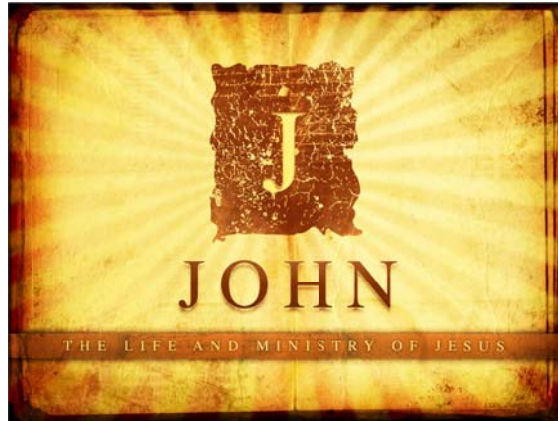


The Man from Heaven



Eight Bible Studies from John 3-5



Eight Studies from John 3-5

The Man from Heaven....

Study 1	brings new birth John 3:1-15
Study 2	is sent to save John 3:16-21
Study 3	is greater than John John 3:22-36
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Note: The preaching roster for 2016 will reverse the order of the last two studies, ie John 5:16-30 will be preached on Easter Sunday, with 5:31-47 preached the week before.

Study 1 – The Man from Heaven brings new birth

John 3:1-15

1. What reaction do you have to the label “born-again Christian”? Would you identify yourself as one?

2. Read John 3:1-15 in its entirety. Then go back and read v 1-2. Why might Nicodemus have come to Jesus at night? Is his perception of Jesus correct?

3. Read verses 3-4. What must we do to see the Kingdom of God? Did Nicodemus understand what Jesus is saying? In what ways is his response to Jesus actually quite appropriate?

4. Verses 5-6. According to v6, what are the two ways of being born? Name some differences between the two types of birth.

5. What do you think Jesus might be getting at in vs 7-8 and what does this teach us regarding the new birth?

6. Skip down to vs 14-15, and then read Numbers 21.1-8. What does this teach us about the new birth?

7. How does the concept of being ‘born again’ as its described here in John distinguish Christianity from other religions?

8. Think about Nicodemus' reaction. What is the substance of Jesus' rebuke in vs 10-13?
9. Why might Nicodemus have found this teaching of Jesus hard to accept? What blockages might people have today to the concept of new birth?
10. Discuss how this teaching of new birth affects:
 - a) how we view non-Christians;
 - b) how we understand our own personal faith;
 - c) how we pray.
11. Commit this week to praying for someone to experience new birth. Share the name of this person with the group.

Did you know: The French theologian John Calvin (1509-1564) invented a word based on the story of Nicodemus. A *Nicodemite* is a person who publicly professes to believe one thing while secretly believing the opposite. Not exactly a name you would like to be called!

Study 2 – The Man from Heaven is sent to save

John 3:16-21

1. What is the difference between:
 - a) a vegetable and fruit;
 - b) a moth and a butterfly;
 - c) a turtle and tortoise?

2. Read John 3:16-17. What do these verses teach us about God's character? Is this how you usually think of him? How well do we present this aspect of God's character to others?

3. What assumption about the world is present in these verses?

4. What do we learn here about the focus of Christ's mission? How might this focus be distorted by Christians today?

5. Read v18. What creates the difference between salvation and condemnation? How does this challenge conventional views of religion?

6. When atheists say "you don't need God to be good", what might they misunderstand about the Christian faith?

7. Read vs 19-20. According to these verses, why might people refuse to take up salvation? Share some examples from your own interactions with others that testify to this truth.

8. What do vs 19-20 teach us about evangelism? How do they focus our prayers?

9. Read v 21 in a couple of different versions. What is John getting at here? The actions of those coming into the light are carried out by whose power?

10. To sum up, take a minute to write down one thing you have learnt about the following. Share with the group at the end.

a) God the Father (who sent Jesus):

b) Jesus Christ:

c) the world and the people in it:

d) yourself:

Did you know that John 3:16 was the most searched for Bible verse on the online Bible site *biblegateway.com* in 2015? You probably could have guessed! Rounding out the top five were: (2) Jer 25:11; (3) Phil 4:13; (4) Rom 8:28; (5) Psalm 23:4.

Study 3 - The Man from Heaven is greater than John

John 3:22-36

1. What situation is most likely to bring out the competitor in you? Are you a competitive person? What about *comparing* yourself to others?
2. Read John 3:22-36 in its entirety. Then read vs 22-24 again. What potential for conflict do we see in these opening verses?
3. Read vs 25-26. What feelings might have been swirling within John's disciples? What temptation might have met John the Baptist at this point?
4. Have you ever felt spiritually competitive? Have you ever compared yourself spiritually to others?
5. What gem of wisdom is found in v 27? Try and rewrite this verse in your own words.
6. Read vs 28-30. Can you explain the bridegroom illustration in v29? What point is John making?
7. Read vs 31-35. Who is the one from Heaven? What reasons are given for believing the words of this man from Heaven?

8. What kind of humility do these final verses call forth from us?

According to v 36, what is the cost of resisting this humility?

9. Is stepping into the background always a good thing? Can you think of any other occasions in the Bible when John was very forward? (Hint: Luke 3:19) How might we know when to step back and when to step up?

10. Have someone read out aloud the following verses, and just listen, then silently pray in response at the end:

Ephesians 4:2; Philippians 2:3; Colossians 3:12; James 4:10; 1 Peter 5:6.

