

FOLLOW ME: JESUS' CALL TO DISCIPLESHIP IN THE GOSPEL OF JOHN¹

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What does it mean to be a disciple of Jesus? This article explores John's theology of discipleship and its surrounding themes in the fourth Gospel. As John explains the command to follow Jesus, he provides numerous rewards that incentivize faithful obedience. These rewards motivate the disciple to persevere in faith and obedience, such that the disciple experiences the blessings of sonship, friendship, and fellowship with the Triune God. As the disciple partakes of these blessings, he comes to realize the magnitude of the eternal life which God has given.

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Introduction

Ignatius, a bishop of Antioch, an historic city in early Christianity, had a reputation of being a “God-bearer.”² He faithfully preached Christ and followed Christ. He thereby earned the nickname “God-bearer.” Ignatius bore the name of God until AD 108 when he was martyred. As Ignatius traveled to Rome, he wrote a letter to the church in Rome: “Through the abuse of the ten soldiers on the road to Rome I am learning to become more and more of a disciple.... But I still need the wild beasts

¹ This article is adapted from a two-part sermon series delivered on January 21 and 28, 2018 at Grace Community Church, titled, “Follow Me: Jesus' Call to Discipleship in the Gospel of John.” Akin to the sermon, this article endeavors to deliver a summary of my book, *Follow Me: The Benefits of Discipleship in the Gospel of John* (Lanham, MD: Fortress Academic, 2021). Published with permission from Bloomsbury, Fortress Academic. This article also relies on my PhD dissertation completed at the University of Edinburgh (2017). Many thanks to Karl Walker and Iosif J. Zhakevich for reworking this material into the current article.

² Bryan M. Litfin, *Early Christian Martyr Stories: An Evangelical Introduction with New Translations* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 46.

awaiting me in the arena.... I know that this is best for me. I am beginning to be a true disciple.”³ Ignatius continued:

May nothing at all, whether of this world or the invisible world above, fight against me and prevent me from reaching Jesus Christ. Bring on the fire and the cross; the hordes of wild beasts! Let the cutting and dissections begin! The wrenching of my bones, the dicing of my limbs, the grinding of my entire body, the hideous tortures of the Devil—let all this befall me; only let me attain to Jesus Christ! Nothing from one end of the earth to the other end matters to me anymore. The kingdoms of this age are meaningless. I would rather die for Jesus Christ than to rule the entire world. He alone is the one I seek, the one who died for us. He is my desire, the one who rose again for our sake.⁴

Ignatius was ultimately torn to pieces by the lions in an arena in Rome.

What sustained Ignatius in his commitment to Jesus? The answer emerges in a letter he wrote to his friend, Polycarp, in which he said: “Be thou watchful as an athlete of God. That which is promised to us is life eternal, which cannot be corrupted, of which things thou are also persuaded.”⁵ The promise of eternal life held him fast. But where did Ignatius pick up the theme of eternal life as a motivation for faithful discipleship, even in the face of the most horrific physical persecution and pain? Who inspired him to stay the course and follow Jesus while facing the lions in Rome? None other than his personal discipler: the Apostle John. This theme of eternal life pervades the Gospel of John.

John refers to (eternal) life fifty-three times.⁶ In John 3:16, John records Jesus saying, “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.” In 10:27–28, Jesus proclaims, “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them.” And in 17:3, Jesus says, “This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.” John appealed to his readers with the theme of eternal life evidently to mitigate against a different experience that was familiar to his audience—a fleeting life frequently cut short by those who hated Christ and Christians.

The Context of Following Jesus

The Gospel of John reveals that persecution was reality for Jesus’ followers. The Apostle John was the last surviving disciple of Jesus, which suggests that he observed more persecution than other followers of Jesus. So, the Apostle John offers an unparalleled point of view on discipleship.

John both endured persecution personally and observed others suffer as well. In Acts 4, Luke describes Peter and John as the first disciples to be arrested after Jesus’

³ Litfin, *Early Christian Martyr Stories*, 48.

⁴ Litfin, 48.

⁵ Ignatius of Antioch, “The Epistle of Ignatius to Polycarp,” in *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Mary and Irenaeus*, eds. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, Vol. 1, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature, 1885), 99.

⁶ See the discussion in Zhakevich, *Follow Me*, 53.

ascension. John was later exiled to Patmos for being a Christian (Rev 1:9). But being the last surviving disciple, John also carried the burden of seeing friends and disciples martyred for their faith as he mourned one Christian friend and ministry partner after another. His brother James was executed with a sword by Herod (c. AD 44; Acts 12:1–2); Paul was beheaded;⁷ and Peter was crucified upside down.⁸

In Acts, after the disciples begin to preach Christ, every chapter after chapter four contains instances of persecution except two chapters. In Acts 10, Luke records a private meeting between Cornelius and Peter. And in Acts 15, Luke describes a private meeting of the disciples at the Jerusalem council. So, John witnessed persecution firsthand during his many years of following Christ. He understood and could affirm that there was a high cost to following Christ.

But this did not suddenly happen after Jesus ascended to heaven; this was true even during Jesus' time. Every chapter in the Gospel of John mentions opposition to Jesus or persecution of His followers.⁹ Consider the following examples:

- 1:11: “He came to His own and His own did not receive Him.”
- 5:16, 18: “For this reason the Jews were persecuting Jesus.... For this reason therefore the Jews were seeking all the more to kill Him.”
- 8:59: “Therefore they picked up stones to throw at Him, but Jesus hid Himself and went out of the temple.”
- 9:28: The Jewish leaders reviled the blind man and said, “You are His disciple, but we are disciples of Moses.”
- 11:53: “So from that day on they planned together to kill Him.”
- 12:10–11: “But the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death also; because on account of him many of the Jews were going away and were believing in Jesus.”
- 15:18–20: “If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you.... If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you.”
- 16:2: “They will make you outcasts from the synagogue, but an hour is coming for everyone who kills you to think that he is offering service to God.”

On account of such opposition to Jesus and His followers, there was a high level of fear that dominated the people, which John conveys in his Gospel.¹⁰

- 7:13: “Yet no one was speaking openly of Him for fear of the Jews.”
- 9:22: The parents of the blind man refused to answer questions about the blindness of their son “because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that if anyone confessed Him to be Christ, he was to be put out of the synagogue.”

⁷ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, Loeb Classical Library 153, trans. Kirsopp Lake (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), 2.25.5, 189.

⁸ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 2.25.5, 189.

⁹ See 1:11; 2:18–21; 3:11, 36; 4:1–3, 44; 5:16–18; 6:60–66; 7:1, 13, 19–20, 25, 30, 32, 44; 8:20, 37, 40, 59; 9:22, 28, 34; 10:39; 11:8, 46–53, 57; 12:10, 19, 42, 13:2, 21; 14:1, 27, 30; 15:18–27; 16:2, 33; 17:14; 18–19; 19:38; 20:19; 21:18. This hostility stems from “the world” and “the Jews.” See Zhakevich, *Follow Me*, 162–63.

¹⁰ Zhakevich, *Follow Me*, 164.

- 12:42: Even though some of the rulers believed in Him, “because of the Pharisees they were not confessing *Him*, for fear that they would be put out of the synagogue.”
- 19:38: Joseph of Arimathea was a secret disciple of Jesus “because of his fear of the Jews.”
- 20:19: After the crucifixion of Christ, when the disciples gathered together, “the doors were shut where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews.”

The common people, the disciples of Jesus, and even some Jewish leaders (such as Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea) all had various degrees of fear of the retribution they would face from Jewish leadership. The Jewish leaders had decided to expel from the synagogue anyone who followed Jesus (9:22; 12:42; 16:2).¹¹

To be expelled from the synagogue was to be ousted from life in the Jewish community. Such a penalty amounted to losing one’s social identity, which was connected to membership in the synagogue. Membership in the synagogue guaranteed access to participation in social life.¹² Many of the significant events of Jewish life took place at the synagogue—from weddings to daily education to weekly worship to the court system (e.g., Luke 4:16). To be cast out of the synagogue was to become a social leper. This context of persecution permeates every chapter in the Gospel of John.

