

To Whom Shall We Go?

John 6:66-71

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“Peter answered him, ‘Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God’” (Jn. 6:68-69).

In our study of John’s Gospel, we have had a number of occasions to compare John with the three other Gospels – Matthew, Mark, and Luke – known as the Synoptic Gospels (*synoptic* means *similar*). It is generally held that John wrote much later than the others, in part to provide information to complement them. Yet there is still essential agreement between John and the Synoptics. One place where we notice this is at the end of John chapter 6.

According to the Synoptics, the turning point of Jesus’ public ministry took place shortly after his miracle of feeding the five thousand. This episode ended his public ministry in Galilee; now Jesus focused on training his disciples and began his own march to the cross. But, first, Jesus led his twelve disciples to Caesarea Philippi, a regional center of pagan worship. There, facing idols to all the false gods, Jesus asked them, “Who do you say that I am?” Peter’s answer is known as the Great Confession: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Mt. 16:15-16). That confession prompted Jesus to say, “You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church” (Mt. 16:18).

John also locates the turning point of Jesus’ ministry in the aftermath of the miraculous feeding. But he tells us of a different occasion when Jesus challenged the Twelve, this time as the crowds were rejecting his teaching. The five thousand so-called “disciples” had followed Jesus when he filled their bellies. But when he taught the

great truths of his gospel – especially God’s sovereign grace in salvation and Christ’s atoning death on the cross– John tells us, “Many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him” (Jn. 6:66). As we see in this concluding passage of John 6, the line between false and true disciples is always drawn by the teaching of biblical truth.

On both occasions – before the idols in the Synoptic Gospels and before the faltering disciples in the Gospel of John – Jesus was testing the faith of his closest followers. Both are stern tests for believers, who must be willing to stand alone with Jesus against both pagan idolatry and religious unbelief.

PETER’S CONFESSION OF FAITH

It is striking that Jesus did not seem to be bothered by the departure of the crowd. Nor did he dilute his teaching to make it more palatable. F. F. Bruce describes the situation: “What they wanted, he would not give; what he offered, they would not receive.”¹ Jesus was willing to allow the religious consumers to turn away, instead focusing on the few who were committed disciples.

There is a lesson in this for us. Many today would say that Jesus made a mistake by preaching such a challenging biblical message that so dramatically reduced the number of his followers. His sermon, they would say, should have been less demanding, more practical, and shorter. But, Frederick Godet comments: “Jesus preferred by far a little nucleus of men established in faith and resolved to accept the self-denials which it imposed, to those multitudes whose bond of union with his person was only an apparent one.”²

As the crowds were leaving, Jesus turned to the Twelve and asked, “Do you want to go away as well?” (Jn. 6:67). As usual it was Peter, often impetuous but always sincere, who answered. His reply is a classic statement of Christian resolve: “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life” (Jn. 6:68). This answer, John’s version of Peter’s Great Confession, serves as a mini-course in Christology, that is, the Bible’s teaching about Christ.

¹ F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 164.

² Frederick Louis Godet, *Commentary on the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1893), 2:47.

First, Peter addressed Jesus as “Lord”. This term was sometimes used as a form of polite address, much as we say “Sir” today. But, given what Peter goes on to say, it is clear that he addresses Jesus as *the divine Lord*. When the New Testament refers to Jesus as Lord it grants him the homage paid to Yahweh in the Old Testament. Psalm 27:1 says, “The LORD is my light and my salvation.” Peter was ascribing this same honor to Jesus. He had learned this from Jesus’ miracle of feeding the five thousand. The same Lord who gave Moses manna in the exodus had come to earth in the form of a man.

Second, Peter had learned that Jesus is *the unique Savior* for the world. He answered: “To whom shall we go?” There were many religious options in Peter’s day. They might turn to the mystical paganism that Jesus would soon show them at Caesarea Philippi, with its exotic pleasures for the mind and body. They might go back with this crowd to the religious legalism of Judaism. But if they were to find a divine salvation that truly meets the needs of sinners and brings us to God, there is no alternative to Jesus Christ. He is the only true Savior; “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (Jn. 14:6), he said.

