

A brown ceramic pitcher is shown from a high angle, pouring a stream of vibrant blue water. The water falls in a thick, dynamic column, splashing at the bottom. The background is a solid, light yellow color.

Abiding in Christ
in the
Johannine Writings

SPIRITUALITY
According to JOHN

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COME AND SEE

Hearing the Word

IMAGINE THAT. It all started with a few simple words. A question, a request, and an invitation (Jn 1:38-39):

“What are you looking for?”

“Rabbi, where do you abide?”

“Come and you will see.”

When we consider Jesus’ encounter with these, his first disciples, we often skip over his question and rush straight to their request and his invitation—partly because we hear poetry in their words, a timeless appeal. Like the disciples, we want to know where Jesus abides so that we can be with him. This is because, no matter what happens in our lives—even if it gets really bad, as hard as carrying a cross—all we need to know is that he’s with us. Jesus’ invitation still rings true for us today. When he says, “Come and you will see,” it sounds as if he is speaking to us too. Those who follow him have learned that, if we come to him, we will see *everything* . . . him, our world, ourselves, God. The rhythm of the disciples’ request and his invitation strikes a chord with us, encouraging us to hear their conversation as if it were a paradigm for *our* discipleship:¹

“Lord, where are you?”

“Follow me and you will see.”

¹“Come and see” is the beginning of discipleship. See Richard Bauckham, *Gospel of Glory: Major Themes in Johannine Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015), 147.

But that's not how it began, with the disciples' query and Jesus' open-ended appeal. Rather, their first encounter started with Jesus asking *them* a question—one I think needs to be asked today, even of those who follow him: “What are you looking for?” When it comes to following Jesus, many of us are looking for many different things—hero, friend, personal assistant, teacher—just like the first disciples.

Notice that Jesus asks the question of those who have already begun to follow him (Jn 1:37). They are following Jesus because their mentor, John the Baptizer, pointed him out as the “Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (Jn 1:29, 36). John told them he had seen the Spirit of God light on Jesus like a dove. As far as the “water-Baptizer” was concerned, that made Jesus the “Son of God,” because he was empowered to be the “Spirit-Baptizer” (Jn 1:30-34)—one can only give what has been given. After John points out Jesus a second time to his disciples, Andrew and an unnamed disciple start to follow Jesus, which causes the Nazarene to take notice of them (Jn 1:38). That must have been an awkward moment. All of the sudden two men are following Jesus, causing him to stop, turn around, and *stare* at them (how long? We don't know).² Obviously, this was the first time anyone had shown this kind of interest in him. Then, eventually breaking the silence, Jesus asks them: “What are you looking for?”—a question he never asks again of any other follower in John's Gospel.

Now, what they should have said in light of the common Jewish hope for national restoration was “The Messiah”—especially since the Baptizer had indicated as much. John's ministry had been so successful, exciting messianic hopes among the people, that leaders from Jerusalem had sent an envoy to the desert to check out the latest fad and report back: “Who do you think you are? Elijah? *The Prophet?*” (Jn 1:19-22). According to Jewish historian Josephus, John and Jesus weren't the first holy men to show up in Israel and excite messianic hopes—and they wouldn't be the last.³ But John makes it clear he isn't the Messiah (Jn 1:20). Furthermore,

²*Stare* is from the Greek verb *theomai* (the English word *theater* derives from the noun).

³Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 17.10.4-10; 18.1.1; 18.5.2; 20.5.1.

he denies that he is the reincarnation of the two great prophets Israel expected to show up just before the end of the world—neither Moses (Deut 18:18) nor Elijah (Mal 4:5-6). He is just a voice crying in the desert, trying to prepare Israel for the day God will visit his people, just as Isaiah predicted (Is 40:3; Jn 1:22-23).

When the man whom the Baptizer calls the Son of God asks these two former disciples of John, “What are you looking for?” they should have impulsively replied, “You! We’ve been looking for you! Aren’t you the Messiah, the long-awaited hope of Israel’s deliverance?” But that’s not what they say (even though they *were* looking for him, Jn 1:41). Rather, somewhat surprisingly, Andrew and the anonymous disciple simply want to know where Jesus is staying, which makes me wonder what Jesus was doing there in the first place.

SIMON, THE CONVERT

John had been baptizing in Bethany “beyond the Jordan” (obviously not the same village where Lazarus, Martha, and Mary lived, Jn 11:1), which means Jesus had traveled some distance from Nazareth to be baptized by John (Jn 1:45). Evidently, after his baptism, Jesus had decided to remain in the area for quite a while—John describes the baptism of Jesus as something that happened several days before (Jn 1:29-34). So, why didn’t Jesus return home to Nazareth after his baptism? Why did he hang around the crowd surrounding John? Was he simply taking in the spectacle, relishing the sight of such a huge crowd of Jews submitting to John’s baptism? Or was Jesus hoping to find his first disciples there? Certainly, those who repented of their sin, looking for the justice of God’s kingdom, would be ideal candidates for his ministry. But, as John’s Gospel is careful to point out, Jesus doesn’t “find” his very first disciples. Rather, they find him, encouraged by the Baptizer to “Behold the Lamb of God” (Jn 1:36). It is John’s witness and their desire to abide with Jesus that gets the whole thing started. After they remain with Jesus that first night (where was Jesus staying in Bethany beyond the Jordan? A friend’s house? In the open air? We don’t know), the dominoes of Jesus’ messianic mission

started falling. First, they find other disciples (Jn 1:40-42); then Jesus does the same (Jn 1:43-51).

