



2024 Q4 Themes in the Gospel of John, Lesson 7 Blessed Are Those Who Believe

by Russell Atkins

SABBATH

“Jesus said to him, ‘Thomas, because you have seen Me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed’ ” (John 20:29, NKJV).

From the lesson:

Throughout his Gospel, John has a diversity of people—people with different backgrounds, beliefs, and experiences—all testify- ing to who Jesus was.

“ ‘Behold the Lamb of God!’ ” **[John the Baptist]** (John 1:36, NKJV). “ ‘We have found the Messiah’ ” **[Andrew - Peter’s brother]** (John 1:41, NKJV). “ ‘We have found Him of whom Moses . . . wrote’ ” **[Philip to Nathanael]** (John 1:45, NKJV). “ ‘Rabbi, You are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!’ ” **[Nathanael to Jesus]** (John 1:49, NKJV). “ ‘Could this be the Christ?’ ” **[Woman @ the Well]** (John 4:29, NKJV). “ ‘We ourselves have heard Him and we know that this is indeed the Christ, the Savior of the world’ ” **[Fellow Samaritans based on interacting with Jesus]** (John 4:42, NKJV). “ ‘Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life’ ” **[Peter to Jesus]** (John 6:68, NKJV). “ ‘I believe that You are the Christ, the Son of God, who is to come into the world’ ” **[Martha to Jesus before Lazarus’ resurrection]** (John 11:27, NKJV). “ ‘Though I was blind, now I see’ ” **[Man born blind]** (John 9:25, NKJV). “ ‘Behold your King!’ ” **[Pilate to jews again]** (John 19:14, NKJV). “ ‘I find no fault in Him’ ” **[Pilate to jews]** (John 19:6, NKJV). “ ‘My Lord and my God!’ ” **[Thomas after examining Jesus]** (John 20:28, NKJV).

(Adult SS Guide Q4 2024, Themes in the Gospel of John, pg 56)

Who were some of these people, and why did they testify as they did to the identity of Jesus?

SUNDAY

Harking Back to Abraham

Jesus speaking to the jews:

“Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad.” [John 8:56, NKJV].

The lesson asks

Why was Abraham's witness so important that it was included in John's gospel?

Through type and promise God 'preached before the gospel unto Abraham.' Galatians 3:8. And the patriarch's faith was fixed upon the Redeemer to come. Said Christ to the Jews, 'Your father Abraham rejoiced that he should see My day; and he saw it, and was glad.' John 8:56, R.V., margin. The ram offered in place of Isaac represented the Son of God, who was to be sacrificed in our stead. When man was doomed to death by transgression of the law of God, the Father, looking upon His Son, said to the sinner, 'Live: I have found a ransom.' — Patriarchs and Prophets, pg 154
(Adult SS Guide Q4 2024, Themes in the Gospel of John, pg 57)

The Jews argued with Him stating, "You are not yet fifty years old, and You have seen Abraham?" [John 8:57 NKJV].

Jesus destroys their argument with, "Most assuredly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM." [John 8:58 NKJV]. The church leadership then gathered stones to "throw at Him". Why was the Jewish political / church leadership so animated to kill Jesus?? What is the root of their animosity?? What about Christian leadership today?? Will it manifest the same hatred for the same reasons??

The lesson correctly identifies the root of the problem contrasting Paul's description of Abraham's righteousness by faith in Romans 4: 1-5:

What then shall we say that Abraham, our ancestor according to the flesh, has discovered regarding this matter? 2 For if Abraham was declared righteous by works, he has something to boast about—but not before God. 3 For what does the scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness." 4 Now to the one who works, his pay is not credited due to grace but due to obligation. 5 But to the one who does not work, but believes in the one who declares the ungodly righteous, his faith is credited as righteousness.
Romans 4: 1-5

Abraham's heart went from a natural distrust of God [thanks to sin], to a position of trust [thanks to Jesus], and he started on the pathway to righteousness by faith in a future event. He developed an understanding of the nature and function of God's Design Law. My suspicion is Abraham better understood the Design Law from the beginning of his life than we do. It's generally accepted that Babylon was the first "nation" that had a codified law, and nearly every culture since then has followed suit. Abraham did not have to unlearn the error that seems to function in our DNA that God's Law functions just like human laws. Scripture is silent on what the Laws of Sodom were, but it doesn't take much imagination to figure out that they were pretty lax in their legislation / enforcement if they existed at all.

MONDAY

The Witness of Mary.