But in addition to persecution and hostility that kept people from believing and confessing Jesus as Messiah, Jesus also demanded a high cost of His followers. In John 12:25–26, Jesus declares, “He who loves his life will lose it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it to life eternal.”¹³ In 6:53–54, Jesus says, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in yourselves. He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life.” Jesus taught that His disciples had to internalize Him and His teaching.

This demand, however, pushed people away from Jesus. In John 6:60 and 66–67, John writes, “Therefore many of His disciples, when they heard *this* said, ‘This is a difficult statement; who can listen to it?’.... As a result of this many of His disciples withdrew and were not walking with Him anymore.” Many followers began to defect from Jesus. So Jesus turned to His disciples and asked: “Will you abandon me also?” (6:67). Jesus’ question to his disciples was fraught with despair and disappointment. Jesus had come to give life (6:54) and to satiate hunger and thirst (6:48, 51), but the people rejected and abandoned Him. Jesus knew that some of His closest followers would abandon Him. He knew that Judas would not only walk away but in fact betray Him, let alone with a kiss (6:70–71).

¹¹ This expulsion was likely done in an unofficial way by the Pharisees exerting pressure on the surrounding community. Bernier describes this action as “something closer to lynching than to formal proceeding.” For further analysis, see Jonathan Bernier, “Jesus, *Ἀποσυνάγωγος*, and Modes of Religiosity,” in *John and Judaism: A Contested Relationship in Context*, eds. R. Alan Culpepper and Paul N. Anderson (Atlanta: SBL, 2017), 127–33.

¹² F. F. Bruce, *New Testament History* (New York: Doubleday, 1971), 143–46.

¹³ The reader should note the change from *ψυχή* to *ζωή* in the verse that denotes a difference between physical life now and *ζωή*, the spiritual life that John describes throughout his Gospel. See Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, New International Commentary on the New Testament, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 527 n75.

John portrayed in his Gospel that to be a follower of Jesus was potentially a perilous commitment. It would lead to suffering, shame, and even persecution. Yet, it is in this context of conflict, opposition, persecution, fear, and death that Jesus broadcasts the command: "Follow Me."

The Command to Follow Jesus

The theme of following Jesus echoes throughout the Gospel of John (1:37, 38, 40, 43; 6:2; 8:12; 10:4, 5, 27; 12:26; 13:36, 37; 18:15; 21:19, 20, 22). John challenges every reader to begin the journey or to evaluate if they are truly and faithfully following Christ. John emphasizes this theme by placing it in the opening and in the closing chapters of the book, using an *inclusio* to stress a point of great importance.¹⁴ In John 1:43, Jesus commands Philip, "Follow Me." Then in John 21:19, Jesus tells Peter, "Follow Me." When Peter sees John behind them, he asks Jesus, "And what about this man?" (21:21). But Jesus responds, "What is *that* to you? You follow Me!" (21:22). Jesus wanted Peter to make sure that he himself was following Christ; that needed to be his primary objective, and that is what Jesus called him to do when He reiterated to him: "You follow Me!" Christ's call is directed to each individual: "Follow Me!"

The theme of following Jesus in the Gospel of John depicts six characteristics of a true follower of Jesus.

Belief

First, John depicts belief as a marker of true discipleship. He mentions belief ninety-eight times,¹⁵ and he uses the verb "believe" to stress the active expression of belief in Jesus Christ. Belief is not merely a response that affirms certain truths but one that appropriates them and lives them out. In John's Gospel, belief is mentioned in a variety of contexts. A person has belief in His name (John 1:12), in Jesus as Messiah (3:15–21, 35; 11:27; 20:31), as the Son of God (3:18, 36, 6:40, 11:27, 20:31), as Savior (4:42), in His word (4:41, 50), as One who is sent by God (5:24, 38, 6:29, 11:42, 16:27, 30, 17:8, 21, 25–26), as Son of Man (9:35–38), as the holy One from God (6:69), as "I am" (8:24), as the Light (1:4, 12:26, 44–46), as One unified with the Father in purpose and work (10:30), as the One who satisfies (6:35, 14:10–12), in Jesus' works affirming Him as God's messenger (10:37–38), and in Jesus Christ as the resurrection and the life (11:25–26).

Furthermore, John refers to belief in God's testimony about Jesus Christ. John records Jesus saying, in 14:1, "Believe in God, believe also in Me." John stresses that true disciples believe that God sent Jesus. In 17:8, the identifying mark of Jesus' true disciples is that they received Jesus, His teaching, and His claim that He is from God.

Additionally, followers of Jesus believe the Scripture about Jesus Christ. They believe the prophecies about Jesus Christ as the coming prophet in the likeness of

¹⁴ Bauckham notes other features of the prologue and epilogue that function as an *inclusio*, such as the priority of belief (1:7; 20:31) or the importance of witness (1:15; 21:24); see Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 364–68.

¹⁵ Refer to the analysis in Zhakevich, *Follow Me*, 4.

Moses (5:39, 46–47). In John 4:19, the Samaritan woman remarks: “Sir, I see that You are a prophet.” In John 6:14, the crowds, after being fed, conclude, “This is truly the Prophet who is to come into the world.” In John 7:40, after Jesus promises to provide water of life, the crowd affirms, “This truly is the Prophet.” In John 9:17, after the blind man is healed, he calls Jesus the prophet. The mark of true discipleship (as opposed to false discipleship) is both affirming that Jesus is the prophet and continuing to believe this truth—that is, continually abiding in Jesus’ teaching. As Jesus says in John 8:31, “If you abide in My word, *then* you are truly My disciples.”

Thus, John first depicts belief as a foundational characteristic of a true disciple of Christ.

Love

True belief, then, leads to affection, so John presents love as the second characteristic of discipleship. In John 21:15–17, Jesus crafted the perfect scene to restore Peter after he denied Him in the garden near a fire that warmed Peter (John 18:18). As the resurrected Jesus waited for His disciples on the shore, He stood near a fire which would have reminded Peter of his denial of Jesus near a fire (cf. 18:18; 21:9). As Peter now sensed the smell of fire on the shore near Jesus, the context was set for Jesus to ask Peter the key questions that would prove or disprove Peter as a disciple. Jesus did not ask if Peter regretted the betrayal. Jesus did not ask if he confessed his sin to others. He did not chastise him. Instead, Jesus asked a single question, “Do you love me?” This is the ultimate display of discipleship—love.

Then, immediately after posing the question three times, Jesus charges Peter, “Follow Me” (21:19).¹⁶ Jesus thereby shows that there is a bond between loving and following Him which is manifested in obedience. True love for Jesus Christ is displayed in obedience.

Obedience

John indicates that obedience is a key distinctive of true discipleship. As Jesus says in John 14,

If you love Me, you will keep My commandments.... He who has My commandments and keeps them is the one who loves Me; and He who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love Him and will disclose Myself to him.... If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our dwelling with him. He who does not love Me does not keep My words; and the word which you hear is not Mine, but the Father’s who sent Me. (14:15, 21, 23–24)

Obedience is the measure of true love and discipleship, and Jesus Christ expects the believers to love not only Him but also the others whom He saved. Jesus says in John

¹⁶ Jesus’ command for Peter to follow Him connects back to Jesus’ earlier statement in 13:36 that Peter would eventually follow Him to death on a cross. See George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, Word Biblical Commentary (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1999), 409.

13:35, “By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.” Consider John 15:12 and 17, in which Jesus says, “This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you.... This I command, that you love one another.” Evidence of true love for Jesus is obedience to the commands of Jesus.

Fruit-Bearing

John then links the expectations of obedience and love with the element of bearing fruit. Jesus says, “You did not choose Me but I chose you, and appointed you that you would go and bear fruit, and *that* your fruit would abide, so that whatever you ask of the Father in My name He would give to you” (John 15:16). Jesus is promising lasting and effective fruit for those who have been chosen by Him who are His disciples.

When John records this, he is not necessarily speaking of a certain type of fruit, but because the word “fruit” appears in different contexts in John (4:36; 12:24), it is a term that broadly includes all the fruits of a Christian life.¹⁷ It refers to the fruit of the Holy Spirit (Gal 5:22–23). The importance of fruit in the Christian life is stressed by John in 15:8, when Jesus explains, “My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and *so* prove to be My disciples.” Fruit proves the authenticity of discipleship. Fruit-bearing is “the visible sign of being a disciple.”¹⁸ Jesus said that a true disciple who bears fruit is engaged in His mission.

