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# I AM:

Examining the Amazing  
Claims of Jesus

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Paul Smith

# **I Am**

## **Examining the Amazing Claims of Jesus**

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# Introduction

This little booklet is offered both to individuals and groups to help them study the Bible and St John's Gospel in particular. If you are working on your own, you may want to read a particular section at a time alongside the Gospel itself. Take time to grasp the various themes before you move on to the next section. Let God speak to you from His Word.

If you are working with other Christians in a group, you may want to obtain a copy of the booklet for each member of the group. This will enable you to read the various sections through before you meet and maybe to share the leadership as you go along. When you meet together, you can then share your own reflections with the others and so benefit from the insights of everyone else in your group.

I have not included questions for discussion as part of these studies, but I have no doubt that they will emerge as you share together. Sometimes there may be issues to be debated; but let's not forget that when John wrote his Gospel he was not presenting it as a proposition to be considered but the account of a life which can still be encountered, that of Jesus Christ. That's really what it's all about.

So these studies are offered in the hope that through them the reader will encounter Jesus again, and encountering Him, follow Him, and following Him discover life in all its fullness.

*Paul Smith*



## St. John's Gospel and the Rest

No one who has read all the Gospels can fail to notice the similarity of the first three, and the contrast between them and the fourth. Much of Mark's Gospel is included in both Matthew and Luke. It seems therefore that both Matthew and Luke had a copy of St. Mark's Gospel before them when they wrote. They used it as one of their sources. A closer examination reveals that some material is common to both Matthew and Luke, but Mark doesn't have it. This suggests that when Matthew and Luke wrote they both had a copy of another document on which they drew, but which we do not have.

Of course, both Matthew and Luke had their own memories, or information which they individually had gleaned from sources of their own. So there is also material in both Matthew and Luke, which is unique to each of these Gospels.

Like Mark, Matthew and Luke were telling a story. They had been involved in or heard about the most remarkable event in all history. It concerned the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus. As they reflect upon it, they clearly have come to their own understanding of who Jesus really is, and consequently the importance of what He has done. But they simply tell the story. Granted they may drop clues on the way, but their objective is to present the reader with enough reliable evidence to make up their own mind. The first three Gospels, therefore, are principally concerned with telling a story; the most wonderful story in the world. They present the reader with the evidence of history. It is too compelling to be ignored.

John is different. He is quite sure who Jesus is, and he has found this truth to be so profound that he cannot keep it to himself. Far from telling a story about the birth of a baby, John begins with a profound theological statement. He says

nothing about shepherds or wise men. His preoccupation is that this was no ordinary child, no ordinary man; Jesus is the Word become flesh.

The more we get into St. John's Gospel, the more we realise the contrast with the other three. John has nothing about the Kingdom of God, a theme so familiar in the others; little about prayer, and demons are scarcely ever mentioned. But he has great themes which keep recurring - truth, life, the world, witness, and what it means to abide in Christ. There is a difference in style. Some discourses included in the others are absent from John, like the Sermon on the Mount. Yet John includes the upper room discourse in significant detail, which the others omit.

John says nothing about the virgin birth of Jesus, His baptism, the temptations, the transfiguration, the institution of the Lord's Supper, the cry of dereliction, or the ascension. Nor does he include parables, so common in the others. He does speak about miracles, but for him they are miraculous signs, not simply the mighty works of Jesus as the others record them, but signs of who He really is, and consequently how significant is His work. Whilst omitting the parables, John tells his story in such a way that these miraculous signs become almost acted parables. Further, John so arranges his material that, not uncommonly, the account of a miraculous sign is followed by the teaching of Jesus which interprets the sign. Thus, the feeding of the five thousand leads on to the teaching of Jesus about the bread of life, and the raising of Lazarus is treated in a similar way.

An even closer examination indicates that John, anxious that his readers do not miss the point, often includes within the teaching of Jesus a saying of Jesus which makes the teaching abundantly clear. Thus, the feeding of the five thousand leads on to Jesus declaring, "I am the Bread of Life." The raising of Lazarus leads to Jesus declaring, "I

am the Resurrection and the Life.” The healing of the man born blind leads to Jesus declaring, “I am the Light of the World.” This booklet will concentrate, one at a time, on each of these sayings.

After careful consideration two things become clear. Firstly, it seems as though John does not want to include material which the other Gospel writers have, unless it is absolutely necessary; but he does include material which they have, for some reason, omitted. For this reason many believe that John assumes his readers already have a familiarity with the other Gospels. He does not want to duplicate their material, but he does want to supplement it. Further, John’s material does make sense on its own, but is even more profound when we come to it with the background knowledge which the other Gospels provide.

Secondly, whilst Matthew, Mark and Luke record history, John both records it and interprets it. This is not to suggest that John ‘puts a spin’ on it. No. As John makes clear in telling his story, the interpretation is included in either the events or the teaching which goes with them, and often in both. The authenticity of John’s material is beyond doubt, but by the time he wrote his gospel he had come to realise that the events of Jesus’ ministry and the teaching which he gave drive all who knew Him, as John did, to one inescapable conclusion concerning who Jesus really is.

What do we make of all this? In a sense we have to read the whole Gospel through (not a bad idea!) before John reveals his purpose. We get it in John 20:31 “...these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name.” This was John’s overriding purpose in writing the whole Gospel. Everything is structured to that great end. Someone has reflected that, whilst Matthew, Mark and Luke seek to give us a photograph of Jesus, John wants to paint a portrait. He brings with his telling of the story a

profound indication of whom he has discovered Jesus to be, and who he wants the reader to discover Him to be as well.

Whilst there has been much speculation about the authorship of St. John's Gospel, these studies assume that it was written by John the Apostle. There is substantial evidence, both within the Gospel, and from other external sources of a very early date, that this was the case. Clearly whoever wrote the Gospel was an eye-witness to many of the events recorded. The inclusion of detail drives us to this conclusion. In addition we notice that a significant number of people who are anonymous in the other Gospels are named in St. John's Gospel (1:45, 3:1, 6:7, 11:2, 18:10).

As we read the Gospel we encounter a disciple who is sometimes unnamed (1:35ff.), and sometimes called "the disciple whom Jesus loved" (13:23, 19:26, 20:2, 21:7). This we believe to be John's way of identifying himself. Modesty prevented him giving greater detail. So let's remember as we read; here we are dealing with the writings of someone who knew Jesus intimately. He knew the accent of His voice and the smell of His sweat. At the Last Supper he leant on the Saviour's breast. He saw the miracles, heard the teaching and through it all discovered the adventure of discipleship. That's what he wants us to discover too.

It is said that when J.B. Phillips was translating St. John's Gospel into modern English his son had a conversation with someone who enquired, "What is your father making of St. John's Gospel?" The son's reply came without hesitation, "I am more eager to see what St. John's Gospel makes of my father!" No one can really encounter this book, or its central character and remain the same. So get ready for a transformation.

The amazing character of Jesus, whom John presents, the amazing claims He makes for Himself, and the amazing opportunity which He gives to others are made clear in the “I am...” sayings of Jesus, unique to St. John’s Gospel. We shall consider each in some detail; but before we do we must not miss the profound significance of the first two words of each of these sayings - ‘I am’. It is to that consideration which we must first turn.

## I Am...

All the first disciples of Jesus were members of the Jewish race. They had been nurtured in a Jewish religious framework. Their understanding of who God is, and what God does had been shaped by their Jewish history. There was a God who had made people, chosen their race through Abraham, redeemed them from bondage through Moses, allowed them to be taken into exile when they had forsaken Him and eventually brought them back to their own land.

There is little doubt that, important though all their history was, the Exodus was of particular significance. The story is often repeated in the Psalms, for example, and is ritually recalled in the annual celebration of Passover.

This epoch-making event began with God choosing Moses to lead His nation out of bondage in Egypt. Moses, with his multi-cultural background was uniquely fitted for the task. But as Moses was all too aware, he was ill-equipped for all that lay ahead. That's where God's personal call comes in. Whilst tending sheep Moses was attracted to a bush which seemed to be on fire, but not consumed by the flames. It was God's way of arresting Moses' attention and led to the conversation through which Moses heard God's unmistakable call.

Many of us can identify with the way in which Moses tried to get off God's hook. He was full of excuses. Like most of us when God's call comes, he thought God had made a mistake by choosing him. But God had other ideas. One by one Moses' excuses are demolished. Inadequate though he felt, he was God's man for a very big job.

During this conversation with God Moses asks a very significant question. Suppose he goes to the Israelites and tells them that God has sent him and they ask what is God's name, what is he to say? The answer comes from God

himself. “I am who I am. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: ‘I am has sent me to you’.” (Exodus 3:14)

So we discover that woven deep into Jewish history is the understanding that God is called ‘I AM’. That is God’s name. Of course more could be said about this, and you may want to read deeper on this fascinating subject; but let it be sufficient for us just now to understand that ‘I AM’ is understood by every Jewish person to be the name of God.

Nor must we forget that for the Jew one’s name and one’s nature were inseparably related. That is why God sometimes chooses the name for the prophet’s children, for example. And that is how we are to understand the teaching of Jesus about asking for things in His name. It is not a kind of magic spell which is to be recited at the end of our prayers to ensure that we get what we ask for. It is a way of expressing our willingness to subject our desires to the sovereign, overarching will of God.

So we are beginning to see that when Jesus uses this phrase ‘I AM’, it had particular significance for his Jewish hearers. They would have clearly understood that it was nothing less than the name of God; and because name and nature go together it was an implicit claim by Jesus of Nazareth to be the one who shared the very nature of God Himself. Quite apart from anything which follows this little phrase, these two words alone are of profound significance.

