

JOHN'S ACCOUNT OF THE "I AM"

JESUS

CONSIDERING JESUS

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*Considering Jesus: John's Account Of The "I Am"*

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RIVERVIEW  
EXISTS TO  
PROCLAIM THE  
LIBERATING  
POWER OF THE  
GOSPEL AS WE  
GROW, SERVE,  
AND GO.

# Introduction

Two words.

Think about how often the use of two little words can have a big impact. *You're beautiful. Try again. Prayers needed. Not yet. Call me. Thank you.* In the right moment two words can make a world of difference. The Gospel of John contains over 15,000 words, but there are two that capture the heart of John's account of the life of Jesus: "*I Am.*" Those two words have made a world of difference.

Let me tell you about who this guy John is for a moment. Born and raised in Galilee, as a young boy he joined his father and his brother in the fishing business. John's family was Jewish, which meant he knew all about the Old Testament stories. In particular, John would have remembered how God had spoken to Moses through the burning bush, urging him to lead the Jews out of slavery in Egypt to freedom in the Promised Land. And when Moses anticipated that he would be asked by the people of Israel exactly who it was that had sent him, John would have remembered the two word name God had spoken to Moses: "Say this to the people of Israel, 'I Am has sent me to you.'" (Exodus 3:14)

God told His people to call Him "I Am."

It's quite possible that John would have known Jesus from a very young age. Some people believe they were actually cousins. At some point, John began following Jesus everywhere He went (not in a stalker way, but in order to watch and learn from everything Jesus said and did). He noticed how people watched and listened to Jesus. The way Jesus lived was causing people to ask questions and consider who Jesus was. He also noticed how often the phrase "I Am" was part of Jesus' response. Dozens of times Jesus described Himself by saying

“I Am.” “I Am” the bread of life, or “I Am” the true vine, or sometimes simply just, “I Am.” For comparison, the other three Gospel writers (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) record less than five times combined where Jesus uses the phrase “I Am” in reference to Himself. In fact, most of the stories that John explores in great detail in his account don’t appear at all in any of the other three Gospel accounts.

Why would John be so intentional about making sure to include these specific stories in which Jesus makes the “I Am” claim?

Every culture asks itself similar questions: Who will provide for us? Who will sustain us? Who will save us? Every culture has voices that rise up and claim “I am” provider, “I am” sustainer, and “I am” savior. John’s Gospel account is heavily influenced by his experience as a pastor in first century Ephesus. If his experience was like that of Paul (another first century pastor and author of a good chunk of the New Testament), John would have befriended many people who fervently believed in the multitude of Greek gods and goddesses who said “I am.”

John likely watched in horror as Roman emperors, governors, and military leaders attempted to assert their own “I am,” often through sheer force. When John sat down to write his account of Jesus’ life, my guess is that he had these voices in his head. He wanted his friends in Ephesus (and beyond) to consider and know that the “I Am” God who saved the Jews from Egypt was the same “I Am” Jesus who John himself had followed closely. John’s Gospel was his way of inviting his friends to personally encounter this same Jesus. His self-described purpose in writing this letter was “so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.” (John 20:31)

This little book is broken into two parts. The first section provides a basic overview of some of the historical, philosophical, and cultural influences that are helpful to know when studying through the book of John. In the second section we'll take a look at several of the "I Am" statements that Jesus made. The specific focus will be on John's effort to translate the "I Am" God of the Old Testament into his first century Ephesian context, which he accomplishes by focusing on the "I Am" statements of Jesus.

Our hope in writing this book is that you would consider Jesus, because it is our belief that life is found in Him, both now and for eternity.

Consider the claims Jesus makes. Consider what He asks of us. Consider what your response will be to His bold claims.

*For Christ,  
Pastor James Granger*

*Riverview Church,  
September 10, 2016*





# PART ONE: INFLUENCES

## John

To understand the Gospel of John, it is helpful to know the perspective and background of John himself. There is a wealth of great information about John found within the pages of the Bible, specifically the Gospel accounts of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, as well as in the book of Acts.

We know that John and his older brother James left their father Zebedee and his fishing business in order to follow Jesus in about 26 A.D. (see Mark 1:19-20) It is possible that John knew Jesus from a very young age; some scholars believe they were cousins. Most scholars believe that John was the youngest of the disciples, perhaps even as young as twelve years old when he began following Jesus.

John and his brother, along with Peter, are consistently identified throughout the Gospels as the three disciples who were part of Jesus' inner circle. This is critical to remember as you read John's Gospel, because it means that just about everything John writes about in his Gospel account is based on his eyewitness experience with Jesus. Whether Jesus is healing a blind man, attending the Passover in Jerusalem, or carrying His cross to Golgotha, it's helpful to picture John standing

right next to Jesus, watching and listening and absorbing as much as possible. This became important later in John's life because he had a deep pool of wisdom and memories from his time with Jesus that he was able to draw from as he aimed to contextualize the Gospel to a population that was vastly different from that of John's upbringing.

John was raised in a Jewish home in Galilee, which is located in the northern portion of Israel (see map on page 67). Life in Galilee was very similar to life in northern Michigan today. Everything centered around Lake Tiberias, also known as the Sea of Galilee, a beautiful freshwater lake that was perfect for boating, swimming, and fishing. John's family was part of the thriving fishing industry that existed in the region, and the trajectory of John's life would likely have left him working as a fisherman for his entire life if he had never known Jesus.

When the opportunity to follow Jesus came along, everything changed for John. He left his home, along with his older brother James, and began to travel everywhere with Jesus. From John's own account we know that he spent about three years walking with Jesus, right up through the time that Jesus was arrested, crucified, and then rose from the dead.

We know from the book of Acts that John continued to live for Jesus and to preach the Gospel boldly, and that he was part of the leadership of the early church. In Acts 4 he was arrested along with Peter because they were so disruptive in their efforts to share about Jesus. When they were ordered to stop speaking about Jesus, and then pressured with physical punishment, their response was, "whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard." (Acts 4:19-20)

Beginning in Acts 8 the focus of the narrative shifts mostly toward Paul, so the remainder of what we know about John's

life comes from historians such as Eusebius, Josephus, and Hippolytus. It seems clear from these accounts that John continued to fervently proclaim Jesus for the rest of his life.

In Acts 12:1 we are told that Herod the king “laid violent hands” on some of the early church leaders, and John’s own brother James was killed with a sword. Most scholars believe that these events lit a fire under the apostles, and that at that point they dispersed to the various provinces throughout the Roman Empire in an effort to follow Jesus’ command to bring the Gospel to the “ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:16)

Toward the end of the first century John ended up succeeding Paul (as well as Timothy) as pastor in Ephesus, a thriving port city located on the Aegean Sea on the western coast of modern Turkey. Ephesus was the ancient equivalent to modern day New York City, a huge commercial metropolis with tremendous wealth and diversity. Because of the roadways and shipping access into the city, Ephesus was a melting pot of culture and ideas and a key economic city in the Roman Empire.

Historians like Irenaeus and Tertullian place John in Ephesus from around 70 A.D. until he died of old age in about 100 A.D. In 95 A.D. the ruthless Roman emperor Domitian exiled John to the island of Patmos, which was only about 7 miles from Ephesus, and it was there that John famously wrote the book of Revelation. In addition to Revelation and the Gospel of John, it is widely accepted that John also wrote 1 John, 2 John, and 3 John.

John’s life and his writings were characterized by a distinct focus on the love of Jesus Christ and a plea for anyone and everyone to place their saving hope in Him.



# Judaic

It would be difficult to overestimate the influence Judaism had on John's Gospel, since the entire narrative is embedded in the Jewish tradition. Jesus was Jewish. John was also Jewish, as were all of the disciples. Every portion of John's account takes place in Israel (see map on page 67). John records Jesus visiting Cana, Capernaum, Samaria, Bethany, and Jerusalem, all cities that lie within a 100 mile strip between Galilee and Jerusalem. Though John wrote his Gospel in Greek because of his Greek audience, Jesus and the disciples would have been speaking Hebrew or Aramaic throughout their lives, not Greek (and certainly not English!). There is a Jewish framework around everything in John's story.

It is important to recognize that Judaism was not merely the religion of many of the people in John's story, it was their race and their culture as well. Judaism was (and is) a nationality. For orthodox Jews every aspect of their life and identity was lived and experienced through the perspective of the God of the Old Testament Scriptures.

In our culture, it is considered normal to emphasize the importance of the separation between one's faith and their involvement in public arenas such as schools or political offices. We have a huge range of faith traditions, and we take great pride in championing freedom and diversity of religion. The Jews in first century Israel did not think about life in the same way. They clung to the traditions of their ancestors, frequently citing Biblical teachings and heroes like Abraham, Moses, and David as examples that informed the way they thought and lived.

All of their education was rooted in their faith tradition. They studied the history of the Bible, they believed in the truth of the Bible, and they cared first and foremost about God. They

didn't practice the separation of church and state. Their religious leaders were also their political leaders. Faith and life were interconnected and interdependent.

One of the other things you'll notice as you read John's Gospel is how often Jesus and his disciples visit Jerusalem for various Jewish feasts. Jewish life revolved around the Jewish calendar, which was highlighted by seven different national feasts. These feasts required every Jew to migrate to Jerusalem three times each year to participate in all of the ceremony and tradition of each feast together with their fellow Jews.

