

Gospel of John Study

Session 1

As we begin our study on the Gospel of John, we need to look at a bit of background into the book and some of the things that make this gospel unique. We'll also look at a few of the major teachings found within the book.

Most of you have read John before as it is the first book of the Bible most recommended for new believers. However, I want to know if you have any questions about this book let me know of them so that I can make sure that we cover it completely when we get to that section. You don't have to tell me now.

The Gospel of John was written by the apostle John, one of the "sons of Zebedee" known as the "sons of thunder". His older brother was James. He grew up around and was close to both Simon Peter and Andrew as their families were both fishermen in the same lake.

This gospel is the fourth gospel account of Jesus' ministry. The first three (Matthew, Mark, & Luke) are called Synoptic gospels. While each is different from the others, they all have many elements in common. John, on the other hand, is often put into a category of its own, called Johannine. Here are some of the things that make John different from the other gospels and they play into the reason the book was written.

1. John's gospel leaves out quite a bit of material that is characteristic of the Synoptics. There are no narrative parables in John. There is no account of the transfiguration. There is no account of the initiation of the Lord's Supper, no accounts of Jesus casting out any demons and no mention of the temptations of Jesus. Also there is no teaching by Jesus on the end times in John. John does not go into any detail about Jesus' calling of His disciples and does not list them. The theme of the kingdom of God, which is a major theme in the Synoptics (because that is the meaning behind the just about all the parables), is barely mentioned in John at all.

2. What John is missing from the Synoptics, it more than makes up for in rich material that aren't in the Synoptics at all. All of chapters 2-4 is only found in John, including the first sign of Jesus' ministry, turning water in to wine and Jesus' dialogue with Nicodemus. You also don't find Jesus' repeated trips to Jerusalem or any mention of raising Lazarus from the dead in the other gospels. Jesus' extended discourses in the Temple and His personal instructions of His disciples are not found in the other gospels as they are in John. However, the biggest difference is that only in John is Jesus explicitly identified with God throughout the entire book. John points out several occasions of Jesus making "I Am" statements linking Himself with the God of the Old Testament. When Moses turned aside to see the burning bush and was confronted by God, God revealed His covenant, personal name to Moses. This was the name that was to be used when referring to the Lord God for all time. It was His personal name. **[Exodus 3:13-15]** The significance of this name is that God is self-sufficient. He exists without any support or aid from anything else. He is the only being in the universe that was not created or owes its existence to something or someone else. In John, Jesus identifies Himself with this name on several occasions and it causes the Jewish religious leaders' heads to figuratively explode as they understood He was calling Himself God.

3. Because of these differences, there will be seeming contradictions between John and the other three gospels, especially in relation to timing of events. How many times did Jesus celebrate the Passover during His ministry? How many temple cleansings happened? When was

Jesus actually crucified? All these questions have answers to them but it takes more than a superficial reading to reconcile all four of the gospels. Many harmony of the gospel books have been written that explain these events clearly. The very style of writing John used is different from the Synoptics and that leads to a lot of these issues. John wrote from a very fresh perspective on Jesus' ministry.

The date that John wrote the Gospel appears to be around 85 A.D. Irenaeus, one of the early church fathers, made a statement about John's age at his death which was held to by many other early Christians. The quote is the apostle John died in the 68th year after the Lord's passion. The passion occurred in 33 A.D. So if you add 68 years to that, you end up with John dying around the year 101 A.D. John was believed to be a few years younger than Jesus so that puts John in the mid to late 90's when he passed away. John outlived all the other original disciples and lived an extremely long life. Though it is not impossible as there are records of at least one other early church father living well into his 90's. This would mean that John wrote his gospel sometime in the middle of Emperor Domitian's reign though he lived all the way to the early reign of Emperor Trajan.

Though there are many theories on where John actually wrote his gospel, the most likely place is Ephesus. Ephesus was the major city of the western part of Asia Minor and it also makes sense as we know John was eventually exiled to the island of Patmos which is logically accessible from Ephesus.

With this brief introduction, we can now explore our topic for this session which is "Why did John write this gospel?" What was his purpose for writing this book? One of the other major differences between John and the Synoptics is that John actually tells us exactly why he wrote the book. We don't need to guess. In the rest of this session we are going to explore why John wrote this book. If we know the reason for the book, we can better interpret some of the difficult passages when they arise.

[John 20:30-31]

Q: Why do you think John lets his readers know that Jesus did more miracles than those he chronicled in his book? (Jesus' ministry was full. He spent His life on earth performing signs that proved that He was who He claimed to be, from God and doing God's will. There was also too much material to be included in one book. John had to exercise some editorial discretion in order to make his point without writing a book that got bogged down in the details.)