As we read the Gospel through we can see how this is made clear. Let two examples be enough to make the point.

As the ministry of Jesus recorded in St. John’s Gospel unfolds we are presented with a developing conflict between Jesus and the Jewish authorities, those whom John often calls ‘the Jews’. Each miracle that Jesus performs and each body of teaching which he delivers seems to make matters worse. The reader quickly realises that Jesus on the one hand and the Jewish religious teachers on the other are

on a collision course. It all comes to a head in the final week of our Lord's earthly life, culminating in the cross.

The reader cannot fail to notice that when confronted with such opposition Jesus never tries to soften his argument or accommodate the opposite point of view. On the contrary, he speaks in a more forthright, uncompromising way; making exceptional claims and forcing his opponents into a corner. Indeed, he forces everyone into a corner, his contemporaries and the reader today. Here is someone about whom we must have an opinion. We can no longer remain neutral. So extreme are his claims for Himself that we are all compelled to decide who we think this person really is. Of course, this is exactly what John has in mind as he writes his Gospel.

During one of the confrontations with the Jewish religious leaders, recorded in the second half of John chapter 8, there is the account of a rather long and complicated argument about the pride the religious leaders took in being children of Abraham. To unpick the argument in detail requires a deal of hard work. Let it be sufficient here to note that Jesus claims a position superior to Abraham. When challenged he strikes back with the amazing claim, "Before Abraham was I am!" (John 8:58). He was, without doubt, claiming divinity, and consequently eternity.

I guess most of us would have expected him to say, "Before Abraham was I was!" The tenses would have been right and it would not have undermined the amazing claim he was making. But that is not what he says. Quite deliberately he changes the tense from what would have been expected. He said, "I am!" He was not only claiming divinity by what he said but by the way he said it. He used the very name of God. No wonder the authorities were ready to stone Him.

The other noteworthy example occurs towards the end of Jesus' ministry and once again we find it recorded in St John's Gospel. In the 18<sup>th</sup> chapter we find Judas guiding a

detachment of Jewish soldiers to where Jesus was. With the authority of the Pharisees they were about to arrest him. Now John wants us to understand that no one took Jesus' life from him, least of all a detachment of soldiers. Jesus knew the plan which was unfolding. He delivers himself into their hands. One can imagine the scene. Judas and the soldiers make their way to the olive grove hoping that they will be able to catch Jesus. But Jesus knows. He does not allow himself to be taken. He takes the initiative and approaches them asking, "Who is it you want?" Their reply makes their quest clear. It's Jesus of Nazareth that they are looking for. They had found their man. He identified Himself with the words "I am he." John includes a very helpful observation as he records the story. "When Jesus said, 'I am he,' they drew back and fell to the ground." (John 18:6). His words seem to knock them off their feet!

The cause of such a reaction may be difficult for us to grasp. It was not difficult for the Jewish reader. They realised that in handing himself over to them he was once again making his claim to divinity by using the divine name. Both the soldiers who did it and those who read the story can be left in no doubt. What is about to happen is not just an example of cruel injustice perpetrated on an innocent life. God incarnate is about to be crucified, and that's a different matter altogether.

So, as we turn now to consider the various 'I am...' sayings recorded in St. John's Gospel we must not lose sight of the fact that underlying them all is the inherent claim that Jesus is God incarnate. His life is the life of God lived out amongst men. He is perfectly identified with them, but not identical to them. He opens up to every enquiring heart the possibility of becoming new and different. He is the door, the good shepherd, the way, the truth, the life, the bread of life... and all the rest. But he is only these because first and foremost he is the great I AM.

## I am the Bread of Life - John 6:35

We have already observed that in St. John's Gospel the miracles of Jesus are seen as signs, pointers to who Jesus really is. They are sometimes followed by a block of teaching which makes this abundantly clear and contains one of the "I am..." sayings of Jesus. When this occurs it is important for us to look back to the miracle, for there we find the backdrop against which the saying is displayed. This is the case here, so before examining the teaching on Jesus the Bread of Life we need to consider the miracle against which it is set.

The fact that this is the only miracle recorded in all four Gospels says much about how important the Gospel writers saw it. Even though we may be familiar with it we need to consider it carefully.

John tells us that Jesus went up a mountainside. Mountains were very important for the first century Jew. So often in the Old Testament it was on mountains that God chose to meet with His people. One can imagine the sense of anticipation in the crowd as they follow Him. On the mountainside He sits down with His disciples and they no doubt were ready to hang on His every word. John makes it clear that this occurred at Passover time and Mark adds the detail that the grass was green (Mark 6:39) which was only the case in spring, the Passover season. But why does John think it important to let us know what time of the year it happened? Because Passover was the season when Jewish patriotism was at its height. Instituted, as it was, to commemorate the liberation from bondage in Egypt, Passover was about Jewish national identity. They were a special race. God had His hand on them and one day liberation from the occupying Roman forces would come.

Of course, the disciples were not the only people with Jesus. The crowd, awed by his healings came in droves. Before long they had a major problem on their hands. How were they to be fed? Philip was from Bethsaida, so no doubt knew the territory well. Maybe this is why Jesus asks him about buying food for such a crowd. But it was not only the lack of shops which presented the difficulty. The sheer size of the crowd meant that the cost of feeding them would be prohibitive. It would take eight months' wages to provide even a morsel for each one.

It is worth remembering at this point that the word which is translated 'men' in verse 10 is the one used for males. So we can conjecture that there were probably at least twice that number when you include women and children.

John lets us into a secret when he tells us that the question to Philip was not because Jesus was in a fix. It was to test Philip, for Jesus already knew what He was going to do. When faced with an intractable problem Jesus already knew what He was going to do. What seemed to be an intractable problem for everyone else was not a problem for Jesus. As we anticipate the end of the story we can observe that as everyone co-operated with Him and His will was done the problem was dealt with. Maybe there's a lesson for us all there. So often the very things which seem to be the greatest problem for us are no problem at all for Him. He knows what He wants to do and if we can know and obey His instructions the problem can be dealt with.

Maybe Andrew overheard this conversation. In any event he had found a small boy who had brought his packed lunch along. It comprised barley loaves and small fish. Here is a detail which convinces us that the writer was an eyewitness to the event. Barley loaves were the diet of the poor, as the first readers of the Gospel would know and John includes the detail to help us understand that it was

not just the size, but the nature of the resources which enhance the sense of wonder at what Jesus did.

So Jesus issues His instructions. In his account, Luke tells that the precise instruction was that they were to get the crowd to sit in blocks of fifty men. Just imagine that. If you were to have looked across the valley and seen that formation you would have immediately thought that an army was being marshalled for battle. If there was a moment when Jesus could have fulfilled the people's expectation to be a political Messiah, then this was it. But He would not do it. Once again it was an option which He refused.

Then the miracle happens. We do not know how He did it, and speculation is pointless. He simply takes what a young lad had to offer, inadequate though it appears, gives thanks and begins to break the bread and the disciples distribute it until everyone there has had their fill. Despite the woefully inadequate resources, when Jesus got His hands on them, wonderful things began to happen and the problem was overcome.

Each disciple was given a basket and the scraps were collected. Jesus had provided more than enough for everyone, but nothing must be wasted. There's a great message for a world where thousands die of hunger and wheat is burnt to keep the price up. Jesus hates waste.

It's easy to understand the reaction of the crowd. He was the One! They would follow Him anywhere! Let's make Him king now. But Jesus was having none of it. He needed to get away, alone, so He withdrew to a mountain by Himself.

Of course, the real meaning of the miracle becomes clear later in this chapter of St. John's Gospel; but before we turn to that it is worth remembering that whatever else this story is about it reminds us that we worship a Saviour

who takes the apparently most inadequate resources to overcome the most intractable problems. It is the story of His followers down the centuries. Folk who had nothing to give but themselves placed their lives in the Master's hands and found that he was able to use them in greater ways than they ever imagined. Toward the end of his life someone once asked William Booth how he could account for the phenomenal growth of the Salvation Army and its profound influence for good throughout the world. He simply replied, "For the last 80 years God has had all that there is of William Booth." That's the answer.

Having considered the miracle we are now in a position to give our attention to the teaching on Jesus as the bread of life later in the chapter. We will take it up from John 6:25. It might be worth remembering at this point that for John the miracles are not only signs of who Jesus is, they are like acted parables. John is most anxious for us to realise that they can be understood at two levels; the obvious, apparent meaning and the deeper, more significant meaning which lies beneath the surface.

The disciples have crossed the lake and as they did so Jesus came to them walking on the water. We now find them on the other side of the lake at Capernaum. The crowds follow, presumably walking round the shore of the lake and they cannot understand how and when Jesus arrived. He had got there before them. Jesus knows why they have come. It is because he had fed them through the miracle. They followed because he met their physical need. Indeed, we might observe that their concern was dominated by the physical. But this is not what the miracle was all about, and Jesus challenges their perception.

There is a deep need in the heart of every person, which cannot be met by physical things. Yet we live in a world where people continually try. It is this deeper need which only Christ can satisfy. Jesus even hammers the truth

home, “Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life” (v27). It is a tragic fact that many people spend their whole lives believing that the next thing they possess will bring a sense of fulfilment, only to discover when life comes to an end that they have missed what it is all about. Jesus is very clear. They have eaten the physical food which He provided, but there is another kind of food which they have yet to discover. He can give them that also. They have had the bread. The danger is that they miss the spiritual food which can give their life real meaning. This is why Jesus came. God the Father has placed His seal of approval on Him.

