

Table of Contents

[Daily Readings From the Life of Christ Vol. 1](#)

[Daily Readings From the Life of Christ Vol. 2](#)

[Daily Readings From the Life of Christ Vol. 3](#)

GRACE FOR TODAY

VOLUME 1

DAILY READINGS

from the Life of

CHRIST

— JOHN —
MACARTHUR

MOODY PUBLISHERS
CHICAGO

JESUS' PUBLIC BAPTISM

Then Jesus arrived from Galilee at the Jordan. —MATT. 3:13A

There is something majestic about Jesus' baptism that brought all the previous events of His earthly life into focus. Here He came fully onto the stage of the gospel story and His work and ministry truly began.

Following an eternity past in heaven and thirty years of obscurity in Nazareth, God presented the Savior publicly to the world. John the Baptist, as "the voice of one crying in the wilderness," had heralded the coming of the Messiah (3:3; cf. Isa. 40:3), and now He was fully and publicly prepared to begin the fulfillment of His earthly mission.

A parallel passage in Luke tells us that this was no private or secluded ceremony: "Now when all the people were baptized, Jesus was also baptized" (Luke 3:21). The word translated "arrived" in Matthew 3:13 often indicated an official arrival or public appearance by a dignitary. From now on Jesus would be in the public eye and call no place His permanent earthly home (8:20).

This important episode from the beginning of Christ's ministry clearly shows us that Jesus, though knowing what a high degree of visibility would ultimately cost Him, obediently stepped from the comfort of obscurity into the high-risk position of a public figure. His work would invite strong opinion, but in order to accomplish the Father's will, it must take place in full view of the world. It must come at the cost of being widely observed.

ASK YOURSELF

We are called to be salt and light, not merely to enjoy God's seasoning and illumination in our own lives but to be His conveyors of grace to others. How does this public calling alter the way you express and live your Christianity? Pray that you will live not in fear but in faith.

JESUS' PURPOSEFUL BAPTISM

*Then Jesus arrived . . . coming to John,
to be baptized by him. —MATT. 3:13 A, B*

In the original text of this passage, the wording “to be baptized” emphasizes purpose in this momentous appearance by the Lord Jesus. But it was extremely difficult for John the Baptist to understand why the God-Man would need to be baptized.

John’s baptism was for the confession of sin and repentance (3:2, 6, 11), but Jesus as the Lamb of God (John 1:29) had no need for such a baptism. It is hard to see why One who would take away sin would need to submit Himself to a ceremony that symbolizes death to sin and rising to spiritual life.

Because John knew so well that Jesus was the sinless Messiah, come to fulfill God’s redemptive purpose, he “tried to prevent Him” (Matt. 3:14). The Greek pronouns in John’s statement “I have need to be baptized by *You*, and do *You* come to *me*?” are all in the emphatic position, underscoring his strong bewilderment over the situation. This was not a direct refusal, as Peter might have given (cf. Matt. 16:22), but the Baptist no doubt misunderstood Jesus’ request, thinking He could not possibly intend to undergo baptism.

All sinners need the repentance that baptism symbolizes, but many, such as the Jewish teachers and leaders of Jesus’ day, do not seek true repentance. Jesus, on the other hand, purposed to receive John’s baptism to show His complete obedience to God’s will.

ASK YOURSELF

The same Jesus who walked with such resolve and determination throughout His own earthly life has a distinct and daily purpose for yours. What pieces of this plan are becoming clearer to you? Pray that He will continue to reveal . . . and that you will continue to follow.

TESTIMONY TO JESUS' SINLESSNESS

John tried to prevent Him, saying, "I have need to be baptized by You, and do You come to me?" —MATT. 3:14

John the Baptist's initial reluctance to baptize Jesus is a testimony to Jesus' sinlessness—and John's awareness of his own sinfulness.

In effect, John said to Jesus, "I'm a sinner, just like everyone else I baptize, so why should You, the sinless Son of God, want me to baptize You?" In an indirect yet definite fashion, John agreed with the later description of Christ by the writer of Hebrews, "One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin" (4:15).

Jesus Himself testified to His perfect righteousness and His reason for wanting to be baptized, "Permit it at this time; for in this way it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness" (Matt. 3:15). Jesus' words did not deny His superiority to John the Baptist or His sinlessness. "Permit it at this time" is an idiomatic expression meaning that Christ's baptism, though seemingly not appropriate or necessary, was actually appropriate for this special time.

The Lord understood John's strong hesitation, and knew it came from deep spiritual commitment and sincerity. Thus He gave John divine permission to do what he was otherwise reluctant to do, so he could perfectly fulfill the Father's plan.

ASK YOURSELF

How do you think you would have reacted to Jesus' request for baptism? How do you react today when you're in His presence, in awe of His holiness and purity? Pray for the spiritual understanding to know that by His grace, He has washed this same righteousness over you.

SYMBOLS FROM JESUS' BAPTISM

Jesus answering said to him, "Permit it at this time; for in this way it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." —MATT. 3:15A

The most important symbol Jesus' baptism gives us is a perfect example of obedience to God the Father. Our Lord always modeled obedience in all things (e.g., Phil. 2:6–8; cf. Matt. 17:25–27). In submitting to baptism, Jesus affirmed the validity of John's standard of righteousness and demonstrated that baptism was God's will to which every believer should be obedient.

Furthermore, Jesus' baptism is a profound, symbolic identification with sinful humanity. Hundreds of years earlier the prophet Isaiah stated that the Messiah "was numbered with the transgressors; yet He himself bore the sin of many, and interceded for the transgressors" (Isa. 53:12). The sinless One took His place among sinners, and that in part entailed submitting Himself to a sinner's baptism.

Finally, Jesus' baptism is a symbol of His death and resurrection, and therefore a prefigurement of our Christian baptism. Concerning His death, Jesus later said, "I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is accomplished!" (Luke 12:50). In pointing to His obedient identification with sinners (cf. Isa. 53:11; 2 Cor. 5:21) and His subsequent atoning death and bodily resurrection, the key symbols stemming from Jesus' baptism remind believers of their need to faithfully obey and be baptized.

ASK YOURSELF

He became one of us, identifying with our sin. Marvel again at the amazement and immensity of this truth. What grace! What humility! What kind of worship should flow from this reality? Worship Him today as the One who was not ashamed to take your place, who stooped down so that you could stand.

TRUE BAPTISM—CHRIST IMMERSSED

After being baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water. —MATT. 3:16A

Christians, especially new believers, sometimes wonder what mode of baptism Jesus underwent, and therefore wonder which is correct for them to experience. Since genuine baptism represents cleansing from sin and symbolizes the believer’s identification with Christ’s death and resurrection, the ordinance must involve immersion, not merely sprinkling or pouring.

The Greek word (*baptizo*) literally means to dip or submerge an object into water or another liquid. Confusion regarding the word’s meaning resulted largely because Latin and more modern-language translations of Scripture simply transliterated many occurrences of the Greek word.

Until the Middle Ages, the Christian church knew and officially practiced no form of baptism but immersion. Then the Roman Catholic Church formally introduced and sanctioned baptism by sprinkling or pouring. Prior to that, even the great Catholic theologian Thomas Aquinas wrote, “In immersion the setting forth of the burial of Christ is more plainly expressed, in which this manner of baptizing is more commendable.”

That Jesus “came up immediately from the water” indicates He had been completely *in* the water—in other words, almost surely immersed. John baptized people in the Jordan River (Matt. 3:6) and at other places where “there was much water” (John 3:23). That would not make sense if he had baptized only by pouring or sprinkling (cf. Acts 8:38–39). Unlike immersion, those other modes just do not fully symbolize dying to sin and being raised to new life.

ASK YOURSELF

Baptism is a one-time exercise in obedience, but the reality of being crucified with Christ and raised to “walk in newness of life” (Rom. 6:4) is an ongoing experience. How do you remind yourself of this on your average day? Pray that the gift of God’s grace never loses its wonder.

THE HOLY SPIRIT VALIDATES JESUS

The heavens were opened, and he [John] saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove and lighting on Him. —MATT. 3:16B

About the supernatural sign that occurred at the conclusion of Jesus' baptism, one commentator has suggested, "Just as the veil of the Temple was rent in twain to symbolize the perfect access of all men to God, so here the heavens are rent asunder to show how near God is to Jesus, and Jesus to God."

