

# The Gospels

LESSON  
FIVE

## THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO JOHN



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# The Gospels

## Lesson Five

### The Gospel According to John

#### INTRODUCTION

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Her name is Sophia. Well, it isn't her real name. It's the name she uses to hide from friends and family members who threaten to kill her because she now believes in Jesus. Sophia comes from a background where believing in Jesus sometimes brings persecution. That's true today in many parts of the world, and it was also true in the first century. In the days of the apostle John, Jewish believers were being thrown out of the synagogues because they believed that Jesus was the fulfillment of God's ancient promises to their forefathers. They were being cut off from their families, their history and their religion. John wrote to assure these persecuted believers that Jesus really is the Christ, the Son of God. He wanted to make sure that even in their harsh circumstances they would remain faithful to Jesus and enjoy abundant life in him.

This is the fifth lesson in our series *The Gospels*. In this series, we're exploring the four books of the Bible that tell us how Jesus brought God's kingdom and glory into earth's history. This lesson is entitled "The Gospel According to John." In this lesson, we'll study John's gospel in a way that helps us read it with greater understanding, love God more deeply, and enjoy our lives in Christ more fully.

In our lesson, we'll study John's gospel in three important ways. First, we'll consider the background of John's gospel. Second, we'll explore the structure and content of John's gospel. Third, we will look at the major themes of John's gospel. We'll begin by studying the background of John's gospel.

#### BACKGROUND

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We'll explore the background of John's gospel by considering the author and the occasion of writing. Let us begin with the authorship of John's gospel.

#### AUTHOR

Throughout church history, Christians have consistently attributed this gospel to Jesus' disciple John, the brother of James, the son of Zebedee. John was one of the inner circle of Jesus' most trusted companions, and a pillar of faith in the early Christian community. His New Testament writings include not only the fourth gospel, but also the letters 1, 2 and 3 John, and the book of Revelation.

We'll study the authorship of John's gospel in two stages. First, we'll see that the traditional view that the apostle John wrote this gospel is reliable. And second, we'll

explore John's personal history. Let's start by looking at the traditional view that the apostle John was the author of the fourth gospel.

## Traditional View

**The Gospel of John is one of the books in the Bible that simply doesn't say who wrote it. And that's where we start, I think. As Bible-believing Christians, we just acknowledge the fact we don't have a definitive statement as to who authored the book. By the second century, Tertullian and Irenaeus and some others were definitely attributing it to the apostle John. So you have to ask the question why did they believe it so close to the time that they either had contact with some of the last living apostles or at least the next generation for them to come out as strongly as they did. And there were others who did as well. Then you go inside the gospel. You have to look at the internal evidence in the book, and there, of course, you've got the eyewitness accounts where whoever is writing the book is writing about a story that they were present when it happened. For example, in the Lord's Supper, the person is at the table, the beloved disciple is sitting at the table with Jesus and that's a very powerful thing.**

— Dr. Steve Harper

We can affirm that John most likely wrote the fourth gospel because of three types of early evidence. First, we will consider the ancient manuscripts of John's gospel.

**Manuscripts.** Many ancient manuscripts of the fourth gospel list the author's name as John. For example, *Papyrus 66* and *Papyrus 75*, both dated around A.D. 200, call the gospel *euangelion kata Iōannēn*, meaning "Gospel According to John." And *Codex Sinaiticus* and *Codex Vaticanus*, both written in the middle of the fourth century A.D., call it simply *kata Iōannēn*, meaning "according to John."

Of course, John wasn't an uncommon name. But it's clear from the writings of the early church that this attribution was intended to refer to the most significant "John" mentioned in the Scriptures, namely the apostle John.

Not only do the ancient manuscripts indicate that John wrote the fourth gospel, but the internal evidence from the gospel itself leads to the conclusion that John is its most likely author.

**Internal Evidence.** The writer of the gospel reported debates between Jesus and the Jewish leadership on particular points of Jewish law. These debates show that the author had a strong understanding of Jewish law just as John, the apostle, would have had as a Palestinian Jew.

Going a step further, there is strong evidence that the author of this gospel actually was a Palestinian Jew. The Palestinian character of the gospel is seen in the

descriptions of Jesus' ministry. For example, in 7:15 he noted the importance of religious training in the eyes of Palestinian Jewish leaders.

The author of the fourth gospel also mentioned religious themes and used vocabulary that was similar to other writings from first century Palestinian Judaism. For example, a number of scholars have pointed out similarities in language between John's gospel and the writings at Qumran, commonly known as the Dead Sea Scrolls. For instance, the expression "the sons of light" appears both in the Qumran documents and in John 12:36. And the phrase "the light of life" appears both in the writings from Qumran and in John 8:12. Similarities like these indicate that the author of the fourth gospel was very much at home in the religious conversation of first century Palestine.

Not only does the text of the gospel give the impression that it was written by a Palestinian Jew, but it also gives the impression that it was written by an eyewitness. This fits the profile of John the apostle, because he himself was an eyewitness to the life of Jesus. We see evidence that the writer was an eyewitness in many places. For example, after Jesus' death, John 19:35 says this:

**The man who saw it has given testimony, and his testimony is true. He knows that he tells the truth, and he testifies so that you also may believe (John 19:35).**

Here the author clearly indicated that he was an eyewitness to Jesus' death. And we find a similar claim in John 21:20-24, which identifies this eyewitness by calling him "the disciple whom Jesus loved," indicating that the writer had a close personal relationship with Jesus.

**Think about what it was like for John at the Last Supper when he laid his head on the bosom of Jesus. Think about that closeness that had to exist between those two men. And even on the cross when Jesus is dying, he gives the care of his mother not to his brothers and sisters but to the apostle John. Again, there had to be a very deep, intimate relationship between those two men. And even in the self-description, John describes himself, again, not in arrogance, not in pride, as the disciple whom Jesus loved.**

— Rev. Thad James

This "disciple whom Jesus loved" is mentioned several times in John's gospel. For example, according to John 13:23, the beloved disciple reclined next to Jesus at the Last Supper. In 19:26-27, Jesus spoke to this beloved disciple from the cross, and entrusted the care of his mother to him. This same disciple ran to the tomb with Peter on the resurrection morning in 20:2-8. And in 21:7, the beloved disciple was the first to recognize Jesus on the shore.

**The apostle John is never mentioned by name in the gospel that he wrote because he prefers to identify himself as the one whom Jesus loves. And in doing that, he pretty much articulates, or reveals his**

**humility in one sense, and then a celebration of his relationship with his Lord in another sense. As you read the gospel, it's kind of interesting and telling while he would make mention of all the other disciples, he never refers to, you know, his own name.**

— Rev. Larry Cockrell

Not once in the gospel is John referred to by name. And it's surprising that a person who is mentioned so often in the other gospels is never named in this one. The most likely explanation is that John was the beloved disciple that wrote this gospel, and that out of humility he refrained from even mentioning his own name. Instead, he focused on the fact that he never would have been a follower of Jesus except for the amazing divine love the Savior had for him.

Not only does the fourth gospel itself lend great support to the belief that John is its most likely author but the writings of the early church confirmed that conclusion.

**Early Church.** By A.D. 170 to 190 the conviction that the fourth gospel had been written by the apostle John was firmly established in the church. Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, and Irenaeus all affirmed that John, the son of Zebedee, was the author. Around A.D. 325 the church historian Eusebius provided the following quote from Irenaeus in his work *Ecclesiastical History*, book 5, chapter 8, section 4:

**Then John, the disciple of the Lord, who had even rested on his breast, himself also gave forth the gospel, while he was living at Ephesus in Asia.**

The testimony of Irenaeus is particularly important for at least two reasons. First, according to Eusebius, Irenaeus had been a disciple of Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna. And according to a letter from the church of Smyrna regarding the martyrdom of their bishop, Polycarp himself had been a disciple of the apostle John. So, Irenaeus could have learned about John's authorship from a trustworthy man that knew John personally. Second, Irenaeus traveled widely in the ancient church, and therefore was familiar with many other bits of information that could have informed his understanding of the authorship of the fourth gospel.

It's also significant that there was no real opposition to John as the author. Nowhere in the writings of the ancient church is there ever any suggestion of an author for the gospel other than John, the son of Zebedee. In fact, history records only two groups that opposed John's gospel: the Alogoi and the Marcionites. And while they rejected the teachings of John's gospel, it's not entirely clear that even they denied his authorship.

Although it might not be possible to prove beyond all doubt that this anonymous gospel was written by John, the most convincing position continues to be the ancient tradition that John the apostle is the author.

Now that we've considered the traditional view that John wrote the fourth gospel, and seen that it's compelling, let's look at John's personal history.

## Personal History

We actually know more about John than we do about most of Jesus' other disciples. John is referred to in the Gospels with his brother James as "the sons of Zebedee." John is also mentioned second, implying that he was the younger of the two. According to Mark 1:14-21, the family fishing business was near Capernaum on the Sea of Galilee. According to verse 20, the business was prosperous enough to employ others. After Jesus' death, the business was still strong enough for them to go back to it according to John 21:1-14.

A comparison of Mark 15:40 and Matthew 27:56 indicates that their mother's name was Salome and that she also followed Jesus at least some of the time. At one time she asked Jesus to give her sons preferential treatment in his kingdom, according to Matthew 20:21. Going a step further, a comparison of John 19:25 and Matthew 27:56 may indicate that Salome, the mother of the sons of Zebedee, was actually the sister of Mary the mother of Jesus. This would have made John the cousin of Jesus. If this was true it helps explain why Jesus speaking from the cross in John 19:25-27 asked John to take care of his mother.

