



**“And I, when I am lifted up from the earth,  
will draw all people to myself.”** John 12:32

## Jesus, the Word Made Flesh (Part 2)

**T**he gospel according to John, as we began to understand in the first part of this study, demonstrates throughout that Jesus is the personal revelation of the unseen God. Because of the eternal bond of the Son with the Father, the life of God shines through the earthly life of Jesus. “The Father and I are one,” he says (10:30). This oneness of the Father and the Son is not a fusion in which they are merely different disguises of the same person. Rather, the person of the Father and the person of the Son are joined in a communion of love in which they are inseparably united and one. This divine oneness and love between the Father and the Son becomes visible through all the words and works of Jesus. As he proclaims at the end of his public life: “Whoever sees me sees him who sent me” (12:45).

Jesus’ revelation of the Father is a progressive process throughout the gospel. Beginning with a series of seven selected signs, Jesus reveals the Father through his words and works. The seventh and greatest of these signs, the raising of Lazarus, begins this second part of the gospel. This final sign of the series marks the beginning of the final week of Jesus’ life. Immediately after the raising of Lazarus, the religious leaders plot against him, and the narrator notes, “So from that day on they planned to put him to death” (11:53). The gospel begins to

move definitively toward the passion and death of Jesus, the climax of the gospel's revelation of the unseen God. The scenes of the next chapter, including the anointing of Jesus, his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, and Jesus' words about the coming of his hour, are all dominated by the theme of Jesus' impending death. After Jesus entered the city, notes the narrator, Jesus departed and hid from the crowds (12:36). This begins the last section of the gospel, in which Jesus will direct his words not to the crowds, but only to his closest disciples.

Following the narrative of the seven signs of John's gospel, traditionally labeled as the "book of signs," the gospel enters a new section with the solemn announcement that "Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father" (13:1). This section, consisting of Jesus' final discourses, the passion account, and the resurrection appearances, is traditionally called the "book of glory." During the narrative of the seven signs, the attention of Jesus is directed toward the "world," the crowds, and the religious authorities of the synagogue and temple. But in the book of glory, Jesus focuses on his close disciples in a more private manifestation of his teaching and identity. As the gospel begins this final section, the narrator notes the intention of Jesus: "Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end" (13:1).

Yet, despite this traditional division into the book of signs and the book of glory, Jesus' revelation of the unseen God to the world and to his disciples is not clearly divided. At the first appearance of Jesus in the gospel, John the Baptist proclaims, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (1:29). This announcement of Jesus' purpose and goal serves as an initial trumpet call that echoes throughout the entire gospel. The self-offering of Jesus as the Lamb of sacrifice would reveal the Father in the fullest way as Jesus is lifted up in glory on the cross. Likewise, by placing the cleansing of the temple toward the beginning of the gospel, an event that marks the beginning of the passion account in the other gospels, the writer sets the entire public life of Jesus within the framework of his passion. The new temple, which would be destroyed and raised up in three days, is the crucified and risen body of Jesus, the paschal sacrifice for the life of the world. Finally, though the seven signs demonstrate Jesus' identity as the fullest revelation of God, they are only a preparation for the fullest sign of all. The crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, his being lifted from the earth, is the ultimate sign by which he will draw all people to himself.

## Reflection and discussion

- In what sense do chapters 11–12 mark a transition from the first part of the gospel to the second?

- Why is it difficult to discern divisions within the gospel? In what sense can we say that the whole gospel is a progressive revelation of the unseen God?

## The Way to the Father

Jesus' revelation of the unseen God reaches its climax at the cross of Jesus. In his sacrificial passion and death, Jesus does the work of the Father in the most perfect and personal act of his life. He submits himself completely to the Father's will and, at the same time, expresses his complete freedom to lay down his life. At the cross, as both the Father and the Son are glorified, Jesus prays, "Glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you" (17:1).