11. Commit this week to memorising either John 3:27 or 3:36.

“John’s Gospel is shallow enough for a child to wade in but deep enough for an elephant to swim in”. Many commentators have picked up this quote over the centuries as an apt way of describing both the simplicity and depth of the fourth Gospel. On one level John’s message is clear— Jesus is God’s Son sent from Heaven who gives eternal life to those who believe— yet John also has profound truths to explore such as the nature of the Trinity. The image itself comes from Pope Gregory the Great (AD 540-604). He originally was referring to the whole Bible (not just John) and spoke about a lamb wading instead of a child, but he did come up with the elephant.

Study 4 - The Man from Heaven meets a woman

John 4:1-42

1. Have you ever been in a situation where you realise that you don't fit in? Have you ever been worried about joining a new group of people?

2. Read John 4:1-9. What were relations like between the Jewish people and the Samaritans? (Also read Luke 9:51-56) What does the location of Jacob's well indicate to us?

3. Read vs 10-15. How does Jesus answer the woman's question in v 12?

4. Read vs 16-18. What does Jesus discern about the woman's personal life? Would the religious leaders back in Jerusalem have considered her a righteous member of God's people? What was against her?

5. Are there groups (or types of people) who we have trouble imagining as recipients of God's grace? What is it that makes us close our hearts to them? What can Jesus teach us about our interactions with others here?

6. Read vs 19-26. What might it mean to worship "in spirit and in truth"? How is this worship different to that of the Samaritans and Jews?

7. Read vs 27-30. What does the woman's testimony involve?

8. What has Jesus done in front of you? Can you imagine someone benefiting from your account of God's activity in your life? Practice testifying aloud to the group about something Jesus has done for you.

9. What is Jesus opening our eyes to in vs 31-38?

10. What is the result of the woman's testimony in vs 39-42?

11. How convinced are you that your own testimonies (note plural – we each have more than one) of God's work in your life make good harvesting tools? Are you willing to dust them off and see if they work?

Did you know that as of 2015, the Samaritans still exist as a religious minority of approximately 780 people? Like the woman in the story, they live near Mt Gerizim (the mountain referred to in v 20), which this day finds itself within the Palestinian territories on the West Bank.

Study 5 - The Man from Heaven heals a boy

John 4:43-54

1. When were you last called upon to show proof of something? i.e. your identity or proof of purchase. Have you ever felt slightly irritated that you've been called upon to show this proof?

2. Read John 4:43-45 (and also John 2:23-25 for the background). What reasons do these texts give us to doubt the sincerity of the Galileans' welcome?

3. What 'false welcomes' might we be tempted to offer Jesus? Is it possible to commit to Jesus for a worldly benefit? What is the danger of such an approach?

4. What words would you use to describe the royal officials' response to Jesus (vs 46-50)?

5. What criticism does Jesus have for the Galileans in vs 48? How does their response compare with that of the Samaritans in vs 41-42? The royal official's response is most like which group?

6. Comparing the Samaritans with the Galileans, what kind of response is John leading us towards in this part of the Gospel?

7. Read vs 51-54. What is it that brings about faith in the official's household?
8. Jesus seems to condemn those looking for a sign, yet willingly grants one for the official's household. Does this make sense? How might we make sense of it?
9. How does this part of John's Gospel help us understand the place of miracles in ministry today?
10. How well do we take Jesus at his word? Are there times in your life when you are tempted to require more from Jesus before you follow his word?

Did you know that modern scholars estimate that Capernaum (where the royal official's son lay dying) had a population of about 1500 at the time of Jesus – about the size of a large school. It was the site of quite a number of miracles performed by Jesus. Think back to your time at school – you'd know whether or not that kid in a wheelchair was suddenly cured wouldn't you? These miracles would have been undeniable by the townsfolk, yet the people of the New Testament remain fickle in their belief. Our conclusion? Belief is impossible without the Holy Spirit!

Study 6 - The Man from Heaven heals a paralytic

John 5:1-15

1. Have you ever had a generous gesture of yours rejected?
2. Read John 5:1-5. What situation does the invalid find himself in? What significant detail does John include in v 5?
3. Read vs 6-7. What is the invalid putting his hope in? Does this approach sound even remotely Biblical?
4. Where do we see religious superstition emerging today? Do we ever allow it to creep into our own lives?
5. Read vs 8-13. What concern is voiced by the Jewish leaders? What have the misunderstood about the Sabbath? See also Matt 12:11-12 abd mark 2:27.
6. How might we fall into the trap of the Pharisees today?
7. How does Jesus ministry in this passage cut across superstition and legalism?

8. What is startling about Jesus' words to the cured man in v 14? Can our sicknesses really be a result of our sin? Look at 1 Cor 11:27-30 and John 9:1-5 for help.

9. How does the man repay Jesus' kindness to him?

10. What is attractive about Jesus in this passage?

Did you know that the pool forming the setting here in John 5 was uncovered in Jerusalem during the 19th Century? Archaeologists discovered it was essentially a rectangular pool with a surrounding sheltered walkway but split in two by a covered colonnade, hence "five covered colonnades".

Study 7 - The Man from Heaven will call us out from the grave

John 5:16-30

1. Who in this whole world are you most alike – both physically and in terms of personality?

2. Read John 5:16-18. How might these verses help us answer the claim that “Jesus never said that he was God”?

3. Read carefully over vs 19-23, and create a list of all the ways in which Jesus echoes the actions of the Father.

4. What words are used in these verses to describe the relationship between Father and Son?

5. Can you love and honour God without doing the same towards Jesus? Why or why not? How might v 23 help us answer the person who claims “all religions are just the same”?

6. What great truths are captured in v 24? What kind of assurance does this verse give the believer who is:
 - a) nervous about death;
 - b) nervous about whether they are good enough for God?

7. What particular aspect of the father's delegation to the Son is picked up from v 25? What might Jesus mean by "a time is coming and now has come?"