In Mark 3:17, James and John were called "Sons of Thunder." This seems to be a reference to their fiery temperament. As just one example, Luke reported an occasion when Jesus had tried to find overnight lodging in a Samaritan city. When the residents refused to allow Jesus and his disciples to stay, James and John reacted with strong anger. Listen to Luke 9:54-56.

**When the disciples James and John saw this, they asked, "Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?" But Jesus turned and rebuked them, and they went to another village (Luke 9:54-56).**

It seems that during his time with Jesus, John's emotions were often close to the surface and only a moment from bursting forth. It's striking that he ultimately became the New Testament writer that, more than any other, focused on the love of God and the love of God's people.

Some critics have thought that the more compassionate nature of the fourth gospel contradicts the portrait of John in the other gospels. But two lines of thinking make it clear that there is no contradiction. First, the story of John is the story of a man changed by the love of God. Being loved by Jesus changed John into the apostle of love. Second, when God changed the intense and emotional John he did not change him into an unemotional shell of a human being. He changed him into an intensely emotional preacher of the gospel of love. God redirected and used the core of his being, but did not eradicate that core.

In the narrative of the gospels, John is a member of the inner circle of disciples along with Peter and James. Only they were with Jesus at critical events like his transfiguration, and his prayers in Gethsemane on the night of his arrest. In the book of Acts, Peter and John are the two leaders of the disciples. And in Galatians 2:9, Paul called John one of the pillars of the church in Jerusalem.



In the early Church, Irenaeus and many other sources reported John's lengthy ministry in Ephesus after he left Jerusalem. There is also a strong tradition that John was eventually exiled to the Island of Patmos. According to some sources, he was later freed from his exile and returned to Ephesus, dying there during the reign of Emperor Trajan, near the end of the first century.

Now that we have affirmed the traditional view that John wrote the fourth gospel, and have become familiar with a little of John's personal history, let's explore the occasion for the authorship of John's gospel.

## OCCASION

We will explore the occasion of the authorship of John's gospel in four ways. First, we will consider the geographical location of both the audience and the writer. Second, we will look a little more closely at the identity of the original audience. Third, we will consider the date of authorship. And fourth, we'll think about the purpose of the gospel. Let's begin by looking at the location of John's gospel.

### Location

It's most likely that John wrote his gospel while he was in Ephesus, and that he wrote it for an audience that lived outside Palestine, perhaps in Asia Minor. We can't know these things for certain, but there are several factors that support these conclusions. For instance, John's comments about Palestinian Jewish customs points to an audience that lived outside Palestine. Listen to what John wrote in John 4:9:

**The Samaritan woman said to him, "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.) (John 4:9).**

In this verse, John included a comment to his readers about the hostility between the Jews and the Samaritans. This hostility would have been well known to everyone in Palestine, so John's comment indicates that his readers lived somewhere else.

The writings of the ancient church also suggest that the gospel was written primarily to people outside Palestine. Earlier we cited Eusebius who quoted Irenaeus saying that John wrote this gospel in Ephesus in Asia Minor. Almost all of the ancient church agreed with this conclusion, including Irenaeus, Polycrates, Clement of Alexandria, and Justin Martyr. Moreover, no ancient source ever suggests that any group other than residents of Asia Minor were its intended recipients.

There is also a close connection between John's gospel and the book of Revelation. John wrote the book of Revelation, and his audience was definitely in Asia Minor — all seven of the churches addressed by the letters in Revelation chapters 2–3 are in Asia Minor. And the striking parallels between John and Revelation create a strong presumption of a similar audience. For example, John's gospel has a powerful strand of

teaching related to the conflict between converts to Christianity and the Jewish synagogues. And the book of Revelation also acknowledges this problem. Listen to what the Lord said to his church in Revelation 2:9 and 3:9.

**I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan... I will make those who are of the synagogue of Satan, who claim to be Jews though they are not, but are liars — I will make them come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you (Revelation 2:9; 3:9).**

From a different perspective, we know from Acts 19:1-7 that followers of John the Baptist continued in Ephesus at least until that time. If the apostle John wrote to an audience that included John the Baptist's followers, this might explain the gospel's clear stress that John the Baptist subordinated himself to Jesus.

Although certainty in the matter is impossible, it seems most likely that John was in Ephesus when he wrote his gospel and that it was shaped in part by the circumstances in Asia Minor.

Now that we've suggested that the location where the gospel was written was most likely Ephesus, let's consider more closely the character of that original audience to whom John wrote.

## Audience

Like all the gospels, there is a sense in which the Gospel of John was intended for the whole church throughout the ages. It has infinite value for all of God's people. But there are also parts of John's gospel that seem to have had special relevance for the church in a particular place and time. At least in parts of the gospel, John appears to have had in mind members of a Jewish community who had come to believe that Jesus was the Messiah, but who had continued to worship in the synagogue, or to have other significant contacts with the Jewish community. In fact, almost the entire central part of the gospel, from chapter 5–12, deals with the intense conflict between Jesus and the Jews.

This conflict is also highlighted by John's use of the phrase "the Jews," which John used more than 70 times, but which appears less than 20 times in the other three gospels combined. In most instances John used this term to refer to the religious leaders who set themselves against Jesus.

By contrast, when John spoke positively about the Old Testament people of God, he typically used words like "Israel" or "Israelite." For instance, in John 1:47, Jesus called Nathanael "a true Israelite in whom there is nothing false."

John also used the Greek word Christ more often than any other gospel writer. The term "Christ" translates both the Greek word *Christos* and the Hebrew word *Mashiach*, both of which mean anointed one. The Christ was God's anointed Redeemer who was to rescue Israel from their sins and free them from foreign rule.

The term "Christ" would have been especially important to Jewish Christians because the focus of the differences between the synagogue and the growing Christian

church was the belief that Jesus was the Christ, the long-awaited savior of God's people that had been prophesied in the Old Testament.

**The Jewish Messiah only came to be designated by the term “messiah” much later, but the promise for a seed of the woman who would defeat evil — Satan and his seed — is made in Genesis 3:15. So, from the beginning forward, the seed of the woman, it's later clarified that he's also going to be the seed of Abraham, and then it's clarified that he'll be the seed of Judah, and these promises to the serpent that he's going to be judged, and Abraham that through his descendant all the nations will be blessed, and then to Judah that the ruler staff will never depart from his feet. These promises are eventually woven together in the Balaam oracles, and from what God's program is at the beginning, the Messiah is to defeat evil and ultimately reopen the way to the Garden of Eden and cause the dry lands to be covered with the glory of Yahweh as the waters cover the sea.**

— Dr. James Hamilton

The topics addressed by John and the way in which he addressed them shows that his primary readers were Jewish Christians that were struggling as followers of Jesus. But like all Scripture, the Holy Spirit also intended John's book to be used by the entire church throughout the ages. And in fact, in John 1:41 and 4:25, John even translated the Hebrew term “messiah” for the Gentiles in his audience. And of course, history has proven that John's gospel is of great value both to Jewish and Gentile believers.

Now that we've looked at both the location and audience of the gospel, let's consider the date of its composition.

## Date

In general, we can say that John most likely wrote between A.D. 85 and 90. Several factors make it likely that the gospel was not written before A.D. 85. First, John is the only gospel that does not include predictions of the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, which took place in A.D. 70. This is probably because a significant period of time had passed since that cataclysmic event.

Second, the gospel reflects a time when the split between the church and the synagogue was most bitter. After the fall of Jerusalem, Judaism became more rigid. Defending itself against heresy the daily synagogue prayers were revised to include a curse on heretics such as those who believed that Jesus was the Son of God; and formal excommunication became more frequent. This tension is prefigured in passages like John 9, where John reported the excommunication of the blind man Jesus had healed. Listen to John's comment on this situation in John 9:22:

**The Jews had decided that anyone who acknowledged that Jesus was the Christ would be put out of the synagogue (John 9:22).**

In this passage, to be put out of the synagogue was to be excommunicated, excluded from the life of the Jewish community.

Third, it seems that the Gospel of John was written after the other three gospels. This view goes back at least to the fourth-century historian Eusebius. According to him, John intended his gospel to supplement the others, especially with information on Jesus' ministry prior to the arrest of John the Baptist. Listen to what Eusebius wrote in *Ecclesiastical History*, book 3, chapter 24, section 12:

**John accordingly, in his gospel, records the deeds of Christ which were performed before the Baptist was cast into prison, but the other three evangelists mention the events which happened after that time.**

**Anyone reading through the four gospels is immediately struck by the fact that you have three gospels: Matthew, Mark, and Luke that look very similar to each other; many the same stories; same basic structure in terms of the ministry of Jesus. Then you've got the fourth gospel, the Gospel of John, that is radically different. John's gospel appears to be written fairly late in the first century, when the church was facing new challenges from the outside world; from their Jewish opponents; from their secular opponents as well. And those challenges were certainly related in one sense to the person of Jesus, who he was. The deity of Jesus was clearly under fire because John's gospel so strongly stresses that Jesus is, in fact, divine. The Synoptic Gospels, that's not a big issue because evidently it wasn't being challenged. The other thing is there is false teaching arising in the church, and so John's gospel seems to address that issue of false teaching. The other thing, the third thing, is that Jewish opponents, there really clearly has been a clear break by that time between the Christians and the Jews; a break we don't yet see really fully in the Synoptic Gospels, in Matthew, Mark, and Luke.**

— Dr. Mark Strauss

All this leads to the conclusion that the ancient tradition of the church was probably correct and that the gospel was written late in John's life, probably after A.D. 85. If John, the son of Zebedee, is the author of this gospel then the latest possible date for John's gospel is determined by his lifespan. John was a young man when he began to follow Jesus, probably around A.D. 30. Even if John had been in his late teens at that time, he would have been almost 80 years old by A.D. 90. Living much longer than that would have been very doubtful.

