

Chapter 16: The Living Water of Jesus

John 7:25–52

Jesus does not permit neutrality. Either we love him or we hate him, but with Jesus, there can be no third option of mere toleration. In the earlier parts of Jesus' ministry, it may have seemed for a time that such a third way might offer the best of both worlds—enjoying ongoing fascination with the extraordinary signs of a wonder-worker, while nevertheless remaining aloof enough to avoid losing respectability in society. The closer Jesus gets to the cross, the clearer he becomes about his identity in a way that draws those who love him increasingly close and simultaneously drives those who hate him increasingly far away. The reason for this is that Jesus has come on a very specific mission, to accomplish a very specific purpose, and demanding a very specific response. John 7:25–52 demonstrates that *the Father sent the Son to give the Spirit to believers*.

The Mission of Jesus (John 7:25–36)

The confrontation that Jesus has with the Jewish religious leaders we observed in John 7:14–24 prompts some of the “people of Jerusalem” to say, “Is not this the man whom they seek to kill? And here he is, speaking openly, and they say nothing to him! Can it be that the authorities really know that this is the Christ? But we know where this man comes from, and when the Christ appears, no one will know where he comes from” (John 7:25–27). John identifies these speakers as “the people of Jerusalem” possibly to distinguish them from the “pilgrims who came to the feast; they are likely better informed than the latter as to the hostile intentions of the Sanhedrin,” since others in the crowd expressed surprise when Jesus exposed the plot to kill him (John 7:20).¹

The Origins of Jesus

Clearly, Jesus and the religious leaders are locked in a significant conflict, and everyone else is trying to make sense of it. In this dialogue among the people of Jerusalem, we find a dispute that we will be exploring through the remainder of this chapter: on the one hand, Jesus does and says much that seems to indicate that he is the Christ—his open speaking, his signs (John 7:31), and his invitation to drink from him (John 7:40, 46). On the other hand, their incomplete knowledge about Jesus' origins undercuts the idea that he could be the Christ—both that his origins are known rather than unknown (John 7:27) and that Jesus comes from Galilee rather than Bethlehem (John 7:41–42, 52).

Now, it is unclear exactly why the people of Jerusalem believe that Jesus' origins should be altogether unknown, for no biblical prophecy teaches that.² Don't miss the seriousness of this mistake, though: their confusion about the teaching of the Scriptures actually keeps them from believing wholeheartedly in Jesus!³ The hard work of Bible study and theology are more than academic exercises, since wrong conclusions can blind us to the reality of the true God who is

revealed in Jesus Christ. In response to their errors, Jesus “cried out” (ESV: “proclaimed”; a loud voice to introduce a “public pronouncement,” cf. John 1:15, 7:37, and 12:44),⁴ challenging whether they really know who he is with what might best be translated as an exclamatory question: “You know me, and you know where I come from?!” (John 7:28).⁵ Here, Jesus does not affirm what they believe, but he speaks ironically to rebuke their presumption.⁶ They are hesitant to come to him not because they have honest reasons for holding back, but because they assume that they know more about the Scriptures and about Jesus than they actually do.

The Son from the Father

Jesus answers the challenge about his origins, although not directly. The crowd is unaware (or, perhaps, willfully skeptical) that Jesus was born in Bethlehem (John 7:41–42), as we know from the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. Jesus does not correct their thinking on this point, but he instead focuses on his origins as the One sent from his Father: “But I have not come of my own accord. He who sent me is true, and him you do not know. I know him, for I come from him, and he sent me” (John 7:28–29). It is as though Jesus is saying, “You are right to believe that the origins of the Messiah will be mysterious to you, but you wrongly imagine that my human birth and upbringing tells the whole story of my origins. Instead, you should meditate upon my origins from the Father who sent me. I come from the Father, and until you understand my relationship to the Father, you cannot understand who I am, and you also cannot know the Father.”

Jesus has spoken extensively about his relationship to the Father already in the Gospel of John, and he will continue to do so in the coming passages. In this passage, Jesus highlights three facets of the relationship between the Father and the Son. First, Jesus again states, “I have not come of my own accord” (John 7:28), or, literally, “I have not come of myself,” which is very similar to what Jesus preached in John 5:19: “Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord [lit: of himself], but only what he sees the Father doing.” Jesus does nothing privately, apart from his Father, including the way he has come into this world. In everything, the Son acts from the Father, and the Father acts in and through the Son.