8. Take a moment to meditate on the image of hearing the voice of Jesus from the grave and following it out into eternal life. This is something we will experience one day. How does this make you feel?

9. Read vs 28-29. Will anyone miss the resurrection on the final day? Will everyone have the same experience? What sense of urgency ought this leave us with?

10. Is there any discrepancy between v 24 and v 29? How might John 6:28-29 help?

11. Finally, how might verse 30 help us answer people who say "I don't like the idea of God as a judge"?

Did you know the girl's name Anastasia comes from the ancient Greek word for "resurrection".

Study 8 - The Man from Heaven asks us to believe

John 5:31-47

1. Have you ever brought suffering upon yourself because you failed to read a set of instructions?
2. Read John 5:31-47. What do you think Jesus' general message is in this passage? Are there any verses you find hard to understand?
3. Go back over vs 31-32. What does Jesus recognise as being needed here (look at Deut 19:15, Matt 18:16, 2 Cor 13.1)? Who might the "other" be in v 32?
4. Who are the first two witnesses mentioned by Jesus in vs 33-36? How accepting have people been of these witnesses?
5. Read vs 37-40. Who is the third witness? If the Jewish leaders have "never heard his voice or seen his form", how has the Father's testimony come to them?
6. Look carefully at v 38. How does Jesus know that the Father's word doesn't dwell in them?

7. Is it possible today to “study the Scriptures diligently” and still miss out on eternal life? How is this so? What is Jesus teaching us about the right interpretation of Scripture?

8. Read vs 41-44. What is the symptom of not having the love of God in your heart?

9. Read vs 45-47. Why is Moses the Jewish leader’s accuser? Which testimony seems most prominent in this passage?

10. Does your own approach to scripture reflect what Jesus is teaching us here? What might need to change?

Did you know that the girl’s name Trinity had a spike in popularity in the early 2000s? *The Matrix* was released in cinemas in 1999. Trinity is the name of the female lead character.

Leaders' notes

Study 1 – The Man from Heaven brings new birth

John 3:1-15

1. What reaction do you have to the label “born-again Christian”? Would you identify yourself as one?

Often the label is used as an insult, as in “that guy’s an actual sincere Christian; he’s a bit too serious about it”. In a way, this is right! Christianity commands a life that is new from the old and different from others. Some might think that being born again only refers to those who have come to Christ later in life. The point that will be made in the rest of the study is that new birth is a necessity – we must all be born-again Christians. It’s a term not referring to the timing of conversion, but to our faith having an origin outside of ourselves and to its life-altering nature.

2. Read John 3:1-15 in its entirety. Then go back and read vs 1-2. Why might Nicodemus have come to Jesus at night? Is his perception of Jesus correct?

Nicodemus is coming at night because he is embarrassed! He’s been able to observe who Jesus is quite accurately, but he’s afraid of what others might think.

3. Read verses 3-4. What must we do to see the Kingdom of God? Did Nicodemus understand what Jesus is saying? In what ways is his response to Jesus actually quite appropriate?

We must be born again. No, Nicodemus didn’t know what Jesus was talking about. His question about entering again into a woman’s womb is appropriate though, as being born again in a spiritual sense is just as impossible! It’s only by a miracle of God’s Holy Spirit that we can be reborn as citizens of God’s Kingdom (see also Mark 10:26-27).

4. Verses 5-6. According to v6, what are the two ways of being born? Name some differences between the two types of birth.

There is human birth (flesh giving birth to flesh) and spiritual birth. Differences: (1) Human birth is through human action, but spiritual birth is an act of the Holy Spirit; (2) Human birth gives way to death eventually, spiritual birth leads to eternal life; (3) All humans have experienced human birth, not everyone will be born again in a spiritual sense.

5. What do you think Jesus might be getting at in v 8 and what does this teach us regarding the new birth?

A difficult verse to understand, but useful question might be to add “What do you think ancient people understood about the wind? Where did they think it came from? Could they control it?” The idea is that the Holy Spirit is a power that is beyond us. We don’t assert ourselves upon him, rather he has his way upon us. But of course, you can see his effects, and you can be carried along with him in a really powerful way. The new birth is not something we can effect ourselves, rather the Holy Spirit acts upon us to bring it about, and when it happens we can never know where this new birth might lead us! V8 “You cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going” New birth means new direction and new life. It’s actually quite exciting!

6. Skip down to vs 14-15, and then read Numbers 21.1-8. What does this teach us about the new birth?

Jesus is referring to the story in Numbers 21. There Moses lifted a bronze snake on a pole to bring healing to people with just a hopeful glance. Jesus is referring to his death on the cross, and he will bring us spiritual healing if we simply flick a hope-filled glance towards him. This is the type of faith the John wants to elicit in his readers. Again, new birth involves trust in what Jesus has done on the cross, a trust enabled by the Holy Spirit.

7. How does the concept of being ‘born again’ as it’s described here in John distinguish Christianity from other religions?

New birth as the entry point to Christian faith is something God enacts for us, it’s not something we can bring about by ourselves. Other religions

often have us attempting to please God first or earn our salvation by good works.

8. Think about Nicodemus' reaction. What is the substance of Jesus' rebuke in vs 10-13?

Nicodemus is a Pharisee, one who was meant to be an expert in the law and who was seeking to influence other Israelites to become more and more obedient to God's Old Testament laws. But the Old Testament pointed to the need of the new birth and how God himself would bring this about (eg Ezekiel 36 – seen by Bible experts as a background passage to this section of John 3). In vs 12-13 Jesus reminds Nicodemus that he has come from Heaven, and so he knows what he is talking about. Jesus is now establishing himself as the rightful teacher of Israel, not the Pharisees.