It doesn't take much for Andrew to become a disciple of Jesus. The Baptizer's witness coupled with "abiding" with Jesus for one night convinces Andrew: "We have found the Messiah" (Jn 1:41). That's what he tells his brother, Simon, who must be part of the crowd in Bethany since Andrew is able to lead him directly to Jesus (Jn 1:42). He offers no explanation, makes no arguments. Andrew simply claims that Jesus is the Messiah, and that is enough for Peter to "come and see." Simon doesn't hear anything more and doesn't say anything at all. All he does is walk up to the "new Messiah" only to hear Jesus say, "You will be called 'Cephas' [the Aramaic word for 'rock']," which is translated "Peter" [the Greek word for "rock"]. That's it. No persuasion. No confession. No problem.

It may have taken Andrew a day and a night to become Jesus' disciple. It only takes Simon Peter a brief moment, one encounter with Jesus, and he is "converted." Or is he? That's the assumption we make, because we know how the story ends. Just as Jesus predicted, Simon became known by his nickname, Peter—a rock-steady disciple who led the early church. But we also know that Simon didn't become Peter overnight. Indeed, it could be said that while it took Andrew only three verses to become a disciple of Jesus, Simon's conversion required twenty-two chapters.⁴

I used to assume that Simon became a disciple the very moment Jesus changed his name. Now I'm not so sure. First, Simon doesn't say a thing, which seems odd compared to the others. The Baptizer says the right things about Jesus. Andrew, Philip, and Nathaniel say the right things about Jesus. Simon never says a word. Peter makes no confession of faith like the others. His silence, therefore, is conspicuous to me. It's not that I question Jesus' prophecy. Throughout John's Gospel, the narrator refers to Simon as Peter. But *Jesus* never calls him Peter. Why? Maybe it's because Simon never seems to live up to his nickname—at least in a positive way. Indeed, when it comes to following Jesus in John's narrative

⁴Of course, John's Gospel has only twenty-one chapters. And so, I'm pointing to the end of Peter's story (Jn 21:18)—which happens long after the last verse of John's Gospel.

world, Peter seems to be more hardheaded and hardhearted than rock solid. Even though Simon was one of the first followers to come and see Jesus, it seems to have taken Peter a much longer time to *hear* the word.

And yet, eventually Simon says the right thing. In fact, it's the only time in John's Gospel where Peter comes off looking good (Jn 6:66-69). Of course, by this time Simon and the rest of the Twelve have already come and seen a lot: Jesus turning water into wine, promising the nobleman, healing the lame man, feeding five thousand, and walking on water. Yet, at this point the Twelve hadn't heard a lot. That is to say, most of the didactic material about Jesus comes while the disciples are absent (the Baptizer, the Samaritan woman) or comes across as a private conversation between Jesus and another person (Nicodemus). In other words, even though Simon (and the Twelve) have been following Jesus for quite a while, they aren't privy to most of what Jesus says or what others say about him. They don't hear "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son," or "He who believes in the Son has eternal life," or "Whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst," or "Yesterday at the seventh hour the fever left him." Therefore, when Jesus began to say strange things about "eating his flesh" and "drinking his blood" (Jn 6:53), the Twelve must have thought, "He doesn't say much, but when he does it sure sounds bizarre." Of course, we hear echoes of the Eucharist in the words of Jesus. But, the disciples couldn't. Therefore, it's not surprising that the disciples were shocked and offended by his strange words (Jn 6:60-66). But Simon wasn't. That's a bit surprising to me.

When it comes to words, the less Simon says, the better. Indeed, as we will come to find out, the converse is true: the more Peter talks, the more he gets into trouble. So, it's not surprising that Peter has nothing to say when he first meets Jesus. Then, for six chapters of John's Gospel, Simon is mute. When he finally speaks up, Peter's confession is not all that spectacular. Simon says what even demons confess about Jesus: "You are the Holy One of God" (Jn 6:69; Mk 1:24; Lk 4:34). But that's not all. After many of Jesus' disciples walk away, no longer following him because they are so offended by his words (Jn 6:66), Jesus asks the Twelve: "Do you

want to leave me too?” To which Simon Peter replies (pitifully? faithfully?): “Where else would we go, Lord? You have words of eternal life” (Jn 6:68). Here, Peter simply repeats what Jesus has just told them: “The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life” (Jn 6:63).⁵ So, it’s hard to tell whether Peter’s remark about having nowhere else to go is evidence of insightful devotion (“Wherever he leads I’ll go”) or pitiful resignation (“What else are we going to do?”). Nevertheless, even though it takes him six chapters, Peter finally ends up saying the right thing about Jesus. Yet, from this point forward, even though Simon talks like he’s the spokesperson for the Twelve, it’s his words that will get him in trouble.

The next time Simon Peter speaks up (and nearly every time afterward), he contradicts what Jesus has just said—the opposite of what happened in John 6. It’s almost as if, for whatever reason (pride? arrogance? stubbornness? ignorance?), Peter is out to prove Jesus wrong. The pattern is so predictable that Peter’s penchant for disagreeing with Jesus becomes wearisomely laughable:

- Jesus: “What I’m doing you won’t understand now, but you will understand later.”
- Peter: [acting like he understands now] “You will never wash my feet.”
- Jesus: “If I don’t wash your feet, you’ll have no part with me.”
- Peter: [acting like he understands now] “Then wash my hands and head too!”
- Jesus: “Where I am going you cannot come.”
- Peter: “Lord, where are you going?”
- Jesus: “Where I am going, you cannot follow me now; but you will follow me later.”
- Peter: [acting like he’s going to follow him now] “Lord, why can’t I follow you now? I will lay down my life for you.”
- Jesus: “You will lay down your life for me? [laughs] I’m telling you

⁵Labahn thinks Peter’s confession is the “right answer” to the question asked by Jesus at the beginning of this entire episode: “Where are we to buy enough bread for everyone to eat?” (Jn 6:5). See Michael Labahn, “Simon Peter: An Ambiguous Character and His Narrative Career,” in *Character Studies in the Fourth Gospel*, ed. Steven A. Hunt, Francois Tolmie, and Ruben Zimmermann (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 155.

