with was healed so that God’s will could be witnessed by all who have ears to hear and eyes to see.

Reveal

John weaves together in these verses the story of inner versus outer transformation by using the objects of food and water, comparing

So the woman **left her water jar** and went away into town and said to the people, “Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. **Can this be the Christ?**” (Jn. 4:28-29)



Figure 8: Christ Feeding the 5,000
Tissot [c. 1896]

them to the ideal of living bread and living water. Recall the entire purpose of his gospel account - to argue that the ideal Logos Λόγος is in fact the person called Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah of God. An excellent way to demonstrate that message is to juxtapose the need for physical food with the need for spiritual food.

The Woman at Jacob's Well The Samaritan woman came to the well with an empty vessel and an empty soul. Her desire was to fill her pot with water, but instead Jesus filled her soul with living water in a conversation that likely surprised her and certainly surprises us. He is rather forthright in His language, and to her credit she perceives Him as a prophet instead of a busybody. But notice her response to the conversation - she tells her fellow Samaritans to come and see Jesus. Her soul was filled! Jesus granted her living water, which she wasn't aware she needed.

Immediately afterward, the disciples are confused as Jesus tells them He has food they are unaware of, and they responded by wondering if someone else brought Him bread. Mistaking the spiritual for the physical, they were thinking about eating to be satiated while He was thinking about being in God's service. Their role, as he put it in these verses, is to "reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor." Much like Paul would teach to the Corinthians ³¹, we each play our role by building upon the work of others as others build upon our work. If we only consider the physical, this type of approach would not work as we would ask ourselves "what's in it for me?" Instead, by thinking of the spiritual aspect of service in God's Kingdom, it is no longer about us or our needs, but rather God's will.

The Multitude Fed The people were following Jesus because He was healing people and they wanted a miracle. They were seeking spiritual food, but the disciples were concerned with their physical needs as it was getting late ³² and they had no food. Jesus solved both problems by blessing the five loaves and two fish – the multitude called Him a prophet, and the disciples were taught another lesson about the importance of spiritual food. Continuing the conversation the next day after walking across a dark and stormy sea, He was more explicit to them (and us): People seek Jesus *because* they want their physical needs met. This is a profound section of Scripture. He tells them they were following Him for physical food. Have we ever treated Jesus like a shortcut to riches? Do we think He will bring us prosperity? Instead of thinking of the outer transformation, Jesus teaches that we ought to concern ourselves with inner transformation:

Teaching Reminder: John's central point in his gospel account is that Jesus is the center of our understanding of the universe; all of His words and deeds are to be examined through that lens. All of our words and deeds are to be judged through that lens. Victory is found in Jesus because He overcame Satan through His death on the cross. To access this victory, we must believe in Him, be born again through water and the Spirit, and we must love another as Christ has loved us.

³¹ 1 Cor. 3:6-11

³² This detail is found in Mk. 6:35

This sobering survey from 2022 shows that 76% of Protestant respondents believe God wants them to prosper financially

“Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you. For on him God the Father has set his seal.” ³³

³³ Jn. 6:27

This “food that endures to eternal life” was further described later in Chapter 6, when Jesus is speaking with the Jews about His statement that he was the bread of Heaven. The fathers ate manna, and died. But those who eat the living bread Christ provides will never hunger again – “He who eats my flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.” ³⁴ We use this teaching (among others) as our justification for the practice of the Lord’s Supper.

³⁴ Jn. 6:54, NASB

The Cross Jesus continues His teaching through the contrast between physical and spiritual thirst, first in Chapter 7 and finally on the cross. He had promised that rivers of living water would flow from those who believe, referring to the Spirit who would come after He was glorified. But that gift required His departure. The cross, then, is not the pouring out of the Spirit, but the necessary act that makes such a gift possible. After hours of suffering, Jesus cried out in thirst and received the sour wine. When His side was pierced, blood and water flowed forth: an unmistakable sign that His death was real and complete. The outer work was finished. His body truly died. Yet in that death, life was released. The victory of the cross is not found in physical preservation but in spiritual provision: through His completed sacrifice, His emptiness, the way was opened for inner transformation by the Spirit who would soon be given. What dies is the outer; what endures is the life His death secures.

Perhaps Jesus had to continually return to this theme of inner and outer transformation because it is so hard for us to understand. How many times have we learned something about someone, and our first reply is “I never would have imagined...”? Why? Because we focus (understandably so, hence the difficulty in perceiving) on the “outer,” or what we can see and not the “inner” or what we cannot see. But he was good family man, we would say. He was always so nice! A person’s inner transformation is more important than one’s outer transformation, and God sees all.

Relate

As we reflect on what true victory is and looks like, consider these open-ended questions as a method to get participants involved or as a way to further refine your lesson.

Teaching tip: Please keep in mind the different levels of Christian maturity. Assuming a certain level of knowledge when asking questions may be unfair. Also, a useful tactic when asking questions is to keep quiet for a few moments after asking. People need time to think and if you immediately answer your own question, people will stop thinking, which is not the goal.

Questions

- 1 How would you describe your inner transformation? What role has Christ and the Spirit played in that?
- 2 Discuss the following prompt: People would talk about a colleague's weight loss before their contributions to charity.
- 3 Imagine being a Jewish leader. How would Christ's directives about eating His flesh have sounded to you?
- 4 How did Christ's death on the cross prove he was both human and divine?

VICTORY OCCURS THROUGH INNER, NOT OUTER, TRANSFORMATION.

Lesson 7. Victory In Connection: Abide and Overcome

Text: John 15:1–17; 16:5–33

Synopsis:

VICTORY ISN'T STRIVING WITH GOD, IT'S REMAINING WITH GOD. The events of this lesson take place wholly within the Upper Room; Jesus is giving His last teaching to the disciples before events take their course and He goes to the cross to die for the sins of mankind. The lesson contains two distinct tasks that are seemingly at odds with one another; further reflection yields an understanding that the tasks are in fact complementary. These tasks are to *abide* and *overcome*. By remaining with God, especially in times of trouble and strife, we are victorious over the forces of evil.

Review

Recall from last week that our emptiness is filled through inner, not outer, transformation. Seeking God is more important than seeking food. The Living Bread and Living Water will eliminate hunger and thirst; bread and water will only temporarily reduce such feelings.

