



My Friend The Starmaker

Tabernacle Baptist Church, Penarth
Six studies in John's Gospel for
small groups.

My Friend the Starmaker.

What does it mean to be called a ‘friend’ of the maker of the universe?

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Front Cover Picture: The Pleiades (Job 9:9; Amos 5:8)

Introduction

You will have seen pictures of the Solar System showing the Earth as a tiny planet alongside the giant-sized gas planets Jupiter and Saturn. You've probably also seen a picture of the Sun and the Earth, with the Sun almost filling an A4 size page while the Earth is little more than a dot. It helps to put us in perspective, and makes us realise too that our lives depend on the Sun, our own star, a gigantic ball of hydrogen gas burning constantly some 98 million miles away.

A friend in the Astronomical Society sent me some pictures like the ones I've just described, but I was intrigued to see that they were only part of a series. The next picture showed the Sun as quite a small object, and towering over it was the huge star Arcturus (a bright star that's in our night sky in Spring and Summer) almost as big as our Sun had been in the previous picture. After pausing for a moment to take it in I moved on to the next picture. This time Arcturus was tiny and filling the page were the red giant stars Betelgeuse (in Orion) and Antares (in Scorpius). The Sun was too small to be seen!

But it was the next two pictures that really blew me away. In the first, Antares had now shrunk and was dominated by the blue hypergiant Pistol Star (too far away to be seen with the naked eye). Then finally came the picture of the largest star ever discovered – the gargantuan V V Cephei. So big that not only did it dwarf the Pistol Star but it would be big enough to swallow the orbits of more than half the planets in our own Solar System, including the Earth.

So is V V Cephei the biggest star there is? We have no idea. We don't even know how many stars there are. A 'best guess' would be to try to imagine every grain of sand on every beach in the world – and then try to think that there are at least one million stars for every one of those grains! In the story of Creation in Genesis chapter 1 we are told God "also made the stars". It's hardly surprising that it's been described as the throwaway line to beat them all!

Billions and billions and trillions of stars. Our Creator God is indeed awesome and wonderful. Yet amongst all the wonder that can be ours as we contemplate the vastness of creation on a clear, starry night, I believe we can often miss something even more wonderful. The Book of Common Prayer invites us to recite "I believe in God the Father

Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth”. Well yes, but you’d be hard pressed to find much support for singling out God the Father as the one person in the Trinity who created the Universe. The vast body of evidence in the Bible points to God the Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, as being the prime motivator behind creation. John chapter 1 verse 3, Colossians chapter 1 verse 16, Hebrews chapter 1 verse 2 all point to God the Son as the voice in the Godhead who said “Let us make...” (Genesis 1:26).

Why is that important? Because it leads us to an utterly mind-boggling conclusion. In John chapter 15, verse 15, the Lord Jesus calls those who follow him, “his friends”. He wants to be my friend – the maker of V V Cephei and all the trillions of other stars! He’s “My Friend, the Starmaker”!

And what of God the Father? Of the many roles given to Him in the Bible, one stands out in that most famous of verses, “For God ***so loved*** the world that he gave his only Son...”. And because He gave His Son to be born into this world we can discover that there’s so much more to our friend the Starmaker – and over the next few weeks we’re going to do just that.

Cedric Longville

1. My Friend... the Starmaker.

Read John chapter 1, verse 1-5, Colossians chapter 1, verses 15-17, and Hebrews chapter 1, verses 1-3

✧ From those verses, how would you describe the role of Jesus, God the Son, in Creation?

Now read John chapter 15 verses 9-15

✧ From those verses, how would you describe the relationship Jesus, God the Son, wants with you?

However hard we try, there is a tendency to think of the Creator God as someone distant, far above the clouds, shrouded in heavenly splendour. Jesus, on the other hand, is someone we can picture, even if we don't know exactly what he looked like. He's someone who walked the earth, just and you and I have done. At first blush the idea that Jesus and the Creator God are one and the same seems fantastical. But as we meditate on the thought, praying it into our minds and hearts, asking the Holy Spirit to give us at least glimpse from afar of that profound truth, the fantastical turns into the fantastic, the amazing, the mind-blowing, and the wonderful. What more amazing friend could we have than the Maker of the Universe? What more powerful friend? What more comforting friend?