Throughout his gospel, John uses the word "lift up" in connection with the climactic moments of Jesus' life and death. Like so many words in this gospel, it has both a physical and a spiritual meaning. The word describes the physical lifting up of Jesus on the cross and also the exaltation of Jesus. The first use of the term "lift up" compares the lifting up of the serpent in the wilderness by Moses, to the lifting up of Jesus on the cross (3:14). Like the bronze snake that Moses lifted on a pole, which brought a cure to those afflicted in the desert, the ugly and shameful image of Jesus lifted on the cross brings healing and life. This crucified and exalted Jesus unveils his deepest divine identity: "When you

have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will realize that I am” (8:28). The divine title “I Am” expresses the reality that at the crowning moment of Jesus’ life, on the cross, the Father and the Son are seen most fully as one.

At the final moment of Jesus’ public ministry in Jerusalem, he proclaims the ultimate effect of his being “lifted up” on the cross. His exaltation is a movement toward the Father, not only for himself but for all people: “When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself” (12:32). This universal drawing power of Jesus on the cross brings believers into the unity that is shared by the Father and the Son.

In his life’s work, Jesus enables us to “see” the unseen God in two ways. First, he descends from the Father and reveals the Father through the words and deeds of his public life. Secondly, he ascends to the Father by his being lifted up on the cross and thereby draws us up to the Father. Not only are we able to see God through our union with Jesus, but we are brought into a sharing in the very life of God. Through the unity of the Son with the Father that is manifested finally on the cross, the Father’s love for humanity shines through fully. We are drawn into that eternal union of love between the Father and the Son. It is this communion with God in love which is the fullness of life, the expression of life’s ultimate purpose and meaning.

### **Reflection and discussion**

- What is the meaning of the verb “lift up” in John’s gospel? What does Jesus mean when he says, “When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself” (12:32)?

- In what way does the Gospel of John invite us to both see God and share in his life?

## A Gospel to Contemplate

The Gospel of John may seem difficult at times because its language is complex and deep. But it might help our comprehension if we realize that John does not want us to understand Jesus with logic but, rather, with insight. If we are unable to follow the circular discourses of the gospel with clarity, it may be because their purpose is not to prove anything but to lead us to faith. Their intention is not perfect comprehension but spiritual wisdom. We can best approach the gospel by thinking of it less as a puzzle to be solved in which every piece neatly fits, and more as an icon on which we can gaze lovingly at Jesus and rest with confidence in his eyes.

The gospel writer frequently uses the misunderstanding of Jesus' hearers as a literary device for developing the discourse and making it clearer to the readers. For example, after Jesus has spoken of his departure, Thomas spoke up with a question: "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" (14:5). Jesus replied with the memorable saying, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (14:6). This is not an announcement that we should be expected to comprehend completely. It is rather a statement to contemplate. By reflecting on these words and images of Jesus, we can be drawn into a deeper faith and trust in him.

In the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the message of Jesus centers on the kingdom of God. In these gospels, Jesus proclaims that the kingdom is at hand; his parables express the nature of God's kingdom, and even his miracles express the reality that the kingdom is breaking into the world. But in sharp contrast to these gospels, the focus in John's gospel falls not on God's kingdom but upon Jesus himself, on the words he has been given to speak and the works he has been given to do. In order to focus on Jesus himself, the gospel simplifies the account and omits many of the details of the other gospels.

In John's gospel we find no description of Jesus' birth, no temptation in the desert, no calling of the twelve apostles, no transfiguration or agony in the garden. This gospel does not include the rapid accounts of miracles that fill the other gospels. There are no cures of lepers, exorcisms of demons, or stilling of storms on the sea. Jesus' characteristic teachings by way of parables, so common in the other gospels, are not found in John. Instead, we find a few select scenes to contemplate: the wedding at Cana, the woman at the well, the raising of Lazarus, the appearance to Mary Magdalene. We discover a few

choice sayings to ponder: “I am the bread of life,” “I am the light of the world,” “I am the gate for the sheep,” “I am the resurrection and the life.” We encounter a gospel that fills us with light so that we can contemplate Jesus and so that he can lead us to intimacy with God.