Reveal

The Oxford Learner's Dictionary defines *abiding* as "(of a feeling or belief) lasting for a long time and not changing" while *overcome* is defined as "to succeed in dealing with or controlling a problem that has been preventing you from achieving something." Herein lies the potential problem: *overcoming* implies growth or some type of change, while *abiding* means to not change. So which directive in Jesus giving the disciples (and us) in this discourse?

The Farewell Discourse is the section of Scripture in which John, and John alone, records the final teachings of Jesus in the Upper Room after they share the Passover and after Judas has left to betray

"Abide in me, and I in you. **As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me.** I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing." (Jn. 15:4-5)



Figure 9: Christ Taking Leave of the Apostles

di Buoninsegna [c. 1311]

Teaching Reminder: John's central point in his gospel account is that Jesus is the center of our understanding of the universe; all of His words and deeds are to be examined through that lens. All of our words and deeds are to be judged through that lens. Victory is found in Jesus because He overcame Satan through His death on the cross. To access this victory, we must believe in Him, be born again through water and the Spirit, and we must love another as Christ has loved us.

Him. Chapter 15:1-17 contains the second discourse of four [Ridderbos, 1987] in which Christ describes Himself as a vine in which the disciples need to abide. Why? Because they will need to bear fruit for the Father. Without abiding, without the belief in Christ Jesus, He tells them they will not bear fruit. The disciples will receive joy in bearing fruit, and the Father will be glorified. Jesus then tells them the mechanism by which they will bear fruit: agape (αγαπε) love. Only through a willful, self-giving, and covenantal love will the disciples bear fruit for God's Kingdom.

However, His message then shifts into the Third Discourse in which He begins to teach His disciples that they will need to overcome the world because 1) it will hate them and 2) He is about to go to the Father. Imagine the confusion at this turn! Jesus tells the disciples to love one another and bear fruit for God, and then tells them that the world will hate them for this and that Jesus Himself won't be there to help them. At this point, if this was all the information they had received from Christ, we could see the confusion between *abiding* and *overcoming*. But, He explains to them that their sorrow over His leaving will be replaced by the comfort of the Helper, Who will convict the world through righteous judgment. Because of that comfort, their sorrow over His leaving (which they still did not understand) will turn to joy, as a mother when giving birth.

He ends this discourse with a teaching that allows us to end the confusion between *abiding* and *overcoming*. Jesus tells them He will be leaving for the Father, and this time it makes sense to them. He will not be alone, but will be with the Father; the disciples will have tribulation, but He has overcome the world.

Like the disciples, we are called to *abide* and *overcome*. But how can we abide in the spirit of God (which is a good place so change is not desired or necessary) but at the same time overcome (that is, be victorious against) sin and judgment? The answer lies in His message about love. Our agape αγαπε connection is the tool that will make these goals achievable! Through love, we can abide in the love of Christ Jesus, we can accept the Helper's ³⁵ role in our lives and in the world's judgment. Finally, through abiding in this love, we abide in the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit who has overcome the world. Therefore, whatever the world can do to us, it will not change the fact that we abide in Christ Jesus. According to 1st and 2nd C. sources, the disciples (save John) died in the service of professing Christ crucified. But because Christ overcame the world, and they abide in Him through their belief, we believe them to be saved.

We are victorious in Christ through connections: to each other and to Him, the Father, and the Spirit through love. What role are you playing in this connection? Are you connected to the body of

³⁵ also the Comforter, the Holy Spirit

believers? Do not strive against God; it is possible to abide in a state of love with Christ that does not change while simultaneously serving Christ, with the help of the Spirit, to work against the evils of sin and death, overcoming the world.

Relate

As we reflect on what true victory is and looks like, consider these open-ended questions as a method to get participants involved or as a way to further refine your lesson.

- 1 How would you rate your connection to the body of Christ?
- 2 How can suffering be seen as overcoming?
- 3 Why is agape love so difficult?

VICTORY ISN'T STRIVING WITH GOD, IT'S REMAINING WITH GOD.

Teaching tip: Please keep in mind the different levels of Christian maturity. Assuming a certain level of knowledge when asking questions may be unfair. Also, a useful tactic when asking questions is to keep quiet for a few moments after asking. People need time to think and if you immediately answer your own question, people will stop thinking, which is not the goal.

Lesson 8. Victory Through Intercession: Jesus Prays For Us

Text: John 17:1-26

Synopsis:

VICTORY IS BEING HELD IN PRAYER BY THE SAVIOR. John, as an invitee to the garden of Gethsemane, was given access to the most beautiful prayer ever uttered. The time for Jesus' betrayal was at hand; the guards, led by Judas, were getting close. What could Jesus do in these final moments to prepare Himself for His upcoming ordeal? He prayed! Specifically, He prayed for Himself, for His disciples, and for his believers. With the central theme of "God's glory," Jesus asked the Father on our behalf for victory over sin and death.

Review

Recall from last week how we are to "abide" and "overcome." Those tasks can seem to be at cross purposes, but in Christ we are more than able. Agape (αγαπε) love is what allows these tasks to be mastered.

Reveal

The ESV refers to John 17 as "The High Priestly Prayer." Written as a continuation of and conclusion to the teachings in the Upper Room, it came at a time following the Passover. Peter, James, and John ³⁶ were asked by Christ to keep watch with Him and pray so that they would not enter into temptation. Only John records the full prayer; in it we can see His love for the Father, for His disciples, and for those who would believe in Him.

"I am praying for them. I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours." (Jn. 17:9)



Figure 10: The Agony in the Garden of Gethsemane

Greco [c. 1590]

Teaching Reminder: John's central point in his gospel account is that Jesus is the center of our understanding of the universe; all of His words and deeds are to be examined through that lens. All of our words and deeds are to be judged through that lens. Victory is found in Jesus because He overcame Satan through His death on the cross. To access this victory, we must believe in Him, be born again through water and the Spirit, and we must love another as Christ has loved us.

³⁶ Mk. 14:33

The importance of this prayer is not found as a simple closing devotion before His arrest. This prayer is a **proclamation of victory**. He speaks to God of things that *have now occurred*. Here, we see that the cross is not defeat, it is the moment of glorification! Here He is not praying *for* victory, He is praying *from* victory!

