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# thrive

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# THIS ISSUE

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## FAITH FOUNDATIONS

- the gospel of John

In this edition of *Thrive* we will be reading about the life and teaching of Jesus as presented in the gospel of John. John gives us an in depth perspective on Jesus' person and works. He writes his gospel in order that we might believe in Jesus and inherit the full blessing of what Jesus passed on to us. I invite you to join me as we turn back to the New Testament and revisit the foundations of our faith in the life and teaching of Jesus Christ.

MJ

## MORE THAN IDEAS

### John 1:1-13

In the first century, the most popular philosophical movement was Stoicism. The Stoics, following Plato, were focused on grasping the truth behind all things, the inherent rationality of the world. They saw this inherent rationality as a kind of 'divine mind' in all things, like a great computer operating system, and they referred to this as 'the logos'. The pinnacle of human dignity was seen to be the grasping of this impersonal 'divine mind' and thinking accordingly. I can hardly overstate the genius of John's first chapter and the way he works with this idea to challenge it. John personalises the 'logos' (translated in our Bibles as 'the Word'). To 'grasp the truth', therefore, is not to just think right thoughts but to *relate to a person*. The further implication of this is that grasping truth is primarily a matter of the *will*. Unfortunately, the Christian tradition has tended to slip back to a kind of intellectual Stoicism. We tend to see salvation as resulting from believing the right things. We say we know 'the truth' when we assent intellectually to certain biblical doctrines. But we cannot really *know* the truth in this way. Correct thinking is of course very important, but it is a means to an end, not an end-in-itself. Never be content with just knowing things *about* God. Jesus Christ, the *logos*, came so that we could reconnect personally with God. You cannot know God intellectually because our finite minds cannot grasp his infinite and eternal *being*. But we can know him in a deeper sense, through relationship, in which we experience his character. This is where life begins.

Read John 1:1-13

Ask God to reveal himself to you more and more.

As you read the first section of John's gospel you will find the metaphor of light repeatedly used. Light was a symbol of both life and truth. Without light, there is no life. Also, without light everything is obscured by darkness. Jesus came to bring life. But to receive this life, we need to realise what we lack. We need to realise that the lives we build without God are futile. We need to realise that the identities we build apart from God are false. We need to realise when we are living in contradiction with reality. We need to realise we are guilty of the greatest crime in the universe, that is, denying God his divine prerogative. All these things remain in the dark for those who live without God. To live in conflict with God we must suppress these facts; they must remain obscured in darkness. Jesus came to save us from our conflict with God, and this begins with bringing all this conflict, futility and falsehood to light. But this is painful. We deeply loathe to face this reality and therefore we are vehemently resistant to allowing these things to come into the light. With this metaphor John summarises the ministry of Jesus and also explains why his people had Jesus killed. We didn't want to be exposed by the light, so we rejected Jesus. We were so vehemently opposed to be shown up, that we killed Jesus. Thankfully, however, as John says, "the darkness has not overcome the light". Are you willing for Jesus to shine on your life?

Read John 1:1-13 again

Ask God to bring to light the areas

in your life that are in conflict with his will.

# TRUTH IS A PERSON

John 1:14-18

FRIDAY  
3 FEB

One of the most revolutionary moments in the New Testament, philosophically speaking, is when John declares that “the *logos* (the Word) became flesh” (refer to Wednesday’s explanation of ‘logos’). According to a popular way of thinking at that time, perfection could only ever be expressed in ‘pure’ abstract ideas. But John is saying that the perfect expression of truth is a physical person, Jesus Christ. What this means is that to know truth is not to just believe a set of ideas but to embrace Jesus Christ, to follow him and to trust him. It is hard to get excited about ideas. You can’t love an idea. If you have found your enthusiasm for the things of God receding into a cloud of boredom, then it may well be the symptom of a faith grounded in mere ideas. We must of course understand and believe correct doctrine, but true faith is ultimately grounded in a real relationship with a real God who comes to us in Jesus Christ and indwells us by his Holy Spirit. God doesn’t want to be a mere idea to you. He wants to inhabit your very being. He wants to make your physical body his tabernacle. This can be a real and constant experience. The Christian faith is not just about abstract theological reflection but about a real relationship with a God who wants to interact with you every day. Jesus did not die just so that you could know some facts that you didn’t know before. He died so that you could have access to God and live in relationship with him.

