



SERMON TITLE: Begin with the End in Mind
SCRIPTURE: John 20:30-31; John 1:1-3

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"These things are written that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ" (John 20:31). This is how John concludes his own biography of Jesus. He wanted the young, the old, the sick, the well, the despairing, the hopeful, the skeptics, the faithful, and whoever reads his account of Jesus to believe and trust Him more fully. But what did John want them to believe? He wanted them to believe that Jesus alone brought eternal life into the present, broken world. And for all who enter this eternal life with God right now, we—like John—are exiles. For all who enter a relationship with Jesus, we will very likely be marginalized and dismissed because we follow Him. So, what does it mean to believe? And how do we mature in believing? What does it mean to remain faithful to God when the pressure is on? These are the things that John will help us explore by showing us the glory and beauty of Jesus.

Today we are beginning a new sermon series in the Gospel of John. We're going to spend a whole year looking at the most significant, most pre-eminent, most influential, and the most polarizing person in the history of the world and his name is Jesus Christ.

Here's what two of the greatest minds in the history of the church say about John's Gospel. St. Augustine: "John's Gospel is deep enough for an elephant to swim, but shallow enough that a child cannot drown." What he's saying is this: If you are a non-Christian a new Christian, or a young person, you're not going to drown. Or, if you're a mature Christian, or studied Christian you're still going to grow. There's a lot more to be unpacked.

Martin Luther asked, should a tyrant succeed in destroying the Holy Scriptures and only a single copy of the epistle to the Romans and the Gospel according to John were to escape him, Christianity would be saved. What Luther is saying is this: If we lost the whole Bible, but we had Romans and John, we'd make it. According to Luther, these are the two most important books in the entire Bible. And we're going to be studying one of them for the next year or so.

When the apostle John wrote the last of the four Gospels, the church was under attack but the true identity of Jesus was under attack as well. Different groups had begun to co-opt Jesus into their philosophical agendas. Some diminished his humanity and others diminished his divinity. John wanted to write a Gospel in a way that would establish once and for all that Jesus was fully God and fully man. So he wrote a gospel that's very different from the other three. John—who was a first-hand eyewitness of Jesus' life, ministry, death, and resurrection—carefully crafted what he's written for us because he has a focused purpose in mind. And he tells us his purpose at the very end of this book—that's why I've titled the message—*Begin with the End in Mind*.

John Purpose (READ 20:30-31). Everything John writes in his biography of Jesus was written so that "you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you might have life in his name."

Actually, I see a two-fold purpose in this passage: an evangelistic purpose and an *apologetic* purpose. The evangelistic purpose in that John carefully chooses stories about and conversations with Jesus to show us how people move from unbelief to belief, in hopes that we make that same journey. He wants us to read his story and believe in Jesus. To lead us to see Jesus as the Son of God, John talks about Jesus' miracles—not simply as acts of compassion and kindness, (though they were most certainly that), but John calls Jesus' miracles "signs" 17 times. They were signs that point to Jesus' deity. He wants us to see that the Son of Man is the Son of God, the one and only unique Heavenly Human. These "signs" are also a way to move people from no faith to faith in Jesus. And John builds his story around seven signs that point to Jesus as the Son of God, which means that Jesus is equal to God.

The book also has an apologetic purpose as well. It's apologetic in the sense that everything John includes in his story of Jesus is geared to encourage people to continue to believe, even in growing hostility they were facing from their

political authorities. He also wants them to continue to believe in spite of false teaching, i.e. all the competing versions of Jesus infiltrating the church.

So basically John says, "Write these things that you may believe and keep on believing."

Here's how all this ties to the "exile" theme we've been reflecting on since January. To remain faithful to God today and to experience the life Jesus died to make possible for us, we must anchor our faith and hope and loyalty in Jesus, the divine Son of God. We must not place our hope in anything we find in this world.

Our hope in exile is in having our eyes fixed on Jesus, and having our lives caught up with Jesus and the life he offers. Yes, John writes these things so you would believe and keep on believing and by believing you would experience abundant life in his name.

But what does it mean to believe?

First, the Greek word *pisteuo* means "to acknowledge the truth as truth." When I say I believe the book of John, I am saying that I accept its content as truth. To believe in Jesus is, first, to accept what he says as the truth. And if he really is God who came in the flesh, then what he says is true and isn't up for debate. Second, and more important, *pisteuo* means "to trust, to rely on, to put confidence in" something or someone. When I say I believe in Jesus, I am saying that I trust him, I rely on him, I have put my complete confidence in him. I take him at his word. And the emphasis is on believing, trusting HIM—in Jesus, as a Person. Not merely believing what he says about heaven and hell. He didn't come to simply offer us a "get-out-of-hell-free" card so we can live any way we want and there be no consequences. No, believing is not just believing his message, and not just believing it's good to follow his example. It's not believing in his teaching "cafeteria-style", e.g. "I'll take a helping of this and this, not that, this, this, not that." No. We are called to believe in him.