Based on John's account, Jesus attended three Passovers (John 2:13, John 5:1, John 13:1), and we are able to easily track the timeline of Jesus' ministry because John consistently notes the feasts Jesus is attending. As I've been reading through John recently, I have been surprised at how much of John's narrative took place during these visits to Jerusalem. Perhaps John included these details to connect with his Greek audience, who were very familiar with huge festivals to honor their own gods.

Another key component of John's account is the presence of various different kinds of Jewish people that Jesus encounters. Every faith tradition has core beliefs that everyone holds to, as well as a range of other beliefs where there is disagreement. Judaism is no different.

John describes interactions between Jesus and Galileans, Samaritans, Pharisees, and many people simply described as "Jews." Galileans were small town folks, typically blue collar Jews who lived in one of the cities in and around the Sea of Galilee. Jesus Himself was from Galilee, and His interactions with other Galileans tended to be familiar and cordial.

Samaritans were technically Jews whose beliefs were rooted in the Old Testament, but they were loathed by the more

orthodox Jews of Jesus' day because of the Samaritan history of intermarrying with pagan women and intermingling with pagan gods.

Pharisees (which literally means "separated ones") were a class of political and social leaders who were known for their meticulous commitment to the correct interpretation and application of Scriptures, particularly the moral law. Though small in number, the Pharisees had a wide influence. John records multiple instances in which Jesus and the Pharisees exchange verbal blows, and also mentions two Pharisees (Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea) who ended up following Jesus.

It is always helpful to pay attention to which category a person or group belongs to as they interact with Jesus.

It was very common for Jesus to make references to Old Testament stories and verses in His teaching. Because John's audience was Greek, he is often careful to offer a bit of explanation for his readers who might not get these references. We will examine many of these Old Testament connections more closely as we take a closer look at the context of the "I Am" claims of Jesus.





# Grecian

The dominant worldview in the first century world was called “Hellenism,” a term used to describe the influence of Greek culture on the perspective and lifestyle of the people who lived in the Roman Empire. In John’s day the centers of life and culture were cities like Rome, Athens, Corinth, and Ephesus. Each of these major cities contained a multitude of temples, statues, arenas, and theaters. These structures and the activities they hosted were dedicated to the various Greek gods and goddesses that were part of the narrative of the ancient Greek mythological teachings.

Essentially, those who subscribed to the Hellenistic viewpoint found the answers to all of life’s questions and the solutions to all of life’s problems through the supposed wisdom and power of the ancient Greek gods. As such, in order to gain the favor and blessing from the gods, they would build idols to honor the gods and massive temples where they could offer sacrifices in the hope that the gods would provide for them.

By way of example, consider the goddess Artemis, who was the most prominent Greek deity among many in the city of Ephesus. Her temple in Ephesus, the Artemisian, was one of the seven wonders of the first century world. It was a majestic and dominant presence in the daily lives of the Ephesian people. Artemis was a fertility goddess, so worshippers would travel great distances to visit her glorious temple to make an offering in hopes that Artemis would provide a fruitful harvest or protection for a pregnant mother. The offering could consist of a financial gift to the temple, participation in the annual festival in honor of Artemis, or even to have sex with one of the temple prostitutes. Belief in Artemis was not merely a matter of tradition or fable for many of the Artemis followers, it was a sincere faith that Artemis indeed held life changing power in her hands.

The worldview of Hellenism stood in obvious contrast to the Christian perspective. For first century Christians (and this stands true today) all hope was found in the one true God, so He alone was their object of worship.

In the Greek view there were multiple gods and goddesses who possessed power and wisdom, so when Christianity was introduced it became a clash of values and ideas. In Acts 19 we see the collision of these ideologies. In verse 23 it says, “there arose no little disturbance” in Ephesus because of the growing Christian presence in the city. The silversmiths who made and sold Artemis statues were concerned about a decline in their sales. One of the craftsmen, a man named Demetrius, said, “there is danger not only that this trade of ours may come into disrepute but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis may be counted as nothing, and that she may even be deposed from her magnificence, she whom all Asia and the world worship.” (Acts 23:27)

Later on it says that for several hours the huge crowd in Ephesus chanted, “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!” over and over again to make it clear where their allegiance was. This incident shows us that the powerful and longstanding Greek influence was a significant obstacle to the spread of the Gospel in the first century world.

A basic understanding of some of the prominent Greek gods and goddesses is useful background for any student of the New Testament. In Corinth (see map on page 68) alone there were prominent temples to the following:

**APHRODITE:** goddess of love

**APOLLO:** god of light and truth

**ASKLEPIUS:** god of healing

**DEMETER:** goddess of the harvest

**HERMES:** god of commerce and the marketplace

**ISIS:** goddess of creation and fertility

**POSEIDON:** god of the sea

**VENUS:** goddess of love, beauty, and sex

Each city also had a theater for productions to tell the stories of the gods, and an arena for athletic events in honor of the gods. There was even a temple in Corinth called the pantheon (literally, “all gods”) which was dedicated to any and every god, because they wanted to make sure they didn’t offend any of the gods by forgetting to mention one of them. Each of these gods and goddesses were heavily revered in the first century world, which is why John sought to address this belief system as he built the church in Ephesus and as he penned his Gospel account.



# Roman

In 27 B.C., after years of political maneuvering and civil war, the Roman Empire was born. At that time the entire Roman nation was consolidated under the rule of Caesar Augustus, the great nephew of Julius Caesar. Augustus assumed the role of dictator, giving him control over the political, financial, and military forces for the entire Roman nation.

The Romans controlled the entire Mediterranean Sea and all of the countries that surrounded it (see map on page 70), including Spain, France, Italy, Rome, Greece, Turkey, Israel, Egypt and all of Northern Africa. Their military force was incredibly powerful and intimidating, and this was the major reason the Romans were able to consistently expand their territory. Whenever an uprising occurred, the Roman military would move swiftly and ruthlessly to quash it so they could maintain control and order throughout the empire.

Augustus ruled for forty-five years until 14 A.D., which means that Jesus was born during his reign. The Romans had established a system whereby they appointed local governors to the various provinces throughout the empire, and entrusted them with keeping the peace and collecting taxes in their respective regions. The person assigned to preside over Israel was Herod, who was a natural choice because he was from nearby Idumea and was a highly prominent and political figure.

Herod was famous for his elaborate building projects, investing huge sums of money and employing thousands of laborers to construct various palaces throughout Israel. Herod was also simultaneously insecure and ruthless, a deadly combination that ended up costing many lives during his reign.

After Herod died his position of leadership was passed to his sons and grandsons, and “Herod” became the official title for whoever held the office. When “Herod” is spoken of in the Bible, it’s not always the original Herod, but often times it is one of his descendants who has assumed power and kept the name “Herod.”

The Herods had a significant impact on the lives of Jesus and the disciples. In Matthew 2, Herod was so threatened by the arrival of Jesus that he decided to kill Him. When he realized Jesus had slipped from his grasp he instead killed all of the babies in Israel who were around the age of Jesus. In Matthew 14, Herod was so jealous of Jesus’ popularity that he ordered Jesus’ best friend John the Baptist to be beheaded. In Luke 23, Jesus was sent before Herod before He was crucified. In Acts 12, Herod ordered the murder of several of the early disciples, including John’s own brother James.

Although Herod and his descendants weren’t Roman or Jewish, they were part of the Roman tyranny and exerted great influence on the Jews during the time of Jesus, John, and the entire narrative of John’s Gospel.

After Augustus died, he was followed by a succession of men who assumed the office of “Caesar.” While these men varied in age, experience, and political persuasion, their common goal was to maintain and expand the Roman presence throughout the world. During John’s life, ten different men became Caesar, and there was tremendous pressure on each of them to not allow any cracks in the Roman mystique.

As the first century progressed, the Caesars became increasingly paranoid. As a result, they began to demand more and more allegiance and worship from their subjects throughout the empire, to the point where the Caesars themselves were demanding to be treated as gods. As an example of this, the

emperor Domitian commissioned the building of a massive temple in Ephesus, right up the street from where John probably lived.

The temple consisted of several columns with statues of various Greek gods at the top of each column. A massive statue of Domitian sat on a throne atop a huge platform that rested on the shoulders of the Greek gods, clearly sending the message that Domitian was to be worshipped above any of the Greek gods. He held coronation ceremonies and minted coins that declared him “king of kings” and “god of gods.” Across the Roman Empire if you weren’t willing to declare Caesar as lord it could be punishable by death.

This posed a problem for Christians, who, of course, believed that Jesus was Lord.

John and the other disciples were striving to engage the culture with the Gospel, a difficult challenge when your strongest voices were being executed. Some Christians fled completely from the major Roman cities, isolating themselves in remote areas where the Roman military would not be able to find them. Others tried to blend as much as they could into the culture by keeping their beliefs behind the scenes.

John’s Gospel was written to engage the dominant Greek and Roman influences with the truth that Jesus alone was the “I Am” of the world.





# PART TWO: BOLD CLAIMS

## I Am

When you consider the first century influences that confronted John, the challenges he faced in writing his Gospel account were daunting. Here was a man who grew up in a distinctly Jewish environment, spent his teenage years following Jesus, and now was trying to translate that entire experience into a Greek and Roman template that was completely foreign to John and diametrically opposed to the Gospel. The fact that John embraced this challenge speaks to his character and to his unwavering commitment to Jesus. The fact that he was successful speaks to his brilliance.