Second, Jesus says, “He who sent me is true, and him you do not know” (John 7:28). This statement reflects two critical and complementary ideas. On the one hand, Jesus points away from himself to the truth of his Father in heaven—and again, Jesus does not defer to the truthfulness of his Father as though he, in his Divine nature, possessed less truth than the Father. Instead, Jesus speaks in accordance with the form of a servant that he has taken as Mediator during the course of his earthly ministry. In the form of a (human) servant, his judgment is not his own (John 5:30) and his teaching is not his own (John 7:18), but Jesus only judges, teaches, and comes on behalf of the One who is true. But, on the other hand, Jesus also insists that the Jews do not know the One who is true. The Son reveals the Father, so anyone who does not believe in the Son cannot know the Father—or, as Jesus will later put it, “No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6), and “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9).

Third, Jesus says, “I know him, for I come from him, and he sent me” (John 7:29). Here, Jesus offers two simple descriptions of the relationship between the Father and the Son: Jesus can claim to “know” the Father because (1) the Son comes from the Father (lit: “is from” the Father), and (2) the Father sent the Son. The first description refers to the relationship of the Father to the Son in his Divine nature, or in the *internal* relationships of the Trinity.⁷ Simply put, the Son is from the Father.

Theologians classify verses like this as testimony of the Son's eternal generation from the Father. We do not get an elaborate description of how the Son is from the Father, and much less do we find any kind of relative ranking in this description, as though Jesus testifies that the Son were "under" the Father. No, Jesus simply tells us that the Son is *from* the Father, telling us the relationship by which the Son is a distinct person from the Father as One who is begotten from the Father, but nothing more. The second description refers to the mission of the Son in the *external* works of the Trinity.⁸ While the Son is equal with the Father *within* the Godhead, the Father sends the Son to take on a unique role in the works of the Trinity *outside* the Godhead. For the sake of our redemption, the Son took upon himself the form of a servant in subjection to the Father during the estate of his humiliation according to his office as Mediator. Apart from the his divine nature as God, Jesus could not accomplish any real redemption. But apart from being sent into the world to take upon himself our nature as a real human being, the power of the Son's God-ness could not redeem us.

Growing Division

From this point, the division surrounding Jesus only grows: "So they were seeking to arrest him, but no one laid a hand on him, because his hour had not yet come. Yet many of the people believed in him. They said, 'When the Christ appears, will he do more signs than this man has done?'" (John 7:30–31). This opposite reaction among the crowd is not surprising, for division always occurs "whenever the revelation of God in Christ Jesus confronts human beings." Because we are made in the image of God *and* we have inherited the curse of sin, Jesus seems both alluring and repulsive to human beings. He is the hope of the nations, and yet he also threatens the sin that we cherish. He alone can fill the God-shaped void in our lives, and yet he commands us to die to ourselves if we would follow him. Apart from the granting of the Father and the gracious life-giving regeneration of the Holy Spirit (John 6:63, 65), no human being can come to Jesus.

Regarding those seeking to arrest Jesus, John tells us that no one could lay a hand on him because Jesus' "hour" had not yet come. As throughout the Gospel of John, we find that the hour of Jesus' crucifixion is a set hour in time. We saw earlier in this chapter that Jesus refused to subject himself to danger needlessly, so he remained in Galilee to avoid the persecution of the Jews in Judea until the Feast of Booths (John 7:1; cf. John 4:1–3). Moreover, we also see that when the proper time comes for Jesus to go up "in private" (John 7:10), he cannot be harmed until his hour fully comes. Jesus goes where the Father has him go, he says what the Father instructs him to say, and he does all that the Father gives him to do. He will be protected while protection is the will of his Father, and when Jesus' hour comes, Jesus will also be crucified according to the will of his Father for the forgiveness of sinners. Yes, God will protect us from every danger that he does not wish to harm us, but he also sovereignly ordains every bit of suffering that we must endure as well. Through good or bad, we can trust our Father in heaven for the same reason that Jesus did: we know the unchanging nature of the Father's love for us, regardless of our changing circumstances.