And yet that's barely the half of it. Read John 15:13 again. This is your friend speaking. This is the Creator God speaking. This is your Saviour speaking.

Take some time to meditate and give thanks in prayer for this wonderful truth.

Read John 8:54-59. Jesus' eternal nature is made clear in his statement "...before Abraham was born, I AM", naming himself in the same way that the Lord answered Moses at the burning bush: "This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you'" (Exodus 3:14). As we read

John's Gospel it becomes clear that John's major task is to ensure that his readers get the message that Jesus is indeed God.

- ✦ Some people try to maintain that the Bible doesn't say that Jesus is God. What particular verses from today would you pick out to counter that view?
- ✦ Muslims in particular have a problem with the idea that God could die. Can you think of a verse where the Bible makes clear that this happened? Which of these verses would you use? Luke 22:70, John 1:1, John 3:16, John 20:26-28, Acts 20:28.

In the hymn 'Down from His Glory' there is a line which says 'the Great Creator became my Saviour'. This is an amazing statement which no other Faith can offer. What more could God do to save His creation? What greater commitment could He have? What more could He offer to redeem us?

Take some time to meditate and give thanks in prayer for this wonderful truth.

The picture on the cover (taken through a telescope) is of the star cluster called the Pleiades (also known as the Seven Sisters). Job 9:9 and Amos 5:8 tell us they are part of the Starmaker's handiwork. Telescope mirrors are often supported on four metal vanes which cause diffraction spikes giving the familiar cross patterns. Some astronomers regard the effect as an annoying aberration. Some other people just think the effect is pretty. Do you think it gives us something special to meditate upon as Christians?

Close your study book and contemplate the photograph on the cover while your study leader reads Colossians 1:15-20.

2. My Friend... The Healer.

How often have we heard "What goes around comes around", or "That's karma for you" when disaster falls on someone else?

While the idea of karma has existed for thousands of years in Eastern religions like Hinduism, Buddhism and Sikhism, it also crops up in our own culture. For example, when Big Brother contestant Jade Goody was diagnosed with cancer in 2008, there were no shortage of comments from people who viewed this simply as 'karma' repaying her for the racist comments she had made to a fellow contestant. Former England football coach Glen Hoddle also famously lost his job for stating his belief that people were born disabled because they were repaying karma from another lifetime.

While Christianity doesn't accept the idea of karma, we may find ourselves asking why good people like Rob Lacey (author of the Street Bible) or Brother Roger (Founder of the Taizé community) are struck down with disease or violence, while tyrants like Stalin or Kim Jong Il live to a ripe old age, their evil deeds going unpunished?

The question of why some people experience suffering and affliction is examined at great length in the book of Job. The Old Testament also tells us about the long-lasting consequences of sin, and that God will punish "the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate [Him]" (Exodus 20:5). For the Jews of Jesus' day, it was assumed that suffering was the direct consequence of sin, whether their own, or inherited from their parents. This is the background to the disciples' question for Jesus when they encounter the beggar who had been blind from birth.

Read John chapter 9 verses 1 to 41

- ✧ What is your experience of God's healing - have you witnessed a healing miracle, has God healed someone through you, or have you seen God work a miracle through doctors and the medical profession? Have your prayers for healing ever been answered in an unexpected way?
- ✧ How comfortable are we with the idea that the man had been born blind 'in order that the works of God might be displayed in him' (vs.3)?