- the truth: before the cock crows you will deny me three times.”
- Jesus: [later that evening] “I told you that I am he; if I’m the one you’re looking for, let my disciples go.”
[Peter acts like he’s not going anywhere, draws his sword and attacks the high priest’s slave]
- Jesus: “Put the sword up; shall I not drink from the cup the Father has given to me?”
- Servants: [Persisting in following Jesus now, Simon is confronted by servants of the high priest] “You are one of his disciples!”
- Peter: “I am not.”

This is the story of how Simon reveals that he is Peter—but not in the best sense of the word. Peter is petulant. Hardheaded, Simon Peter refuses to take Jesus at his word. “You don’t understand.” “Yes, I do.” “You can’t follow me now.” “Yes, I can.” “You need to leave now.” “No, I don’t.” “You will deny me three times.” Yes he does, and without even a whimper of regret. Unlike the Synoptic Gospels, where Peter walks away weeping bitterly with great remorse, in John’s narrative world, hardhearted Peter denies that he is a disciple of Jesus and walks away like a cold-blooded traitor. No tears, no regrets. So much for the disciple who claimed he would die for Jesus.

In the Synoptic Gospels, Peter denies that he *knows* Jesus. But in John’s Gospel, Simon denies three times that he is a *disciple* of Jesus (Jn 18:15-18, 25-27).⁶ Truer words were never spoken. For even though the narrator describes Simon Peter as “following Jesus” (Jn 18:15), we soon realize that Simon meant what he said, living up to his reputation as the petulant disciple: “You are one of his disciples.” “No, I’m not.” The juxtaposition of the interrogation of Jesus and of Simon is breathtaking. Jesus is on trial for his life, his enemies questioning him about *his disciples* and what he has taught them. Tragically, at that very moment, as Peter is denying that he is a disciple, Jesus says confidently to the chief priests, “Ask those *who heard me* what I taught them” (Jn 18:21). Given Simon’s disclaimer, it’s

⁶James Resseguie, *The Strange Gospel: Narrative Design and Point of View in John* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 153.

quite apparent that Peter wasn't one of those *who truly heard Jesus*. It's not only evident in his denial in word, but also in deed—getting at the heart of why Simon denied Jesus in the first place. We typically don't ponder that question too much. The answer seems rather obvious: Simon was afraid for his life. He didn't want to die. But hadn't Simon already promised to die for Jesus (Jn 13:37)? Why did he back out now?

Perhaps it's because Simon was willing to die for *his hero*—the kind of Messiah he wanted to follow.⁷ But when Jesus turned out to be the kind of Messiah he no longer wanted to follow, one who was willing to die for his enemies (rather than slay them), hardhearted Peter said, “No thanks. I won't follow a Messiah like that.” How do we know Simon was looking for a take-no-prisoners-and-slay-your-enemies-with-a-sword Messiah? Malchus, the slave of the high priest could tell us—or rather *show* us, by holding up his bloody ear (Jn 18:10). Simon didn't want to give up without a fight. Therefore, he was probably shocked to hear Jesus rebuke him for his reckless behavior (Jn 18:11). At that moment, it was probably painfully obvious to Simon that he would no longer call himself a disciple—for the *way* Jesus established the kingdom of God on earth was not the way for Peter. That's why, I think, Simon walked away without any regrets. What he said was true. He may have been following Jesus from a distance, but he was no longer a disciple of the way.

It's no wonder, then, that John seems to have tacked on the episode of Jesus confronting Peter.⁸ Simon wasn't sorry at all for denying Jesus. So, according to John's Gospel, Jesus had to take care of some unfinished business between him and his hardheaded, hardhearted disciple. After all, Jesus had predicted that one day Simon would be called Peter, marking a genuine conversion. As everyone knows, conversion doesn't happen without repentance, a genuine sorrow for sin, truly regretting what we've done. So, how do we make someone feel sorry for their sin? Sit them

⁷I owe this insight to my wife, Sheri.

⁸To many scholars, John 20:24-31 is the perfect ending to the story “come and see.” John 21 looks like an addendum to the Gospel; see the discussion in Marianne Meye Thompson, *John: A Commentary*, New Testament Library (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2015), 431-34. Thompson argues for the unity of John's Gospel.

down like a parent scolding a child and put them in time-out? My mom used to make me stand in the corner of the living room, nose pressed up against the wall, undistracted, so that I would have plenty of time to “think about what you’ve done.” Regret often came within minutes. Is that what Jesus should have done, put Simon in time-out to make him think about what he had done—especially since he approached Jesus that day on the seashore like nothing had happened? Indeed, we wouldn’t blame Jesus if he had wagged his finger at Simon and said, “I’m disappointed in you.” But that’s not what he did. Instead, he asks Simon three times, “Do you love me?”—the question that leads to true repentance.

It must have bothered Simon that Jesus didn’t call him Peter. Instead, Jesus used the same name as when they first met (Jn 1:42)—seemingly going along with Simon, acting like nothing had changed. “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” (Jn 21:15-17). By his response, Simon sounds like he hasn’t learned his lesson, counting on his words to prove his faithfulness: “Yes, Lord. You know that I love you.” What I find compelling is that, of the seven disciples gathered around Jesus that early morning, Simon would have been the *only one* to have understood why Jesus had to ask the same question *three* times. If Simon had repented of his sin (or at least showed some remorse that he denied Jesus *three* times), then perhaps this whole exchange could have been avoided. It wasn’t his sin that grieved him; it was that Jesus asked him the same question three times (Jn 21:17). By giving the same answer (“you know that I love you”), Simon tried to act like nothing had changed. And that’s why, I think, Jesus wouldn’t call him by his nickname. Peter was still just “Simon, son of John.” But one day, just as Jesus predicted, Simon would become Peter, when he fed Jesus’ lambs and followed him all the way to the cross (Jn 21:18-19). Repentance is revealed by what we do more than what we say.