Witness

Fruit-bearing is directly related to fulfilling Jesus’ mission and being His witness, which is the fifth expression of true discipleship. Jesus declares in John 4:36–38,

Even now he who reaps is receiving wages and is gathering fruit for life eternal; so that he who sows and he who reaps may rejoice together. For in this *case* the saying is true, “One sows and another reaps.” I sent you to reap that for which you have not labored; others have labored and you have entered into their labor.

Jesus came to fulfill God’s mission of making His name known. Upon His ascension to heaven, Jesus engages each of His disciples in that same mission. He prays in John 17:18, “As You sent Me into the world, I also sent them into the world.”¹⁹ He also says to His disciples in John 20:21, “Peace *be* with you; as the Father has sent Me, I also send you.” Believers are to serve as witnesses of Christ.

¹⁷ In contrast to Carson, who suggests that the fruit is “new converts.” See D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Leicester, UK: Apollos, 1991), 523.

¹⁸ C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978), 475.

¹⁹ This witness and the disciples’ preparation is one of the primary themes in Jesus’ prayer in John 17; see Gerald L. Borchert, *John 12–21*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2002), 203.

In John 15:27, Jesus Christ tells His disciples they will be His witnesses because they had been with Him from the beginning.²⁰ John features the requirement for the true disciple to witness and testify for Christ. He uses this verb “witness” (μαρτυρέω) thirty-three times in the Gospel of John.²¹ Followers of Jesus are called to faithfully proclaim the same message that they had believed, even in times of opposition and persecution.

However, many may not respond to this witness. John records in 12:42–43, “Nevertheless many even of the rulers believed in Him, but because of the Pharisees they were not confessing *Him*, for fear that they would be put out of the synagogue; for they loved the glory of men rather than the glory of God.” This is John’s explanation as to why people refused to fully commit to Jesus and confess Him—the fear of losing prestige before men. In John 5:44, Jesus accuses the Jewish leaders of preferring human glory over belief in Him. In verse 44, He emphatically places glory at the front of the statement and in juxtaposition to belief, saying: “How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another and you do not seek the glory that is from the only God?” Jesus condemns them for preferring human glory over the glory that comes from God.

The irony is that in pursuing human glory people forego true divine glory. As Jesus prays in John 17:22, He says, “The glory which You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one, just as We are one.” Jesus extends to every person true affirmation, greatest accolades, and approval from God, but the fleshly obsession with human approval causes people to forfeit eternal glory. So, how does one resist the allure of human accolades? John addresses this in the final expression of discipleship.

Hate Your Life

John affirms that a true disciple of Christ loves Christ more than he loves his own life. In fact, he even hates his life in comparison to his undivided love for Christ. In John 12:25–26, Jesus states, “He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it to life eternal. If anyone serves Me, he must follow Me; and where I am, there My servant will be also; if anyone serves Me, the Father will honor him.” The context of John 12:23–26 is death. Jesus declares that the hour of glory has come and that His glory will come through His death on the cross (12:23).²² Jesus’ illustration of a seed dying in the ground reiterates the point of the fruit that results from Jesus’ death (v. 24). In verse 25, Jesus articulates the principle that in order for life to mean something, the disciple must be willing to die. The disciple

²⁰ This command to witness is inseparably linked with the role of the Spirit, the Helper whom Jesus will send from the Father (John 15:26). The Spirit Himself will witness, suggesting that “this witness of the Paraclete is not a phenomenon apart from that of the disciples, but inseparably associated with it.” See Beasley-Murray, *John*, 276–77.

²¹ The verb is used only thirty-five times in the Gospels. The two uses outside of John are found in Matthew 23:31 and Luke 4:22.

²² This is a significant shift within John’s Gospel in the way he uses the word “hour.” Carson observes that previous uses of “hour” are anticipatory (2:4; 4:21, 23; 7:30; 8:20), looking ahead. However, now John notes that the “hour” has come (12:23), namely the hour of Christ’s glorification. This sets the tone for references to the hour moving forward (12:27; 13:1; 17:1). See Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 437.

must be willing to sacrifice his life for something that will outlast it. Oswald Sanders states, "The great use of one's life is to spend it for something that will outlast it."²³

What awaits the believers on the other side of this passing life is eternal life (v. 25), presence with Jesus (v. 26), and honor from the Father (v. 26). In 12:25–26, Jesus gives the promise that, "The Father will honor" the faithful disciples of Christ. The preference of God's glory and honor will drive Christ's disciples to hate their life (v. 25) and to serve Jesus Christ (v. 26) in order to gain eternal life (v. 25).

By exhorting believers to hate this life and to focus on eternal life, John encourages believers to not be preoccupied with human approval but to be committed to God's glory and honor. In 12:26, John features "following" as the key to fulfilling this requirement. The way one would hate his life and serve Christ is by following Him, which is the focus of this study.²⁴ To be a disciple is to be in a student-teacher relationship; it is to demonstrate commitment and loyalty.

This is the essence of the word "disciple," which John uses seventy-eight times (seventy-four times for followers of Jesus Christ). John uses the word "disciple" more often than any other Gospel, and John uses this term to refer not only to the twelve disciples, but also to anyone who faithfully believes and follows Jesus. Discipleship is personal allegiance to Jesus that shapes the whole life of a person. This is the commitment to which John is inviting his readers, a personal attachment to Christ. John is not inviting his readers to a relationship he himself was not personally committed to; rather, he was a follower of Jesus and he was inviting his audience to follow Christ as well.

The Model to Follow

Portraying discipleship in a concrete and specific way, the Gospel of John depicts John as a man who was transformed into a disciple of Jesus and who demonstrated exemplary commitment to Christ. The Gospel reveals what propelled John forward in his life of faith and what drove him to live for Christ even in the face of opposition, arrests, beatings, imprisonment and exile. John, therefore, serves as a model to imitate in the pursuit of following Jesus Christ (cf. 1 Cor 11:1).

John the Model Disciple

John spent three years following Christ, he was one of the three closest disciples (along with Peter and James), and he reclined on Jesus' chest at the final meal before the crucifixion (13:23).²⁵ In John 1:18, the intimacy between the Father and the Son is

²³ J. Oswald Sanders, *Spiritual Leadership* (Chicago: Moody, 1986), 114.

²⁴ Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John: I–XII*, Anchor Bible Commentary (New York: Doubleday, 1966), 474–75.

²⁵ The association of Peter, James, and John is found at numerous points throughout the Synoptic Gospels as they witnessed exclusively some miracles or events (Mark 1:28; 5:37; 9:2–4; 13:3; 14:33). See Raymond F. Collins, "John (Disciple)," in *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992): 3:884.

described using similar language: “[the Son] is in the bosom of the Father.”²⁶ John uses the intimacy between the Father and the Son to describe his friendship with Jesus Christ.

But John was not always the example to emulate. John was transformed by Christ from being a man of thunder who wanted to call down fire from heaven on a Samaritan village that would not welcome Jesus (Luke 9:54) to being a man designated as the beloved disciple.²⁷ He was changed from one who wanted to burn down the Samaritans to one who devotes an entire chapter to the conversion of a Samaritan woman and her village (a story no other Gospel records). John had been aggressive, impatient, self-promoting, sectarian, ambitious, and explosive. In Mark 9:38, he boastfully comes to Jesus to inform Him that he had forbidden another follower of Jesus to minister just because he was not part of the twelve. Yet by the time he writes his Gospel, he applies the term “disciple” to anyone who believes in Jesus Christ. Anyone can believe and follow, even those outside the circle of the twelve.

Moreover, it was John and his older brother James who, immediately after Jesus described His upcoming crucifixion, demanded of Jesus: “Grant that we may sit, one on Your right and one on *Your* left, in Your glory” (Mark 10:37; Matt 20:28). They assumed they were superior to the other ten disciples. They felt entitled to such preference plausibly because they were the sons of Zebedee, a wealthy man who had multiple servants in his fishing business. Their father was well-established, known even to the High Priest in Jerusalem, which might suggest that the Zebedee family was prominent.

