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INTRODUCTION

Thank God for the Gospel of John. It preserves and teaches the story of Jesus with tremendous clarity and force. Often using simple words John conveys complex truths. “God so loved the world that He sent His only Son that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). That simple so-called “Gospel in a nutshell” summarizes the Christian faith well. It leaves us pondering the relationship of the Father and the Son, the uniqueness of Jesus, the meaning of faith, the threat of judgment, the blessing of eternal life and the mystery of God’s love.

PURPOSE OF THE GOSPEL

There is no mystery why the Gospel was written. John 20:31 clearly gives the goal. “These (signs) are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.” The words ring clear with typical Johannine simplicity and truth. Yet careful consideration reveals typical Johannine complexity. For example, what is “life?” *Is it spiritual life, or life after death, or both?* Does “believing” mean to know that Jesus is God’s Son, to be aware of His power, to trust Him as reliable, to expect Him to solve life’s problems, to understand the value of His death and resurrection, or all of the above? What does it mean to call Jesus “Christ” and “Son of God?” Do the titles complement each other or teach different truths? Does “in His name” refer to Jesus’ powerful signs (miracles), His teaching and revelation of God’s truth, His entire life and ministry, or does it even hint to Christian baptism? Hopefully, careful study of the Gospel will help us answer such questions.

AUTHORSHIP

Studies on the Gospel of John often begin by noting the tradition that claims the book was written by John, the Son of Zebedee, about 90 AD in

Ephesus. The tradition may be true, but the Gospel itself suggests such information is unimportant. The Gospel author remains anonymous (21:24). John, the Son of Zebedee, is never even named in the book. Unlike Paul's letters, John's Gospel does not tell by whom it was originally written. Rather than evaluate the tradition about authorship, profitable study begins with the study of the Gospel itself.

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JOHN'S RELATION TO GOSPEL OF MATTHEW, MARK AND LUKE

The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke are often called the “Synoptic Gospels” because, as the Greek words behind “synoptic” suggest, they “look together” with a “common perspective” at Jesus' life and work. The Gospel of John presents the story of Jesus from such a unique perspective that it is usually studied somewhat independent of the other three Gospels. For example, read how the different Gospels describe the events in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night Jesus is arrested (Matthew 26:36-56, Mark 14:32-50, Luke 22:40-53, John 18:1-11). Matthew, Mark and Luke show the agony and humiliation of Jesus. John shows Jesus, as God, dominating the arrest procedure. He “gives” Himself to fulfilling God's will.

As another example of Johannine uniqueness, read the stories of Jesus cleansing the temple (Matthew 21:12-13, Mark 11:15-17, Luke 19:45-46 and John 2:13-17). One major difference is the timing of the cleansing. The Synoptics record it after the entry into Jerusalem but John puts it early in Jesus' ministry. Martin Luther, and scholars long before and after him, have debated the importance of the differences. They debate whether Jesus cleansed the temple once or twice. If twice, why did John report only the earlier incident and if once why did John tell it at a time so different from that of the Synoptics? Some Christians think that John tells of the event early in Jesus' career for theological (rather than chronological) reasons. John shows from the very beginning how Jesus critiques old religious practices and calls for a new relationship with God. With

the signs in Jerusalem the greatness of Jesus begins to unfold as promised to Nathanael (John 1:51). Furthermore, John's version eliminates the possibility of unbelievers thinking that Jesus was a revolutionary who was crucified because He tried to instigate a rebellion in the temple precincts. As you note ways in which John differs from the Synoptics, think about ways in which John may be using the material to teach more clearly Jesus' meaning.

On the other hand, John's uniqueness is not limited to theological insights. Thanks to John's Gospel we have a more complete historical understanding of Jesus' ministry. Most of Jesus' public ministry reported in the Synoptics is in Galilee while John also describes His work in or near Jerusalem. If we read only Synoptics, we could think that Jesus' public ministry lasted less than one year because He goes to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover only one time (Matthew 21:1ff, Mark 11:1ff, Luke 19:28ff). Because of John, we speak of Jesus' three year public ministry. Only John records Jesus going to Jerusalem for three Passover celebrations (d. John 2:13ff, 6:4, 13:1ff).

Part of the greatness of John's Gospel lies in telling us things not recorded in the Synoptics. Part of the mystery of John's Gospel lies in not telling us major important things about Jesus that the Synoptics all record. For example, in the Gospel of John there are no birth stories, no report of Jesus' own baptism or His subsequent temptations. John records none of the Synoptic parables, fewer miracles (John records seven signs, but Mark's shorter Gospel records nineteen miracles), no confession by Peter at Caesarea Philippi, no transfiguration, no words of institution of either baptism or eucharist, no prayerful struggle in Gethsemane, no help by Simon of Cyrene in carrying the cross, no darkness on Calvary and no cry of rejection from the cross. Did John deliberately leave out (Synoptic) information already known? Or did John, without reference to the Synoptic Gospels, simply tell the story differently?