9. Why might Nicodemus have found this teaching of Jesus hard to accept? What blockages might people have today to the concept of new birth?

As a Pharisee, Nicodemus was teaching about obedience to the law as a means of bringing about God's kingdom, but Jesus is saying it has nothing to do with obedience. If Nicodemus sides with Jesus, he risks rejection (or worse!) by his own crew. Plus Nicodemus himself may still feel a sense of pride in his own ability to please God. People may have similar issues today.

10. Discuss how this teaching of new birth affects:

- a) how we view non-Christians;
- b) how we understand our own personal faith;
- c) how we pray.

Non Christians are in need of the new birth brought only by the Holy Spirit. That we have been reborn means that our lives should be radically different to the lives of people around us. We ought to pray for the re-birth of others, to see them "wonderfully converted" as the old-timers used to say!

11. Commit this week to praying for someone to experience new birth. Share the name of this person with the group.

Ask members of the group to name a person, and to pray for them then and there. Ask people to commit to praying for that person all week. Ask the group members next week how the praying has gone. It might be a good idea to pray for that person all term.

Study 2 – The Man from Heaven is sent to save

John 3:16-21

1. What is the difference between:

- a) a vegetable and fruit;
- b) a moth and a butterfly;
- c) a turtle and tortoise?

A question to get people thinking about how two things that look the same can have fundamental differences. In the study we will be thinking (among other things) about what is actually the difference between a believer and a non-Christian. Don't get too bogged down in disputes about how to answer the above opening question. My opinion is that: fruits have seeds, moths rest their wings flat while butterflies rest their wings in upright position, turtles have flippers while tortoises have legs.

2. Read John 3:16-17. What do these verses teach us about God's character? Is this how you usually think of him? How well do we present this aspect of God's character to others?

Note that God's character is presented in a positive, attractive light. Love is the basis of his sending Jesus into the world. He doesn't wish to condemn, but to save. Maybe refer to Ezk 18:23, 33:11.

3. What assumption about the world is present in these verses?

But not all is positive here. The assumption here is that the world is in trouble and in need of saving. Unless God intervenes in the person of Jesus, then condemnation is a reality. The world is not in a 'neutral' moral state; it is in need of saving.

4. What do we learn here about the focus of Christ's mission? How might this focus be distorted by Christians today?

The focus of Christ's mission is to save a world that is heading for condemnation. Sometimes Christians can talk of Christ as a doer of good works, a champion of the poor. This he was, but to speak of this at the expense of his salvation work is to misrepresent him drastically. Good works are not done in and of themselves but as a reflection of God's generosity towards us. Works of justice are done because we see everyone as deserving of dignity as they are created in God's image, but the true restoration of God's image is not complete unless our sin is removed too.

5. Read v18. What creates the difference between salvation and condemnation? How does this challenge conventional views of religion?

Belief in Christ is the difference. Conventional views of religion are all about doing good works. Islam says "Obey Allah and he might have mercy on you. Hinduism says "Do good works and you'll receive a better reincarnation". Communism says "be a good worker and society will flourish". Christianity says "believe in Christ"

6. When atheists say "you don't need God to be good", what have they misunderstood about the Christian faith?

Often western secularists view Christianity merely as one structure among many that influence people towards good works. But Christianity is actually a belief in something that has been revealed to us by supernatural means; belief in Jesus who is revealed to us in the Bible by the Holy Spirit as the Son of God

7. Read vs 19-20. According to these verses, why might people refuse to take up salvation? Can you think of examples from your own interactions with others that testify to this truth?

Because they actually like their sinful ways. Think of Eve in the garden, the path of sin was attractive! Often people will posit intellectual objections to Christian faith, but the reality is that they like calling the shots themselves.

8. What do vs 19-20 teach us about evangelism? How do they focus our prayers?

Sometimes all the arguments in the world wont budge people's beliefs, because the issue is how much they love their sin! We should pray that people will be convicted that the lives they are living are in need of redemption. Pray also that they will recognise the destruction that sin leaves behind.

9. Read v 21 in a couple of different versions. What is John getting at here? The actions of those coming into the light are carried out by whose power?

This is an unclear verse in the NIV. The ESV is a little better: "But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God." The idea seems to be that people who have believed in the truth will have no hesitation exposing their lives to God because it will be seen that God himself is at work in them. All that believers do is empowered by God ("carried out in God" in the ESV). Because it is God who is at work, there is no room for moral superiority on behalf of the believer.

10. To sum up, take a minute to write down one thing you have learnt about the following. Share your answers with the group at the end.

a) God the father (who sent Jesus):

b) Jesus Christ:

c) the world and the people in it:

d) yourself:

Study 3 - The Man from Heaven is greater than John **John 3:22-36**

1. What situation is most likely to bring out the competitor in you? Are you a competitive person? What about *comparing* yourself to others?

A question to get people thinking about one of the themes faced by the characters in today's passage. The aim is for people in the group to form a renewed appreciation for and determination to practice humility. But notice that the humility as practised by John in this passage is not humility for humility's sake, but humility that is sparked by the glory of Christ. It is a product of encountering Christ that we humble ourselves before him.

2. Read John 3:22-36 in its entirety. Then read vs 22-24 again. What potential for conflict do we see in these opening verses?

Up until this point John has been the only Baptist in town, but the disciples of Jesus (check 4:2) begin their own baptism ministry and people start flocking to them! Is there room for two baptism ministries? Ultimately the answer will be "No!". Who will back down?

3. Read vs 25-26. What feelings might have been swirling within John's disciples? What temptation might have met John the Baptist at this point?

