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To Whom Shall We Go?

These Things are Written that You May Believe Series

John 6:59-71

Pastor Bryan Clark

I think most people in our community, across the Midwest, and even across the country, would identify themselves as Christian. It's kind of the most general sense of the term. What many mean is they're *for Jesus*. They're not against Jesus; they're *for* Jesus. They might be religious—at least they go to church on Christmas and Easter. They have a church; it's for weddings and funerals. Generally they would say, "I'm *for* Jesus." But oftentimes it's a Jesus that they've created that they're comfortable with. It's a Jesus that they visit at church. It's a Jesus that doesn't interfere with their lives too much. It's just a Jesus that's there when I need Him. But what often happens is when the storms of life hit, when the bottom drops out of their world, they get angry with God and they walk away. Why is that? Maybe a more relevant question this morning is, "Will that be true of you?"

That's what we want to talk about. If you have a Bible, turn with us to the Gospel of John, Chapter 6. If you're visiting with us, we've been working our way through the Gospel of John. Beginning in chapter 6, Jesus fed well over five thousand people with a few loaves and fishes. He then walked on the water. The next morning the people who were fed are looking for Him and they find Him in Capernaum. The reason they're seeking Him, according to Jesus, is because they're hungry and they want breakfast. Jesus is trying to help them understand that He can offer them so much more than just breakfast. It's very similar to the conversation He had with the woman at the well, She's wanting water and Jesus says to her, "If you knew who I am, you'd understand I can give you living water to satisfy your thirsty soul." It's the same conversation Jesus is having with them. "I can offer you so much more than just breakfast." So then they respond, "Well, how do we get this?" and Jesus says, "You have to believe." And that's the main theme through the Gospel of John. So you see it in verse 29: "*That you believe in Him.*" You see it again in verse 35: "*Whoever believes in Me.*" You see it again in verse 40: "*Whoever believes in Me.*" You see it again in verse 47: "*Truly, truly I say to you, he who believes has eternal life.*" So that's this theme throughout the conversation. It finally gets to verse 58 and there's been discussion about Moses and the manna from heaven, and Jesus reminds them that when their fathers ate of that bread in the wilderness, they still died. It just satisfied their hunger for a moment, but they still died. But the bread that Jesus offers, gives them life forever. That then gets us to verse 59:

These things He said in the synagogue as He taught in Capernaum. (*NASB, John 6:59)

So this is what we'd refer to as an editorial comment. It provides a background to understanding the text. They're in Capernaum and in Capernaum there is a **synagogue**. A synagogue is not a temple. A synagogue is a place where the Scriptures were read and discussed, and it would be a really big deal to have a synagogue **in Capernaum**. It would remind us that these are highly religious people. Jesus is strategically choosing the season of Passover to have this conversation because in the synagogue they would be reading Old Testament Scriptures that talk about the release from bondage in Egypt. They would be reading Scriptures about the Passover, about the blood that was painted on the doorframe. They would be talking about crossing the Red Sea. They would be talking about God providing bread—manna from heaven—in the wilderness. These would all be Scriptures they would

be reading and discussing, when Jesus chooses to have this conversation about who He is and what He's come to do. Verse 60:

Therefore many of His disciples, when they heard *this* said, “This is a difficult statement; who can listen to it? But Jesus, conscious that His disciples grumbled at this... (Vs. 60-61a)

