

The Gospel of John: So That You May Believe

Introduction

The Gospel of John is at once simple and profound. It is so simple that this gospel has often been used to introduce people to Jesus and lead them to place their faith in him. As the purpose of the Gospel of John states: ***"Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name"*** (John 20:31, New Revised Standard Version).

In the midst of this apparent simplicity, however, there is also great depth, even mystery. We see this from the very first verse: ***"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God"*** (1:1). For all their simplicity, those words contain deep meaning. Moreover, as this gospel moves through its treatment of Jesus, what he did, and how people responded to him, it interacts with Greek and Jewish religious traditions of many kinds. Underneath what seems so simple on the surface can be found references to how the Christian faith related to various complex clusters of first-century ideas. These interactions are sometimes not apparent from mere surface reading or study.

Simple and easy to understand; profound and mysterious—that is the Gospel of John. But how could we expect otherwise? After all, the subject of the Gospel of John is God becoming flesh in a human being. Not only that, it is the account of this human being, Jesus, in whom God was uniquely present, giving his life and being rejected by "his own people" (1:11). What kind of God is this? How could this happen? The Gospel of John calls us to ponder such questions rather than merely to consider interesting stories and sayings.

A brilliant Baptist interpreter of the Gospel of John, George Beasley-Murray, now gone to be with the Lord of whom this gospel is written, said that new believers can find in John a wonderful exposition of the faith they have embraced. Also, mature Christians can continue to find their faith illumined as they learn more of Jesus through this gospel. Too, the aged Christian can learn even more of the glory of God as it is revealed in this gospel. Further, those who are dying can find comfort in its words that tell of Jesus, who brings peace, comfort, and hope. Let us add that those who have not yet believed can be led to believe through a study of this gospel. (George R. Beasley-Murray, John, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 36, Waco, Texas: Word Books, Publisher, 1987, x.)

Which vantage point in the preceding paragraph is yours? Whatever the case, as you study this gospel, let John's message speak to you. Consider several ways of approaching this study that will help you do just that.

First, plan to study John with keen attention and a willingness to learn what John's Gospel has to teach. Avoid assuming that you have "heard this story before" and thus

know all about it. Studying John with the attitude that you are crossing territory so familiar you can do it with your eyes closed is a sure way not to learn much of anything on this particular journey.

Second, consider the meaning behind the familiar stories and sayings. As is often the case with the Bible, many readers of the Gospel of John have focused on the stories and the sayings—Jesus turning the water into wine (John 2); Jesus talking with Nicodemus (John 3); Jesus talking with the Samaritan woman (John 4); Jesus healing the paralyzed man (John 5); plus John 3:16—but they have neither sought nor found the interconnectedness and the powerful insights that carry John's message along and reveal who Jesus is. In particular, Jesus' extended teachings in John 6—12 are often passed by in favour of the stories of Jesus' feeding the multitude (John 6) and healing the blind man (John 9). These teachings, however, provide needed explanation of the significance of these events. Resolve not merely to see the interesting stories but also to seek their meaning.

Third, let the Gospel of John speak its own unique message about Jesus. Don't run too quickly to the other gospels, particularly to try to harmonize the flow of events. Seek to understand John's Gospel on its own terms. Each of the gospels has its own unique approach to Jesus and his significance. Each gospel tells and interprets Jesus' story in a special way for its own focused purpose.

There has long been general agreement that Matthew, Mark, and Luke have great similarities, that Mark was the first written gospel, and that Matthew and Luke show dependence on Mark. John, however, stands to itself to an even greater extent than do the other three gospels.

Have you ever heard or sung a familiar hymn text set to a different tune? Often when this is done, the hymn text takes on new meaning and causes us to worship in new and unexpected ways. We might say that each of the gospel writers set the text of Jesus' life, ministry, death, and resurrection to a different tune. Moreover, each of them used somewhat different words, with John's words being quite different. Each gospel's "hymn" still calls us to know and serve the risen Christ, however.