This leads to Peter’s third observation: “You have the words of eternal life” (Jn. 6:68). This reminds us that Jesus is *the true giver of life*. Eternal life comes through a trusting relationship with Jesus, including present satisfaction for the soul and unending glory in the life to come. This, too, had been a lesson of Jesus’ miracle. The same Jesus who had been able to feed a vast crowd with a few fish and loaves can also meet the needs of our souls. Jesus said, “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst” (Jn. 6:35). Knowing this, Peter gained the courage to resist following the unbelieving crowd. He realized that, as John Calvin explained, “as soon as they have gone away from Christ, nothing remains for them but death, wherever they go.”³

Fourth, Peter says, “You are *the Holy One of God*” (Jn. 6:69, italics mine). This is not a commonly used title for Jesus. Elsewhere in the New Testament it is only heard from a demon Jesus cast out of a man in the synagogue of Capernaum – likely the very synagogue where

³ John Calvin, *New Testament Commentaries*, trans. T.H.L. Parker, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 4:178.

Jesus was preaching in John 6. The demon cried: “I know who you are – the Holy One of God” (Mk. 1:24). Perhaps Peter remembered the earlier occasion and thus recalled this truth about Jesus.

It says much that the demons refer to Jesus as “the Holy One of God.” This shows the contrast between Jesus and Satan, an absolute contrast between holiness and evil. It also shows that Jesus is the One who came to deal with the problem of sin. In his first epistle, John writes, “The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil” (1 Jn. 3:8).

One way to understanding Jesus as “the Holy One of God” is to contrast him with other holy men in the Bible. Consider the difference between Jesus and the holy prophet Elijah. Elijah once was staying in a widow’s home, when the widow’s son fell sick and died. So Elijah prayed and God brought him back to life. The woman rejoiced, saying to Elijah, “Now I know that you are a man of God” (1 Ki. 17:17-24). The Gospel of John shows Jesus also bringing the dead back to life. However, Jesus did not raise his friend Lazarus by praying, but by speaking (Jn. 11:43-44). Elijah prayed *to God*, but Jesus acted *as God*. Whereas Elijah was *a* holy man, whose prayers could raise the dead, Jesus is *the* Holy One who above all others has the authority to do God’s work on earth. Lazarus’ sister, Martha, said to him, “You are the Christ, the Son of God” (Jn. 11:27).

Peter’s answer not only tells us about Jesus, but it helpfully depicts what it means to come to faith. He says, “We have believed, and have come to know” (Jn. 6:69). This is opposite of how the world thinks. The world argues that we can only believe after we have come to know. But the Bible teaches that we first believe God’s Word, and having believed we gain understanding from God. Hebrews 11:3 says, “By faith we understand.” James Boice comments, “The secret to arriving at a point of certainty in spiritual things is that we must believe what God tells us. Then, believing, we will find knowledge following.”⁴

If you are waiting to believe until you understand all the divine things taught in the Bible, then you will never understand or believe. Faith comes by receiving Scripture because it is God’s Word. Jesus said,

⁴ James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John*, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 2:543.

“The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life” (Jn. 6:63). Peter’s answer echoed back in faith, “You have the words of eternal life” (Jn. 6:68). That is the conviction from which faith always proceeds.

A REMINDER OF SOVEREIGN GRACE

This obviously was the reply that Jesus was seeking and expecting from the Twelve. We might therefore think he would congratulate Peter for his answer. Instead, he replied, “Did I not choose you, the Twelve?” (Jn. 6:70).

Jesus probably detected a trace of pride in Peter’s answer, since the Twelve had remained while the great crowd had departed. In the Greek of John 6:69, the word order suggests some boasting in Peter’s confession of faith: “*We* have believed,” he emphasized, in contrast to the unbelieving crowd. But Jesus did not want Peter to take credit for his faith or put on an air of spiritual superiority. It is true that Peter stood out for his faith, but this was not because Peter possessed some native excellence in spiritual things. It was all by God’s sovereign will: “Did I not choose you?” A similar concern is seen in Jesus’ reply to Peter’s Great Confession in Matthew. Peter had said, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Jesus answered him, “Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven” (Mt. 16:16-17). Peter’s faith did not arise out of himself, but by God’s sovereign choice and saving revelation.