Lest we miss it we should pause for a moment to notice two very important facts. The first is that Jesus calls Himself “The Son of Man” and any Jew would immediately identify that with the rather mysterious figure of Daniel 7. Here is the stark evidence that Jesus identified Himself as more than just a man, even a man who was able to perform miracles. In Daniel 7 the Son of Man is One who is given all authority and before whom all the nations of the world bow in worship; and here Jesus identifies Himself as this figure! Further, He dares to call God “Father”. Both these things must have been shocking to first century Jewish ears.

It is interesting to notice that once Jesus points out that this inner fulfilment is not to be found in material things the people begin to talk about doing God’s will. If it’s not to be found in things, then it must be found by living as God requires, at least that is what they thought, for that is what the law had taught them. So they ask Him what they have to do to meet God’s requirements.

In a sense that is the major problem. They think that it is the result of what they do. As though through some effort on their part, or by adopting a particular lifestyle, or by being diligent about their religious observance they would enter into a life in which the deepest need of the heart

would be met. But Jesus dismisses this right away. It's not about doing anything. It's about believing; and specifically about believing in Him, whom God has sent.

We need to remember that in St. John's Gospel, indeed in the whole New Testament, believing in Jesus is about far more than believing he exists. We use the phrase in the same way today. If I am feeling overawed by a challenge and someone looks me in the eye and says that they believe in me they mean far more than they accept that I exist. They are affirming that they have confidence in me. It's their way of saying, "Come on! You can do it!" Similarly, to believe in Jesus is about placing our faith and confidence in Him. That, he says, is God's will.

Verse 30 is a bit of a puzzle. In view of the fact that they had just witnessed the feeding of the 5000 how could they ask for more evidence? Either they wanted him to perform a miracle to order - "do something now to convince us!" - or there were some in this crowd who had not witnessed the earlier miracle. In any event, they draw a parallel with Moses and the manna provided in the wilderness wanderings. Clearly, they have misunderstood Exodus 16:4 which they quote. They seem to be suggesting that the provision of manna validated Moses' ministry whereas, as Jesus points out, it is not Moses who gave the manna, but God whom he again calls Father. But the parallel which they have drawn is significant. The true bread of God, Jesus says, is not a thing but a person, who comes from heaven to give life to the world.

The crowd still don't get it, although they have made some progress in understanding. They are still thinking of the bread as a thing, but they seem to have accepted that Jesus is the means whereby this thing may be delivered. It is at this point that Jesus makes the matter clear. "I am the bread of life." It's him! He is the one whom God has sent to satisfy the deepest longing of the human heart. He

is the One who is able to meet the need of all those who hunger for meaning and purpose, for life as it was meant to be.

So we have the clear parallel drawn. As the bread provided at the feeding of the 5000 met the physical hunger of the crowd, so Jesus Himself, the bread of God, was able to satisfy the spiritual hunger in the human heart. Further, once a person has discovered this for themselves and responded to his invitation, once they have come to him, believed in him, they need never know that emptiness inside again.

We ought not to miss the point that bread is very basic. Jesus is not the caviar, or the Victoria sponge. They are luxuries. But bread is different. It is a basic daily requirement to keep hunger at bay. For those in the crowd, for the first readers of St. John's Gospel and for millions throughout the world today bread is the staff of life. That is how John wants us to understand the ministry of Jesus. How interesting that so often in western society today He is seen as an optional extra, an acquired taste for those who like that kind of thing. He is the bread of life, but we have made him into a sponge cake!

One of the problems that we have with the written word is that we cannot hear the voice of the speaker. We do not know the tone in which Jesus spoke these words and many assume that, in the face of their obstinacy, Jesus declares in a rather authoritarian tone, "Still you do not believe". Speaking for myself I have come to feel that we misunderstand this phrase unless to grasp the sadness in his voice. He is there before them, this is their opportunity, but still they refuse to make that commitment which makes all the difference. Yet He is not daunted, nor should we be, for Jesus gives an insight into how these things work. It is God, he says, who constrains us. In response we come to Him, and then the wonderful assurance that

whoever comes He will never drive them away. This is why He came. It's all for this. And when we have come and know His welcome we can rest in the wonderful truth that He will keep us right to the end.

I wonder where you figure in this story? Have you ever found Christ to be the bread of God? Do you know that deep emptiness inside filled by Him? Have you known the Father drawing you to Christ? Maybe you are knowing that just now. Have you ever responded in absolute trust and deep commitment? Have you known His welcome? Are you resting in His almighty love which is able to keep you to the end? I do not know where you are in the story, but I know that it is God's purpose that this should be fulfilled in every one of us.

## The Light of the World - John 8:12, 9:5

This amazing claim of Jesus occurs twice in St. John's Gospel in quick succession, so it is important for us to note the context of both these instances if we are to grasp the impact of Jesus' claim fully.

The first occasion is at the Feast of Tabernacles. We find an account of Jesus' visit in John 7 and the argument with the religious leaders which resulted from his teaching at the feast extends through John chapter 8.

The Feast of Tabernacles was an annual Jewish Festival. It had become closely associated with harvest thanksgiving, but its origins lay deep in the religious history of the nation. During the wanderings of the children of Israel in the wilderness God provided food in the form of manna and quails. They depended on God for their very existence. This is why the harvest thanksgiving element is to be found in the annual Tabernacles Festival. It served as an annual reminder that they were dependent on God for their daily food; even when a more exciting diet replaced manna and quails. You may want to see Leviticus 23:33, and Numbers 29:12ff. to check out the Old Testament references.

As part of this annual celebration, in order to understand the deliverance which God had wrought in bringing them out of Egypt, the people would move out of their houses and live in tents, or booths, either on their own land or on common land. That is how their ancestors lived in the wilderness years. It reminded them that God had delivered his people in bringing them out of Egypt, provided for His people by giving them food in the desert, and that He guided His people with a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night.

The guiding light which God gave to people who would otherwise be lost in the dark night of the wilderness was

symbolised in the annual festival by the lighting of four great candelabra in the temple in Jerusalem. They would be lit at dusk each evening during the festivities and extinguished in the morning as dawn broke. During the night, in the light of these candelabra, the worshippers in the temple would dance and sing in praise of the God who had guided them safe through the desert to the promised land.

It is against the background of these festivities that Jesus claims to be the light of the world. Those who first heard his words would have no doubt about the contrast He was presenting. In the wilderness wanderings God had guided His people by light in their darkness. Now Jesus was claiming to be the light, not just for the Jewish race but for the whole world. To the first hearers it would have been both incredible and offensive. They were the chosen people of God. Gentiles were regarded, at least by the religious leaders, as no-hopers. But not so with Jesus. He is a guiding light for all.

You may recall another instance in the Bible of people walking in darkness. The first hearers would also have known it. It occurs in Isaiah 9:2, part of one of the great prophecies of the coming Messiah. It is not difficult, therefore, to catch something of the impact of Jesus' claim. Such a close allusion to a Messianic prophecy presents us with an implicit claim to Messiahship on the part of Jesus.

So let's grasp this before we move on. In speaking of Himself as the light of the world Jesus is being very clear. His claim is that He provides for all people what the pillar of fire provided for the children of Israel in the desert, as it was commemorated at the Feast of Tabernacles. He is a reminder of God's presence with them. Even though they may be lost in a wilderness, they are not lost to God. They are still His people. He has not given up on them, and will guide them to his appointed destination for them.

That's what Jesus wants to do for all people, and what he wants to do for you. Do you sometimes go through wilderness experiences? Maybe you have known, or are now experiencing times which are very dark. How do people walk in darkness? Usually, very badly. They miss the way, fall over, get injured and know pain. In just such moments Jesus seeks to step into our lives again and speak His truth to our hearts. To us just now Jesus says, "I am the light of the world." I guess that includes you too. And he follows his great claim with his great promise, "Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but have the light of life."

The second occasion which Jesus makes this claim is to be found in John 9. The occasion is of a man who was born blind and John preserves the order of events so that we, the reader, will clearly understand that the story is, amongst other things, an illustration of Jesus' claim to be the light of the world.

The question of the disciples "...who sinned, this man or his parents?" indicates a clear understanding in their minds of the relationship between sin and suffering. It was one of cause and effect. We might pause to reflect that this was the common understanding at the time, and indeed was common throughout the Old Testament period as well. It is this understanding that provides the backdrop to the book of Job, concerning an innocent man who suffered. His case was in contradiction to this understanding, as the reader is privileged to know, and as such it shows such an understanding to be in error.

The reply of Jesus is entirely in harmony with this as he asserts that the man's present condition is not the result of the sin of either this man or his parents, but rather that the power of God might be displayed in his life.

We often come across similar situations today. It is part of human nature to want someone to blame for bad things

which happen, especially to good people. We feel that there must be some great scheme of things and within that scheme there must be a cause for this suffering. But Jesus says, in effect, that is the wrong question. Indeed, it is the wrong approach altogether. Instead of looking for a cause, which we will never discover, we ought to be asking how God's power could be demonstrated in this situation. Instead of asking how we got here, we need to be asking how God can show His power in getting us out!

Life is like a day, Jesus says, full of opportunities, and He enlists our help in doing the Father's will while there is opportunity, because the 'night' is coming when those opportunities will cease. How interesting that Jesus involves His disciples in this great task. We would expect Him to say, "As long as it is day I must do the work of Him who sent me." But in fact he does not say 'I' but 'we'. If we are the disciples of Jesus we, together with Him are involved in doing the Father's will whilst there is opportunity. What a privilege and what a challenge!

