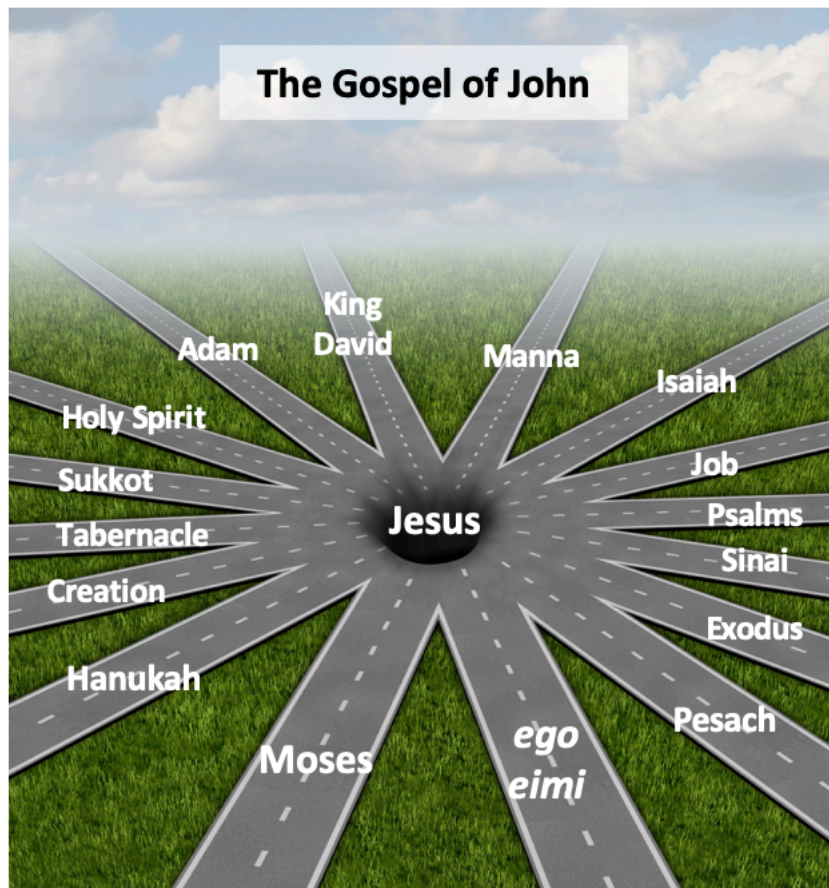


Reading the Old Testament Through John Overview

More than perhaps any other Gospel, the Gospel of John takes many roads found through the history and instructions of the Old Testament, converging them in the life of Jesus Christ. John recounts the major Jewish festivals of Sukkot (the “Festival of Booths”), Pesach (“Passover”), and even Hanukkah (the “Festival of Lights”). More than that, John follows notable people in the Old Testament, using their stories and positions to illustrate the significance of the ministry and calling of Jesus. Echoes of King David, Jacob, and Adam are found within John. Direct references and comparisons to Moses occur over and over. Abraham is a central figure in John’s gospel.



John takes his readers through notable events and actions of the Old Testament, finding in them foreshadowing of the work of Jesus the Messiah. The Exodus, the Ark of the Covenant, the tabernacle and more are woven into the tapestry that John gives his careful reader. John’s use of the Old Testament is often direct, appealing to Isaiah and other prophetic words about the Messiah, but is also often indirect,

referencing Zechariah, Ezekiel, the Psalms, and more in ways that will occur only to those well-steeped in the Old Testament. The first several words of John, are repetitive of the first words of the Old testament.

In John, the reader hears Jesus clearly proclaim himself the Messiah. John explains stories, making sure the reader understands without question that Jesus is God, not simply some holy prophet. John also wrote with a full view of what Jesus as Messiah meant for his followers in the church. Whether using Paul's language from the Ephesian letter, or expressing Jesus' prayers for the future church, John shows that the incarnated Jesus sits squarely in the center of human history, giving definition and meaning to humanity's past and future.

John is a marvelous book for reading through and getting to know Jesus. But it is also a book worthy of a deep dive, seeking the nuggets that are often overlooked. Diligent study, an intimacy with the Old Testament, an understanding of 1st century Judaism, and awareness of the issues of the early church, are all tools that can bring greater clarity, light, and appreciation for the Gospel of John. That is the goal of this study.

