

## **“Am I Going to Heaven?”**

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**Brian Watson**

Whenever a celebrity dies, without fail people get on social media and write “R.I.P.” or “rest in peace.” When someone’s loved one dies, it’s common for people to say, “She’s in a better place,” or, “Now he’s with his wife in heaven,” or something similar. These people write or say such things regardless of what the deceased believed or how the departed lived. It seems that most people think their loved ones go to heaven. Perhaps they can’t bear to think of the alternative.

Over the past few weeks I’ve been answering questions that people have submitted to us (in person at Park Day in West Bridgewater or online). One person submitted a very simple yet very profound question: “Am I going to heaven?” Another person asked a question related to losing salvation, and still another person asked a question about whether God would love them or not if they got a divorce. So, today I want to talk about salvation, and what that looks like.

I’m going to answer this question by looking at one chapter in the Gospel of John. The four Gospels in the Bible are theological biographies of Jesus. They explain who he is and what he did. John presents some of the clearest information about Jesus that relates to salvation and who has eternal life. You may wonder how this chapter relates to heaven, but if you hang with me, you’ll see that it answers the question of heaven and salvation.

So, without further ado, let’s turn to John 6.

I’m going to summarize part of this chapter, since it’s long. The chapter begins with Jesus being followed by a crowd of people “because they saw the signs that he was doing on the sick” (verse 2).<sup>1</sup> Jesus had the ability to heal the sick, and he did so in miraculous fashion. As you could imagine, this would draw a crowd.

We’re told that Jesus crossed the Sea of Galilee and went up on a mountain, where he sat with his disciples (verse 3). It was the time of Passover, the Jewish holiday that commemorated the time when God redeemed the Israelites, bringing them out of slavery in Egypt (verse 4). On this mountain, Jesus performs another miracle. He feeds thousands of people with five loaves of bread and two fish (verses 5–13). When this happens, we’re told, “When the people saw the sign

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

that he had done, they said, ‘This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!’” (verse 14).

A lot of the details of John 6 recall Moses and the exodus out of Egypt. Moses was the leader whom God used. He was the one who said to Pharaoh, “Let my people go.” So, it’s no accident that Jesus is on a mountain, miraculously feeding people bread at the time of the Passover. We’re even told that were twelve baskets full of bread left over, one for every tribe of Israel (verse 13). Moses foretold of a day when a special prophet would come, *the* prophet. Deuteronomy 18:18–19 says, “I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him. And whoever will not listen to my words that he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him.” So, when the people see these miracles, they’re reminded of Moses, and they think, “Ah, so this is the Prophet Moses told us about!” They were expecting that just as Moses led Israel out of Egypt, this new Moses figure would free the people from the oppression of the Roman Empire. The Israelites were in their land, but they lived there under Roman occupation. They expected a political ruler, an anointed King, who would come and take care of their enemies. They thought Jesus might very well be that King.

So, we read this in verse 15: “Perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself.” This is a bit odd. We know from the whole of the Bible that Jesus is the true King. He is Lord. He is God. Yet when the people come to make him king, and to do so by force, Jesus leaves. Many people would want to be king, but Jesus knows they want him to be king for the wrong reasons.<sup>2</sup> They don’t want a king who will lead the people in righteousness and holiness. They don’t want a king who will lead them to God. No, they want a king who will get rid of their enemies and give them prosperity. The fact that Jesus won’t become their king in that way shows that he doesn’t exist to serve our agenda.

In the next passage, we see who Jesus is. Let’s read John 6:16–21:

<sup>16</sup> When evening came, his disciples went down to the sea, <sup>17</sup> got into a boat, and started across the sea to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. <sup>18</sup> The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing.

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<sup>2</sup> “The crowds would have marched him to Jerusalem to crown him as their political Messiah. But he came to do his Father’s will: he would go to Jerusalem not to wield the spear and bring the judgment, but to receive the spear thrust and bear the judgment.” Edmund Clowney, “A Biblical Theology of Prayer,” in *Teach Us to Pray: Prayer in the Bible and the World* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1990), 158.

<sup>19</sup> When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were frightened. <sup>20</sup> But he said to them, “It is I; do not be afraid.” <sup>21</sup> Then they were glad to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat was at the land to which they were going.

This passage shows that Jesus is unique. He has power over nature. He can walk on water and, when he gets on the boat, he is able to either overpower the strong wind or make it stop so they can get to the other side of the sea. This is just one of many ways that John shows that Jesus is God.