- ✦ How willingly would we accept a disability or sickness if we knew that it would be used to give God glory?
- ✦ In the language of 'light' and 'dark' in verses 4 and 5, Jesus reminded his disciples that his death was imminent, and that he had limited time to do God's work. Do we share this sense of urgency in our own lives, and what regrets would we have if we died tonight?
- ✦ Jesus used many different ways to heal during his ministry, including prayer, commands and physical touch. Do we find it strange that the God who created the universe healed with spit, mud and a bath? (see also Mark 7:31-35). Is there a 'right' or 'wrong' way to pray for healing?
- ✦ The Pharisees could not believe that Jesus had performed this miracle (verse 18). Have you ever heard of a miraculous healing and struggled to believe? Do we have a responsibility to test whether a miracle is from God or not? (see Deuteronomy 13:1-5 and Mark 13:21-23).
- ✦ When the Pharisees question the healed man (verses 15-17, 24-33), he responds not with persuasive arguments or theology but with a simple testimony of what Jesus has done for him: "One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!" (verse 25). What does this tell us about the value of a personal testimony? Has there ever been a time when your own testimony has been effective in sharing the Good News when other methods have failed?
- ✦ The healed man was abused, insulted and kicked out of the synagogue for telling the truth about Jesus. What penalty are we prepared to suffer for sharing our faith? Read Matthew 5:11-12 and the account of the apostles in Acts 5:41-42. Do we see suffering for Jesus as an opportunity to rejoice?
- ✦ In verse 35, Jesus finds the healed man who had been cast out of the synagogue and his faith is rewarded by Jesus' revelation that He is the Son of Man. Is it comforting that someone who suffered for their faith received a deeper relationship and understanding of Jesus? Will living true to our faith always result in persecution?

3. My Friend... The Shepherd.

The Bible is full of stories about shepherds and sheep. The picture of the shepherd was woven into the language and imagery of the Scriptures. From Abel in Genesis, to Jesus in Revelation, sheep and shepherds are used as illustrations of the waywardness of people and the care that God has for the world.

What stories or passages from the Bible can you think of that are about sheep or shepherds?

What can we learn about God, people, and ourselves from these passages?

Why do we find the picture of God as our shepherd helpful and comforting?

The Eastern shepherd

led the sheep

found them safe pasture

protected them from danger

He used his sling to defend the sheep and to warn them of danger by shooting a stone in front of their feet.

He used a nail studded club or staff to protect them.

He used his rod or crook to pull back a straying sheep.

He used his body as the door through which the sheep entered and left the sheepfold.

Read John chapter 10 verses 1 to 42.

- ✦ How do these pictures of the Good Shepherd help us understand Jesus' care for us?
- ✦ Verses 3 to 6 tell us that the sheep hear, know and obey the shepherds' voice. How does God speak to us today? How can we be sure it is His voice we hear?

Jesus calls Himself “the door (or gate) of the sheep” (verse 7). **Read John 14:6; Ephesians 2:18; Hebrews 10:20.**

- ✦ How do these verses help us understand what Jesus meant by this statement?
- ✦ What does Jesus mean when He says He has come to bring “life in all its’ fullness”? (verse 10).
- ✦ A good shepherd would do anything to protect his sheep. Jesus describes Himself as the Good Shepherd who would lay down His life for the sheep. (verse 11 and verses 17-18).
- ✦ How do these verses help us answer the person who believes that Jesus’ death was a tragic accident?
- ✦ In verses 27–29, Jesus makes promises to His sheep. What are these promises and how do they encourage us?

The incredible fact about Jesus is that He is not only the Good Shepherd , but the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29). He will always be the Lamb (Revelation 5:12) and He will always be the Shepherd (Revelation 7:17).

Jesus died, the smitten shepherd, defending the flock, giving His life for the sheep. He rose, the eternal shepherd, to lead them to eternal pastures and to living fountains of everlasting life.

As we finish this week’s study read Psalm 23

4. My Friend...

The Heartbroken.

John chapter 11 contains the shortest verse in the Bible. It's verse 35: 'Jesus wept.'