But the three-year journey with Jesus transformed John. By the time of Jesus’ crucifixion, John was not as brash; he was, instead, caring. When Jesus wanted to entrust the welfare of His mother to someone, He entrusted her to John (19:27). John learned compassion and faithfulness in following Christ.

Peter the Faltering Disciple

John’s devotion to Christ can be contrasted with Peter’s faltering faith who initially denies Christ but ultimately repents and follows Him. When Jesus was arrested and taken to Annas and Caiaphas for interrogation (John 19), Peter displayed frailty in his commitment to Christ. Peter was confronted of being Jesus’ follower (18:17), but instead of affirming this claim, he was so afraid that he denied Jesus. In John 18:18–19, Peter is standing with the enemies of Christ and warming himself with the fire, a symbol of warmth, communion, intimacy, and fellowship with those

²⁶ This wording signifies a close, personal relationship, “the most intimate human relationship,” in the words of Klink. Elsewhere, it is used for “marriage (Deut 13:6), mother and child (1 Kgs 3:20), and God’s care for Israel (Num 11:12). See Edward W. Klink III, *John*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 118.

²⁷ Carson points out that John’s description of himself in the third person is customary for John’s Gospel (cf. “that disciple whom Jesus loved”; John 21:7). See Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 582. The request to call fire down upon a Samaritan city alludes to the Elijah-Ahaziah narrative (2 Kgs 1:1–18). In a similar location (1:2–3), Elijah proves his status as a “man of God” by calling down fire upon the messengers of Ahaziah (1:10, 12, 14). In a context where Jesus is believed by many to be Elijah (Luke 9:8, compare with 9:19, 30), Jesus implies that He is greater than Elijah by refusing to submit to the request of James and John (Luke 9:54–56). See David E. Garland, *Luke*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 414.

who hate Christ. Though the people call him a disciple of Jesus (vv. 17 and 25), significantly he is not even with Christ at that moment.

As in verse 25, other servants seemingly recognize Peter, and ask, "You are not also *one* of His disciples, are you?" But again he denies his relationship to Christ. However, then a man definitively recognizes Peter, and says: "Did I not see you in the garden with Him?" (v. 26). This man is certain of Peter's identity because Peter had cut off the ear of his relative (v. 26). But for the third time Peter denies Christ (v. 27). In fact, in Mark 14:71 it says Peter began to swear, putting himself under a curse that if he is lying, then God should judge him.²⁸

Peter's fear of man overpowered his commitment to Christ. Peter would rather be condemned by God than identified as a disciple of Jesus Christ. This is the same Peter who no more than a few hours prior had said, "Lord, why can I not follow You right now? I will lay down my life for you" (John 13:37). Peter had three opportunities to stand for Jesus and to witness about Him, and he failed every time. Peter followed Jesus Christ until it became a threat to his reputation and life.

While in his denials Peter serves as a negative example of following Christ, John stands as a model disciple. John goes into the inner court to be with Jesus. Of all the disciples, John alone stands at the foot of the cross with Jesus when the others abandon Him. At the end of the story, around the campfire in John 21, after Jesus forgives and recommissions Peter, Jesus *has* to tell Peter to follow him, but in contrast to Jesus' command to Peter, John follows Jesus with no command. It was his determination to follow Jesus.

In seeing the consequences of being a disciple of Jesus, a question arises: Is it worth it to follow Jesus? Is it worth it to forego the pleasures of this world and to follow Christ? John answers this question affirmatively by delineating the reward of following Christ.

The Reward of Following Jesus

As John's readers faced persecution, they began to question whether following Jesus was worth it. Following Jesus as Messiah became difficult and dangerous. But John's reply to this question is that the call to follow Jesus Christ is precisely the call to suffer and, if need be, to die for Jesus. The disciple of Jesus must forego the accolades of men and indeed hate his life, in order to obtain honor and glory from God. John understands the risk and the consequences of following Jesus, so he writes a Gospel to motivate his readers to faithfully follow Christ.

Jesus' command "Follow Me" comes in a tension-filled religious environment. Capturing the essence of Jesus' words, Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes,

When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.... Suffering ... is the badge of true discipleship.... Following Christ means suffering....

²⁸ For discussion on Peter pronouncing a curse, see James A. Brooks, *Mark*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1991), 246; Mark L. Strauss, *Mark*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 665.

Discipleship means allegiance to the suffering Christ, and it is therefore not at all surprising that Christians should be called upon to suffer.²⁹

On account of the persecution that comes from following Jesus, John writes the Gospel of John to motivate his readers to remain loyal to Jesus. He wants his readers to believe in Jesus and to keep following Him. In 20:30–31, John writes, “Therefore many other signs Jesus also did in the presence of the disciples which are not written in this book; but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name.” This is John’s aim: to persuade the readers to believe and to keep believing, which would be manifested in following Christ faithfully.

Distinct Gospel

As John seeks to encourage his readers to follow Christ, he writes a Gospel that includes ninety-two percent of content that is distinct from Matthew, Mark, and Luke. He incorporates new stories, miracles, conversions, discourses, and details about the pre-incarnate Christ, the incarnate Son of God, and the resurrected Christ that are only found in the Gospel of John. Expecting his readers to be familiar with Matthew, Mark, and Luke, he complements these three biographies of Jesus with this new content to further encourage the believers to remain loyal to Christ. Drawing his Gospel to a close, as noted above, John explicitly tells his readers in 20:30–31 that he composed the new material to motivate them to believe and to continue believing in Jesus as Messiah. The charge to believe continuously is made clear through the present tense use of the verb “believe.”³⁰ That is John’s intent: to provide encouragement to the followers of Jesus to remain faithful in their commitment to Him.

As John seeks to motivate his readers toward continuous belief, he permeates the entire Gospel with promises, benefits, and rewards for following Christ. He deploys twenty-six such themes that are intended to incentivize believers to faithfully follow Christ.³¹

Benefit	
Life (eternal)	1:4; 3:15–21, 36; 4:10, 14; 5:21, 24, 38–40; 6:27, 33, 51–58; 8:51; 10:10, 27–29; 11:24–26; 12:25–27, 50; 14:6, 19; 17:2, 3
Resurrection	5:25–30; 8:51–53; 11:24–27
Adoption into God’s family	1:12; 10:29; 17:2, 6, 9, 11–12, 24; 18:9; 20:17; 21:5

²⁹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, rev. ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1979), 99–101.

³⁰ For an expanded discussion of this point, see Mark Zhakevich, “Jesus’ Love for His Own: The Remnant in John,” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 35, no. 2 (Fall 2024), 244, especially n. 4.

³¹ See Mark Zhakevich, “The Compensatory Benefits of Discipleship in the Gospel of John” (PhD diss., University of Edinburgh, 2017), 230.

Salvation	3:17; 10:9
You do not perish	3:16
No judgment	3:17–19; 5:22–30; 12:47–50
Avoid God's wrath	3:36
Walk in the Light/Do not remain in darkness	3:19–21; 8:12; 12:36, 46
Abiding with the Father and the Son	14:1–3; 14:15–24
Future presence with Jesus	12:26; 14:1–3; 17:24
The presence of the Paraclete	7:37–39; 14:15–27; 16:7; 20:22–23
Freedom from sin	8:21–24, 8:31–36, 39–47, 51; 9:41
Possession of the Truth	8:31
Protection from the Father	10:28–29; 17:11–13
Knowledge of the Father and the Son	10:14–15, 27–29; 14:20; 15:15; 17:26
Honor from the Father	12:25–26
Performance of greater works	14:12–15
Answered prayer	14:12–14; 15:7, 16; 16:23–26
Peace	14:27; 16:33; 20:19, 21, 26
Joy	15:11; 16:20–24; 17:13
Fruitfulness	4:36; 12:24; 15:2–8, 16
Friendship	15:13–16
Unity	11:52; 14:20; 17:6, 11, 21, 22, 23, 26
Love	13:1; 14:21, 23; 15:9–17; 16:27; 17:23, 26
Glory	17:22, 24
Forgiveness	20:22–23

These twenty-six themes can be grouped under three primary promises that reflect three relationships uniquely highlighted in the Gospel of John. There are three primary promises John features through their strategic placement in the Gospel, frequency of occurrence, and peculiarity to the Gospel. Each of these three themes attracts multiple lesser-repeated themes in the Gospel.