That A.D. 85 or 90 is the latest date possible for John to have written the gospel agrees with the manuscript evidence. The oldest manuscript containing any portion of the New Testament is designated *Papyrus 52*, also called the *Rylands Papyrus*. This fragment contains a part of John 18.

*Papyrus 52* is dated between A.D. 100 and 150. Assuming this small fragment was originally part of a complete gospel, it indicates that the gospel was written early enough to have been distributed fairly widely by the early part of the second century. Other manuscripts of the gospel from later in the second century have also been found. These manuscripts are all Egyptian in origin, and represent different manuscript traditions. It is doubtful that this geographical transport from Asia Minor to Egypt, as well as the diversification of manuscript tradition, could have taken place in less than 40 or 50 years. So, it seems reasonable to set the latest possible date for the writing of John's gospel around A.D. 90 or 100.

Now that we've considered the location, audience, and date of John's gospel, let's focus on John's purpose for writing his gospel.

## Purpose

All books of substantial size in the New Testament have complex purposes, and John's gospel is no different. Just as Jesus dealt with a substantial number of themes during his ministry, John's record of Jesus' ministry also addresses many subjects. But it's still possible to describe these purposes in a unified manner. In fact, John himself summarized his purpose for us. Specifically, he said that he wanted to confirm the belief that Jesus was both the Christ and the Son of God. Listen to what he wrote in John 20:30-31.

**Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these 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 (John 20:30-31).**

Simply put, John wrote so that his audience would believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, in order that they would receive the benefits that come with believing this gospel message.

**John is pretty explicit as to the reason for the writing of the gospel. In John 20:31, he states that these things were written that we may know that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing we may have eternal life in him. Now that is a twofold, let's say, purpose that's stated there. First and foremost, it has to do with his gospel being evangelistic in nature. Obviously, he has written so that his readers would exercise at some point in time, as the Lord drew them, faith in himself. Then secondly, it is apologetic in nature. He also wanted to convince his readers that Jesus indeed was the incarnate God-man.**

— Rev. Larry Cockrell

**John is saying, I'm writing this gospel so that you may know the identity of Jesus. Jesus is the Son of God. And he explains who the Son of God is, that he's the Word who was with the Father and became flesh, that Jesus is the promised Messiah, and this is not just some abstract information that we assent to, but he says, I want you to have trusting reliance upon this so that you may have the life that the Father's freely giving through him.**

— Dr. Robert Plummer

Throughout his gospel, the central focus of John's purpose was to promote belief in Jesus as both the Messiah and the Son of God. These were the two points on which Jewish Christians needed the most support in their conflicts with the synagogue. They had come to believe in Jesus as the Christ and the Son of God, and they needed to persevere in this belief if they were to receive the blessings of salvation.

Of course there is also a sense in which John's gospel is for all believers. For example, in John 13–17 John tried to nurture the faith of all believers by stressing that even though Jesus was no longer walking on the earth, he was a present reality in the lives of his people through the Holy Spirit. All of John's teaching was aimed at enriching the lives of all believers.

Scholars have said that John's gospel is “a pool in which babes wade and elephants swim.” Its basic message is clear and simple: Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. But the details of this basic message continue to challenge interpreters who have studied the gospel for years.

The first Christians that read this gospel would have been deeply encouraged by it. It would have taught them to persevere in their Christian faith despite their conflicts with their opponents. And it would have challenged them to grow in their love and awe for the Christ who was their only source for abundant life. And John's gospel provides these same encouragements and challenges to modern Christians, too.

Now that we have studied the background of John's gospel, let's turn to the structure and content of the gospel.

## **STRUCTURE AND CONTENT**

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Scholars have described the structure of John's gospel in a variety of ways. In this lesson, we'll follow those that have suggested a connection between John's introductory summary of Jesus' life and ministry, and the content of John's book. Listen to these words from John 1:10-14:

**[Jesus] was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children**

**of God ... We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth (John 1:10-14).**

This passage focuses on four main ideas: Jesus came into the world; he came and was rejected by his own people, namely Israel; those who received and believed in him became children of God; and then those believers became witnesses for Jesus. Following those four main ideas, we'll outline John's gospel in this way:

- First, John opened his gospel with a brief introduction that described Jesus' incarnation in 1:1-18.
- Second, John recorded Jesus' public ministry in 1:19–12:50, where he showed that Jesus came to his own creation and was rejected by the human race he had come to save.
- Third, John included a description of Jesus' private ministry to those who had received and believed in him in 13:1–20:31.
- And fourth, in the conclusion to John's gospel in 21:1-25, John highlighted the role of the apostles and other disciples as witnesses to Jesus' glory.

We'll look at each of these parts of the Gospel According to John, beginning with its introduction.

## INTRODUCTION

In 1:1-18 John powerfully and beautifully summarized the whole gospel. He taught that Jesus is the Word of God who created all things and is the source of all life. But more than this, Jesus also came into the world as a true human being of flesh and blood. And as God incarnate, he revealed the Father's glory to the world he had created.

John described this in John 1:4-5 by saying that Jesus is the light who came into a dark world. He conquered that darkness by being the one full revelation of the grace of God. And while the Bible sometimes talks about Jesus' glory being veiled during his incarnation, John highlighted the fact that Jesus' incarnation actually made his glory known in important ways. And far from obscuring Jesus' glory, his incarnation as a human being actually revealed his glory. John wrote in John 1:14:

**We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth (John 1:14).**

## JESUS' PUBLIC MINISTRY

Following the introduction, John recorded Jesus' public ministry in John 1:19–12:50. In this section, John focused on the fact that Jesus came to his own people, the nation of Israel, and that the people of Israel rejected Jesus as their Christ and Lord. As we saw in John 1:11, John said that,

**[Jesus] came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him (John 1:11).**

Although there are important exceptions to this summary, this is generally how the nation of Israel responded to Jesus' public ministry in the Gospel of John.

Our survey of Jesus' public ministry will divide into seven parts, beginning with his preparation for ministry, and continuing with events surrounding six different Jewish feasts. Let's look first at Jesus' preparation for ministry in John 1:19–2:12.

## **Preparation for Ministry**

The section on Jesus' preparation for ministry begins with the ministry of John the Baptist in John 1:19-36. In this passage, John stressed that John the Baptist was an important witness to the fact that Jesus was the Son of God, and that Jesus would be God's sacrificial lamb that would take away the sin of the world.

Following this, John reported the calling of Jesus' first disciples in John 1:37-51. As with the account of John the Baptist, the emphasis in this section is on Jesus' identity. His disciples refer to him as "Rabbi," which means teacher, in verse 38; "Messiah," which means Christ, in verse 41; "the one Moses wrote about," which was a reference to the prophet Moses had foretold, in verse 45; and "the Son of God" and its parallel term "the King of Israel," in verse 49. Finally in verse 51 Jesus identified himself as the "Son of Man" who had been sent to provide access to God's presence.

The last part of Jesus' preparation for ministry was his first miracle, which John recorded in John 2:1-12. This was the occasion when Jesus turned water into wine. But the focus wasn't on the miracle itself. Listen to what John wrote in John 2:11:

**This, the first of his miraculous signs, Jesus performed at Cana in Galilee. He thus revealed his glory, and his disciples put their faith in him (John 2:11).**

One of the main points John made was that this miracle was a sign that revealed Jesus' glory, and that caused his disciples to trust him.

**The term "signs" is used in the book of Exodus in reference to the miracles that Moses performs, I guess specifically the plagues. And so signs are already, or the term "sign" is already used to refer to miracles, and I think that not only is John doing this because he often compares Jesus to Moses, which he does, but also, I think he actually has the same interest as the author of the book of Exodus in showing that the miracles were given to show people something, to give them, you could say, information that they were expected to act upon, and specifically that God is saying something to people, and people need to respond to that.**

— Dr. David Redelings



John is unique among the Gospels in consistently calling Jesus' miracles "*semeion*"—"signs" as it is usually translated. The miracles were not intended to draw attention to themselves, but to point beyond themselves to Jesus. Particularly they were intended to identify Jesus as both "the Christ" and "the Son of God," in line with the purpose of the book that John summarized in John 20:30-31.

**Many people benefitted from Jesus's miracles, but actually those who had eyes that had been opened were able to see that to which they pointed, namely the identity of Christ. And therefore I think John uses a word that sort of speaks about the miracles, not just as being great miraculous events, but actually as pointing beyond themselves to the identity of Christ. And of course John says that this is why he's written, that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ and that by believing you might have life in his name and the signs perform that part of that function.**

— Dr. Simon Vibert

**A sign is something that Jesus does that points to his true identity. And if you'd simply understand it on the material level of a wonderwork, then you've missed the point whether it is changing the water into wine, whether it's feeding the crowd with bread miraculously, whether it's healing the blind man. Throughout John, John sees that these are not just wonderworks, but these are things that if you see through them as God intends, you see the true revelation of Jesus' identity; that he is the Bread of Life. That he's the one who's come to give us sight; that he brings the new wine of the coming age and we celebrate that.**

— Dr. Robert Plummer

## **First Passover**

The second section dealing with Jesus' public ministry is oriented around a Passover celebration in Jerusalem. We'll refer to this as the first Passover because it's the first one specifically named in John's gospel. This section extends from John 2:13–4:54.

This section begins with John's account of Jesus cleansing the temple by driving out the merchants in John 2:13-25. And once again, the focus was on Jesus' identity. Listen to what the Jews asked Jesus in John 2:18:

**"What miraculous sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?" (John 2:18).**

Jesus responded by foretelling his own death and resurrection, which would be the greatest sign in all his ministry that he was the Son of God.