His announcement, "While I am in the world I am the light of the world" is like the text for the sermon which follows. As soon as the text is announced he begins. He spits on the ground, makes mud with the saliva and dirt, and places it on the man's eyes. He is told to go and wash in the pool of Siloam. He does so and is healed.

I try and understand it from the point of view of the blind man. Others can see what is happening. He cannot. Think about what he hears, and then what he feels on his eyes. Can you describe his emotions at this point in the story? And what about the command which follows? Why did he have to do that? Our modern scientific minds do not sit easily with such a story. We want to understand the relationship between the mud and the washing. How do they come together to effect the healing? To pursue such a line of enquiry is bound to prove fruitless. We simply do not know.

But maybe that is the wrong approach. We are not meant to be able to understand it in that way. That is not what it is about. Instead, it concerns Jesus doing exactly as He wishes, however bizarre that may seem to others, and the man being obedient even when he cannot understand why. It is this blend of the sovereign will of Christ and the willing obedience of his people that enables God to work. I wonder how that truth might apply in some of the challenges we have to face today in both the world and the church.

The remainder of the chapter offers a detailed account of the controversy between Jesus, the Pharisees, the man and his parents which resulted from the miracle. We do not have time here to go into the detail, although it does merit fuller examination. Let it be sufficient at this stage simply to observe that here was a man whose whole life had been spent in darkness and one encounter with Christ, the Light of the World, changed that for ever.

It may help you to try and imagine the impact which this made on the man at each stage in the story. How did he feel when Jesus placed the mud on his eyes, when he was told to go and wash, when he regained his sight? And how did he feel about the argument between Jesus and the Pharisees which resulted? It seems evident that he did not understand how it had happened, but he was sure it had. The theological controversy was all too much for him, all he knew was that once he was blind but now he can see (v25).

So John, in recording the story, offers us a vivid illustration of what it means to acknowledge Jesus to be the Light of the World. Christ comes and banishes darkness for ever. Lives are transformed. Things will never be, and can never be, the same again. And what we see exemplified in the life of one person can be true for the whole world, for he is the Light of the World.

It would be wrong to leave this brief study without reminding ourselves that light is one the great themes in St. John's Gospel. As the Gospel begins he speaks of the coming of Christ as light shining in the darkness and the darkness being unable to extinguish it. The life of Christ, John says, is the light of men. Clearly he is speaking metaphorically. What does he mean by light as he so often uses the word? And what does he mean by the darkness which it banishes?

Primarily, of course, light is about illumination; it enables us to see things. Thus it is used to describe, objectively, revelation and subjectively, perception. We all know this to be true. We can know something for a long time, but then in a moment we begin to see it in a new and clearer way. We say "the penny has dropped" or "I've seen the light". Yet as we examine scripture we see something more. Darkness is used to describe so many negative things - ignorance, human sin and rebellion, deceit, the desire to hide things away from the prying eyes of others or of God. On the other hand light is seen as the opposite of these things - knowledge, openness, transparency, righteousness, honesty. These are what Christ brings to every life that takes him seriously.

One more thing to add. The claim is not that Christ brings light, although that is true; but that he is the light. These positive qualities which we have observed are supremely found in Him. He is light in Himself. When He comes he brings all things with him. As Charles Wesley puts it in one of his great hymns -

"Jesus, and all in Him, is mine!"

## **I am the Gate for the Sheep - John 10:7 & 8**

### **I am the Good Shepherd - John 10:11, 14**

In view of the fact that both these 'I Am...' sayings occur within the same narrative we will consider them together.

If we are to appreciate the impact of these claims of Christ fully, it is important for us to take note of one or two things first. For one thing we ought to consider who the audience were. Clearly the disciples were present, as were the Pharisees with whom Jesus has just had such a confrontation. Since this follows the healing of the man blind from birth is it fair to assume that he was present too, and his parents, and maybe some who had witnessed the miracle? And since the conversation with the Pharisees was interrupted by the incident of the woman taken in adultery (notwithstanding the questions about where this should be included at this point in the Gospel) was she still present, even though her accusers had already left? All this will be important as we consider the impact this teaching had on those who first heard it. One suspects that each hearer could identify with a character in the allegory.

We also need to take note of the Old Testament background that would have shaped the understanding of the first hearers. The imagery of God as a shepherd with Israel as the sheep is very common. We keep stumbling on it in the Psalms - Psalms 23, 79:13, 95:1. Jeremiah and Ezekiel both speak of evil shepherds who neglect the flock - Jeremiah 23, Ezekiel 34. Numbers 27 speaks of the plight of deserted sheep, and the promise of a Shepherd who will really care for the flock is part of the prophecies of both Ezekiel and Jeremiah (Ezekiel 34:23 and Jeremiah 23:5) and thus shaped the expectation of the coming Messiah. So here we are dealing with a kind of picture of the way ordinary Jewish people thought about the relationship between God, as the Shepherd, and the people, as the sheep.

Of course we will never get to grips with the story unless we know a little about shepherding in New Testament times. Part of the irony of this passage, and others in a similar vein, is that the nature of their work meant that shepherds could never be ceremonially clean, and therefore were always viewed by the Pharisees as dirty, corrupt and tainted. How wonderful, therefore, that the Saviour's birth was first announced to people such as these, and how wonderful that this is the very image that Jesus should use.

One can imagine them, out on the hillside looking after their flocks. If they owned them they took their responsibilities seriously but sometimes, in order to have time off or because their work load was too great, others were hired in to take care of the sheep. They did not feel the same responsibility. They were in it for the money, not the sheep.

Predators were common, so the sheep needed to be guarded. At night they would be led to a sheep fold; a circular or square pen built out of stones with walls high enough to keep the predators out and one door through which the sheep had to pass both to get in and to get out. Once safely inside the shepherd would lie across the doorway so nothing either entered or left without him knowing about it. In the fold they were secure. Sometimes the sheepfolds were large enough for one flock, but sometimes they were larger, used by a number of flocks. Each shepherd would lead their flock into the sheepfold as night fell, which presented the challenge of sorting them all out in the morning! But more of that later.

If you read straight from the end of chapter 9 into chapter 10 you get the feel of the impact which this teaching must have had on those who first heard it. In his confrontation with the Pharisees Jesus has spoken plainly, now He gets his message across by painting a picture with which they would all have been familiar; and one suspects that as he does so

they know that really he is not talking about shepherds and sheep, he is talking about them.

The picture he paints shows a sheepfold. There is a watchman posted at the gate to guard the sheep. The watchman knows the legitimate shepherd, but there are others. They know that they will not fool the watchman, so they attempt to enter by climbing over the wall. Their behaviour betrays their intent. They are thieves and robbers, attempting to take the sheep from the legitimate shepherd.

In contrast the watchman knows the shepherd, and so do his sheep. The watchman opens the way for the shepherd to enter and the sheep recognise his voice immediately. He then calls his own by name and leads them out. It seems strange to us that sheep should recognise the voice of the shepherd, but this is exactly what happened when several flocks have been penned together overnight. Each shepherd would come, call his own sheep, they would recognise his voice and he would lead them out to pasture. This recognition continues as the sheep follow the shepherd to whom they belong. Note how, in Palestine in contrast to England, the shepherd goes before the sheep. He does not drive them, he leads them.

Maybe we should pause at this point just to reflect on the voice of the shepherd being recognised by the sheep. It is a metaphor for the personal guidance which Jesus promises to his followers. I don't know how easy or difficult you find this. Speaking for myself I am very hesitant about claiming that God has told me to do a specific thing, or not do it as the case may be, unless that is clearly commanded in scripture. For me that is where he primarily speaks. Yet I often hear others saying that God has told them to do something and it seems so clear for them. I used to wonder whether that meant there was something wrong with my relationship with Him, but not any more. I think over the

years I have learned that some of those who claim that God is guiding them in a specific way really mean that they feel an inner compulsion to follow a particular course of action, or worse that they want to do it and are invoking a kind of divine blessing on what they have already decided to do! By very careful. God may be speaking to you in a very direct way, but make sure He is before you make that claim. We lament the fact that so many around us take the Lord's name in vain, but there is a danger here that we are doing the same thing, but with a rather spiritual veneer over it. Spiritual veneer or not, it is still a sin to be avoided.

It is clear that Jesus was speaking of a relationship between himself and his followers. There is that instinctive response on their part to his call. In contrast there are others, i.e. the Pharisees, who do not have a legitimate claim on the sheep. In fact they are the ones who are attempting to steal the sheep from the true shepherd. This may seem clear to us, but apparently it was not clear to those who first heard it. So Jesus makes it very clear. He is the gate for the sheep.

We have already said that at night the shepherd would lie across the only entrance to the sheepfold. Nothing could go in or out without him being aware of it. Even though the sheepfold did not have a gate, the shepherd became the gate. Entry was through him alone. This is how it is with me, says Jesus. The way to security is found through me. The way to protection from all that would harm you is found through me. The way to lush pasture on which you can be fed and sustained is through me. There are others, both before and contemporary with Jesus, who had come with malicious intent, but his purpose is that those who belong to him might have life, the best life they could possibly have, life in all its fullness.

What a wonderful picture of the relationship between Jesus and his people. In an age where personal insecurity is

undermining the potential of so many, here is the way to become all that we were intended to be. And how interesting that when Jesus speaks of being 'saved' in verse 9 he is not speaking about a spiritual experience but a way of living. We thank God for the experiences when they come, but here Jesus is offering a life security in which we can feel confident. Did you notice also that the sheep find their security in the proximity of the shepherd and not the structure of the sheepfold? Of course, the sheepfold provides the security they need at night, but they go in and out as well, knowing they are safe as long as they are with the shepherd.