John's Gospel ends with this: "Now there are also many other things that Jesus did. Were every one of them written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written." (John 21:25) John is saying that there were a seemingly endless number of stories about Jesus and quotes from Jesus that he could have included in his account, way too many to try to include them all. His choice instead was to carefully select the stories and quotes that would best represent the Gospel to a Greek thinking audience living under Roman rule.

My guess is that when John moved to Ephesus he was bombarded with the “I am” claims of the Greek gods and goddesses as well as the Roman emperors and governors. I would also guess that many times when he heard those claims he couldn’t help but think of how different they were from the bold claims of Jesus, so he began formulating a way in which he could share the Jesus narrative in a way that would have the greatest impact on his fellow Ephesian citizens.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke are referred to as the Synoptic Gospels, because they share so many of the same stories and sequence. John stands apart from them because its tone and content is very different in comparison. Consider the following ways in which John’s Gospel is dissimilar to the Synoptics:

- John begins his Gospel with a description of who Jesus was. The Synoptics begin with stories.
- Most of the stories John selects only appear in his Gospel, including the miracle of the water to wine, Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman, the man by the pool at Bethesda, the woman caught in adultery, the man born blind, Lazarus, and Jesus’ resurrection appearance to Thomas.
- John’s Gospel contains fewer stories than the Synoptics, but they are told with much more detail and focus on Jesus’ interactions with specific individuals and their personal response to that interaction.
- John often provides explanation and references when he includes stories or quotes from the Old Testament.
- John chronicles the life of Jesus by emphasizing his participation in the Jewish Feasts.
- John’s Gospel doesn’t contain any parables.

As mentioned earlier, the three years John spent with Jesus offered virtually unlimited material for a biographical account of the life of Jesus. We will spend the remainder of this second section focusing on some of the “I Am” statements of Jesus, because they provide very clear examples of the strategy John employed when he wrote his account. We are going to look at six different statements, asking ourselves the following questions about each:

**What are the Jewish roots of this claim?**

**What did this claim mean to Jesus’ audience when He said it?**

**Why did John include this claim for his first century audience?**

**What does this claim mean for us today?**



# Living Water

## John 4:10

*Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.”*

## John 7:37-38

*On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’”*

## What are the Jewish roots of this claim?

In traditional Jewish thinking, water by itself often represented chaos. This began from the very first few verses in Genesis, where it says that “the earth was without form and void...and the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.” (Genesis 1:2) When God speaks, He speaks order into the chaos, partially by dividing the waters in an orderly fashion. A few chapters later in Genesis there is a catastrophic flood...more chaos. This theme continues through other Old Testament stories like the parting of the Red Sea and the life of Jonah.

At the same time, there are dozens of Old Testament passages where water is seen both literally and metaphorically as a nourishing, cleansing, and sustaining necessity for life. In Jeremiah 2:13 God describes Himself as a “fountain of living water.” In Psalm 1:3 the writer describes a man who is blessed because he holds to God’s Word, saying he is “like a tree

planted by streams of water.” These are just two examples of many. The Psalms and Prophets are filled with this kind of language.

Depending on the context and usage, to the Jews water could represent life or death. It’s worth noting that in most of the passages where water is seen as a source of life it is referred to as “living” or “flowing.” Many in Israel were farmers or desert people, so water that was moving, like rivers or springs or rain, was life-giving water. The Jews developed the tradition of having a “mikveh,” or ritual bath, in each town. Each “mikveh” was supplied with water that was “living,” meaning the water would fill the basin through rain or a natural spring rather than being transported by man. Many scholars believe these “mikveh” baths were the forerunner to the Christian tradition of baptism.

## **What did this claim mean to Jesus’ audience when He said it?**

Two different times Jesus made the claim that He Himself was “living water,” and the context of each was very different. In John 4:1-26 Jesus meets a Samaritan woman who had come to Jacob’s well to draw water. The dialogue between Jesus and this woman began with a conversation about actual water (Jesus says, “give me a drink”) but Jesus quickly took things to a deeper level. He identified in the woman a deeper thirst that she was trying to satisfy, and then told her that He Himself was the living water that would satisfy her thirst both now and for eternity. The conversation ended with woman telling Jesus that she was awaiting the Messiah, to which Jesus responded, “I who speak to you am He.”

The second time Jesus called Himself “living water” was toward the end of John 7. Jesus and John and the other disciples were at the Feast of Booths, which is the fall festival of

the Jews that celebrated the grape harvest. A huge part of the Feast of Booths is the daily prayer for God to provide rain, which included a daily ritual in which the high priest would walk down to the Pool of Siloam (the nearest “living water”) and bring back a gold pitcher full of fresh water. He would then pour the water on the altar while thousands of Jews cried out to God for His provision. The Bible says that “on the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out, ‘If anyone thirsts, let Him come to Me and drink!’” (John 7:37) This would have been shocking to the Jews, because in saying these words Jesus was essentially claiming to be God. The Text that follows says that some wondered if Jesus was the Messiah, while others wanted to have Him arrested. Either way, the claims of Jesus could not be ignored.

## **Why did John include this claim for his first century audience?**

The Greek gods of water were the three sons of Cronus, named Zeus, Poseidon, and Hades. In the myth, Zeus overthrew his father, so he became the “god of gods,” as well as being the god of the sky and of rain. Poseidon became the god of the sea and Hades the god of the underworld. Like the Jews, the Greek worldview saw the sea as chaotic and scary because so many people lost their lives due to shipwrecks and storms at sea. As such, they would pray to Poseidon or one of the other “sea” gods for safe travel by ship. When it came to “living” water, when they were seeking rain they would pray and offer sacrifices to Zeus himself because he was their lord of the sky, and they might also pray to one of the fertility goddesses as well. They made offerings to please the gods, trusting them to nourish and sustain them with fresh water. I think one reason John included the “living water” quotes and stories was because they flew in the face of the Greek belief system, and he wanted to confront the false beliefs of the followers of Zeus.



The Greeks were accustomed to holding massive and lengthy festivals to worship their gods, much like the Jewish Feast of the Booths described in John 7. The annual festival to honor Zeus was actually their Olympic games. Each year athletes from all over the Roman Empire would gather in Olympia to honor Zeus in their competitions. There was an enormous ivory and gold statue of Zeus that overlooked the games which was so elaborate it was considered to be one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. When John shared the story of Jesus standing at the festival and shouting, “come to me and drink,” it would have been alarming to his Greek audience. Again, John wanted to challenge the false trust in the Greek gods and instead urge his readers to consider the claims of Jesus.

## What does this claim mean for us today?

We’re all thirsty for something, and there are all kinds of wells that we try to dip into to satisfy our thirst. We might think it’s ridiculous for anyone to show up at a sporting event to honor a mythological figure like Zeus, but are we really any different? Think about the most recent sporting event you attended or watched on television, with thousands of people gathered together wearing the same clothes and chanting and screaming with hands held high. Think about the “offerings” we make (also known as the ticket prices we pay). We like to think we’re not so foolish as to worship a fictional god like Zeus, but if we’re honest we would acknowledge that sometimes we’re trying to satisfy our thirst in similarly unfulfilling ways.

I think it’s important to recognize the voices in our culture that are calling out to us, urging us to “obey our thirst.” The world of athletics is just one example. We are seduced by many things that promise to satisfy. For example, our culture says we should satisfy our thirst through sexual exploration, but the Bible says a person should “drink water from your own cistern.” (Proverbs 5:15) The woman at the well attempted to

satisfy her thirst through multiple sexual partners. Jesus said that kind of satisfaction was temporary at best, and that only through Him would her thirst would be permanently satisfied.

The thirst you feel inside of you is a thirst for God, so it can only be satisfied by God Himself. Are you thirsty? Jesus says, “come to Me and drink.” Not only will your thirst be satisfied, but out of your heart “will flow rivers of living water,” meaning that God will use you to bring Jesus to other thirsty people to Jesus as well.

## Consider This

- All of us are thirsty for love, hope, and life. Being completely honest, where do you typically turn to satisfy that thirst? What is your replacement for Jesus?
- What are the seductive voices and influences in our culture that clamor for your attention, promising to satisfy your thirst? Why are you tempted to believe these voices?
- How can you shift your life to allow you to remain focused on those influences (i.e. God’s Word and God’s people) that will remind you that love, hope, and life can only be satisfied by Jesus?
- How can we, like John, go about proclaiming that Jesus satisfies our thirst in a way that our culture will understand?



# Bread

## John 6:35

*Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst."*

## What are the Jewish roots of this statement?

Bread is a staple food in many cultures across the world, and Israel is no exception. The Jews relied on the annual barley harvest and wheat harvest to allow them to produce the bread that would sustain their lives. These harvest seasons were so important that two of the three Feasts on the Jewish calendar revolved around them. The Passover in the spring was filled with prayers and offerings related to the barley harvest, while the Pentecost in the summer was a celebration of the wheat harvest. Bread was always at the center of the Jewish table, and came to symbolize God's provision.

The primary Old Testament example of this is found in Exodus 16, as the Jewish nation is starving in the desert after fleeing from slavery in Egypt. In Exodus 16:4 God tells Moses that He is "about to rain bread from heaven," and that going forward He would supernaturally provide a daily portion of bread to sustain His people.

What's interesting is that the stuff God rained out of heaven was NOT bread, it was something they called "manna." Manna was described as being "like coriander seed, white, and the taste of it was like wafers made with honey." (Exodus 16:31) No one really knew exactly what it was...the word

“manna” literally means, “what is it?” The point is, even though it wasn’t actually bread, God called it bread because bread was their word to describe God’s overall daily provision. This is explained clearly in Deuteronomy 8:3, which says, “And He humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna...that He might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.” This is the exact verse that Jesus quotes in Matthew 4, when the devil tempts Him to “turn these stones into bread” after forty days of fasting. As good as bread tastes when we are hungry, the bread that God provides is something better.