Jesus prays for Himself In the first five verses, Christ prays for Himself by submitting His glory to the Father's. His only request is to be glorified *so that the Father could be glorified*. This prayer highlights the fact that from His incarnation until "it is finished", ³⁷ Jesus willingly lays down His glory so that will of the Father can be fulfilled. ³⁸ Once the evil of the Cross was completed, that which was removed from Him was restored. This is what he prays for here.

Jesus gave up His rightful place of glory for...us. The price was the cross. While it is unlikely we will die for our faith, our lives will ebb and flow with periods of abundance and scarcity, peace and suffering. It may be hard to understand sometimes, but suffering can lead to glory, and certainly does in this case. This prayer tells us that suffering can also be glory.

Jesus prays for His Disciples The bulk of His prayer focuses on His disciples, who would soon be scattered, confused, perhaps angry. But they would be prepared for their task and they would soon have the Spirit. In the performance of their duty to preach the Gospel to the ends of the earth, ³⁹ they will glorify Christ. He recounts His earthly task, which was to reveal the Father to the disciples, a task now complete. He calls the disciples "believers," recalls His task that none given to Him by the Father be lost except the "son of destruction," and asks that His joy be fulfilled in the disciples.

More importantly, the disciples would be *given and kept* to and by the Father. This is crucial to our understanding as His children. Like the disciples, we are not to be removed from the world, but rather protected against the evil one. Hard times, sickness, sin, all from the devil, will come towards us as temptations. ⁴⁰ Therefore, our goal isn't to escape danger but rather sustain our faithfulness within the dark and sin-sick world. Jesus asks God to sanctify the disciples; this is not a moral veneer to be "worn" but rather a state of consecration to be ready for His mission.

Jesus prays for all believers He concludes His prayer with a request that all believers be unified with Him and with the Father, as they are one. "That they may be one" is a concept that has tripped up believers as we have struggled to know the Truth. The key issue seems to be the interplay between the concepts of *unity* and *uniformity*.

³⁷ Jn. 19:30

³⁸ Phil. 2:5-8

Philippians 2 is an excellent corollary passage for the concept of Christ's intercession for us.

³⁹ Matt. 28:18-20

⁴⁰ 1 Pet. 5:8-10

Uniformity is defined as thinking the same, looking the same, and acting the same - that is not what Christ is praying for here. Unity is a shared participation in God's plan, an evangelistic witness to the world. While unity can occur in a uniform congregation, unity is broader and more important than uniformity. When Paul teaches the Corinthians about this concept, he uses body parts to prove his point. ⁴¹ Not everyone can be an eye, not everyone can be a foot, but *together* they help comprise the body of Christ. Likewise, Paul confronted Peter in Antioch ⁴² because Peter started acting differently towards Gentiles when Jews came around. Paul knew that Peter understood unity, but he felt the need for uniformity when his co-ethnics entered the room. *Unity* doesn't do that, uniformity does. Therefore, the concept of unity by definition implies *differences* that are used for the glory of God instead of ways to divide or ostracize. Unity is victory, not because we look the same, but because God is the same and His love, revealed in Christ Jesus, gives us a way back to Him. Manners, dress, color – none of that matters when we are in a state of unity.

⁴¹ 1 Cor. 12:12-31

⁴² Gal. 2:11-14

How marvelous is it when we consider that Jesus prayed for us! He cared for us in ways we can't begin to understand. Through His victory, He prayed for our victory.

Relate

As we reflect on what true victory is and looks like, consider these open-ended questions as a method to get participants involved or as a way to further refine your lesson.

Questions

- 1 Why can Jesus pray about victory as though it has already happened?
- 2 Discuss the concepts of unity and uniformity. Have you ever thought that uniformity was more important than unity?
- 3 How can we reframe our desire to avoid struggles as a request for God to take care of us?

Teaching tip: Please keep in mind the different levels of Christian maturity. Assuming a certain level of knowledge when asking questions may be unfair. Also, a useful tactic when asking questions is to keep quiet for a few moments after asking. People need time to think and if you immediately answer your own question, people will stop thinking, which is not the goal.

VICTORY IS BEING HELD IN PRAYER BY THE SAVIOR.

Lesson 9. Victory over Blindness: Who Can Truly See?

Text: John 3; 6:60 - 71; 9; 12:37-50

Synopsis:

VICTORY IS CLARITY IN A WORLD OF CONFUSION. In these chapters, we see various individuals and groups of people struggle with Jesus' message of victory. His words seem nonsensical and contrary to the Law; He makes links between Himself and the Father in ways no sane person ever would even consider. But it was not Jesus who was confused, it was they who did not realize that His words and actions were a fulfillment of the Law. What teachings confuse us? What do we not comprehend about Jesus?

Review

Recall from last week that Jesus, even as the hour of His physical death drew close, prayed for His disciples and all believers, present *and future*. Only one with the heart of God could think of others in such a personally perilous time as that. Keep this love in mind as we learn this week about the patience and love He showed in these interactions with people who did not understand Him.

Reveal

As the gospel for all, John enriches our understanding of Christ's ministry with additional stories that allow us to get a fuller picture of the interplay between Christ, the people, and the religious leaders. These stories allow us to better see ourselves as various characters; for example, how would you reply to Jesus if you were Nicodemus? Or, how would you react to being told your devotion to God really isn't devotion, but rather performative art? This lesson will help us better understand what the difference between blindness and sight truly is.

When many of his disciples heard it, they said, "This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?" But Jesus, knowing in himself that his disciples were grumbling about this, said to them, "Do you take offense at this? Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. **But there are some of you who do not believe.**" And he said, "This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father." **After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him.** (Jn. 6:60-66)

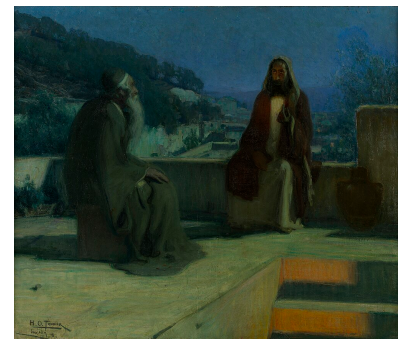


Figure 11: Nicodemus Visiting Jesus
Tanner [1899]

Teaching Reminder: John's central point in his gospel account is that Jesus is the center of our understanding of the universe; all of His words and deeds are to be examined through that lens. All of our words and deeds are to be judged through that lens. Victory is found in Jesus because He overcame Satan through His death on the cross. To access this victory, we must believe in Him, be born again through water and the Spirit, and we must love another as Christ has loved us.