So first of all, the term **disciple** can get confusing. We hear it and we think of the twelve, but it is a broader term that literally just refers to *learners*. In a first-century Roman culture it was common to have a rabbi, and the rabbi was itinerant—traveled around—and there were people that followed, listening and learning. They would be referred to as disciples. So there's a lot of people following, listening to what Jesus has to say. But they're starting to figure what Jesus is saying, and they don't like it. They're struggling with it. When it says **this is a difficult statement**, that doesn't mean it's hard to understand. The word means it's offensive. This is offensive; this is a stumbling block. When it says, **“Who can listen to it?”** it could be translated, *“Who can accept this?”* They're grumbling. They **grumbled** in verse 41, and they're grumbling again. So, what's going on here? He just told us they're in Capernaum where there is a synagogue. These are highly religious people. These are not the religious leaders like the Pharisees down around Jerusalem who are plotting to kill Him. But these are highly religious people in Galilee. We tend to think when we hear the word religion that religion leads people to God. But again and again John is reminding us that actually religion becomes the barrier to getting to God. The Old Testament—the old covenant—was meant to be the story of Jesus. It was the picture of Jesus. Jesus even said, “When Moses was writing, he was writing about Me.” So Jesus was the fulfillment of all these images and pictures and the fulfillment of the promise of a Savior. But what's happened over time is what always happens with religion. And rather than leading to Christ, it's now become a substitute for Christ. They have convinced themselves that by keeping the laws, by doing the rituals, by doing the activities, they can make themselves righteous before God. So now Jesus shows up on the scene as the fulfillment of these promises and is telling them, “By the way, all your religious activity cannot make you right before God. The only hope you have is Me and believing in Me. I am the long-awaited, promised Messiah.” But what's happening with religious people is they don't like it! They've spent their lives dedicated to making themselves righteous and they don't like hearing that that doesn't make them right before God. So it's difficult to hear it. It's offensive to them. Who can listen to this? Who can accept it? They're grumbling. They're figuring out what Jesus is saying, and they don't like it. So Jesus responds in verse 61: Jesus...

...said to them, “Does this cause you to stumble? *What* then if you see the Son of Man ascending to where He was before?” (Vs. 61b-62)

One of the consistent messages of Jesus is that He's come from heaven. This came up in the dialogue last week. People are saying, “What is the deal with You saying You're from heaven? We know Your parents. We know where You live; You're from Nazareth. You're not from heaven; You're from Nazareth.” But Jesus is trying to get them to understand, “I am God in the flesh. I am the fulfillment.” So now what Jesus is saying is, “Maybe when I return to heaven, when I ascend, what then?” So if you look at verse 62, the *what* is in italics, which tells you it's not actually in the Greek language. What Jesus is saying sounds a little bit more like this: *“Then if you see the Son of Man ascending to where He was before, then what are you going to do with that?”* So what Jesus is saying is there's more to come. There are going to be more signs, more miracles. He's going to be crucified. He's going to be buried. He's gonna rise from the dead, and He's gonna ascend back to heaven, and Jesus is basically saying, “When that happens, maybe you'll believe.” And thousands and thousands and thousands did. But it wasn't until that point that they finally understood and believed. Verse 63:

“It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and are life.”

This is the repeated message. There's nothing you can do in your own flesh to make yourself right before God. This has been a consistent message in John. So just to pull together kind of a review of this theme, go all the way back in your mind to John chapter 1, when John the Baptist is talking about his baptism, and he says, “This is just ceremonial; this is water. All it really does is wash the dirt off you, but it's symbolic. But the One who comes after me will baptize you in the Holy Spirit. The One that comes after me—Jesus—has the power to actually change you from the inside out.”

Jesus then moved to Cana up in the Galilee area, and there He changed the water to wine at a marriage feast. Marriage is the picture of the coming together of Christ and His church. How is that possible? Jesus is going to have to turn the water to wine. He took ceremonial purification water, and He turned it into wine which was symbolic of His blood. This is what would be necessary for Jesus to come and fulfill the promises to provide salvation. But we talked about, then this is going to be very difficult with highly religious people, to turn the water to wine.

Jesus then goes to Jerusalem. It's the Passover. He goes into the temple and He causes quite a stir. And in the midst of all of that, He identifies Himself as the true temple. He's the fulfillment. The real temple is not a building; it's a person, and the person is Jesus.

That then moves into a conversation with Nicodemus, who was a highly religious leader, yet he was struggling to figure this out. He's trying to figure out, “What does it take to be right with God?” And Jesus says, “**You have to be born again,**” and Nicodemus says, “I don't even know what you're talking about.” Jesus says, “You have to be born of the water and the Spirit.” Water is identifying with John's baptism of repentance. Repentance means you have to change your mind! You can't make yourself righteous through religion. You have to trust the Spirit of God to supernaturally change you from the inside out, and it can only happen through Jesus. Nicodemus walks away confused.