In his comments after this report, found in 2:21-25, John mentioned that Jesus also preformed many other signs, and that as a result many people believed in his name, at least superficially.

Next, John reported Jesus' amazing conversation with Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council, in 3:1-21. And again, the emphasis was on Jesus' identity, this time as both the "Son of Man" and the "Son of God," and on the saving role he had been sent to perform.

In John 3:22-36, we find another account of John the Baptist. In this one, John insisted that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God. And he said that Jesus had come to testify about God and salvation, but that almost no one was receiving him in faith.

In John 4:1-42, John reported Jesus' encounter with a Samaritan woman at a well in Samaria. Once again, the emphasis was on Jesus' identity as the Messiah, also called the Christ — the one who would come and explain all things to his people. By insisting that salvation would come through the Jews, and particularly through himself, Jesus challenged her way of thinking, and called her to find in him the life and reality of God that she had always wanted. And many Samaritans responded to this teaching by trusting in Jesus.

Finally, in John 4:43-54, John reported Jesus' second miraculous sign. Like the first sign, this one also took place in Cana. But this time Jesus healed a child without even touching or seeing him. And not surprisingly, the emphasis in this story is on the fact that the miracle was intended to validate Jesus' authority, and that it led to faith in those who witnessed it.

One important theme that runs throughout the section dealing with the first Passover is faith. John reported in 2:11 that after the first sign, the disciples believed in Jesus. In 4:42, the Samaritans believed because of Jesus' teaching. And in 4:53, the family of the healed boy believed. Later, in John 7:50 and 19:39, we find reason to think that Nicodemus also became a believer in Jesus. Jesus' signs and profound teaching were powerful testimonies to his identity and the salvation he offered, and many put their faith in him.

**Certainly one of the main themes in the Gospel of John is saving faith; to believe is an emphasis throughout the gospel. And its emphasis is placing in two areas — one is that belief, or becoming a child of God, is a work of God himself, and the other is, is that it is an action, as it were, taken on the part of the individual saving faith is understood certainly as a gift, it's God's grace in our life that we believe — but it is based upon something that we are doing, and so there has to be an aspect of knowledge. There must be an understanding that Christ has died on the cross for our sins. There must also be a sense of assent, that we agree with that. But it goes far more than just knowing and agreeing. There is the sense of trust, and that is the crucial aspect of faith. It's the empty hand of the individual reaching out and receiving all that God has done through his Son Christ.**

— Dr. Jeff Lowman

**You know, one of the most frustrating things about the world around us is that the word “faith” is used so casually and so carelessly. There are a lot of people who basically talk about faith as if they have faith in faith. That’s not the way Christians talk about faith. There are all kinds of different faith. I’m sitting in a chair right now. I’ve got pretty good confidence that it’s going to hold me up. I’ve got faith in this chair. However, I wouldn’t have any faith in this chair to do anything other than to hold me up. It serves no other purpose. When we talk about the faith that saves, it’s a faith in Christ. It is trusting and resting in that trust, that Christ has done all that is needful for our salvation. The faith that saves is a faith that is faith in Christ knowing that it’s Christ who paid the penalty for our sin, knowing that it is Christ who purchased our salvation, knowing that it is Christ who has made full atonement for our sins, knowing that in him we have full forgiveness of our sins. The faith that saves is simply the confidence to rest and trust in Christ, knowing that he has done this on our behalf, that there is no more that is left to be done, and that he keeps those who come to him by faith, forever. You know, saving faith, the faith that saves, is a faith that is defined by the fact that in its solitary, most essential meaning, we trust Christ. We would have nothing else. We desire nothing else. We know that Christ is sufficient for our salvation.**

— Dr. R. Albert Mohler, Jr.

Sadly, not everyone responded to Jesus in faith. In 2:12-20, Jesus drove out those who had been polluting the temple. In 2:24-25, Jesus didn’t entrust or *commit* himself to many people, because he knew that they didn’t have true faith. And in 3:18-21, we read about the judgment that’s coming against those who refuse to believe.

## **Unnamed Feast**

The third portion of Jesus’ public ministry is associated with an unnamed feast, and is found in John 5:1-47.

In verses 1-15, Jesus healed a man who had been an invalid for 38 years. But since it was the Sabbath day, Jesus was accosted by the Jews for violating the law against working on the Sabbath. John 5:16-47 records Jesus’ response, where he claimed to be the giver of eternal life to all who believe in him.

## **Second Passover**

The fourth section detailing Jesus’ public ministry tells us of his observance of a second feast of Passover in John 6:1-71.

The Passover was the feast where the Jews celebrated Israel's exodus from Egypt. So it's not surprising that this section contains many references to the exodus. In 6:1-15, Jesus miraculously fed five thousand people with only five loaves of bread and two fish. This act recalled God's provision of manna to the nation of Israel after they had been released from slavery in Egypt.

In John 6:16-24, Jesus walked on water, showing even greater command over the water than Moses had when he parted the Red Sea. Then, in 6:25-71, after crossing the sea, Jesus presented himself as "true bread from heaven," which far surpasses the manna that God provided in the days of the Exodus. As the true bread, Jesus fulfilled the Passover Feast as the provider of true life for all believers.

## **Feast of Tabernacles**

The fifth section of Jesus' public ministry surrounds his observance of the feast of Tabernacles in John 7:1-10:21.

In John 7:1-52, John recorded how Jesus observed and fulfilled the Feast of Tabernacles.

In John 7:1-52, Jesus fulfilled the intention of the Feast of Tabernacles. The Feast of Tabernacles was a commemoration of God's deliverance of Israel from Egypt, and of his provision of water in the wilderness. It also celebrated God's continuing provision of rain for the harvest. And it looked forward to the day of God's final deliverance of his people. During the feast, the priest illustrated God's gracious provision by pouring out water around the altar of the temple. Using this imagery of water, Jesus boldly claimed that he was the one who could give them "living water."

In John 8:12-59, Jesus addressed true sonship by calling himself the Son of God. Jesus called himself the Son of God. He even denied that unbelieving Jews were legitimate sons of Abraham.

In 9:1-41, Jesus healed a man who had been blind since birth. In response, suspicious Pharisees carefully investigate what Jesus has done. Their unbelief prompted Jesus to claim that the Pharisees were actually the ones who were blind, even though they claimed to see.

And Jesus presented himself as the Good Shepherd in 10:1-21. In contrast to the Pharisees, Jesus was the Good Shepherd because he was willing to lay down his life for his sheep.

## **Feast of Dedication**

The sixth section of Jesus' public ministry records the events surrounding his observance of the Feast of Dedication in John 10:22-11:57. John 10:22-40 reports that Jesus observed and fulfilled the Feast of Dedication.

John 10:22-40 records that Jesus observed the Feast of Dedication. This feast was not instituted in the Old Testament. Its observance began in 165 B.C., after the priestly family the Macabbees led a successful revolt against the Greek king Antiochus Epiphanes. Antiochus had taken the title Epiphanes because he believed himself to be a

manifestation of god. He massacred many in Jerusalem, defiled the temple, and ordered the worship of Zeus by the Jews. So the Feast of Dedication celebrated the purifying of the temple by re-consecrating it after it had been reclaimed by the Macabbees. Today, the feast is best known by its Hebrew name, Hanukkah, which means “dedication.”

This passage implicitly contrasts Jesus with Antiochus. On the one hand, Antiochus falsely claimed to be divine as he massacred God’s people and defiled his temple. On the other hand, Jesus really is God’s Son who faithfully does the Father’s work, including giving eternal life to his people. In John 10:36, Jesus even claimed that he had been set apart — or as some translations put it “consecrated” — and sent into the world. And this language recalled the consecration of the temple in the Feast of Dedication. And of course, Jesus had already compared the rebuilding of the temple to the resurrection of his body in John 2:19-21.

These themes are carried into the story of the resurrection of Lazarus in John 11:1-57, which demonstrates Jesus’ divine power over death. And the raising of Lazarus from the dead also foreshadows Jesus’ own resurrection at the end of the gospel, when all the hopes of the Feast of Dedication are finally fulfilled.

### **Third Passover**

The seventh section dealing with Jesus’ public ministry is centered around preparations for a third Passover in John 12:1-50.

Jesus’ preparations for this third Passover that John mentioned set the stage for his ministry to his twelve disciples in John 13–17, as well as for his sacrifice as the Passover lamb in chapter 19. Jesus’ preparations began with him being anointed for burial in 12:1-11. In verses 12-19, John recorded Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem. In John 12:20-50, Jesus announced publicly that it was the time for him to be glorified through his death and resurrection. Jesus called for those in his hearing to believe in him. But even after performing miracles before them, many Jews believed but many others did not.

The next major portion of John’s gospel deals with Jesus’ private ministry to those who had received and believed in him. This section runs from in John 13:1–20:31.

### **JESUS’ PRIVATE MINISTRY**

This section of the gospel contains John’s account of Jesus’ last supper with his disciples and his arrest, crucifixion, and resurrection. It is the story of how Jesus revealed his glory to his special people. John taught that Jesus intimately ministered to those who believed in him, and voluntarily gave his life for them. Through these events, Jesus displayed the glory of God in a way it had never been seen before.

This section of John’s gospel unpacks the thought John had expressed in John 1:11-12, where he wrote these words:

**[Jesus] came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God (John 1:11-12).**

In the first 12 chapters of John's gospel, Jesus ministered to the world, but even his own did not receive him. Then, beginning in chapter 13, Jesus concentrated on those who did receive him: his disciples.

We will look at this section of John's gospel in two parts. First we will consider the events at the Last Supper. Second, we will look at the hour of Jesus' greatest glory, namely, his death and resurrection. Let's start with the events surrounding the Last Supper.