This emphasis on God’s sovereignty in salvation puts the exclamation point on a chapter that is singular in stressing this doctrine. All through John 6, Jesus has insisted that salvation is by God’s election, that is, by his sovereign choice of specific persons to believe and be saved. John 6:37 says, “All that the Father gives me will come to me.” And all those given to Christ will certainly be saved: “This is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me” (Jn. 6:39). Moreover, Jesus added, “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him” (Jn. 6:44). This explains why the crowd rejected him: “This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father” (Jn. 6:65). Finally, he insists that it was only by divine election that Peter gained the ability to believe: “Did I not choose you, the Twelve?” (Jn. 6:70).

The first thing that Peter needed to know about his vaunted “we” is that they were set apart by a sovereign grace.

Many Christians resist the doctrine of election (so named for the Greek word for *chosen*), also known as predestination, on the grounds that it violates human freedom. Jesus deals with this objection in John 8, denying that sinful mankind possesses free moral will. He says, “Everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin” (Jn. 8:34). His point is that sin has so enslaved mankind that we do not possess the moral and spiritual ability even to believe the gospel. The wonder is not that *not everyone* believes, but that *anyone* believes. The reason some people come to Christ is that God chose them to receive his gift of faith.

A second objection, that divine election is unfair to those not chosen, is dealt with by the apostle Paul in Romans 9. Paul points out that if what we want is fairness and justice, then as sinners we will all perish in a fair and just condemnation. Salvation results from God’s mercy to the guilty, and mercy is always freely given, not deserved. Paul explains, “[God] says to Moses, ‘I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.’ So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy” (Rom. 9:15-16). The only way for anyone to be saved is by God’s sovereign mercy; as Paul concludes, “He has mercy on whomever he wills” (Rom. 9:18).

Jesus wanted Peter to remember this, not to make him proud but instead to make him humble. Peter declared, “We have believed.” Jesus reminded him, “Did I not choose you?” (Jn. 6:69-70).

JESUS AND JUDAS

Not only must Peter not take credit for his saving faith, but he should not presume on the basis of his privileges. For even though Jesus had chosen these twelve men to be his inner circle, he added, “Yet one of you is a devil” (Jn. 6:70). Even in this band of Jesus’ closest followers – those most privileged to see his miracles and hear his teaching – there was one who did not believe and who ultimately would betray Jesus. John explains, “He spoke of Judas the

son of Simon Iscariot, for he, one of the Twelve, was going to betray him” (Jn. 6:71).

This statement makes the important point that Judas Iscariot never believed in Jesus. Those who would deny our security in salvation often point to Judas as an example of one who was chosen but later fell away. But, instead, this passage proves that Judas never was saved. Judas was not chosen to eternal life, but to earthly discipleship; all along Jesus knew that Judas was not truly one of his own. It would be a year before Judas betrayed Jesus to the chief priests, but even now Jesus says, “One of you is a devil” (Jn. 6:70). Judas was a servant of Satan – one who was animated not by eternal life but by the same evil spirit as the devil. Had Judas ever believed and been saved then he never could have fallen away and betrayed Jesus. For as Jesus had taught: “This is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day” (Jn. 6:40). Had Judas ever been saved, this promise would be disproved.

So why Jesus would choose an agent of Satan to be one of the Twelve? Why would a person who was not elected to salvation be chosen to be among the Twelve? Arthur Pink points out six reasons why Jesus chose Judas to be one of his close companions, each of which tells us something important about our Lord and his gospel.

First, by choosing Judas as one of the Twelve, Jesus *displayed his perfect obedience to the will of his Father*. Hebrews 10:7 tells us that Jesus came into the world to fulfill the words of Psalm 40:7-8, “Behold, I have come to do your will, O God, as it is written of me in the scroll of the book.” One of the prophecies recorded in God’s book required that Jesus be betrayed by a close friend: “Even my close friend in whom I trusted, who ate my bread, has lifted his heel against me” (Ps. 41:9). Jesus included such a person in his band of companions so as to fulfill God’s Word. When you are betrayed for your faith, you can take comfort in knowing that Jesus experienced the same for you.