[John 21:24-25]

Q: According to John 20:30-31, why did John write this book? (*that the reader may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God so that the reader may have life in His name*)

Q: According to this statement made by John, do you think that John was primarily written for young Christians in order to bolster their faith or was it primarily written as an evangelistic tool for bringing the lost to Christ? (It certainly has been used for both purposes over the years.)

(listen to answers)

There is currently a large theological debate over this question. The problem arises in the translation of the phrase “so that you may believe”. Just under half the ancient manuscripts have this as a present subjunctive verb. If this is the true verb tense then this phrase can be translated “*so that you may continue to believe...*” However, the other half of ancient manuscripts have this as an aorist subjunctive verb and in that case it could be translated “*so that you may decisively believe...*” Did you hear the difference? (In the Greek, the difference between the two tenses is a single “s” about two thirds through the word - meaning it would be easy for a scribe to make a mistake when copying this word down.) What makes this even more difficult is that John uses both tenses speaking about coming to faith and continuing in the faith throughout his book. With this said, you cannot answer this question with grammar alone.

Look back to John’s statement about what he wants his readers to believe. He wants them to believe that Jesus is the Christ - the Messiah. If his readers were primarily believers, then they would already believe that Jesus is the Messiah. If they are lost, then they need to come to believe this fact about Jesus so that they can be saved. The following is just MY OPINION on this debate and I think the evidence is stronger in supporting the notion that John is writing primarily to the lost seeking them to be saved. However, it cannot be denied that John is our most common go-to book when it comes to asking new believers to read it and gain an understanding of who Jesus, their Savior, truly is. We should not confuse purpose with result - meaning what John intended as the purpose of his book to be evangelistic doesn’t mean it isn’t useful for building the faith of believers. I think that the result of John writing this book has far exceeded any hope he could have entertained while writing it.

With the basics covered, let’s dig into the meaning of John’s purpose in writing the book.

Q: According to these two verses, what do we need to believe? *(that Jesus is both the Christ (Messiah) and the Son of God)*

1. It is important to note that Christ is not Jesus’ last name. It is a title. Specifically, Christ is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word “Messiah”. The people of Jesus age would have called Him “Jesus of Nazareth” as that’s where He grew up lived when He began His ministry. By saying “Jesus Christ” you are acknowledging the belief that Jesus is the Messiah from God. By the time Jesus began His ministry, the Jewish world had been waiting centuries for the coming of the Messiah. As we read through John, we’ll see that Jesus came to a people where were waiting for the Christ to appear.

Q: What do you think is the significance that John identifies Jesus as the Messiah? Why is that one of the foundational truths John needs to make clear in His book? *(The Messiah was the one who would fulfill all the promises of the Old Testament made by God. A person seeking to inherit and experience the blessings God made throughout the Old Testament needs to believe that Jesus was this Messiah who ties the entire Old Testament together and is the central figure of human history bringing God’s will to mankind.)*

The Old Testament isn’t just a collection of sacred stories but rather one story. It is the

single story of God creating man, man rebelling against God, and God sending His Son reconcile man back to God. By saying that his purpose in writing this book was to reveal Jesus as the Christ and that we need to believe in Jesus as the Messiah, John is saying that Jesus is the promised keeper. It's needing to have the belief that all of God's promises are fulfilled and come true in Christ. Let's take a very fast glance at just a few of those promises God made to man.

1) In Genesis 3, Adam and Eve had just sinned and God was explaining to them the consequences of their rebellion. In that explanation, God also graciously gave a promise. **[Genesis 3:14-15]** In this statement, God was promising that a child born of a woman (seed) would someday crush Satan and this child would fix everything that sin had broken.

2) **[Psalm 2:1-12]** In this promise we see that the Christ will be the Son of God and that He will end all injustice and rebellion. Kings and leaders oppress people and make a mockery of justice but the Christ will come to put an end to their reign. He will judge them for their wickedness and only those who run to Him will find mercy.

3) **[Isaiah 53:1-12]** In this passage we see the promise of God sending a suffering servant. God's servant will be perfectly righteous and will never sin Himself. Yet He will take upon Himself the sins of the world and die as the payment for the sins of mankind. He takes the guilt of the world upon Himself so that mankind can be declared innocent.

4) **[Daniel 7:13-14]** In this vision God is seen as ruling in heaven. One comes to before Him who looks like a man and God gives Him a kingdom that will never end and includes people from every tribe, every language and every nation.