I’ll skip over the next few verses, which basically say that when the crowds realize that Jesus had gone, they came looking for him. But they were still looking for him for the wrong reasons.

Let’s now read verses 25–34:

<sup>25</sup> When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, “Rabbi, when did you come here?” <sup>26</sup> Jesus answered them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. <sup>27</sup> Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you. For on him God the Father has set his seal.” <sup>28</sup> Then they said to him, “What must we do, to be doing the works of God?” <sup>29</sup> Jesus answered them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.” <sup>30</sup> So they said to him, “Then what sign do you do, that we may see and believe you? What work do you perform? <sup>31</sup> Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’” <sup>32</sup> Jesus then said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. <sup>33</sup> For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” <sup>34</sup> They said to him, “Sir, give us this bread always.”

I want us to see four things in that paragraph. First, Jesus calls out the crowd. He says, “You aren’t seeking me for who I am. No, you’re seeking me because I perform miracles and gave you bread.” That should cause us to question why we are seeking Jesus. Do we seek him in order to get things from him or in order to get him?

Second, Jesus says, “Forget the free bread I gave you. That’s food that perishes. But I can give you eternal food. So, work for that.” In other words, Jesus is saying, “Don’t get so caught up in things that fade away, that don’t last. He tells them that he can give them something of eternal value.

Third, when the people ask, “What must we do, to be doing the works of God?” Jesus says, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.” In other words, Jesus

says, “If you want to earn food that gives you eternal life, believe in me.” He doesn’t say, “Do all of these good works to receive this eternal food.” The only “work” that people must do to receive from Jesus is to trust him. That means we don’t earn things from Jesus. We come as beggars with the knowledge that he has what we don’t have and what we need, and the only way we can get it is by receiving it as a gift.

Fourth, when the people ask why they should believe in Jesus, Jesus says, “Just as God sent manna (the bread from heaven that sustained the Israelites), he is sending bread from heaven now.” But this time, the bread from heaven doesn’t perish. It is eternal. As you can imagine, the people say, “Give us this bread!”

So, Jesus tells them about this eternal bread. Let’s read verses 35–40:

<sup>35</sup> Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst. <sup>36</sup> But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe. <sup>37</sup> All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out. <sup>38</sup> For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. <sup>39</sup> And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. <sup>40</sup> For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.”

Jesus tells the crowd that he is the bread of life. He is the food they must consume in order to have eternal life. He is the one who can satisfy their spiritual hunger and thirst. Yet, they do not trust him.

Then Jesus says there are people who will trust him. They are those whom the Father has given him. Anyone who comes to Jesus in faith does so because the Father has already given them to Jesus, and they will never be cast out. This is the Father’s will, to save these people. It is the Father’s will that these people will not be lost, but will be raised up to eternal life on the last day, on judgment day. That is the day when Jesus returns to judge everyone who has lived and to usher in the age to come, when the world will be recreated to be Paradise. Everyone who believes in Jesus will have eternal life in that Paradise.

We shouldn’t miss the significance of what Jesus is saying. He recognizes that not everyone will believe in him. But there are people who will. And God already knows them, because he has chosen them and he gives them to the Son. All who are given to the Son will have true faith in him, and they will have eternal life. This theme runs throughout the Gospel of John.

In John 1:11–13, we’re told that many Jews rejected Jesus but those who receive him become children of God, and this is because they are born (again) of the will of God, not the will of man. In John 3:5–8, Jesus says that in order to enter the kingdom of God, people must first be born again of the Holy Spirit, who, like the wind, blows where he wills. We can’t cause ourselves to be born again. In John 17, Jesus prays to God the Father. Jesus makes a distinction between people whom the Father has given him and the whole world (see John 17:2, 6, 7, 9, 24).