Who, What, When, and Where?

Because John is so intricate below the surface, and because the theology of John is so developed, scholars have long recognized that the book was not written as the first gospel. While Matthew, Mark, and Luke all tell many of the same stories, often using the same word choice, John strikes out on a different path. Even a casual reading of John seems to indicate that John was aware of the earlier three gospels, and that John choose to write supplemental material, not simply reworking the narratives and events found in the other gospels. John's message is distinct. John's stories are ones that add important events to the biography of Jesus, providing an additional level of depth to the Messiah's life, death, and resurrection.

Scholars often use the phrase "synoptic gospels," to reference Matthew, Mark, and Luke. These three gospels "see things the same," the core meaning of the word "synoptic."¹ Certainly, the synoptic gospels have distinctions, but overall they follow the same principal geographical outline (Jesus starts in Galilee and makes his way to Jerusalem where he is crucified and resurrected), bring out the same basic miracles and events in the life of Christ, and deliver many of the same teachings and sermons of Jesus. Each gospel provides a slightly different perspective, much as Rembrandt painted multiple self-portraits to capture different perspectives on his personality and life. But not so the Gospel of John. John, gives a radically different

¹ "Synoptic" is a compound of two Greek words: συν (*sun*) indicating "with" and ὀπτικός (*optikos*) referencing something visual or how something looks.

approach. John's account adds multiple trips of Jesus going in and out of Jerusalem during his ministry, while the synoptics, do not speak of Jesus ministering in Jerusalem until the very end of his time on earth (Matthew 20; Mark 11; Luke 19). In each of the synoptics, Jesus stays in and around Jerusalem until his crucifixion. John, however, has Jesus in Jerusalem clearing the temple and attending Passover as early as chapter two! Jesus then goes back into Galilee in chapter four, only to return to Jerusalem in chapter five. In chapter six, Jesus is back in Galilee, but in chapter seven Jesus returns to Jerusalem. John also differs from the synoptics by presenting different miracles and giving different teachings. Even when John does reference events that are covered in the synoptics, he adds an additional layer of theology onto them.

The early church recorded historical information that makes great sense with John's distinct approach. Irenaeus (c.140-c.202) wrote of his memories interacting with Polycarp (c.70-c.156). Polycarp hailed from Smyrna (modern Turkey), near the area of Ephesus where church history records that the apostle John lived and taught in the later part of his long life. Thinking of Polycarp, Irenaeus wrote,

I remember the events of that time more clearly than those of recent years. For what boys learn, growing with their mind, becomes joined with it; so that I am able to describe the very place in which the blessed Polycarp sat as he discoursed, and his goings out and his comings in, and the manner of his life, and his physical appearance, and his discourses to the people, and the accounts which he gave of his intercourse with John and with the others who had seen the Lord. And as he remembered their words, and what he heard from them concerning the Lord, and concerning his miracles and his teaching, having received them from eyewitnesses of the 'Word of life,' [a Johannine term] Polycarp related all things in harmony with the Scriptures.²

In another book, Irenaeus reiterates that the writer of John's gospel was none other than the apostle John, writing late in his life from Ephesus.

Afterwards, John, the disciple of the Lord, who also had leaned upon His breast, did himself publish a Gospel during his residence at Ephesus in Asia.³

Timewise, this places the Gospel of John several decades after the dates many give for the synoptic gospels. The history is consistent with what one reads in John. John

² Recorded by Eusebius in his *Ecclesiastical History*, V.xx.5-6.

³ *Against the Heresies*, iii.1.2

gives the impression of a work that came substantially after the other gospels. Not only in reading like a supplementation of the prior gospel accounts but in the way it is well thought out theologically. John reflects decades of growing in understanding of the ministry of Jesus as one might expect later in time than the less theological synoptic gospels. This substantiates the early church writer Clement of Alexandria who was quoted saying,

But, last of all [after Matthew, Mark, and Luke], John, perceiving that the external facts had been made plain in the Gospel, being urged by his friends, and inspired by the Spirit, composed a spiritual⁴ Gospel. This is the account of Clement.⁵