Nicodemus: Disciple of Christ? A ruler of the Jews comes to Jesus at night. On the one hand, the night-time visit implies he feared what might be said by his fellow Jews if he were to be seen in public talking to Jesus. On the other hand, *he visited when no other Pharisee did*. He was curious; he wanted to know more. He acknowledged that God is with him, which was an amazing statement from a learned religious leader about a carpenter with no formal training in Torah. He gets confused when Christ tells him that a precondition of becoming part of the Kingdom of God is to be born again. But “how can this be?” What does it mean to be born of Spirit and water? Christ, for His part, seemed confused as well. How does a Pharisee not know the answer to this question? But He ends the confusion; for God so loved the world, that he gave His only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.⁴³ After a discussion about light and darkness, good and evil. And that’s the end of the conversation as we have it. However, later in chapter 7, John gives us a clue that Nicodemus’ confusion was beginning to clarify: as the Pharisees cry out for Christ to be arrested for blasphemy, he defends Jesus by reminding them of their criminal justice laws.

Finally, after Christ “canceled the record of debt that stood against us...nailing it to the cross,”⁴⁴ Nicodemus worked with Joseph of Arimethea⁴⁵ to give the body a proper burial so that it would not hang through the Sabbath. He bore the cost of seventy-five pounds of myrrh and aloes, an incredible expense, to preserve His body. Taken *in toto*, these do not seem to be the actions of a man who was confused or who did not believe. His story becomes an interesting one to meditate on as we struggle in our daily walk to be good Christians in the face of a hostile world.

The disciples who left How can one eat flesh? Jesus’ teaching when He described His flesh as “true food” (6:55), both the Pharisees and the disciples were utterly confused. “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” Jesus was clear however; this is the bread that comes down from heaven; not like the fathers ate, but rather bread that will lead to eternal life.

Following a teacher includes times in which obedience must be given even when the teaching seems odd or perhaps even wrong. So their admission “this is a hard saying, who can listen it?” is understandable, and perhaps in their shoes we would say the same thing. But Jesus reminds them who He is and what they agreed to in following Him. But in the case of some unnamed disciples, it was too much to believe. As a result, John alone among the Gospel writers recorded that some left Him. What do we do when the cognitive dissonance becomes high? When what we read and believe about

If we were asked this question, how would we respond?

⁴³ Jn. 3:16

⁴⁴ Col. 2:14

⁴⁵ Another secret disciple of Jesus and Pharisee, Joseph is mentioned in all three synoptic accounts. Matthew describes him as rich man who was a disciple of Christ (27:57); Mark calls him a respected member of the council who was looking for the kingdom of God (15:43); Luke enhances Mark’s account by adding that he had not consented to the Pharisees’ actions (23:50-56).

God the Father and Christ the Son simply aren't matching what is happening in life? In other words, what do we do when confusion reigns? We need to *seek clarity*. After they left, Jesus asks Peter point blank: "Do you want to go away as well?" Peter has an immediate choice to make: leave with the others (and while we don't know, perhaps Peter is just as confused as everyone else in this moment) or stay with Jesus. He stayed. "To whom else should we go? **You** have the words of eternal life..." So too we, when in a condition of confusion, ought to seek clarity. Jesus is Lord. Even when it doesn't seem to make sense, the facts are the facts.

The Pharisees We revisit the events of chapter 9, but this time instead of focusing on the man born blind, we turn our attention to the actions and reaction of the Pharisees. After all, the man born blind had better sight and was never confused about what had happened to him. In contrast, the Pharisees were thrown into confusion on two fronts: first, some were open to the idea that Christ could do signs while others were insistent he could not, so they were divided amongst themselves. Second, they confused themselves into thinking that either the blind man made everything up or that Jesus played some type of trick. In this case, their confusion stemmed from their misunderstanding of Scripture. They misunderstood the commandment to not work on the Sabbath, they refused to hear the blind man's clear and unequivocal testimony, and believed that his blindness was the result of sin.

Like the Pharisees, we too can fall into this trap of confusion. Can God really use *that person* for His work? Surely not! They look like such and such, or their past is tawdry, their countenance unattractive, their sins immense. Have we ever thought that way? If so, that is a confused understanding of how God works. In this case, Jesus used a random, poor, regular person to show the Pharisees their error. Clarity is understanding that God can in fact use people towards His ends, even if they don't look or dress the part. Let's not be like the Pharisees; let's seek clarity about God's purposes and how *each of us* fit into that plan.

The People Even after three years of seeing signs, wonders, and miracles, upon His entry into Jerusalem, John recounts that the people did not believe in Him. He quotes from Isaiah chapters 6 and 53 to explain that the confusion among the people should not be a surprise, but was rather expected from the beginning. And while some authorities believed, they were afraid of the Pharisees. How can we ensure that we believe, living in an environment of clarity as a world of confusion swirls around us? We can mediate upon these

This fear was well-founded. The Pharisees' ability to cast someone out of synagogue was an especially powerful and threatening tool. Social ostracism and/or exile isn't something we understand particularly well, but it was quite rare for people to publicly shame and countermand the Pharisees during the Temple period. We will revisit this tidbit in the next lesson.

words:

“That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life— the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us— that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete. This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.” ⁴⁶

⁴⁶ 1 John 1:1-7

It’s not any more complicated than that.

Relate

As we reflect on what true victory is and looks like, consider these open-ended questions as a method to get participants involved or as a way to further refine your lesson.

Questions

- 1 Discuss a time in which you were confused about God.
- 2 Have you ever thought like the Pharisees did?
- 3 Why did the people still not believe even after three years of seeing?

Teaching tip: Please keep in mind the different levels of Christian maturity. Assuming a certain level of knowledge when asking questions may be unfair. Also, a useful tactic when asking questions is to keep quiet for a few moments after asking. People need time to think and if you immediately answer your own question, people will stop thinking, which is not the goal.

VICTORY IS CLARITY IN A WORLD OF CONFUSION.

Lesson 10. Victory in Persecution: The World Will Hate You

Text: John 15:18–27; 16:1–4; 18:12–40; 19:1–16

Synopsis:

VICTORY IS RESILIENCE, NOT COMFORT. How is an individual expected to react when they are injured without cause? Is that person supposed to fight back, ask the law for justice, or “get even” perhaps? A central struggle we have as Christians is that these responses seem completely *understandable and justified*; however, when Jesus finds Himself in the same predicament, He does none of those things and furthermore instructs His disciples to act in the way He does.