Mary anointed Jesus with some expensive fragrant oil at Simon's house. The lesson surmises that this was done in gratitude for the forgiveness of her "sins" and for the resurrection of Lazarus. The whole house was filled with the heady fragrance of the oil[s] and Judas rebuked her, claiming that the gift should have been sold and the proceeds given to "the poor". Jesus states:

Leave her alone, she kept it for the day of my burial. For you will always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me."
[John 12: 7,8 NET].

Many on the political left reject this Scripture along with the ones in Deuteronomy 15 and Matthew 26 / Mark 14, and in their utopian zeal tell us that poverty can be eradicated with a variety of government imposed programs of excessive taxation or universal basic income. These programs are at war with God's Design Law of Liberty, Sowing & Reaping, and Exertion. How?

John takes an aside to make clear to the reader the nature of Judas' character [John 12:6]. He's a thief. Jesus knew this beforehand and still protected Judas' reputation. The disciples found out about Judas' thefts after his death.

The fragrant gift which Mary had thought to lavish upon the dead body of the Saviour she poured upon His living form. At the burial its sweetness could only have pervaded the tomb; now it gladdened His heart with the assurance of her faith and love. . . . And as He went down into the darkness of His great trial, He carried with Him the memory of that deed, an earnest of the love that would be His from His redeemed ones forever.
(The Desire of Ages, pg 560)

Our sense of smell is one of the most primitive and a familiar scent can trigger some deep memories / emotions. Imagine Jesus in Gethsemane, his humanity wrestling with powerful emotions to deviate from his chosen path, praying for Devine strength, feeling the loss of connection with his Father, and getting a whiff of the perfume originally bought for His burial, and getting strengthened to continue along with His decision. Or hanging on the Cross, and feeling the pain of nails in His hands and feet; his back raw flesh from two floggings pressed against rough wood, splinters jabbing in His spine; the crown of thorns that pierced his skull, and a slight change in breeze brings the faint scent of the perfume on his punctured feet mixing with the odor of sweat and blood, strengthening Him to continue the fight against His human nature from his mother and surrender His life to His Father — "in to your hands, I commit my Spirit, Father".

TUESDAY

The Unwitting Witness of Pilate.

The lesson recommends reading the EGW Desire of Ages chapter “In Pilate’s Judgement Hall”. I wholeheartedly agree.

Christ's persecutors had tried to measure His character by their own; they had represented Him as vile as themselves. But back of all the present appearance another scene intruded itself,—a scene which they will one day see in all its glory. There were some who trembled in Christ's presence. While the rude throng were bowing in mockery before Him, some who came forward for that purpose turned back, afraid and silenced. Herod was convicted. The last rays of merciful light were shining upon his sin-hardened heart. **He felt that this was no common man; for divinity had flashed through humanity. At the very time when Christ was encompassed by mockers, adulterers, and murderers, Herod felt that he was beholding a God upon His throne.**

(Desire of Ages, pg 731[emphasis mine]).

When Jesus was returned to Pilate he was “disappointed and much displeased.” He had already told the mob Jesus was innocent of their false charges and wanted to be done with their mess. He did, however, agree to have Jesus scourged. For those who don’t know what Roman scourging involved, it was a deeply cruel beating. The prisoner was tied to a post, while a punisher swung a short stick with 3-6 leather straps attached to the end of it. Embedded in the ends of the leather straps were sharp pieces of iron or bone that dug in to the prisoners skin and ripped it apart when the straps were jerked away for the next lash. Jewish law limited the beating to 40 lashes, so typically a prisoner was given 39 lashes [“twoscore less one”], however the Romans had no such limitations, and no body part was off limits. Many victims died with 39 or less.

Concerning the Romans flagrum, the church historian Eusebius of Caesarea recounts in vivid, horrible detail a scene of scourging. He says, “For they say that the bystanders were struck with amazement when they saw them lacerated with scourges even to the innermost veins and arteries, so that the hidden inward parts of the body, both their bowels and their members, were exposed to view”

(Ecclesiastical History, Book 4, chapter 15).

The Jewish accusers of Jesus noted Pilate’s weakness in capitulating to having an “innocent” man scourged to placate them and they pressed for more.

Here Pilate showed his weakness. He had declared that Jesus was innocent, yet he was willing for Him to be scourged to pacify His accusers. **He would sacrifice justice and principle in order to compromise with the mob. This placed him at a disadvantage.** The crowd presumed upon his indecision, and clamored the more for the life of the prisoner. If at the first Pilate had stood firm, refusing to condemn a man whom he found guiltless, he would have broken the fatal chain that was to bind him in remorse and guilt as long as he lived. Had he carried out his convictions of right, the Jews would not have presumed to dictate to him.