I wonder what this is saying about the importance of the spiritual life? Here we have a picture of a Saviour who knows us intimately. If we belong to him we recognise that distinctive nature of his voice. He guides most often through his clear teaching in scripture, and sometimes through those faint whispers in the soul which can only be heard by those who live so close that he does not have to shout. Relying on him alone we find security. As we follow his lead we are able to be sustained and fed so that we can enter into and enjoy the life that he means all his flock to know, life in all its fullness.

In offering life to the full Jesus has presented us with the contrast between Himself and those who come to steal, kill and destroy. This contrast is further exploited as he describes himself as 'The Good Shepherd' who lays down his life for the sheep; in contrast to the one who does not own the sheep and cares nothing for them.

We have already observed that the shepherd would become the gate to the sheepfold. Now the metaphor is expanded. The good shepherd is far more than just the gate. He is in an intimate, loving relationship with the sheep. They mean more to him than his own life. That's how we identify that he is good. The Greek of the New Testament has two words

which in English are translated as 'good'. The one used here is not the usual one, and is better translated as beautiful or excellent; bringing the implication that there are other shepherds who are good, but he stands above them all. It is this excellent character of the shepherd which is shown by his self-sacrifice for the sheep. Notice how he uses the phrase 'lays down his life'. It is not as though the shepherd was involved in a struggle and died in the process of defending the sheep. No, here we have a voluntary laying down of life for the sake of the sheep. As he says in verse 18; he lays it down by his own choice, of his own accord.

The use of the word 'for' is also important. The good shepherd lays down his life on behalf of the sheep, but also instead of them. This is the purpose of Jesus' mission as John understands it. That is why so much of the Gospel is devoted to the final week in our Lord's life. That is why the cross is seen as the fulfilment of his mission, and not a rather unfortunate end to what could otherwise have been a quite successful ministry. Here the cross is casting a shadow forward. In this word picture of sheep and a shepherd Jesus is making it very clear that he understood what he needed to do. We are not here given the insight into why this is so, but it is clear that this is the commission which Jesus had received from his Father and this was what he had to do. One suspects that the hearers just couldn't get it at this stage. Maybe that's why some even said he was demon possessed. But by the time John came to write his Gospel it had become clear.

There is little doubt that those who first heard this must have identified the hired hands who cared nothing for the sheep with the Pharisees, the religious teachers of their day. They cared nothing for the sheep. Had they expressed any compassion for the man who had been born blind? Had they shown any understanding of forgiving love to the woman taken in adultery? In contrast the Good Shepherd knows his own, they know him, and he is going to fulfil his ministry by

laying down his life for them. And not for them alone, but for others, who are in a different flock; not Jewish people but Gentiles. He is to be the Saviour of the world.

Maybe we ought not to close this study without recognising that one of the characteristics of the Good Shepherd, in contrast to the others, is that he gathers the sheep whilst the others scatter them. And those who are after his own heart do the same. We are not about emphasising our divisions or scoring points over those who see things differently. We are about pursuing a vision of a whole range of different flocks all united under one shepherd, and anything we can do to share in that mission gladdens the Shepherd's heart.

## I am the Resurrection and the Life - John 11:25

Once again this 'I am...' saying of Jesus' is set against the background of a sign, this time the raising of Lazarus. So let's remember that as John records these miracles and the teaching of Jesus which accompanies them, they become illustrations of the central text. The miracles are like acted parables which hammer home the truth. Consequently, we will need to take some time considering the sign if we are to grasp the impact of the claim which Jesus makes.

As chapter 11 in St. John's Gospel begins we are introduced to a potentially tragic scene in Bethany. In the home of Mary and Martha, Lazarus their brother was seriously ill. The first reaction of the sisters was to send for Jesus. At least they informed Him, believing that if He knew about their situation He would immediately come to their aid. But that was not the case. Despite Jesus' close relationship with the family and His love for them all He did not hurry to meet their need. Instead He deliberately delays His departure for two days.

Why was this so? At first sight we may be forgiven for thinking that He was callous. We have difficulty in reconciling His reaction with the compassion which we know was at His heart. We feel there must be some reasonable explanation.

Some have suggested that He was loath to return to Judea for fear of what awaited Him there, but this can't be true otherwise He would never have gone. Others have suggested that the distance involved meant that if He had set out to return the time involved would have meant that Lazarus would have died any way. This may be true, but there must be another way of understanding His apparent wilful refusal to come to their aid. We find the clue in verse 4 where

Jesus promises, not only that this sickness will not end in death, but also that the way He is handling the situation will bring even greater glory to God than that which would result from simply a healing miracle.

But for the sisters this must have been a very stressful experience, as is belied by their remark when eventually Jesus arrives, “If you had been here my brother would not have died.” They felt confused and let down. They found it very difficult to understand the economy of God in the midst of their tragedy.

I wonder whether this is a help to all those of us who have to struggle with unanswered prayer. Sooner or later the time will come for every Christian when the activity of God, or lack of it, seems incomprehensible. It is not as though the things we ask for are motivated by selfishness. They are good things, and we believe them to be entirely in harmony with the will of God as we understand it. But God seems to do nothing. We believe that He has both the power to make a difference and the love which must move Him to do so, but He seems strangely deaf to our prayers and apparently insensitive to our need, or the need of those we love.

To our confused, breaking hearts Jesus says, “It is for God’s glory...” There are times when we all must simply bow the knee before the infinite wisdom of God, hard though that may be. It cannot be that God is impotent, or uncaring. It is simply that in the greater scheme of things, which only He can see, an even greater good can come out of what appears to be failure and defeat. After all that’s what happened on the cross, and if God can make something out of the horror of Calvary I dare believe that He can make something out of my pain and tragedy too. If we can find the grace to offer Him our pain as well as our joy He will make something very beautiful from it, and we may live long enough to see that, or we may have to wait for that time when in glory all is made clear and all our questions are answered. I think it was

Martyn Lloyd Jones who said, “I have lived long enough to be able to thank God that He did not answer all my prayers.”

Another element in this story which some find confusing is the way in which Jesus speaks of death as sleep. We have the same thing in various other Gospel stories; the raising of Jairus’ daughter, and the son of the widow of Nain. In fact John 11:14 is the only occasion when Jesus calls death ‘death’. On every other occasion He calls it sleep.

Of course the crowds in some of the stories, and the disciples here, cannot understand. To them it seems absurd. Lazarus is dead. But Jesus speaks of him being asleep and going to wake him up (v11). It is only when Jesus realises that He needs to make the matter clear to the disciples that He agrees with the way the disciples use the word ‘death’. After all, the pastoral sensitivities required suggest that this is not the time to engage in a theological discussion. But His use of the word on this occasion does not contradict the other occasions. It makes the point, rather than denying it.

So we need to be clear - that experience which we call death, Jesus called sleep. Why does He do this? There are a number of reasons. Death is permanent, but sleep is transitory. If we go to sleep we will wake up. Death is entirely different. But what a wonderful thing it would be if Jesus was right. What if the experience which we call death is not permanent? Certainly, for Christians, that is what the New Testament teaches.

There again, we view death and sleep very differently. Death is to be feared and avoided at all costs. But sleep is part of the rhythm of life, a necessary part of healthy living. Could it be that there is a hidden offer here? Jesus is offering the possibility of entering a life with Him in which our view of death is transformed from being a dreaded ogre to part of our normal living; no more the end of it than being born is.

But there is another, and more profound reason for Jesus using the word as He does. He calls death 'sleep' but keeps the word death in reserve for a more dreadful experience. The Apostle Paul follows the same pattern. If you turn to 1 Corinthians 15 you will read the same kind of thing. Yet what is surprising is that when Jesus speaks of His own death he does not call it sleep; He calls it death, that more dreadful experience (Matthew 26:38). And once again Paul follows the same pattern. Christ died, he says for our sins (1 Corinthians 15:3). Cruel soldiers may have put Him to sleep on the cross, but it was for our sins that He died. And here we encounter the wonderful truth of the Gospel. He died that we may not die. One day we will sleep, but we need not die.

By the time Jesus arrives at Bethany Lazarus has been in the tomb four days. There is something here worthy of note. It was the common belief that the soul hovered around the body for three days after death. By the fourth day decomposition was evident and the possibility of resuscitation had passed. When John tells the reader that Lazarus has been entombed for four days it is his way of helping us to understand that here is a situation from which hope was gone. That is certainly what the sisters felt as well. One by one they meet Jesus and say, "If you had been here my brother would not have died.", the implication being that if you had come you could have done something about it, but now all hope of that is gone.

It is very wonderful to remember that even though Jesus knew how this episode would work out He, nevertheless, entered into their grief as He wept, but His tears are those of sympathy not grief. Even though He knows the big picture which we cannot see He still stands with us in our pain. The God whom we worship is One who knows what it is to stand by a friend's grave and to weep. He shares our sorrows, as well as our joys.

Yet alongside this we must remember that the word which is translated “deeply moved” (v34,38) was also used in secular Greek to describe horses snorting before they galloped into the fight. It brings with it a note of rage and anger. The trouble which Jesus felt was not just sorrow. He was enraged as He went to the tomb. And He was going into the battle. What enraged Him was the awful consequence of sin, suffering and death which He saw. He was going into battle against all those powers which would make people less than His Father intended them to be.

