

“So That You May Believe”

The First in a Series on the Gospel of John

Texts: John 20:30-31; Psalm 19:1-14

It was Augustine who supposedly said of the Gospel of John, “John’s Gospel is deep enough for an elephant to swim and shallow enough for a child not to drown.” Whether Augustine said this or not, the sentiment is certainly true. John is a remarkable Gospel which can instruct a child and yet challenge the greatest of theologians. It is to this gospel that we now turn our attention as we begin a new series on the Gospel of John.

In years past we have made our way through the gospels of Matthew and Mark, and we have covered John’s epistles (1, 2, 3 John) as well as the Book of Revelation, which I believe was also written by John. But we’ve never covered John’s Gospel, which is different in style and structure from the so-called synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke). The reason for these differences—which is expressed in the Gospel’s purpose statement (our New Testament lesson; John 20:30-31)—is that John’s gospel is written for the purpose of answering the question “who is Jesus?” Or more specifically, John answers the question “who is the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of God?”

Christians would not ask these questions because they already knew the answer. Since these were questions Jews and non-Christians would be asking, it is clear that the Gospel of John was written to equip Christians to evangelize those who were asking about Jesus, including Jews, Jewish proselytes, and God-fearing Gentiles.¹ In many ways, John’s gospel reflects a time of chaos. After the events of AD 70, Jews were asking the question, “what would become of the people of God after the temple was destroyed and Jerusalem had been occupied by the Romans?” Furthermore, after the loss of their homeland the Jews had been dispersed throughout the Mediterranean world, and were encountering Christians in virtually every city in which there was a synagogue. In answering the question “who is Jesus” John is not only addressing one critical question many Jews were asking, but he also directs his readers to trust (believe) in that one whose own body is the greater temple (John 2:21). The coming of Jesus Christ (the true temple), is God’s answer to all of these questions regarding the fate of the nation of Israel.

John’s gospel was not intended to replace the synoptic gospels, nor was it intended to serve as an evangelistic tract to give to unbelievers (and Jews). But it was written to offer Christians instruction about how to answer the question Jews and God-fearers were asking about Jesus’ identity and about God’s purpose for his people. Who is this Jesus in whom Christians were trusting? What were Jews to do now that the temple was destroyed and they had been cast from the promised land. How is Jesus *their* Messiah? And how are Christians to relate to Jesus now that he has ascended into heaven? This is why John’s gospel is structured as it is, and this is why this gospel is every bit as relevant to us now as it was to John’s original audience. Living in an age of religious chaos and uncertainty as we now do, we too need to listen to John’s answer to the question many are still asking, “who is Jesus?”

In order to get the most out of this gospel as we work our way through it, we need to know something

¹ Carson, Moo, and Morris, An Introduction to the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 170-171.

about it. Before we raise a number of important questions and attempt to answer them, I want to encourage you to read through this gospel from beginning to end as often as you can during this series. This is an important book to know and know well, because the Gospel of John deals with so many of the issues which arise when we encounter unbelievers around us. The more familiar you are with John's Gospel, the more you'll get out of this series. Now, as for the critical questions we need to address, they are "who wrote this gospel and why?" "When was John written, and under what circumstances?" "How is John both like and unlike the synoptic gospels?" And then finally as we wrap up, we will take a closer look at John's purpose statement in John 20:31-32.

So, we begin with the question, "who wrote this gospel?" I am always reluctant to spend time on background material in a sermon, but in this case it is important because the vast majority of biblical scholars do not believe this gospel was written by John. In fact, most New Testament scholars contend that this gospel was written 60 or more years after Jesus died by someone who was not an eyewitness to any of the events associated with the life of Jesus. Supposedly, the Gospel of John reflects the beliefs of the early Christians, not the facts of Christ's life, or the true teaching of Jesus which, it is argued, was collected and edited by the author of this book seeking to make his own theological point.

It is all too common for people to contend that John's gospel shows the influence of Hellenistic thought (Greek), or that it contains some sort of proto-Gnosticism (allowing John's gospel to serve as an ecumenical bridge to the Eastern religions). So, if you take a religion course in college, watch any TV documentaries on Jesus and the gospels, if you read Dan Brown and the *DaVinci Code* nonsense, don't be surprised if you hear something along these lines. This is nothing but unsubstantiated dogma coming from people who should know better, and ironically, can be explained using John's own categories; "*and this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil*" (John 3:19).