This lesson is a difficult one. Not only do we feel justified anger, fear, and shame when reading about the events that led to His crucifixion, we are confronted with a tough reality - as His followers, we are expected to act in the same way He did, and that is not easy. We will see that resilience is an important skill to develop, and that physical and ideological comfort may make us miss the finer riches of what Christ is offering us while we sojourn this earth.

Review

Recall from last week we learned to seek clarity in a world of confusion. People in various social strata had a difficult time fully understanding some of Jesus’ teachings. While the same can happen to us from time to time, we are reminded that so long as we walk in the light, we can lean not on our own understanding but rather trust in the Lord. ⁴⁷

“If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.” (Jn. 5:18-19)



Figure 12: Martyrdom of St. Stephen
Masip [c. 1560]

⁴⁷ Pro. 3:5

Reveal

Abuse. Mockery. Scorn. Pain. If you saw a job advertisement that offered these experiences, would you apply? There's something rather unnatural about accepting punishment. Yet, we do see examples throughout the world where it is expected that a person "signing up" for any particular position can expect these types of experiences. "No pain, no gain" is a popular catch-phrase for those selling gym memberships, while those wishing to join the US Navy SEAL program will quickly learn "the only easy day was yesterday" – so the concept of resilience isn't completely foreign to us. However, in the normal course of a normal day, one wouldn't be expected to endure physical or emotional pain as "part of the job."

Yet through these verses, we see Christ model that exact type of behavior; He is treated unjustly, He is tortured, and He is killed, all for things He didn't do. But His mission was completed. By staying focused on the Father's will, by refusing to yield to social or physical pressure, Christ was able to bridge the gap between God's holiness and mankind's sin. Through His example and teaching, if we are to bear fruit for the Kingdom of God, we will need to be *resilient* - the quality that allows us to recover quickly after something unpleasant.

The World will Hate You After telling the disciples to go bear fruit, Jesus tells them that the world will hate them and persecute them for preaching His message. The world will hate them because they hate(d) Christ, and "a servant is not greater than his master."⁴⁸ The reason the world hates them is because the world does not understand Who sent Him.

Persecution for the faith is a concept with a long and storied tradition. While there are too many individual instances across time and space to recount, *Foxe's Book of Martyrs* is seen within Protestantism as the first solid, although polemical⁴⁹ attempt to categorize and survey the history of Christian martyrs. It is a rather sober read, as it helps us as 21st Century Christians realize what Christians have had to endure in the past just so the Good News could be spread. The reason the book is so difficult to read is largely because we live in a country expressly built to **avoid** the types of arguments that caused the bloodshed in the first place! By the time of the American founding, killing and/or dying for one's faith was seen as hopelessly unhelpful and unnecessary to a proper functioning society.⁵⁰ When we fast-forward 250 years, we live in a social and cultural time where Christianity may be mocked and it may be seen as something only unintelligent people believe, but it is unlikely anyone in the US is dying for their faith. However, this is not the case in a large part of the

Teaching Reminder: John's central point in his gospel account is that Jesus is the center of our understanding of the universe; all of His words and deeds are to be examined through that lens. All of our words and deeds are to be judged through that lens. Victory is found in Jesus because He overcame Satan through His death on the cross. To access this victory, we must believe in Him, be born again through water and the Spirit, and we must love another as Christ has loved us.



Figure 13: Ecce Homo
Caravaggio [c. 1605]

⁴⁸ Jn. 15:20

⁴⁹ Foxe's main goal with his tome was to affirm the English Reformation during the 16th Century, an historical event far beyond the scope of this work, but an event very much worth learning more about.

⁵⁰ See James Madison's 1785 *Memorial and Remonstrance against Religious Assessments* and Thomas Jefferson's 1786 *Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom*

world. Figure 14 shows persecution against Christians throughout the world; categories include arrests, forced labor, death sentences, and strict rules on public and private gatherings.

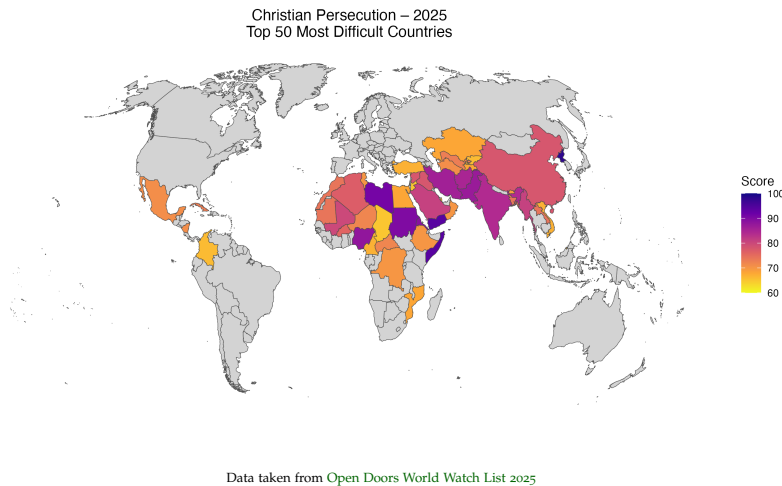


Figure 14: Global Persecution of Christians

In total, for US Christians, the concept that “the world will hate us” can seem difficult to understand. But it also may be the case that even though our persecution doesn’t include loss of life or limb, it does include loss of social capital. That is still persecution, and the application for Christ’s message to His disciples (and us) is to be resilient. Lean on God in those times of persecution; trust Him to lead you through those difficult days. We persevere through persecution because our Master did, and because that is how the Gospel is spread. ⁵¹

Arrest, Trial, & Crucifixion Being crucified while innocent is enough of a miscarriage of justice, but Christ had to endure far more. First, His legal protections within the Jewish justice system were ignored; He was arrested at night, and was put on trial at the same time. He was struck on the face after answering the High Priest’s questions; He was brought to Pilate, the Roman administrator, to be judged about Roman matters he had no hand in. Clearly Pilate wanted nothing to do with this increasingly volatile situation ⁵², so he tried to get the Jews to judge Christ without getting Rome (and himself) involved. But the Jews wanted Him dead, and they couldn’t do that, only Rome could. So they pressed Pilate, and his actions can help us better understand why resilience is such a necessary quality when following Christ.