Some people don’t like that idea. In fact, some people didn’t like it in Jesus’ day. We see that in the next paragraph, verses 41–51:

<sup>41</sup> So the Jews grumbled about him, because he said, “I am the bread that came down from heaven.” <sup>42</sup> They said, “Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How does he now say, ‘I have come down from heaven?’” <sup>43</sup> Jesus answered them, “Do not grumble among yourselves. <sup>44</sup> No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day. <sup>45</sup> It is written in the Prophets, ‘And they will all be taught by God.’ Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me— <sup>46</sup> not that anyone has seen the Father except he who is from God; he has seen the Father. <sup>47</sup> Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life. <sup>48</sup> I am the bread of life. <sup>49</sup> Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. <sup>50</sup> This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. <sup>51</sup> I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”

Some of the crowd grumbled at Jesus. (Keep in mind that Jesus and John were Jewish. So, when John says, “Jews,” he just means some of the people there.) “Grumble” is a loaded word, because the Israelites grumbled in Moses’ day (Exod. 16:2, 8–9; Num. 11:4–23). They complained that he was leading them to their death. They complained about the food that they received. Just as the Israelites complained then, so some Israelites complained during Jesus’ day. They couldn’t believe that a man who was born of a woman and raised by a carpenter could also be someone who came down from heaven. In other words, they say, “Who does this guy think he is?”

Jesus tells them not to grumble. He says that no one can come to him unless the Father draws that person to Jesus. And the that person will be raised to eternal life on the last day. In other words, Jesus is the only way to the Father, and the only ones who will put their trust in Jesus are those whom the Father has drawn to Jesus. And those people will be raised to eternal life. Jesus doesn’t say, “some of the people drawn to me will be raised to eternal life.” No, all

whom the Father gives to Jesus will be raised. That means that salvation begins with God's work and it ends with God's work. Salvation can't be lost, because God saves from start to finish.

Jesus does not say, "All are drawn to me by the Father, and some will persevere to the end, and they will receive eternal life." He doesn't say, "All are drawn by the Father to me, and some will believe." No, all that the Father gives to Jesus will believe and they will be raised to eternal life.

Jesus says this because there are clearly some people who don't believe. In fact, it seems like most of the people there didn't believe Jesus. This does not surprise him at all. He realizes that many will not believe in him. Many Israelites didn't trust God. The manna they ate in the wilderness didn't give them eternal life. But those who trust Jesus will live forever, because he is the true bread from heaven. In verse 51, he says, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."

That last statement confuses the crowd. They can't understand what Jesus is saying. We see that in the next paragraph, verses 52–59:

<sup>52</sup> The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" <sup>53</sup> So Jesus said to them, "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 you.

<sup>54</sup> Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. <sup>55</sup> For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink.

<sup>56</sup> Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him.

<sup>57</sup> As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever feeds on me, he also will live because of me. <sup>58</sup> This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like the bread the fathers ate, and died. Whoever feeds on this bread will live forever." <sup>59</sup> Jesus said these things in the synagogue, as he taught at Capernaum.

This is another example in the book of John when people take Jesus' words too literally. The crowd thinks, "How can we eat this guy's flesh?" Jesus doesn't make things easy for them, because he goes on to say that they must eat his flesh and drink his blood. Those who do this will be raised to eternal life on the last day.

What is Jesus talking about? Surely, he's not talking about cannibalism. And he's not talking about the Lord's Supper. I suppose Catholics take this literally. They believe that when they take the eucharist, the wafer and the wine don't just represent Jesus' body and blood. No, they believe that those elements have been miraculously transformed so that their substance is that of Jesus' body and blood. I think that misses the point completely.

Jesus is clearly talking in metaphorical terms. After all, he was not actually a loaf of bread that talked. At one level, he says that is spiritual food. To live forever, one must “consume” him. We must live with a daily reliance on Jesus. But when Jesus talks about his body and blood, he’s already looking forward to the cross. Jesus knows that the only way he can give people eternal life is if his body is broken on the cross and his blood is poured out. His body was broken like bread. His blood was poured out like wine. When Jesus died, he received God’s righteous, holy wrath against sin. As Isaiah 53:5 says, “he was crushed for our iniquities.” References to his blood represent his life (cf. Lev. 17:11). His life was drained from his body on the cross so that we may have eternal life. Jesus died to pay for the sins of those whom the Father gives to him, and Jesus laid down his life willingly (John 10:14–18).

All of this may seem strange to us, just as it seemed strange to Jesus’ original audience. But we must understand a couple of things. One, the Bible talks about sacrifice for sin in very gory ways. All the talk of blood shed for the remission of sins shows how gross sin is. Sin is rebellion against God, and sin must be dealt with. God is a perfect judge, and a perfect judge makes sure that crimes are paid for. And the penalty for the crime is commensurate with the crime. If the penalty is death, it shows us that sin is a heinous crime. The fact that God sent his own Son to be a bloody sacrifice shows us the seriousness of sin. The fact that Jesus willingly came to die for his people, and that God would let his Son die, should cause us to wonder at God’s love.