So when John calls Jesus the Messiah and says that the cornerstone of saving faith is believing that Jesus is this God anointed Messiah, then it is a vast and sweeping statement.

Q: What are the promises that we just read that Jesus fulfilled? *(they are listed above)*

Q: According to John, what is the other thing we must believe about Jesus' identity? *(that He is the Son of God)*

The title "Son of God" implies that Jesus is God. Only someone who was divine by their very nature could fulfill and the promises God made in the Old Testament. Only the Son of God could be trusted with the absolute power and authority promised to the Messiah. Only someone divine could live a sinless life and offer Himself as the perfect sacrifice for the payments of the entire world. A "son" has his father's nature in him. So to call Jesus the Son of God is to say that His nature is that of God. As we'll see, the use of this term by Jesus concerning Himself also caused the religious leaders heads to figuratively explode.

Q: According to John in our passage (20:31) what is the action required on our part? *(to believe these things about Jesus)*

In our culture we use the word "believe" in a variety of ways and most of them are not what the word we see in the New Testament translated "believe" means. Let's take a quick look at how our culture defines "believe".

1) Someone asks you, "Is the weather supposed to be nice today?" You answer, "I believe it's supposed to warm up today and be sunny." What we really mean is we think that it will be a nice day or we hope that it will be a nice day or that we've heard it will be a nice day or

that in honesty, we don't have a clue about the weather but would certainly be great if it turned out to be a nice day. This sort of belief is grounded in speculation and desire.

2) Another use of the word "believe" in our culture are like the facts we learn in school, for instance "science facts" or head knowledge. We believe that there are nine planets in our solar system and believe this is a fact yet we have no real attachment to those facts. If someone comes along with the right credentials and tells us that Pluto is no longer considered a planet, we say, "Ok, there are only 8 planets in our solar system now." We're willing to change our minds (our beliefs) based upon the word of an "expert" but either way, it doesn't really impact our life at all. What does it really matter to us if a chunk of rock billions of miles away is a planet or a dwarf planet? It's still a rock. This sort of belief is grounded in physically discernable knowledge and is subject to change as more knowledge is acquired but either way, it has little to no impact upon our lives. It's just head-knowledge faith.

The word "believe" translates a Greek word which means "to trust of put one's faith into something or someone". To believe in Jesus Christ as the Messiah and God's Son requires more than just intellectual adherence to a set of facts about the life of Jesus. It is much more than just a mental acceptance of the fact presented (as in example 2 above) and more than just a speculation or desire that Jesus is probably the Messiah (as in example 1 above). It requires trusting one's whole self into what and who Jesus said He was and what He was sent to accomplish. Right now by sitting in your chair, you are experiencing chair faith - faith that the chair will support your weight. The chair is the object of your faith that it will do as it was designed to do by holding you up as you sit on it.

Charles Blondin illustrates the principle. Charles Blondin was a French acrobat and tightrope walker. In 1859 he walked a tightrope across Niagra Falls. But that was only the beginning of his feat. After he crossed the entire falls, he shouted a question to the crowd, "*Do you believe I can walk across the falls again?*" The crowd shouted, "*Yes! You can do it!*" Then Blondin shouted, "*Do you think I can walk back across the falls while carrying one of you across with me on my back?*" The crowd went wild and shouted, "*Of course you can! Yes! Do it!*" Then he walked into the crowd and starting asking people if they would be the one he carried on his back across the falls. Of course, no one accepted the offer. In the end, he carried his manager, Henry Colcord, across the falls on his back and he did it successfully without any incident. See faith wasn't believing that Blondin could walk across the falls on a tightrope, that's type one belief - an expectation or hope or speculation grounded in desire. Believing wasn't seeing Blondin walk across the falls on a tightrope and from there extrapolating that he could do it again while carrying another person. The word belief is reserved for his manager. He believed that Blondin could do it and trusted him with his life to show that he believed in Blondin. The manager had "Blondin faith". He put his trust fully in Blondin. New Testament belief is putting one's full faith in Jesus Christ. This belief consumes our soul (mind, will and emotions). By our minds we learn about Jesus Christ being the Messiah and the Son of God. By our hearts open ourselves up to loving Jesus as He has first loved us and trusting Him. By our will we choose to believe fully and engage both our mind and heart (emotions) so that Jesus becomes Lord of our lives. Don't ever make belief just "mental ascent" or a belief about certain facts. It is engaging the truths about Jesus (and in fact, Jesus Himself) with one's heart. **[Romans 10:9-11]**

In John, when we encounter the word "believe" (which we will do 52 times in John) we need to know that John didn't write his gospel just to give us historical facts about Jesus' life.