Understanding this history makes great sense not only of the additions in John's gospel, but also the deletions. There was no need in John's gospel to recount the baptism of Jesus, it was in the already public synoptic gospels. Similarly, the calling of all twelve apostles, the temptations, and much of the material included in the synoptics were not included in John.⁶

John's gospel is the mature and ripened gospel of reflection that comes easily after fifty years or more of preaching and living the Christian faith. John's gospel shows a depth of perception, a fluency with Hebrew thought and Scripture, and a ready usage of Greek thought. Yet in spite of all these impressive themes and an equally impressive architecture to the book, the Greek of John is hardly elegant. The writing style works well to communicate the message, but it is not the flowing literary Greek found, for example, in Luke. This is an interesting set of factors that fits well with the idea of John or someone similar writing (or dictating) the gospel. It has incredibly well-developed theology, well-nuanced ideas, and yet is written in very common language, rather than the flowing Greek of more elegant literature.

⁴ "Spiritual" is the Greek word πνευματικός (*pneumatikos*). The word references something spiritual in the sense of "pertaining to God." Carson suggests an understanding of it as "symbol-laden." Carson, D. A., *The Gospel According to John*, (1991 Eerdmans), at 29. I suggest the idea of "spiritual" in the sense of what many would today call a "theological gospel," meaning that it speaks of events in a spiritual sense, or a sense of how it pertains to spiritual matters. This is much like Paul used the word "spiritual" in 1 Corinthians 3.

⁵ Recorded by Eusebius in his *Ecclesiastical History*, VI.xiv.7.

⁶ While the early church was virtually unanimous in ascribing the fourth gospel to John, the last several hundred years of scholarship have offered alternative views. I do not probe those now, for they are based upon material within the gospel itself, and the gospel material must be studied before assessing the newer novel ideas of authorship.

The Old Testament in John

One finds in John marvelous subtleties, as well as point blank bluntness, in discussing God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and the Christian faith. Aspects of John fit in well with Greek thought and philosophy, but at its core, John carries strong Hebrew themes. It begins in Chapter one and carries on through the end of the book. In this overview lesson, three surface examples are given, but the real significance will be gained in the coming lessons that more deeply probe these examples along with others.

1. *The Themes from Creation*

John's gospel, has a running echo of Genesis that is found in the words of the gospel as well as the structure. John chapter one begins with the same phrase as Genesis one found in the Greek version of the Old Testament (the "Septuagint"⁷). The first words in Genesis and John begin, "In the beginning..." In Genesis, the next word is the verb "created" followed by the subject who did the creating, "God." In John, "In the beginning" is followed by the verb "was" and then the noun "the Word." Genesis 1 continues to tell *how* God created. God created all things into existence by speaking them into existence. God *said*, "Let there be light." God *said*, "Let us make man." It was the word of God that brought all things into existence. It was the word of God that gave structure and meaning to the world. It was the word of God spoken and expressed in the beginning. No Hebrew could have read John's gospel and not understood that John was echoing Genesis and the word God used to bring forth life and meaning on this world.

Genesis 1:1	Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἐποίησεν ὁ θεὸς
John 1:1	Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος
A comparison of the first phrases in Genesis and John shows the similarities	

Another subtler echo of the creation is found in a full reading of John's gospel. In the creation story of Genesis 1, God miraculously creates in seven days (the seventh day as a day of rest was just as important as the days of activity, perhaps even more so as the one that was hallowed in the Ten Commandments). After the seven days,

⁷ The Greek translation of the Old Testament, commonly called the Septuagint, was made by Jewish scholars affiliated with the massive library in Alexandria, Egypt, as early as two-hundred years before the birth of Jesus. These Greek copies of the Old Testament were in use among Jews dispersed throughout the Mediterranean world. Paul, following in the footsteps of his mentor Rabbi Gamaliel, more often than not used a Greek translation of the Old Testament when writing to the churches outside of Jerusalem.

Genesis leaves the reader with the story of Adam and Eve tending the Garden of Eden.

John's structure runs parallel in the same way. John does not include many of the miracles of the synoptics, John limits his miracles to seven, the same as the number of creation days.⁸ John even notes that,

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these [seven] are written 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 (Jn 20:30-31).