The second thing we should understand is that all of us look to something or someone to give us life. We trust something or someone to give us security, meaning, and happiness. That is, we might say, our spiritual bread and drink. If we trust anything but Jesus, we’ll be left empty and we will die. Football or movies won’t give eternal life. Money won’t. Politics won’t. Power won’t. Good looks and health won’t last. Only Jesus endures. Only Jesus is perfect. And only Jesus dies for us, taking away our problem, our sin against God.

I suppose food is a good metaphor, because we need it every day. We spend a good amount of time and money on food. How much time do we spend on Jesus? We should ask God for our daily bread (Matt. 6:11), but how many of us give ourselves daily to God? Do our lives revolve around him, or do we expect him to revolve around us?

Let’s continue with the story by reading verses 60–65:

<sup>60</sup> When many of his disciples heard it, they said, “This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?” <sup>61</sup> But Jesus, knowing in himself that his disciples were grumbling about this, said to them, “Do you take offense at this? <sup>62</sup> Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? <sup>63</sup> It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. <sup>64</sup> But there are some of you who do not believe.” (For Jesus knew from the beginning who those were who did not believe, and who it was who would betray him.) <sup>65</sup> And he said, “This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father.”

Many of those who followed Jesus found his teachings to be hard—hard to understand and hard to follow. If they are offended by what Jesus has already said, what will they think when he ascends to heaven, where he was before? After Jesus died, he rose from the grave in a body that can never die again, and he rose to heaven. He is the Son of Man, the divine figure of Daniel 7. If they can’t accept that God sent him to be their spiritual food, what will they think of the idea that he is God?

Jesus knows that for them to believe his words, they need the Holy Spirit. His words give life, but they can only be understood, received, and trusted through the power of the Holy Spirit. “This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father.” In a sense, it is miraculous that anyone believes in Jesus, because it is the work of God.

After Jesus said this to the crowd, many turned away from him. We see this in concluding verses of the chapter. Let’s read verses 66–71:

<sup>66</sup> After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him. <sup>67</sup> So Jesus said to the twelve, “Do you want to go away as well?” <sup>68</sup> Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, <sup>69</sup> and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God.” <sup>70</sup> Jesus answered them, “Did I not choose you, the twelve? And yet one of you is a devil.” <sup>71</sup> He spoke of Judas the son of Simon Iscariot, for he, one of the twelve, was going to betray him.

This paragraph is both sad and hopeful. It’s sad because people who had followed Jesus, people who were his students, his disciples, left him. They didn’t believe. It is true that people can appear to trust Jesus for a while, only to later turn their backs on him. These are not true believers. They are not the ones the Father has given to the Son, the ones who will be raised on the last day. Even Judas Iscariot, one of Jesus’ twelve disciples, would reject and betray Jesus.

But that paragraph is hopeful, too. When Jesus says to the twelve apostles, “Do you want to go away as well? Peter says, “Where are we going to go? Only you have the words have



eternal life. Only you are the Holy One of God.” I think that Peter might have been confused by some of Jesus’ teachings. He probably wouldn’t disagree that Jesus taught some hard things. But he also knew that Jesus was his only hope.

This shows us that we may not fully understand or even fully like what Jesus teaches. But if we trust that he is who he says he is, then he is our only hope, and we must follow him. We must trust him. Who else but Jesus can give us eternal life? There is no one. So, who are we to correct Jesus, or ignore him?

Now that we’ve gone through this chapter, I want to come back to the original question. “Am I going to heaven?” I actually think that question is a bad one. The question shouldn’t be, “Am I going to heaven?” It should be, “Will I be with God for eternity?”

A lot of people like the idea of heaven. They like the idea of eternal life, of an existence without pain or loss. But a lot of people don’t like the idea that God is the greatest reward possible. They don’t like the idea that Jesus is greater than heaven.

I said this on Easter, but it bears repeating. Imagine if God were to make a deal with you. Imagine if he said, “I will let you live in a world without pain, evil, disease, wars, hunger or thirst, and death. I’ll let you live with all your loved ones in that world forever. You will have all of the world’s greatest pleasures. But there’s only one condition: you won’t be with me, you’ll never see me, and you’ll never hear from me.” Would you take that deal?

