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John 8:12, English Standard Version.

¹² Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

The secret Messiah.

Many people believe that the so-called "Synoptic" Gospels, that is, Matthew, Mark, and Luke are more historically accurate than the Gospel of John. The word "synoptic" is related to the word "summary", and it is used to refer to the fact that Matthew, Mark, and Luke all give the same or a very similar summary of Jesus' life. It is believed that Mark was written first. It is a bit difficult to put percentages on this, but very roughly, Matthew uses about 90 % of Mark, and Luke uses about 60% of Mark, and both Matthew and Luke include significantly more material than appears in Mark. But the Gospel of John appears to have been written independently, with no content directly borrowed. The going theory is that the Gospels were written in this order: Mark, Matthew, Luke, then John. But there is something much more significant about the relationship between the three Synoptics, Mark, Matthew, Luke, and the seemingly independent Gospel of John. John not only contains unique language and much content not included in the other

three Gospels, but the Gospel of John seems to present a very different Jesus. This difference can be illustrated by considering something that is called the “Messianic Secret”, which relates to the way in which Jesus’ identity as the promised Messiah of the Old Testament is revealed. This phrase, “Messianic Secret” was coined over a century ago, but the biblical issue behind it has been well-known for a long time.

This “Messianic Secret” theory refers specifically to the Gospel of Mark, although all three of the Synoptic Gospels exhibit the same phenomena: Jesus was supposed to be a Messiah, but he certainly didn’t live or act like one, at least not according to the conventional meaning of “messiah” at the time. Jews had been longing for an earthly Messiah, one seemingly promised by numerous prophecies in the Old Testament, a prophet who would destroy the oppressors of the Israelites. There were a long series of them, including the Egyptians, the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks, and the Romans. They wanted a mighty, God-empowered savior who would gather an army of followers and attack their oppressors. But in the Gospels that is not how Jesus lives. He is poor, hangs out with outcasts, when attacked he turns the other cheek, and his career begins by fighting the Devil in the desert, not the Romans in Jerusalem. So, why does Jesus keep his Messianic nature a secret? Repeatedly, he tells his followers, his Apostles, and those whom he cures to keep his identity a secret. In the first Chapter of Mark, we read this:

40 And a leper came to him, imploring him, and kneeling said to him, "If you will, you can make me clean." 41 Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand and touched him and said to him, "I will; be clean." 42 And immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. 43 And Jesus sternly charged him and sent him away at once, 44 and said to him, "See that you say nothing to anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, for a proof to them."

Jesus not only tells him to keep it a secret who healed him, but he also tells the man to go to the Temple and follow Jewish law by having his healing, the fact that he is now "clean" of leprosy, authenticated by the priests of the Temple so that he can freely reenter society. Jesus at this point isn't even willing to go against the priests at the Temple, he is so concerned to not make waves.

So, why is Jesus being so un-Messiah-like? The "Messianic Secret" theory says that it is because Jesus wasn't turned into a Messiah until after he died, that in truth, it wasn't until after he had apparently been resurrected that his followers decided he was a spiritual Messiah. In other words, the Gospels represent highly manipulated history. Jesus' life was embellished with miracles, and words identifying him as the Son of God were put in his mouth after he was gone.

Of course, there are other, more logical answers. Jesus doesn't want to get arrested too early, before he has finished his ministry, so he must keep quiet about who he is. Also, he is a spiritual Messiah, not a military one, and it is important to him to define his ministry in his own terms, not as a soldier, but as a man who will

be sacrificed on the cross. Even more, it turns out that if we look at the Gospel of Matthew, there is another reason. Consider this from Chapter 12:

¹⁵ Jesus, aware of this, withdrew from there. And many followed him, and he healed them all ¹⁶ and ordered them not to make him known. ¹⁷ This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah:

*¹⁸ “Behold, my servant whom I have chosen,
my beloved with whom my soul is well pleased.
I will put my Spirit upon him,
and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles.
¹⁹ He will not quarrel or cry aloud,
nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets;
²⁰ a bruised reed he will not break,
and a smoldering wick he will not quench,
until he brings justice to victory;
²¹ and in his name the Gentiles will hope.”*

This happens just after Jesus cures a man with a withered hand. The Pharisees find out and plot against him. But Jesus heals many more and tells them all to keep it a secret – because this is to fulfill a prediction made in Isaiah, in one of his prophecies. He is referencing Isaiah 42:1-4. In other words, in fulfillment of Old Testament prophesy, Jesus is beyond humble, more than modest. He does not make himself known as the Messiah. As Matthew tells us over and over, and this is indeed the unique slant of his Gospel, Jesus fulfills many of the Old Testament prophecies. So, the ultra-modest way that Jesus lives makes perfect sense.