## **The Last Supper**

Jesus' ministry to his disciples at the Last Supper is described in four distinct parts. In the first part, Jesus served them by washing their feet in John 13:1-30.

*Service.* Jesus symbolized his whole earthly ministry as he humbly washed his disciples' feet. This event dramatically portrayed both his incarnation and his saving sacrifice on the cross. The creator of the universe bowed before his own people and served them by washing their weary, dirty feet. It was a service that would reach its climax the next day on the cross when he would wash their weary, dirty souls with his cleansing blood. After washing their feet, Jesus announced that one of the disciples would betray him. Then, after Satan entered Judas, Judas left the room to accomplish the betrayal.

After serving his disciples by washing their feet, Jesus comforted them in John 13:31–14:31.

*Comfort.* After Judas left, Jesus began what is often called his "farewell discourse," in which he prepared his faithful disciples for the fact that he would soon be leaving them.

**Even though the apostles are the audience, to be sure, there is some reason why that needed to be preserved for future generations of apostolic ministry. In other words, there can be transferable concepts for any person who wants to live as an apostle and an apprentice, as one who is learning and one who understands that you're sent into the world. If you have the vocational understanding of yourself, then there's a lot of wonderful teachings in the upper room discourse. I do think there are particular applications for leaders in that passage. I think those chapters can be read with great profit by men and women who are called to places of leadership in the body of Christ. But what I normally say is that all Christian motif is really personified by Jesus in John 17, because he divides the prayer, you know, praying for the apostles, but then he says, "But I pray not only for them, but for those**

**who will believe because of their testimony.” So this whole section in John 14, 15, 16 and 17 is this back-and-forth between the Twelve and the ones who would serve in similar roles after the Twelve were gone. So I see it as a section for all believers.**

— Dr. Steve Harper

Jesus began his farewell discourse by saying that the time had come for him to be glorified — meaning that he was going to die, rise from the dead, and ascend to his Father in heaven. His disciples were going to have to live without his bodily presence walking, talking, and living among them. He also predicted that Peter was about to deny him three times. But Jesus knew that these difficult pieces of news troubled his disciples, so he comforted them, and reassured them that he would eventually bring them to the Father, too. And he told them that he wouldn’t leave them alone; he would send the Holy Spirit to minister to them in his place. Listen to Jesus’ promise in John 14:26.

**The Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you (John 14:26).**

Jesus promised that his disciples would never be alone. They would be put on trial and persecuted by the world, but they would never need to defend Jesus’ name and themselves alone. The Spirit of truth would empower them to speak and to write infallibly and authoritatively on Jesus’ behalf.

After comforting his disciples, Jesus prepared them for his departure and for their future ministries in John 15:1–16:33.

**Preparation.** At the end of the previous section, Jesus and his disciples left the place where they had been, and Jesus began a new section of his discourse. He began by describing himself as “the true vine” in John 15:1-8. This metaphor appealed to Psalm 80:8 and Isaiah 5:1-7, where the nation of Israel was pictured as a glorious vine. Because of Israel’s failure and sin she was later called a “corrupt, wild vine” in Jeremiah 2:21. But Jesus used this imagery to assure his disciples that he himself was reconstituting a true and faithful nation for Israel, and that they were part of this grand plan. Listen to what Jesus said in John 15:1-5:

**I am the true vine ... I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit (John 15:1-5).**

By claiming to be the true vine, Jesus was saying that in an important sense, he himself was Israel. Jesus represented Israel, and he fulfilled Israel’s destiny. Israel had failed to establish God’s kingdom on earth, but Jesus was succeeding. And his disciples were the branches of the vine. They were a part of the people of God, and the agents through whom God would carry out his plan for the ages.

But Jesus also knew that the world would hate his disciples, because it already hated him. So, he assured them that he was opening the door of prayer to the Father for

them. They were his ambassadors, his authoritative representatives on earth. And because of this, the Father would heed their prayers as if Jesus himself had prayed them. As he told them in John 16:23-24:

**I tell you the truth, my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete (John 16:23-24).**

After preparing his disciples, Jesus prayed for them in John 17:1-26.

**Prayer.** Jesus' prayer in John 17 is often called his High Priestly Prayer, because he interceded for his followers in priestly ways. In particular, Jesus prayed that the Father would protect his disciples so that many others might come to faith through them. He prayed that they and their own disciples would be protected from the forces of the world, that their unity would strengthen them, and that their lives would glorify God.

**Jesus knows that his time is short, that it's time for him, as he says, to go back to be with the Father when they were one before the beginning of the world. And in this time, Jesus says that I've kept all that you have given me except one, the Son of Perdition, so that Scripture may be fulfilled. So Jesus is really praying to the Father about the disciples. He says, I worked with them for 3 to 3-1/2 years to sanctify them, to bring them to this point. But now, I'm not going to be here with them, so Father, please keep them, continue this sanctification process because they're going to be facing great trials and great persecutions, and now how are they going to get through this? So, again, it's a prayer to God to take care of his disciples in preparation for the work and the trials, the persecutions, the martyrdom that is going to come before them, the things they're going to have to sacrifice to spread the gospel message of Jesus Christ.**

— Rev. Thad James

After describing the Last Supper, John reported Jesus' death and resurrection in John 18:1–20:31.

## **Death and Resurrection**

In John's gospel, Jesus' death and resurrection, and their associated events, are often described as the hour of Jesus' glory. In the Old Testament, the word "glory" often referred to the presence of God among his people. Throughout Israel's history, God's glory accompanied Israel. His glory was the cloud that led the Israelites during their wilderness wanderings in Exodus 16:10. It was in the tabernacle of God in Exodus 40:34-35. And God's glory dwelt in Solomon's temple in 1 Kings 8:11. And corresponding to



this, in John's gospel the word "glory" refers to Jesus as God incarnate that dwelled among his people. But when Jesus referred to "the hour of his glory," he was usually referring to the particular point in his life in which his glory would be demonstrated to the world in the most profound way possible. In other words, he was referring to his death and resurrection.

We don't normally think of death as glorious. But Jesus' death and resurrection purchased reconciliation for God's people. His voluntary self-sacrifice and resurrection brought salvation and life to everyone that believed in him and received him as Messiah. They revealed God's love and power to us in ways we never would have realized otherwise. They were tragic, but they were beautiful. And they brought God immeasurable honor and praise. In short, they were the most glorious events ever to take place in human history.

The account of Jesus' death and resurrection divides into three main parts, beginning with his arrest and trials in John 18:1–19:16.

***Arrest and Trials.*** First we read Jesus arrested in 18:1-11. After Judas betrayed Jesus into the hands of the authorities, soldiers and officials from the chief priest and Pharisees came and arrested Jesus. In 18:12-27, Jesus was brought to Caiaphas the high priest to be questioned. During this time, Peter denied Jesus three times, just as Jesus had prophesied.

Next, Jesus was tried by the Roman governor Pilate in 18:28–19:16. Pilate concluded that Jesus was innocent, but didn't release him for fear of the Jews. But the true power behind Jesus' arrest and trials was God himself. Neither Pilate nor Caiaphas was really in control. Everything happened according to God's plan. As we read in John 19:10-11:

**Pilate said, "Don't you realize I have power either to free you or to crucify you?" Jesus answered, "You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above" (John 19:10-11).**

The second major portion of John's account of Jesus' death and resurrection is the crucifixion in John 19:16-37.

***Crucifixion.*** In his account of Jesus' death, John explained how the particular events of the crucifixion fulfilled several Old Testament expectations for the Messiah. These details demonstrated that Jesus wasn't taken by surprise; everything took place according to God's plan.

Throughout his arrest, trials, and crucifixion, Jesus quietly maintained unbowed dignity. The Son of God laid down his life for his people, and in so doing revealed the glory of God in a way it had never been revealed before. How far would God go to deliver his people? All the way to the cross!

**The Bible says that Jesus went to the cross for the joy set before him. The cross was the hardest thing anybody's ever done. There's never been any greater suffering than what the Son of God experienced on the cross, as he not only died a brutally difficult physical death, but he endured the imposition of our sin on him, and the wrath of God on his**

shoulders. So it was the hardest thing anybody's ever done, but Jesus did it for the joy set before him. Now, why would he do that? He did it because he knew what it would result in. It would produce a display of God's glory. A display of his love, his justice, his wrath, his holiness, his compassion, his mercy, all beautifully converging on the cross in a way where we see him for who he is, and we're able to worship him for all of eternity as we gather around the Lamb who was slain. His throne is where we worship. So God has displayed his character and his glory, and shown us who he is in the cross, and we worship him. And he brings many sons to glory in this cross. And so that's why he was able to do it joyfully, because of what it ends up producing.

— Dr. K. Erik Thoennes

Third, the report of Jesus' death and resurrection ends with the resurrection itself in John 20:1-31.

**Resurrection.** According to John 20:1-9, Jesus' tomb was a historical fact. Mary, Peter and John himself saw that Jesus was not there. In 20:10-31, Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene, the disciples, and to Thomas. These reports indicate that Jesus' followers were somewhat skeptical and not easily fooled.

In particular, Thomas had not been present the first time Jesus appeared to the disciples. And Thomas was skeptical. He wanted evidence. He wasn't going to believe some crazy story of a resurrection. And his confession in verse 28 is the climax of John's narrative, where Thomas acknowledged Jesus with the words, "My Lord and my God."

It's quite striking that when Thomas hears from the other disciples, who he's knows personally, has been traveling with for all this time — he knows these guys — and they tell him they've seen Jesus risen, he just can't bring himself to accept that. It's not as though strangers are telling him this, and they all agree. And he just can't bring himself to believe it. And, I think, I would suspect that it has to do with his inability to risk believing and being disappointed again. I think he's afraid to be disappointed again.