## **What did this claim mean to Jesus’ audience when He said it?**

John 6 begins with the famous story of Jesus feeding thousands of people with five barley loaves and two fish. When He was finished, there were still baskets of bread leftover after everyone had eaten. The people were stunned and impressed, to the point that they were convinced that Jesus was indeed the Messiah and wanted to crown Him king because of the miracle or “sign” He had performed. However, in the dialogue that followed, Jesus was insistent that they were missing the point. Look at this passage:

### **John 6:26-35**

*Jesus answered them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you. For on Him God the Father has set his seal.” Then they said to him, “What must we do, to be doing the works of God?” Jesus answered them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom he has sent.” So they said to him,*

*“Then what sign do you do, that we may see and believe you? What work do you perform? Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’” Jesus then said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is He who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” They said to him, “Sir, give us this bread always.” Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.”*

Jesus acknowledged that they were drawn to Him because He fed them with bread, but He didn’t want them to stop there. The bigger picture was that they were in the presence of the Son of Man, and that He Himself was the “food that endures to eternal life.” Note how they referenced the story from Exodus 16, of their forefathers receiving bread from heaven. They understood exactly the claim Jesus was making.

Jesus responded by reminding them that the same God who provided bread “from heaven” in the wilderness was now giving them Jesus Himself, “the bread of God is He who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” When Jesus says, “I am the bread of life,” He is telling the disciples that He is God, and that He has been sent by God to satisfy the deep hunger for eternal life that lies within each of them.

## **Why did John include this claim for his first century audience?**

Provision through bread and through the harvest was a huge daily anxiety in the first century world. Will it rain? Will it be too cold? Too hot? Will our harvest be enough? The Greek answer to these questions was Demeter, the goddess of the harvest. Temples to Demeter have been excavated in more

than twenty ancient Greek cities, which makes sense because bread was such a commodity in the ancient world. The ancient playwright Euripides referred to Demeter as the “goddess Demeter - call her Earth if you like - who nourishes mortals with solid food.” She was also called, “she of the grain.” In other words, the Greeks already had a “bread of life,” and her name was Demeter. I picture John showing up in Ephesus, learning that they considered Demeter to be the one who “nourishes mortals with solid food,” and laughing to himself as he remembered back to the conversation with Jesus after the miraculous feeding.

John lived in a world that was asking the right question (who will provide?) but had the wrong answer. I think it probably was painful for John to watch his friends worship and trust in Demeter, who wasn't even real, so he wanted to give them the right answer to the right question. Three times Jesus said “I am the bread of life,” and He made it clear that what He meant by that was that God had sent Jesus as the provision for all mankind forever.

## **What does this claim mean for us today?**

We all crave nourishment, so we all trust in someone or something to be our “bread,” or to be our provider. The story of Jesus' temptation is helpful here, because I think often when we are tempted (or suffering, or afraid) we will call upon a trusted idol rather than turning to God for help. It's important for each of us to recognize our “go to” bread, the person or thing that tends to replace Jesus as our provider. Whether it's food, alcohol, material things, achievement, or power, there are plenty of options for us to pursue as we attempt to fill ourselves. Like Demeter, they all promise to provide and to nourish. Like Demeter, that promise is temporary and will leave us empty.

In Jesus we have the true bread of life that God has provided from above, the one who will sustain us for eternity.

Practically speaking, how do we “eat” the bread that is Jesus? First, we nourish ourselves with God’s Word, the Bible. John says that when Jesus became a man the “Word became flesh.” Jesus was the human embodiment of God’s Word, which means when we read and reflect on the Bible we are taking in Jesus. Jesus Himself modeled this for us, when He quoted Deuteronomy 8:3 in the face of temptation: “man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.” We “eat” the bread that is Jesus by “eating” every word of the Bible.

The second way we “eat” the bread that is Jesus is to focus on the cross. Jesus said, “the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.” (John 6:51) Jesus gave His very body on the cross, His own flesh and blood, in order for us to have eternal life.

I think sometimes we tend to know in the back of our minds that Jesus sacrificed His flesh on the cross for us, but our daily “bread” is the pursuit of comfort or the attempt to prove our worth through good morals, or some other temporary thing. My prayer is that our focus would always return to Jesus on the cross as the true bread provided by God, because, as Jesus said, “whoever feeds on this bread will live forever.” (John 6:59)



# Consider This

- What is your strategy for regular interaction with the Bible? Who else is (or could be) involved with this part of your life?
- Having enough to eat was a daily worry for John's audience, and there are certainly people in our own community that this is true for as well. What are the common worries in your life? To whom or what do you go when you're worried about these things?
- Corrie Ten Boom (a Dutch Christian who helped many Jews escape the Nazis) said, "You may never know that Jesus is all you need, until Jesus is all you have." Do you live like you believe this is true, or do you find it difficult to believe that Jesus is enough? Where have you experienced God's provision in your life? What does this tell you about what God has in store for you eternally?

# Light

## John 8:12

*Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."*

## What are the Jewish roots of this claim?

The Jewish tradition regarding light goes all the way back to Genesis 1. Into the formless darkness God spoke: "And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. And God saw that the light was good. And God separated the light from the darkness." (Genesis 1:3-4) Because of these verses the Jews understood the following:

- Light was very important, since God spoke about it first.
- God was the source of light.
- Light was good.
- Darkness was not good.

Consider the benefits light provides. When it's dark, we can't see. It's difficult to discern what's true. We can become confused, uncertain, and afraid. The introduction of light changes all of that. It brings clarity and truth. When we can see we are able to take comfort. Because God created and introduced light, the Jews considered light to be one of the great blessings provided by God. Light represented God's presence and God's truth. The Psalmist said, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path." (Psalm 119:105) The

Jews knew that God gave clarity and direction to life through the wisdom of His Word.

The Prophets, particularly Isaiah, point to God's provision of a "great light" who will come to save the world and bring glory to God:

## **Isaiah 9:2-3, 6**

*The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone. You have multiplied the nation; you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as they are glad when they divide the spoil. For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*

## **Isaiah 60:1-3**

*Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you. And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising.*

## **Isaiah 35:4-5**

*Say to those who have an anxious heart, "Be strong; fear not! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you. Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened.*

When Jesus says, "I am the light of the world," the Jews would have recalled passages like these, wondering if indeed this

man who claimed to be “the light” was the promised son spoken of by the Prophets who would open the eyes of the blind.

## **What did this claim mean to Jesus’ audience when He said it?**

The story that precedes Jesus’ statement is about a woman caught in the act of adultery. Jesus had been teaching in the temple, and the Pharisees dragged the woman through the crowd in front of Jesus and asked Him if she ought to be stoned to death. Rather than respond to their question, Jesus knelt and began writing in the dirt on the floor of the temple. John doesn’t tell us why Jesus did this. Maybe what He wrote was something significant, or perhaps He was trying to draw attention away from the humiliated woman. Whatever the case, the Pharisees persisted with their questioning, so after a few minutes Jesus stood up and said, “Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her.” (John 8:7) This was a brilliant statement by Jesus. One by one everyone walked away until “Jesus was left alone with the woman,” although I suspect John was still lingering closely by so he could overhear. Jesus said to the woman, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” She said, “No one, Lord.” And Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more.” (John 8:10-11)

Typically when I’ve heard sermons or teachings from this passage the story will end there. It’s such a powerful interaction, with a pointed application that we’re all guilty of sin and should be careful not to throw stones at others. But the story doesn’t end there. In fact, it continues through the end of chapter 8, almost fifty more verses of dialogue take place between Jesus and the Pharisees, dialogue that was provoked by Jesus.

After He finished talking to the woman, it says, “Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, ‘I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.’” Remember, everyone was walking away. Jesus could have dropped the mic. He had silenced His critics by answering their question (should we stone the woman?) emphatically. Instead, He calls them back in order to remind them “again” that He’s not just there giving moral lessons about judging others, He’s there as the Savior of the world, to help people escape from the darkness of their sin into the light of God’s truth. The Pharisees were predictably flustered by this claim, which is why such a long discussion ensued. The chapter and the discussion came to an end when Jesus said, “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I Am.” (John 8:58) Every Jew in the crowd would likely have known that Jesus was claiming to be God, for two reasons. First, Jesus was saying He existed before Abraham, who had died hundreds of years earlier, so He was essentially calling Himself eternal. Second, Jesus called Himself “I Am,” which was the name God had told Moses He wanted to be called in Exodus 3:14. Many of the Jews in the crowd were so incensed by Jesus’ claim that now they picked up stones to throw at Jesus, but He was able to hide and slip away without harm.

## **Why did John include this claim for his first century audience?**

The “god of light” in the Greek world was Zeus’ son Apollo, who was also known as the god of truth and of prophetic utterances. Most major cities in the Roman Empire had prominent temples and / or statues in honor of Apollo. The typical temple to Apollo functioned like a psychic hotline or fortune teller does today. It housed a person who functioned as the “oracle” for Apollo. Worshippers who wanted to hear wisdom from Apollo would give money or make a sacrifice, and then the oracle would consult with Apollo and come back with

advice or predictions about the future. It was said that a lie could not fall from the lips of Apollo, so he was considered the ultimate source of truth. Apollo was thought of so highly that even the narcissistic emperor Domitian sought the advice of Apollo and had coins minted with the image of Apollo on them. When John wrote that Jesus said, “I am the light of the world,” it would have started a great discussion. Most Greeks would have responded with, “no, Apollo is the light of the world,” giving John a chance to tell them more about Jesus.