They would have felt some competitiveness with Jesus. Perhaps that's why an argument broke out (v25); maybe they were getting defensive! John may have felt the temptation to join in with this defensive and competitive spirit. Or he could have become disheartened.

4. Have you ever felt spiritually competitive? Have you ever compared yourself spiritually to others?

Perhaps you have a need to be seen as spiritually successful, either before others or before God. Or maybe you are constantly comparing yourself before others, and this leads to envy, or pride, or despair!

5. What gem of wisdom is found in v 27? Try and rewrite this verse in your own words.

What a great line from John: "A person can receive only what is given him from heaven". We can only have what God permits us to have; we can only work with what God gives us to work with. This is a great line that captures the reality of our humble position before God. John knows there is no use comparing ourselves to others because God has different tasks for each of us and has equipped us differently.

6. Read vs 28-30. Can you explain the bridegroom illustration in v29? What point is John making?

God's people are the bride, Jesus is the groom, and John is the groomsman ("The friend who attends the bridegroom"). Who is the centre of attention at a wedding? The bridegroom. Don't you hate it when the best man tries to hog the attention? It's simply not appropriate! The point is that Jesus is at the centre. John knows this, he knows his place, and he is content with that! V 30 is great, isn't it?

7. Read vs 31-35. Who is the one from Heaven? What reasons are given for believing the words of this man from Heaven?

Jesus is the one from heaven. Reasons for believing him include the fact that because he is from heaven, his testimony relates to what he has seen and heard there (a hint of Christ's pre-existence with the Father before he came to earth). His words are not mere words from an earthly human being like you and me. The spirit has been given to him without limit. The Father has entrusted Jesus with everything.

8. What kind of humility do these final verses call forth from us? According to v 36, what is the cost of resisting this humility?

It's worth noting that John's humility was brought about by his recognition of who Jesus is. The message of this passage isn't simply "consider others greater than yourself" (even though that is a Biblical idea – Phil 2:3), but "consider Christ and humble yourself before him." Have we humbled ourselves before Christ and his plan for our lives, or are we trying to stick with our own plan? Have we relied on him and his righteousness, or are we trying to secure our own good standing before God? The consequences of not exercising this humility are dire – we remain under God's wrath.

9. Is stepping into the background always a good thing? Can you think of any other occasions in the Bible when John was very forward? (Hint: Luke 3:19) How might we know when to step back and when to step up?

Again, the main type of humility called for here is humility before Christ. Sometimes we might have to step forward to speak up in his name. John did this in Luke 3:19. Sometimes we can be humble before God while showing leadership in front of others. One way to tell the difference is to ask: "Whose glory are you trying to secure with your actions, God's or your own?"

10. Have someone read out aloud the following verses, and just listen, then silently pray in response at the end:
Ephesians 4:2; Philippians 2:3; Colossians 3:12; James 4:10; 1 Peter 5:6.

You may like to indicate to the group that some of these verses speak about humbling ourselves before God, which is exactly what John does in this passage. Then just have the verses read out without commentary, allowing people to meditate on God's word.

11. Commit this week to memorising either John 3:27 or 3:36.

Study 4 - The Man from Heaven meets a woman

John 4:1-42

1. Have you ever been in a situation where you realise that you don't fit in? Have you ever been worried about joining a new group of people?

One of the questions raised by this passage has to do with who belongs to the Kingdom of God. Many people don't think that they belong, that they need to somehow get it together before they can enter. This episode will show that what matters is belief and faith in Christ, not the quality of our life or who we associate with.

2. Read John 4:1-9. What were relations like between the Jewish people and the Samaritans? (Also read Luke 9:51-56) What does the location of Jacob's well indicate to us?

The relationships were not good! It is fair enough to say that there was a fair amount of hatred between the two. BUT, notice Jacobs well is within the Samaritan territories. This reminds us that the two groups had a common past and that ultimately they can come together again by a shared faith in Jacob's descendent Jesus.

3. Read vs 10-15. How does Jesus answer the woman's question in v 12?

Yes, Jesus is greater than Jacob, because he offers something greater, a type of 'water' that revives us for all eternity. This water is an image, of course, representing the Holy Spirit who leads us to eternal life (Isaiah 44:3)

4. Read vs 16-18. What does Jesus discern about the woman's personal life? Would the religious leaders back in Jerusalem have considered her a righteous member of God's people? What was against her?

Jesus discerns that the woman has a dismal marital record. Whether it is her fault or not, we are not sure. No doubt the Jews back in Jerusalem would have not given her the benefit of the doubt as she appeared suspect in her morality and was a Samaritan too. Interestingly though, she seems to have no trouble being heard and listened to by her own people.

5. Are there groups (or types of people) who we have trouble imagining as recipients of God's grace? What is it that makes us close our hearts to them? What can Jesus teach us about our interactions with others here?

Try not to let the group get off too lightly with this question. It is easy for some Christians to name clichéd groups of outsiders whom we know we ought to show love and grace to—the single parent, the sexually immoral, the addicted—although what we know to be true often goes untested! Try to probe with some really undesirable groups—the child sex offender, the Islamic extremist, the racist ideologue—do we believe they are outside of God’s offer of living water?

6. Read vs 19-26. What might it mean to worship “in spirit and in truth”? How is this worship different to that of the Samaritans and Jews?

A harder question but the idea behind “spirit and truth” is that because God is Spirit, there isn’t one place or code that controls our worship of him. But we also worship in truth, which means we do have to worship God as he has revealed himself to us; we must worship him truthfully, and not with some made up version of God in our heads. This is different to the Samaritans and the Jews because they had tied worship to two specific mountains. Jesus here is also indicated the pending end of temple worship. We can worship here in Waitara (and not Jerusalem) because we worship in “Spirit and truth”!