But did Jesus really need an anointing from the Holy Spirit? When He came to earth, Jesus retained His full deity. In His complete humanity, however, He needed divine strengthening for ministry. Like any human being, Jesus experienced fatigue, hunger, sleepiness, and the like. Only the Holy Spirit could strengthen such humanness (cf. Matt. 4:1; Luke 4:14).

That the Spirit came upon Him at His baptism was a fulfillment of the prophet's words, "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the afflicted; He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to captives and freedom to prisoners" (Isa. 61:1). It was also the sign God had given to John the Baptist so that he would know Jesus when he saw Him (John 1:33).

This anointing by the Holy Spirit was unique in several ways, including being the only New Testament instance in which the Holy Spirit appeared as a dove. Most important, however, this act not only empowered Jesus as the Son of Man for redemptive service, but it was a confirming sign to everyone present—and to us as well—that Jesus is indeed the Messiah.

ASK YOURSELF

If Jesus was dependent on the Spirit's empowering for effective service, how much more do we need His help and strengthening?

In what ways are you making yourself fully open to the Holy Spirit's power and direction? Pray that He will make you ever aware of your need for Him.

BELOVED JESUS—SUPERIOR TO ALL SACRIFICES

*A voice out of the heavens said, “This is My beloved Son,
in whom I am well-pleased.” —MATT. 3:17*

No Old Testament sacrifice, no matter how carefully selected, was genuinely and completely pleasing to God. The people could not possibly find an animal without some imperfection. Furthermore, the blood of the sacrificial animals was at best only symbolic, “for it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins” (Heb. 10:4; cf. 9:12). But the Cross would effect a sacrifice that would be “with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ” (1 Peter 1:19).

It was this reality that rang out in the Father’s declaration of blessing at the Jordan that day—the day of Jesus’ baptism. His use of the word “beloved” connotes a rich, profound, ultimately satisfying relationship between the Father and the Son. Forms of this word occur elsewhere in the New Testament to denote God’s love for believers (Rom. 1:7) and to describe the ideal love they should have for one another (1 Cor. 4:14). But in God’s eyes the Lord Jesus ever remains the most beloved among any living being—past, present, or future.

This means that Christians, too, are a delight to their heavenly Father, because they are now “in Christ” and adopted into God’s eternal, spiritual family. If God can find no imperfection in His Son, He likewise by His grace finds no defect in His saints (cf. Rom. 3:26; Eph. 1:3–6).

ASK YOURSELF

Is the Son “beloved” in your eyes as well? How does your love for Him express itself in your conversation, your interactions, your behavior, your worship? If you couldn’t say that He is your “first love” (Rev. 2:4), ask God to help you return Him to His rightful place of adoration.

JESUS' DEITY—CENTRAL TO THE GOSPEL

*A voice out of the heavens said, "This is My beloved Son,
in whom I am well-pleased." —MATT. 3:17*

The truth that Jesus Christ is God's perfect Son is a key feature of the gospel message. The author of the letter to the Hebrews makes this clear at the outset of his writing:

God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world. And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power. When He had made purification of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much better than the angels, as He has inherited a more excellent name than they. For to which of the angels did He ever say, "You are My Son, today I have begotten You"? And again, "I will be a Father to Him and He shall be a Son to Me"? And when He again brings the firstborn into the world, He says, "And let all the angels of God worship Him." And of the angels He says, "Who makes His angels winds, and His ministers a flame of fire." But of the Son He says, "Your throne, O God, is forever and ever, and the righteous scepter is the scepter of His kingdom." (1:1–8; cf. Col. 1:15–19; 2:9)

The New Testament presents God more as the Father of Jesus (John 14:6–11; Phil. 2:9–11) than as the Father of believers (Matt. 6:9). We cannot worship God unless we also worship Christ as one with Him (cf. John 5:23).

ASK YOURSELF

Are you as "well-pleased" with the Son—your Savior—as the Father is? And are you willing to declare it, as if boomed from the heavens? Pray that God would renew your love for Him today and fill you with boldness to pronounce your devotion at every opportunity.

PREPARATION FOR TESTING

*Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness
to be tempted by the devil. —MATT. 4:1*

One of life's important truisms is that strong temptation tends to follow every major personal triumph. The apostle Paul warns, "Let him who thinks he stands take heed that he does not fall" (1 Cor. 10:12). In the aftermath of significant successes, we are often tempted to think the accomplishment came solely by our own strength and ingenuity. But just when we think success is here to stay, we become vulnerable to pride—and failure. Even Christ in His incarnation was not exempt from testing, such as what came on the heels of His God-affirming baptism.

In a parallel passage, Mark says, "Immediately the Spirit impelled Him to go out into the wilderness" (Mark 1:12). Mark's use of "impelled" denotes the necessity of the Lord's temptation, or testing. Although the testings would come from Satan, it was God's will that Jesus undergo them in advance of His earthly ministry and redemptive work.

So after His ministry and Person had been validated by the Father and the Spirit at the scene of His baptism, Jesus confronted the first great challenge to His mission. Our Savior was not intimidated by the prospect of temptation but fully conscious of His divine mission and strengthened in His humanity by the abiding presence and power of God. That is what Satan sought to forever undermine and destroy.

ASK YOURSELF

What specific temptations often awaken in your own heart following times of encouragement or accomplishment? How do you deal with them and defeat them? May God be seen as your continual supply, even at times when you're tempted to think you can manage on your own.

GOD'S PLAN FOR TEMPTATION

*Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness
to be tempted by the devil. —MATT. 4:1*

Jesus' temptation in the wilderness did not catch His Father by surprise. The Son was specifically "led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil." The word translated "tempted" is from a morally neutral term that means "to test." But sometimes, as here, the context clearly indicates that the testing was aimed at enticing one to do evil. That the devil was going to present certain temptations to Jesus thus justifies rendering the word "tempted"—it gives us the negative connotation of Satan's sinister intentions.

God sometimes uses Satan's temptations toward evil as part of His larger plan to test believers for good (cf. Job). Whereas the devil wanted to lead Christ into sin and disobedience in the wilderness, God used the circumstances to reconfirm Christ's holiness and worthiness. This is God's plan for all His saints (cf. James 1:2–4, 12–13)—that Christ's righteousness be revealed in us.

Joseph's severe mistreatment at the hands of his brothers in the Old Testament and his subsequent "misfortunes" in Egypt could have driven him to despair and sinful bitterness, but by faith he recognized God's sovereign hand in it all (Gen. 50:20). Whether God tests us directly or uses Satan to challenge us, He will always use the situation to eventually produce good fruit in us.

ASK YOURSELF

What positive benefits does temptation serve in your own life?
As unwanted and unwelcome as it is, what does its mere presence
keep before you, thereby thwarting the aspirations of the enemy?

Pray that God would gain His desired objectives in you,
even through times of testing.

FASTING AS PART OF PREPARATION FOR TESTING

*After He had fasted forty days and forty nights,
He then became hungry. —MATT. 4:2*

For a quite lengthy period prior to the three diabolical temptations directed at Jesus, He fasted. We don't know exactly what He did during the forty-day period, but He likely spent most of the time communing with His heavenly Father.

Even in His perfect humanity, Jesus needed solitary preparation time in meditation and prayer, as we all do in anticipating a major testing. Consider how Moses spent forty years in Midian in preparation for his leadership of Israel out of Egypt to the Promised Land, or that the apostle Paul lived three years in the desert of Arabia before launching his extensive ministries.

Matthew reports, with much simplicity and directness, that at the end of the period of fasting, Jesus "became hungry." Hunger weakens us physically and somehow leaves us more vulnerable to spiritual attack, which is precisely why Satan often assails us at such times. But temptations that we have anticipated and prayed about have little power to harm us, if we constantly rely on the Lord.

Jesus, though spending more than a month in fasting, is a tremendous example to us of remaining alert to spiritual danger, which He did as Satan approached. During the temptations, He did not yield on the slightest point.

ASK YOURSELF

What other feelings and conditions—like hunger—serve as ready-made points of entry for spiritual temptation? Knowing this, how can you better "keep watching and praying" that you not fall into sin (Mark 14:38)? Pray for the courage to live with such keen awareness.