The Destiny of Jesus

After rebuking the crowd for their false views of his *origins*, Jesus then addresses the "muttering" (John 7:32) of the crowd by speaking about his *destiny*:

The Pharisees heard the crowd muttering these things about him, and the chief priests and

Pharisees sent officers to arrest him. Jesus then said, “I will be with you a little longer, and then I am going to him who sent me. You will seek me and you will not find me. Where I am you cannot come.” The Jews said to one another, “Where does this man intend to go that we will not find him? Does he intend to go to the Dispersion among the Greeks and teach the Greeks? What does he mean by saying, ‘You will seek me and you will not find me,’ and, ‘Where I am you cannot come?’” (John 7:32–36)

It is not only the mysterious, sent-from-the-Father origins of Jesus that should lead the people to believe in him, but also the fact that he is *returning* to his Father who sent him. Jesus here refers to the coming work of his crucifixion, burial, resurrection, and, ultimately, his ascension. When those things happen, the people will seek after Jesus, but they will not find him, for they cannot come where Jesus is going.

Jesus offers these words as a warning against those who are slow and sluggish to believe. For as long as a human being has breath left, there is still time to repent and believe; however, it is also true that time has a way of slipping away from us, both in *quantity* and *quality*. Every last one of us has an hour set in the providence of God for our death, and when that time comes, we will no longer have the ability to repent and believe. *Quantitatively*, therefore, the remaining time left in our lives is always diminishing. It is also true, though, that our time *qualitatively* slips away the longer we put off believing, perhaps imagining that we can live our lives the way that we want to, and then make peace with God just before we die. Every time that we reject God’s free offer of the gospel, we harden our hearts further against God, so that even if we have *enough* time to repent, our hearts are hardened against faith in Christ so that we cannot make use of that time. John Calvin writes, “If we accept the hand which he holds out, he will lead us to the Father; and so long as we must sojourn in the world, not only will he show himself to be near us, but will constantly dwell in us. And if we disregard his presence, he will lose nothing, but, departing from us, will leave us altogether strangers to God and to life.”¹⁰

Sadly, the Jews do not repent at this point. Instead, they simply puzzle over his words. They do not embrace the opportunity, fearing that they might miss out on receiving Christ if he goes away from them, but they retreat back into stubborn curiosity and speculation on what Jesus might mean. *This is what unbelief looks like*. Unbelief is not always a radical, violent opposition to Jesus. On the contrary, unbelief is just as strong when we pretend that we are willing to believe if we only had a few more facts, but never actually *do* believe. You may feel like this is a very reasonable way to straddle the fence, always ready to believe—at least, theoretically—but never actually embracing Christ for who he is. In this way, you can present yourself as open-minded to Christians, yet you do not have to endure the suffering of those who would hate you for following Christ. Jesus is not fooled, however. He recognizes your unbelief for what it is.

The Purpose of Jesus’ Mission (John 7:37–39)

And yet, Jesus is not finished with this crowd. Instead of rejecting them altogether—as he would be justified to do on the basis of their unbelief—Jesus invites them to come to him in faith:

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.’” Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified. (John 7:37–39)

In words reminiscent of what Jesus said to the Samaritan woman about living water (John 4:10–14), as well as what Jesus said to the Galilean Jews about his being the bread of life, so that whoever comes to him will never thirst (John 6:35), Jesus now calls to all those who thirst to come to him and drink. These words not only stand at the heart of this passage, but at the heart of the mission of Jesus, so we will do well to consider them carefully.

The Last, Great Day of the Feast

We pointed out in passing the fact that Jesus is in Jerusalem for a very specific purpose: the Feast of Booths (John 7:2), sometimes called the Feast of Tabernacles. The Feast of Booths was an annual celebration to remember the wilderness wanderings of Israel under Moses (Lev. 23:33–43; Num. 29:12–38; Deut. 16:13–15), and to anticipate the coming Messianic age when even Gentiles would be drawn in to celebrate to worship the King (Zech. 14:16–19).¹¹ The name of the festival comes from the way in which the Israelites were commanded to dwell in “booths” or “tabernacles”—that is, *tents*—for seven days, just as their forefathers had to dwell in tents while they wandered through the wilderness, waiting to enter into the Promised Land (Lev. 23:42–43). This feast lasted seven days, with an additional eighth day as a day for solemn assembly, holy convocation, and rest from ordinary work (Lev. 23:36, 39; Num. 29:35–38)—in other words, this eighth day became another Sabbath for the people.