## **What does this claim mean for us today?**

There are all kinds of voices in our culture today claiming to be voices of truth. I think about politicians, bloggers, musicians, psychics, pundits, and screenwriters, each advancing their own version of truth. Ironically, the other consistent message about truth in our culture is that each person needs to find or define their own version of truth. You’ll hear statements like “be true to yourself,” or “the truth lies within.” With so much debate about truth happening around us, Jesus’ claim to be the “light of the world” is just as startling in our culture today as it was in the first century world, because light exposes truth. In the middle of the debate with the Pharisees Jesus made a famous statement. He said, “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” (John 8:31-32) Because Jesus is the one true “light of the world,” He is the one true source of wisdom and truth. This means that freedom from the darkness of sin is found in the truth that is Jesus Christ. It also means the Bible is truth. In Romans 3:2 Paul calls God’s Word the “oracles of God.” The good news is, unlike with Apollo, we don’t need to give an offering or make sacrifice in order to hear truth and wisdom from God. The Bible is readily accessible to us at all times.

The other part of Jesus’ teaching that is very powerful is that we are expected to be “light” in the world on His behalf. In

John 9:5, Jesus said, “While I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” In a sense, Jesus is always in the world, because He is always present everywhere. At the same time, now that He is no longer physically present He has chosen to shine His light through us. Consider what Jesus said in Matthew 5:14-16, “You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.” Our challenge is to live bright and noticeable lives, in the process causing others to get a clear look at Jesus.

## Consider This

- The use of the physical metaphor of light vs. darkness to help us understand a spiritual reality still holds true today. When we are in a state of confusion, depression, or isolation, we often describe these as “dark times.” Can you think of a time where you have been in darkness, only to have a “light” help you on your way?
- Jesus said, “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” (John 8:31-31) Consider the pathway to truth and freedom Jesus describes here. Do you “abide” in the word of Jesus? Are you, “truly,” a disciple of Jesus? Do you know the truth? Are you free? How might your thoughts and actions change to better line up with these verses?
- Who do you know that is experiencing darkness? How could you show them the light of Jesus?

# Shepherd

## John 10:7-11

*So Jesus again said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”*

## What are the Jewish roots of this claim?

The shepherding culture was a desert culture, and therefore very prominent in the desert land of Israel. Sheep were relied upon as sources of meat, milk, and wool. They traveled in groups in order to protect one another as they searched for food, water, and shade. The shepherd cared for these flocks, directing them toward fresh water to drink and grass to eat. They would also defend them from the predators and threatening elements of the desert. The Bible tells us that Abel, Abraham, Jacob and his sons, Rachel, Moses, David, and Amos were all shepherds by trade. Because of this there is quite a bit of shepherding imagery found in the Old Testament.

Perhaps the most widely known example of this is David's Psalm 23:

## Psalm 23

*The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He*



*restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.*

In the Jewish mind, God is the shepherd. He provides. He leads. He restores. He guides. He protects. David says God is “my shepherd.” It’s personal. The shepherd knows each of the sheep, and the sheep trust their shepherd. Being under the care of a good shepherd leads to blessing.

At the same time, the Jews also recognized that not all shepherds were good. The Prophets spoke about this as well:

## **Jeremiah 23:1-2, 5-6**

*Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!” declares the Lord. Therefore thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who care for my people: “You have scattered my flock and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. Behold, I will attend to you for your evil deeds, declares the Lord. Then I will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. I will set shepherds over them who will care for them, and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, neither shall any be missing, declares the Lord. Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel*

*will dwell securely. And this is the name by which he will be called: 'The Lord is our righteousness.'*

Jeremiah speaks about leaders who have done a poor job “shepherding” their people, and then foretells a day when the Lord will provide a better shepherd who will save and protect and rule with righteousness.

## **What did this claim mean to Jesus' audience when He said it?**

Jesus is again talking to the Pharisees here, and the question they had asked Him was “are we also blind?” (see John 9 for context) Based on Jesus' response He doesn't necessarily think they're blind, but He does seem to believe they've done a terrible job of shepherding their flock. He says, “all who came before Me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them,” and then he also calls them “strangers” and “hired hands.” While this language had broad meaning, it was also a clear indictment of the Pharisees, and I imagine it further infuriated them against Jesus.

Once again Jesus is claiming to be the Messiah, because He refers to Himself as both “I Am” and “the good shepherd.” These are titles that were associated with God Himself, and Jesus is using them to describe Himself. John tells us that many of the Jews thought Jesus “had a demon, and [was] insane.” I wonder if there were others in the crowd who were intrigued by Jesus' words, and even hopeful at the prospect of following a better shepherd.

## **Why did John include this claim for his first century audience?**

The Greek god of the flock was called Pan, who was also god of the hunter and the forest. The Greeks associated the worship of Pan with fear and uncertainty, apparently because being alone in the forest with the flock or hunting game were considered to be dangerous activities. As a result, the worship ceremonies in his honor were pure chaos, and are some of the filthiest and darkest things I've ever read about.

Because Pan was the god of the wild, he was not worshipped in temples. Instead, they would gather on the side of a mountain or in a cave out in nature and cut loose. Our words “panic” and “pandemonium” originate from these highly sexual and immoral “celebrations,” and it was not uncommon for people to get pregnant or injured or even to die during a Pan festival. The idea was that being out of control during worship meant that Pan would provide peace and protection when you were out in the wild.

The entire Pan cult stands in direct contrast to the description Jesus provides of Himself as the “good shepherd” in John 10. The shepherd Jesus is there to protect the sheep from thieves, robbers, and strangers, so the sheep feel safe and free under His care. Jesus knows His sheep intimately, so He will not flee like a hired hand when the wolves arrive. In fact, Jesus is so invested in His sheep that He will die to save them. Three different times Jesus says that He “lays down His life” for His sheep. Whereas the worship of Pan requires a person to lose themselves for the sake of Pan, the good shepherd Jesus has chosen to lose His life on our behalf.

## **What does this claim mean for us today?**

If Jesus is “the good shepherd,” that means that we are sheep. We were designed to be on the move, but that comes with inherent risks. Our survival, our peace, and our productivity depends on the shepherd we follow. There are good shepherds, and then there are thieves and robbers. Jesus said, “I am the door. If anyone enters by Me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they might have life and have it abundantly.” (John 10:9-10) The more we read and reflect on God’s Word, the better we are able to distinguish the voice of our shepherd from the other voices that call out to us on a daily basis. In addition, part of our responsibility then becomes to be good shepherds for others, helping them to recognize the voice of Jesus and allowing them to follow us as we follow Jesus.

## **Consider This**

- Christians are sometimes referred to as “sheep” as an intended insult. What is the culture’s understanding of being a sheep? How is this different than what the Bible is describing?
- How does a sheep know the right shepherd to follow? How do we determine which teachers are teaching us correctly, and which ones we need to watch out for? How often are you listening to the Shepherd, letting him guide and protect you through the Word?
- How does Jesus feel about lost sheep? How can we be good shepherds to others who might not yet know Jesus?



# Life

## John 11:25-26

*Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?"*

## John 14:6

*Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."*

## What are the Jewish roots of this claim?

The Jews understood that God was the author of life. The very first person came into existence like this: "Then the Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature." (Genesis 2:7) God not only created man, He literally breathed life into his body. Consistently throughout the Old Testament God is life:

## Deuteronomy 32:39

*'See now that I, even I, am He, and there is no god beside me; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and there is none that can deliver out of my hand.'*

## Nehemiah 9:6

*You are the Lord, you alone. You have made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them; and you preserve all of them; and the host of heaven worships you.*

## Job 33:4

*The Spirit of God has made me, and the breath of the Almighty gives me life.*

With the truth that God is the author of life also came the realization that God also has complete control over death and eternity as well. In Psalm 139:16 it says, “in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them.” No one is alive apart from God, not even for one day. In fact, it would be worth your time to read all of Psalm 139, as the Psalmist describes the intimate detail with which God is involved in our lives. For the Jews, life came from God, life was sustained by God, and it was also God who held the keys to eternal life.

## What did this claim mean to Jesus' audience when He said it?

Two different times Jesus said, “I am the life,” each in a different context. The first time was at the funeral of His friend Lazarus, as Jesus was consoling Lazarus' sister Martha. His message to Martha was a message of hope. He told her that her brother would rise again, because resurrection and life come through Jesus. This must have been immensely comforting for Martha, to hear Jesus promise that Lazarus had eternal hope because of his belief in Jesus. Jesus then asked Martha if she believed that she would never die if she had faith in Him, and Martha assured Jesus that she did. Again, I can't

imagine how comforting this must have been to Martha, to be reminded that not only would Lazarus live for eternity, but that she would be there to join her brother.

The second time Jesus said, “I am the life,” He was in a completely different situation. He and the disciples had arrived in Jerusalem for their final Passover feast, and Jesus was just a few days from being arrested and crucified. Jesus wanted to be as clear as He possibly could with the disciples about their eternal future:

## **John 14:1-6**

*Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. And you know the way to where I am going.” Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.*

Jesus was anticipating His death, and wanted to comfort His disciples. He assured them that there was plenty of room for them in heaven because they believed in Him, and that He would be coming back to get them. Once again Jesus asserted His deity by calling Himself “I Am,” and also by saying He was the only way to the Father.