THE TEMPTER IS REAL

And the tempter came and said to Him . . . —MATT. 4:3A

It is not popular today to believe in a literal, personal devil, even among professing Christians. The devil is increasingly seen as being somewhere between a figment of our imagination and a useful device to coerce obedience.

Yet in addition to the name used here (“tempter”), the New Testament gives Satan many other names: “ruler of this world” (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11); “the prince of the power of the air” (Eph. 2:2); “the god of this world” (2 Cor. 4:4); “Abaddon” and “Apollyon,” both of which mean “destroyer” (Rev. 9:11); and “the serpent of old” (Rev. 12:9).

With these and many other references to the devil in God’s infallible Scripture—all of which assume a real, supernatural person—it’s clear that Satan does exist. And he never made himself more personally manifest than when he confronted Jesus in the wilderness. The Lord’s opponent was an actual, personal foe in every sense of that expression.

Since the Fall, Satan has directed his full attention and fury against God and His kingdom work. While Christ was on earth, that opposition was particularly intense against the Son and His redemptive mission, beginning at the very outset of His ministry. Yet all the forces of hell continue to present us with real challenges as we endeavor to advance God’s kingdom. Thus all believers must remain ever vigilant and prayerful against a genuine spiritual foe.

ASK YOURSELF

Have you grown lax in guarding yourself from the “roaring lion” (1 Peter 5:8) who actively seeks to devour you? He is not to be feared, for your God is triumphant, but he is definitely in need of accounting for.

Ask the Lord to make you wise and wary of the enemy’s presence.

TESTING JESUS' DIVINE RIGHTS

"If You are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread."—MATT. 4:3B

Before Satan tempted Jesus more directly, he threw out a cynical challenge to test Christ's deity. The devil's conditional statement, "If You are the Son of God," assumed that Jesus was indeed God's beloved Son (3:17). But he hoped to persuade Him into a demonstration of divine power that would violate God's plan, which called for Jesus to set aside His divine power while on earth and use it only when the Father commanded. If Satan could make Jesus presume upon His divine rights and act independently of His Father, this would amount to disobedience.

Obviously, then, the purpose of the first temptation went far beyond getting Jesus to satisfy His physical hunger by wrongly using miraculous power. The devil wanted Him to doubt the Father's word, love, and provision—to disobediently declare that being hungry was simply not fit for God's only Son.

Satan's argument was, "Hadn't He endured enough humiliating circumstances already (the stable, the flight to Egypt, obscurity in Nazareth, this time in the wilderness) in an effort to identify with unworthy humanity?" But unlike Eve in the Garden of Eden (cf. Gen. 3:1f.), Jesus stayed true to God's will and did not cast doubt on the Father's word or His already secured position as God's Son.

ASK YOURSELF

Yes, there is more at stake in temptation than the mere subject of the enticement. There are significant matters of trust and freedom and identity involved. How seriously are you taking these threats to your Christian calling? Pray that God would help you see the battle for what it is.

JESUS' REAL FOOD—OBEYING THE FATHER

He answered and said, "It is written, 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.'"—MATT. 4:4

Above all, Satan's temptations of Jesus Christ solicited His rebellion against the Father. But Jesus had come to earth to do the Father's will and nothing else. In fact, His will and the Father's were precisely the same (John 5:30; cf. 10:30; Heb. 10:9).

Case in point: In the ultimate test of obedience, just prior to His arrest and betrayal, Jesus prayed in the garden of Gethsemane, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; yet not as I will, but as You will." . . . "My Father, if this cannot pass away unless I drink it, Your will be done" (Matt. 26:39, 42). This supreme example of absolute trust and submission by Jesus to His Father is what Satan tried to smash. In his proudest and wickedest manner, the enemy attempted to fracture the Trinitarian nature of the Godhead.

But Christ, in His immeasurable humility and righteousness, replied to Satan's first words, "It is written, 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.'" All three of our Lord's responses to Satan would begin with the simple but straightforward appeal to the Word of God—"It is written" (cf. Ps. 119:11). In quoting Deuteronomy 8:3, Jesus affirmed that believers are far better off depending on God and waiting on His provision than they are in grabbing for their own satisfaction—something we all are tempted to do.

ASK YOURSELF

You may feel unsure of what God's will is for you, but much of it is spelled out clearly in Scripture. How well are you obeying the aspects of His will that have already been revealed to you? In seeking to know His plan, a good place to start is always obedience to His Word.

TRUSTING SELF IS NEVER JUSTIFIED

He answered and said, "It is written, 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.'"—MATT. 4:4

Christians are never justified in trusting solely in themselves to meet their basic needs. No matter how worried we might become, if we turn to God in faith and obedience, He will meet all our essential needs in His own way, according to His sovereign schedule. Implicit in this understanding is that God will meet every need, both physical and spiritual, as Paul promises us, "My God will supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 4:19; cf. Matt. 6:8, 33).

It is always best to follow Jesus' example, obeying God and trusting wholeheartedly in His gracious provision, than to impulsively and selfishly attempt to meet our own needs in ways that could disobey or compromise God's Word.

To trust first of all in ourselves to meet our needs—circumventing or modifying God's will in the process—not only demonstrates a lack of faith but rests on the false assumption that our earthly well-being is our most crucial need. Jesus contradicts such thinking, which is so natural to fallen humanity, both to unbelievers as well as believers who slip into carnal mind-sets. Therefore our Lord quoted Deuteronomy 8:3, "Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God." The all-sufficient and sustaining power of God is the only true source that meets our every need.

ASK YOURSELF

Where does your dependence lie? Are you trusting in your paycheck? Your insurance policies? Your physical strength and smarts? Or have you finally realized that everything hinges on God, His Word, and His sovereign plan for your life? Find your sense of security in Him alone.

GRACE FOR TODAY

VOLUME 2

DAILY READINGS

from the Life of

CHRIST

— JOHN —
MACARTHUR

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THE PREEXISTENT WORD, PART 1

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. —JOHN 1:1–2

The concept of “the Word” (*logos* in the Greek) was meaningful to both Jewish and Greek readers of this gospel. Greek philosophers defined it as the abstract principle of order and reason in the universe. Even laymen understood the term as one of the universe’s most important principles, the source of wisdom.

Thus to John’s Greek audience, he presented Jesus as the embodiment of the *logos* concept, though not as an impersonal force or emanation. God, the true *logos*, became a man, Jesus Christ. This concept was something new to Greek thought.

To his Jewish readers, on the other hand, John presented Jesus as the incarnation of divine power and revelation, a continuation of the Old Testament “word of the Lord” concept (cf. Gen. 15:1; Ex. 24:3–4; 1 Sam. 3:21; Ps. 33:6; Jer. 1:2). Among other things, Jesus was the agent of creation (Col. 1:16), inspired the New Testament through the Holy Spirit whom He sent (John 14:26; 15:26), initiated the new covenant (Luke 22:20), and was the One who instructed believers (John 10:27). As God’s incarnate Word, Jesus is His final word to humanity: “God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son” (Heb. 1:1–2).

Although Jesus was intimately with the Father from eternity past, He willingly left that glorious privilege and “emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. . . . He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Phil. 2:7–8).

ASK YOURSELF

Jesus is not all things to all people, yet He meets each of us at our individual points of need and our unique frames of reference. If you were to describe how Jesus proves His Word true in your own life, what ideas would come most quickly to mind?

THE PREEXISTENT WORD, PART 2

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. —JOHN 1:1–2

John restates the profound truths of verse 1 in verse 2. He underscores again the eternity of the Word—Christ existed “in the beginning” when everything else was created. And as noted in verse 1, that existence was one of intimate fellowship with God the Father.

Jesus’ deity and full equality with His Father is a truth of the Christian faith that can’t be compromised. The apostle John later warned the readers of his second letter, “If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching [the biblical truth of Christ’s deity; cf. vv. 7, 9], do not receive him into your house, and do not give him a greeting” (2 John 10). Such seemingly unloving actions are justified toward heretics who deny the Lord’s deity and His gospel, because they are under God’s curse:

There are some who are disturbing you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we [Paul], or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed! As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to what you received, he is to be accursed! (Gal. 1:7–9)

We must not be confused about the deity of Christ, because the Bible teaches it clearly and unmistakably. Jesus is the eternally preexistent Word, who has always enjoyed full communion and divine life with the Father, and is Himself God.