Furthermore, this feast celebrated God’s provision of water for his people in the wilderness from the rock.¹² For this reason, the feast came to be associated with a great water-pouring ritual:

On each of the seven feast-days a priest would fill a golden pitcher with water from this pool [the pool of Siloam]. Accompanied by a solemn procession, he would return to the temple and amid the sounding of trumpets and the shouting of rejoicing multitudes he would pour it through a funnel which led to the base of the altar of burnt offering. The people were in a jubilant mood. Not only did this ceremony remind them of the blessings granted to the forefathers in the wilderness (the water from the rock), but it also pointed forward to the spiritual bounties of the Messianic age. Their minds, hearts, and voices were occupied with such passages as Is. 12:3, “Therefore with joy shall you draw water from the wells of salvation.”¹³

Because the celebration of God’s *past* provision of water in the wilderness was always in view, the feast came to be associated with prayers for *current* rain for the next year’s harvest, so that any who did not come to the feast were warned that they would not receive rain (Zech. 14:17–18).¹⁴ The entire celebration was accompanied by so much joy that the Mishnah says, “He that never has seen the joy of the Water-drawing has never in his life seen joy” (*Sukk.* 5:1).¹⁵

The water-pouring rites lasted only for the first seven days of the feast, and not to the extra, eighth day of the feast. For this reason, commentators are divided as to which day John’s words refer

to: “On the last day of the feast, the great day...” (John 7:37). If the seventh, then Jesus likely would have stood up and cried out these words at the completion of the water-pouring rite on the seventh day, which would have sounded out among the throngs of worshipers “as a thunderclap from heaven.”¹⁶ On the other hand, if Jesus stood up and cried out on the eighth day, then he would have drawn this comparison to himself after the celebration of the feast was complete, suggesting that he could offer something that the feast itself could only promise, but not provide: “The water and the light of Tabernacles rites pass into memory, year after year; his claim to provide living water and light for the world is continuously valid.”¹⁷ In either case, Jesus’ loud cry would have arrested the worshipers as they pondered its staggering significance.

“If anyone thirsts”

This is not the first time that Jesus has claimed the ability to quench thirst. He told the Samaritan woman, “Everyone who drinks of this water [from Jacob’s well] will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (John 4:13–14). Then, to the Galilean Jews, Jesus said, “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst” (John 6:35). Beyond explicit references to thirst, the Gospel of John demonstrates a multitude of ways in which Jesus is “greater than traditional water rituals.”¹⁸ Jesus is greater than the water baptism of John, for Jesus baptizes with the Holy Spirit (John 1:31–33). Jesus is greater than the inadequate Jewish rites of purification, turning their water into a super-abundance of wine (John 2:6). Jesus could heal a man who had been lame for thirty-eight years when the pool of Bethesda could do nothing for him (John 5:2–5). Later, Jesus will use the pool of Siloam to wash a blind man as a part of restoring his sight (John 9:7). Finally, don’t forget what Jesus insisted to Nicodemus: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of *water* and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (John 3:5).

Throughout the Gospel of John, Jesus pleads that all those who are thirsty should come to him, for he alone can offer the living water that will satisfy our thirst. This means that sinners must first come to “a conviction of their own poverty...[and] desire to obtain assistance” in order to come to drink from him.¹⁹ Yet, Jesus urges that “If *anyone* thirsts, let him come to me and drink.” Jesus echoes the words of Isaiah 55:1: “Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.” Then, these words appear later at the end of Revelation: “The Spirit and the Bride say, ‘Come.’ And let the one who hears say, ‘Come.’ And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price” (Rev. 22:17). All Jesus asks is that we confess the poverty of our thirst and acknowledge our need of him.

Rivers of Living Water

After the invitation, Jesus speaks the promise: “Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water’” (John 7:38). Which “Scripture” is Jesus referring to? Also, why do the rivers of living water flow out of the heart of the believer? No passage in the Old Testament states exactly this promise, that “Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water,” so it is better to understand Jesus’ words as paraphrasing and reproducing “Scripture thought.”²⁰ Multiple points in Scripture speak to the way that God quenches the thirst of his people, whether physically or

spiritually (Ex. 17:3; Num. 20:5; Jer. 2:13; Ps. 42:1; 63:1).