— Dr. David Redelings

You have the account of Thomas doubting and saying the famous words that, "Unless I put my fingers in the nail marks and in Jesus' side, I will not believe," and often Thomas is castigated as "Doubting Thomas" because he wouldn't believe Jesus, but I think that we should be slightly less harsh on Thomas. In the first instance, John tells us that Thomas was not there with the Twelve when Jesus came among them and revealed himself to them. And secondly, if we believe that the disciples were selected to be eyewitnesses of Jesus'

resurrection, then there was a sense in which Thomas had to see in order to believe. And thirdly, we should also say that when Jesus did stand among them and he revealed himself to Thomas, Thomas makes the boldest and clearest profession of faith in the whole gospel. He calls Jesus “My Lord and my God.” And so John then actually goes on to explain at the end of John 20, that Jesus said that, you know, because you’ve seen you believed, but from now on, blessed will be those who have not seen and yet believed. And there is a sense in which Thomas had to see in order to believe, but there is a sense in which you and I come to see, not through seeing Jesus before us, but actually coming to appreciate and understand all that they saw and coming to believe it for our self. So, I think we’re a bit unfair on Thomas sometimes because he did have a unique role, and because he is a great model of somebody who when he did see Jesus for who he is, he expressed wonderful faith in him. He actually is a model for us as well, that when we come to apprehend who Jesus is, we too should fall down and worship him as well.

— Dr. Simon Vibert

The last portion of John’s gospel is the conclusion to his account of Jesus’ earthly life and ministry, recorded in John 21:1-25.

## CONCLUSION

This conclusion picks up themes from the whole gospel, and then directs readers toward the future. Like the preceding chapter, it reports a resurrection appearance of Jesus in verses 1-14. But the stress of the narrative is not on the fact of the appearance. In both verses 1 and 14, John spoke of this appearance as a revelation, using the same word he used in 2:11 when he said that Jesus “revealed his glory.” So, rather than using this appearance as a simple proof of the resurrection, John intended us to read this account as a completion of the revelation of Jesus and his glory that had begun in the first chapter of his gospel and continued throughout all its reports.

Moreover, the conclusion also confirms the authority of the apostles and other disciples to bear witness to Jesus, despite the fact that the preeminent apostle Peter had denied Jesus three times. In John 21:15-23, Jesus counteracted Peter’s denials by forgiving Peter, and by restoring him three separate times. And in these restorations, Jesus commissioned Peter to care for the flock of God. Jesus himself was the Good Shepherd. But now he appointed Peter to follow him in caring for the people of God.

Each of the other gospels ends with some form of the Great Commission — Jesus command to his apostles and other disciples to build the church. And this story of Peter’s restoration is John’s way of looking to the future of the church. Jesus had promised to be with his people always. And he took this moment to make it clear that one way he would always be with his people was through other shepherds, like Peter. As Peter himself later wrote in 1 Peter 5:1-2:

**To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder, a witness of Christ's sufferings and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed: Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care (1 Peter 5:1-2).**

Most scholars believe that John's gospel was written as the last apostles were dying. John may even have been the very last apostle alive at this point. So, that made it important for God's people to hear that Jesus was still present through the shepherds of his flock. Ultimately it wasn't Peter or any other apostle who led the church. It was Jesus as they followed him. They served only as his ambassadors and helpers. And Jesus promised to return for his people himself, bodily and permanently, to lead them in the future.

Now that we've looked at both the background and the structure and content of John's gospel, we're ready to consider some major themes that John emphasized.

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## MAJOR THEMES

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John listed several important themes in his purpose statement in John 20:30-31, where we read these words:

**Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these 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 (John 20:30-31).**

In this part of our lesson, we'll focus on four closely related themes drawn from John's purpose statement: the act of believing, Jesus' identity as Christ, his parallel identity as the Son of God, and the blessing of life that he brings. Let's begin with John's emphasis on believing.

### BELIEVING

John used the Greek word *pisteuo*, meaning "believe," 106 times. The other three gospels all together used it 34 times, only about a third of John's total. This difference in emphasis shows how important the idea of believing is to John's story.

In John's gospel, the concept of believing is closely related to other concepts signified by words like "receive," "come to," and "know." So, to believe in Jesus is to receive him, to come to him, to know him in the sense of interpersonal experience.

This kind of believing, receiving, knowing and coming to Jesus often begins as a moment of personal decision to trust and follow Christ — the same thing modern Christians often call "conversion." When conversion is genuine, it causes us to participate

in God's work and to receive his blessings in a variety of ways. In this part of his gospel, John referred to conversion with terms like becoming children of God, and obtaining eternal life. Listen to John's description of believing in John 1:12:

**To all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God (John 1:12).**

And we find similar language in John 3:36, where we read these words:

**Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life (John 3:36).**

In passages like these, believing is the sincere, heart-felt, act of personal reliance and commitment to Jesus that unites us with him. It makes us part of God's work in history. And it will reach its fullness only when Jesus is revealed in all of his glory.

Now, it's important to realize that John didn't always use the word "believe" in the same way. In some passages, John used the word "believe" to signify superficial faith — what theologians have often called "temporary" or "hypocritical" faith. For example, listen to John's report in John 2:23-24:

**While [Jesus] was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many people saw the miraculous signs he was doing and believed in his name. But Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all men (John 2:23-24).**

Jesus didn't entrust himself to these people because their belief was only superficial. It wasn't the sincere belief that theologians often call "saving faith."

For the most part, we can tell from the contexts where John spoke of "believing" that he usually had in mind true saving faith — true trust in Jesus as Savior and Lord. For John, Jesus — the object of our belief — makes all the difference. It's not the power of our belief that saves us, but the power of the one in whom we believe.

Now that we've looked at the theme of believing in Jesus, let's turn to one of the main things John would have us believe about Jesus, namely, that he's the Christ, the Messiah, the fulfillment of God's ancient promises to his people Israel.

## CHRIST

By calling Jesus "Christ," John clearly identified him as Israel's king. After all, in the first century the term "Christ" or "Messiah" had become the functional equivalent of "king of Israel." This is who the Christ was. But the fact that Jesus was Israel's king had many implications, and John drew attention to several of these.

For instance, John stressed that like the kings of Israel and Judah in the Old Testament, Jesus embodied the people that he ruled. Jesus became everything that Israel had failed to be, and he thereby received all the blessings that Israel had previously failed

to gain. As Israel's king, Jesus represented Israel in every capacity, and served both as their substitute and as the conduit of God's blessings to them.

In John 15:1-8, John demonstrated this truth about Jesus by reporting that Jesus was the true vine, and that his followers were branches in him. Listen to what Jesus said in John 15:5-8:

**I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit ... This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples (John 15:5-8).**

Throughout the Old Testament, Israel had been pictured as the vine of God. We find this imagery in places like Psalm 80, Jeremiah 2, Ezekiel 17, and Hosea 10. Moreover, the royal family of David, and even the future great Messiah, were represented as the branch out of which the entire people of God would grow. We see this in places like Isaiah 11:1. So, against this background, when Jesus claimed to be the true vine and the only route to pleasing and glorifying God, his disciples would have understood that Jesus was the true King of Israel who represented and embodied his people.

But what are the implications of this idea that as king, Jesus is the true or real Israel? For one thing, it means that Jesus was fulfilling everything that Israel was called to be. Israel had failed to be and to do what God had called her to be and do. But where Israel failed because of sin, Jesus perfectly succeeded. He fulfilled Israel's destiny. In his own person, Jesus summed up centuries of Old Testament history and revealed the reality of God's glorious presence as only he could reveal it. And because of this, the true people of Israel aren't identified by membership in the nation of Israel. Instead, they're the people who are branches in the true vine — believers in Christ, who are united to him by faith.

Our discussion of Jesus' representative role as the Christ will focus on three ways Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament expectations for the Messiah that were particularly important in John's gospel. First, Jesus fulfilled the temple. Second, he fulfilled the expectations created by Israel's feasts. And third, he fulfilled God's law. We'll look at each of these ideas, beginning the way that Jesus fulfilled the temple.

## Temple

One of the reasons the temple was important in Scripture is that it was a place where God had promised to be present with his people in a special way. Of course, we know that God is omnipresent; he is everywhere all the time. But when we talk about his special presence, we have in mind *manifestations* of his presence — times when God concentrated his presence in particular locations, often in a way that was visibly glorious.

**God's presence in the tabernacle and the temple is significant because the tabernacle and the temple are the universe in miniature. They are microcosms of what the world is, and so God's presence there really represents his presence in the world. The world is the temple that he**

made in which he would commune with his people. And then, when Adam rebelled, God chose this one line of people that eventually becomes the nation of Israel, and he takes up residence among them, and where he dwells among them is in this miniature replica of what the universe was, and his presence there is unique because that's where Israel goes to be in the presence of God, to the tabernacle, and later to the temple, and it's also something of a foretaste of what God is going to do in the whole world. When God fills the tabernacle at its consecration, when it's completed at the end of Exodus, and later when he fills the temple when it's completed in 1 Kings 8, we're really getting a preview of what's going to happen in the universe when the glory of God is fully known.

— Dr. James Hamilton

The theme of God's special presence among his people is fulfilled in a number of stages in biblical history. In the beginning, the Garden of Eden was the sanctified place on earth where God's central special presence could be found. It was to serve as his throne room on earth, from which humanity was to sanctify the entire earth, turning the whole world into God's holy kingdom.