7. Read vs 27-30. What does the woman’s testimony involve?

Simply relating to others what she had witnessed of God’s activity, then making the suggestion as to why she thinks this might be significant.

8. What has Jesus done in front of you? Can you imagine someone benefiting from your account of God’s activity in your life? Practice testifying aloud to the group about something Jesus has done for you.

The idea here is to help people think about their testimonies. Being prepared to testify is a great and simple way to evangelise. It’s also not as offensive as some other forms of evangelism because we are simply sharing our story, not probing into other people’s beliefs. A testimony doesn’t have to be the full story of your conversion, it can just be a single line as to what God has done most recently in your life. Encourage everyone to have a go in the group.

9. What is Jesus opening our eyes to in vs 31-38?

The fact that the harvest is ready and the job is to bring in the wheat. This is an illustration about evangelism, of course. Note also the need for multiple roles in evangelism, those who plant and those who reap. We need to be doing both.

10. What is the result of the woman's testimony in vs 39-42?

People are willing to investigate more. We ought to be ready for God to act in people's hearts as we give testimony. Maybe talk with the group about the different reactions people might have to our testimonies. Emphasise that an initial negative reaction isn't necessarily the end of the matter. How often have you been doubtful when hearing something new? It's understandable! But note that sometimes people might be willing to investigate more, like they did in this story!

11. How convinced are you that your own testimonies (note plural – we each have more than one) of God's work in your life make good harvesting tools? Are you willing to dust them off and see if they work?

Talk honestly about our willingness to testify. Maybe ask people whether they are willing to drop in a line or two of testimony in their conversations this week. Pray for opportunities, especially with the person named at the end of the first study. Follow up by asking people next week what happened.

Study 5 - The Man from Heaven heals a boy

John 4:43-54

1. When were you last called upon to show proof of something? i.e. your identity or proof of purchase. Have you ever felt slightly irritated that you've been called upon to show this proof?

A theme in today's passage has to do with the contrast between those who push Jesus for a sign and those who take Jesus at his word. Seeking some proof is not unreasonable, but it is possible to ask for unreasonable

proof! This seems to have been the issue with many people in Jesus' day; they were unsatisfied with what Jesus was showing them, always asking for more.

2. Read John 4:43-45 (and also John 2:23-25 for the background). What reasons do these texts give us to doubt the sincerity of the Galileans' welcome?

Note verse 44: Jesus indicates that his own people (the Galileans) were having trouble honouring him properly. Also in John 2:23-25 people believed him but Jesus is still wary – John tells us that Jesus knew the fickleness/insincerity of people's hearts.

3. What 'false welcomes' might we be tempted to offer Jesus? Is it possible to commit to Jesus for a worldly benefit? What is the danger of such an approach?

One example: we might commit to Jesus in a superficial way in order to get accepted with a group of people, e.g. politicians who suddenly turn up to church before an election. Of course, the danger is that true discipleship will put you at odds with the world, so such false allegiances rarely last the distance.

4. What words would you use to describe the royal officials' response to Jesus (vs 46-50)?

He isn't looking for further sign as a way of testing Jesus, he trusts that Jesus can heal his son. I think Jesus' words here are probably directed more at the general Galilean community than the official himself (note the plural: 'you people' in v 48).

5. What criticism does Jesus have for the Galileans in vs 48? How does their response compare with that of the Samaritans in vs 41-42? The royal official's response is most like which group?

The criticism is levelled at the Galileans ongoing demand for "signs and wonders" (note plural again). The Samaritans, by contrast, believe on account of the testimony of the woman whom Jesus met at the well, and

then after hearing Christ's teaching. Granted, there was a miraculous element in Christ's ability to see the woman's private history, but her kinsfolk don't see any miracle, instead they believe "because of his words" (v 41). Thus the Royal official is most like the Samaritans, in that he "took Jesus at his word" (v 50).

6. Comparing the Samaritans with the Galileans, what kind of response is John leading us towards in this part of the Gospel?

John is leading us to believe on account of what we hear, not what we see. This lines up with John's overall purpose in writing his Gospel. He wants us to believe the account of Jesus' miracles (see 20:31); he doesn't tell us to go out and hunt down miracles for ourselves. We are to take Jesus at his word. Note also that throughout his Gospel John spends just as much time relating the words of Jesus as he does the miracles of Jesus; He is notable for the space he devotes to 'signs' AND 'discourses'.

7. Read vs 51-54. What is it that brings about faith in the official's household?

But then again, it is a miracle that brings faith to the official's household!

8. Jesus seems to condemn those looking for a sign, yet willingly grants one for the official's household. Does this make sense? How might we make sense of it?

This does seem contradictory, but I don't think it's a black and white case of one or the other. Faith based on witnessing a miracle is no less real than faith based on God's word. However, throughout the Bible there does seem to be a priority on God's verbal revelation over his physical manifestations. This isn't to deny the reality of miracles, but to say that such activity is a grace-filled concession on behalf of God to our weak hearts. That's the way to relate the two: priority on the word, but recognising that God sometimes makes miraculous concessions to help us. The miracle here is a compassionate response to the official's faith; a gracious act which brings faith to the whole household.

9. How does this part of John's Gospel help us understand the place of miracles in ministry today?

Miracles can occur – Jesus demonstrates this. But they are not necessary for ministry, nor are they even a prioritised method. What is necessary for ministry is the work of the Holy Spirit in helping us believe God's word (which is its own miracle, when you think about it). Miracles were necessary for proving Christ's identity (imagine a God who can't do miracles!), but the proofs have been given and are recorded for us, so they no longer need to be repeated. Also note that there are many examples in the gospel where people do not believe even after they see a miracle. So even in Jesus' day they were not sufficient in and of themselves.