ASK YOURSELF

Are you ever in danger of limiting the power, rule, sovereignty and, yes, even the goodness of God? Though your belief and profession may be biblically sound and solid, does your daily interaction with life’s circumstances reveal a complete trust in God’s preeminence?

THE WORD'S CREATIVE POWER

All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being. —JOHN 1:3

Here John declares the weighty truth that Jesus, the eternal Word, created everything that “came into being.” This truth provides two more proofs of His deity. First, if Christ is Creator of all things, He must be uncreated, and only God is uncreated. This verse uses a different verb from “to be” in verses 1 and 2, which denotes a state of being. Here the verb (“came into being”) describes the creation of the universe, thus emphasizing the divine creative act distinct from that state of being. The verb also points to a second proof of deity—Jesus is Creator (“through Him”) and thus is God. Elsewhere in Scripture the Creator is likewise portrayed as God (Gen. 1:1; Isa. 40:28; Rom. 1:25; Rev. 4:11).

With this clear verse, John strongly rejected the developing heresy of Gnosticism, which claimed that matter was evil and spirit was good, and therefore a good God could not have created the universe.

Today's world, however, is obviously radically different from the Lord's original good creation (Gen. 1:31). The fall not only affected humanity adversely but the whole creation as well. Because of that, Christ will eventually redeem not only believers but also the created world, as Romans 8:19–21 teaches:

For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

ASK YOURSELF

The concept of God as Creator comes with many practical, daily implications since we live inside His created order at all times. How does the creation itself—even in its fallen state—continue to reflect the grandeur and careful oversight of its and your Creator?

THE WORD'S SELF-EXISTENCE, PART 1

In Him was life, and the life was the Light of men. The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it. —JOHN 1:4–5

God's and Christ's having life in themselves—self-existence—is a foundational truth to our faith. We can describe everything created as “becoming,” because nothing created is unchanging. But the divine, eternal, nonchanging being or life, such as the Father and the Son, is distinct from what is becoming—and is actually its source. It is what distinguishes creatures (us) from the Creator (God).

There was a point when the universe did not exist (Gen. 1:1), but never a point when God did not exist (cf. Ex. 3:14). Acts 17:28 says, “In Him we live and move and exist.” We can do nothing apart from Him, but He has always lived and moved and been.

This verse is one of the purest descriptions of deity—and to say Jesus is “the life” is the purest statement about His deity and His role in creation. As Creator He is the source of everything and of everyone who has life. Furthermore, John's gospel often uses the form of the word “life” that denotes spiritual or eternal life (1:12; 3:15–16; 6:37, 39–40, 44, 47; 20:31). Christ came into the world to impart spiritual life to sinners who “were dead in [their] trespasses and sins” (Eph. 2:1; cf. John 6:33; 10:10).

ASK YOURSELF

Of all the things we forget to be grateful for and most often take for granted is the simple gift of life. May you stop at frequent moments of the day simply to give glory to God for the gift of breath, of sight, of hearing, of life itself . . . and the privilege of enjoying it with Him.

THE WORD'S SELF-EXISTENCE, PART 2

In Him was life, and the life was the Light of men. The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it. —JOHN 1:4–5

John's statement "the life was the Light" says that life and light are essentially the same. It basically has the same construction as "the Word was God" (v. 1)—divine life and light share the same essential properties.

The divine life is true and holy. "Light" is that truth and holiness displayed against the darkness of lies and sin. In John 8:12 Jesus declares, "I am the Light of the world; he who follows Me will not walk in the darkness, but will have the Light of life" (cf. Ps. 36:9).

This Light is no less than the manifest life of God shining in His Son: "The light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God" (2 Cor. 4:4; cf. v. 6). "The Light" is simply the Father's divine light revealed in His Son, Jesus Christ.

Satan's kingdom is the "domain of darkness" (Col. 1:13), but Christ is the source of life (John 14:6) and the Light that "shines in the darkness" of a lost world (cf. 12:35–36). Despite the devil's intense assaults on the Light, "the darkness did not comprehend it." The word translated "comprehend" is better rendered "overcome." A very small candle can dispel darkness from a room; the Lord Jesus, the glorious Light of saving truth, will destroy the satanic realm of spiritual darkness. In fact, since Jesus' earthly ministry, "the darkness is passing away and the true Light is already shining" (1 John 2:8).

ASK YOURSELF

What effect does Jesus' being "the Light" have on your life? How does He brighten the path you walk? What does His light expose, both in the world and in yourself, refining your approach and strengthening your confidence as you journey through each day?

THE WORD'S SELF-EXISTENCE, PART 3

In Him was life, and the life was the Light of men. The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it. — JOHN 1:4–5

Because they understand so well the final judgment awaiting them, Satan and his forces have tried desperately throughout redemptive history to destroy the self-existent Word of life and light, the Lord Jesus. First they attempted to destroy the nation of Israel, from which Messiah would arise. They also targeted the royal line from which Christ would descend (2 Kings 11:1–2).

Shortly after Jesus' birth, Satan prompted Herod's vicious but futile attempt to murder Him (Matt. 2:16). Prior to the start of Jesus' ministry, the evil one tried in vain to turn Him aside from His mission (Matt. 4:1–11). Later he worked through Peter in an effort to accomplish the same objective (Matt. 16:21–23). Likewise, Satan's children, those who refuse to believe the truth, are eternally lost because they reject the Word of Light and life:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them [through Jesus Christ]. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse. For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but . . . their foolish heart was darkened. (Rom. 1:18–21)

Anyone who rejects the deity of the Logos, Jesus Christ, will be lost: "For unless you believe that I am He, you will die in your sins" (John 8:24).

ASK YOURSELF

In what ways do you continue to see the enemy at work, combating and contradicting Jesus, His gospel, and His people? We know he cannot ultimately succeed, but what can we do as Christ's followers to stand against the onslaught of Satan's attacks and accusations?

GOD'S GRACE ON MARY

Jacob was the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, by whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah. —MATT. 1:16

When God chose Mary to be the mother of His Son, He showered much grace upon her. And although a descendant of King David's family, she was a humble, obscure young woman, just as much a sinner as all other human beings ever born. She was likely a superior person morally and spiritually than her contemporaries, but she was not sinless. Mary demonstrated her faithfulness and obedience to God by her humble and submissive response to the angel Gabriel's announcement (Luke 1:38).

Mary herself, in her song of praise called the Magnificat, acknowledged her need of a Savior: "My soul exalts the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior. For He has had regard for the humble state of His bondservant" (Luke 1:46–48). These words refute any ideas of her being co-redemptrix and co-mediator with Jesus. Such beliefs are not scriptural and were never contained in early church doctrine. The Catholic Church embraced such false concepts several centuries later by accommodating pagan myths from the Babylonian mystery religions.

According to Scripture, Mary never did dispense grace but only received it from the Lord. "Favored one" (Luke 1:28) literally means "one endowed with grace." Just as every other sinner, Mary needed God's grace and salvation. That's why she "rejoiced in God [her] Savior" (Luke 1:47). Mary realized what an unequalled privilege she enjoyed being a sinful woman chosen by the Lord to give birth to the Messiah, Jesus.

ASK YOURSELF

Are you encouraged by realizing that even the most revered figures in biblical history were just as much in need of God's grace and mercy as you are? Humility is the shared property of all who possess an appropriate view of themselves and of their incredible debt to God.

GOD'S GRACE ON TWO MEN

*The record of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah,
the Son of David, the son of Abraham. —MATT. 1:1*

Although they were sinful men, David and Abraham, by God's grace, both were ancestors of Jesus Christ.

David sinned against Bathsheba and her husband, Uriah. He was also a poor father who failed to discipline his children. One of those (Absalom) even tried to wrest the throne from David by armed rebellion.

Abraham on two different occasions (Gen. 12:11–19; 20:1–18) told pagan kings that his wife Sarah was his sister. This brought shame on Sarah, himself, and God, the One he claimed to trust and serve. In spite of these sins, God made Abraham the father of Israel, the chosen people from whom Christ would arise. The Lord appointed David head of the kingly line from whom Messiah was promised.

Furthermore, God's grace extended to specific descendants of these two men. Abraham's son Isaac was the son of promise and a type of Christ, willingly offered up to God (Gen. 22:1–13). Isaac's son Jacob (later renamed Israel) and his sons were leaders of the people of Israel. God's grace was always with them, even when they needed discipline or rebuke.