So, John includes three major rewards that are unique to the Gospel of John in that the other Gospel writers either never mention the theme or do not develop it to the same depth that John does. Each theme represents a relational benefit that John weaves into the tapestry of his Gospel in order to encourage his readers to believe

and continue believing that Jesus is the Messiah (20:30–31). These three rewards are sonship, friendship, and fellowship.³²

Sonship: Adoption into the Family of God

John wastes no time informing his readers of the good news that those who believe in Jesus Christ are adopted into the divine family. He writes,

He came to what was His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him. But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, *even* to those who believe in His name, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. (1:11–13)

Adoption into God’s family is the first promise made in the Gospel of John (1:12), and John continues this theme in the rest of the Gospel through references to the Father, the Son, children, little children, orphans, brothers, and the mention of the Father’s house as the future destination. The family theme permeates the entire Gospel. But John uniquely shines a spotlight on this promise in chapter one by making it central in his opening section—the prologue. John places the promise of sonship right in the middle of the prologue through his usage of a chiasmic structure.³³

- A Word with God (1:1–2)
- B What came to be through the Word: Creation (1:3)
- C What we have received from the Word: Life (1:4–5)
- D John sent to testify (1:6–8)
- E Incarnation and response of the World (1:9–10)
- F The Word and His own (1:11)
- G Those who accepted the Word (1:12a)
- H Those who became children of God (1:12b)**
- G’ Those who believed in the Word (1:12c)
- F’ The Word and His own (1:13)
- E’ Incarnation and response of the community (1:14)
- D’ John’s testimony (1:15)
- C’ What we have received from the Word: Grace (1:16)
- B’ What came to be through the Word: Grace and Truth (1:17)
- A’ Word with God (1:18)

The climax is in verse 12b: “to them He gave the right to become children of God.” John arranges his opening thoughts in such a way so as to declare that the main benefit in the coming of Jesus is that His followers are embraced by the Father and are welcomed into the divine family.

³² Zhakevich, *Follow Me*, 155.

³³ Zhakevich, “Jesus’ Love for His Own,” 247; see Zhakevich, *Follow Me*, 6–7 n21, and 29–30; R. Alan Culpepper, “The Pivot of John’s Prologue,” *NTS* 27 no. 1 (1980): 14; compare with Andreas Köstenberger’s chiasm in *John*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 20–21.

But John spotlights adoption into the family of God not only through this chiasmic structure but also through the family motif in the beginning (i.e., in the prologue, as just noted) and at the end of his Gospel. In John 20:17, Jesus tells Mary, “Stop clinging to Me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to My brothers and say to them, ‘I ascend to My Father and your Father, and My God and your God.’” Until this point, Jesus had not yet addressed His disciples as “brothers.”³⁴ But through His death, Jesus created a new family of God. In effect, He can call His followers “brothers.” In 21:5, Jesus calls His disciples “children,” another familial term.³⁵ So, John features the family idea in chapter 1 and in chapters 20 and 21, impressing on the minds of his readers that the followers of Christ are now in the family of God.

Additionally, at the end of His public ministry, which appears in the middle of the Gospel in chapter 12, Jesus calls the public to follow Him and become part of the family as well.³⁶ His final words to the public are, “While you have the Light, believe in the Light, so that you may become sons of Light” (12:36). This also is how John had opened his Gospel, saying, “There was the true Light which, coming into the world, enlightens everyone.... But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, *even* to those who believe in His name” (1:9, 12). In John 12:36a, Jesus calls people to believe in Him as the Light and become His sons. Thus, just as the theme of sonship opens and closes the entire Gospel, so also it opens and closes the subsection in the Gospel: the beginning of the Gospel and the end of Jesus’ public ministry toward the middle of the Gospel. This structure stresses the importance of this promise to those who believe—that those who believe in Jesus are welcomed into the family of God.³⁷ This is God’s reward for belief.

But why would the promise of being in God’s family incentivize people to believe and follow Christ? In the Ancient Near East, life revolved around family. The family was the most important element of anyone’s life. The family would define one’s social status, and the last name would affect one’s success. For this reason, John stresses birth in John 1:13 (“who were born ... of God”). Being born into nobility or even the royal family is extraordinary, but John reaches even higher: he declares that a follower of Jesus is born into the family of God.

Birth, however, was not the only means of entry into a prestigious family; adoption was another. In Rome, the adoption process included three phases. The adopted son would renounce his biological father, and the biological father would renounce his relationship to his son three times. Then the adoptive father would

³⁴ J. Ramsay Michaels, *The Gospel of John*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 1001. Michaels observes that until this point, brothers and disciples have been distinguished by believing in Jesus (2:11–12); however, this text shifts the definition of “brothers.”

³⁵ Klink notes that John’s typical way of referring to Christians is with τέκνα whereas υἱός is generally reserved for Jesus Christ. See Klink, *John*, 104. However, the promise of sonship is offered with the word υἱός, such as in John 12:36 (“While you have the Light, believe in the Light, so that you may become sons [υἱοὶ] of Light”).

³⁶ Chapters 1–12 is Jesus’ public ministry while 13–17 is Jesus’ private ministry. The rejection of the Jews (12:36–43) as well as the arrival of Gentiles at Passover (12:20) signals the shift in audience within John’s Gospel. Chapters 1–12 are thus referred to as the Book of Signs, whereas the latter half is labeled the Book of Exaltation. See Andreas J. Köstenberger, L. Scott Kellum, and Charles L. Quarles, *The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2016), 369.

³⁷ Zhakevich, *Follow Me*, 29.

accept the son three times, thereby permanently sealing his new family relationship.³⁸ From that moment forward, the adopted son would be treated as a biological son; he would be considered a true heir—he would gain all the possessions, slaves, all the debtors, and political relationships of his new father.³⁹ Through adoption, “a son could be raised up from the bottom of society and installed among the nobility.”⁴⁰ That is how the first emperor of Rome became prominent. Since Julius Caesar had no sons, he adopted his nephew Octavius and made him his heir.⁴¹

When God adopted the believers, their status changed from being slaves of sin to becoming sons of God, from being children of the devil to becoming children of God. Just as ancient adoption brought benefits, so also John associates sixteen benefits that followers of Christ gain through adoption. These benefits are:⁴²

- Love (17:23)
- Knowledge of God (10:14–15)
- Knowledge of the truth (8:31–32)
- Freedom from sin (8:34, 36)
- Walking in the light (12:35–36; 8:12)
- Salvation (3:17)
- Avoidance of condemnation (3:16–19, 36)
- Protection (10:28–29; 17:11, 12, 15)
- Performance of great works (14:12)
- Confirmation of genuine discipleship (8:31; 15:8)
- Honor (12:26)
- Glory (17:22)
- Unity/Oneness with the Father/Son/Spirit (17:21)
- Unity with other disciples (17:22–23)
- Resurrection (5:24, 29; 6:54)
- Eternal Life (17:3)

All these benefits appear throughout the Gospel of John and are associated with the theme of familial terminology.

But a theme that stands out above the rest and that always appears in the Gospel of John in the context of familial terminology is the theme mentioned last on the list above: the benefit of eternal life. John mentions life and eternal life fifty-three times. He wants his readers to understand eternal life within the context of membership in

³⁸ Michael Peppard, *The Son of God in the Roman World: Divine Sonship in Its Social and Political Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 58.

³⁹ Peppard, *The Son of God in the Roman World*, 54.

⁴⁰ Peppard, 57.

⁴¹ While there may be questions surrounding Julius Caesar’s adoption of Octavius, Gardner remarks that “it was a condition of Octavius’ inheritance that he take Caesar’s name; he seized the opportunity of making political capital out of the name, by representing himself as ‘adopted’ by the will.... The persistent belief among some modern scholars in the legal reality of ‘testamentary adoption’ rests entirely upon the subsequent action by Octavius, now calling himself C. Julius Caesar Octavianus.” For further reading, see Jane F. Gardner, “The Dictator,” in *A Companion to Julius Caesar*, ed. Miriam Griffin (West Sussex, UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2009), 66–68.