Second, the choice of Judas *provided an impartial witness to the moral excellency of Christ*. We might expect Jesus’ close friends to praise his holiness, but the witness of his betrayer is all the more

significant. Before killing himself, Judas declared Jesus to be sinless: “I have sinned by betraying innocent blood” (Mt. 27:4).

Third, the choice of Judas *gave occasion to uncover the awfulness of sin*. Judas enjoyed the close friendship of Jesus and witnessed his entire saving ministry, yet still betrayed him. This shows us the level of sin of which we are capable unless we should gain eternal life in Christ.

Fourth, this *supplies sinners with a solemn warning*. Pink writes, “The example of Judas shows us how near a man may come to Christ and yet be lost.” Those who put on religious airs or frequent the church, but who do not yield their hearts to Jesus, are in the gravest peril. The example of Judas proves that “a man may witness the most stupendous marvels, may hear the most spiritual teaching, may company with the most godly characters, and yet himself never be born again.” This highlights the urgency of believing on Jesus Christ.

Fifth, *we may expect to find hypocrites among the followers of Christ*. Judas was not an honest unbeliever. He deceived people by pretending to follow Jesus. He even preached the gospel, while not believing it himself (Mt. 10:4). He played his act so well that none of his peers doubted that he was a disciple. But Jesus knew all along, just as he knows the truth of every heart today. Judas’ hypocrisy ended with his betrayal of Jesus, damning his own soul. There are Judases among us today – many of them occupying pulpits in the church – and we must not be dismayed when they are discovered.

Sixth, Jesus’ choice of Judas to be one of the Twelve *affords one more illustration of how radically different are God’s thoughts and ways from ours*.⁵ This is not how we would orchestrate the coming of the world’s Savior. Likewise, God has ordained many things that seem unwise to our way of thinking. But the wisdom of God’s choice of Judas was unfolded at the cross, where our sins were put away by Christ’s blood. Let us always trust God’s higher wisdom for the world and for our own lives, humbling ourselves before his majesty, trusting his providential care and learning to embrace even the difficult teachings of his Word.

⁵ Pink, 363-365.

A DECISIVE QUESTION

As we conclude our study of John 6, let us reflect on the decisive question that Jesus asked his disciples. It is a question he puts before each of us today: “Do you want to go away as well?” (Jn. 6:67). The world is not following Jesus. His teaching causes people to scoff and ridicule. His gospel and the way of life to which he calls us are out of fashion – to say the least.

The choices are many. You may go back to your former way of life. But do you not remember how empty of meaning and purpose it was to live without Jesus? You may have sought happiness through the pleasures of sin. But was that life satisfying? You may have been worldly, adopting the values of our generation: materialism, egotism, and sensualism. But, having come to Jesus, would you really go back?

Or you might leave Jesus for some other religion. You might seek out emotional experiences or ecstatic spiritual highs. You might try to look for God within yourself or take up rituals that promise inner harmony and peace. You might take a more liberal approach to the Bible that avoids the hard teaching of the cross. You might hold onto your pride before God, turning to the dead moralism for which the Jewish crowd of John 6 abandoned Jesus. But where will you find forgiveness for your sins if you turn away from Jesus? If you have had any experience with Peter’s claim of faith – “You have the words of eternal life” – then you will also say with him, “Lord, to whom shall we go?” (Jn. 6:68).

But if you realize that only Jesus has the words of life, then you must also realize that being his disciple may require you to stand with Jesus while others are turning away. You will have to follow him even when the path seems dark and his commands are hard to accept. And you will have to take up your cross – dying to sin, self, and the world – to follow where Jesus leads.

Jesus calmly watched as the masses of unbelievers turned their backs and walked away. He asked the Twelve, “Do you want to go away as well?” And when Peter, speaking for the others, answered, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life,” Jesus was satisfied. “Did I not choose you,” he said.

And having chosen this little band, eleven of whom would truly believe, Jesus looked confidently to the future. His path led to Judas' betrayal and his death on the cross. But beyond the cross lay a crown of glory and through the witness of just that small band of true disciples multitudes would believe and come to him. "For this is the will of my Father," he had said, "that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day" (Jn. 6:40).