Reference to the Johannine materials not found in the Synoptics also helps us think about such questions. For example, only John records the confession of John the Baptist, that Jesus is the Lamb of God (1:29), the wedding at Cana (2:1ff), the conversation with Nicodemus (3:1ff), the mission with the Samaritan woman (4:4ff), the healing at Bethsaida (5:1ff), the self explanation after

feeding 5,000 people (6:25ff), the events at the Feast of the Tabernacles (7:1ff), the healing of the blind man in Jerusalem (9:1ff), the events surrounding the death of Lazarus (11:4ff), the upper room teachings (14-17), the events of Easter involving Peter, Mary Magdalene and other disciples (20:1-29), and the post-Easter events near the Sea of Tiberias (21:1-22).

Not only does John record different events in the life of Jesus but he also shows a different side of Jesus' teaching. To become more aware of some of the differences, read the Sermon on the Mount in chapter five through seven of Matthew and then read Jesus sayings in John 6:32-49 or in chapters fourteen through seventeen. Note that Matthew's report of the Sermon on the Mount emphasizes human conduct and it does not deal explicitly with who Jesus is. The focus is God's loving power and human beings' loving response. In John, however, note how much Jesus talks about Himself and His relationship to His Father and to His disciples. In Matthew, Jesus proclaims God's way, truth, and life. In John, Jesus shows that He is the way, the truth, and the life.

In summary, when we study the Gospel of John it is helpful to keep in mind the uniqueness of John. John is not merely telling the history about Jesus but wants us to share the faith of Jesus. Awareness of John's uniqueness often enriches our understanding of Jesus. In the Synoptics, Jesus speaks explicitly of the Kingdom of God but merely implies His relationship to the Father. On the contrary, in John's Gospel, Jesus speaks explicitly about His relationship with the Father while implying the truths about the Kingdom of God. In the Synoptics Jesus stresses what God is working while in John Jesus stresses how God is working in His Son. As the statement of purpose in John 20:30-31 told us, John writes with a special concern that we understand Jesus.

THE FIRST READERS OF JOHN'S GOSPEL

Who first read John's Gospel? Some readers must have known Jewish tradition very well. The Gospel contains some nuances that would be understood only by Jewish people. John is the most Jewish Gospel even though Matthew quotes the Old Testament more often. As we will see when we read the Gospel, John does not frequently quote the Old Testament but rather points to its allusions

and symbolic references. For example, Jewish-Christian readers would fully understand and treasure Jesus' allusion to Jacob's ladder (John 1:51. Cf. Genesis 28:12). Knowing Jesus is like having Jacob's Bethel experience. Gentiles would wonder what John 1:51 is all about. Jewish people would also catch the echo of Exodus 3:14 in Jesus' saying, "Before Abraham was, I AM" (John 8:58). The "I AM" which Moses heard from a burning bush now comes from Jesus' own mouth (Cf. John 1:17). Jewish people familiar with the usage of water during Tabernacles would find special irony and force in Jesus' proclamations on the last day of the feast (John 7:37-39). Repeatedly, the book contrasts the significance of Jesus and His message to Moses, national Jewish holidays, and Jewish traditions. Such claims reach out to Jewish people. John's Gospel clearly seeks to convince people of Jewish background that Jesus calls them to believe.

On the other hand, the Gospel seems to be written for some readers who know little about Jewish traditions. The Gospel contains several editorial comments to help such readers understand the story. For example, John translates simple Hebrew names and titles (e.g. John 1:38, 41, 42). He offers an explanation (4:9) to readers who apparently do not know about Jewish-Samaritan segregation practices. It reminds me of the way we today must tell young people about segregation laws in the United States that were in force a generation ago. Finally, only readers who had never visited Jerusalem would need to be told the distance of Bethany from Jerusalem (11:18). These and other explanatory comments hint that some readers lived far removed from the time and places of Jesus.

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MAJOR THEMES IN THE GOSPEL

Read John 1:1-18 and John 20:30-31 and you have a good review of major themes in John's Gospel. Nevertheless, let me point out a few themes.

1 The most important theme in the Gospel of John is the meaning of Jesus. He is the Messiah, that is, God's appointed leader. John shows how Jesus fulfills and surpasses expectations and hopes based on the Old

Testament and even Jewish traditions. Jesus is also the Son of God. John records again and again how Jesus related Himself and His work to the Father. Almost one hundred times the Gospel points to God as Father and all but eleven of these are out of the mouth of Jesus. Christology, the teaching of Christ, dominates the Gospel.

2. The Gospel calls people to faith. John explores the meaning of faith and also doubt. Strangers, like Samaritans (4:42), believe, but a disciple, like Thomas (20:25), doubts. Seeing a miraculous sign can create faith (11:45) but its report can also create incredible unbelief (11:53). The signs are recorded so that people will believe (20:30) but Jesus Himself declares that believing without seeing is more blessed (20:29). Faith is more important than miracles.