Nevertheless, Jesus does not speak simply of quenching thirst. He makes a very specific (and, frankly, bizarre-sounding) promise, that anyone who believes in him will find rivers of living water flowing out of his heart. Importantly, the Greek word is not actually “heart” (*kardia*), but “belly” (*koilia*), a word that many Bible scholars believe serves as a translation for the Aramaic word *gûph*, or “cavity.”²¹ (Aramaic is the language Jesus would have spoken when he made this original pronouncement.) If so, then the idea of rivers of living water flowing out of a “belly/cavity” sounds like a description of the river flowing out of a cavity of the rock that Moses struck in the wilderness (Ex. 17:6). Remember, one of the central themes of the Feast of Booths was to remember and celebrate the way that God gave his people water to drink in the wilderness from the rock, so it is likely that Jesus is purposefully building on that story. It is not Jesus, though, but the one who *believes* in Jesus who becomes the new, water-giving rock.

Notice also that Jesus speaks of “rivers” of living water, rather than just water. Originally, God established a *single* river in Eden that then divided to form *four* rivers to water the rest of the earth (Gen. 2:10–14). For this reason, a recurring theme in the prophets was to describe God’s future work of redemption and renewal in his creation and on behalf of his people as the breaking forth of new waters, streams, and rivers that would water the barren places dried up by the curse of sin (e.g., Isa. 35:6–7, 41:18). Most importantly, when God gives the prophet Ezekiel a vision of the new temple (Eze. 40–48), Ezekiel sees water flowing out of the temple toward the east (Eze. 47:1–12), although Zechariah 14:8 adds that some will go west as well: “On that day, living waters shall flow out from Jerusalem, half of them to the eastern sea and half of them to the western sea.”²² Remarkably, this water flowing from the temple turns the saltwater of the seas fresh in order to give new life: “And wherever the river goes, every living creature that swarms will live, and there will be very many fish. For this water goes there, that the waters of the sea may become fresh; so everything will live where the river goes” (Eze. 47:9). The water flowing from the temple would be *living*—or, better, *life-giving*—water. Ezekiel goes on, writing: “And on the banks, on both sides of the river, there will grow all kinds of trees for food. Their leaves will not wither, nor their fruit fail, but they will bear fresh fruit every month, because the water for them flows from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food, and their leaves for healing” (Eze. 47:12). The Apostle John picks this imagery up in his own vision:

Then an angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. (Rev. 22:1–2)

This river, like the river out of Eden (Gen. 2:10), will flow to give life to God’s creation.

“He said this about the Spirit”

Unless we see this rich vision of God’s redeeming and renewing work in the world by living water, we will not understand the full significance of John’s summary words: “Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified” (John 7:39). The rivers of living water that will flow out from the belly of the believer symbolize the person and work of the Holy Spirit in us. *He* is the one

flowing out from Christ (the new temple) into the world, bringing new life for the healing of the nations. When we drink from Christ, we do not slake our thirst for a moment, only to become thirsty again (cf. John 4:13), but we instead gain the superabundance of the ministry of our infinite God in the person of the Holy Spirit. This does not mean that we will be instantly transformed into an entirely victorious Christian when we come to Christ, “but that the believer will become a participant, by the Spirit, in the glorification of Christ, [so] that the believer will drink from a spring whose fullness for everyone who believes will never be exhausted.”²³ After we come to Jesus, we need never again seek another source of water to quench our spiritual thirst. The purpose for the Father’s sending the Son was to give the Spirit to all those who believe in Jesus.

Note here that the coming ministry of the Holy Spirit does not remain in the future for those of us living today. At the point in time when Jesus addressed the worshipers at the Feast of Booths, “the Spirit had not been given [lit: “the Spirit was not”], because Jesus was not yet glorified” (John 7:39). This does not mean that the Holy Spirit did not exist at all, since the Spirit has already been active in the world already in the Gospel of John (John 1:32; 3:34),²⁴ and even from the foundations of creation (Gen. 1:2), for the Spirit is eternal.²⁵ Jesus’ promise, though, points forward to the great outpouring of the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, when the glorified and ascended Son received from the Father the gift of the Holy Spirit in order to pour out his Spirit on his people (Acts 2:33). The Spirit, in turn, pours out the love of God into our hearts (Rom. 5:5), cutting our hearts by exposing to us our sin and leading us to believe on Christ for salvation (Acts 2:37–39). The outpouring of the Spirit continues to this day as the fulfillment of all the prophecies of the Old Testament by the gospel, which is why the giving of the Spirit is at the culmination of the redemptive work of the Triune God.