A few times in his Gospel, John points the reader to things that transpired after John 21 (Jn 2:22; 10:16; 12:16; 14:26; 15:26-27; 16:2-4, 8-14; 20:29). But of all of these post-Gospel events, the death of Simon is the most peculiar. That the Holy Spirit would come and guide the disciples “in all truth,” helping them to remember Jesus’ teaching, that Jesus would

have “other sheep” he would bring into the fold, that the disciples would make sense of what Jesus said and did after the resurrection—all of these post-Gospel events make sense to us because we have Acts and the Epistles. But Jesus’ enigmatic reference to the eventual martyrdom of Simon Peter sounds odd by comparison (Jn 21:18). Indeed, given his reaction to Jesus’ prophecy, Simon also acts like it is an odd thing for Jesus to say. Pointing out the beloved one, Simon wants to know: “Lord, and what about this man?” (Jn 21:21). Simon sounds like he believes Jesus is picking on him. “If I’m going to die a horrible death, what about him?” And yet, the beloved one had already followed Jesus all the way to the cross. Peter hadn’t. So Simon may have interpreted Jesus’ prediction about his eventual martyrdom as punishment for his unfaithfulness, especially since Jesus threw in the line that someone would take Simon “where you do not wish to go” (Jn 21:18)—as if Jesus knew that Peter would be a reluctant martyr. It’s as if Jesus were saying, “One day, *Simon*, you will learn to follow me all the way to the cross. *Then* you will finally keep your promise. *Then* you will lay down your life for me. *Then* my prophecy will come true. *Then* everyone will know what I have known all along: you are Peter.”

According to an apocryphal story, Jesus’ prophecy regarding Peter’s martyrdom did come true. Peter was crucified in Rome, impaled on a cross upside down at his request—intended to be a symbolic picture of both the depravity of humanity and the subversive work of Christ’s cross.⁹ Did John’s readers know about how Peter died? Perhaps. They certainly knew about the fate of the beloved one (Jn 21:23). And, since the narrator interprets Jesus’ vague prophecy as “signifying by what kind of death [Peter] will glorify God” (Jn 21:19), he seems to presume readers would know how Peter died.¹⁰ Therefore, the literary effect of the way

⁹Acts of Peter 37. Peter declares from the cross, “For the first man, whose image I bear, in falling head downward showed a manner of birth which did not formerly exist, for it was dead, having no motion. . . . Concerning this the Lord says in a mystery, ‘Unless you make the right as the left and the left as the right, and the top as the bottom and the front as the back, you shall not know the Kingdom.’” See Acts of Peter 38, in *The Apocryphal New Testament*, ed. J. K. Elliott (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), 425.

¹⁰Being led to a place where Peter doesn’t want to go could mean any number of things—prison,

John has framed the discipleship of Simon—from Jesus’ first prophecy to his last—is that Jesus is the Lord of Simon’s life. His words will come true. Simon will be called Peter. One day Peter will be crucified.

By pointing to a post-Gospel event, then, John signals that Peter will eventually do what Jesus required of him, “follow me” (Jn 21:19)—all the way to the cross, glorifying God even in his death. In other words, *it would take a story beyond what was written to reveal the conversion of Simon to Peter*: how a hardheaded, hardhearted man became a rock-solid disciple who followed Jesus to the end.¹¹ Consequently, John’s literary technique sounds like an apt description of our discipleship too. For, it will take a story beyond what has been written to reveal our conversion, from the beginning to the end.

BECOMING A CHRISTIAN TAKES TIME

I grew up in a church that talked about conversion as a singular moment, a one-time transformational experience. Our pastor emphasized the importance of “getting saved,” the event when a lost person was converted to our Christian faith. Stories of dramatic conversions were often held up as the model; whether through personal testimonies or biblical examples, we were told over and over again about the power of the gospel to change a sinner’s life *immediately*. “Once I was blind but now I see” was our mantra. Weeklong revival services were held twice a year to harvest souls for the Lord. Then, once someone was “saved,” we would teach them how to be good members of our church. The evidence of conversion, the proof that a new disciple really meant it when they prayed the sinner’s prayer, was measured by their participation in church activities. The church even issued handy offering envelopes for members (our names printed on the front), with a checklist on the bottom so that we could report whether we were 100 percent Christians that week:

exile, persecution, a transitory life, being homeless—not just martyrdom.

¹¹According to Bauckham, true discipleship (following Jesus) can only happen *after* the resurrection (*Gospel of Glory*, 145-46). So also Resseguie (per Simon Peter): “Only in the *afterward* of Jesus’ death will Peter be able to follow” (*Strange Gospel*, 153, emphasis original).

worship attendance (30 percent), Sunday school attendance (20 percent), on time (10 percent), studied lesson (10 percent), tithing (10 percent), daily Bible reading (10 percent), visitation (10 percent). Most Sundays, I was only a 70 percent Christian, rarely measuring up to what the church said it meant to be truly dedicated to Christ. Yet, even though I wasn't a 100 percent Christian, I had no doubts that I was "saved." My conversion was never in question, as evidenced by my willingness to share my personal testimony during Sunday evening services, recounting the details of when I became a Christian.