John's seven miracles, start with the creation of wine from water in John 2:1-11. Next, John recounts Jesus healing an official's son in John 4:43-54. John's third miracle is Jesus healing at the pool of Bethesda in John 5:1-15. The fourth is the feeding of the 5,000 in John 6. In the same chapter miracle five is detailed where Jesus walked on water. Miracle six is the healing of a blind man in John 9. The last

⁸ Notably, in the time and culture of John and the Ancient Near East "seven" meant more than the mathematical number. "Seven" also stood for "completeness" and "fullness." Seven as a symbolic number dates back in ancient Near Eastern cultures for thousands of years in Hebrew and other related Semitic languages. While the origin of this thought is not known, some scholars believe it derives from adding three, the well-rounded sacred number to four, the completeness of the world. This provides the number seven, a complete number of things sacred and earthly. (The same principle is cited for the number 12, which is three times four, and is also indicative of godly perfection or totality.) This number carried the symbolic meaning in a number of references throughout Biblical times and geography/cultures. There are many Biblical examples of seven as God's complete number. (Gen. 4:15 – God announced a seven-fold vengeance on any who kill Cain; Gen. 7:2ff – Noah was instructed to take seven pairs of all clean animals into the ark. Noah also took seven birds. God set to commence his rains in seven days; Gen. 8:4-12 – Noah's ark rested on the seventh month the seventh plus ten day. After seven days Noah sent out a dove. Seven days later he sent out another dove; Ex. 21:2 – Hebrew slaves were to be released after seven years; Ex. 22:30 first born cattle were to be given to YHWH after seven days of life; Ex. 23:11 – Fields were to be left fallow in the seventh year; Ex 24:16 – YHWH had Moses wait on Sinai until the seventh day before he spoke to him; Ex 25ff – The priests' rituals before YHWH repeatedly are built around sevens: seven lampstands, seven days of priestly garb, seven days of consecration, etc.) There are also countless examples from Roman and Greek culture as well as the Babylonian and Egyptian cultures of the Ancient Near East.

miracle of Jesus is the resurrection of Lazarus, giving life to a dead man (similar to the last miracle of creation where God breathed life into Adam). John recorded no more miracles of Jesus than those seven. After those seven, John recorded the death and resurrection of Jesus (a miracle of God the Father). In a continuation of the Genesis storyline, after the resurrection, there is a new creation in Christ. Notably, it is John's gospel that has Jesus mistaken for a gardener, the job of Adam after the first seven days of creation in Genesis.

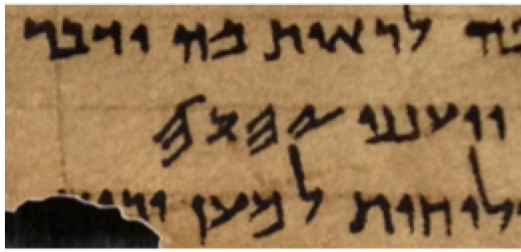
2. *Jesus and Moses*

Moses is always associated with the story of Israel's exodus, receiving the Law on Sinai, and leading Israel through the wilderness wanderings, feeding them with God's manna, finding water in the desert, and bringing both judgment and mercy upon a rebellious people. At the end of the books of Moses, Moses told Israel to be watchful, that God would be sending another like Moses, yet even greater. John makes it clear that prophecy was finally fulfilled in Jesus.

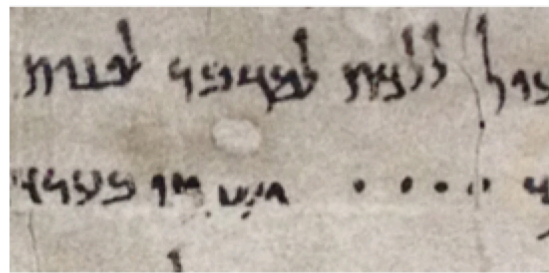
John wrote with expressing many echoes of the Exodus story. Repeatedly in John, one reads that Jesus was superior to Moses in ministry as well as personage. So Moses instructed Israel in the ways associated with the holy tabernacle, the place where God would meet his people. John explains that Jesus *was* the holy tabernacle (Jn. 1:14). While the truth that was the Law came through Moses, John explained that grace *and* truth came through Jesus Christ (Jn 1:17). Moses and the prophets wrote of God's words to the people, but Jesus was the fulfillment of their writing (Jn 1:45; 5:45-46). Moses lifted up a serpent to cure diseases in the wilderness, but Jesus would be personally lifted up to cure humanity from all the curses of sin (Jn 3:14). Through Moses people got daily manna, but Jesus was the actual bread of life from God (Jn 6:32). Those who refused to see Jesus as Christ claimed to be following Moses, yet they refused to follow the one to whom Moses pointed (Jn 1:28-29).