We ought to feel that too. It is a very dreadful thing to become complacent about sin. Sin is dreadful. The weight of human suffering is incalculable. It ought to enrage us as it so often did in the lives of those who have gone before us. To follow Christ is to be involved in this battle, and you have to be on one side or the other. If you are not part of the answer you are part of the problem.

As we approach the raising of Lazarus it’s good to remember that John, as he records the story, sees this sign as an acted parable. It is a picture of who Jesus is and what He does.

So He orders that the stone be removed. Why? If He could raise the dead then presumably He could have moved the stone. Yet He enlists the co-operation of others in the miracle which is about to take place. Maybe this is a picture of how He works. Maybe he enlists our help too if He is to perform miracles as those dead in sin are to be raised. He could do it without us; but in the economy of God our co-operation is needed. I wonder what stones we need to move to enable Him to work.

John includes Martha’s concern about the bad smell to stress the nature of the miracle. But Jesus’ reply is clear. It concerns the glory of God. It’s as though the benefits to Lazarus were almost incidental. The glory of God is His chief concern. I wonder whether this challenges our selfish

motives as we want God to act. Are we more concerned about the benefits which His acting will bring to ourselves and others, rather than the primacy of His glory?

The prayer of Jesus, said and recorded for the benefit of the onlookers, puts the miracle in its true perspective. It is that others may believe. That is to say, the primary purpose is the glory of God, which is enhanced as others believe. It's about mission.

So the stone is removed and Jesus issues His command in a loud voice. He shouts. Why? It is not that He needed to shout in order to wake the dead, but rather that He wanted the whole crowd to know that the dead respond to his call. And He is specific. He calls the dead by name. It was for this person alone. If He had not identified the person involved all the dead would have been raised!

The miracle happens. The dead man was raised to life at the command of Christ. Still wrapped in the grave clothes Lazarus emerges from the tomb. He is raised to life by the power of Christ, without a touch, the word of Jesus was enough to raise the dead. He has entered into the life which Jesus gives, but he is still bound. The trappings of death are still around him. So once again the help of others is enlisted. It is their job to remove the trappings of death so that he who has been raised can enter fully into the life that Christ has given him.

There is little doubt that as John records the story he wants the reader to see this not just as a mighty act of God, but as a picture of who Jesus is and what He does. When people are utterly helpless, as dead people are, and when all around them are in despair; when God seems to be dilatory and, overwhelmed with our own situations, we cannot see the big picture; at that very time Christ is able to move in, take charge of the situation and bring life out of death. He chooses to enlist the help of those who will stand with Him,

but the power is His and the purpose is that God may be glorified as others come to believe. Through the power of His word the dead are raised. Situations of despair are changed into causes for rejoicing, the evil one is defeated and people begin to discover the life which they were meant to have from the beginning. Yet, as new life comes into situations where death reigned sometimes the trappings of death remain. People are bound by those things which have more to do with death than life, and it is the task of those who will stand with Christ to remove these things so that those who have been raised to a new life might fully enter into all that God has for them.

One last thing. This is not just about what Jesus does, it is about who He is. He *does* raise the dead and He *does* give life; but primarily He *is* the resurrection and the life. So resurrection will be ours because we are His. His life will be ours as we are related to Him. These things are only ours because He is ours. If it isn't too disrespectful to say it, we get these things on His ticket, or we do not get them at all.

## **I am the Way, the Truth and the Life - John 14:6**

As always, context matters. In chapter 12 of St. John's Gospel we have read of the Greeks who came to request that they too might see Jesus. There is little doubt that this incident triggers something in the eternal plan of God, for immediately Jesus begins to speak of His imminent death. Throughout His ministry He has often been heard saying that His hour has not yet come, but now (12:23) He affirms that it has arrived. He is about to embark upon that final stage in his journey which will prove to be its climax.

Chapter 13 brings us into the upper room where Jesus meets with His disciples on the evening before His death. John introduces the events by telling us that "having loved His own that were in the world He now showed them the full extent of His love". He does so initially by washing their feet; setting the example of servanthood which they are to follow.

The opening of chapter 14 brings us to the beginning of the final upper room discourse which will continue for three chapters, and as it begins we are made aware that even though He was facing His own cruel death on the cross His first concern was for those closest to Him. How were they going to cope, not only with bereavement, but also with that feeling that all their hopes had been dashed and their dreams broken? It is against that background that Jesus seeks to prepare them for what lies ahead.

Aware of all the conflicting emotions which must have been racing through their hearts He seeks to reassure them that they need not have troubled hearts. The heart, of course, is seen as the seat of emotion. It is the seat of our being. And it is in that very core of who they were that they were, understandably, troubled. No doubt they were sad to hear

Him speak of His impending death, but there may also have been a sense of perplexity at what was going to happen and maybe a sense of guilt that, even as these monumental events draw close, they had argued about their own status in the coming kingdom.

Jesus seeks to quell all the disturbance of their troubled hearts. Yet it is interesting and somewhat ironic to remember that as He seeks to deal with their troubled hearts He has admitted (12:27) that His own heart is deeply troubled. Out of His own troubled heart He seeks to address the troubled hearts of those closest to Him. Maybe here we are glimpsing an element of the gospel message which His death would enable. It was through His going from them by way of a cross that the answer could be made available to deal with their troubled hearts. The hearts of the disciples need not be troubled because the heart of their Saviour was.

Before we move on it is worth pausing to reflect on our own society. Troubled hearts are a modern epidemic. We have more wealth than some of our parents ever dreamed of, yet with the acquisition of more possessions has come the need to worry about them. The decline of faith has left people feeling that they are responsible for their own destiny, and they are worried about how they are going to cope. To a world like this Jesus says, "Trust in God, trust also in me." It is a very wonderful thing to be able to rest in the hands of almighty love and know that the great questions are answered, the great issues settled and love divine holds you no matter what life may throw at you.

So, we, like those first disciples, are called to have confidence in our Saviour. To them His promise is that He is going to His Father's house. He is clearly speaking about heaven, as His first hearers would understand. That is God's abode (Psalms 33:13, Isaiah 63:15) and in His Father's house there are many rooms. It is difficult to find an adequate

accurate translation into modern western English. Mansions certainly won't do. One wonders whether it is more appropriate to think of a host of apartments, with God as the owner. What is unacceptable is to suggest that because there are many rooms or apartments there is accommodation for everyone irrespective of their commitment, faith, religion or conduct. Such a view is entirely out of harmony with the rest of scripture. The point is surely that there is a place, as it were, reserved for His followers. What He is about to do, i.e. die on the cross, is what is necessary to bring them into that prepared place. His work on the cross is the preparation. It is not that He is somehow going to get it ready, as we would get our home ready when a guest was coming. Dusting will not be required in heaven!

We ought not to miss this wonderful phrase "if it were not so I would have told you". What did Jesus mean? Simply this, that even though He had not spoken in detail about this the disciples can be assured that if there was anything for them to be concerned about He would have made them aware of it. He would have told them. Here we have the answer to all those issues on which we wish the teaching of scripture was clearer. We can leave the unanswered questions with Him, in the assurance that all will be well. If there had been any cause for us to be concerned He would have told us.

There has been some divergence of opinion concerning what Jesus meant by His coming back. Some have suggested that He is referring to the coming of the Holy Spirit, since He uses the same phrase in verse 18 and there the context is the coming of the Spirit. Others have pointed out that He uses the same phrase in verse 28 where the context is His return following the resurrection. The context here however favours the second coming of Christ, when all history will find its fitting climax in Him. In any event, the important thing is that He promises that His followers will be with Him. In the face of such mystery it is enough to know that we will

be with Him. Further, He affirms that they know the way to the place He is going. Clearly He believes that they should by this time have understood that the way to the place is through Him.

Such, however, is not the case and Thomas is the one who voices the concern that no doubt the other disciples felt as well, “We do not know where you are going; how can we know the way?” How can they be expected to know the route when they do not even know the destination?

It is in response to this question that Jesus makes the great affirmation, “I am the way, the truth and the life.” He is the way. Note, He does not say that He will show us the way, as though it were some inside information which we need, rather He is the way. Maybe an illustration will help us to grasp this profound truth.

Let’s imagine that I have to visit an address in a town with which I am unfamiliar, before sat-nav has been invented. I arrive at the outskirts of the town and then I have a number of options. I can buy a map. If I do so I have to find first of all where I am on the map and then where my destination is. Then I can trace a route and follow it eventually arriving at my destination. The map *shows* me the way. Another option is that I can stop and ask someone who is familiar with the town. Providing he is as familiar with it as he claims and providing his accent is not so broad as to make his instructions unintelligible to my untrained ear, I can receive his instructions, follow them closely and eventually arrive at my destination. In this case the helpful native of the town *tells* me the way. But there is another option. Let’s imagine I stop to ask someone directions and they say, “What a surprise. That’s exactly where I am going. I will take you.” I agree to his offer and eventually we arrive at the destination together. In this case the person *becomes* the way for me. I do not need to know the complications of the route, how many roundabouts to cross and where to turn

left or right. All I need to do is stick close to him, trust him, and eventually I will arrive at the place he promised.

That's what Jesus means when he claims to be the way. I do not need to know the exact route which He has chosen for me, nor how many challenges I will encounter on the way. All that's needed is that I stick close to Him, and if I do I know that He who is the way will take me safely to the place which is prepared for me.