⁴² See Zhakevich, *Follow Me*, 182.

the family of God. Birth from above signifies entrance into the divine family; and eternal life signifies the believer's continuous participation in the divine family. However, while eternal life is often conceived of as a future experience, John presents it as a present experience.

John carefully distinguishes between eternal life that is in part experienced in the present and resurrection which is a future reality. He records Jesus' words saying, "He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise Him up on the last day" (John 6:54). Jesus clearly states that eternal life is experienced in the present while resurrection refers to the future.⁴³ In John 5:24 and 5:29, Jesus says, "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes on Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life ... and will come forth; those who did the good deeds to a resurrection of life, those who committed the evil deeds to a resurrection of judgment." Again, believers in Jesus experience eternal life in the present while the final resurrection is reserved for the future.

So, if eternal life is not synonymous with resurrection or living forever, then what is eternal life? John answers this question in John 17:3: "And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent." At the heart of eternal life is knowing God and Jesus. Knowledge of God is a progressive experience.⁴⁴ In 10:38, Jesus explains, "So that you may know and continue knowing that the Father is in Me, and I in the Father." John intentionally switches tenses to stress the initial and the continuous commitment of a disciple.⁴⁵ He makes the point that people are to believe so that they may *begin* to know and *continue* to know. Eternal life is participation in the life of God through the knowledge of God, as empowered by the Holy Spirit; and so, the intimacy of one's relationship with God fluctuates in proportion to one's knowledge of God.⁴⁶

In effect, it is possible to have an improved quality of eternal life through a deeper knowledge of God. This knowledge of God will continue to become deeper and more intimate until the believer enters into God's presence. First Corinthians 13:10–12 teaches that when the perfect comes, the believers will see Him face to face and that they will know Him as they are known. Revelation 22:4 says that believers will see His face in eternity.⁴⁷ Followers of Christ have eternal life today which continuously grows and deepens, but it will reach its apex in the resurrection when believers see God face to face.

The believer's knowledge of God today is a preview of their eternal presence with God in the future. Therefore, eternal life is not merely something a believer will receive only in the future; it is something every believer possesses today. However, eternal life reaches its full completion in resurrection. Investing into the relationship with God is investing into eternity. This is what John promises to every believer who chooses to follow Jesus Christ: spiritual participation in the life of God that begins

⁴³ Zhakevich, "Jesus' Love for His Own," 246 n8; Richard Bauckham, *Gospel of Glory: Major Themes in Johannine Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 71.

⁴⁴ Zhakevich, *Follow Me*, 56.

⁴⁵ Zhakevich, 56.

⁴⁶ Zhakevich, 51.

⁴⁷ See John F. MacArthur Jr., *Revelation 12–22*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody, 2000), 288.

today and extends into eternity. So, Jesus' promise of an abundant life in John 10:10 ("I came that they may have life, and have *it* abundantly") is not a promise for the future; it is available today through the knowledge of God.

It is eternal life that gives meaning and satisfaction to believers today. John describes eternal life as the water of life (4:10) and the bread of life (6:48) because it satiates our spiritual hunger and thirst. If someone feels like his spiritual life is stagnant, stale, and flat, it is because he is not filling himself with the water of life and the bread of life which is found in the knowledge of God (Deut 8:3). True believers crave time with God because He satisfies them. True children of God treasure those moments of focused, undistracted, thoughtful, and awe-inspiring personal time with their God. Eternal life is learning more and more of God's thoughts that become precious to us (Ps 139:17–18). Because eternal life in the Gospel of John is always coupled with familial terminology, it is this life that gives the believers access to all the other benefits already noted.

But these benefits are juxtaposed with responsibilities that are embedded into one's membership in the family of God. Just as in the ancient family everything revolved around the father's name because he was the chief member of the family, so in the spiritual family everything revolves around God the Father who is the chief member of the divine family.⁴⁸ John refers to God as Father one-hundred-twenty times. The entire Gospel is about God. God is at the center of the story.

The Roman father had the authority in his family over life and death of every member, over marriage, divorce, and even over the decision to keep or disown a child.⁴⁹ In the Gospel of John, the Father is portrayed as the Author of life (5:20–21), all-powerful (10:29), one who owns everything (17:6, 9–10), one who commands (10:18), judges through the Son (5:22; 8:16), and seeks worship (4:23; 5:23).⁵⁰ God is presented as the main figure in the divine family and Jesus Christ is depicted by John as God's messenger who came to fulfill God's work (4:34; 6:38).

Consider the following three points about the mission of Christ, God the Son, to represent God the Father:

- Jesus Christ came to explain God (1:18).
- Jesus Christ is the way to God (14:6).
- Jesus Christ looks heavenward and declares, "I [have] finished the work which You have given Me to do ... I have manifested Your name to the men whom You gave Me" (17:4, 6).

Jesus' assignment from the Father was to make the Father known, and after Jesus completed that work (17:12), He says in 17:18, "As You sent Me into the world, I also sent them into the world." Believers are to continue the work of Jesus and glorify the Father. This is the point of sonship—to elevate the Father, to honor the Father, and to glorify the Father. Everything believers do is to be done for the fame of God's Name.

⁴⁸ See Zhakevich, "Compensatory Benefits of Discipleship," 250.

⁴⁹ Craig S. Keener, "Man and Woman," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, eds. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 587.

⁵⁰ Zhakevich, "Compensatory Benefits of Discipleship," 251.

This is what it means to be in God's Family. It means to be about God's work and God's honor. As members of God's family, God's children are loved by the Father like the Son is loved by the Father (17:23). Believers know God, they know the Truth, they are no longer enslaved to sin, they walk in the Light, they avoid judgment from God, they are protected by God and the Son from the Evil One (10:27–30, 17:15), they will receive honor and glory from the Father (12:26; 17:22), and they are unified with the Trinity and with one other. This is what drew people to Christianity—the ability to have a personal relationship with God, to call God “Father,” to know Him, and to spend eternity with Him.

One's birth from above grants access into the family of God, but eternal life is the quality of one's relationship within the divine family—with God first and then with other believers who share that same eternal life. Believers are united to God and to God's children.

Thus sonship is the first prominent benefit and promise that John features to motivate his readers to follow Christ faithfully. Next, John shifts the focus from the believer's new relationship with God to the believer's new relationship with Christ.

Friendship: Royal Friendship with Jesus

As John begins his discourse on royal friendship, he cites Jesus stating,

Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down His life for His friends. You are My friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you slaves, for the slave does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you. You did not choose Me but I chose You, and appointed you that you would go and bear fruit, and *that* your fruit would abide, so that whatever you ask of the Father in My name He may give to you. (John 15:12–16)

Immediately after this promise of friendship with Jesus Christ, Jesus warns about hatred from the world in verses 18–25. John placed this promise of friendship with Christ next to Christ's warning of hostility arguably to motivate Jesus' followers to be faithful in the face of upcoming hostility.

In the Ancient Near East, an individual was constrained to friendships within his social class and among his peers, lest a friendship with someone from a lower class hinder his social promotion; such was the case in the Greco-Roman world with the *cursus honorum*.⁵¹ In peer relationships, one does not command others nor interact with them as slaves; since they are equals, there is an expectation of mutual respect and honor. But in 15:13–16, John places an accent on disparity and inequality. He uses terms such as servants, master, friends, command, obedience, choosing, appointment,

⁵¹ Joseph Hellerman defines the *cursus honorum* as “a sequence of offices that marked the standard career for the Roman senatorial class, and which had been in place since the middle of the fourth century BCE” (Joseph H. Hellerman, *Reconstructing Honor in Roman Philippi: Carmen Christi as Cursus Podorum*, Society for New Testament Monograph Series 132 [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005], 51). He goes on to recount that “Ancient historians lament two ways in which social standards were compromised” (Hellerman, *Reconstructing Honor in Roman Philippi*, 53). Violations of this social hierarchy in Rome were scorned by the surrounding culture.

and send.⁵² In John 15:15, Jesus refers to Himself as Lord. In John 13:13, He tells His disciples, “You call Me Lord and you are right in doing so.” In John 15:20, He refers to Himself as master and to His disciples as slaves. So, even while calling His disciples friends, Jesus retains the position of authority and lordship.⁵³ Jesus ensures His disciples understand that this friendship was not mutually agreed upon. He chose them (13:18; 15:19), and they are now to obey Him, serve Him, and fulfill His mission.