Approach the gospel with a contemplative mind and heart. Allow these images of Jesus to form in your imagination. Mull over the sayings of Jesus as they lead you to deeper understanding and wisdom. In this way, the gospel, which may seem at times difficult to comprehend, will lead us simply to faith and to love.

### **Reflection and discussion**

- Why should I set aside my desire for perfect comprehension as I read the Gospel of John?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- What are some ways in which this gospel can lead me to contemplation?

### **Believing and Loving**

The Gospel of John is an invitation to enter into intimacy with God. We respond to that invitation in two closely connected ways: believing and loving. These two responses are the foundation of the Christian way of life. The first letter of John sums us this dual response to God: “This is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one

another, just as he has commanded us.” All who believe in him and love one another “abide in him and he abides in them,” resulting in an unimaginable closeness with God (1 John 3:23–24).

Believing and loving are inseparable. True believing always leads to genuine loving. These human responses to God’s revelation in Jesus are most often expressed as active verbs in John’s gospel. The verb “believe” is found over ninety times in the gospel, primarily in the first part of the gospel. The verb “love” occurs more predominantly in the second part of the gospel. The general movement throughout the gospel is from faith to love, from believing to loving.

Believing, in John’s gospel, is not just an intellectual assent to particular truths, but rather a personal attachment and commitment to Jesus. It is the acceptance of Jesus as the personal revelation of God. Believing joins a person to Jesus in a way that involves the person’s whole existence. Because it is a dynamic reality, believing implies a process of growth, complete with crises of faith and periods of trial. It includes elements of trust, commitment, fidelity, and witness.

Jesus never imposes belief, and the ability to believe is ultimately a gift from God. It is freely offered; each individual must freely respond. The disciples of Jesus hesitate, fluctuate, and falter. But eventually they come to accept him personally and to believe in him fully, like Thomas, to whom Jesus said, “Do not doubt but believe,” and who said to Jesus, “My Lord and my God!” (20:27–28). The result of believing in Jesus is intimacy of life with God forever, for “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” (3:16).

For those who accept the invitation to believe in him, Jesus gives them only one instruction: “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another (13:34). The command to love is not new, but it is the quality of that love that Jesus makes new. The disciples must love one another as Jesus has loved them. The love that inspires and empowers love of others is the love revealed in the life, and especially in the death, of Jesus. This quality of love leads to the giving of the lover’s life: “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (15:13). This love impels us to continually give ourselves, placing ourselves in the service of others. To give one’s life is an abiding characteristic of Christian love.

Jesus told his disciples that believing in him and loving one another will enable them to continue his mission in the world. When Jesus returns to the Father, believers will do the work of Jesus to an even greater extent than Jesus did during his earthly life. In his parting address, he offered this wonderful assurance: “The one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these” (14:12). The internal life of the Christian community flows out to the world: “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (13:35). The world will recognize the disciples of Jesus by the demonstration of their life-giving love and will be drawn to the animating love of the Christian community. When disciples believe and love, Jesus, his Spirit, and the Father are present, and the disciples form a community unlike any other.

Reading the Gospel of John may sometimes seem difficult, but truly it is our easier task. The bigger challenge comes in putting it into practice. But we know that we can fulfill the instructions of Jesus in the gospel because we have been brought into a life far beyond our imagining. Through Jesus, the Word of God, we are able to know the unseen God and be drawn into the love of the Father. Through Jesus, the way, the truth, and the life, we are able to share intimately in the life of our God.

### **Reflection and discussion**

- In what way do I want to be formed as a disciple of Jesus as I study the Gospel of John?

- In what ways does believing and loving enable disciples to continue the mission of Jesus in the world?



## Prayer

*Holy Father, you so loved the world that you gave your only Son, so that those who believe in him may have the fullness of life. Through the words of this holy gospel, deepen my understanding that Jesus is the Word made flesh among us, so that I may have life in his name. As I look to Jesus, lifted up from the earth on the cross, help me to believe in him and to love others as he has loved us. Let your Spirit come upon me to guide my study and prayer so that I may remain faithful to the challenge of living the good news according to John.*

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