The Response Jesus Demands (John 7:40–52)

At this point, the division in the crowd becomes even more pronounced. Some argue that Jesus is “the Prophet” (John 7:40), while others argue that he must be the Christ (John 7:41). During this time in history, almost no one believed that the Prophet and the Christ would be the same person, just as almost no one believed that the suffering servant would be the same individual as the victorious son of David.²⁶ In fact, the Jews spoke of the “Son of Joseph” Messiah (the suffering servant) as a very distinct person from the “Son of David” Messiah (the conquering king), because they could not fathom how the Christ could *both* suffer *and* conquer.²⁷

Of course, not everyone shared either of those positive impressions of Jesus: “But some said, ‘Is the Christ to come from Galilee? Has not the Scripture said that the Christ comes from the offspring of David, and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David was?’” (John 7:42). John subtly lays out these charges without comment, depending on the Gospels of Matthew and Luke to lay out the fuller truth—that Jesus was indeed *born* in Bethlehem, for Joseph had to go there to register in the census, since he “was of the house and lineage of David” (Luke 2:4). Then, Joseph, Mary, and Jesus fled to Egypt to escape the persecution of Herod (Matt. 2:13–15), but once Herod died the family was able to return to their home in Nazareth of Galilee, where Jesus grew up (Matt. 2:19–23). Jesus is indeed from Galilee, but he also comes from Bethlehem (Mic. 5:2), and he is the offspring of David, whose throne God promised to establish forever (2 Sam. 7:16). Some of the confusion of Jesus arises from misreadings of the prophecies (as in, whether the Prophet and the Christ could be the same

person), but this confusion arises from misinformation about the true origins of Jesus. In the midst of all this confusion, it is not surprising that a great division arose amidst the people, so that some wanted to arrest him, and yet no one laid hands on him (Luke 7:43–44).

Testimony of the Officers

The Pharisees and the chief priests sent officers to arrest Jesus in John 7:32, while Jesus was still publicly teaching in the temple. At this point, those officers return to those who sent them without Jesus, prompting the chief priests and the Pharisees to demand of them, “Why did you not bring him?” (John 7:45). The officers respond, “No one ever spoke like this man!” They fully understood the charge that they were given—and that disobedience to their charge could bring trouble upon themselves—but they are nevertheless unable to lay hands on Jesus to arrest him. A very similar story happens later when officers are again sent to arrest Jesus, but when Jesus identifies himself to them, they fall back to the ground (John 18:6).²⁸ John emphasizes in many ways throughout his Gospel that human authorities are powerless to contain Jesus unless and until Jesus willingly turns himself over to them according to the plan of his Father. Neither the ambition of Jesus’ brothers (John 7:1–8) nor the scheming of the Jewish religious leaders (John 7:45–46) can divert Jesus from the works that his Father has given him to do.

The Pharisees are furious, demanding, “Have you also been deceived? Have any of the authorities or the Pharisees believed in him? But this crowd that does not know the law is accursed” (John 7:47–49). Yet, while the nations rage, and the peoples plot against Jesus in vain, taking counsel together against Yahweh’s Anointed (Ps. 2:1–3), “He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision” (Ps. 2:4). Yahweh will establish his King on Zion, his holy hill, making the nations his heritage and the ends of the earth his Son’s possession, and the rulers of the world can do nothing to stop it.

The Question of Nicodemus

Not even procedure or the Scriptures themselves can stop the blind rage of the religious leaders:

Nicodemus, who had gone to him, before, and who was one of them, said to them, “Does our law judge a man without first giving him a hearing and learning what he does?” They replied, “Are you from Galilee too? Search and see that no prophet arises from Galilee.” (John 7:50–52).

Nicodemus himself sought out Jesus to give him a hearing and to learn his doctrine in John 3, and he urges his fellow members of the Sanhedrin to do the same.²⁹ We do not know yet what Nicodemus personally believes about Jesus, for the most that can be said about this passage is what Calvin writes: “The Evangelist describes Nicodemus as a neutral man.”³⁰ Still, we should probably read this passage as a step between Nicodemus’s original meeting with Jesus, while he was still “in the dark” (John 3:2, 19), and Nicodemus’s final faith in Jesus after the Lord’s death (John 19:39). It is even likely that the blind rejection of Jesus by the religious leaders plays a major role in leading him to consider Jesus more carefully.