We also need to take special note of the personal pronoun. It is emphatic. This will be underscored later in the passage. Jesus says, "*I* am the way," and the implication is that others are not. This is not to say that there is no value whatsoever in what they may say, the advice which they may give or the insights which they may impart. But it is to say that if what I really want is to arrive at the destination there is only one who guarantees to take me there. We are not saved by a theory but by a person, in the same way that I am not educated by chalk and blackboards, but by a teacher. It is the claim of Jesus to be the way to the Father and the way to heaven, and implicit in the claim is the invitation to take that way.

To put it in another way. Jesus is the supreme mediator between God and humankind. And it works both ways. He is the way from God to man, for He is God incarnate amongst us. He is also the way from man to God, for He is the only way for us to come to the Father.

Jesus also claims to be the truth. As John begins his gospel he announced that Jesus was "full of grace and truth", now here Jesus claims this for Himself. He is the embodiment of truth over against falsehood. He is entirely genuine, the exact opposite to a lie. 'Truth' has been defined as 'the reality lying at the base of an appearance'. So many folk are not what they appear to be. Indeed, we speak of 'putting on a good appearance' and the implication is that such an

appearance masks that which we would not be happy about others seeing. We want to fool people into thinking we are something we are not, so we dress in a certain way, or adopt an accent or follow a particular custom, but underneath, inside, we are not the person we appear to be.

But with Jesus it is entirely different. He is absolutely genuine. Indeed, He is the embodiment of all truth. Truth is not a theory, or an academic system of thought. It's a person and Jesus is His name. If He is the way He has to be the truth, or the way would be flawed. And because He is the truth he is the final answer to all our questions and searching. If truth were embodied in a person what would that person look like? For the Christian there can only be one answer - Jesus.

He is the dependable source of reliable revelation. If God is the final ultimate reality in the universe, beyond whom we can go no further back, Jesus is the complete revelation of God. When the people ask, 'What is God like?' the Christian can have only one answer, God is like Jesus. Jesus is the final and best revelation of God that we will ever have.

He is also the life. Again, as he began his Gospel John reminded us that 'in Him was life and the life was the light of men'; and just as we found it easier to understand truth over against falsehood, so we understand Jesus to be life over against death. His life is the life of God lived out on dusty streets with fallen people in a broken world like ours. The disciples knew there was something different about Him. It took them a long time to grasp it, as we see in the conversation with Philip in the following verses, but eventually they came to see that the difference with this one life was that it was the life of God. That's why they wrote the Gospels; not because it was just a good story, but because this life was the life of God made real to ordinary broken sinners in this messy world.

It follows, therefore, that He is the source of this life, and this life, life of this amazing quality, is what He gives to His own when they come to Him. That's why, as Paul says, we are a new creation; not an old creation just polished up a bit; but entirely new knowing nothing less than the life of God within us. That's why Paul speaks of Christ being in us, and that which is in us is His life, the life of God.

It is only when we grasp that Jesus is the way, the truth and the life that we can understand why no one can come to the Father but through Him. On first reading it seems, to some, arrogant. Who does He think He is to make such a claim? But if He is the way to God, the truth of God and nothing less than the life of God, if He is the unique revelation of God and the unique mediator between God and human beings, then there can be no other way to the Father.

We need to be careful about two things here.

Firstly, we must not attempt to water-down the exclusive nature of His claim. He said what He said. We have no right to massage the text in order to make it fit a pluralistic society like our own. We can of course say that He was mistaken, but to make such an assertion challenges the very nature of our faith. How can He claim to be the truth and then immediately follow that by uttering a falsehood?

Secondly, we must affirm what He said, and no more than what He said. He did not say that there is absolutely no value whatsoever in other philosophical systems of thought, or indeed other religions. Some of the people whom God chose to communicate His love to the world were not of the chosen race and still today those who are not Christians may help us to understand and live the life which God intended for us. When I go for an operation I do not ask whether the doctor is a Christian or not. I wish he were, but I understand that even if he is not he can be the channel that God can use to bring me healing. Some of the world's greatest

thinkers might help me to see things clearer whether they are Christians or not. So we have no right to dismiss out of hand everyone who is not a Christian and to disregard any contribution which they may wish to make. Yet we will also want to affirm exactly what Jesus said, that no one comes to the Father except through Him.

For me the mention at this point of the fatherhood of God is important. Jesus was not saying that there was no other way to glimpse any truth about God. He was saying that we can never come to know God as Father except through Him. Exactly so! This is one of the things which makes Christianity unique. Others may have a view of God and may seek to worship Him according to the light which they have, but Jesus opens up the possibility of knowing God as Father. That's how Jesus knew Him, and He taught His followers to pray "Our Father..." so we can know God like that too, through Jesus, but only through Him.

Indeed, this is exactly what Jesus makes clear in the following verse. Through Jesus we can know God in the same way that Jesus did. He is the revelation of the Father. He makes God accessible to ordinary folk. To know Christ is to know God, and to know God as Jesus did is to call him Father.

## I am the True Vine - John 15:1

When I was a boy I used to have a printing outfit. There were little rubber letters, a wooden block to hold them, tweezers to handle them and an ink pad. At the first attempt some of the letters were upside down, but after a while I mastered it. There was no stopping me now! I printed my name everywhere, much to my parents' annoyance! The trade name of the printing outfit was 'John Bull'. There was a picture on the front of the box of a rather portly gentleman sporting a waistcoat bearing the union flag. No one had any doubt that it was made in England. John Bull was a kind of symbol for England. Americans have Uncle Sam. He wears a tall hat and rather eccentric clothing, but he also sports the national flag. I don't know if John Bull or Uncle Sam ever existed, or how they came into use if they are merely legends, but I do know that each in their own way have become powerful symbols for these two nations.

As John Bull is to English people, and Uncle Sam to Americans, so the Vine was to the Jewish nation. It was a national symbol. In the temple in Jerusalem there was a great golden vine in front of the Holy Place. During a brief period when the nation was not ruled by an external power and minted their own coins the symbol for the nation which was chosen to be cast on the coins was a vine. Time and again in the Old Testament we have references to Israel as a vine (Isaiah 5:1-7, Jeremiah 2:21, Hosea 10:1, Psalms 80:8).

It is against this background that Jesus claims to be the true vine; the real, genuine one. The meaning is clear. God had created a nation, planted a vine. He had a dream of what it would become, just as I look closely at the picture on the seed packet when I plant the seeds. But God's dream had not been realised. Things had gone wrong. It is interesting to notice that every time Israel is spoken of as a vine in the Old

Testament it contains a reference to the way things have failed to live up to what they ought to be. And the trouble was, not just that things had gone wrong, but that people still thought they were part of God's chosen race, the people of God, just because they belonged to the nation of Israel. It had become a matter of nationality and not spirituality.

But Jesus claims to be the true vine. In His life we see all that God intends for His people. We look at the character of Jesus and see what He intends the character of every one of His children to be. The vine which God planted had, as Jeremiah puts it 'gone wild' but God had not forsaken His people. He had sent another vine, Jesus, to be the embodiment of all that God intended from the very beginning.

So this metaphor of a vine and the branches would have been familiar to those who first heard Jesus share this teaching in the upper room. Yet Jesus, instead of endorsing the imagery of the relationship between God and Israel, applies it to the relationship between Him and His disciples. Of course here, once again, there is a slightly veiled affirmation of His divinity. He takes what has always been applied to God and applies it to Himself. But He takes it further as He applies the metaphor to the relationship with His followers.

We see this most clearly when we remember what Jesus did not say. He did not say, "I am the trunk and you are the branches." That is what some folk think He said, but He did not, and the implication is important. When we think of a tree we think of trunk and branches, but vines are different. The word 'vine' describes the whole plant; the bit that grows from the soil and the bit which bears the fruit. To speak of the trunk and the branches would have been to describe one kind of relationship, but this is altogether different and far more intimate. The one is in the other.

This is entirely in harmony with Paul's familiar phrases when he speaks of the Christian being 'in Christ' and Christ in the believer. That is the kind of relationship which our Lord intends us to have with Himself.

We come across this throughout scripture, but one example should be enough. In Acts 9 we read of Saul's conversion on the road to Damascus. The voice which he hears and which he understands to be that of the Lord Jesus asks a question, "Why do you persecute me?" Now of course it was the followers of Jesus that he was persecuting. There is no evidence that he ever actually met Christ before the events of that last Good Friday and Easter Day. Yet Christ asks why he is persecuting *Him*. The simple fact is that the Lord Jesus was so closely related to His followers that to persecute one was to persecute the other. He felt their pain. He is as close as the vine and the branches.

We can know that close relationship with Him, indeed, that is what He desires most for us. And when we know it our lives are completely changed. In Christ we have one who does not just know about our circumstances, He shares them, and whatever we have to face we face it with Him.

Jesus' first hearers would also know very well that the vine only had one purpose, and Jesus exploits that in the metaphor. It was grown solely for the fruit it would bear. Wood was not a by-product. The leaves may occasionally have been used for decoration, but the chief purpose of the vine was to bear fruit. 'So it is with you,' says Jesus. That's why you were called and chosen - to bear fruit. This, Jesus affirms is to the Father's glory, for when this happens the intention of the Gardener has been fulfilled.