Christ would have been put to death, but the guilt would not have rested upon Pilate. But Pilate had taken step after step in the violation of his conscience. He had excused himself from judging with justice and equity, and he now found himself almost helpless in the hands of the priests and rulers. His wavering and indecision proved his ruin.

(Desire of Ages, pg 731 emphasis mine)

Pilate is an example of those described in Revelation as receiving the mark of the beast in their hands. He was not a true believer in the Jews or their accusations about Jesus, but he wanted to curry their favor, and was afraid of ill reports getting back to Caesar possibly jeopardizing his position, so he “went along” to protect self. God was still trying to reach Pilate and gave him another evidence via the letter from his wife regarding her vision. He still vacillated and offered them the release of a prisoner, Jesus or Barabbas, for their Passover. The Jews would have none of it and demanded Christ be crucified, and welcomed the release of Barabbas.

Pilate yielded to the demands of the mob. Rather than risk losing his position, he delivered Jesus up to be crucified. But in spite of his precautions, the very thing he dreaded afterward came upon him. His honors were stripped from him, he was cast down from his high office, and, stung by remorse and wounded pride, not long after the crucifixion he ended his own life. So all who compromise with sin will gain only sorrow and ruin. “There is a way which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death.

The people of Israel had made their choice. Pointing to Jesus they had said, “Not this man, but Barabbas.” Barabbas, the robber and murderer, was the representative of Satan. Christ was the representative of God. Christ had been rejected; Barabbas had been chosen. Barabbas they were to have. **In making this choice they accepted him who from the beginning was a liar and a murderer. Satan was their leader. As a nation they would act out his dictation. His works they would do. His rule they must endure.** That people who chose Barabbas in the place of Christ were to feel the cruelty of Barabbas as long as time should last.

(Desire of Ages, pg 738 (emphasis mine))

WEDNESDAY

The Witness of Thomas

The lesson asks “What major mistake did Thomas make?”

Did Thomas make a mistake or did he exercise his discernment in not surrendering his decision making to another disciple or an authority figure. I’m willing to give Thomas some grace in wanting to examine evidence for himself. To be fair, the other disciples would not likely have lied to Thomas about seeing Christ, but I still affirm him for wanting to evaluate the evidence himself. Sister White disagrees with me:

Thomas “cast himself at the feet of Jesus crying, ‘My Lord and my God.’ Jesus accepted his acknowledgment, but gently reproved his unbelief: ‘Thomas, because thou hast seen Me, thou

hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed.’ The faith of Thomas would have been more pleasing to Christ if he had been willing to believe upon the testimony of his brethren. Should the world now follow the example of Thomas, no one would believe unto salvation; for all who receive Christ must do so through the testimony of others.

Many who are given to doubt excuse themselves by saying that if they had the evidence which Thomas had from his companions, they would believe. They do not realize that they have not only that evidence, but much more. Many who, like Thomas, wait for all cause of doubt to be removed, will never realize their desire. They gradually become confirmed in unbelief. Those who educate themselves to look on the dark side, and murmur and complain, know not what they do. They are sowing the seeds of doubt, and they will have a harvest of doubt to reap. At a time when faith and confidence are most essential, many will thus find themselves powerless to hope and believe.

(Desire of Ages, pp 807, 808)

God never asks us to believe, without giving sufficient evidence upon which to base our faith. His existence, His character, the truthfulness of His word, are all established by testimony that appeals to our reason; and this testimony is abundant. Yet God has never removed the possibility of doubt. **Our faith must rest upon evidence, not demonstration.**

(Steps to Christ, pg 105 emphasis mine)

THURSDAY

Our Witness of Jesus.

From the Lesson:

Imagine having been there, in person, in the flesh, and having seen Jesus do many of these miracles. We’d certainly believe, wouldn’t we? We’d like to think so; but, in some ways, we have even more reasons to believe in Jesus than did those who actually saw the miracles.

(Adult SS Guide Q4 2024, Themes in the Gospel of John, pg 61)

Why?

Why indeed? Are we advantaged in any way

The lesson makes excellent points on this — we have the history of the 1st century church; all of the gospels; history of Paul’s conversion / missions / letters; fulfillment of a variety of prophecies including the persecution of the believers in medieval Europe, & those being fulfilled in real time now; the compilation of both Old and New Testaments into our Bible; advances in science supporting Scriptural accounts of beginnings and events; and **OUR** unique experience with the Holy Spirit making effectual Christ’s accomplishments and transforming our characters to ones like His.