WHAT IS TRUTH? Upon hearing from Christ that “everyone who is

⁵¹ Paul mentions both loss of social standing and physical discomfort in his comparison to the riches of Christ - Phil. 3:8-10; 2 Cor. 11:25-33

⁵² see Matt. 27:1-26; Mk. 15:1-15; Lk. 23:1-25 to weave together the full interplay between Pilate and Jesus

of the truth listens to my voice" (Jn. 18:37), Pilate answers with three words that reverberate to this day: what is truth? Since we only have the words and not the facial expressions and tone of voice, we are left to guess the full meaning of this monumental question. But we can place ourselves in the role of Pilate to better understand that true victory lies in resilience and not comfort.

First, the Truth sits in front of him, but he does not or cannot recognize it. John is cluing us into the dramatic irony; Pilate knows Jesus is innocent, and he knows that he has the power to set him free. To his credit, he tries *four times* to do just that; however, the comfort of his position makes this action impossible. The Jews would summon Rome, there would be chaos, and eventually Pilate would be recalled to Rome, never to be seen again. In this case, only survival matters, not truth. Second, this fatalistic realism drives Pilate - he is trapped in a political crisis that only ends well for him if he turns Jesus over to be crucified. Truth won't save him, only political expediency will.

On the other hand, Jesus sits as Truth embodied, undeterred by the mob and Roman law. He is who He is, regardless of earthly power structures or who sits in what post. While Pilate chooses comfort over courage, Jesus chooses resilient Truth. Therefore Jesus receives victory at the Cross, while Pilate sees a truth he cannot afford. John's use of Pilate here is one of a foil to Jesus: He stands in resilient truth despite danger, while Pilate retreats into comfort and self-preservation.

What would you have done if you were in Pilate's place? Have we ever refused to defend Christ when the moment came? Have we ever judged expediency as better than truth? Have we ever chosen comfort over resilience? Perhaps we shouldn't be too hard on Pilate; we may be no better than he.

Relate

As we reflect on what true victory is and looks like, consider these open-ended questions as a method to get participants involved or as a way to further refine your lesson.

Questions

- 1 Consider a time in your life when you felt persecuted for the faith. What did you do to get through it?
- 2 What would you have done if you were in Pilate's place?
- 3 Review the parable of the sower (Matt. 13:3-23). Which one was Pilate, and which one are you?
- 4 Does the world hate you? How do you know?

Teaching tip: Please keep in mind the different levels of Christian maturity. Assuming a certain level of knowledge when asking questions may be unfair. Also, a useful tactic when asking questions is to keep quiet for a few moments after asking. People need time to think and if you immediately answer your own question, people will stop thinking, which is not the goal.

VICTORY IS RESILIENCE, NOT COMFORT.

Lesson 11. Victory Through Resurrection: Death Is Not The End

Text: John 5:24-29; 11; 20:1-10

Synopsis

VICTORY IS ALREADY AT WORK IN THE LIVES OF BELIEVERS. John presents resurrection not merely as a future hope, but as a present reality rooted in the person of Jesus. Long before Lazarus walks from the tomb, Jesus teaches that life and death are already being redefined: those who hear His voice and believe have passed from death to life. The raising of Lazarus then becomes a lived parable - revealing both the power of Jesus and the limits of provisional resurrection. Finally, the empty tomb confirms what Jesus has been declaring all along: death is not merely delayed, restrained, or reversed; rather, it is defeated. Resurrection, therefore, is not the end of the story, but the revelation of a victory that was already underway.⁵³

Review

Recall last week that true victory is found through self-sacrifice, especially in the case of Jesus. He prepared His mind, body, and spirit for the task of the cross. We may think of victory as winning, but in our walk with Christ, we are called to sacrifice.

Reveal

Like Nicodemus' confusion regarding being born again⁵⁴, the concepts of death and life seem straightforward, but may not be. Those insisting physical evidence must predate belief or knowledge would seem to be more opposed to the idea of an afterlife, instead seeing time linearly and the states of life and death and mutual and total

Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you." Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." Jesus said to her, **"I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?"** She said to him, "Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world." (John 11:21-27)

⁵³ Rom. 5:12-21 is an excellent corollary passage for this lesson.



Figure 15: Raising of Lazarus
Giotto [c. 1305]

⁵⁴ Jn. 3:4

opposites. However, Christ tells a different story. A God and an afterlife (which He has witnessed) allows Him a more open and figurative understanding of the concept of life and death. In His understanding, a living person can be dead and a dead person can be made alive. So this question becomes: If life is preferred to death, how does one know which state they are in? This lesson unfolds in three movements. First, Jesus redefines life and death in His teaching. Second, He confronts Death directly in the raising of Lazarus. Finally, He completes that confrontation in His own resurrection. Together, these scenes reveal that resurrection is not merely something Jesus performs but rather it is the act through which Christ defeats Death, and we share in that victory.

The hour is coming During His public ministry, Jesus healed numerous people on numerous occasions, and if everything He did was recorded, the world could not contain the books that would have to be written.⁵⁵ Within the events of John 5, after He heals the man who had been invalid for thirty-eight years, He discusses His authority and states that the dead will hear His voice, and those who hear will live. He tells the crowd (including the disciples and Pharisees) they should not marvel that the dead will hear His voice, because their deeds will lead them to a resurrection of life or of judgment. He also states that the Father gave Him life, and the Son will give it to those whom He wishes to give it. Clearly then, life is to be preferred to death, but the same question remains – how does one know if they are alive or dead? If Christ tells the multitude to not marvel, that usually means He has said something that on first glance seems wrong. But since we as humans cannot understand time the way Jesus and God do, the confusion, especially about a topic like this, seems understandable. But He gives the answer to anyone who will understand it:⁵⁶

“Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever **hears my word and believes him who sent me** (emphasis added) has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.” (Jn. 5:24)

Now it is more plainly stated: life is preferred to death, as life is synonymous with Jesus and death is synonymous with judgment. Life and Death are no longer strictly biological states but spiritual realities determined by one’s response to Jesus. Resurrection, therefore, is not delayed until the end of time – it begins with trust and belief in the grace of Jesus.