3. *The "I Am" statements*

"I am" is the best interpretation that scholars can give to the Hebrew name for God, *YHWH*. To pronounce *YHWH* was itself considered blasphemy by Jews. The name of God was too holy to be uttered. In fact, it was rarely even written. The Dead Sea scrolls give good evidence of how Jews at the time would treat the name of God. In the scrolls the name of God (*YHWH*) received two main treatments. Most often, the scribes who were writing the scrolls would simply eliminate the name, replacing it with four dots (one for each letter). Occasionally the name *YHWH* was spelled out, but done so in ancient Hebrew letters rather than the Aramaic letters in use at the time.



The middle line of this passage from the Habakkuk Pesher ("commentary") shows the name *YHWH* are the last four letters to the left. They are written in ancient Hebrew script instead of the Aramaic script in the rest of the document.



In this passage from the scroll of discipline, we can see the four dots used for the four letters in the name *YHWH*.

When Moses encountered God in the burning bush on Sinai, Moses asked God what his name was. Our English Bibles give God's answer as follows:

God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." And he said, "Say this to the people of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you'" (Ex. 3:14).

In the Greek translation of this at John's time, the name of God written "I AM who I AM" is *ego eimi ho on*. *Ego eimi* is one way in Greek to say "I am," and *ho on* is a second. Over and over in the Greek text of Moses' encounter with God, one reads God using "*ego eimi*" in describing himself:

- **Ex. 3:6** And he said, "I am [*ego eimi*] the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.
- **Ex. 7:5** The Egyptians shall know that I am [*ego eimi*] the LORD, when I stretch out my hand against Egypt and bring out the people of Israel from among them."
- **Ex. 8:22** But on that day I will set apart the land of Goshen, where my people dwell, so that no swarms of flies shall be there, that you may know that I am [*ego eimi*] the LORD in the midst of the earth.
- **Ex. 14:4** And I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and he will pursue them, and I will get glory over Pharaoh and all his host, and the Egyptians shall know that I am [*ego eimi*] the LORD." And they did so.
- **Ex. 14:18** And the Egyptians shall know that I am [*ego eimi*] the LORD, when I have gotten glory over Pharaoh, his chariots, and his horsemen."

- **Ex. 20:2** I am [*ego eimi*] the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

John brings this same holy expression into the words of Jesus, and John does so in ways that indicate that Jesus was proclaiming himself as both God and Messiah. Jesus took the mantle of God as God presented himself to Moses. There are four places in John's Greek text where Jesus explicitly says, *ego eimi* ("I am") without any predicate. In other words, these are just simple proclamations of Jesus as "I AM." These passages make sense if one sees Jesus assuming the title or mantle of God and his holy name. Otherwise they seem to be incomplete sentences. An English reader awaits a predicate to go behind "I am..." like "I am this," or "I am that." It reads so awkward that the translators occasionally smooth the English. I will use the English Standard Version below, but take out the smoothness to be more literal:

- **John 8:24** I told you that you would die in your sins, for unless you believe that I am [*ego eimi*] you will die in your sins.
- **John 8:28** So Jesus said to them, "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am [*ego eimi*], and that I do nothing on my own authority, but speak just as the Father taught me.
- **John 8:58** Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am [*ego eimi*]."
- **John 13:19** I am telling you this now, before it takes place, that when it does take place you may believe that I am [*ego eimi*].

In these interactions, Jesus was likely not speaking Greek, but was speaking Aramaic (or Hebrew). John's translation makes it clear, however, as does the context, that Jesus was making the claim of being YHWH, and likely actually saying the name in the process. Pronouncing the name of God is what brought the Jews to the point of stoning him. That Jesus would pronounce the name of God was alone sufficient grounds for stoning. That Jesus would do so in a context where Jesus claimed the title for himself was utterly blasphemous – unless, of course, it was true. That thought did not enter the people's mind. Although if that thought had entered their minds, if they had known the truth, then the truth would have indeed set them free.