You're not supposed to laugh in a cemetery. But my uncle did at my grandfather's funeral. He even went so far as to say "the old man would have had a good laugh himself", and knowing my grandfather I think my uncle was probably right.

My grandfather's hearse had set off down the road, with his three sons and his oldest grandson (me) following in the car behind. We only got concerned when the hearse turned on to Cowbridge Road. "Where are we going?" my father asked the driver. "Ely Cemetery" came the reply. We should have been going to Thornhill. For the next ten minutes the driver did his best to attract the attention of the hearse driver – with flashing lights and dignified touches on the horn – to no avail. And that's how my grandfather's coffin ended up in the wrong cemetery. Of course when we got there the mistake was explained and the hearse turned around ready to leave. It was then, as we waited to move back onto the main road that the gatekeeper, scratching his head under his peak cap, said "Well, I've seen hundreds going in, but I've never seen one coming out before!"

Of course he was right. Dead people go into cemeteries. They don't come out.

...and that's why Jesus wept.

Read John chapter 11, verse 1-16

- ✦ What does verse 16 tell us about how Thomas views the power of death?
- ✦ Benjamin Franklin was famous among other things for saying "The only things certain in life are *death and taxes*." Was he right? How would you respond if you were a resident of the British Virgin Islands where, apparently, there is no capital gains tax, gift tax, sales tax, or inheritance tax, and its effective income tax rate is zero?
- ✦ Read verse 11 to 13. Then turn to 1 Thessalonians 4: 15&16. How

would you sum up the way that Jesus and Paul use the words 'dead' and 'asleep' in these passages?

Read John chapter 11, verse 17-44

The story leaves us wondering what happened next. How did the sisters react? How did their friends react? Perhaps the scene was too emotional, too private, to be recorded for posterity. Yet on the two other recorded occasions when Jesus brought someone to life, there was awe and astonishment (Luke 7:16 and 8:56). Somehow the mood is altogether more sombre. It's as if the whole wonderful miracle is nuanced by the presence of a weeping Saviour who knew that Lazarus would one day die and there would be no miracle. A weeping Saviour who knew that death was never intended to be a part of His Creation (Genesis 2:16-17 and 3:19). A weeping Saviour who knew what it would cost to redeem us (Romans 5:6-11). A weeping Saviour who knew that the last enemy to be destroyed would be death (1 Corinthians 15:26).

- ✧ Read verses 25 and 26 and answer the question Jesus puts. What difference does that make for you now, and when contemplating the end of this life?
- ✧ Read verses 33-36. The Reeves family were devastated when their 150 year old furniture shop in Lambeth was burned to the ground in last years' riots. When someone's life's work is totally destroyed our hearts go out them. Can we even begin to understand our Lord's emotions as He contemplates the effect of sin on His once perfect creation?
- ✧ No one would dream of blaming the Reeves family for their tragedy. How would you responds to someone who blames God for the world's tragedies?

For further discussion

A number of popular TV programmes and books have come out recently describing how we humans have evolved from ape-like creatures. The genetic evidence seems quite strong (although no one has yet explained how humans uniquely have language, and the skills and intellect to invent and discover, and change their environment). But is the fossil evidence relevant at all when considering the Genesis creation story? The Bible tells us that mankind became mortal as a result of disobedience (Genesis 3:17-19). So immortal Adam and Eve suddenly became mortal Adam and Eve.

That sounds like a pretty serious change in their gene structure! Do you think that might go some way to explaining why today we appear to share most of our genes (though not the really important ones) with the great apes?

5. My Friend... The Fugitive.

In his commentary on John chapter 11 Tom Wright tells of being part of a group recently arrived in an unfamiliar country. The journey they were taking should have been fairly straightforward, but during the trip it became apparent that their host was taking several seemingly unnecessary diversions, only to rejoin the same road further on. Eventually, curiosity got the better of them, and they asked for an explanation. Their host then informed them that their route would have taken them through a number of places where there had recently been terrorist activity - he was in effect taking evasive action. Suddenly it became clear - what appeared to be completely irrational behaviour becomes explicable in the light of the threat.