David's son and royal successor, Solomon, was peaceful and wiser than most men but also foolish and sinful in many ways. His hundreds of wives, mostly pagan, turned his and the people's hearts away from the Lord (1 Kings 11:1–8). The kingdom of Israel soon became divided, but the royal line remained and God eventually fulfilled His promise to David, God's grace prevailing in the person of Messiah Jesus.

ASK YOURSELF

All the way back, we see humanity's inconsistency and God's faithfulness, intertwining into the merciful, purposeful outworking of His plan for the ages. Far from being an excuse to slack off, how does this realization infuse you with new zeal to trust, obey, and follow?

GOD'S GRACE IN THE HISTORY OF THREE ERAS

So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, fourteen generations. —MATT. 1:17

Matthew's summary of Jesus' genealogy shows us God's grace working in three eras of Israel's history. First was the period of the patriarchs, Moses, Joshua, and the judges. During that time God's people found an identity, served as slaves, wandered after their deliverance, received divine law and covenant, and conquered the Promised Land.

The second era was one when Israel became a monarchy similar to her neighboring nations. But the Israelites soon discovered that sinful kings more often led them away from God instead of toward obedience and peace. There was much decline and apostasy, followed by defeat, exile, and the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. Kings David, Jehoshaphat, Hezekiah, and Josiah were notable exceptions to the pattern of ungodliness.

The third period, concluding with the time of Christ, was one of captivity, frustration, and the marking of time. It was a period generally cloaked in spiritual and cultural darkness and marked by many inconsequential years. Most of the men of this period are unknown and unnamed apart from the genealogy. Essentially it was Israel's Dark Ages.

Christ's genealogy contains elements of pathos and glory, listing persons of disgrace and heroism, obscurity and renown. The Messiah's nation rose, fell, stagnated, and eventually rejected and crucified the One the Father sent to His people. In spite of it all, God's grace was at work during all three periods through His Son and the promise of His Son.

ASK YOURSELF

What spiritual markers and descriptions could be given to the age in which we currently live? Even in spite of our failings and the evidence of much falling away, what are some of the singular examples of faithfulness you see in the world at large, as well as close to home?

GOD'S GRACE SEEN IN OUTCASTS TAMAR AND RAHAB

*Judah was the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar. . . .
Salmon was the father of Boaz by Rahab. —MATT. 1:3a, 5a*

The first outcast through whom Christ would descend and in whom God manifested His grace was Judah's daughter-in-law Tamar. Because of their evilness, God had killed Tamar's husband, Er, and allowed his next oldest brother, Onan, to commit suicide. As a result, Judah promised her that his third son, Shelah, would become her husband when he came of age and would produce children for her in place of the deceased Er (Gen. 38:6–11). When Judah didn't keep that promise, Tamar posed as a prostitute, had intercourse with Judah, and bore twin sons, Perez and Zerah (vv. 13–30). Despite such sinful activities, God graciously allowed Judah, Tamar, and Perez to join the messianic line.

A second Gentile woman outcast in the genealogy is Rahab, the prostitute from Jericho. In order to save the lives of the two spies Joshua had sent to the city, Rahab lied to messengers of Jericho's king (Josh. 2:1–21). Because she feared God and was kind toward His people, He spared Rahab and her family when He destroyed Jericho (Josh. 6:22–25). Beyond that, divine grace brought Rahab into the messianic genealogy as wife of Salmon and mother of Boaz, David's great-grandfather. Thus it is documented that God used undeserving sinners in His plan to give all sinners His Son, the Savior.

ASK YOURSELF

Are there individuals in your family, workplace, or community whom you've basically given up on? Could it be that God still has plans to capture their hearts and use them for His glory? How might they see this kind of hope in your eyes as a result of your dealings with them?

GOD'S GRACE SEEN IN OUTCASTS RUTH AND BATHSHEBA

Boaz was the father of Obed by Ruth . . . David was the father of Solomon by Bathsheba who had been the wife of Uriah. —MATT. 1:5b, 6b

Like Tamar and Rahab, the third outcast, Ruth, was a Gentile (a Moabite). After her husband (an Israelite named Mahlon) died, she went to Israel with her mother-in-law, Naomi (Ruth 1:22). Ruth was a godly, devoted woman who had accepted by faith the Lord as her own God (v. 16). Mahlon had married Ruth in violation of the Mosaic law (Deut. 7:3; cf. Ezra 9:2; Neh. 13:23), and many believe his early death, and that of his brother, were God's judgment on their disobedience. Though she was a Gentile Moabite who had no right to marry an Israelite, God's grace made Ruth one of His people and later, through Boaz, brought her into the royal line as grandmother of King David.

The fourth outcast is Bathsheba, with whom David committed adultery (2 Sam. 11:2–5). He then sent her husband, Uriah, to the front lines to be killed and took her to be his own wife. The son of the adultery died in infancy, but the next son, Solomon, succeeded to David's throne and continued the messianic line. God's grace was again abundant as Bathsheba became an ancestor of Jesus Christ.

Jesus' genealogy is far more than merely a list of ancient names that identifies His forbears. It is a wonderful testimony to the Father's grace and the Son's ministry—the Son who is the friend of sinners, who “did not come to call the righteous, but sinners” (Matt. 9:13).

ASK YOURSELF

Have you felt as though your sins of the past or your sinful struggles of the present have shipwrecked your spiritual future? To remain in sin is to give up on God (and yourself) too easily. To believe that you have no choice is to fall for one of Satan's favorite deceptions.

CONFRONTING THE VIRGIN BIRTH

Joseph her husband, being a righteous man and not wanting to disgrace her, planned to send her away secretly. But when he had considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for the Child who has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit.”—MATT. 1:19–20

Although they were only betrothed at this time, Mary and Joseph were considered husband and wife according to Jewish custom. Because he was a righteous man, Joseph felt he faced two difficult dilemmas in this situation. First, his high moral standards would not allow him to proceed with his marriage to Mary because of her pregnancy. Second, his strong love for Mary would not allow him to shame her publicly, much less to demand her death, as provided by the law (Deut. 22:23–24).

Joseph’s concern was not for his own shame but for Mary’s. Therefore, “not wanting to disgrace her” by public exposure to her alleged sin, he “planned to send her away secretly.” The word translated “send away” was the common term for divorce—Joseph planned to divorce Mary secretly so that at least for a while she would be protected.

In the midst of these considerations, an angel from heaven instructed Joseph on what to do: “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for the Child who has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit.” These words emphasize the supernatural character of events and give ultimate testimony to the truth of the virgin birth. Furthermore, to underscore the divine encouragement and verify Jesus’ royal lineage, the angel called Joseph “son of David.” The Lord’s rightful place in the Davidic line came through Joseph, even though He was just Joseph’s legal son and actually God’s Son by the power of the Holy Spirit.

ASK YOURSELF

Integrity is usually one of several options available to you in tough, complex situations. If you find yourself rarely choosing the highest road in circumstances like these, to what would you attribute your reluctance—not knowing what to do, or just not wanting to do it?

THE VIRGIN BIRTH PREDICTED

Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet: “Behold, the virgin shall be with child and shall bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel,” which translated means, “God with us.”

—MATT. 1:22–23

Here Matthew, under the Spirit’s inspiration, clearly identifies the birth of Christ as a fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. Thus the prophetic text of Isaiah (7:14) must be interpreted as predicting Jesus’ virgin birth.

The prophet used the Hebrew word *alma* in Isaiah 7:14. The word can mean “virgin,” which is how the Jewish translators of the Greek Old Testament rendered it in 7:14 (by the Greek *parthenos*)—several centuries prior to the birth of Christ. The “sign” Isaiah referred to was specifically for King Ahaz, who feared that Syria and Israel might destroy Judah’s royal line. Isaiah assured Ahaz that God would protect that line and the future Messiah—through the birth of a son and the death of the kings. The future birth of a far greater Son, the virgin birth of God incarnate, would ensure the covenant with His people. Matthew did not simply give *alma* a Christian “twist.” He used it with the same understanding that all his Jewish readers would have had for it.