Read John 1:14-18

Seek God.

## Listening – Psalm 95

Psalm 95 declares: “We are the people of his pasture, the flock under his care.” God wants to care for us, and his primary way of doing this is not by giving us things but by *speaking to us* and guiding us as a shepherd guides his sheep. Jesus said, “My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me” (John 10:27). The most important way in which we must respond to God is to listen to his voice. The failure of Israel to do this in the desert after they came out of Egypt (Numbers 13-14) meant that they wandered in the desert for the rest of their lives. Psalm 95 warns us that we too will be like that generation if we fail to heed God’s voice. God is always speaking to us. We have God’s word in the Bible, but we also have the presence of the Holy Spirit speaking within us. Then God also speaks to us through other people, external things and circumstances. He is even speaking to us constantly through creation itself (Psalm 19:1-4). God is constantly speaking through everything in some sense, and we must learn to engage with his conversation. Prayer is a matter of responding to what God is saying and doing. We may feel at times that God is giving us the silent treatment, but that is often because we haven’t been willing to listen to the last thing that he tried to tell us. God is speaking to you all the time. Be more aware of that. He has started the conversation; it is for you now to respond.

Read **Psalm 95**. Reflect on what God has been saying to you lately. Ask him to help you listen to and act upon what he is saying.

# PREPARING THE WAY

John **1:19-28**

MONDAY

**6 FEB**

You are not the Messiah. That might sound obvious, but we sometimes act and think as though we really believed we were. John the Baptist could easily have aspired to be more than what he was. The people were ready to receive him as their Messiah, that is, as their anointed ruler. But John was quick to acknowledge his place and he saw his place as one of great honour. He was called to 'prepare the way for the Lord'. We are likewise called to prepare the way for God, not to be God ourselves. We are the body not the head. Jesus is our head. He is the one who sets the agenda for our lives and the lives of all who believe in him. Our job is not to take control of situations as though we were Christ, but to prepare the way for Christ to become the head of every situation. You are not your own, you belong to him. The church does not belong to you, it belongs to him. This is what I mean by acknowledging him as the head. It is a position that we are prone to want to step into. Be careful lest you find yourself on Christ's throne. He is the Lord. You have the honour of preparing a way for him in this world. Be prepared to become less so that he may increase in every situation (John 3:30).

Read John 1:19-28

Acknowledge Jesus as the Lord of your life.

TUESDAY  
7 FEB

## LAMB OF GOD

John 1:29-34

John the Baptist's role in God's scheme was to bear witness to the Messiah, to Jesus. The first recorded declaration that John the Baptist makes about Jesus (according to John's Gospel) is the declaration that Jesus is the 'Lamb of God'. In other words, the most crucial aspect of Jesus' role, as seen by John the Baptist, was to be the sacrificial lamb of the annual Passover festival. On the original Passover night, on the eve of the exodus of Israel from Egypt, the Israelites sacrificed lambs as God had directed them through Moses, and they placed the blood over the doors of their homes. When the judgement of God came upon Egypt it 'passed over' the homes of these people. If you belong to Christ, then his blood is placed over your life as a sign of God's eternal love and favour upon you. This is what John saw in Jesus. He saw him as the one who exhausts the fires of condemnation; the one who would satisfy the demands of eternal justice in order that God might love and remain just in loving the guilty. This is who Jesus is for you. He is the one who appeals for you at the right hand of God declaring that no stain of sin remains on your record. You have a clean slate right now and upon it you can begin a new life, make new choices, and become the person God made you to be. You can close the door behind you now to whatever you might be ashamed of in your distant or immediate past.