But here is something truly intriguing. The Gospel of John does not read in the same way, with Jesus being silent about who he is. The Gospel seems to

almost conflict with the Synoptic Gospels in spirit. John portrays Jesus as being upfront about who he is as the Messiah, and so Jesus is very vocal very early on. This often happens in anecdotal stories that are not included in the other three Gospels. Consider this from Chapter 8, where Jesus is still quite early in his ministry. Jesus is in public, in the Temple Court, where all people can congregate. The Pharisees are present and are watching him as we read this happening:

¹² Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

Of course, there is no true conflict between the Synoptic Gospels and John's. It is a matter of focus. The Synoptic Gospels are telling us about the Kingdom of God, about the how we can enter it now and remain there for eternity. Jesus is not only modest, and in fact, meek: he also talks in parables, quietly and indirectly teaching those around him. But John shows us that Jesus can be bold at times. When it is necessary, Jesus doesn't shy away from declaring who he is. The Gospel of John tells us that Jesus isn't just a heavenly evangelist, here to deliver the Good News of eternal salvation. In the Gospel of John, Jesus reveals God the Father to us. Jesus is the reason we have an ongoing relationship with God. This is the powerful message in John. The Gospel of John tells us that we not only have a direct relationship with God - we have God living within us. In

Chapter 14, John is preparing the Apostles for his eventual execution. Thomas, one of his disciples, is worried about Jesus leaving. Jesus declares this to his followers, assuring them that knowing Jesus means that we now know God:

"I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷ If you had known me, you would have known my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him."

There is more. Jesus continues to reassure his Apostles that even without his physical presence, they will continue to be with God. They will not be alone when he goes away physically. This is about a lot more than salvation. This promise is also made to us. The Gospel of John makes it clear that we can live in confidence. We do not have to worry about ever being alone. I have edited this:

¹⁵ "If you love me, you will keep my commandments. ¹⁶ And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, ¹⁷ even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you.

¹⁸ "I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. ¹⁹ Yet a little while and the world will see me no more, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. ²⁰ In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.

²⁵ "These things I have spoken to you while I am still with you. ²⁶ But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you. ²⁷ Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.

Because we believe, because we live by the laws of God, we are not like those who have yet to be introduced to Jesus. We have the Holy Spirit planted within us. We

are not spiritual orphans, wandering the Earth lost, now that Jesus has left the Earth. And, of course, just as Jesus lives for all of eternity, so will we. How do we know this? The Holy Spirit will always guide and teach us. Jesus is our conduit with God, and the Holy Spirit is our Helper, inspiring us and helping us maintain our faith. Moreover, we do not have to be afraid, ever. Through the Holy Spirit, Jesus leaves with us a peace that is far more powerful than any peace that the world could ever give us. The Holy Spirit will transform us, giving us joy and calm - and salvation.

In Chapter 16, Jesus continues promising that we have nothing to worry about, that he is our representative, our advocate with God:

²² So also you have sorrow now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you. ²³ In that day you will ask nothing of me. Truly, truly, I say to you, whatever you ask of the Father in my name, he will give it to you.

We may be sorry that Jesus is not here on Earth with us. But while Jesus was indeed around, long ago, as a living man for part of one generation, he is now within us, in the form of the Holy Spirit, for all believers and for all time. He tells us that if we turn to God in his name, then God will listen. There is a subtlety here that does not come through in translation. In biblical Greek there are multiple words that are used to mean “ask”. The Greek word that is translated to “ask” in the second verse that I just read, *“whatever you ask of the Father in my name, he will give it to you”*

is αἰτέω - aiteó - (ahee-teh'-o). This word has a special nuance. It is a somewhat formal word, and the implication is that someone is making a petition, or an appeal. Today, it might be used when a person with little in the way of assets is asking for food assistance from a governmental source. In this sense, Jesus is saying that when we make a petition of God for something that we need, God will fulfill our need. This verse does not have the feeling of someone asking for a specific thing, such as me asking for a hundred dollars so I can go get some food. The feel is more along the lines of asking for relief in whatever way a powerful entity might be able to provide it. So, Jesus is saying that he is always within us, in the form of the Holy Spirit, and through this connection to God, we will never be without the things we need. God will provide. Of course, God might do this in a way that we cannot predict because God has resources at his disposal that we cannot even imagine.

This passage is also meant to be taken in more of a spiritual sense than a physical one. Jesus is trying to reassure the Apostles that they will be able to carry on just fine without him. Through the Holy Spirit, Jesus will ensure that God will always give them the direction, the knowledge, and the wisdom that they need to serve God, to maintain a proper relationship with God, and to spread the Word of God. Likewise, we, since we also have the Holy Spirit within us, will always be able to live the way God wants us to, and to find peace and joy in doing so. This does

also imply that we won't be under such incredible physical duress that we won't be able to do anything because we're literally starving. God will provide whatever physical means we need to serve him and to serve all those made in his image.

The amazing part of this, and what we get from the Gospel of John, is that the Holy Spirit within us is indeed like that fire that descended on the Apostles when Jesus commissioned them. The Holy Spirit is brilliant and powerful. We have something inside of us that connects us with all that we need to live radiant lives of faith. Remember that, in the Synoptic Gospels, when Jesus is being secretive and telling people not to blab about his healing powers, he is making sure that he will be seen not as a magical, military king who has control over life and death and will swoop in and conquer an enemy with a heavenly army. He is defining himself as a spiritual king, a Messiah who is leading us into the Kingdom of God. In the Gospel of John, we see just how that spiritual Messiah acts within us today. John, who is almost certainly the Apostle John, a trusted companion of Jesus, shows us how we can reach out and connect with God at any time. This is because we are more than simple mortals. We are simple mortals with the Holy Spirit living and blazing within us and helping us thrive in the Kingdom of God. Please pray with me.

God, we thank you for the Holy Spirit, our gift delivered by Jesus, and which allows us to never lose track of you and to always have access to your gifts. Amen.