So what is the fruit which Jesus has in mind? Some have suggested that He was thinking of the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 2:20). That is to say, the intended growth is realised when Christian character is formed. Others have

suggested that the fruit is the fruit of mission - those who come to believe as a result of the witness of these disciples. The context would certainly favour this understanding. Jesus is about to leave them and He is going to entrust them with the great task of mission. Before long they will hear Him say, "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." (John 20:21). In a little while He will speak to them about the crucial role of the Holy Spirit in both their lives and their task. So it seems that as Jesus speaks here of the fruit which the Father longs to see He is thinking of the supreme task of evangelism. Yet we need to be careful not to give the impression that Christian character does not matter. In fact, we can conclude that the Father longs to see both kinds of fruit in the believer's life. We are called both to holiness and to mission, and both these things are indicators of a fruitful Christian life. Here we surely have a case of not 'either or' but 'both and'.

So the bearing of fruit is as crucial in the life of the believer as it is in the vine on the hillside in Palestine. We all know what happens to vines that do not bear the fruit, and just so that we do not miss the point Jesus states it very clearly; they are discarded and burnt because they never fulfilled the purpose of the gardener. The question which remains is simple. How can we ensure that we are fruitful, that the intention of the Gardener is fulfilled in and through us? Jesus answers the question very clearly. There are two necessary requirements if we are to be fruitful.

The first concerns remaining in Christ. The older translations used to have it 'abiding' in Christ. Clearly, for those first disciples, the call was to remain in that close relationship with Him, even though He is going from them, by way of the cross. Yet whether it is remaining or abiding the central truth remains the same; the ability to bear fruit is derived from Him and not dependent on their natural abilities. As the grapes are produced because the sap flows through the branches, so the fruit for which the Father is looking is

produced by the life of Christ flowing through the life of the believer. This is a crucial lesson for any would-be disciples. If we are ever to be the people God wants us to be, and if our lives are going to impact the lives of others drawing them to Christ, it will not be because we learn some technique or adopt some strategy but because the life of Christ flows through us. So many Christians are filled with guilt because they cannot do what in fact they were never intended to do. They feel a failure. So we need to be very clear about this. It is impossible for any Christian to form a Christian character. We simply cannot do it. Take a look at the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 2. If you were expected to develop these things how are you supposed to do it? Can you try and be more loving, or joyful, or peaceful? And what about patience? How are you supposed to cultivate that? No. We cannot do it because we were never intended to do it. These things are the fruit of the indwelling Spirit of God. He does what we cannot do.

It is this understanding of remaining in the vine which makes sense of what Jesus says in verse 7 about prayer. If we truly abide in Christ, then His will is our supreme desire. We may not always understand it, but we always know how much He loves us and so we are confident that He would not let anything come our way which He could not use for his glory. So whatever we wish is given, because we only wish for His will.

The same is true for effective evangelism. We try and win others for Christ, and often we fail and we feel failures. Mistakenly we then begin to believe that it is because we do not know the right technique, so we buy a book and try to learn a new and better way of doing it. But the truth of the matter is that we cannot win another person for Christ because we were never intended to do so. It is Christ who draws people to Himself; and by His grace He chooses to do it through sinners like us. Jesus makes this very clear later in His teaching about the Holy Spirit. 'When He comes,'

Jesus says, 'He will convince the world...' It is the Holy Spirit's work, not ours. I can think of many occasions when well-meaning Christians have tried to convince another person of their sin and their need for a Saviour, but they have only succeeded in driving the person away. But that same person has later found themselves in an atmosphere where the Spirit of God is at work and they have known that inner conviction which Christ promised. A well-meaning Christian may have tried for years and failed, but the Holy Spirit has done it in seconds. The lives of those who have gone before us whose biographies we read and whose lives we admire are not the stories of people who tried harder than we do, but of those who had discovered the secret; namely that they cannot do it. With a broken spirit they have gone to God, when they had nothing to offer but their failure, and God has taken them and begun to work through them in ways that they never believed possible. They knew what it was to abide in the vine and they were fruitful. Here we are glimpsing the very heart of what it is to be a Christian. Christianity is not primarily about accepting a belief system, nor primarily about adopting a code of behaviour. It is first and foremost about the life of God lived out through the lives of ordinary people who have been made anything but ordinary by His indwelling.

The second requirement of fruitfulness is effective pruning. Every good gardener knows that. The disciples had probably seen the vine dressers working their way along the rows of vines on the hillsides around Jerusalem many times. With the skill which only comes through years of experience they would cut away the dead wood or the branches which they knew were going to be unproductive. Then, as the season progressed their work would bear the reward. The vines would fruit and the harvest would be just what the gardener intended.

We have a lesson here for every level of our lives, both corporate and personal. Let's be very clear; the object of

the exercise is to enable fruitfulness. The energies of the vine must be directed to those places where fruit will come to maturity. To leave other branches would just divert precious resources and weaken the whole plant making the possibility of a good crop less likely. Some things have to go if the desires of the gardener are to be fulfilled. I wonder what that says about the church in the first half of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Does the Gardener want us to sustain branches which, frankly, have not produced any fruit in years? Or what about our personal lives? There are lots of things which we could be doing which are not sinful or wrong, they just divert our energies from the intention of the Gardener. I have a hunch that if we spent as much time and energy trying to win other people for Christ as we do on so many other things we would have more success. But we make excuses. We say we don't have the time. What we really mean is that we don't have the inclination. We can always find time to do those things which we consider important. I wonder if the Gardener, secateurs in hand, wants to move through his vineyard and cut away that which is unproductive. I wonder whether, if we let Him do it, we would begin to bear real fruit again.

Maybe God is speaking to you just now about how finite resources are used within your church or group of churches. Maybe He is speaking of your personal life and moving his secateurs toward something which ought to go in order for your life to bear the fruit that He intends. Maybe He is waiting for your invitation to come and prune that which is bearing fruit already that it may be even more fruitful. I don't know what God is saying to you, but I hope you will say 'Yes' to Him.

## **And Finally.....**

### **I Am the Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and the End - Revelation 21:6; 22:13**

Most of the studies into the 'I am...' sayings of Jesus deal only with those recorded in St. John's Gospel. But there is another, recorded here in Revelation.

During these studies we have been on a journey, discovering more about the Lord Jesus with each one. We are all on a journey of another kind, and for Christians the final destination is not in doubt. The book of Revelation deals with that final destination. It is a very mysterious book to many people. We love the first three chapters and the last two. It's the bit in the middle which causes the problems. We do not have time to deal with those here; sufficient to say that whatever you make of the bit in the middle the last two chapters present us with a wonderful picture of what things will ultimately be like.

The One on the throne, the ruler of the universe, says that He is going to make everything new. A whole new order is going to be established involving a new heaven and a new earth. That's important because clearly the present order of things is not as God wishes, or as He intended it to be. Pain and suffering are somehow woven into the fabric of life as we know it. We may debate how this came about, but we cannot be in any doubt that this is how things are. There is not a living organism on the planet which does not suffer in some way. Disease is everywhere. Nature is red in tooth and claw. Something has gone tragically wrong with this world. God did not intend it to be like this, and one day He is going to put it right. Of course this means that the emotional pain which suffering brings will also be dealt with. Sorrow will have no place there. All distress will be left behind, because

they belong to this order and God is going to replace it with a new order altogether. God Himself will wipe away all our tears.

It will be a time of uninterrupted communion with our Lord, for God himself will dwell amongst His people, and this time of uninterrupted communion will begin with what the writer describes as a wedding. The church of the redeemed will be married to their Saviour. The bride of Christ will be joined to her husband.

One of the later and lesser known sermons of John Wesley was entitled 'The Wedding Garment'. It's about holiness, for which Methodism was raised up under God. As a bride is dressed for her husband on their wedding day, so the church is adorned by holiness as she prepares for this eternal marriage to her Bridegroom.

It's a graphic and wonderful picture of all that Christ has prepared for those who love Him. But how do we know that this one day will be ours? Where do we look for the assurance which fills us with determination as we press on towards the goal?

Our assurance lies not just in the promise of our Lord recorded in the pages of scripture, but in His very being. That is why he says, "I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end..." He is Lord of history. Everything ultimately will be in His hands. Creation itself came about by His will and power and in the end His will and power will prevail. He is the One who will bring all things to a fitting climax in Himself.

If I visit an unfamiliar place and need a map I turn first to the A to Z. I know that if it has everything from A to Z it will meet my need. Christ is like that. He is the source of our life and He will be its climax.

There is another sense in which this is important. Every book, every paragraph, every sentence, every word is made up of A to Z, or Alpha to Omega in Greek. If Christ is Alpha and Omega then there is a sense in which he embraces everything. As Paul says, “He is before all things and in Him all things hold together” (Col 1:17). Christ is the One who inhabits and embraces the whole universe and without Him it is impossible to make sense of anything.

One last thought: So many of the ‘I Am’ sayings of Jesus which we have considered are followed by a promise. ‘I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry...’ (John 6:35). ‘I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness...’ (John 8:12). ‘I am the gate whoever enters through me will be saved...’ (John 10:8). ‘I am the good shepherd... My sheep listen to my voice; I know them... no one can snatch them out of my hand’ (John 10:14, 27,28) and so on. Well how do we know that His promises hold true? What assurance do we have that He will keep His word?

Promise and power go together. We can’t make the promise if we do not have the power to keep it, despite what politicians may have you believe! But if we have the power we can make the promise. So if someone makes the promise we immediately want to know if they have the power. Jesus makes the promise, but does He have the power? Oh yes! Because He is the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. In a sense everything depends on this. If Jesus is the source of all creation, the glue which holds everything together and the One who in the end reigns supreme; if He is the One who first thought of me and the One before whom at last I will have to stand; if He is the One who loved me before the foundation of the world and who came in search of me, giving Himself on a cross so that every barrier between us might be removed; then I guess I can trust Him with my little life, both here and in eternity. And so can you!



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