But Matthew’s teaching of the virgin birth of Jesus does not rest solely on the usage of *alma*. The case is made unquestionably clear by his previous statements that Jesus’ conception was by and of “the Holy Spirit” (1:18, 20). And Matthew reinforced the case by reminding us that the Son would also be known as Immanuel (“God with us”), which was an honored and descriptive title more than a proper name. In His virgin birth and incarnation, the Lord Jesus was in the most literal sense “God with us.”

ASK YOURSELF

We admittedly serve a God who is invisible to our human eyes. Thus, like Moses, we must live as though “seeing Him who is unseen” (Heb. 11:27). But in what ways does God reveal to you that He is “with us”?

How does He help you counteract your doubts?

THE VIRGIN BIRTH CONSUMMATED

And Joseph awoke from his sleep and did as the angel of the Lord commanded him, and took Mary as his wife, but kept her a virgin until she gave birth to a Son; and he called His name Jesus. —MATT. 1:24–25

That “Joseph awoke from his sleep” confirms that God had spoken to him in a dream. Such extraordinary communication occurred on other occasions (cf. Gen. 20:3; Job 33:14–16; 1 Kings 3:5).

We don’t know much about Joseph’s reaction to God’s words except that right away he obeyed. He must have had feelings of amazement, relief, and gratitude that he could marry Mary with honor. He undoubtedly also would have been pleased that he could care for the Son of God while He grew up. Joseph’s obedience demonstrates his godliness and proves the trustworthy, faithful kind of man he was and the reason God chose him as earthly father for His Son.

Joseph took the baby Jesus to the temple for dedication (Luke 2:22–33), to Egypt with His mother to flee Herod (Matt. 2:13–23), and to Jerusalem when He was twelve (Luke 2:42–52). Beyond those events, Scripture says virtually nothing about Joseph.

Joseph likely took Mary as his wife shortly after the angel’s message to him, and he was faithful to keep Mary a virgin “until she gave birth to [her] Son.” And, as a final obedience to the dream’s instruction, Joseph called that Son Jesus, which indicated He was to be the Savior of His people (v. 21).

An unbeliever reportedly asked a believer, “If I told you that child over there had no human father, would you believe me?” The Christian answered, “Yes, if he lived as Christ lived.” One of the best proofs of our Lord’s supernatural birth and deity was His earthly life.

ASK YOURSELF

You probably haven’t received a dream lately with specific instructions from God on how to handle a certain situation. (You may wish you had!) But how well are you following the instructions already given to you in His Word? Are you in the habit of doing what He says?

MAGI FROM THE EAST

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, “Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him.” —MATT. 2:1–2

This is one of the most myth-shrouded yet well-known accounts in all of Scripture. The only sure facts we know about these magi, or wise men, are the ones in Matthew 2:1–12. We don’t even know their number, names, mode of transportation, or specific country from which they traveled. Most would have assumed they came “from the east” since people knew the magi constituted the priestly-political class of the Parthians, who lived east of Palestine.

The Bible also does not tell us how God revealed to the magi about Messiah, only that He gave them the sign of “His star in the east.” As with the identity of the men, little is known about the star’s nature. Some claim it was Jupiter, the largest of the planets. Others say it was the conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn. But since the Bible simply mentions the star, we can’t be dogmatic about its characteristics—it might have been the same divine glory that shone around the shepherds when the angels announced Jesus’ birth (Luke 2:9).

Because they had to ask about where Jesus was born, it’s clear the magi did not actually *follow* the star. Only after they heard of the prophesied birthplace of Christ (2:5–6) did the star reappear and guide them to the precise place where Jesus was.

That the magi came to worship Christ shows they were genuine seekers after God. With limited spiritual light, they recognized God’s light when it shone on them and they found Him in the person of His Son.

ASK YOURSELF

You may not think of yourself as a very wise person, but the Bible teaches us that “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (Prov. 9:10). If that’s where it starts, what could you do with that piece of information to make some wise choices and decisions today?

GRACE FOR TODAY

VOLUME 3

DAILY READINGS

from the Life of

CHRIST

— JOHN —
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THE PURPOSE OF ONE MAN'S BLINDNESS

"It was neither that this man sinned, nor his parents; but it was so that the works of God might be displayed in him." —JOHN 9:3

There is not always a direct connection between suffering and personal sin, as Jesus' statement to the apostles asserts. At another time Christ instructed that neither those Galileans killed by Pilate nor those who died as the tower of Siloam fell (Luke 13:1–5) suffered because they were worse sinners than others, as His listeners had arrogantly assumed. Instead, our Lord pointed to those events as a warning that all sinners face death, and when it arrives they will perish unless they repent and trust Him.

Like Job, the real reason the blind man suffered his affliction was "so that the works of God might be displayed in him." In his commentary on John's gospel, F. F. Bruce gives this insight:

This does not mean that God deliberately caused the [man] to be born blind in order that, after many years, his glory should be displayed in the removal of the blindness; to think so would again be an aspersion on the character of God. It does mean that God overruled the disaster of the [man's] blindness so that, when [he] grew to manhood, he might, by recovering his sight, see the glory of God in the face of Christ, and others, seeing this work of God, might turn to the true Light.

ASK YOURSELF

In looking for reasons and answers to your suffering, where does your mind usually run? Are most of your conclusions biblical, or are they shaped more by your feelings and others' opinions? How could you foresee God receiving glory from the situations you're facing right now?

JESUS' PRIORITY

"We must work the works of Him who sent Me as long as it is day; night is coming when no one can work. While I am in the world, I am the Light of the world."

—JOHN 9:4–5

Jesus' top priority was clearly to "work the works of Him who sent Me." Whereas the apostles wanted to look back and analyze why and how the man was born blind, the Lord looked ahead and eagerly desired to place God's power on display for the man's benefit. (Jesus' use of "we" includes the apostles and all Spirit-empowered believers in the divine mission.)

The phrase "as long as it is day" implies further urgency regarding ministry. It refers to the few months Jesus had left with the apostles on earth. After that the darkness of His departure (cf. John 12:35) would overtake them and they'd be unable to minister again until Pentecost.

During His earthly ministry, our Lord was most certainly "the Light of the world." And after His death He did not stop being that Light, because the apostles by His power continued His ministry (Matt. 28:18–20).

Christ's instructions to the apostles apply to all believers. They should serve God with a sense of urgency, "making the most of [their] time, because the days are evil" (Eph. 5:16). The Puritan Richard Baxter wrote, "I preached as never sure to preach again, and as a dying man to dying men."

ASK YOURSELF

What keeps you from sensing an urgency to live with deep conviction for Christ? What keeps you from making His priorities the same ones that drive your own daily schedule? Which of these hindrances to full surrender could stand to be completely eliminated from your life?

JESUS' POWER OVER BLINDNESS

*When He had said this, He spat on the ground, and made clay of the spittle, and applied the clay to his eyes, and said to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam"...
So he went away and washed, and came back seeing. —JOHN 9:6–7*

Jesus had previously used His saliva to heal a deaf and mute man (Mark 7:33) and a blind man (8:23); but here is the only time He made clay with His saliva. Ancient interpreters have said making clay symbolizes Christ's creating a new, functioning pair of eyes to replace the blind ones (cf. Gen. 2:7). But Leon Morris wisely comments, "Jesus performed His miracles with a sovereign hand and He cannot be limited by rules of procedure. He cured how He willed."

As well as representing water sent into the pool from the Gihon spring, "Siloam" symbolized the blessings God sent to Israel. Here it is the Father's ultimate blessing to the nation: Jesus Christ, God's Sent One (Mark 9:37; Luke 4:18; John 12:44–45, 49).

The blind man obediently heeded Jesus' command and washed in the pool, which gave him sight. His response represents the obedience of true saving faith (Rom. 16:26; Heb. 5:9), which the man would soon demonstrate. This healing is also a living parable, showing Christ's ministry as the Light shining into a spiritually dark world (see John 1:5).

ASK YOURSELF

Have you put limits on God's activity, expecting Him to work only in certain ways? What do you run the risk of missing when you try to erect fences and boundaries around God's plans for your life?

How do you keep a careful, biblical mind-set without leaking over into rigid legalism?

PERPLEXITY OVER THE LARGER MEANING

Therefore the neighbors, and those who previously saw him as a beggar, were saying, "Is not this the one who used to sit and beg?" . . . So they were saying to him, "How then were your eyes opened?" —JOHN 9:8, 10

The blind man's healing caused sensation and much confusion for the people. Some had to ask if it was really that man, whereas others were certain it was. But other skeptical people found it easier to believe in mistaken identity than in a miraculous healing.