He wrote the book in order for us to know who Jesus is and what He was sent to do and that our personal response to those truths would be to place our trust in Him completely. That we would get on His back as He walks across the falls - that's the belief spoken of in John and the New Testament. It's a trust that is deeply personal and impacts every aspect of our lives. The act of true belief is that it changes our perspectives and in time, our entire lives.

Q: With this introduction into the word "believe", how would you define the word as used in the New Testament? (*allow for responses but direct that they should include believing so fully that it changes one's life completely*)

There is another aspect of believing that we need to know in order to round out our definition. This is that belief must have an object. In our culture, America religious gurus love to talk about belief in believing. These are buzzwords used generically and end up meaning nothing - at least nothing close to how the Bible uses such words. Contemporary spirituality trumpets not belief in an object but rather belief in belief. It goes something like this: *"It doesn't matter who you believe or what you believe. All that matters is that you believe."*

Let me give you an example of this sort of zany, heretical thought from the high priestess of this philosophy for the past 30 years - Oprah Winfrey. She doesn't care what you believed; she just wanted you to believe. She was convinced that if you believed in something, no matter what the something or someone was, your life would get better. (This belief in belief is called the "faith movement" in American theology and usually finds itself in Pentecostal and Prosperity gospel teachings.) A few years ago, Oprah had a atheist on her show. The atheist described the awe and wonder she felt standing on the beach looking out over the ocean. Here's Oprah's response, *"Well, I don't call you an atheist then...I think you believe in awe and the wonder and mystery - then that is what god is...It's not a bearded guy in the sky."* Oprah has been peddling this nonsense for a long time and this rot has permeated the fabric of our culture. As long as a person has faith, they are ok. What's important to note is that the Bible never condones object-less faith. Faith always has one specific object and that object is the person of Jesus Christ. We may believe that the setting sun over the ocean looks beautiful but we aren't putting our trust in that sunset to change anything about our lives. In John, he challenges his readers to put their complete trust in Jesus Christ as the long-awaited Messiah of the world and as the unique Son of God. He is who will change your life.

So in these two verses that lay out John's purpose in writing this book, thus far we have answered two question so far. 1) What do we need to believe? & 2) What does it mean to believe? There is one more answer John gives us in this short passage and it goes to the question of "Why do we need to believe?"

One of the dominant and recurring themes in John is our need for life. In John, life is always connected to the person and work of Jesus Christ.

[John 1:4]

[John 3:16]

[John 5:24]

[John 10:10]

[John 11:25-6]

[John 14:6]

Q: What are some of the common teachings of all these verses? *(Jesus is the key that unlocks eternal life, Eternal life is found only in Jesus, etc.)*

Q: What is the result of believing that Jesus is the Messiah and the Son of God? *(Eternal life)*

The life we need, the spiritual, eternal life that will be delivered from the judgment of hell comes through belief in Jesus Christ - belief as defined in our last section. But life does not come to us like a package from Amazon. He doesn't show up on our front door the day we believe in Him, hand us a box with eternal life in it, and then walks away and leaves us to figure things out on our own. Instead it is important to realize that this eternal life is "in Him"; it's in Christ. It's best illustrated by an adoption. When a child is adopted into a family, more than just a brown folder of legal papers enter the house and the child is left alone. Rather it signifies a new and totally different set of relationships. The adopted child sleeps in the house with his adopted family. He now sits down and eats his meals with the adopted family. He exchanges gifts and Christmas with his new family. He goes on trips with his new family. He cries at grandmas' funeral with the rest of the family. He goes to church with his new family. He catches the colds and flu from his new family and passes it back to them. When a person believes in Jesus Christ, they are brought into His family, under His care and watchful eye for protection so that we can flourish into the person we were given life to become.

[John 15:1-5]

Q: What does this passage teach us about our relationship with Christ? *(That He is the vine, the source of life-giving nutrition and we are the branches who need to remain connected to the vine in order to receive that nutrition. It is a daily nourishing of our souls that comes from our relationship to Christ. We don't have that life apart from Him nor can we bear any fruit apart from our connection to Him. It is an all-consuming, "all-in" belief in Christ and His ability to fulfill the promises of God to believers that makes this happen and sustains it.)*

This is the picture John paints for us of why it is important to believe in Jesus Christ. Jesus is where true life is found, abundant, eternal life.

Q: Do you have any questions, comments, rebukes or rebuttals?