Years ago, I remember Brian Onken defining "belief" like this: "To believe means coming to trust Jesus as an individual and as a person in such a way that you permit his relationship with you to flavor all you do in life." That's about as good as it gets. That's John's purpose, the end to which he is writing, so let's see how he begins with the end in mind.

John's Prologue (READ 1:1-3) John begins his story of Jesus, not with his birth in Bethlehem, and not by quoting Old Testament prophecy. No, John begins his story of Jesus way back in eternity past.

Why? What is his purpose? "I write these things that you might believe that Jesus is the Son of God." What you believe about Jesus is the most important thing about you. Who is Jesus? What does John say? This week I'm just going to unpack verses 1-3. In the first three verses, John says: Jesus is the Eternal God. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."

"Jesus is God." He says that because Jesus made that claim for himself. In fact, that's what got him killed. By claiming to be the Son of God, Jesus made himself equal to God. He said, "I and my Father are one." He didn't mean one and the same, but of the same essence—one essence in two distinct personas. The Word was with God and the Word was God—with God, was God—one "God" essence in two persons.

But the point is, when Jesus made this statement, the religious authorities picked up stones to kill him because they said, "you being a man, make yourself out to be God." In the original Greek, *logos* means "word."

The first Christians were Hebrew and then Christianity spread to the Greeks. By the time John is writing, the majority of Christians are Greek, not Jewish, and that's why the New Testament is written in Greek because that was the common language of the people of that day. The Greeks tried to find God (or to make sense out of life) through philosophy. If you've been to college you may have studied some of these guys: Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Cicero. Those were the famous Greeks trying to find God through philosophy. Predating all of them, about 500 B.C., was a man named Heraclitus. He was like the founding father of Greek philosophy. Heraclitus influenced Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero. Guess where he lived? In Ephesus. And where was John pastoring late in life? In Ephesus. And he said (*my paraphrase*): *the one thing that holds all things together, the one thing that gives everything life and meaning and value and purpose, the key that unlocks the understanding for everything else is the logos—the word.* So somewhere in the confusion of Greek philosophy, there was this longing for the "word," a longing for the logos, that would make everything make sense.

Now the Jewish people would have also been familiar with the Word of God because the word *dabar* is Hebrew for “word.” Genesis 1:1 says, “In the beginning, God spoke and it was so, and God spoke and it was so, and God spoke and it was so. Everything that exists didn’t come from pre-existing material. Everything that exists, exists solely by the power of God’s Word.

To the Jews, the Word of God is how God works. God speaks and creation comes into existence. God speaks and creation obeys. God speaks and there is light. God speaks and there is life. The first thing in God’s new creation that doesn’t obey God are God’s people, but everything else obeys God’s Word.

In Isaiah 55 God says, “My Word that goes forth from my mouth will not return to me void, but it will accomplish what I have spoken and everything I have sent it to do.” God works through his Word. And Jesus is the Word of God. Jesus is God working in human history. Jesus is God speaking and acting in this world.

So, John is connecting to Greek philosophy and to the ancient Hebrew Scriptures when he employs the term “word.” And John brings all this together to make this one point: Whatever culture, whatever philosophy, whatever spirituality, whatever theology, whatever ideology, whatever nationality, whatever history—everyone, everywhere needs to meet Jesus, to believe Jesus, to trust Jesus, to know Jesus, to love Jesus, to submit to Jesus, to follow Jesus, to enjoy Jesus—because apart from Jesus there is no revelation from God, no Word from God, no salvation from God!

Let me close this way: If Jesus is truly Eternal God that means he is not someone to be taken lightly. If you take Jesus lightly that which you take is not Jesus. He doesn’t give us the freedom to just believe in him as a good teacher, or as a philosopher, or as someone you can throw a couple of quotes up on your Facebook feed and say, “I’m a follower of Jesus.”

He doesn’t give you the choice to take part of him—the part about going to heaven when you die—but then reject the other parts about him that interfere with your way of life. He’s not someone you can co-opt into your political agenda or into a kind of *Oprahology* smorgasbord spiritualism. Jesus is not some kindly soul that has some good advice for us. That is not the Jesus in the book of John. Jesus is God come in the flesh, and because he is Eternal God he calls us to believe in him so that our relationship with him shapes and flavors everything about us.

Discussion Starters:

- [Ice breaker]: Do you have a favorite story or a verse from the Gospel of John?
- Read John 20:30-31. Why did John not write a comprehensive biography of Jesus? Why did he leave out so much of the material found in the other three Gospels and include so many things that are not found in Matthew, Mark, and Luke?
- What does it mean to believe? Why is believing more than just believing in Jesus in order to go to heaven when you die?
- Read John 1:1-3. What did the Greeks believe about the “Word”—the *logos* of God?
- What did the Jewish people believe about God’s Word—the *dabar* of God?
- How do these two ideas come together in John’s discussion about The Word in verses 1-3?
- John teaches us that Jesus is the eternal God. Why is this important to believe?
- What else stood out to you in this message?