One of the leading American scholars writing on John (Raymond Brown) tells us that the gospel we now have in our New Testament went through five stages of editing in which various "Jesus traditions" were harmonized into our current Gospel of John. Brown writes with such self-assurance it were as though he himself were a witness to the editorial process. Yet there is no external or internal evidence that the Gospel of John went through five editorial stages no matter how compelling Brown makes his theory sound. Another leading British scholar who wrote a massive commentary on John admits that the traditional case for John's authorship must be carefully weighed, but then concludes that it must be considered "a moral certainty that John, the Son of Zebedee did not write the fourth gospel."² This is yet another dogmatic assertion made despite the overwhelming evidence to the contrary. All of the arguments raised against John's authorship are weak and easily answered. It is amazing to me that many critical scholars just ignore the overwhelming evidence that John wrote this gospel (the traditional view) on grounds which amount to nothing more than the presupposition "the traditional view cannot be right."

But the case for John's authorship is overwhelming, and to my mind absolutely compelling. We start with the external evidence which is nearly unanimous in affirming that this gospel was written by John, the son of Zebedee. The church fathers, writing in the second century, all believed that the disciple of Jesus named John, wrote this gospel while an old man living in the city of Ephesus after fleeing from Judea after the Fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD. Some of the church fathers even knew of eyewitnesses who

² C. K. Barrett, The Gospel According to St. John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text, second edition (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1978), 132.

heard the apostles preach (including John), and many of them urged John to write his own account because he had seen the Lord and remembered his words.³ This gospel was associated with John (the disciple of Jesus) from the very beginning, and there were no doubts about its authorship until the rise of critical scholarship in the seventeenth century. The common view today is that this Gospel was written by a different John (John “the elder”), who also lived in Ephesus, but who was not the disciple of the gospels. This other John (“the elder”) was a leader of the church in Ephesus. But it has been convincingly argued that the aging apostles were often designated “elder,” so that the “elder John” who lived in Ephesus is most likely one and the same as the disciple named John who appears in the gospels.

As for the internal evidence, this too is quite compelling. That John, the son of Zebedee, wrote this gospel is apparent because of the references throughout the gospels to John as both an apostle (one of the twelve) as well as a member of the inner circle of apostles (along with Peter and James). In this Gospel, John speaks of himself as the disciple “*whom Jesus loved*.” One such example is found in John 13:23 in the upper room discourse when Jesus informs his disciples that one of them will betray him. We read “*one of his disciples, whom Jesus loved, was reclining at table at Jesus' side*.” During the agony of his crucifixion, Jesus spoke to John from the cross, giving him the following instructions. According to John 19:26-27, “*when Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, “woman, behold, your son!” Then he said to the disciple, “Behold, your mother!” And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home*.” It was John, then, who took care of Mary until her death. The one whom Jesus loved has been identified as John from the beginning, and critical scholars have stumbled all over themselves trying to figure out who this beloved one is, if not John the disciple.

In fact, one of the arguments raised against the traditional view of John’s authorship of this gospel is that no Christian who was truly taught by Jesus would dare identify himself as that one “loved by Jesus,” because such a self-designation supposedly smacks of pride or exclusivism. But in Galatians 2:20, Paul spoke of Jesus as follows. “*I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me*.” When we acknowledge that Jesus loves us (as individuals)—which is a perfectly proper thing to do—in no way do we mean that Jesus loves only me and no one else. That Jesus was fond of John is evident throughout the gospels. As a matter of fact, John may have used this identification (“beloved of Jesus”) rather than name himself as a demonstration of his humility. There is no reason whatsoever to conclude that in saying this, the author manifests sinful pride.

There is much, much more, which could be said about the historicity of the gospel which supports the view that John is the author of this epistle—the commentaries by Carson and Morris make the case quite well, and if this is of interest to you, I direct you there. But there is one rather fascinating bit of circumstantial evidence in which it becomes obvious that the disciple whom Jesus loved is the young apostle John. It is found in John 20, where we read the following. “*Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.” So Peter went out with the other disciple, and they were going toward the tomb. Both of them were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. And stooping to look in, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen cloths lying there, and the face cloth, which had been on Jesus' head, not*

³ Carson, Moo, and Morris, An Introduction to the New Testament, 139 ff.

lying with the linen cloths but folded up in a place by itself. Then the other disciples, who had reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples went back to their homes.” That the much younger John outran the much older Peter is certainly not the kind of thing that gets included in a Gnostic-Redeemer myth, or in a gospel written two generations after the events recounted in John 20. This kind of thing certainly has the ring of truth about it. If the disciple whom Jesus loved is John, the Son of Zebedee, then John is the author of this gospel, and we know that he runs faster than Peter. To paraphrase and summarize D. A. Carson, most of the arguments raised against the traditional view of the authorship of John carry little weight and ought to cease being repeated. The case for John’s authorship of this gospel stands.