Think of what we would miss if we did not have this gospel. Were it not for the Gospel of John, we would not know of Jesus' extensive ministry in Jerusalem earlier than the week of his death. Indeed, we would not even know of the likelihood of a three-year ministry of Jesus. The timeline of the other gospels can be put into a single year, while John alone mentions three Passovers (see 2:13; 6:4; 11:55). Even more important, we would not see as clearly the linkage between Jesus' death and his ministry if we did not have John's Gospel.

So, for this study, pay attention to John's Gospel and what it tells about Jesus and his significance for your life. Let this study lead you to the abundant life of which John

speaks and which Jesus offers to those who will believe in him. Jesus' words still ring true for us: "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (10:10).

The last verse of the Gospel of John states: "But there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written" (21:25). We might also apply the spirit of that verse to Bible study sessions. Out of many possibilities, thirteen Bible study sessions have been projected for this study. The thirteen sessions are divided into four units. These units and the sessions within them attempt to follow the contours of the Gospel of John itself and to encourage us to get at the heart of its message as we study.

Unit 40, "The Word and His Works," consists of five sessions from John 1—5. The unit begins with a study of what is known as the prologue (1:1-18), which introduces the entire book and points to its meaning. The next four sessions are on the following incidents: Jesus' first sign, at the wedding at Cana (John 2); Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus (John 3); Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman (John 4); and Jesus' healing of the lame man (John 5).

16-40-01-en	God in the Flesh	John 1:1-18
16-40-02-en	Whatever Jesus Tells You	John 2:1-22
16-40-03-en	For God So Loved	John 3:1-16
16-40-04-en	If You Knew the Gift of God	John 4:4-30, 39-42
16-40-05-en	The Case for Jesus	John 5:1-24, 31-40

Unit 41, "The Growing Conflict," is a two-session study of John 6—10. The first session in this unit is from John 6 and focuses on Jesus' interpretation of the meaning of the feeding of the multitude. The second session in the unit considers Jesus' healing of the blind man and the meaning of that event, according to John 9—10. These sessions show the growing conflict between Jesus and the Jewish leaders.

16-41-06-en	To Whom Shall We Go?	John 6:41-58, 66-69
16-41-07-en	The Good Shepherd and Human Blindness	John 9:1-7; 9:39—10:19

Unit 42, "The Time Has Come," provides a two-session study of John 11—12. With Jesus' raising of Lazarus from death, the opposition of the Pharisees came to a head with the decision to kill Jesus. The first session of the unit is a study of the raising of Lazarus in John 11, which will be studied on Easter in the first year of release of this study. The second session focuses on Jesus' offer of himself as the Savior of the world in John 11:55—12:50. In this unit, we will see that both the Jewish leaders and Jesus considered that "the time had come." At this point, the Jewish leaders began to seek to kill Jesus (11:53), and Jesus stated that his "hour" had come (12:23).

16-42-08-en	The Resurrection and the Life	John 11:14-44, 47-53
16-42-09-en	The Hour Has Come	John 11:55-57; 12:20-37, 44-50

Unit 43, "Jesus' Glorious Triumph," relates to Jesus' death and resurrection and consists of sessions on John 13—21. The first treats Jesus' example of service in John 13, and the second considers portions of Jesus' farewell discourse in John 14—17. The emphasis in both of these sessions is on Jesus' preparation of the disciples for life after his death. The third and fourth sessions of this unit are a study of John's portrayal of Jesus' trials and then death on the cross in John 19. The next session of the study is on Jesus' resurrection appearances to Mary, the disciples, and Thomas (John 20). The Gospel story is not complete without John 21. This session brings us to follow Jesus by actively obeying his commission to "Go Tell" and disciple the nations. It is the story that launched the church into all the world.

16-43-10-en	Do As Jesus Did	John 13:1-17
16-43-11-en	Never Alone	John 14:15-27; 15:26—16:15
16-43-12-en	Jesus Prays In the Shadow of the Cross	John 17:1-26
16-43-13-en	It Is Finished	John 19:1-21, 26-30
16-43-14-en	Seeing and Believing	John 20:1-2, 11-29
16-43-15-en	Breakfast with Jesus	John 21