Jesus then travels North, and in route stops in Samaria where there's the conversation with the Samaritan woman. He identifies Himself as the *living water*. “I'm the fulfillment; I'm what your soul has been longing for.” What's so interesting is that even though the Jews despised the Samaritans, this is the only place so far where there was this great harvest of souls. They actually listened and heard and believed.

Jesus then goes back to Cana, and in Cana He heals the Roman official's son, that's clear back in Capernaum. He then travels back to Jerusalem and He heals the man who had been sick for thirty-eight years at the pool of Bethesda. But He intentionally does it on the Sabbath in order to expose the fallacies of the beliefs of the religious leaders. So now they're offended; they're upset. As a matter of fact, they're now plotting to kill Him. Why? Because He broke the rules. Jesus' defense was, “Wait a minute; you know that God worked on the Sabbath. I'm God! That's why I worked on the Sabbath.” In the midst of that was the reminder that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Sabbath. The whole point of the Sabbath is that one day God would do the work, and we would rest in the finished work of Jesus on the cross to experience salvation. Jesus is trying to get them to understand that, but they just don't want to hear it.

Now He's back up North. He's fed over five thousand people with a few loaves and fishes, and they're following Him. But the only reason they're following Him is because they want breakfast. This is the

whole idea—that we like Jesus as long as Jesus delivers what we want—as long as Jesus helps us with our agenda! “Don't talk to me about sin.” “Don't talk to me about repentance.” “Don't talk to me about taking over my life; I just want Jesus to be there if I need Him.” But now Jesus is telling them, “I'm actually the Bread of Life; I've come to give you what your soul hungers for. But the way to receive that is not through a bunch of religious activity; it's not through a bunch of good works. It's rather by believing I am the fulfillment—the Messiah—the long-awaited Christ!”

The problem with religion is that religious people start to believe their religious activities can save them. Who needs a Savior if you can do it yourself through your religion? “Jesus, You stay at church. I'll go visit you once a week, but I just don't really want You interfering in my life.” So Jesus is explaining this to highly religious people, and they're offended. The flesh profits nothing; it has to be a work of the spirit. They're saying, “This is offensive; this is hard to hear.” So you see this reoccurring message—that this religion that was supposed to be the old covenant that would lead them to Christ—has now become the substitute for Christ, and it's what prevents them from hearing the message. Verse 64:

“But there are some of you who do not believe.” For Jesus knew from the beginning who they were who did not believe, and who it was that would betray Him. And He was saying, “For this reason I have said to you, that no one can come to Me unless it has been granted him from the Father.” (Verses 64-65)

So this is kind of a dividing point in the ministry of Jesus. The crowds are going to diminish, and Jesus, more and more, is going to pour Himself into those who believe. He will essentially teach and train those who, after He ascends, will literally change the world. This is a pretty significant moment in the ministry of Jesus. Jesus identifies that He knows many of them don't really believe. They're enjoying the miracles; they're enjoying the show. They'd like some breakfast, but they're not really interested in what He has to say. He even knows that one of those that He chooses to be one of His closest disciples, will become a betrayer. One of them will never really believe. John's telling us, **“Jesus knew that!”**

Verse 65, I mentioned last week, that throughout the Bible, there is this mystery in salvation between God's part and our part. There are things that God is doing: *electing, choosing*. And there are things that we're doing: *listening, understanding* and *believing*. It's really mysterious and confusing. You listen to some people talk, and they have it all figured out, “This is exactly the way it works.” But nobody knows. All we know is there's God's part, and there's our part. And that shows up again and again. But verse 65 isn't really talking about that. Verse 65 is as practical as: when all these people are together, it's hard to tell who really believes and who doesn't. As a matter of fact, we can't figure that out. You always get yourself into trouble when you're trying to figure out who the true believers are, and who are those that don't really believe. You can't tell. But what Jesus is saying is, “*God knows*.” God knows; God sorts it out. God takes those who are true believers—and only God knows that—and gives them to Jesus. And Jesus then will keep them all the way to the finish line. So, essentially Jesus is saying many of those who maybe we thought were believing, they're going to go home. But there are those who truly believe, and God knows who they are. This, then, gets us to Verse 66:

As a result of this many of His disciples withdrew and were not walking with Him anymore. So Jesus said to the twelve, “You do not want to go away also, do you?” (Verses 66-67)

So now the twelve—who we think of as the disciples—Jesus asks them this question. The crowd is dismissing; they're going home, and Jesus looks at them. The way that question is worded in the Greek expects a negative answer. In other words, He doesn't think they're leaving. He's expecting them to say, “No, we're not leaving.” Peter then answers with a great response:

Simon Peter answered Him, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have believed and have come to know that You are the Holy One of God.”

(Verses 68-69)

So Peter says, “*Lord, where are we gonna go? You're the only way. You're the only one that has the Words of Life.*” When Peter identifies Jesus as **the Holy One**, it's a very rare statement in the New Testament. But it's a phrase that shows up thirty times in the prophet Isaiah. It's a significant term. Peter understands, to some degree, that this is actually God in the flesh, the long-awaited Messiah. There is no plan “B”; there's no other way. So Peter responds and says, “*There's nowhere else to go. You're the only one that has the words of life.*” Verse 70:

Jesus answered them, “Did I Myself not choose you, the twelve, and yet one of you is a devil?” Now He meant Judas *the son of Simon Iscariot, for he, one of the twelve, was going to betray Him.* (Vs. 70-71)

So Jesus has identified He's known that from the beginning; this wasn't a surprise. It's not that He didn't see it coming. Why He chose Judas, knowing that, no one really knows. But it is sobering to think how much Judas witnessed, how much he saw, how much he heard. At the end of the gospel of John in chapter 20, John tells us, “There are so many more things the disciples witness that he does not have room to write about them.” What all did Judas see and hear and experience with Jesus, and yet at the end of the story Judas says, “No thanks, not interested.” As long as Judas thought he could use and manipulate Jesus for his own personal gain, he was in. “I want Jesus, but I want a Jesus of my own making.” And when it became evident that that was not going to play out, Judas cashed in for thirty pieces of silver and said, “I'm out!”

It is a good reminder that there are many people who don't believe, because they simply do not want to believe. It's not a lack of evidence. It's not a lack of proof. It's not a lack of information. They just don't want it. God has created us with a will, and we can exercise our will and we can choose to believe or we can choose to say, “No thanks.” Sometimes as parents, our kids grow up and they don't want Jesus, and we beat ourselves up thinking, “What could we have done differently? What did we do?” And it's so hurtful and confusing and painful. I understand that. But you do have to come to grips with the fact that Judas walked with Jesus and saw unimaginable things for three years and, at the end of the story said, “No thanks. I'm out.” People with a will to choose can choose to believe or not to believe. That's just simply part of the story.

Religion is often about inviting people on a cruise on the Love Boat, and Jesus is the captain of the ship. As long as there's a buffet and the pool and entertainment and sunny skies, this is lovely. “Jesus, You stay up there where You belong, and we're gonna have a great time on the cruise. We'll call You if we need You.” But then when life hits, when the storms of life come, when the bottom drops out of your world, people are like, “Wait a minute, this isn't what I paid for.” And they get angry with God and walk away. Jesus has been very clear from the beginning. “This is not a cruise ship. This is a battleship.” For the next year He will prepare these core disciples for the battle. All but probably one of them will ultimately be executed for their beliefs. When Peter says, “*Lord, there's nowhere else to turn. You alone have the words of life,*” he himself will be crucified upside down because of

his absolute determination to believe that's true. These men understood it, and they would give their lives, believing that the life that our souls long for will be found in the world to come.