## **Why did John include this claim for his first century audience?**

The Greek view of the afterlife was a fascinating one. Hades was the god of the underworld, which was a grey place where the Greeks believed everyone went after they died. They also



believed that there were different levels of enjoyment in the afterlife. How pleasant things were in the afterlife was dependent on how noble your life was, and also by how well you were remembered by others after you died. If you lived a good life and were remembered with fondness, you would enjoy an afterlife in a sunny place called “Elysium.” Those who lived immoral lives or were forgotten after they died lived for eternity in darker places. Because of this, people who had not yet died attempted to live good lives to earn a better afterlife, and they also made an effort to remember their loved ones who had died so their loved ones could have a better afterlife as well.

As we’ve seen already, there was no shortage of first century voices claiming to be “the life.” Domitian and the other Roman emperors insisted that life was found in them, and there were countless Greek gods and goddesses who promised life in one form or another. John included the Lazarus story in his Gospel in order to challenge the first century view of both life and the afterlife. Jesus showed up at a funeral and claimed to be “the resurrection and the life,” and then backed it up by raising His friend Lazarus from the dead. By sharing this story John dropped a grenade into their worldview, boldly claiming that Jesus alone was the answer to every single question about life and death.

## **What does this claim mean for us today?**

Jesus’ statements about life and death are some of the most significant statements in the history of the world. There are all kinds of beliefs about what happens after we die. Some people believe there is no afterlife. Others think like the Greeks, that we earn our place in the afterlife based on our performance in our lives on earth. Still others believe that every time anyone dies heaven “gains an angel,” regardless of what they believed or who they followed.

Jesus makes a different claim. He says that eternal life is found in Him. Only Him. No one, not one person, comes to the Father except through Jesus Christ. Not only that, true life here on earth is also found in His name as well. Following and serving Jesus is the “way” in this life.

If His claims are true, they demand our attention, and this is a message we should desperately want to share with as many people as possible. We spend so much of our time focused on less important things, temporary things. I implore you, reader, to believe in Jesus, and in doing so to find life in His name.

## Consider This

- What are some common views of the afterlife that our culture holds?
- In both instances where Jesus talks about being “the life,” resurrection occurs, but not in the time-frame that people expect. The Jews believed the soul remained near the body for three days after death in hopes of returning. At the point Jesus gets to Lazarus, all hope (in their eyes) is gone. Jesus moved as God directed, not as people pressured. In the same way, when Jesus himself was crucified, he waited on God’s timing instead of his own to resurrect. Sometimes a situation seems hopeless when in fact God is just waiting to bring about new life. What are some situations you’ve encountered where you thought it was over, but then God showed up?
- If Jesus’ claim is correct - that eternal life is found in Him and only Him – how does this impact our priorities? How should this change the way we spend our time and the way we interact with others?



# Vine

## John 15:5

*I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.”*

## What are the Jewish roots of this claim?

The hillsides in Israel are filled with terraced vineyards that produce a rich bounty of grapes, alongside olive, fig, and pomegranate trees. The grapevines required meticulous and tender care in order for the grapes to thrive. The vine keeper carefully pruned the branches and used the strategic placement of sticks to tie vines upright in order to keep grapes from dragging in the dirt.

The grapes from these vineyards were harvested in the fall, and the Jews celebrated this harvest annually with a huge celebration in Jerusalem called the Feast of Booths, or “Succoth.” They would offer thanksgiving and prayers to God for His provision during this important harvest season, and ask God for rain and for fruitfulness in their harvest. Each season the Jews would harvest the grapes and dump them into wine “presses,” rectangular stone basins they had hewn out of the rock. They would then dance and walk on the grapes with their feet, pressing out the juice through holes they had dug in the sides of the stone.

The Old Testament is full of vineyard imagery:

## Isaiah 5:1-7

*Let me sing for my beloved my love song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; and he looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes. And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. What more was there to do for my vineyard, that I have not done in it? When I looked for it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes? And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and briers and thorns shall grow up; I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it. For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting; and he looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed; for righteousness, but behold, an outcry!*

The Jews saw the vineyard as a metaphor for life, with God as the vineyard keeper tenderly caring for the vines (the lives of His people) in hopes of seeing fruit. Here in Isaiah God is depicted as the owner and caretaker of an unfruitful vineyard, who finally gets fed up and stops caring for it because it won't produce fruit. God says, "judge between me and my vineyard," meaning: do you think the unfruitfulness is God's fault, or is it the unwillingness of the people to yield?

## What did this claim mean to Jesus' audience when He said it?

In John 15 Jesus was in the middle of a lengthy discourse (it lasts four full chapters) with His disciples, preparing them for

the reality of His coming death on the cross. Here is the entire statement Jesus made about the vine and the branches:

## John 15:1-8

*I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.*

Jesus' message to the disciples is clear. The goal is fruitfulness, and the key to fruitfulness is being connected to Jesus. God desires fruitfulness, to the point where He will "prune" branches, meaning He will cut off those parts that are preventing growth in order for the entire vineyard to "bear more fruit." The branches that abide in the vine will be fruitful, and God is glorified when the disciples of Jesus are fruitful. In contrast, the branches that do not abide in the vine are not useful. Jesus says, "apart from Me you can do nothing." There are many opinions about what "fruit" and "fruitfulness" are specifically referring to in this passage. Paul's description of the "fruit of the Spirit" in Galatians 5:22-23 is a helpful text for this discussion.

## **Why did John include this claim for his first century audience?**

Dionysus (or “Bacchus”) was the Greek god of wine and the grape harvest as well as one of their fertility gods. The worship festivals of Dionysus were similar to those of Pan, involving several days of drunken unrestraint in celebration of the grapes and the wine that Dionysus had provided.

Dionysus was also the god of “ritual madness,” which is a good description of what took place during the festival. Our word “bacchanal,” which is a wild, drunken celebration, comes from “Bacchus,” the name the Romans used for Dionysus. The Dionysus temples were often located near the theater, so stage productions were a huge part of the Dionysus cult. For example, the massive theater in Athens was dedicated to Dionysus, as was the one in Pergamum, and in both cities the temple to Dionysus was built right next to the theater itself.

The annual festival began with Dionysus turning water to wine, and culminated with the worshippers eating raw flesh and drinking blood from animals. John replays these images in his Gospel, with Jesus as the central figure rather than Dionysus. He is the only Gospel writer who included the story of Jesus turning water to wine (see John 2), and he also included this statement from Jesus: “whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.” (John 8:54) In addition we have the “I am” statement in John 15, where Jesus calls Himself the “true vine.” Those who believed in Dionysus or had participated in one of the Dionysus festivals would have been challenged by John’s account, because what they believed about Dionysus and what John wrote about Jesus could not both be true at the same time.

## **What does this claim mean for us today?**

Jesus is the true vine, and He wants us to “abide” in Him. “Abide” is a tricky word to define. Synonyms include accept, remain, obey, observe, and follow. I think it means we stay close to Jesus, we keep our eyes on Jesus, and we keep the commandments of Jesus. If we wander off and forget about Jesus and ignore His commands, that doesn’t sound like “abide” to me.

It’s easy to judge the people of old that are described in Isaiah, but we’re just as prone to stray from God and become unfruitful as they were. It’s easy to be dismissive of the strange practices of Dionysus, and wonder how anyone could possibly “abide” in the drinking of blood, but we listen to, and “abide” in, all kinds of voices that draw us away from Jesus. If we want to be fruitful, meaning we want to grow in character and help others find Jesus, we need to accept, observe, follow, obey, and remain with Jesus.

## **Consider This**

- Is there fruit in your own life? What do you think it means to be “fruitful”? Read Galatians 5:22-23. How do we produce this kind of fruit?
- Jesus says that unless we “abide in him” we can do nothing. Nothing! What does this tell us about our own self-efforts or striving to improve or be a better person? What are we to do instead?
- What specific “abiding” steps are you taking in your life that will allow you to best accept, obey, observe, and follow Jesus?





# PART THREE: APPENDIX

## Final Thoughts

At first it was amazing to me how each of the “I Am” claims in John were so closely tied to one of the cults from the Greek world. However, the more I’ve studied the life of John the more I’ve realized how God uniquely prepared him to bring the Gospel to the Greek and Roman world. The claims Jesus made to His Jewish audience translated perfectly into John’s new environment because John was intimate with Jesus and because he was willing to study his culture in order to find the best points of connection.

We have the same opportunity and challenge in front of us today. Do we struggle to proclaim Jesus because we’re not very intimate with Jesus, or is it more because we don’t know our culture very well? We need to do both.

The good news is that, unlike John, we have the Gospel of John as a tool in our hands to share Jesus with others. Often someone will say to me, “I want to read the Bible! Where do I start?” I always point them toward John. We’re more like the Greeks than we like to admit, which is why John’s Gospel tends to resonate with folks who are newer to the Bible and to Christianity.

