

New Testament Survey for Beginners: Part 4 – John

The gospel according to John is an amazing book, and possibly unequalled by any other that has ever been written. It is no wonder that it is a favourite of many, or that God has used it to draw countless numbers of people to a living faith in Jesus Christ. One author described it as both simple and profound, writing, “its stories are so simple that even a child will love them, but its statements are so profound that no philosopher can fathom them.” It is true that John is an easy book to read, and one reason for that, to be sure, is that it was written with a very limited and elementary vocabulary. It must have been written – deliberately, in my opinion – for people from every demographic of society.

It really has two themes running throughout the book, namely, **the deity of Christ** and **a call to faith**, that is, a call to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and be saved. These themes are listed together in John’s own stated purpose for writing the book – John 20:30,31 – “And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.” The life that is referred to here is not merely animal vitality or the course of human existence, but a life of knowing the Lord and walking with Him; it is a life of loving the Lord and having the freedom to serve Him in obedience; and it is a life of embracing the hope of eternal glory as an anchor of the soul which keeps the Christian fixed on Christ as he passes through all the troubled waters and afflictions of this present world.

John’s account of the gospel was the last of the four to be written, and he wanted to emphasize the deity of the man Jesus because the incarnation of Christ was increasingly being attacked, especially by a growing number of gnostics within the churches. These gnostics were unbelievers who had been influenced by Greek philosophy, who thought the body was evil but that the spirit could escape the confines of the flesh through an enlightenment of the mind. They often infiltrated churches, hoping that they could persuade Christians of their own ‘gospel’ and so bring them on board with their ideas, but it always ended with disastrous results because what they taught was heretical and no gospel at all.

It should be noted in passing that the human body is not evil. Man's fallen nature is evil, yes, but not his body. The body was created to house the spirit, to provide for it, and to be (literally) its arms and legs. The curse of God that has come upon the created order as a result of man's sin means that the body at the present time is subject to death and decomposition, that is true. Yet at the end of the world, when Christ returns at last and this curse is finally lifted, the body of every Christian will be raised again to take on incorruption and immortality. The body of every redeemed soul will reunite with the spirit so that the whole man, body and spirit together, may stand faultless before the Lord, with exceeding joy, and bear His glorious image forever!

Now in the face of this gnostic error, and determined to keep it from confusing any of God's people, John sought to demonstrate that Jesus was not merely an appearance of God, or someone who possessed the Spirit of God, but that He was both God and man, someone who had assumed a true human body, and that He was the perfect union of these two indivisible natures. That was not what the gnostics wanted to hear, of course, nor was it something they were prepared to accept. If God were ever to come into the world, they insisted, He would surely not take to Himself an evil body; He would not become flesh and live among men as a man.

It is essential to our Lord's incarnation, however, and it is the very heart of the gospel message, that God became a man – a man like the rest of us in every way except for sin – and He did so in order to offer up His own body on the cross, thus providing a substitutionary atonement and a ransom for many. It could not happen any other way, and to depart from that core principle of Old and New Testament doctrine is to overturn the Word of God and to deny it completely. Hence John wrote, "the Word was God" (1:1); "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (1:14); "Most assuredly," said Jesus, "before Abraham was, I AM" (8:58); "I and the Father are one," He claimed (10:30); and again, "He who has seen Me," said the man Jesus, "has seen the Father" (14:9).

The several "I am" statements of Jesus have become a special feature in the book of John, particularly to those who recognize that the Lord Jesus Christ is there identifying Himself with the eternal God, the great I AM, who revealed Himself to Moses at the burning bush in Exodus 3.

But make no mistake, John's account is also a call to faith in Christ. It is not enough to know who the Lord's Christ is; we are called to a living, growing and fruitful faith in Him. John acknowledges the sovereignty of God in all this, quoting the Lord Jesus Himself that no one can come to Him, the Son of God, unless he is drawn of the Father to do so (6:44,65), yet John also emphasizes the responsibility of all men to commit all they are and have to Him, and their dire need to do that before it is too late (3:35,36).

These two themes – the deity of Christ and a call to faith – come to a head in chapter 20 when Thomas saw the resurrected Christ and confessed of Him, “My Lord and my God!” (v.28). In some ways this is the climax of the entire book, and it draws attention to that key moment in every believer's life when he is no longer a child of Adam, dead in sin, but now a living, breathing child and heir of God. In the same sentence Thomas confesses both who Jesus really is and, from now on, his own faith in Him and commitment to Him!

Do you know the Lord like that, with such a personal faith and heartfelt commitment to Him? Have you tasted and seen for yourself His goodness? Have you experienced the blessing of trusting in Him? If not, do so today. The Lord has promised to all who come to Him that He will never cast them out (John 6:37).

The gospel accounts of Matthew, Mark and Luke are known as the synoptic gospels, meaning that they tell the story of Jesus, the same story, seeing everything through one eye. The gospel according to John is different, and deliberately so, with more than 90% of its content found nowhere else. Perhaps it was because John wrote much later, had read the earlier accounts and realized that something more was now needed. Whatever the reason, however, John records only eight of the miracles, just two of which are found elsewhere, and no parables. He focuses more on the interviews and topical discourses of Jesus, which are concerned more with who He is than His ethical teaching, and have more to do with His relationship to individuals than His contact with the general public. Of particular interest is Jesus' allegory of the true shepherd (chapter 10), His promise of the Holy Spirit (chapters 14-16), His high priestly prayer (chapter 17), and the fact that the entire second half of the book is taken up with our Lord's final days on earth.

But who now is John, and what do we know about him? Unlike Luke, John was an eye-witness to the events of which he wrote (John 19:35). He was the youngest of the disciples, a brother of James, and these two were sons of Zebedee and Salome. John and James grew up in Galilee and went into partnership with Peter and Andrew in the fishing business before any of them became disciples and later apostles. James died early (Acts 12), but John outlived all the other apostles, spending some time in exile on the island of Patmos, and living out his latter days in Ephesus.

These two brothers were known as ‘the sons of thunder’ (or of tumult), indicating that at some point in their lives they were probably quick-tempered and too easily entangled in controversy. We see some evidence of that in their readiness to rebuke the man who was casting out demons but was not following with them (Luke 9:49). We see it again in their desire to call down fire from heaven on the Samaritan villages because they would not receive Jesus, (Luke 9:52-54). Yet another example of this same kind of behaviour was when the brothers asked their mother to make special request of Jesus to grant them the seats of highest honour in His kingdom, a request which, as one might have guessed, angered the other disciples (Matthew 20:20-28). All this may take us a bit by surprise – but, remember, of such were many of us! What we may find even more humbling is the sanctifying grace of God which later conquered their hearts, enabling James to become a martyr and John to become known as the apostle of love.

The apostle John displayed an uncommon humility. He never referred to himself by name, but identified himself rather as the disciple “whom Jesus loved” – it seems that he could never really get over that – and sometimes just as “the other disciple.” When on the cross, it was to John that Jesus committed the care of His mother, and at the empty tomb it was John who was so quick to believe. You may be someone of a tumultuous temperament yourself, but John is a good example of how by the grace of God our lives can be transformed to become faithful, effective servants of the true and living God.

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