This may provide some explanation as to the events that unfold in the course of this passage – without which can seem to us with our knowledge of how the story ends somewhat bizarre!

Read John chapter 11 verses 45 – 57

- ✦ This passage is preceded by the amazing story of the raising of Lazarus. Yet it seems not all were convinced by Jesus – we are told ‘many’, but clearly not all put their faith in him. Some went to the religious leaders. How do, or should, we respond when people fail to accept the good news of Jesus in the face of what we consider to be irrefutable evidence?
- ✦ Caiaphas is clearly a character of some importance in this part of the story. Spend some time looking up what we are told about him in the Gospels – especially his role in the trial of Jesus. A good concordance may come in useful here!
- ✦ The religious leaders considered Jesus’ actions and increasing popularity a threat. But a threat to what?
- ✦ The gospel message is still considered a threat by many. Why is the good news of Jesus still such a challenge to some people? (See Luke 18:18-23 for one possible explanation)

- ✦ In verse 50, Caiaphas declares, “.... It is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish.” How did this statement become a true prophecy, considering that it is little more than political cynicism, given the situation of the Jewish religious leaders of the time?
- ✦ It is at this point in the story that two threads – Jesus’ sense of vocation on one hand and the leaders’ sense of anxiety and political calculation on the other – come together. We will all experience occasions in our discipleship when we will question whether God really is in control of a particular situation. What would the events of this passage teach us at such times?

Encourage others in your group by sharing stories from your own walk with God where it only became apparent some time later that He was in control of a situation throughout, even though it might not have felt like that at the time.

6. My Friend...

The Light Of The World.

All through his Gospel, John uses the pictures of light and darkness, night and day to illustrate the conflict between good and evil and the results of rejecting or accepting Jesus. At the beginning of the Gospel he wrote “The true light that enlightened every man had come into the world” (John 1:9) and that some people had allowed the light to change them while others chose to remain in darkness (John 1:11-12).

John chapter 12 contains several different themes, one of them being the call to walk in the light. Other themes are: Jesus’ prediction of His death and its consequences; a call to discipleship, and a challenge to hear and believe the words of Jesus.

Read John chapter 12 verses 20 – 50.

- ✦ If someone came to you today and said that they wanted to “see Jesus” (verses 20–22) what would you do or say?
- ✦ In verses 23 –26, Jesus describes His death as the sowing of a seed that would bring life. Why did Jesus have to die in order for us to have eternal life?
- ✦ Jim Eliot, who was martyred in Ecuador once said “he is no fool who loses what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.” What do you think he meant by this? Does what Jesus said in Luke 17:33 and Luke 9:24-25 help us?

In verses 27 to 34, Jesus talks about His approaching death. He is troubled but knows that His death has a great purpose. (verses 30-32).

- ✦ How does the fact that Jesus was troubled and afraid (Mark 14:32-35 and Luke 22:44) help us when we go through difficult times?
- ✦ In verses 35-36, Jesus describes Himself as the light who is only in the world for a short while. Why is light so important in everyday life?

- ✦ How does the picture of Jesus as the Light help us understand who He is and what He does for us? (John 1:1-9; John 8:12 will give us some ideas.)
- ✦ What does it mean to live as “children of the light”? (1 John 1:1-9; Ephesians 5:8-10; Matthew 5:14 –16).
- ✦ Why do some people prefer to stay in darkness?

Jesus warns that for those who choose to stay in darkness there will be judgment (verses 46–48), but the good news is that those who come to the light and accept His word will have eternal life.

As we end this study let us pray that

- ✦ We can help others find Jesus
- ✦ We will live our lives as children of light, shining like stars (Phil. 2:15).
- ✦ We will know today the joy of eternal life.

A Prayer

Day by day dear Lord
Of Thee three things I pray
To see Thee more clearly,
Love Thee more dearly and
Follow Thee more nearly, day by day. Amen

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