The man himself tried to eliminate the people's confusion by briefly summarizing that Jesus placed saliva-moistened clay on his eyes, told him to wash at Siloam, after which he received his sight. This prompted the people to wonder where such an amazing miracle worker was; however, the man could not tell them, being unable to recognize Him (see vv. 11–12).

Our Lord's healing of this blind man wonderfully illustrates the salvation process. The man born blind would not have received sight (Rom. 8:7) had Jesus not reached out to him. And in salvation, God's Spirit must reach out and draw spiritually blind sinners to redemption (John 6:44, 65). Just as the man was healed only when he obeyed Jesus' order to wash at Siloam, so also God saves sinners only when they sincerely embrace the truth of the gospel (Rom. 1:5; cf. 2 Thess. 1:8; 1 Peter 4:17).

ASK YOURSELF

Who in your life continues to show many of the telltale signs of spiritual blindness, unable to see truth when it's staring them in the face? Commit to praying steadfastly for them throughout this coming year, asking God to open their eyes of faith so they can see what they've been missing.

UNBELIEF IS INCONSISTENT

Therefore some of the Pharisees were saying, “This man is not from God, because He does not keep the Sabbath.” But others were saying, “How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?” And there was a division among them.

—JOHN 9:16

The Pharisees’ statement, “This man is not from God, because He does not keep the Sabbath,” reveals their biased approach to the situation. They thought Jesus had broken the Sabbath, not because He had violated scriptural regulations but because He had ignored their extrabiblical legalisms.

Why did Jesus deliberately irritate the Jewish leaders by violating their Sabbath rules? Primarily He did so because of His divine authority as Lord of the Sabbath (Luke 6:5). Second, He wanted to show how unnecessary and burdensome such man-centered regulations were on the people. All the legalistic, trivial rules had perverted God’s design for a weekly day of rest and gratitude to God. By contrast, Jesus noted, “The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27).

It seemed obvious to the sabbatarian Pharisees that Jesus could not be Messiah if He did not strictly keep their kind of Sabbath (cf. Deut. 13:1–5). Other Jews, however, were not as easily convinced, countering the first group’s logic with reasoning of their own: since Jesus opened blind eyes as only God can do, He must be from God. But there was still a division among the Jews (cf. John 7:40–43), revealing unbelief’s faithless inconsistency.

ASK YOURSELF

How can you tell when a staunch stance for righteousness is more about controlling other people than defending God’s Word? What are some of our other reasons and rationales for holding arbitrary standards over others’ heads, equating compliance with our rules as Christian character?

UNBELIEF IS STUBBORN

The Jews then did not believe it of him, that he had been blind and had received sight, until they called the parents of the very one who had received his sight, and questioned them. —JOHN 9:17–19a

There was no doubt that Jesus had miraculously healed the blind man—he was the physical proof standing before the Pharisees. But they stubbornly refused to accept the evidence and purposely remained unconvinced of the truth. The Jews thus were like that “perverse generation, sons in whom is no faithfulness” (Deut. 32:20).

That the stubborn Pharisees would ask the man again what he thought of Jesus reveals their continued confusion and unbelieving scorn toward the beggar. The man’s confident identification of Jesus, “He is a prophet,” proves he believed the reality that the spiritually blind Pharisees refused to: Christ was sent from God.

The Jews essentially wanted the man to join them in their unbelief of Jesus’ claims. They urged him to disingenuously “Give glory to God” (John 9:24) but not to Jesus, who was in fact God’s Son and Himself worthy of glory. Such an incomplete confession would equal agreement with the Jewish leaders’ obstinate conviction that Jesus was a sinner and not empowered by God (cf. 8:52), but such an attitude merely showed the stubbornness of unbelief.

ASK YOURSELF

How often are you accused of stubbornness—if not in unbelief, perhaps in other areas of life? Even if you don’t see a stubborn streak in yourself, what of value could you likely learn from this rebuke?

UNBELIEF IS IRRATIONAL

They reviled him and said, “You are His disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where He is from.” —JOHN 9:28–29

The healed man was undoubtedly frustrated by the Pharisees’ irrational bias and repeated interrogation of him. Thus he “answered them, ‘I told you already and you did not listen; why do you want to hear it again?’” (v. 27). Realizing their animosity toward Jesus, the formerly blind man sardonically asked the Jews if their repetitive questions concerning our Lord meant that they wanted to learn more and therefore also “become His disciples.”

To the Pharisees, the man’s courageous response was insolent, and they angrily and piously answered him by retreating to the safety of their alleged loyalty to Moses. After all, they asserted, “God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where He is from.” The healed man’s next rejoinder completely exposed the Pharisees’ lack of faith: “Well, here is an amazing thing, that you do not know where He is from, and yet He opened my eyes.” Christ did what only God’s power would enable someone to do—He healed the man’s congenital blindness and created eyes with vision—yet the Jewish leaders professed ignorance of His origin. Such irrational rejection of the obvious evidence has occurred ever since sinners have heard the gospel and still clung to their unbelief.

ASK YOURSELF

One of the grandest qualities of Christian virtue is being able to admit when you’re wrong. Are there areas of life that you continue to defend, even when you know you’re standing on shaky ground? What shape could your surrender from that position take?

UNBELIEF IS INSOLENT

*They answered him, “You were born entirely in sins, and are you teaching us?”
So they put him out. —JOHN 9:34*

They couldn't refute the healed man's logic about Jesus and His healing and, furious that he would lecture to them, therefore the Pharisees insolently piled personal abuse on him. They attacked him disdainfully and sarcastically implied that as one born blind, he or his parents must have committed some horrendous sin. Ironically, now through their insolent words they finally admitted that the man who received sight had indeed been born blind. But this admission did not prevent them from excommunicating him from the synagogue.

We learn from this account, as from other places in the Gospels, that when hardened doubters investigate Jesus' miracles or other supernatural biblical events, they reach only one conclusion. Unless the Holy Spirit opens their eyes, they deny the truth no matter what the evidence. Here the man healed of blindness was living proof of our Lord's divine power, yet the Pharisees tried to deny the undeniable and refute the irrefutable. As Paul later wrote to the Corinthians, “A natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised” (1 Cor. 2:14; cf. John 6:44).

ASK YOURSELF

What are some of the most common sources for a person's doubts and hardenings? Is there much to be gained by getting to know someone well who persists in unbelief, seeing if you can detect the sources of their confusion and blindness? How have you seen a hard heart opened?

SPIRITUAL SIGHT COMES FROM GOD

*Jesus heard that they had put him out, and finding him, He said,
“Do you believe in the Son of Man?” —JOHN 9:35*

Just as the Lord Jesus did in bestowing physical sight to the blind beggar, He seized the initiative in opening the man’s spiritual eyes. Rejected by the religious leaders, the man was sought out by the Savior.

If God did not sovereignly reach out to sinners, no one would be saved. Paul summarizes such total inability: “There is none righteous, not even one; there is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God; all have turned aside, together they have become useless; there is none who does good, there is not even one” (Rom. 3:10–12; cf. John 6:44, 65; 15:16). Even as the physically blind cannot restore their own sight, neither can the spiritually dead be reborn by their own strength (cf. John 1:12–13; 6:37).

When Jesus found the man, He asked the question “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” using the personal pronoun “you” to stress the man’s need to respond. Our Lord confronted the healed man with his crucial need to trust the Messiah as his personal Lord and Savior. And the answer he wants everyone to give is a sincere and unqualified “Yes,” which entails repenting of sin, accepting God’s forgiveness, and resting by faith in His everlasting redemption.

ASK YOURSELF

How attuned are you to the spiritual needs in those you encounter on a regular basis? What are some of the things you would likely pick up if you were predisposed to listening for hunger and thirst in the hearts of your friends, your family members, even total strangers?

SPIRITUAL SIGHT RESPONDS IN FAITH

He answered, "Who is He, Lord, that I may believe in Him?" —JOHN 9:36

The healed man already considered the Lord as sent from God, and he had experienced directly His healing power. Now he implicitly trusted Jesus to lead him to the One in whom he was to place his faith. This clearly illustrates that salvation, though divinely initiated, never occurs apart from a faith response.