Many of you know that somewhere in my mid-20s, I kind of reached a little bit of a crisis—maybe not a little bit, maybe a lot—crisis of faith of trying to sort out over twenty years of the pain and suffering twenty-four hours a day, every day for over twenty years, that we experienced in our home together. So maybe growing up in it, it seemed kind of normal. But as Patty and I got married and we were having our own kids, it started to sink in, “That's not normal,” and trying to understand what happened—and where was God in the midst of all that? Trying to reconcile this message that God is good, and He's kind and He's loving, and He's compassionate, up against the circumstances of life, and trying to somehow sort this out and make sense of it. I basically hit a fork in the road, where it's like, “I can't keep going on like this.” Strangely enough, I was a pastor. I was preaching sermons, but I was going home and wrestling with, “I don't know that this is true,” and trying to reconcile what's coming out of my mouth with what I'd experienced in life. I understood I could get angry and walk away. But what does that change? How does that fix anything? How does that make anything better? What has that accomplished? What is the point of becoming angry and bitter and walking away? I realized I needed to surrender. But for me surrender meant *surrendering the need for answers to my questions*. I had so many questions about God, and where was God, and how does that make sense, and why did it have to be this way? Realizing I'm never going to get answers to those questions, if this is gonna work, *I have to surrender the need for answers and simply believe God tells the truth*. God says He's kind. He says He's compassionate. He says He's good. He says He's loving. Either that's true, or it's not. But if you're going to demand answers to your questions, you're going to live a miserable, hopeless life. Surrender means, “*I choose to believe and surrender my need for answers to my questions.*” I settled that in my middle to late 20s and decided, “I'm in!” I'm 61 years old now, and I have had my share of heartache—and, “I'm in!” I believe more today than I've ever believed that God is good. He's kind. He's compassionate. He's loving. I don't doubt that. I do not have answers to my questions, and I've resolved that I never will. I can't tell you how many times along the way when we've gone through these difficult moments as a family, I've said to Patty, “I'm not going back...I'm not going back. I settled this in my 20s—over 30 years ago—and I'm not going back! I believe God is good and He's faithful and He's kind, and I don't have to have answers to my questions. I'm in!” For any of us, tomorrow may be the worst day of your life. “I'm in...I'm in...all the way to the finish line. I do believe it with all my heart! I'm in. I hope you're in with me!”

Our Father, we're thankful that when we don't have answers, You know. Probably most of us in the room have lots of unanswered questions, that when it seems like the circumstances of life conflict with what You say is true about You, that either You tell the truth or You don't. God, may we believe like Peter, “Lord, where else are we gonna go?” You alone have the words of life. You're the only One that gives us hope. You're the only One that will get us to the world our souls long for. Lord, we acknowledge this morning there's just nowhere else to turn, so we're in all the way to the finish line. For this we pray in Jesus' name, Amen.

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That You May Believe

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Opening Discussion

1. What is the difference between a cultural Christian or a religious person and a true believer in Jesus? How do you discern the difference?
2. Have you ever been tempted to walk away from Jesus because of something you've experienced in life? Did you or why didn't you?

Bible Study

1. Read John 6:29, 35, 40, 47, 58. How does one "eat" the bread of life according to Jesus? What does this mean?
2. Read John 6:59-61. Why are His disciples grumbling? What is getting in their way of believing in Jesus? (hint: Jesus is intentionally exposing the problem by doing and saying things in the temple, on the sabbath, at Passover season). How does this same thing happen to people today?
3. Read John 6:61-63. Compare John 1:31-34; 3:5, 6; 6:28, 29; Galatians 3:1-3. How do these verses help confirm that 6:53-58 is to be taken figuratively for believing in Jesus?
4. Read John 6:64-71. How could Judas be with Jesus for 3 years and see so many signs and hear so much teaching and yet not believe? How does this help us understand some of the unbelievers around us?
5. Why do you think so many "disciples" stopped following Jesus at this point in the story? What do we learn from this? What does it really mean to follow Jesus?
6. Discuss Peter's words to Jesus. Even when times are hard and life doesn't make sense, where else can we turn? Sometimes our hurt comes from our theology born out of wishful thinking more than the pages of the Bible. What can we expect in this world and what can we expect from Jesus in this world?