In other places, Jesus also spoke such that John translated *ego eimi* with predicates as well, echoing the Exodus passages earlier. Jesus spoke as YHWH indicating himself the presence in the burning bush as he explained what it meant. No longer

was it “*ego eimi* who brought you out of slavery.” Now it is *ego eimi* in a magnificent new way:

- **John 6:35** Jesus said to them, “I am [*ego eimi*] the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst. (John added that in response to this “the Jews grumbled about him because he said ‘I am [*ego eimi*] the bread that came down from heaven’” – Jn 6:41).
- **John 8:12** Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, “I am [*ego eimi*] the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”
- **John 10:9** I am [*ego eimi*] the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture.
- **John 10:11** I am [*ego eimi*] the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.
- **John 11:25** Jesus said to her, “I am [*ego eimi*] the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live.
- **John 14:6** Jesus said to him, “I am [*ego eimi*] the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.
- **John 15:5** I am [*ego eimi*] 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.

One of the most stunning comes in the Garden of Gethsemane. There Jesus asks the mob who they have come for and they said, “Jesus of Nazareth.” Jesus’ response was significant. He said simply, *ego eimi*. At this, John recorded that the crowd “drew back and fell to the ground!” Jesus could make no more awesome divine claim, nor could John more clearly carry out the Hebrew themes in his gospel!

A final note on the *ego eimi* passages involves Jesus repeatedly pointing out even as he was the *ego eimi*, he was revealing the true name of the Father. As Moses wanted to know God’s name so that he could more clearly communicate to the people exactly *who* was calling them forth from Egypt, so Jesus used this name to personally demonstrate *who* not only called the Israelites out of Egypt, but who called the world out of darkness and sin into light and forgiveness:

- **John 17:6, 26** “I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world...I made known to them your name, and I

will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.”

- **John 5:43** “I have come in my Father's name, and you do not receive me.”
- **John 10:25** “Jesus answered them, “I told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name bear witness about me, but you do not believe because you are not among my sheep. My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.”
- **John 17:11** “And I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one.”
- **John 12:23, 28** “And Jesus answered them, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified...Father, glorify your name.” Then a voice came from heaven: ‘I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.’”

CONCLUSION

In some ways, time and maturity ripen a message. John’s gospel came at a time where he had seen and understood the implications for much of what Jesus lived and taught, as John had decades to teach it. The fruit of this is found in his “spiritual gospel,” as it lays out the amazing incarnation, ministry, and redemptive death and resurrection of Jesus. The coming lessons will illustrate more of this in a deep dive studying the uniqueness of John.

POINTS FOR HOME

1. *“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” (Jn 1:1).*

We hear this so many times that I fear it might lose its profundity in our lives. Yes, Jesus was with God and was God. Is there more to it than that? Absolutely! Jesus was not an accident. He was not a Plan B for God. He was something that God had recognized from before creation would be necessary. Yet he was involved in creation from the beginning. We often say that God so loved the world that he sent Jesus. We should never lose track of the fact that Jesus so loved the world that he came! This should draw us to love him back, even as it humbles us at this greatness. This is not the same old thing. It is beyond words in how it should amaze us.

2. *“And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”* (Jn. 3:14-15).

This is part of what Jesus was teaching to Nicodemus, the Jewish leader who snuck out in the night to visit with Jesus. It puts into contrast the efforts of this world against the supreme act of God. Where do we put our confidence? Is it in what we do? Is it in what we see from others? Is it in what we think? Or is our confidence in Jesus Christ, lifted up and crucified, the righteous for the unrighteous? Can we sing with conviction the hymn, “My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus’ blood and righteousness; I dare not trust the sweetest frame, but wholly lean on Jesus’ name.”? Let us live lives on Christ the solid rock! May he be the solid framework for all we are and all we do.

3. *“Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.”* (Jn 2:19).

The older I get, the more convicted I am that Jesus was physically resurrected from the dead. It has always been a tenet of my faith, but as I get older, I see more and more not only the theological necessity, but the incredible evidence that points to the historical fact. I was not there to touch his nail-scarred hands or feet, but I have no doubt they were real. Jesus was resurrected. In that I have hope; in that I have confidence. There is one who is mightier than death who holds my hand. Thank you, Lord.