Read John 1:29-34

Thank God for his grace and favour upon you.

## JACOB'S LADDER

John **1:35-51**

For those who follow Jesus, who become disciples with lives yielded to him, Jesus will be like the ladder that Jacob saw in his dream at Bethel (Genesis 28:12). Jesus' promise to Nathanael was that he would "see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man". In what sense was this fulfilled? Did Nathanael see this? Jesus was speaking figuratively here with reference to Jacob's dream and all that it signified. The allusion is a powerful one. Jesus said this in the context of predicting also that Nathanael would see Jesus do many great works. Jesus is hereby explaining the significance of what John, the writer of this gospel, refers to as his 'signs', that is, his miracles. Jesus' miracles signify that heaven and earth have been reconciled again through him and that he himself is the portal through which the two can interact. Jacob called the place of his vision of the ladder 'Bethel' which means 'house of God'. Later the temple, also called 'the house of God', would come to signify the same thing. It was seen as a kind of portal through which heaven interfaces with the realm of earth. Jesus referred to himself as the temple and since he has poured out his Spirit into our hearts it can be said that we also are the temple of the Holy Spirit. In other words, to bring this all together, the vessel through which God pours out his blessings from heaven to earth is no less or more than our own hearts. What is passing back and forth in your heart?

Read John 1:35-51

What is it in your heart that needs to ascend to God and what from God is descending into your heart?

John refers to Jesus' miracles as 'signs'. They were not tricks to impress people, they were loud and clear declarations about something that God was doing. A miracle for someone was a sign of breakthrough for everyone. So, what was being declared in the changing of the water to wine? Jesus was doing far more than helping a group of people have a good time. He was declaring something. Wine was a symbol of joy. Jesus was declaring by this sign that the plain water of Israel's existence was now being transformed into the wine of joy. And the sign is a sign for us also. Life can so easily take on the dullness of futility. We taste it when we wake up in the morning with an aching, void of any purpose. It is a feeling of blandness, of emptiness. Our hearts yearn for the wine of the joy of real life. Real joy comes from being at rest in the flow of God's will; when you feel that you have been drawn into something bigger than yourself, something wonderful, something that will draw you along and that you don't have to make happen. This joy is the feeling of waking up in the morning knowing that God has set out a wonderful pathway for you that day so that you will find joy even in the most mundane things of life. It is the joy of being in orbit around the sun of God's love and favour. Your life can be transformed from dull water to the wine of joy.

Read John 2:1-11

Give your life to Jesus and ask him to change you from dullness to joy.

# CLEANSING

John 2:12-25

FRIDAY  
10 FEB

Each of the gospel writers orders the events of Jesus' ministry to highlight something about what God was doing in Jesus. The fact that John places the 'cleansing of the temple' up front is very significant for what he wants to say about the way the Kingdom works. When Jesus comes to us, he brings joy (as was signified by the miracle of the water and the wine). But the one who brings joy also comes with the whip of cleansing, seeking to drive out of our lives all that grieves God. This is not an act of condemnation but an act of deliverance. The temple was to be the portal of God's blessing to Israel, but this portal had been clogged up as it were with other agendas that were at odds with God's will. God wants you to flow with him as his love and blessing flows through you. You are called to be a portal of God's love and blessing, but this cannot happen so long as your heart is clogged up with selfish, prideful and fear-driven agendas. We must open our hearts to the Spirit of Christ so that he may enter and drive out the agendas that block our interaction with God. Let him do this because it will relieve you of what contaminates and chokes your life. It will be a joyous relief and release to you. Jesus is the great temple builder, rebuilding the lives of his people to be portals of heaven on earth. Before he builds up what is good, he must tear down what is bad and dig a deep foundation.

Read John 2:12-25

Open your heart to the searchlight of God's Spirit today.