If so, you don’t have real faith. You’re like the people who wanted the free bread from Jesus, but didn’t want to receive Jesus as their bread. God does not exist to give us stuff. We exist for God, and God gives us himself. Of course, God doesn’t say, “You can have me or Paradise.” No, if we want God more than anything, we get Paradise thrown in. But if we only want Paradise and not God, we won’t get either.

Are you going to heaven when you die? The better question is, are you going to be with Jesus when you die? And the answer to that question comes is a question: do you trust Jesus? Do you believe that he is who the Bible says he is and that he did (and does, and will do) what the Bible says he did (and does, and will do)? Do you know that he is the Holy One of God, the only one who can give you his righteous standing before God and the only one who can take away your sin? Is your faith in him one that leads to good works, to following him? We’re not reconciled to God by our good works, but once we’re saved—once we’re born again, or transformed by God—we start to live for him.

Jesus said, in John 10:27–29,

<sup>27</sup> My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. <sup>28</sup> I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. <sup>29</sup> My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand.

Do you listen to the voice of Jesus by reading the Bible? Does your listening to him lead to obedience? If so, you are one of Jesus’ sheep, one of his people, and you will never perish. No one can take you out of God’s hands because no one is greater than God.

And that leads me to answer another question we received. Someone asked, “What does the Bible mean by 1 Peter 5:8, 2 Corinthians 11:3, and 1 John 5:16 if once you are a believer in Jesus as Savior and you cannot lose your salvation?” Those three verses deal with Satan, false teachers, and a sin that leads to death.<sup>3</sup> I suppose the question is, if you can’t lose your salvation, why are those warnings in the Bible?

I believe those warnings are in the Bible because they are the means God uses to keep his people on the right track. I suppose they are also there because God knows that there will be people in churches who aren’t true believers. God knows who his people are, and those who are his people will listen to these warnings and heed them. Those who are not his people won’t take these warnings seriously.

Many passages in the Bible teach what we might call “eternal security.” We have already seen that John 6 and John 10 teach this. Romans 8 teaches this, too. So does 1 Peter 1.<sup>4</sup> The apostle Paul says that believers were not only predestined to be redeemed, but that they are sealed with the Holy Spirit when they believed the gospel (Eph. 1:13). He says that the Holy Spirit “is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory” (Eph. 1:14; see also Eph. 4:30; 2 Cor. 1:22; 5:5). If you truly believe in Jesus, God has set his seal on you, just as the Father as put his seal on the Son (John 6:27). That means that nothing can take you away from God. You may stumble and sin. You won’t be perfect. But if you’re a

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<sup>3</sup> An explanation of what the “sin that leads to death” is can be found in my sermon, “The True God and Eternal Life” (July 30, 2017), available at <https://wbcommunity.org/letters-of-john>.

<sup>4</sup> Romans 8:28–30 shows clearly that salvation is of God, from start to finish. He foreknows people (not their future free decisions, but people he will save) in eternity past. He predestines them to salvation. He calls them to faith in Jesus through the preaching of the gospel. He justifies them, or declares them righteous, when they believe. He conforms believers to the image of Jesus, so that they live more and more righteously. And he glorifies them, bringing into eternity. Romans 8:31–39 makes it abundantly clear that nothing can separate believers from God. See also 1 Peter 1:3–5.

believer, you will turn back to Jesus repeatedly. If you sin, you'll confess and repent. But that sin won't remove you from the love of God.

We shouldn't want to sin, but if we do—and we will—“we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous” (1 John 2:1). We know that Jesus' sacrifice on the cross covers all our sins. Do you believe that? If you're a Christian, you will. If you're a Christian, you will grow in your love for God and his Son, and you'll grow in your love for others, particularly other Christians. And if you love Jesus, you will do your best to keep his commandments (John 14:15), not to earn heaven or salvation, but as a new way of living that is right, good, and true. You won't be perfect in this life, but you'll grow more like Jesus.<sup>5</sup>

The question is, “Am I going to heaven?” The answer to that question is found in the answer to this question, “Do you want Jesus more than anything else?” If you want Jesus, you get heaven thrown in. If he is your daily bread, you have eternal life. If you trust Jesus, you will be raised on the last day, because God has given you to Jesus' care. And no one can separate you from Jesus, because no one is greater than God.

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<sup>5</sup> The book of 1 John was written to Christians so that they “may know that you have eternal life” (1 John 5:13). To learn more about how we know we're Christians, visit <https://wbcommunity.org/letters-of-john>.