10. How well do we take Jesus at his word? Are there times in your life when you are tempted to require more from Jesus before you follow his word?

A personal question to examine the nature of our own response to Christ. Some people might try and do a trade off with Jesus: "Give me a, b, c and then I'll follow you", or "show me you care about this issue in my life, then I'll hand myself over to you". How different is the person who says "I hear your call, and that's enough. I'll come and follow!"

Study 6 - The Man from Heaven heals a paralytic

John 5:1-15

1. Have you ever had a generous gesture of yours rejected?

A question to help people comprehend the actions of the crippled man in this passage. The crippled man is the recipient of enormous grace from Jesus, yet he responds unfavourably

2. Read John 5:1-5. What situation does the invalid find himself in? What significant detail does John include in v 5?

He finds himself among the sick and paralysed, looking for some kind of cure. John lets us know that he has been this way for 38 years. This is

significant, because it highlights the power of the miracle. This wasn't just some remedial massage performed by Jesus or a final act of will on behalf of the man. Muscles unused for 38 years could not just leap up without some supernatural intervention.

3. Read vs 6-7. What is the invalid putting his hope in? Does this approach sound even remotely Biblical?

He is hoping to be cured by the powers that he believes reside in the pool. Some older translations add an extra couple of lines after verse 3, describing how the paralyzed "waited for the moving of the waters. From time to time an angel of the Lord would come down and stir up the waters. The first one into the pool after each such disturbance would be cured of whatever disease they had." These lines are likely a later addition, and not part of the original text. However, they do seem to reflect something of the superstition that attracted the lame to the pool. It's hard to find biblical confirmation of this kind of activity. Naaman was cured by washing in the Jordan (2 Kings 5), but this was a deliberate act of prophesy conducted by Elisha, not a semi-regular occurrence in a local pool.

4. Where do we see religious superstition emerging today? Do we ever allow it to creep into our own lives?

Superstition is a belief not based on any sound reason or knowledge. Some people's cultural religions and practices might be very superstitious indeed. Sometimes we can get into habits and practices ourselves which border on the superstitious. We can find comfort in a habit or place, which is fine to a point; just so long as we don't attach spiritual significance to it.

5. Read vs 8-13. What concern is voiced by the Jewish leaders? What have the misunderstood about the Sabbath? See also Matt 12:11-12 and Mark 2:27.

They are upset about the man carrying his mat on the Sabbath. The Jewish leaders of Jesus' day had expanded the Sabbath laws to include many more things not included under the Old Testament. Under their

leadership, Sabbath observance had become a much bigger thing than was ever intended. Designed to be a blessing for God's people, God's people were now being told to serve it! Jesus makes this point in the other two passages listed above.

6. How might we fall into the trap of the Pharisees today?

When we go beyond what is written in the Bible, either in our expectations of ourselves or of others. Ask the group if they can think of any real or potential examples.

7. How does Jesus' ministry in this passage cut across superstition and legalism?

What Jesus offers is refreshingly simple. Do we want what he offers? If so, then we will receive it. We don't have to play superstitious games in order to try and connect with God's power, nor do we have to invent demanding religious practices and habits. He offers and we receive. In this case, Jesus offers and gives without the man even giving a straight answer!

8. What is startling about Jesus' words to the cured man in v 14? Can our sicknesses really be a result of our sin? Look at 1 Cor 11:27-30 and John 9:1-5 for help.

Jesus seems to suggest that the man's sinfulness (exactly what, we are not told) is linked to his illness. Indeed the Bible elsewhere indicates that such a link is a possibility (1 Cor 11:27-30, also Acts 5:1-11). However, a few chapters later in John 9, the disciples ask about the sinfulness of a blind man – perhaps they had in mind Jesus' words here in 5:14. Jesus' reply there indicates that while sin related illness is a possibility, it's not always the case that the two are linked.

9. How does the man repay Jesus' kindness to him?

He finds the Jewish leaders and dubs in Jesus! This now-cured man is a bit of a pathetic creature. Even though his sin has led to illness and he's placing his hope in superstition, he receives a gracious approach by Jesus.

But then he turns around and report's Jesus to the authorities! May the Holy Spirit keep us from such a response!

10. What is attractive about Jesus in this passage?

His grace and willingness to help this guy despite the man's character issues is wonderful.

Study 7 - The Man from Heaven will call us out from the grave

John 5:16-30

1. Who in this whole world are you most alike – both physically and in terms of personality?

This study's passage is one place where John starts to examine the nature of the Trinity. We will note the similarities between the Father and the Son.

2. Read John 5:16-18. How might these verses help us answer the claim that "Jesus never said that he was God"?

This is often something that armchair atheists will throw at us, but these verses are one place where Jesus makes a clear claim to be equal with God. The key is to recognise that he makes the claim using categories that were suitable to his day. In the ears of his audience, claiming to have God as father was exactly the same as claiming to be God himself.

3. Read carefully over vs 19-23, and create a list of all the ways in which Jesus echoes the actions of the Father.

Jesus does what the father does, he gives life as the father gives life, he receives honour as the father receives honour.

4. What words are used in these verses to describe the relationship between Father and Son?

“Loves”, “shows”, “entrusts”, “sends”

5. Can you love and honour God without doing the same towards Jesus? Why or why not? How might v 23 help us answer the person who claims “all religions are just the same”?

Verse 23 has the answer. We don't honour God unless we honour the Son, which, in the context of all that Jesus has been saying, means believing his word. Not honouring Jesus is an insult to God because the Father has sent him. And note that the type of honour involved here is just like the one we show to the Father (v 23). Merely honouring Jesus as a prophet is not enough. This means that all religions are NOT the same, not unless they place Jesus in the same category as God himself. See also John 14:6.