Later, when God established Israel as his royal priesthood, he associated his special presence first with the tabernacle and later with the temple. The decorations and furnishings of the tabernacle and temple were modeled after the Garden of Eden, and both the tabernacle and the temple served the same function as the garden. Scripture confirms this connection by pointing out that the tabernacle and temple were God's royal throne room on earth — places where he dwelled gloriously in the midst of his people. This fact is made clear in places like 1 Chronicles 28:2, Psalm 11:4, and Isaiah 6:1. These were the most sacred areas on earth. They were places where God's blessings could be readily obtained by his people. And like the Garden of Eden, they were the center of his kingdom, from which his people were to sanctify the earth as his kingdom. And according to John's gospel, a vital way to understand the importance of Jesus is to see that he fulfills the Old Testament theme of God's tabernacle and temple. Listen to what John wrote in John 1:14:

**[Jesus] became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth (John 1:14).**

When John spoke of Jesus "dwelling among us," he used the Greek verb *skenoō*, which is related to the noun *skēnē*, meaning tent or tabernacle. In fact, this same noun is used for God's sacred tabernacle in the Septuagint — the Greek translation of the Old Testament. By using this verb and associating it with the "glory" of God's presence, John made it clear that Jesus was now providing the same access to God's special presence that had previously be available at the tabernacle.

And John made the same point about the temple in John 2:19-21, where we read this account:

**Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.” The Jews replied, “It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?” But the temple he had spoken of was his body (John 2:19-21).**

Here, John made it clear that Jesus was the fulfillment of the temple, too.

John also made it clear that even after Jesus was no longer physically present on the earth, his followers would enjoy the special presence of God. This is why, in John 4:21, Jesus told the Samaritan woman that a day was quickly coming when neither the Jerusalem temple nor the Samaritan holy place would have special priority in the worship of God. As Jesus said in John 4:23-24:

**A time is coming and has now come when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth ... God is spirit, and his worshippers must worship in spirit and in truth (John 4:23-24).**

Jesus’ words to the Samaritan woman should be a great encouragement to the modern church, because we live in the very time Jesus was talking about. In our day, Jesus isn’t physically present on earth. According to Hebrews 8:2, and 9:11-12, he physically resides in God’s tabernacle in heaven. But he’s present with us spiritually, especially when we gather as his church. We see this in places like Matthew 18:20, and 1 Peter 2:4-9. And because Jesus is present with us, we are now the sacred temple of God’s special presence on earth.

But even this wonderful fulfillment of the temple in Christ will be surpassed when Jesus returns in glory. Passages like Revelation 21:1-5 teach that when Christ comes back, he’ll transform the entire creation into God’s dwelling place. At that time, Christ and the Father will always be present with us, and the entire earth will be filled with the glory of God.

A second way that Jesus met Old Testament messianic expectations in John’s gospel was by fulfilling the significance of Israel’s feasts.

## **Feasts**

As we mentioned earlier, much of John’s gospel can be outlined around several feasts that Jesus attended. Among these feasts were various celebrations of Passover, Tabernacles and Dedication. God established these feasts to identify Israel as a royal priesthood, and to give them regular ways to enjoy the blessings of his special presence in the tabernacle and temple. And in his gospel, John made it clear that Jesus fulfilled the significance of these feasts.

The Passover feast was one of Israel’s three main annual feasts. It celebrated Israel’s exodus from Egypt. In brief, Jesus fulfilled this feast because he was like the Passover lamb, which was slain and eaten on Passover, and whose blood was symbolic of Israel’s deliverance from Egypt. All four gospel writers identified Jesus as the true Passover Lamb. But only John highlighted this fact by reporting the words of John the



Baptist who said, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” in John 1:29. In John 19:33, John also reported that when Jesus died, the soldiers “did not break his legs,” fulfilling the requirement in Exodus 12:46 that the bones of lambs chosen for the Passover feast shouldn’t be broken. In these and many other ways, John showed that Jesus fulfilled the symbolism and meaning of Passover.

In John 7:2, 37, John also reported Jesus’ celebration of another of Israel’s three annual feasts: the Feast of Tabernacles. One of the most important rituals of this feast involved pouring water in recollection of the way God provided water for Israel in the wilderness, and the way God provided rain for Israel’s crops year after year; and in anticipation of the way God would pour out streams of blessings on his people in the last days. And John drew a strong connection between this ceremony and Jesus by pointing out that Jesus is the conduit of all the blessings God will pour out at the climax of history. Specifically, John reported that on the last day of the Feast of Tabernacles, Jesus announced his power to dispense God’s blessings. Listen to what Jesus told the crowds in John 7:37:

**If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink (John 7:37).**

John reported that the streams of living water of God’s blessing flow from Jesus. Past blessing, present blessing, and future blessing all come through him. In this way, Jesus is the fulfillment of all the hopes for God’s blessings that were pictured in the Feast of Tabernacles.

Finally, in John 10:22-39, Jesus celebrated the Feast of Dedication or Hanukkah. The Feast of Dedication wasn’t one of Israel’s major feasts established in the Old Testament. But it was significant to Israel’s life in the first century because it celebrated Israel’s victory over its Greek oppressors in 165 B.C., as well as the rededication of the altar and the temple that took place after this victory. In John 10:30, while Jesus was celebrating the Feast of Dedication, he made the startling claim.

**I and the Father are one (John 10:30).**

The Jews understood that he was claiming to be God, and responded by trying to stone him. Then Jesus defended himself in John 10:36 by referring to himself as:

**The one whom the Father set apart (John 10:36).**

When Jesus said that he was “set apart,” he used the common Greek term *hagiazō*, which the Scriptures use many times to refer to dedication and consecration in the ceremonies of the Temple. In this context, *hagiazō* is nearly synonymous with the Greek term *egkainia* — the word translated “dedication” in the expression “Feast of Dedication.”

In these ways, John closely associated Jesus with the celebration of the dedication or consecration of the temple. The feast celebrated the temple being set apart for the presence of God. And in a similar way, Jesus was set apart as the fulfillment of God’s special presence on the earth.

In addition to showing that Jesus fulfilled the expectations for the temple and the feasts, John also demonstrated that Jesus fulfilled God’s law.

## The Law

Although Christians are often accustomed to thinking of God's law in negative terms — as something that condemns us — we also need to remember that the law was given to true believers as a guide toward God's blessings.

**When you look at the law in the Bible, it's clear that the people who read it didn't simply believe that they were reading a list of rules and regulations. It was a life orientation. And so they could read it knowing that, if they kept the law, they would be blessed in the keeping of it, and I think there are several reasons for that. One is that the law is God's revelation. The law tells us how God wants us to live. And the psalmist in 40:8 says, "I delight to do Thy will, O God." So when we align ourselves with the will of God, when we understand what the will of God is, then we find great joy and blessing in doing whatever it is that we are supposed to do, or not doing what we're told to not to do. So the mere fact that it's revelation is a sign of God's blessing, a sign of God's favor. But more than that, I think it's a blessing because it's actually, the law is actually an invitation for us to participate in what God wants to bring about on the earth.**

— Dr. Steve Harper

**The predominant use of law in the Old Testament is positive because God's law is a reflection of God's character. And so the Psalms, for instance, speak of God's law as a light to our path and a lamp to our feet. David in the Psalms described it as sweeter than the honeycomb, more precious than gold, in keeping them his servant is warned, and there is great reward in them. In fact, the whole Psalms begin that way — "Blessed is the man who doesn't walk in the counsel of the wicked nor stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of scoffers, but his delight is in the law of the Lord" — then Psalm 1 goes on to paint an image that the one who fears God and keeps his commands is like a tree planted by a stream that never ceases to bear fruit. And so the law is a place of blessedness. But it's only a place of blessedness for those for whom God has first granted forgiveness, that forgiveness which comes through Christ. But the law then is a guide to how to live life under Christ as a life of blessing. And so the one who loves Christ fulfills the law, Paul says, that Christ is the goal or the purpose of the law. So the law teaches us our sin, but it also shows us what Jesus has done for us and then ultimately provides us a guide for living. So that the whole law, Jesus said, is summed up in two commands: love God, heart, soul, mind, strength and love neighbor as self. So anyone who has known someone who loves God heart, soul, mind and strength,**

**knows the blessing of that kind of a person. And anyone who has known somebody who loves neighbor as that person loves himself, they know there's great blessing in that. There's generosity, there's mercy, there's provision, there's blessedness in being around and even in the presence of those who are faithful to God's commands.**

— Rev. Michael Glodo

In the Old Testament, God's Law was portrayed as a special gift to his people. Psalm 119 and many other passages celebrate it as Israel's guide to the blessings of God. And in the New Testament, James called the law of God the perfect law that gives freedom in James 1:25, and Paul called it Christ's law in 1 Corinthians 9:21. And Jesus himself affirmed the Law's importance and value in John 10:35 when he said:

**The Scripture cannot be broken (John 10:35).**

Here, Jesus taught that the entire Old Testament, including the law, is God's perpetual and abiding word to his people.

Even so, John made it clear that the law wasn't an end in itself. In an important sense, it always pointed beyond itself to Jesus. In John 5:46-47 Jesus told the unbelieving Jews,

**If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me. But since you do not believe what he wrote, how are you going to believe what I say? (John 5:46-47).**

John emphasized this point throughout his gospel. The Old Testament law pointed forward to Jesus. So, to reject Jesus was also to reject the law that foretold him.

One way John stressed this was by applying to Jesus the titles, characteristics, and actions that Judaism had already given to the law. For example, Judaism had said you should feed a hungry enemy with "the bread of the Torah." And in John 6:35, Jesus is called "the bread of life." Judaism had claimed that the "words of the Torah are life for the world." And in John 4:11, Jesus is the giver of living water. Judaism also spoke of "the light of the Law which was given to lighten every man." And John 1:9 calls Jesus "the true light that gives light to every man." These are just a few of many examples in John's gospel that show that Jesus embodied God's law. Jesus and his teachings continue to be the source of life and light for all who follow him.