Then I went away to a Baptist college and heard my philosophy professor, Dr. Dan Cochran, talk about how none of us really are Christian, especially since the word *Christian* means "Christlike." Rather than claim, "I'm a Christian," we should all admit that we are actually *becoming* Christian—that we won't truly be Christlike until the last day, at the resurrection. He wanted us to realize that our conversion to Christ didn't happen all at once. It would take a lifetime to become Christian, being "transformed" daily by the "renewing of our mind"—something Paul emphasizes (Rom 12:1-2).

That same year, we had a guest speaker (I don't remember his name) give a series of talks during chapel, "The Criteria for Evaluating Spiritual Growth." Much to my surprise, he never mentioned the checklist that appeared on the bottom of our offering envelopes. Instead, he spoke about the fruit of the Spirit, virtue ethics, and the importance of character formation. For the first time in my life, I began to reconsider my conversion to Christ—that it didn't happen overnight. Being a Christian takes time, a statement that came as a relief. No wonder I never measured up. Slowly, daily, Christ converts his disciples to his way of thinking, his way of living, his priorities, his kingdom—just like he did for Simon Peter, a lesson his young disciple would learn when he got old (Jn 21:18).

It doesn't surprise me, then, that old Simon Peter wrote about conversion as something that takes time, that salvation is a growth process for all of us (1 Pet 2:2). Christ is gathering stones to build the temple of the living God—each rock fitted for his divine purpose—even a man

named Peter (1 Pet 2:4-6). Some might see all of us as rejects. But God loves to take what “the builders rejected” and use it as the cornerstone—Christ Jesus proves it (1 Pet 2:7-8). That’s why old Peter keeps reminding his young converts of who they are in Christ. Over and over again he writes, “You are this” and “You are that”—the mother lode appearing in 1 Peter 2:9: “You are A CHOSEN PEOPLE, A ROYAL PRIESTHOOD, A HOLY NATION, A PEOPLE FOR GOD’S OWN POSSESSION” (NASB). This is what *God has said* about us (Peter quotes Moses and Isaiah). We may not look like choice people, act like royalty, or seem very holy. But, since Christ’s prediction about Simon came true—“you will be called Peter”—we believe these prophecies will come true for us too. Just like Peter, it will take the story of our lives built together—beyond what has been written—to reveal our conversion in the end. Until then, we look for signs that God is at work among us.

NICODEMUS, THE SEEKER

Miracles are signs of God’s presence. When we witness the miraculous, however we may try to explain it, we are seeing God at work. Of course, the handiwork of God is seen in the everyday happenings of life too—what could be called daily signs of divine presence. The sun rises; the sun sets. Rain falls from heaven; trees rise from the earth. The grass dies; the flower blooms. Those who have eyes to see God at work among us—his faithful gifts are so reliable that it’s easy to take him for granted—recognize God’s presence among us. “The heavens tell the glory of God,” writes the psalmist. “And their expanse declares the work of His hands. Day to day pours forth speech” (Ps 19:1-2 NASB). When creation talks, we listen to God. When things happen, we see God. Therefore, it’s not surprising that whenever believers witness the unusual, hear of the miraculous, we see God. For we are convinced that every good gift—whether ordinary or extraordinary—comes from God. Since he rains his gifts on the just and the unjust, we know that God is with all of us. It just takes eyes to see the signs.

So, when Nicodemus surmised, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God because no one can do the signs that you do

unless God is with him” (Jn 3:2), it sounds like something we would say. As a matter of fact, compared to the *only* confession of faith made by Simon Peter (Jn 6:68), Nicodemus’s confession sounds just as meaningful. “God is with him” is nearly the same as saying “God is with us.” Furthermore, Peter says the same thing to Cornelius about Jesus: “God was with him” (Acts 10:38). Since John wrote his Gospel so that his readers would be able to see miracles as signs of God’s work and therefore “believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God” (Jn 20:31), Nicodemus seems to personify the desired result of John’s Gospel story. Those who see the signs recognize God in Jesus. Yet, most readers are suspicious of Nicodemus—and with good reason.

First, the narrator has just informed us that simply because someone sees the signs and is drawn to Jesus doesn’t necessarily mean that someone is a “believer” to be trusted. This is because Jesus didn’t trust such people (Jn 2:23-25). Second, the narrator uses several negative images to introduce Nicodemus: he’s a Pharisee, he’s a ruler of the Jews, and he came to Jesus under cover of night (Jn 3:1-2). In light of the prologue, we already know that Jesus will be rejected by “his own,” that the world will not listen to the Baptizer because he bore witness to the Light, and that those who live in darkness will be repelled by the Light (Jn 1:5-11). That sounds like a sneak preview of Jesus’ encounter with Nicodemus. Finally, and perhaps most tellingly, Nicodemus *never* confesses Jesus as “the Christ, the Son of God” (the goal of John’s Gospel). Therefore, it’s easy to dismiss Nicodemus as an unqualified disciple, questioning whether he ever showed any signs of being a true believer. Nicodemus may see signs of the kingdom, but does he ever see the King?

Then again, the same question could be asked of Simon. Does Peter ever display any signs of being a true believer *within the pages of John’s Gospel*? Yes, no, maybe? That’s why some think Nicodemus deserves a second look. While it’s true that Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night, at least he’s drawn to the Light.¹² While it’s true that Nicodemus is a Pharisee

¹²“In so doing, John foreshadows Nicodemus’s ultimate discipleship in 19:39-42.” See Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), 1:536.

(one of the groups that opposed Jesus), nevertheless, Jesus treated him like a dialogue partner, expecting him to understand Jesus' teaching (Jn 3:10, 12).¹³ And while it's true that Nicodemus was puzzled by Jesus' teaching, nowhere does the narrator say that he rejected what Jesus said.