A Case Study in Life and Death: Lazarus The raising of Lazarus is the tension point of John’s resurrection theology. He is raised, yet he will die again. He emerges bound, dependent on others to free him. His

Teaching Reminder: John’s central point in his gospel account is that Jesus is the center of our understanding of the universe; all of His words and deeds are to be examined through that lens. All of our words and deeds are to be judged through that lens. Victory is found in Jesus because He overcame Satan through His death on the cross. To access this victory, we must believe in Him, be born again through water and the Spirit, and we must love another as Christ has loved us.

⁵⁵ Jn. 21:25

⁵⁶ Is. 6:9-10; Eze. 3:27

resurrection is real, but incomplete; it demonstrates Jesus' authority over death without abolishing death itself.

The time is approaching for Christ to enter Jerusalem and suffer death at the hands of people He did not wrong. While outside of both Jerusalem and Bethany, Jesus is told Lazarus is sick, and He replies by saying this illness will not lead to death but rather glory, but then later tells them that Lazarus has died after telling them that he is asleep. The confusion among the disciples as well as Martha and Mary was palpable. However, with a proper (read: God- and Christ-centric) point of view, his statements made perfect sense and help us better understand that life and death are *both* present and future tense states of being.

Lazarus died from his illness, and at that point, He tells the disciples they will go to him. It seems clear that upon hearing the news of his illness, the disciples' expectation was that Jesus would make haste to get there to heal him before he died. But He had already done that; the royal official's son was healed from afar.⁵⁷ The disciples needed to believe, the Jews needed to believe, as did Mary and Martha. The sisters of Lazarus offer us a dichotomy in how to respond to the issue of life and death: Martha seems to understand Christ's thinking regarding this trip to Bethany, while Mary seems more withdrawn.

⁵⁷ Jn. 4:43-45

Martha runs to greet Jesus and does tell Him rather directly that their brother would not be dead if He would have come sooner. But she trusts Him and she trusts God, that even in this moment of pain and loss, they can make him live again. Jesus responds to this statement of faith with the central lesson for all humanity as it relates to life and death:

"I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?"⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Jn. 11:25-26

That final question is as much given to us to answer as it was given to Martha. **Do we believe that we will live even after we die?** Here, death is physical and literal, but *because of Christ's sacrifice, it is not permanent* whereas life is literal and figurative in the present, literal in the future, and permanent in both. Even physical death cannot stop life when that life is found in Jesus Christ.⁵⁹ Put another way, if victory means that even physical death cannot undo the life given by Christ, then no other definition will suffice.

⁵⁹ 1 Cor. 15:55

On the other end of this family tragedy is Mary, who had an understanding of Christ that surpassed the others when she washed Jesus' feet, but now the loss of her brother makes her withdrawn and overcome with sadness. Unlike her sister, she only states that Lazarus wouldn't have died if Christ had been there, but her weeping caused in Jesus several strong emotions that if unpacked, can help

us better understand life, death, God, Jesus, and the role we play in being servants of His. Victory requires both truth and sorrow. Martha knows what is true, while Mary knows what is lost. Jesus meets both at their level of understanding - not to correct them, but to complete their understanding.

JESUS WEPT The shortest verse in Scripture is full of theological meaning; He is deeply moved by the scene.⁶⁰ **The central point John is teaching us here is that Christ is confronting death as the final enemy of God while revealing Himself as the giver of life.** He is compassionate to those mourning, He is indignant in facing the horror of Death head-on, and He is resolute in defeating it. In short, this episode, just a few days away from His triumphal entry into Jerusalem, shows that He (as Life) is achieving victory over Death!⁶¹ The tears of Jesus signal that resurrection is not denial of suffering, but God's refusal to accept Death's claim over His creation.

The Resurrection After His death on the cross and His entombment by Joseph of Arimethea and Nicodemus, the world waited. For three days and nights as Scripture prophesied, the Savior of the World slept. The disciples were likely confused and mournful, while Judas was likely already dead.⁶² But Mary Magdalene wanted to be with her Rabbi. The only problem was, He wasn't there! John and Peter also visited the tomb, with Peter going in first while John stayed back. The folded face cloth was a strong signal that helped John believe that the Master had indeed risen from the dead. This scene would have also reminded them of how Lazarus had to be unbound⁶³, while He had *unbound Himself*! Therefore, while Lazarus is raised and must be unbound, Jesus rises and leaves His burial cloths behind. Lazarus returns to life temporarily, while Jesus enters a transformed life permanently. The folded sudarium is not incidental but the quiet declaration of mastery. Death has been entered, exhausted, and overcome.

Thus victory was earned by Christ Jesus, fulfilling His Father's plan by placing upon Himself the sins of mankind and putting Death to death. Eternal life is now within reach for all who believe! Not because we are special, but because God is! And this life is not something that happens in the future; it is happening now. We have victory in the here and now as we live in the Kingdom of God. We need no longer fear of death or of things or of people that can take the body.⁶⁴ Resurrection in John is not merely proof of life after death but the revelation that death no longer governs life. Jesus does not avoid Death; He confronts it, enters it, and empties it of authority. The victory of resurrection is not comfort, but conquest - not escape

⁶⁰ John touches on a very interesting and theologically rich comparison here. He describes Mary's weeping as *klaio* (κλαίω), which is a public, mournful wail. But when describing Jesus weeping, he uses the word *dakryo* (δακρύω), which is a quiet, deeply subdued grief. He is *not* mourning Lazarus' death, because He knows that Lazarus will rise again. Instead, he is grieved by the nature of Death: this Thing that should not be.

⁶¹ "achieving" because the victory would not be won until the cross.

⁶² Matt. 27:3-6; depending on the passage of time from returning the coins to hanging himself

The *sudarium* was used in Jewish burial traditions to keep the jaw closed as embalming was forbidden.

⁶³ Jn. 11:44

⁶⁴ Matt. 10:28

from suffering, but instead transformation through it. Because Christ lives, life is no longer fragile, provisional, or defined by the grave. Victory is Christ's, and He freely gives it to all who would call on His name! **Will you do so?**

Relate

As we reflect on what true victory is and looks like, consider these open-ended questions as a method to get participants involved or as a way to further refine your lesson.

Questions

- 1 How does Jesus' sacrifice help us understand life and death?
- 2 Why do we sometimes struggle with our status as victors in Christ?
- 3 How do Jesus' actions in Bethany help us understand His purpose?