One final thought. I think John the Baptist provided a great example for us as we aim to help others connect with Jesus. John the Apostle described John the Baptist as “a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through Him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light.” (John 1:6-8)

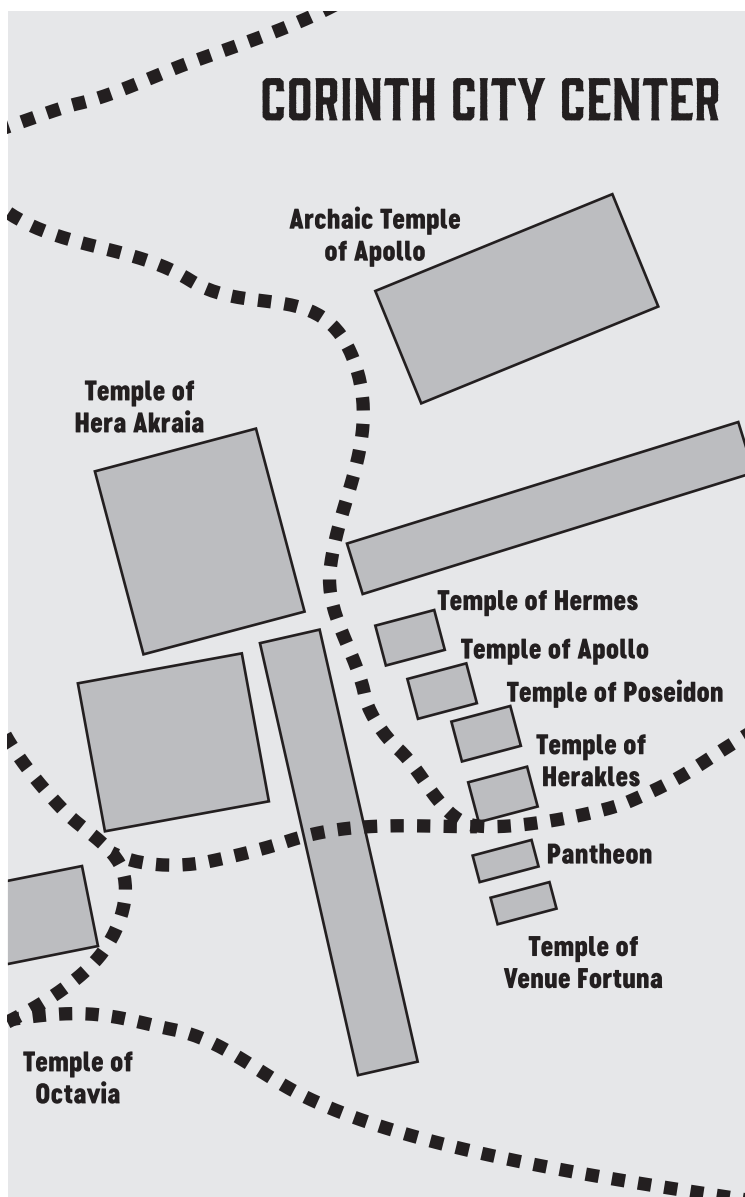
John the Apostle makes it clear that John the Baptist knew who he was, and who he was not. For him it was simple, Jesus was the light of the world. John the Baptist was not the light of the world. His purpose was to bear witness about the light, to point others to the light, to help others find the light. When John the Baptist showed up and people asked him who he was, his response was, “I am not the Christ.” Then when Jesus arrived on the scene, John was quick to point to Him and to tell everyone he possibly could that Jesus was the guy they needed to follow.

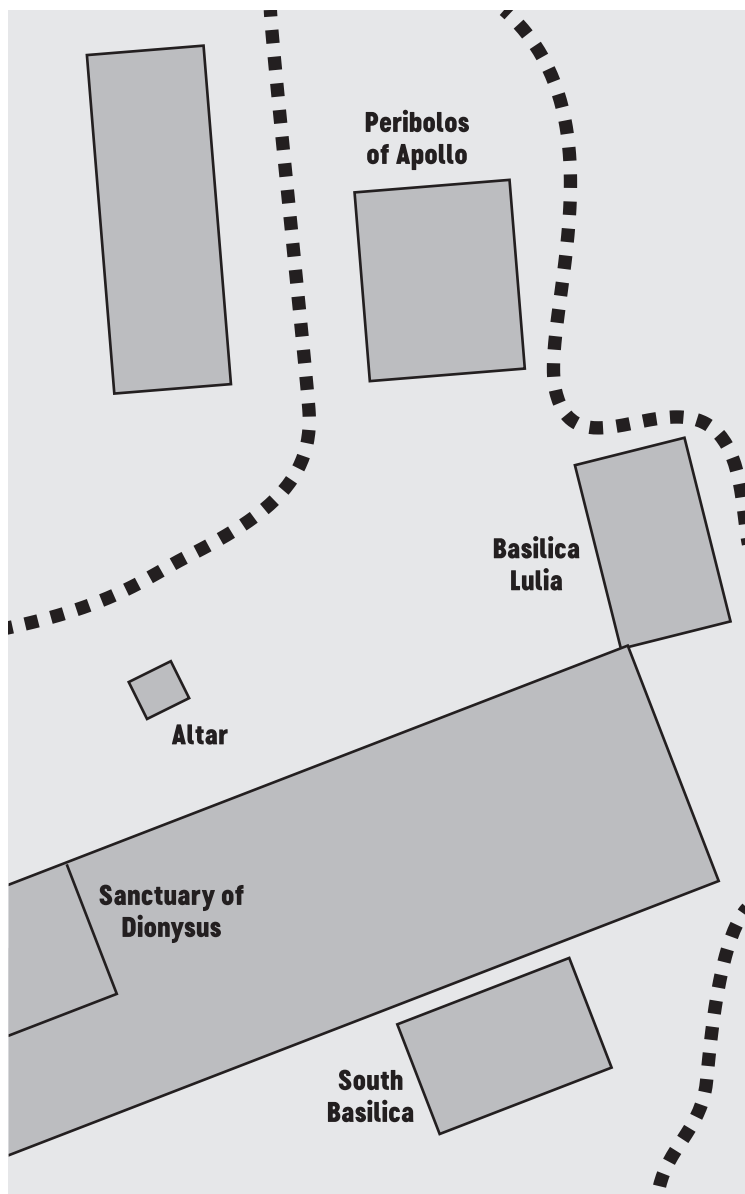
So pick up the book of John and consider Jesus. Become intimate with the “light of the world.”

Then imitate John by learning your culture. Position yourself with the same posture as John the Baptist, here for the sole purpose of pointing others to the light.

Jesus said it best: “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” (John 8:32)