John has created a gap in the narrative, forcing the reader to wonder whether Nicodemus will eventually become an opponent of Jesus. Or will he continue to be Jesus-friendly, believing that "God is with him" because he sees the signs? When times get tough, will he betray Jesus like Judas or deny him like Simon Peter? Or will Nicodemus come through in the end—someone who shows his true colors when the world turns black and white? Due to John's literary technique, then, the next time Nicodemus reappears in John's Gospel (Jn 7:50-52), readers are inclined to lean in and take notes: "What's going to happen here?" It's also why, when Nicodemus raises his voice in protest (in the midst of Jesus' enemies!), we can't help but begin to develop a favorable opinion of this particular Pharisee. He seems to be the *only* insider to stick up for Jesus.

What tripped up the insiders about Jesus was that he was from Galilee (Jn 7:52). Of course, by this time, the things Jesus said and did had already troubled "the Jews" (Jn 2:18-20; 5:16-18; 7:1-32). But when some of the people began to wonder out loud whether Jesus was the Christ (Jn 7:26, 31, 41), the rebuttal by those who opposed Jesus was based on where he came from: "But the Christ doesn't come from Galilee, does he? Do not the Scriptures say that the Christ comes from the seed of David and from Bethlehem, the village where David was from?" (Jn 7:41-42). The last king of Israel, the one who would claim David's throne and bring about God's everlasting reign on earth, had to share David's nativity (Ps 89:3-4; Mic 5:2)—everyone knew that. But in John's narrative world, Jesus' heavenly origin was far more important than any earthly nativity. John didn't need to tell the story of Jesus' birth because "He was in the beginning with God" (Jn 1:2). Those who believe in him are not born of

¹³J. Ramsey Michaels, *The Gospel of John*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 179-80; Francis J. Moloney, *Belief in the Word, Reading the Fourth Gospel: John 1-4* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 109-15.

blood or of the flesh but of God (Jn 1:13). That's what Jesus tried to teach Nicodemus regarding the kingdom of God. What is born of the flesh is earthly; what is born of the Spirit is heavenly. Therefore, only those who have eyes to see the exalted King will enter the kingdom of God (Jn 3:3-13). Indeed, it will take heavenly eyes to see the King when he comes into his kingdom.¹⁴

Nicodemus may see the signs of God's reign on earth. But will he see the kingdom when Jesus is lifted up as king of Israel and the whole world? Of course, that will be a difficult thing even for Jesus' disciples to see: *how* Jesus is exalted as the last king of Israel isn't what anyone was expecting, not even a teacher of the law. One has to be "born again" and "born from above" to see it. "Just as it is *impossible* to do what Jesus has been doing *unless* 'God is with him,' so it is *impossible* 'to see the kingdom of God unless one is 'born from above,'" says J. Ramsey Michaels.¹⁵ Jesus says he will look more like a serpent on a pole lifted up in the wilderness than a royal son of David exalted to his heaven-ordained throne in Jerusalem (Jn 3:14). When that happened, when Jesus was lifted up on the cross, the scandal of the Christ having come from Galilee paled in comparison.

Jesus wasn't reticent to use negative imagery to reveal how he pictured himself and his mission. You would think he would do just the opposite, relying exclusively on flattering images to convince everyone that he was God's Messiah. He certainly does that a lot in John's Gospel—more than any other Gospel. Even though Jesus spends most of his time in the Synoptic Gospels teaching about the kingdom of God, he prefers to talk about himself in John's Gospel. He claims he is the light of the world, the living water, the bread of life, the good shepherd, the resurrection and the life, and perhaps most famously, he says he is the way, the truth, and the life. To be sure, the revelation of Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God, is John's purpose—in word and in deed. Even the miracles are supposed

¹⁴"Jesus speaks of a rebirth that enables the one reborn *to see* the kingdom of God. However familiar the reader is with a Jewish notion of God as King, something different is being introduced by these words of Jesus to Nicodemus" (Moloney, *Belief in the Word*, 110, emphasis original).

¹⁵Michaels, *Gospel of John*, 179, emphasis original.

to be signs of Jesus' identity. But some of those signs make Jesus look bad (Jn 5:1-18; 9:1-34). And much of what Jesus says about himself—even the positive imagery of being the bread of life—has a negative effect (“How is this man able to give us his flesh to eat?” [Jn 6:52]). Mixing in a few blatantly offensive images only makes things worse, especially for a Pharisee like Nicodemus.

As Nicodemus is already confused by Jesus, it certainly doesn't help when Jesus compares himself to the serpent that God used to punish Israel for its rebellion (Jn 3:14-15)—a strange story from the Hebrew Scriptures that seems to contradict the very lesson God tried to teach Israel regarding the perils of idolatry (the bronze serpent was eventually idolized by Israel; see 2 Kings 18:4). In order to stay God's punishment, Moses was instructed to make a “graven image,” requiring Israel to “look at the serpent of bronze and live” (Num 21:9 NRSV). To compare yourself to an idol—a serpent, no less—and say, “You need to see me like that” seems to invite unmerciful scrutiny. So, when Nicodemus appears to stick up for Jesus before the Sanhedrin, claiming, “Our law doesn't judge a man without listening to him” (Jn 7:51), it should take us by surprise. What he should have said was, “Since our law doesn't judge a man unless we've heard from him first, let me report that I've talked to the man. He compared himself to an idol. That those who believe *in him*—not in the LORD!—will live forever. This man is dangerous. He's a false prophet. Yes, his signs come true. But, just as Moses warned us, even false prophets can perform signs, trying to convince us to worship other gods (Deut 13:1-5). And so we must ‘purge the evil from among us.’”

But that's not what Nicodemus says, and I wonder why? Yet, what intrigues me more is what this Pharisee *does* after Jesus is “lifted up like a serpent.”