Nicodemus’s argument at this juncture, however, falls on deaf ears. The religious leaders respond not to what he says, but with an *ad hominem* argument, asking whether Nicodemus himself is a

Galilean, as though being a Galilean were a great disqualification from the service of God. Indeed, they seem to think that very thing, telling Nicodemus to search the Scriptures to find that no prophet arises from Galilee. Yet, even this statement is false, for Jonah came from Galilee (2 Kgs. 14:25), and Nahum and Hosea (prophets to northern Israel) almost certainly came from Galilee as well.³¹ The religious leaders are just as confused as the crowd about the truth of Jesus' origins, but they do not care to learn the truth. They feel the threat of Jesus against their personal glory as exalted teachers in society, and they want to do anything they can to get rid of this threat. With such opponents, truth is irrelevant. They would rather die of thirst than to relinquish their power.

The Response Jesus Demands

We should notice that, at this point in the narrative, the “third way” of following Jesus from a distance, as a fence-sitter, now entirely vanishes. Either you believe in Jesus, or you reject him—there is no other option. Don't let the hubbub and division at the end of this passage cloud the extraordinary invitation Jesus extends to us. “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’” (John 7:37–38). Jesus holds out living water and demands that we come to him in faith to drink. There will always be excuses to put off faith, waiting to get just a few more facts or a little bit more understanding, but Jesus commands us to believe him in the way that we would believe someone we loved: when we trust the *person*, we can believe what the person says, even before we understand the whole story. In the person of Jesus, we have the Son from the Father, sent by the Father into the world to live, die, be resurrected, and ascend into glory so that he might pour out the gift of the Holy Spirit on all those who believe. Jesus demands faith; will you believe?

Discussion Questions

1. Is there any way to know God apart from Jesus? Why or why not? What about the relationship of Jesus to the Father helps to explain your answer to this question?
2. What makes the “third way” of following Jesus from a distance so attractive? If you are honest, does this “third way” describe your own relationship to Jesus?
3. What does your own thirst look like? How might Jesus quench it? What would it mean for rivers of living water to flow out of you? What is the role of the Holy Spirit in your life?
4. Practically, what does the inability of the temple officers to arrest Jesus mean for your life? What does the persistent rejection of the Jewish religious leaders teach you about the nature of evangelism?

Notes

1. Beasley-Murray, *John*, 110.
2. Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 15–16.
3. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 298. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/>>

ccel/calvin/calcom34.xiii.v.html>

4. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 318.

5. Lenski, *The Interpretation of John's Gospel*, 560–61.

6. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 298–99. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom34.xiii.v.html>>

7. Theologians speak of the intra-personal relationships of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit within the Godhead as the *ontological* or *immanent* Trinity—that is, the aspect of the Trinity that deals with the *ontology* (nature, being, essence) of the one God who exists as three persons.

8. Theologians speak of the external works of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit outside of the Godhead in creation and redemption as the *economic* Trinity.

9. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 318.

10. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 303. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom34.xiii.vi.html>>

11. Köstenberger, *John*, 229.

12. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 322.

13. Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 23.

14. Keener, *The Gospel of John*, vol. 1, 723–24.

15. Cited in Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 373.

16. Beasley-Murray, *John*, 114.

17. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 321.

18. Keener, *The Gospel of John*, vol. 1, 725.

19. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 306. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom34.xiii.vii.html>>

20. Lenski, *The Interpretation of John's Gospel*, 576.

21. Beasley-Murray, *John*, 116–17.

22. Beasley-Murray, *John*, 116.

23. Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John*, 275–76.

24. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 329.

25. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 310. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom34.xiii.vii.html>>

26. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 329.

27. Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *Jesus Was a Jew*, rev. ed. (San Antonio, TX: Ariel Ministries, 2014), 37, 43, 57.

28. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 313–14. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom34.xiii.ix.html>>

29. Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John*, 284–85.

30. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 316. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom34.xiii.ix.html>>

31. Lenski, *The Interpretation of John's Gospel*, 591.