3. Life or eternal life is a major theme. The Gospel wants us to know what true life is and how we get it. John makes us think about the mysterious relationship of the Christian life on earth and the life after death. As we will see, the gift of life in chapter eleven deals not merely with the physical death of Lazarus but especially with the spiritual death of Martha, Mary, and others.

4. John emphasizes witnessing or revelation. Jesus is the light which means that He reveals the truth. The verb “to witness” appears about thirty times in John but only once each in Matthew and Luke and never in Mark. The noun “witness” occurs fourteen times in John, never in Matthew, three times in Mark, and but once in Luke. John wants to teach us how the Father witnesses the Son, the Son witnesses the Father and, in Jesus, we witness to truth, and to life.

5. John emphasizes the totality of God's action. God loves the whole world. Jewish traditions and festivals find deeper meaning in Jesus. Pagan Samaritans and Greeks seek Him. Human needs for essentials like food and water are met and surpassed by Jesus. Human institutions, for example the mighty Roman empire exemplified by Pilate, stands confused and indecisive compared to Jesus. The true world ruler is Jesus, not Rome. The gift of the Holy Spirit connects the past actions of God in Jesus with the future activities of God in the lives of all His disciples.

THE STRUCTURE OF JOHN'S GOSPEL

Some people prefer to study John's Gospel like a seamless robe. They think that one section leads into another without a break and the stories build on and interpret each other. A deed of Jesus often precedes a teaching by Jesus which builds on and explains the deed. No doubt if you read through the Gospel without interruption you will experience its unfolding power.

On the other hand, Christians for centuries have divided the Gospel into chapters and verses and proposed various outlines. Such logical divisions also facilitate study and understanding. Usually John 1:1-18 is identified as one unit and called “the prologue.” It serves as an introduction to the Gospel and can be studied independently. It anticipates the theology of the book but does not report stories.

The bulk of the Gospel tells what Jesus did and said. Often the first twelve chapters are described as Jesus' “public ministry” and chapters thirteen through twenty stand as His “private ministry.” In scholarly literature, the units are often called “The Book of Signs” and “The Book of Glory,” respectively. The division is helpful although I prefer to see chapters eleven and twelve as a hinge-section connecting the life of Jesus with His death and resurrection.

Until recently, chapter twenty-one has been viewed as a strange, even unnecessary, late addition to the Gospel. It is often called an appendix. I think that is wrong. Chapter twenty-one effectively bridges the gap between Easter and the ongoing activity of the church.

A FINAL WORD

As you read and study the Gospel according to John, I pray that you will feel the power of the Holy Spirit giving you new understanding and insights into the great truth of our Christian faith and life. John's Gospel is no idle tale. Its goal is not entertainment. It calls for commitment. Like great music, it begins softly before reaching a dramatic crescendo. You may enjoy the music or plug your ears but you cannot ignore it. When we read John we too cannot ignore the message. The truth soars high and dear. The invitation is to faith. The choice is acceptance or rejection. May God enrich your faith.

PERSONAL APPLICATION – JOHN 1:1-18

Pray that the Word of God will bless you as you read John 1:1-18.

1. John 1:1-18 is usually called the prologue. What is the purpose of The Prologue?

2. What words or verses in the prologue interest you the most? Why?

3. Read the introductory verses of each of the other Gospels. Write what each suggest about the purpose of the book and what it means to you.
Matthew 1:1-17

Mark 1:1

Luke 1:1-4

4. Why do you think John's prologue is so different from the introductory verses of the other Gospels?

5. How is the beginning of John similar to the beginning of Genesis?

6. How does the similarity influence your thinking as you begin reading John?

7. Describe the status and function of the "Word" in John 1:1-5.
What was it?

What did it do?

What is it doing now?

8. Why do you think John began with the term "Word" instead of simply using the name Jesus? Think about how God creates in Genesis chapter 1 and the role of the Word of God for the Hebrew prophets before you reply.

9. Compare John 1:3 to Colossians 1:17. What activity of Jesus is described?

How does awareness of Jesus' activity affect your attitude toward creation?

10. What does "life" mean to you? Read John 1:4, 3:3, 5:25, 11:25-26 and 20:20-31.

11. In John 1:4 & 5, what do you think light and darkness mean or symbolize?

12. How is John the Baptist (John 1:6-8 and 15) a model for us?

13. John carefully shows that John the Baptist is not greater than Jesus. List some things that you sometimes make more important than Jesus.

14. According to verses 12 and 13, how do people not become children of God?

Name some incorrect reasons why people today think they have a relationship with God.

15. According to verse fourteen, what happens when the Word becomes flesh?

16. Today, how can Jesus "become flesh and dwell among us" so that the glory of God can be seen?

17. Compare Exodus 34:6 and Psalm 86:15 to John 1:14 and 16. How do the Old Testament passages help you understand Jesus?

18. What does it mean to you that (1:16) we all receive "grace upon grace?" List some "grace upon grace" that you have experienced.

19. Why are you thankful for the law given through Moses but even more thankful for grace and truth in Jesus Christ?

20. According to John 1:18, what is the work of Jesus?

How does this work affect your faith?