

02–03–2021 John 20.19–31 Bible Study #64

[SPECIAL NOTICE] There will be no study for yesterday. Computer problems again. My screen went dark and I could not get it going. I thought I was going to need a new monitor, but when I tested it on another computer, it worked fine. That meant either a cord or computer problem. After the techs got working on it, they had trouble pinning down the problem. It turned out to be connector which was defective. It may have been part of the problem all along. I will be conducting the services at Woodlands this weekend due to the expected birth of another daughter for Pastor & Elizabeth Pettit. We only need 3 days to finish John so today, tomorrow and Saturday we will wrap it up.

02–03 is now 02–04–2021 John 20.19–31 Bible Study #64

In an important parallel passage, Luke 24:33–43 describes how the followers of Jesus remained in Jerusalem, frightened and doubtful until Jesus appeared and provided evidence to them of his wounds. John builds the same scene but with important differences.

John tells us that it was the evening of this Easter Sunday (v. 19) and that the doors were shut. They had no doubt fearfully concluded that the tragic fate of Jesus would soon be theirs. Soon the temple authorities would find them and arrest them, too. But instead Jesus “came” to them and stood in their midst. This appearance was miraculous since John has just told us that the doors were shut tight.

His words “peace be with you” (repeated in vs. 19 and 21) were far more than a greeting. In 14:27 and 16:33 Jesus had promised that this peace would be his gift to them. Now he has delivered it. The disciples’ joyful response (v. 20) to his appearance—after they see the evidence of his wounds—is likewise a fulfillment of what was promised.

“Truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice; you will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy” (16:20). “So you have sorrow now, but I will see you again and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you” (16:22).

With his work nearly completed, Jesus’ final task is to commission his followers as he was commissioned by the Father. To be commissioned (v. 21), to advance the work of God as God’s agent, also means being empowered as Jesus was empowered—obtaining the Spirit, as Jesus was anointed—as Jesus had promised it to his followers.

Thus John 20:22 becomes the climax to the entire gospel. The Spirit—suggested throughout his public ministry, promised in the upper room, and symbolized at the cross—now is given to the disciples in a provocative and personal way. Jesus breathes [on them] and says, “Receive [the] Holy Spirit.”

Jesus’ offer of living water given at Tabernacles really referred to the Holy Spirit which could not be distributed until Jesus was glorified (7:39). Now the hour of glorification has reached its climax. Jesus is departing. And he places the Spirit that is within him in their lives.

While every interpreter must come to terms with the theological meaning of the Easter anointing for John’s narrative, it is an additional challenge to discern the relationship of this anointing to the giving of the Spirit in Acts 2. Three exegetical positions are common.

For some, the account in John 20 recounts a symbolic gesture much like Jesus’ many signs in the gospel. The disciples did not receive the Spirit, but were offered a symbol of what it would be like. In order to reconcile this

with Acts 2, others have wondered if the disciples experienced a partial anointing in the Spirit that prepared them for the fuller gift given seven weeks later.

But it is best to see this gift of the Spirit as a genuine transforming experience on Easter day. The language of the chapter closely links promises in chapters 14–16 and it bears every feature of a genuine event. The phrase used by Jesus (“receive holy spirit”) may well have been an easily-recognized formula used by the early Christians for the gift of the Spirit.

The disciples must have experienced numerous moments of overwhelming glory as the Spirit touched and transformed them—and it all began the moment Jesus returned on Easter. That they would be empowered again—in a different way—on Pentecost does not eliminate the possibility that they were filled as well earlier. We refuel our vehicles regularly and we are refueling our bodies each time we eat.

In 20:21 we observed how the disciples will enjoy a mission that parallels the mission of Jesus (cf. 17:18a). And in 20:23 Jesus points to their ability to forgive sin (no doubt as a part of that mission). Is Jesus giving all of his followers (surely more than the apostles who are present) this power? Or is this an office reserved for the leaders—the apostles—and so, the leadership and bishops—the apostolic successors in later centuries?

The Protestant view has pointed to the more generic ministry of the church and in particular to the work of baptizing and making disciples (which is also a part of Jesus’ resurrection commission, Matt. 28:19; Mark 16:16). When John describes the work of Jesus, he places in tension salvation and judgment. Jesus has entered the world to save humankind (3:16–17) but those who reject salvation, remain under judgment (9:39).

In a similar manner, Christians who bear Christ’s Spirit and point to what God has disclosed in Christ unveil divine light in darkness and place the prospect of judgment and salvation before every man and woman. Thomas has appeared earlier in the gospel. In 11:16 he loyally, though pessimistically, committed himself to following Jesus even though it meant he might die. And in 14:5 he readily admitted his ignorance of Jesus’ words as the Lord describes his departure. In this final episode we learn that Thomas was absent when Jesus revealed himself to them in Jerusalem (v. 24).

Upon hearing their confession that Jesus had been resurrected (“We have seen the Lord,” cf. 20:18, 20) and that he had visited them, he remained skeptical and obstinate. He demanded evidence (v. 25), as the Capernaum official had done in 4:48, “Unless you people see miraculous signs and wonders,” Jesus told him, “you will never believe.”

The following account makes it clear that Thomas’s experience was very similar to that of the other disciples. Once again it was the day after Sabbath (26a) or Sunday one week later. Again the disciples are in a room with the doors shut and Jesus appears to them and greets them. All of this carefully duplicates what transpired on Easter Sunday (vs. 19–23).

Jesus had heard Thomas’s challenge in 20:25, and now provides the evidence he demanded—to see and touch Jesus’ wounds (v. 26). Not only can Thomas see that Jesus is alive but in addition he can touch the mark of the nails and the wound of the spear. John does not say that Thomas acted on Jesus’ invitation and in v. 29 it is Thomas’s seeing that is credited with his faith.

“My Lord and my God!” (v. 28), is not a word of astonishment or praise to God. It is a confession of Thomas’s heartfelt belief in Jesus. These words supply the closing frame of the gospel, matching the high and lofty descriptions of Christ the Word in 1:1–18.

The climax of the passage comes in 20:29. Is the first half of the verse a statement or a question. Jesus does not disparage the faith of Thomas (“So now you believe because you see me?”) but simply cites a fact (“Because

you have seen me you believe”). I don’t believe that is a significant question because the emphasis is on who is blessed: those who have not seen yet have believed.

Jesus is now pointing forward to those who will follow Jesus in the future. Here we see ourselves being blessed by Jesus. He points forward beyond the apostolic circle, to the world of the church, to all believers who will come to faith through the testimony of the apostles and all future generations..

John has provided a record for those whom Jesus has in mind who are now reading this gospel and have not had access to Thomas’s opportunity to touch Jesus’ wounds. John’s gospel can serve us in a similar capacity (31). While not doing what Thomas did, still, we have Thomas’s story and this should give us a reasonable ground for belief.

Many believe verses 30–31 are the conclusion of this gospel. John acknowledges that Jesus provided many other signs with his disciples and that the selection offered here are only a selection (v. 29). John is aware of a rich source of traditions about Jesus, and he has an editor (the Holy Spirit) who had to make a careful selection to fit God’s design for this Gospel.

It appears that John assumes his readers know at least the rudimentary things of Jesus’ life and thought. They may even have read one of the Synoptic Gospels. But this is hardly to say that it is not a useful or beneficial gospel for those who possess no belief.

John’s gospel serves both audiences with perhaps the clearest, most poignant explanation of Jesus and his mission in the world. In 20:31, John discloses his purpose for writing the gospel. Belief leads to life and this life is a gift given through the power of Jesus Christ, God’s Son.