The next question we need to address is “when was this gospel written?” The key event here is the Fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple in 70 A.D. John was likely among those Christians who fled north from Palestine after the Roman army crushed the Jewish revolt, and it is the testimony of the church fathers that John ended up in the city of Ephesus (in Asia Minor—now Turkey). So, this gospel was very likely written after the destruction of the temple, but before John’s death (believed to be in the late 90’s of the first century). Church tradition holds that John wrote this gospel while an older man, and if he wrote his epistles to correct gnostic misunderstandings and/or misuses of his gospel, then some time must be allowed between the date of his gospel and John’s epistles. So, a date of composition somewhere between 80-85 AD makes a lot of sense.⁴

This brings us to the question of the relationship of John to the other gospels (the synoptics). How is the Gospel of John similar, and unlike the synoptic gospels? It is my view that the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) were all written before AD 70. All three synoptics follow the course of Jesus’ life from his birth until his death, resurrection and ascension. Unlike the synoptics, John emphasizes different aspects of Jesus’ messianic mission, so his gospel is arranged quite differently than Matthew, Mark, and Luke. John deals with Jesus’ origin in his prologue (vv. 1-18 of chapter one), while the gospel narrative begins with the dawn of Jesus’ public ministry and then recounts the signs Jesus performed to demonstrate he was Israel’s Messiah and the Son of God. Then John devotes the second half of his gospel to Jesus’ farewell discourse and the account of his crucifixion.

As for content, there are significant differences as well. John does not include the parables found in the other gospels, nor does John emphasize the kingdom of God—instead John speaks of eternal life. John does not include the Sermon on the Mount or the Lord’s Prayer, nor does he describe the account of Jesus’ baptism by John. John does not recount the institution of the Lord’s Supper as in the synoptics and instead focuses upon different aspects of that fateful night—Jesus’ instructions about the new commandment (that we love one another), the coming of the Holy Spirit after his departure, and so on. John does not mention Jesus’ transfiguration, he does not include the Olivet Discourse (where Jesus teaches the disciples about the end times), his temptation by Satan, or the fateful events of Gethsemane.

John is writing after AD 70 for a different audience and for a different purpose. He uses lengthy discourses rather than parables (such as the account of the vine and branches in John 15). John recounts the details of Jesus’ farewell discourse in chapter 13-17, he speaks in some detail of Jesus’ interaction with John the Baptist, he includes Jesus’ “bread from heaven” sermon (John 6), the story of Lazarus being raised from the dead (John 11), and speaks of Judas as the agent of Satan.

⁴ Carson, Moo, and Morris, An Introduction to the New Testament, 139 ff.

In his gospel, Matthew is writing to convince Jews that Jesus is Israel's Messiah. Structured along the lines of the Book of Exodus, the Gospel of Matthew alternates between blocks of Jesus' teaching and those historical events which demonstrate that Jesus is the coming redeemer foretold in the Old Testament. Mark's gospel is known as the "action" gospel because Mark was an associate of Peter, and Mark focuses more upon the events of the life of Jesus, rather than upon his teaching (although much of the teaching of Jesus recorded in Matthew is also found in Mark in shorter form). Luke, who was not an eyewitness to these events but was a companion of Paul, tells us that he consulted other gospels before composing his own (Luke 1:1-4). His gospel is set out in chronological order and takes us right up to Jesus' ascension, before he composed a second book (the Book of Acts) which continues the story of the spread of Jesus' kingdom after the Day of Pentecost. Despite the different emphases, these three "synoptic" gospels follow the same basic order and include many of the same sayings of Jesus.

John's gospel begins with a prologue (we will spend several weeks going through the first 18 verses of John), and then from John 1:19-10:42, Jesus reveals his glory through his preaching and through a series of miraculous signs which prove that he is the Christ and the son of God. In chapters 11-12, we see Jesus revealed as both king and suffering servant, while in the final section (chapters 13-20), Jesus' humiliation and exaltation come to the fore. John ends his Gospel with an epilogue in chapter 21. This is a remarkable book and it clearly supplements and enhances the material in the synoptics. John completes our picture of Jesus Christ by revealing things not found in the other gospels, and by dealing with the question who is Jesus and in explaining why we must place our trust in him.