Early in His ministry Christ had declared that lost sinners must “repent and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15). The best known gospel verse promises us “that whoever believes in [Jesus] shall not perish, but have eternal life” (John 3:16; cf. 1:12; 5:24; 6:40). In His Bread of Life discourse, our Lord affirmed, “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes has eternal life” (6:47; cf. Acts 10:43). When the jailor at Philippi asked Paul and Silas, “‘Sirs, what must I do to be saved?’ they said, ‘Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household’” (Acts 16:30–31).

What happened at Antioch applies to the healed man: “When the Gentiles heard [see Isa. 49:6], they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord; and as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed” (Acts 13:48). God sovereignly chooses those who will be awakened, empowered, and enabled to respond in faith (cf. Eph. 2:8–9).

ASK YOURSELF

How have you responded to the Lord in faith—not merely in receiving His gift of salvation but also in appropriating His authority in your life, or in making a certain decision, or in choosing an unpopular path? Are you continuing to sense the necessity of faith as a requirement for daily life?

SPIRITUAL SIGHT BELIEVES IN JESUS CHRIST

Jesus said to him, “You have both seen Him, and He is the one who is talking with you.” And he said, “Lord, I believe.” And he worshiped Him.

—JOHN 9:37–38

Jesus presented Himself to the man as the object of saving faith, just as He did earlier to the people at Capernaum: “This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent” (John 6:29; cf. 3:36; 6:40; 11:25–26).

The Holy Spirit opened his heart to the gospel (“Lord, I believe”) and revealed Jesus’ true identity to him. He who was blind from birth exemplified this divine principle: “If anyone is willing to do His will, he will know of the teaching, whether it is of God or whether I speak from Myself” (7:17).

As the Spirit dispelled the final vestiges of spiritual darkness from the man’s heart, he clearly wanted to worship Jesus. Spurgeon summarizes that moment:

Then, further, *he acted as a believer*: for “he worshipped him.” This proves how his faith had grown. I should like to ask you who are the people of God when you are happiest. . . . My happiest moments are when I am worshipping God, really adoring the Lord Jesus Christ. . . . It is the nearest approach to what it will be in heaven, where, day without night, they offer perpetual adoration unto him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb. Hence, what a memorable moment it was for this man when he worshipped Christ! (emphasis in original)

ASK YOURSELF

What do you miss by not turning your thoughts more often to praise and thanksgiving of God? How has worship produced some of the most exciting experiences and seasons of your life?

SPIRITUAL BLINDNESS RECEIVES JUDGMENT

And Jesus said, "For judgment I came into this world, so that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may become blind." —JOHN 9:39

Although Christ came to save, not to condemn (Luke 19:10; John 12:47), sinners who reject His gospel condemn themselves and place themselves under judgment (John 3:18, 36). To reject the Lord's peace is to receive His punishment; to reject His grace is to receive His justice; to reject His mercy is to receive His wrath; to reject His love is to receive His righteous anger. Spiritual sight comes only to those who confess their spiritual blindness and their need for the Light of the world. But contrariwise, sinners outside of the Savior who think their own sight is enough deceive themselves and remain spiritually blind.

The danger for those who think their carnal sight is sufficient is that their rejection of Jesus and refusal to embrace His gospel is irreversible, and their spiritual blindness may well become permanent. In other words, they can find themselves divinely fixed in their position (cf. Ex. 8:15; 10:1; Isa. 6:10; Acts 28:26–27; Rom. 11:8–10). Many of the Pharisees reached that point when they rejected the Father's light of His Son (Matt. 12:24–32). And that is a most precarious spiritual posture for any needy sinner to take.

ASK YOURSELF

What are some of the implications in your own life of this principle: that decisions build on each other, making future changes and corrections even harder to make? What are some of the slippages you need to catch early, while you can, while they're still small enough to tackle?

SPIRITUAL BLINDNESS REJECTS THE NEED OF SIGHT

Those of the Pharisees who were with Him heard these things and said to Him, "We are not blind too, are we?" Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would have no sin." —JOHN 9:40–41a

Could Jesus really be saying the Pharisees were spiritually blind like the masses who didn't know the Law (John 7:49)? As the elite religious leaders of the Jews, they were certain they did not lack spiritual perception. But the reality was they were blind to spiritual truth and refused to admit it. In so doing they simply intensified the darkened condition of their hearts and increased their hatred for the true Messiah.

Our Lord's answer to the Pharisees probably surprised them because they were expecting a more direct reply to their question. Nonetheless, Jesus' point for the leaders was that if they would only confess their spiritual blindness and thus admit their need for Him, the true Light, they "would have no sin." Instead, it would be divinely forgiven (Ps. 32:5; 1 John 1:9).

As John Calvin comments, "[Christ] only means that the disease may easily be cured, when it is truly felt; because, when a *blind* man is desirous to obtain deliverance, God is ready to assist him; but they who, insensible to their diseases, despise the grace of God, are incurable." Many, like the Pharisees, have stubbornly refused to admit their spiritual blindness and therefore doomed themselves to eternal darkness.

ASK YOURSELF

What was Jesus' reason for so often answering questions with another question, or (in this case) with a response that took the matter deeper than expected? When people ask you questions about the Christian faith, what might they really be asking? When is a straight answer not always best?

SPIRITUAL BLINDNESS RESULTS IN DOOM

“But since you say, ‘We see,’ your sin remains.” —JOHN 9:41b

The always-damning sin of unbelief is in view here. Jesus’ pronouncement that the Pharisees’ “sin remains” (cf. Heb. 6:4–6; 10:29–31) conveys a sense of finality. It parallels His confirmation of others in their willful unbelief: “Every plant which My heavenly Father did not plant shall be uprooted. Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if a blind man guides a blind man, both will fall into a pit” (Matt. 15:13–14). The sobering words, “Let them alone,” show that the Father sometimes directly judges unrepentant sinners by abandoning them, or even hardening them in their unbelief (cf. Rom. 1:18, 24, 26, 28).

As the sovereign Redeemer (Rev. 19:16), Christ is the divine determiner of a sinner’s destiny. Simeon prophesied in the presence of the infant Jesus, “Behold, this Child is appointed for the fall and rise of many in Israel” (Luke 2:34). People who follow the healed man’s example, confess their spiritual blindness, and turn to the Light “will not walk in the darkness, but will have the Light of life” (John 8:12). But those who follow the Pharisees’ pattern and persist in the darkness (3:19) will likely stay in that spiritual gloom (12:35; 1 John 2:11), absent any saving sight (Matt. 6:23). The first group will spend eternity in heaven (Rev. 22:5); the others will spend it in hell (Matt. 8:12; 25:30).

ASK YOURSELF

Since God alone possesses knowledge about who will “walk in darkness” and who will receive the “Light of life,” how are we to treat the various individuals in our path who do not now profess Christ as Savior and Lord? How can we unwisely let this doctrine lead us into unconcern?

JESUS THE GOOD SHEPHERD, PART 1

“He who enters by the door is a shepherd of the sheep. To him the doorkeeper opens, and the sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.” —JOHN 10:2–3

Perhaps Jesus’ most precious title is that of Shepherd. Centuries before Messiah came, Micah prophesied that He would “arise and shepherd His flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord His God” (Mic. 5:4; cf. Ezek. 34:23; Matt. 2:6 [quoting Mic. 5:2]).

The New Testament also portrays Jesus as the Shepherd. Peter describes Him as the Shepherd of believers’ souls (1 Peter 2:25) and as the Chief Shepherd of the church (5:4). But here Christ most vividly depicts Himself as the Shepherd of His flock. And this presentation flows directly from Jesus’ dealings with the blind man, the Pharisees, and all who witnessed what occurred.

Because He’s the Good Shepherd, the sheep hear Jesus’ voice when He calls them out of Israel and into His messianic fold. The imagery pictures the human response to the divine call of salvation (John 6:44, 65; Rom. 8:28–30). The Lord “calls his own sheep by name” because they *are* His. Their names were divinely “written from the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who has been slain” (Rev. 13:8), and the Father has sovereignly given them to the Son (John 6:37).

ASK YOURSELF

As you meditate on Jesus as Shepherd, what are some blessings that come to mind? How has He proven Himself the Good Shepherd in your life? How could you express this to someone as both an encouragement to them and a gift of worship to God?