Nicodemus makes three appearances in John's Gospel: extensively at the beginning (Jn 3:1-15), briefly near the middle (Jn 7:50-52), and toward the end, when he helps Joseph of Arimathea inter the body of the crucified Jesus (Jn 19:39-42). Since Nicodemus was a member of the Sanhedrin, he probably saw everything that happened to Jesus. He heard

Caiaphas condemn Jesus to death (Jn 11:49-50). He probably saw Jesus welcomed into Jerusalem with shouts of messianic praise, “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel” (Jn 12:13). He heard Jesus respond to the high priest’s interrogation, “Why do you question me? Ask those who heard what I said to them. They know what I said” (Jn 18:21)—including Nicodemus. He saw the abuse, the hatred. He heard the cries, the mockery. He was probably there when Pilate asked, “Shall I crucify your king?” and the crowd responded, “We have no king but Caesar” (Jn 19:15). He read the sign, “Jesus the Nazarene, the King of the Jews” (Jn 19:19). He heard Jesus say, “It is finished” (Jn 19:30). He probably saw Jesus die. Indeed, it’s very likely Nicodemus saw the whole thing because he’s the man who brought a hundred pounds of burial spices to inter the body of Jesus (Jn 19:39). I picture with my mind’s eye the arrangement between Joseph and Nicodemus, “I’ll get his body; you get the spices.” So, as the man who first came to him at night gathered what was necessary for Jesus’ burial—in light of the strange turn of events that no one saw coming except Jesus (and perhaps his enemies)—I wonder whether this Pharisee was troubled by the same question he asked at the beginning: “How can these things be?” (Jn 3:9).

There’s a lot of king talk in John’s version of the trial and execution of Jesus: “Are you the king of the Jews?” (Jn 18:33); “My kingdom is not of this world” (Jn 18:36); “So you are a king?” (Jn 18:37); “You say I am a king” (Jn 18:37); “Shall I release to you the king of the Jews?” (Jn 18:39); “Hail, king of the Jews” (Jn 19:3); “Shall I crucify your king?” (Jn 19:15); “We have no king but Caesar” (Jn 19:15); “Jesus the Nazarene, the king of the Jews” (Jn 19:19); “Do not write, ‘the king of the Jews’; but that he said, ‘I am king of the Jews’” (Jn 19:21). Yet, despite all of the talk of king and kingdoms, the crucifixion seemed to confirm two undeniable realities: (1) Rome ruled Jerusalem, and (2) Jesus looked more like a serpent lifted up on a pole than a king. Even though Jesus claimed, “Whenever I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to me” (Jn 12:32), the only people drawn to him at that time who were calling him “king” were his enemies. There were no disciples at the cross lifting up Jesus as their

Messiah. Instead, in John's Gospel, talk of a king and a kingdom around a cross is foolish nonsense (Jn 19:21).

That's why I think Nicodemus comes off looking like a disciple in the end.¹⁶ In light of the cross, it's not what he said but what he did that reveals his faith. It has to do with the amount of burial spices he brought to prepare the body of Jesus. Usually, a pound of spices—worth quite a bit of money—would suffice (Jn 12:3-7). Nicodemus brought a *hundred pounds* (Jn 19:39). Why? Kings were interred with large quantities of aloes and myrrh. According to Josephus, it took five hundred servants to carry the burial spices for Herod the Great's funeral.¹⁷ The olfactory effect would be obvious: one could smell the burial of a king for miles. So it looks like Joseph and Nicodemus orchestrated a royal burial for Jesus. Raymond Brown writes, "The idea that Jesus was accorded a burial fit for a king would correspond well to the solemn proclamation that on the cross he was truly 'the King of the Jews.'"¹⁸ All who lived in Jerusalem, both the rulers responsible for Jesus' death and the pilgrims attending the holy city during Passover, would have caught the scent that a king was buried in the city of David that day.

Nicodemus may have never offered the proper confession, "Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God." But his actions spoke volumes. Even though nearly all of Jesus' disciples abandoned him, there was one man who despised the shame and buried Jesus like a king. And I wonder, as the wind carried the royal scent for miles, whether Jesus' words echoed in Nicodemus's ears, bringing a grin to his solemn face: "Don't be surprised that I said to you, 'It is necessary for you all to be born from above.' The *pneuma* blows wherever it wants, and you hear its voice, but you do not know where it comes from or where it is going; so also is everyone who

¹⁶So also Susan E. Hylen, *Imperfect Believers: Ambiguous Characters in the Gospel of John* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 37; Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St. John*, trans. David Smith and G. A. Kon (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 3:296-97; and Keener, who sees Nicodemus as a model for Jewish "secret" disciples to "go public with their confession of faith in Jesus" (*Gospel of John*, 2:1162).

¹⁷Josephus, *Jewish War* 1.133.9.

¹⁸Raymond E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 2:1261; also Michaels, *Gospel of John*, 981-83; Thompson, *John*, 406.

has been born by the *pneuma*” (Jn 3:7-8). Indeed, one has to be born with spiritual eyes to see the kingdom of a crucified Christ.

WHAT ARE YOU LOOKING FOR?

I've often wondered what kind of disciple I would have been if I had lived in Jesus' day. Would I have been like Nicodemus, an educated man who came to Jesus with more questions than answers? Or would I look more like Simon, a guy from the working-class world who had a long stubborn streak? Since I was a college professor, I often identify with Nicodemus—perhaps that's why I'm willing to give him the benefit of the doubt. Asking questions that deserve good answers was my livelihood. Then again, I come from blue-collar stock—a carpet installer's son who is too proud to admit it when he's claimed too much. Is that why I'm so hard on Simon for not measuring up to his nickname?