Teaching tip: Please keep in mind the different levels of Christian maturity. Assuming a certain level of knowledge when asking questions may be unfair. Also, a useful tactic when asking questions is to keep quiet for a few moments after asking. People need time to think and if you immediately answer your own question, people will stop thinking, which is not the goal.

VICTORY IS ALREADY AT WORK IN THE LIVES OF BELIEVERS.

Lesson 12. Victory That Compels Us: The Risen Lord

Text: John 20-21

Synopsis

VICTORY DOESN'T END AT THE EMPTY TOMB - IT GOES OUT INTO THE WORLD. Jesus is risen! All prophecies have been fulfilled; Jesus was given tasks by the Father, and He completed them all fully, without fail and without complaint. If this were a movie, at this point the credits would roll and the people would file out of the theater. However, Christ's resurrection isn't the end of the story, but it is the end of the beginning. The next step is for imperfect humans to take His message to the world. But how are we supposed to do that? In this lesson, John tells the post-resurrection story in such a way that we can answer the question: we preach the Good News in a spirit of unity, faith, and love.

Review

Recall last week that true victory is already at work in the lives of believers. By understanding life and death literally and figuratively, in the present and in the future, we can better appreciate the life He brings and how Death is not anything we should fear when we abide in Him.

Reveal

Like other aspects of his Gospel account, John's story-telling approach for the post-resurrection events is rather unique. While the other three accounts focus on the collective appearances of Christ, John focuses on the final time Jesus spends with the disciples at an *individual* level, specifically in the cases of Mary Magdalene, Thomas, and Peter. This approach emphasizes the resurrection as not only a communal one, but also a personal one.

Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. **As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.**" (Jn. 20:19b-21)



Figure 16: Mary Magdalene
Savoldo [c. 1535]

Teaching Reminder: John's central point in his gospel account is that Jesus is the center of our understanding of the universe; all of His words and deeds are to be examined through that lens. All of our words and deeds are to be judged through that lens. Victory is found in Jesus because He overcame Satan through His death on the cross. To access this victory, we must believe in Him, be born again through water and the Spirit, and we must love another as Christ has loved us.

Compelling Unity - Mary Magdalene All four Gospel accounts list Mary Magdalene as the first to visit Christ's tomb. The early morning on the first day of the week was *literally* the first moment she could do anything, and she was at His tomb! But the stone was rolled away, and He wasn't there. After fetching Peter and John, she weeps at the sight, not understanding what has happened. Jesus arrives, but she suspects he is someone else. Critically, she asks "the gardener" where Jesus was moved. She sought to restore the relationship she had with the Teacher **before** understanding the resurrection story. From her point of view, her unity with Christ was broken and she sought to reestablish it. But that restoration doesn't happen until Jesus calls her name. Once He does that, unity is restored and her purpose is clear: go to the brothers. She is now the first witness to Christ's resurrection, and she takes that message to the disciples, re-unifying the community of Christ's beloved. The scattered were now once again together, with a renewed sense of being. She was separated and grief-stricken, but Christ recognized her and gave her a mission.

How have you acted as a unifier? Is it an easy task? Where do you think her mindset was on that day?

Compelling Faith - Thomas Christ returns to see the disciples, but for reasons we are not told, Thomas was not in attendance. So from his vantage point, he has not seen nor heard the news that Christ is risen. When Thomas is informed of this wonderful news, he responds by expressing disbelief in a resoundingly clear way:

"Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will *never* (emphasis added) believe."⁶⁵

⁶⁵ Jn. 20:25

History hasn't been too kind to Thomas for this expression of doubt. People have wondered how it could be possible after everything they saw and heard, that someone who walked and talked to Jesus could still have such a strong feeling of disbelief.⁶⁶ But was his reaction so hard to believe? Peter and John marveled at the open tomb, and the nature of people to not believe until they have seen or heard is fairly common. How does Jesus react to Thomas' stubbornness? Rebuke? Resignation? No, He appears to Thomas and gives him exactly what he asked for! The risen Lord and Savior's open wounds became the physical evidence Thomas needed to believe, and so he did.

⁶⁶ Have you ever used the phrase "doubting Thomas"?

How many times does the Lord appear far away? We ask to see and hear so that we can believe. Our prayers ask and seek, and He answers them. We see and hear things that can lead us to God, and we hope and pray that these lead us to faith (belief without sight).

Compelling Love - Peter Christ stands on the shore of the Sea of Tiberias, patiently waiting for the fishermen to complete their tasks. They don't recognize Him, but a miraculous catch of fish jogs their memory and they realize the man on the shore is the risen Christ. They have breakfast, and then Jesus gives His final instruction to Peter, but the student wasn't understanding his Master. Compounding this scene, surely Peter is still reeling from his abandonment of Christ after promising he would not.

"DO YOU LOVE ME?" is one of those questions that has to be dealt with very carefully, especially if the answer is "no." In this case, Peter doesn't say "no", but he also doesn't quite say "yes." The English language works against us in this section of scripture, as Jesus is asking about Peter's love for Him by using the word *agape* (αγαπε), meaning self-sacrificial love, but Peter responds with *phileo* (φιλεο), meaning a relational and friendship type of love. Three times⁶⁷ He asks Peter about his love for Him, and each time Peter replies that he does love Him. At each iteration, He gives Peter a task: Feed the lambs, tend the sheep, and feed the sheep. John also records that Jesus tells Peter how he would die to glorify God. Finally, Jesus ends His conversation with Peter the way He began it three years ago - "Follow me."

⁶⁷ Most likely, Peter's grief is due to the three round nature of this discussion, reminding him of his betrayal.

Relate

As we reflect on what true victory is and looks like, consider these open-ended questions as a method to get participants involved or as a way to further refine your lesson.

Questions

- 1 When have you struggled with unity?
- 2 When have you struggled with faith?
- 3 When have you struggled with love?
- 4 What does victory in Jesus mean to you?

Teaching tip: Please keep in mind the different levels of Christian maturity. Assuming a certain level of knowledge when asking questions may be unfair. Also, a useful tactic when asking questions is to keep quiet for a few moments after asking. People need time to think and if you immediately answer your own question, people will stop thinking, which is not the goal.

VICTORY DOESN'T END AT THE EMPTY TOMB - IT GOES OUT INTO THE WORLD.

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