So, if superiors and inferiors were not friends in the ancient world, what kind of friendship is Jesus promising? There was a paradigm of the ancient practice of friendship that fits the Johannine description, that is, friendship with a king. In ancient writings, the king’s inner circle of confidants, associates, and advisers were “friends of the king.”⁵⁴ When Jesus tells His followers “I call you friends,” He is elevating them into the prestigious inner circle of being friends of the king. As a friend of a king or of Caesar, the individual would be treated with preference, honor, distinction, and protection from public insult.⁵⁵

As an example, this language “friend of Caesar” appears in John 19:12, in which John records the Jews saying, “If you release this man, you are no friend of Caesar; everyone who makes Himself *to be* a king opposes Caesar.” Pilate was a friend of Caesar Tiberius, the Roman emperor at that time who granted Pilate the governorship over Judea.⁵⁶ In return, Tiberius expected loyalty from Pilate. Therefore, it was dangerous for Pilate to express any disloyalty to Tiberius because he was in his inner circle. When Jesus refers to His followers as His friends, He as king affirms a distinct and honorable relationship between Himself and His followers.

Establishing this royal friendship, John presents Jesus not only as the Messiah, the Son of God and the Son of Man, but also as a king. Nathanael says to Jesus, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the king of Israel” (John 1:49). As a representative of the kingdom of God, Jesus speaks to Nicodemus about the means of entering God’s kingdom: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God. . . Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (3:3, 5). John depicts Jesus as a king.

Later in John’s Gospel, the crowd is eager to stage a coronation ceremony and make Jesus king by force. John records, “Therefore, when the people saw the sign which He had done, they were saying, ‘This is truly the Prophet who is to come into the world.’ So Jesus, knowing that they were going to come and take Him by force to make Him king, withdrew again to the mountain by Himself alone” (6:14–15). Then at the triumphal entry, Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a donkey because kings in ancient Israel rode on donkeys (12:13, 15; cf. 1 Kgs 1:33). This scene is reminiscent of an ancient triumphal military procession and a royal entrance.

⁵² Zhakevich, *Follow Me*, 116.

⁵³ Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John*, 477.

⁵⁴ See the discussion on friendship in the ancient Greco-Roman world by Víctor Alonso Troncoso in Michael Peachin and Maria Letizia Caldelli, *Aspects of Friendship in the Graeco-Roman World: Proceedings of a Conference Held at the Seminar für Alte Geschichte, Heidelberg, on 10–11 June, 2000*. Universität Heidelberg. Seminar für Alte Geschichte. *Journal of Roman Archaeology*. Supplementary series, no. 43 (Portsmouth: Journal of Roman Archaeology, 2001), 81–86.

⁵⁵ Philo, *Flaccus*, Loeb Classical Library 363, trans. F. H. Colson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1941), 6.40, 325.

⁵⁶ Tacitus, *Annals*, Loeb Classical Library 322, trans. John Jackson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1937), 15.44, 283.

Even Pilate's interrogation of Jesus (18:33–19:12) includes ten references to Jesus as king and three references to kingdom (18:33, 37 [2x], 39; 19:3, 12, 14, 15, 19, 21). Notably, the first question Pilate asks Jesus is: "Are You the King of the Jews?" (18:33). Of all the questions Pilate could have asked Jesus—"Are You the Messiah? Are You the Prophet? Are You an insurrectionist? Where are You from?"—Pilate instead focuses on Jesus' royal status.

This same question appears in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and in each Gospel Jesus gives the same answer: Yes! In John 18:36, Jesus explains, "My kingdom is not of this world." Earlier, in 3:3–5, Jesus speaks of "God's kingdom," but here He says, "My kingdom is not of this world." So, there is a shift in John's depiction of the kingdom: in John 3, he presents it as God's kingdom; in 18:36, he presents it as Jesus' kingdom.⁵⁷

John's point is that Jesus is the king in God's kingdom, and He is the only king. He is the only anointed One by the Father as the ruler of the world. For this reason, John later writes that when Jesus returns, His robe and thigh will display: "KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS" (Rev 19:16; cf. 17:14).

Toward the end of Jesus' trial, Pilate walks Jesus out before the Jewish leaders and in John 19:14, he says "Behold, your King." But instead of submitting to Jesus' rule, the Jewish rulers declare: "We have no king but Caesar" (John 19:15).⁵⁸

The irony in this statement is that the Jews hated Caesar, they hated the Romans, and they hated all foreign interference into their rule, such that some became assassins and assaulted the Roman soldiers with daggers as an act of rebellion.⁵⁹ But their hatred for Jesus was so consuming that they were willing to side with their enemies rather than acknowledge God's royal Messiah.

Developing further the image of Christ as king, John shows that King Jesus is like no other king, in that He dies for His subjects. Jesus Himself exclaims in John 15:13, "Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends." In John 10:11, Jesus says of Himself, "I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down His life for His sheep" (vv. 11, 15, 17, 18).⁶⁰ The kingship of Jesus is

⁵⁷ See Zhakevich, *Follow Me*, 133. As Beasley-Murray observes, some commentators try to explain the difference between God's kingdom (3:3, 5) and Jesus' kingdom (18:36) by redefining Jesus' use of kingdom to mean "kingship" (e.g., Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St. John: Volume 3* [New York: Crossroad, 1982], 249). However, the recurrence of "kingdom" in 18:36 appears to be intentional on the part of Jesus, to declare that He is in the same role of authority as He described God to be in when He spoke to Nicodemus. Therefore, it seems best to treat these uses of "kingdom" (3:3, 5; 18:36) as describing the same entity. Beasley-Murray, *John*, 330.

⁵⁸ The history of the nation's dealings with God and kingship demonstrate this to be "the ultimate hypocrisy" (Borchert, *John 12–21*, 259). Borchert points out that God's desire was to be King over His people (Judg 8:23; Isa 26:13), but their rebellion was a rejection of His kingship (1 Sam 8:4–9), which culminated in the declaration of a pagan ruler to be their king. See Borchert, *John 12–21*, 259.

⁵⁹ Bruce notes the occurrence of these figures in both Josephus and the biblical record (perhaps Acts 21:38; Bruce, *New Testament History*, 98–99). The word "assassins" in Acts 21:38 translates the Greek word σικάρπιος (pl. σικαρίων) and describes "one who is intent on killing someone as part of an organized subversive political program" (William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker, Walter Bauer, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000], 923). The word σικάρπιος could be connected to the usage of daggers in carrying out acts of extremism against Rome and other oppressors.

⁶⁰ Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John: XII–XXI*, Anchor Bible Commentary (New York: Doubleday, 1970), 682.

significant in that it is paired with the self-sacrificing shepherd. Ancient writings describe kings, pharaohs, and emperors who perceived themselves as shepherds of their people.⁶¹ Alluding to this image of the shepherd-king, John strategically refers to Jesus laying down His life (only in John 10 and 15) in order to portray Jesus as the ultimate shepherd-king.⁶² Not only does He take care of His people as a shepherd takes care of his sheep; He in fact fulfills the ultimate sacrifice to demonstrate His love and care for His people. To summarize, then, this King Jesus both lays down His life for His sheep and embraces His followers as His royal friends.

As Jesus transforms His followers from being His servants to being His royal friends, additional benefits are experienced by those in their new status. To those who are His friends, Jesus promises:⁶³

- Knowledge of the Father (15:15)
- Access to the Father (15:7, 16)
- Answered requests from the Father (15:7, 16)
- Abiding fruit that glorifies the Father and confirms them as authentic disciples (15:8)
- Sacrificial love from their royal patron (15:9, 12)
- Complete joy (15:11)

But these benefits continue even beyond this life. One should not forget Jesus' words to Pilate in John 18:36: "My kingdom is not of this world." This means that beyond these benefits, more rewards await the believers in the future:

- Reigning with Christ (2 Tim 2:12)
- Receiving the crown of righteousness (2 Tim 4:8)
- Receiving the crown of life (Jas 1:12)
- Receiving the unfading crown of glory (1 Pet 5:4)
- Receiving the crown of life (Rev 2:10)

All these benefits await the believers in heaven inasmuch as the believers are friends of the Shepherd-King Jesus.