Indeed, there tends to be a reflective quality to John's work. What we see is who we are. That's why I wonder what I would have done if I were one of the first disciples of Jesus. When I had just begun to follow Jesus, if he had turned to me and asked, “What are you looking for?” I wonder what I would have said. “Heaven when I die”? Or “the promise of a better life”? Or “no more fear of hell”? Or even “forgiveness of my sins”? Given what I think are the reasons I first began to follow Jesus, there's no telling what I would have said. Nevertheless, for a man who's been trying to follow him for over fifty years, I know exactly what I would say today.

Jesus: “What are you looking for?”

Me: “I'm looking for *you*, in a world filled with hate and violence, war and hunger. I'm looking for *you*, in a world of sorrow and pain, abuse and suffering. I'm looking for *you*, when a child dies of disease, when a teenager is killed in a car wreck, when a young mother is taken from her children due to Covid. I'm looking for *you*, when my mother died, when members of my family no longer believe, when my colleague has to retire early because she's dying of cancer. I'm looking for *you*, when Egyptian Christians are murdered. I'm looking for *you*, when earthquakes level entire cities. I'm looking for *you*, when a little boy sits in shock with a

bloody face, covered in ashes, taken from a pile of rubble after a bomb destroyed his whole world. I'm looking for *you*—and I'm not the only one.”

In Elie Wiesel's Nobel Prize-winning book, *Night*, he tells the horror story of how he survived the Holocaust. Riddled with survivor's guilt, Wiesel tries to make sense of the inexplicable evil he saw with his own eyes, endured in his own body: the persecution and execution of his people, family, and friends, carried out by the hardheaded, hardhearted Nazis. It all happened so fast, the escalation of violence: from being stripped of their possessions, ghettoized in their own hometown (Sighet, Transylvania), crammed into cattle cars and transported to concentration camps (first Birkenau, then Auschwitz, and finally Buchenwald), to enduring severe persecution—beaten, starved, tortured, executed, cremated—their numbers dwindled by the hundreds every day.

Throughout the ordeal, as Wiesel recounts his descent into what he called the “Kingdom of Night,” he lays bare his struggle to believe in God.¹⁹ At first, Elie and his family looked for any signs of God's presence, good news that they were not forgotten. They found reasons to celebrate small graces: hope in each other, a chance to sleep, thickened soup, and mud that cloaked coveted shoes: “I had new shoes myself. But as they were covered with a thick coat of mud, they had not been noticed. I thanked God, in an improvised prayer, for having created mud in His infinite and wondrous universe.”²⁰ But eventually night overwhelmed them when the Secret Service executed a young boy along with two men, forcing the prisoners to watch the hanging:

“Where is the merciful God, where is He?” someone behind me was asking. At the signal, the three chairs were tipped over. Total silence in the camp. On the horizon, the sun was setting. “Caps off!” screamed the *Lageraelteste*. His voice quivered. As for the rest of us, we were weeping. “Cover your heads!” Then came the march past the victims. The two men were no longer alive. Their tongues were hanging out, swollen and bluish. But the third rope was still moving: the child, too light, was still breathing. . . . And

¹⁹Elie Wiesel, *Night*, trans. Marion Wiesel (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006), 118.

²⁰Wiesel, *Night*, 38.

so he remained for more than a half hour, lingering between life and death, writhing before our eyes. And we were forced to look at him at close range. He was still alive when I passed him. His tongue was still red, his eyes not yet extinguished. Behind me, I heard the same man asking: "For God's sake, where is God?" And from within me, I heard a voice answer: "Where He is? This is where—hanging here from this gallows."²¹

That was the turning point. Wiesel no longer praised God or asked for his help. The holy days meant nothing to him; observing Yom Kippur, asking God to forgive him of his sins, seemed useless. He even refused to recite Kaddish, the prayer for the dead. It was because, to him, in the darkness of night, God died with that little boy.

Elie is short for *Eliezer*, which means, "God helps him"—the last word Elie heard his father whisper just before he died. Elie feared that his father's fragile condition would make him an ideal candidate for "selection," when the weak and the lame would be culled from the group and sent to the incinerators. His father said he was ready to die. But Elie wouldn't hear of it, doing everything in his power to protect him. Suffering from an acute fever that left him delirious, his father began to cry out his son's name in the middle of the night. A guard warned him to shut up, but Elie's father persisted, "Eliezer, Eliezer." The officer beat him with a club, striking a death blow to his head. Always before, Elie would try to shield his father from such punishment. Not this time. He remained silent, listening to his father die as he breathed his last word, "Eliezer"—a betrayal Elie regretted for the rest of his life.²²

Perhaps that's why he prefers to go by the name *Elie* (which means, ironically, "My God"—an echo of Jesus' cry from the cross). *Eliezer* is too painful, too sorrowful, too many bad memories. Yet, I hear a prayer in his name. That one word, *Eliezer*, could be heard as a dying man's desperate cry for redemption, "God, help him." And God did. Because, in the end, Elie not only survived the atrocities of the death camps of the Nazis, but he also embodied the hope of his father's last wish: that God

²¹Wiesel, *Night*, 64-65.

²²Wiesel, *Night*, 110-12.

would help his son. “I express to you my deepest gratitude as one who has emerged from the Kingdom of Night. We know that every moment is a moment of grace, every hour an offering; not to share them would mean to betray them. Our lives no longer belong to us alone; they belong to all those who need us desperately.”²³

When I read Elie’s story with resurrection eyes, I can’t help but think about another innocent Jew who was viciously murdered on the day we call Good Friday—the day when God died. For his sacrifice teaches us that God shows up in the darkest of places, leading us out of the kingdom of night.

Staring at the death of the innocent one, someone behind us asks, “Where is God?” We say, pointing to the crucified King, “Where is he? This is where—hanging from the cross.”

²³Wiesel, *Night*, 120.

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