John dearly wanted his readers to understand what it meant for Jesus to be the Christ. He wanted them to take comfort in the knowledge that Jesus hasn't abandoned his church, but is always present with us. He wanted them to trust in Jesus, so that they would receive God's blessings through him. And he wanted them to be obedient to the Word of God, so that they would glorify the Lord as his kingdom of priests.

Now that we've looked at the major themes of believing in Jesus, and Jesus' identity as the Christ, we should consider his closely related identity as the Son of God.

## SON OF GOD

Jesus' identity as the Son of God is parallel to his identity as the Christ because they both refer to the fact that he is the king over God's kingdom on earth. But it's worth discussing these terms separately because they each have different nuances.

In John's gospel the term Son of God refers to the divine messianic King. On the one hand, it refers to the concept of the Divine Son who came down from heaven to earth, as in John 10:22-40. On the other hand, it can be synonymous with King of Israel or Christ, the human descendant of David who was the rightful king over Israel, as we see in John 1:49 and 11:27.

To get a better understanding of what it means for Jesus to be the Son of God in the Gospel of John, it helps to see how John stressed the great mystery that Jesus is both fully divine and fully human. Let's look first at the idea that Jesus is fully divine.

### Divine

One way that John portrayed the divinity of the Son was through the relationship between Jesus the Son and God the Father. There are many passages that demonstrate that this relationship is qualitatively different from the relationships the Father has with his merely human children, such as believers. Listen to this exchange between Jesus and the Jews in John 10:30-33:

**[Jesus said,] "I and the Father are one." Again the Jews picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus said to them, "I have shown you many great miracles from the Father. For which of these do you stone me?" "We are not stoning you for any of these," replied the Jews, "but for blasphemy, because you, a mere man, claim to be God" (John 10:30-33).**

The Jews rightly understood that Jesus' claim of unity in his relationship with God the Father was, in fact, a claim that Jesus actually was God.

Moreover, according to John 14:9, Jesus is the unique Son of God who revealed the Father as no one else could ever do. Although 1:18 does not use the word "son" the thought is exactly the same. Jesus perfectly reveals his Father to his people. In fact, according to Jesus, in John 14:9, to see Jesus is to see the Father.

And beyond these matters of revelation, Jesus also possesses full divine authority over things like life and death, and ultimate judgment. As we read in John 5:21-22:

**Just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it. Moreover, the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son (John 5:21-22).**

John made it clear that Jesus was God in the flesh. He was God himself, with unlimited authority to carry out God's work on the earth.

Another way John portrayed the divinity or deity of the Son was through Jesus' description of himself as the "I Am." In Exodus 3:14, God revealed his covenant name to Moses by saying, "I am who I am." This was the basis of the divine name that has often been represented in English simply as "the Lord." God's name was thought to be so holy that the Jews of Jesus' day refused to pronounce it. But Jesus applied it to himself.

**In John's gospel, he's got "I am" statements that show up about 24 times in things Jesus says. He's got more than any of the other gospels and about half in the whole New Testament. The significance in the first place is that it's a way of identifying Jesus with the God of the Old Testament. So, seven of these statements is just kind of a bare "I am," and on at least one of those occasions in John 8:58, 59 when he says it, they pick up rocks to try to execute him for claiming to be the God of the Old Testament. The rest of the statements are "I am" connected with something, like "I am the Bread"; "I am the Light"; "I am the Way the Truth and the Life." These are where you have Jesus claiming to be God, but God related to human life. So, I think that we should read all of the statements together, that John is putting forward for us something Jesus has done, to say, "This man existed in prior time because he is God." When he makes the claim, "Before Abraham was, I am" in John 8:58, it's not just claiming to have lived two thousand years before; it's claiming to be the God who interacted with Abraham and the God who is eternal.**

— Dr. John McKinley

In John 8:12-59 Jesus and the Jewish leaders were engaged in an explosive confrontation. The controversy had to do with Jesus' claim to sonship, and his opponents' claim to be sons of Abraham. In verse 44, Jesus told them that their true father was the devil. In return they challenged him by asking if he was greater than Abraham. Then

Jesus ended the argument with these words in John 8:58:

**Before Abraham was born, I am! (John 8:58).**

Jesus didn't say, "I was," as would have been natural if he simply meant that he was older than Abraham. He said, "I am" claiming to be not only older and greater than Abraham, but to be the eternal God of Israel himself.

Having considered Jesus' divinity, let's look at John's treatment of the fact that as the Son of God, Jesus was also fully human.

## Human

Since the time of David, the term "Son of God" was used to refer to the human king who sat on David's throne as king over Israel. We can see this in places like Psalm

2:7 and 2 Samuel 7:14. John 7:42 also shows that the Jews expected the Christ to come from David's family. And in John 1:49, the term "Son of God" is used as a synonym for "King of Israel."

Several other passages in John's gospel also identify Jesus as the King of the Jews, such as 12:13-15, 18:33-40, and 19:1-21. In short, when John identified Jesus as the Son of God, part of what he meant was that Jesus was David's perfect human descendant that would rule over Israel forever.

The Gospel of John stresses that as the Son of God, Jesus possesses both full divine kingship and full human kingship. Every hope that the Old Testament put in God's reign over the universe, and every hope that the Old Testament established for the rule of the Davidic Messiah, is fulfilled in the kingship of Jesus

So far, we've looked at the major themes of believing in Jesus, and Jesus' identity as the Christ and the Son of God. So, now we're ready to turn to the blessing of life that comes to those who believe in Christ.

## LIFE

John used the word "life" 36 times in his gospel. The other three gospel writers used it a total of 16 times. But it isn't just the sheer number of times that he used it that gives "life" its great importance in this gospel. It's also the role "life" plays in the gospel message. In John 17:3, Jesus defined "life" in this way:

**Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent (John 17:3).**

Of course, this knowledge is far more than mere intellectual awareness of God. It includes a measure of rational cognition about God. But more importantly, it's a relationship with him — a personal experience of his presence and involvement in our lives. This fellowship with our Creator is one of the main goals of human existence. According to John 3:16, this life can also be called "eternal," meaning that it will never end. But John makes it clear that we don't have to die in order to obtain this eternal life. In fact, believers already possess eternal life. As Jesus said in John 5:24,

**Whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life (John 5:24).**

Life is already the gift of God to those who believe in Jesus.

**You know, the words that come together as eternal life come to us so easily because we encounter them so often in Scripture. We know that one of the gifts of our salvation through Christ is eternal life. But you know, we are chronological creatures. That's just the way we think. We think in terms of seconds and minutes and hours and days and months and years, and so it's easy for us to think that eternal life is**

**the life we know now, just with a longer calendar, a calendar that never ends. That's not actually the biblical notion of eternal life. The first meaning of eternal life in Scripture is that it is life in God. It is God who is eternal. One of the contrasts between God and we who are his human creatures is that we are very temporal. We feel time. But God is timeless. And by the atonement that Christ has achieved for us, those who are in Christ enter into the eternal life of God. And so, eternal life means we are alive in Christ with God forever. It's not just a calendar that never runs out of pages. It's a state of existence, which is grounded in God himself, and in the fact that he is eternal. But you know, the second word there in that couplet is really important, the word "life," because in the Scripture there's a contrast between life and death. And after the judgment, there's a contrast between eternal life and the second death. So, eternal life also is an affirmation that in Christ, those whose sins are forgiven, we know life with God and Christ forever. We are forever in the presence of God. We enter into a state of existence which is timeless, eternal, that is all about the glory of God and the comfort and joy and exhilaration of being in God's presence and praising him forever. The contrast of that is hell, defined as a second death. So what we're talking about here with eternal life is not just length in eternity. It's the richness of being with Christ and having fellowship with God, rather than spending eternity in hell.**

— Dr. R. Albert Mohler, Jr.

Eternal life is a gift of deliverance from divine judgment into never-ending joy and peace. And it can only be obtained from God by believing in his Son Jesus. And John's gospel stresses at least two reasons for this. First, Jesus is the creator and the source of life, as we learn in places like John 1:1-5, 5:26, 11:25, and 14:6. And therefore, Jesus has the right to dispense life to those he wishes. In fact, Jesus made this point explicitly in John 5:21.

The second reason that eternal life can only be obtained through Jesus is that only Jesus possesses the words of life, that is, the gospel message that leads people into a saving knowledge of God. Jesus explained this in places like John 6:63, and 12:49-50. And Peter confirmed it in John 6:68.

Jesus is "the One and Only"; or as he is called in John 1:18, "God the One and Only." No one else has ever revealed the heavenly Father like Jesus has, because no one else has ever come from the Father like Jesus has. Jesus' unique role as the revealer of God is grounded in his identity as "God the One and Only," who came to show us the Father and give us eternal life.

And so throughout John's gospel, Jesus is the giver of life to all who believe. Those who don't believe don't understand his words, and they reject the life he offers. But those who do believe receive eternal life right now, and immeasurable blessings in the age to come.

## CONCLUSION

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In this lesson, we've explored the background of the Gospel According to John in terms of its author and occasion of writing; we've surveyed its structure and content; and we've considered the major themes of believing, Jesus' identity as Christ and Son of God, and the blessing of life in his name.

John's gospel shows us that Jesus is the fulfillment of all of God's promises of blessing. Jesus is the Christ. He can and will keep every glorious promise God has made because Jesus is the saving Son of God. And those promises and that salvation include the wonderful gift of eternal life. If we hold fast to these hopes as we read John's gospel, we'll be better prepared to understand it and to apply to it our lives. And if we keep them in our hearts as we live, we'll be better prepared to glorify God, and to enjoy the eternal life he has given us through his Son Jesus.



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