6. What great truths are captured in v 24? What kind of assurance does this verse give the believer who is:

- a) nervous about death;
- b) nervous about whether they are good enough for God?

Great truths include: (1) hearing Christ's word is central to faith, (2) belief is the response he is looking for, (3) Eternal life is the result, (4) there is no judgment for those who believe.

Assurance for nervous type (a): Eternal life is easily attainable by faith in Christ. Type (b): being good enough is not what he is calling for, the response that matters is believing in what Jesus says!

7. What particular aspect of the father's delegation to the Son is picked up from v 25? What might Jesus mean by “a time is coming and now has come?”

Jesus focuses on the role he has bringing eternal life to the dead. The work of new life is one that comes in stages. First of all we hear the good news and receive spiritual re-birth upon believing (the “now has come” bit). We then become God's children. Then after we have died, we will hear God's word again calling us up from the grave (“a time is coming”). Some

theologians and bible teachers call these two stages of salvation the “now but not yet”.

8. Take a moment to meditate on the image of hearing the voice of Jesus from the grave and following it out into eternal life. This is something we will experience one day. How does this make you feel?

I think this is an amazing image. We will hear the voice of Jesus calling us out to emerge from the dead. Just like Lazarus did in John 11:43.

9. Read vs 28-29. Will anyone miss the resurrection on the final day? Will everyone have the same experience? What sense of urgency ought this leave us with?

No one will be able to escape the voice of Jesus calling them back to life. But not everyone will be raised to face the same future. Some will receive eternal life, others will receive condemnation. Therefore we must feel some urgency in enabling others to believe in Jesus and to therefore receive the more positive resurrection.

10. Is there any discrepancy between v 24 and v 29? How might John 6:28-29 help?

Some may notice that v 24 speaks about believing and receiving eternal life, while v 29 speaks about receiving eternal life on the basis of what we have done. Is verse 29 salvation by works? John 6:28-29 gives us the answer. The work that is required is belief! No works salvation here.

11. Finally, how might verse 30 help us answer people who say “I don’t like the idea of God as a judge”?

One thing we can say is “Don’t you think justice is a good thing? We long for justice, and God is willing to bring it!” V 30 adds the idea that Jesus will be just in his judgements, he will be absolutely fair in a way that only God can be.

Study 8 - The Man from Heaven asks us to believe

John 5:31-47

1. Have you ever brought suffering upon yourself because you failed to read a set of instructions?

A question to get the group thinking about the danger of reading and ignoring what has been read (or reading and not understanding). This is what Jesus will accuse the Jewish leaders about in today's passage.

2. Read John 5:31-47. What do you think Jesus' general message is in this passage? Are there any verses you find hard to understand?

The passage is quite dense so it may be helpful to read it through first and get a general orientation. If there are verses that people don't understand then come back to them at the end to see whether the penny has dropped. If not, then ask the rest of the group what their reading is.

3. Go back over vs 31-32. What does Jesus recognise as being needed here (look at Deut 19:15, Matt 18:16, 2 Cor 13.1)? Who might the "other" be in v 32?

Jesus recognises that just his own word isn't enough. This is a biblical theme in that the other passages listed in the question speak of the need of two or three witnesses before a matter can be settled. This Jesus will provide as the passage unfolds. Who is the other? Given the amount of attention allotted from v 37 to the witness of the Father through the words of Scripture it would seem that Jesus is referring to his heavenly Father. Maybe come back to this question to see if people can work this out themselves after completing the rest of the study.

4. Who are the first two witnesses mentioned by Jesus in vs 33-36? How accepting have people been of these witnesses?

John the Baptist and the miraculous signs. John the Baptist ended up in prison (3:24), and the miracles just made the Jewish leaders angry.

5. Read vs 37-40. Who is the third witness? If the Jewish leaders have “never heard his voice or seen his form”, how has the Father’s testimony come to them?

The third witness is the Father. Given that Jesus goes on to speak about the witness of Scripture it would seem that Jesus is referring to the words of the Father as contained in the Old Testament.

6. Look carefully at v 38. How does Jesus know that the Father’s word doesn’t dwell in them?

Evidence of God’s word dwelling in Jesus is found in whether we have accepted Christ. The Jewish leaders haven’t, so God’s word is obviously not in them.

7. Is it possible today to “study the Scriptures diligently” and still miss out on eternal life? How is this so? What is Jesus teaching us about the right interpretation of Scripture?

Yes, it would appear so. If we study the scriptures and conclude that Jesus has not come from the Father and is not the way to eternal life then we’ve missed their point. Jesus himself is saying here that a proper reading of the Old Testament will lead to an acceptance of Jesus as God’s Son.

8. Read vs 41-44. What is the symptom of not having the love of God in your heart?

Similar to question 6 above, the evidence of not having the love of God in your heart is the rejection of his Son. Also note v 44, another result of not having the love of God in us is that we seek and uphold the glory of our fellow humans but are not interested in the glory which comes from loving God.

9. Read vs 45-47. Why is Moses the Jewish leader’s accuser? Which kind of the three kinds of testimony mentioned by Jesus seems most prominent in this passage?

Because Moses, as a key OT author, was used by the Father to testify about the Son (eg Deut 18). Jesus seems to be focussing on the written testimony of Scripture. This is the most damning oversight regarding the Jewish leaders unbelief. Scripture is the most fundamental form of testimony.

10. Does your own approach to the Bible reflect what Jesus is teaching us here? What might need to change?

Here is a challenge/reminder to believe the Bible as it's the Father's own testimony, and also to read the Bible in a way that sees Jesus as the main topic, even when in the OT!