So, with this introductory material in mind, we take up our final matter, "why did John write his gospel?" We've already addressed this question in part, but this does bring us to John 20:31-32, and the purpose statement of this gospel. "*Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.*" Coming at the end of the gospel as it does, the purpose statement is a summary of everything John has written earlier in this book. In fact, we should be able to do a better job of covering this purpose statement after we've completed our series on John, rather than before beginning our a series.

Yet there are a number of important things found in the summary statement which we ought to consider before we go through the gospel itself. First, Jesus Christ is revealed to us in the gospel (the gospel as a message of good news), and specifically in this Gospel (John, as a written document). As we see in our Old Testament lesson (Psalm 19), God has revealed his glory in creation (since he created all things including the heaven and earth), and through the giving of the law to his people at Mount Sinai.

According to the Psalmist, all of creation pours out "speech" by visually testifies to us that there is a God. When Paul expounds on this same point in Romans 1, he tell us that from the testimony of creation, all people know that there is a God, that he is eternal and all-powerful, and that he is going to judge all of humanity. This explains why all people know God, and why all people, since the fall, sinfully try to suppress what they know to be true about God. John expresses this same point when he speaks of people loving darkness rather than light. This revelation of God through the creation is so clear that on the day of judgment, no one will be able to say, "I didn't know there was a God, and that I owed him my perfect obedience." This knowledge of God derived from creation renders us all without excuse.

As for the law, the Psalmist informs us that in his commandments, God's perfections and will are revealed to all. Again, in Romans 2, Paul adds the point that God's commandments are written upon every human heart because we are all created in the image of God. But the law was codified (written

down and spelled out in detail) when God gave the law to Israel through the mediation of Moses (a theme John discusses throughout this gospel). The law reveals to us what God requires of us (perfect obedience) and because the law is written upon every human heart, and then published on two stone tablets and enshrined in God's word, when the law is given, all men and women are without excuse.

The fact that God is known through creation and the through law means that every human being stands condemned before God, and all are guilty as charged. To put it as Paul does in Romans 3:10-12: "*None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.*" Or, we may consider the way John puts it in at the end of chapter 5 when Jesus says to the Jews, "*do not think that I will accuse you to the Father. There is one who accuses you: Moses, on whom you have set your hope. For if you believed Moses, you would believe me; for he wrote of me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words?*" The law is holy, righteous, and good, but because we are sinners we do not keep the law and it (Moses) condemns us. And if we do not understand Moses (if you believed Moses, Jesus says) who, in the law, shows us our sins, then we will see no need for Jesus to reveal to us the good news of the gospel—and then we'll look to him as just another religious teacher, prophet, or guru.

Although sufficient to condemn, the knowledge of God we derive from nature and from the conscience tells us nothing about who God is (only that he is), or what he has done to save us from our sins. Apart from the revelation of himself in his word, specifically through his Son, Jesus Christ, we can know nothing about the Triune God, or his grace and mercy toward those sinners who have broken his law. There is no good news in nature or the law. For a Christian, a beautiful sunset is an occasion to worship the creator whose glory is being revealed. But a beautiful sunset condemns a non-Christian to eternal punishment because they see nothing more than the "big Dodger" in the sky, to quote Tommy LaSorda.

The good news (how God saves us from our sins) comes to us only through the gospel, specifically the gospel of Jesus Christ. And this is why John has written his gospel, so that we might know who Jesus is and understand what he has done to save us from our sins. There is a creator, a law-giver, and a Savior.

For many, John's purpose statement is good news indeed, and the basis for much peace, joy, comfort, and assurance. For others, these words also may be old news long since taken for granted. To those of you at this point in your Christian life, I exhort you to let the words of John's Gospel remind you once again of those things most important and fundamental to the Christian life and to your faith in Jesus Christ. "*These [things] are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.*" You only have life because you have faith in Jesus—and as John will tell us, that faith is itself given us by God and is strengthened through the means of grace (word and sacrament). Hearing the words of Jesus and considering the signs he performed will strengthen our faith, and better enable us to share that faith with those non-Christians all around us who are perishing in their sins, and who may be asking the same question John answers, "who is Jesus?"

And there may be some who do not yet trust in Jesus Christ. In many ways, this Gospel was written for people like you—to convince you that because of what Jesus said and did, that he is the Son of God, and he is that one in whom you must believe (trust), if you are to have eternal life and live in the joy of knowing that your many sins are forgiven by the doing and dying of Jesus Christ. May you come to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. That is why these things (the content of John's Gospel) were written—so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, and that by believing in Jesus, you may have eternal life.