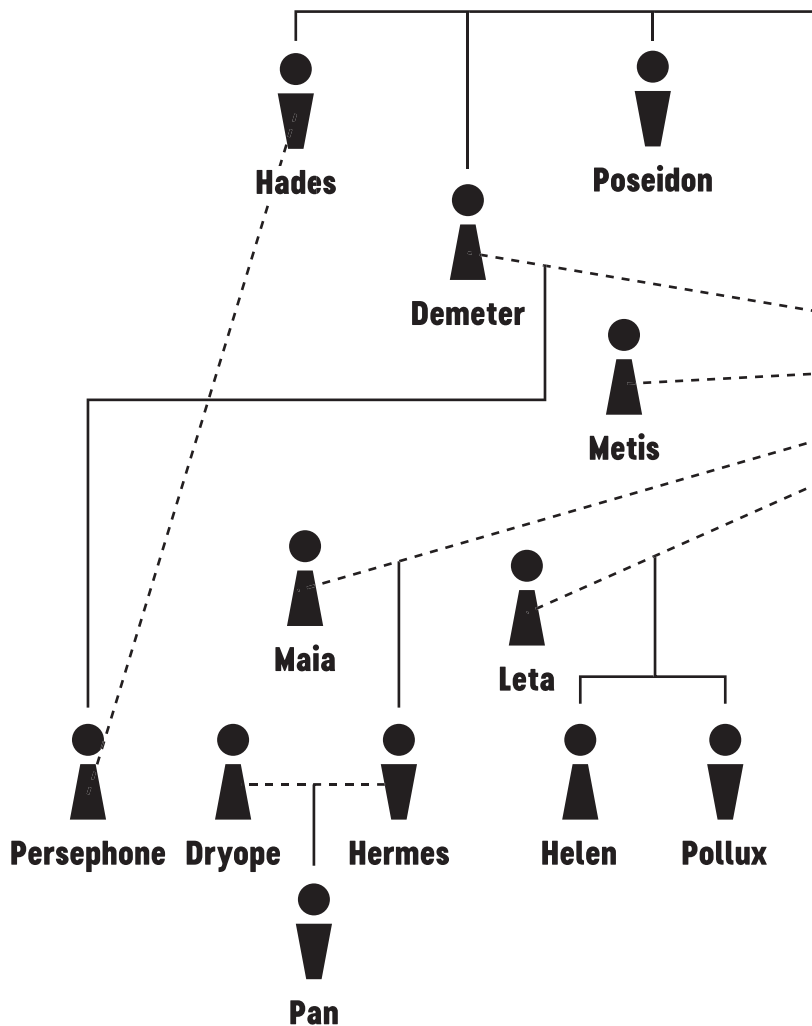


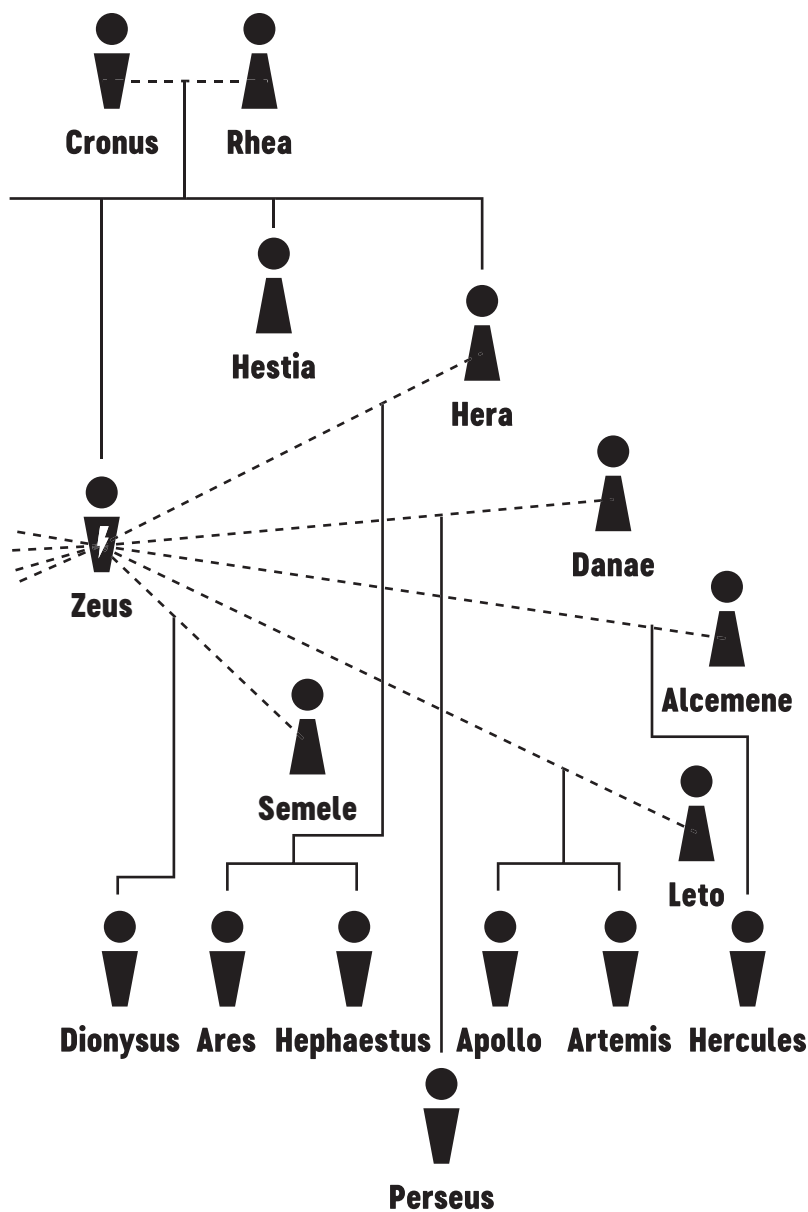






# ZEUS FAMILY TREE







# Reading Plan

This is a six-month reading plan to study through the New Testament book of John alongside other supporting passages each weekday.

If you're holding this book in your hands and it's currently the 2016-2017 school year, you can follow along with Riv's weekend messages by reading the passages as broken out here.

## ☐ Week 1 (9.11.16)

John 1:1-18

John 1:1-5, Genesis 1

John 1:6-8, Malachi 3:1-4

John 1:9-13, Isaiah 53

John 1:14-18, Luke 2:1-21

## ☐ Week 4 (10.2.16)

John 3:22-36

John 3:22-24, Matthew 4:12-17

John 3:25-30, Luke 7:18-35

John 3:31-36, Ephesians 1:11-14

John 3:22-36

## ☐ Week 2 (9.18.16)

John 1:19-2:12

John 1:19-23, Isaiah 40:1-5

John 1:24-34, Matthew 3

John 1:35-51, Genesis 28:10-17

John 2:1-12, Matthew 22:1-14

## ☐ Week 5 (10.9.16)

John 4:1-42

John 4:1-9, Acts 10

John 4:10-26, Deuteronomy  
11:25-12:9

John 4:27-38, Matthew 9:35-58

John 4:39-42, Acts 8:4-25

## ☐ Week 3 (9.25.16)

John 2:13-3:21

John 2:13-25, Deuteronomy  
16:1-8

John 3:1-8, 1 Peter 1

John 3:9-16, Numbers 21:4-9

John 3:16-21, 1 John 4:7-12

## ☐ Week 6 (10.16.16)

John 4:43-5:17

John 4:43-45, Matthew 13:53-58

John 4:46-54, John 2:13-25

John 5:1-9, Matthew 9:1-8

John 5:10-17, Exodus 20:8-11

**□ Week 7 (10.23.16)**

John 5:18-47

John 5:18-24, Acts 17:22-31

John 5:25-29, Daniel 7:13-14

John 5:30-36, Mark 1:1-8

John 5:37-47, Luke 24:13-27

**□ Week 8 (10.30.16)**

John 6

John 6:1-15, Mark 6:30-44

John 6:16-21, Matthew 14:22-33

John 6:22-59, Exodus 16

John 6:60-71, Matthew 16:13-20

**□ Week 9 (11.6.16)**

John 7

John 7:1-24, Leviticus 23:33-44,  
Psalm 25

John 7:25-31, Matthew 11:25-30

John 7:32-39, Deuteronomy  
18:15-22

John 7:40-51, Micah 5:1-6

**□ Week 10 (11.13.16)**

John 8:1-20

John 8:1-5, Luke 21:34-48

John 8:6-11, Romans 2:1-11

John 8:12-14, Isaiah 42:1-9

John 8:15-20, 1 Samuel 16:7

**□ Week 11 (11.20.16)**

John 8:21-59

John 8:21-30, Matthew 27:32-44

John 8:31-38, Romans 6

John 8:39-47, 1 John 3:8-15

John 8:48-59, Exodus 3

**□ Week 12 (11.27.16)**

John 9

John 9:1-7, 2 Kings 5:1-14

John 9:8-17, Matthew 12:1-14

John 9:18-23, Romans 10:5-13

John 9:24-41, Psalm 34

**□ Week 13 (12.4.16)**

John 10:1-21

John 10:1-6, Isaiah 40:9-11

John 10:7-13, Ezekiel 34:1-31

John 10:14-18, Isaiah 53

John 10:19-21, Matthew 10:34-39

**□ Week 14 (12.11.16)**

John 10:22-42

John 10:22-30, 1 John 5:6-20

John 10:31-33, Philippians 2:1-11

John 10:34-39, Psalm 82

John 10:40-42, John 1:19-34

### ☐ **Week 15 (12.18.16)**

John 11:1-54

John 11:1-16, 1 John 2:7-11

John 11:17-27, Daniel 12:1-15

John 11:28-44, Luke 19:41-44

John 11:45-54, Matthew 26:1-5

### ☐ **Week 16 (2.12.17)**

John 11:55-12:50

John 11:55-12:8, Mark 14:3-9

John 12:9-19, Zechariah 9:1-13

John 12:20-36, Luke 14:25-33

John 12:37-50, Isaiah 6

### ☐ **Week 17 (2.19.17)**

John 13:1-30

John 13:1-5, Acts 5:1-11

John 13:6-11, Luke 22:24-30

John 13:12-20, Mark 10:35-45

John 13:21-30, Luke 22:3-6

### ☐ **Week 18 (2.26.17)**

John 13:31-36

John 13:31-36, 1 John 1

John 13:31-36, 1 John 2

John 13:31-36, 1 John 3

John 13:31-36, 1 John 4-5

### ☐ **Week 19 (3.5.17)**

John 14

John 14:1-7, Ephesians 2:11-22

John 14:8-14, Matthew 7:7-11

John 14:15-24, 1 Corinthians 2:6-16

John 14:25-31, Hebrews 4:14-16

### ☐ **Week 20 (3.12.17)**

John 15:1-16:15

John 15:1-11, Isaiah 5:1-7

John 15:12-17, Ephesians 5:1-21

John 15:18-16:4, Psalm 69

John 16:5-15, Psalm 25

### ☐ **Week 21 (3.19.17)**

John 16:16-33

John 16:16-22, Matthew 9:14-17

John 16:23-24, John 14:1-14

John 16:25-28, Psalm 78:1-8

John 16:29-33, Matthew 26:30-35

### ☐ **Week 22 (3.26.17)**

John 17

John 17:1-5, Matthew 28:16-20

John 17:6-11, Hebrews 7

John 17:12-19, Hebrews 2:5-18

John 17:20-26, Romans 8:1-10

**□ Week 23 (4.2.17)**

John 18

John 18:1-11, Matthew 26:36-46

John 18:12-18, Matthew 26:69-75

John 18:19-27, Isaiah 45:14-25

John 18:28-40, Mark 10:32-34

**□ Week 24 (4.9.17)**

John 19

John 19:1-16, Romans 13:1-7

John 19:17-27, Psalm 22

John 19:28-30, Psalm 69

John 19:31-42, Psalm 34, Zechariah 12

**□ Week 25 (4.16.17)**

John 20

John 20:1-10, 1 Corinthians 15

John 20:11-18, Matthew 28

John 20:19-29, Acts 2

John 20:30-31, 1 John 5:13-20

**□ Week 26 (4.23.17)**

John 21

John 21:1-8, John 1:35-51

John 21:9-14, Matthew 26:17-30

John 21:15-19, 1 Peter 5:1-5

John 21:20-24, Matthew 16:24-28

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# Message Videos

This book has corresponding messages that were taught across Riverview Church's venues in the fall of 2016 and spring of 2017. Visit *rivchurch.com* or download Riverview Church's app by searching "rivchurch" in your App Store to view the videos.

A digital version of this book, Life Group conversation starters, and other resources can be viewed and downloaded by visiting *rivchurch.com/considering-jesus*.