But John does not end his discourse on the benefits for faithfully following Jesus with the believer's new relationship with God the Father and God the Son; he also focuses on God the Spirit. In addition to adoption into the family of God and royal friendship with Jesus, fellowship with the Spirit is the third relational benefit John deploys in order to motivate believers to faithfully follow Christ.

⁶¹ Dio Cassius, *Roman History*, trans. Earnest Cary, Loeb Classical Library 175 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1924), 57.10.5, 137; Suetonius, *The Lives of the Caesars, Book 3: Tiberius*, trans. J. C. Rolfe, Loeb Classical Library 31 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1914), 32.2, 359.

⁶² See Zhakevich, *Follow Me*, 138–39.

⁶³ See this list in Zhakevich, *Follow Me*, 142

Fellowship with the Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit mediates the permanent abiding presence of the Father and the Son to Christ's followers. Throughout the Old Testament, believers express a longing to dwell in the presence of God. David writes, "You will make known to me the path of life; in Your presence is fullness of joy; in Your right hand there are pleasures forever" (Ps 16:11). Similarly, "For You make him most blessed forever; You make him joyful with gladness in Your presence" (21:6). He also writes, "As for me, You uphold me in my integrity, and You set me in Your presence forever" (41:12). The sons of Korah also exclaim, "My soul thirsts for God, for the living God; when shall I come and appear before God?" (42:2). The Old Testament pilgrims such as Abraham, Moses, and David longed to see the face of God and to be in God's presence (e.g., Ps 27:4).⁶⁴ Hebrews 11:14–16 says they were seeking the heavenly country that is prepared for them by God. True believers yearn to be with God (cf. Phil 1:23).

Then, when Jesus comes on the scene, He encourages His disciples in John 14:1–3 with the promise that a place in heaven is already awaiting them:

Do not let your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many dwelling places [μονή]; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go to prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, *there* you may be also.

Jesus affirmed that God will satisfy the desire of the believers to be with God.

As Jesus makes this promise, He uses language that points to the trinitarian abiding with the believer. In John 14:2, Jesus employs the term "dwelling places" (μονή), and He then uses this same term again in John 14:23, saying, "If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our dwelling [μονή] with him." These two passages, along with the surrounding context (14:16–17), denote the reality that God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit dwell with the believer.⁶⁵

However, while the promise in John 14:2–3 refers to the future dwelling in God's presence, John 14:23 promises God's presence with the believer today.⁶⁶ Jesus explains that this promise is fulfilled through the presence of the Holy Spirit who will be with the believer forever. Explaining the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit, Jesus says in 14:16–20:

And I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Advocate, that He may be with you forever; the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not see Him or know Him. You know Him because He abides with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. After a

⁶⁴ For a fuller treatment of this doctrine, see Samuel G. Parkison, *To Gaze upon God: The Beatific Vision in Doctrine, Tradition, and Practice* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2024).

⁶⁵ The Greek term μονή in 14:23 indicates a sense of permanence in the Father's and the Son's abiding with the believer. See C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John*, 456–57.

⁶⁶ See Zhakevich, *Follow Me*, 15, 92–93.

little while the world will no longer see Me, but you will see Me; because I live, you will live also. On that day you will know that I am in My Father, and you in Me, and I in you.

Jesus' promise not to leave His disciples as orphans is fulfilled through the coming of the Holy Spirit "on that day" (14:20). If "that day" were to refer to Jesus' second coming, then the disciples would be orphans in the intermediate time between His ascension and His return. However, since Jesus had the anointing of the Holy Spirit (3:34), since the Holy Spirit is the other Comforter (14:16), and since the ministry of the Holy Spirit is a continuation of the ministry of Jesus,⁶⁷ it is most appropriate to understand "that day" as the coming of the Holy Spirit. The following explanation of this view helps capture the meaning of this promise:

This interpretation coheres with the references to "in that day" in 16:23 and 16:26, since in both verses the disciples are encouraged to bring their requests directly to God in the name of Jesus, which implies that Jesus is not present with them when they bring their requests to God, since they would otherwise bring their requests directly to Jesus.⁶⁸

Thus, the Holy Spirit would mediate the relationship between the Father and the Son to the believer. The fulfillment of this promise takes place at Pentecost (Acts 2:1–4), as the Holy Spirit's arrival at Pentecost comports with Christ's promise to be with the believers ("you in Me, and I in you"; 14:20), which resulted in more miraculous activity to fulfill the mission entrusted to them by Jesus (7:37–39; 17:18; 20:21–23). Thus the Holy Spirit permanently abides with the believers, indwelling them (e.g., Rom 8:9) and empowering them to fulfill the mission of Jesus.⁶⁹

Ultimately, the permanent abiding presence of the Holy Spirit with the believers confirms that one day the believers will be with God forever, in the house of God (cf. Ps 23:6). Until then, the believer is expected to abide in Jesus, and in return, Jesus abides with the believer (John 15:1–11). If the believer habitually abides in Jesus, then Jesus empowers him to produce much fruit that glorifies the Father. Moreover, the disciple possesses assurance of his status as a disciple, his prayers are answered, he experiences the love of the Father and the Son through obedience, and his joy is complete (15:1–11). This is John's third primary reward that he promises to the believer who faithfully follows Jesus—the triadic abiding relationship with the Father and the Son sustained by the Holy Spirit, here and into eternity.

⁶⁷ See Zhakevich, *Follow Me*, 93–94.

⁶⁸ See Zhakevich, 93.

⁶⁹ The Greek verb for "dwell" in Romans 8:9 ("However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him") is the Greek verb οἰκέω which is closely related to its noun counterpart οἶκος, often translated "house." Furthermore, though the pronouns ὑμεῖς and ὑμῖν are plural ("you"), often signifying a reference to the believers corporately, the clarification of τις, a singular pronoun, suggests that Paul has the individual Christian in mind here. See Frank Thielman, *Romans*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), 385.

Conclusion

After writing about God dwelling with His disciples in the Gospel of John, John continued this theme in the book of Revelation. In Revelation 21:3–4, he describes the believer's presence with God in the following way:

Behold the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them, and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be *any* death; there will no longer be *any* mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things will have passed away.

John understood that the greatest motivation for committed discipleship to the Lord Jesus, no matter the threat, was the promise of eternal life in the presence of God. Thus, John brought this out in the Gospel of John and later in the book of Revelation.

The effectiveness of John's motivation can be observed in the history of Christianity. This article began with the story of Ignatius—a disciple of John—and with his faithfulness to Christ. But John had another disciple as well: Polycarp, who was martyred after Ignatius.⁷⁰ Polycarp was considered to be the spiritual father of all the Christians in Smyrna. He was a man honored for his virtuous and dignified life. So, when the Romans needed a martyr, they selected Polycarp.

To avoid death, Polycarp merely had to say “Caesar is Lord” and then offer incense to the emperor. But Polycarp refused and replied: “For eighty and six years have I been his servant, and he has done me no wrong, and how can I blaspheme my King who saved me?”⁷¹ In the end, Polycarp was burned at the stake in AD 156 at the age of eighty-six.

But what sustained Polycarp in his commitment to Jesus? The same promise that sustained Ignatius. Ignatius and Polycarp were friends, and at one point, Ignatius wrote a letter to Polycarp to encourage him in his faith: “Be thou watchful as an athlete of God. That which is promised to us is life eternal, which cannot be corrupted, of which things thou are also persuaded.”⁷²

Both of these men leaned on the teaching they had learned from John who received it from Jesus: there are rewards for following Jesus, and in these two cases, the promise of eternal life fueled their commitment to follow Jesus Christ unto death. This promise is extended to everyone who believes in Jesus and perseveres in faithfully following Him, thereby experiencing the blessing of divine adoption, royal friendship, and triadic fellowship.

⁷⁰ The following account is taken from Eusebius' record in *Ecclesiastical History*, 4.15, 340ff.

⁷¹ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 4.15.20, 349.

⁷² Ignatius, “The Epistle of Ignatius to Polycarp,” 99.