

Introduction to the Gospel of John (John 1:1-1:18)

Expository Lessons from the Gospel of John

I. Background: Why Study the Gospel of John?

- a. After series on Genesis, how did we select Gospel of John?
 - i. We want to focus on expository teaching, and just finished Genesis (about 35 lessons) so wanted to cover a foundational NT book next.
 - ii. Spirited discussion within our group; many especially among the sisters were interested in John's gospel. We drew lots among the four gospels, and this was the one selected!
- b. Many Protestant churches have strong preference to John's gospel over the other three. In church I attended in the past, unbelievers were almost always asked to study with someone through John's gospel as the first step. (Wonder why that one?)
- c. Martin Luther, in his original (1522) Preface to the New Testament in his German language translation of the Bible wrote:
 - i. "Which are the true and noblest books of the New Testament?"
 - ii. "From all this you can now judge all the books and decide among them which are the best. John's gospel and St. Paul's epistles, especially that to the Romans, and St. Peter's first epistle are the true kernel and marrow of all the books. They ought properly to be the foremost books, and it would be advisable for every Christian to read them first and most, and by daily reading to make them as much his own as his daily bread. For in them you do not find many works and miracles of Christ described, but you do find depicted in masterly fashion how faith in Christ overcomes sin, death, and hell, and gives life, righteousness, and salvation. This is the real nature of the gospel, as you have heard.
 - iii. "If I had to do without one of the other – either the works or the preaching of Christ – I would rather do without the works than without His preaching. For the works do not help me, but His words give life, as He Himself says (**John 6:63**). Now John writes very little about the works of Christ, but very much about His preaching, while the other evangelists write much about His works and little about His preaching. Therefore, John's gospel is the one, fine, true, and chief gospel, and is far, far to be preferred over the other three and placed

high above them. So, too, the epistles of St. Paul and St. Peter far surpass the other three Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

- iv. “In a word St. John’s Gospel and his first epistle, St. Paul’s epistles, especially Romans, Galatians, and Ephesians, and St. Peter’s first epistle are the books that show you Christ and teach you all that is necessary and salvatory for you to know, even if you were never to see or hear any other book or doctrine. Therefore St. James’ epistle is really an epistle of straw, compared to these others, for it has nothing of the nature of the gospel about it.”
- d. Luther’s assessment seems rather horrifying to me, on several counts. He clearly is basing his assessment on the degree to which the books can be used to support or demolish his theology. And this from the man who was essentially the founder of the Protestant Reformation. Think about it:
- i. Luther is trashing the epistle of James, inspired by the Holy Spirit and accepted by the church as inspired by the Holy Spirit, since the beginning. This is incredibly arrogant!
 - ii. Luther claims that **John** wrote primarily about what Jesus *taught* (rather than on what He *did*), in contrast to **Matthew, Mark and Luke**, who Luther claims focused on what Jesus *did* (and not on what He *taught*). Clearly what Luther claims is not true! All four gospels describe *both* what Jesus did and what He taught!
 - 1. Furthermore, the apostle John, who Luther holds up, reminded us all in his first letter, “He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to walk just as He walked.” (**1 John 2:6**, NKJV)
 - 2. We must study the life of Jesus, so that we can imitate it and follow Him. We must walk as He walked, not just believe what he taught.
 - iii. Luther is elevating the writings of Paul (Romans) as more important than the gospels of **Matthew, Mark and Luke**!
 - 1. However, Jesus is our ultimate teacher, not Paul (one of Jesus’ students)!
 - 2. Jesus said, “A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master.” (**Matthew 10:24**, NKJV)
 - 3. Jesus also said, “...for One is your Teacher, the Christ.” (**Matthew 23:10**, NKJV)
 - iv. Recall that in the first three gospels, where we find:
 - 1. The entire story of the birth of Christ to a virgin in Bethlehem

2. The Sermon on the Mount and Sermon on the Plain
 3. Most of the miracles Jesus performed
 4. The bulk of Jesus' teaching on the kingdom, in the form of parables
 5. So many of Jesus' teachings on things like Final Judgment, hell, forgiving others, permanence of marriage, how to pray, fasting, giving to the poor, the Second Coming, and the Great Commission.
- v. We see the effects of the bad foundation that Luther established for Protestantism, at the start of the Protestant Reformation. Look around at the fruit that has produced 400-500 years later, in the West.
1. No obedience to the hard teachings of Jesus on righteousness and holiness
 2. Rampant divorce and disintegration of families
 3. Focus on 'what do I need to believe to be saved' rather than 'how can I walk like Jesus'
 4. Nominal Christians who live no different from the world
 5. Holding up '**John 3:16**' signs at sporting events and rallies. Claims that all you have to do to be saved is believe; no repentance, no overcoming sin, no perseverance, no taking up the cross and following Jesus, even no need to get baptized
- vi. I must admit that in reaction against the preference given to the gospel of John by Luther and modern Protestants, I have tended to make a point of emphasizing the first three gospels. However, I do not want to overreact either (After all, overreacting against abuses in Catholicism is what got Martin Luther off course!)
1. Note that every group will tend to have its favorite books, and to a large extent that will tell a lot about the group (strengths and weaknesses). Consider:
 - a. Luther and Protestants - emphasize Gospel of John and writings of Paul, especially Romans
 - b. Conservative Anabaptists – emphasize Sermon on the Mount and perhaps also the gospel of Matthew where it is found
 - c. Churches of Christ – emphasize the Book of Acts
 2. I hope we will be people who emphasize studying the whole Bible, with the core being the teachings of Jesus found in all four gospels!

II. How Gospel of John was Viewed in the Early Days of the Church

- a. Four gospels (no more, no less)
 - i. Sometimes I hear claims that there were “missing gospels” such as “Gospel of Thomas”, “Gospel of Judas” or “Gospel of Mary Magdalene”. These rumors are often promoted in fictional accounts such as *The DaVinci Code*, a popular book later turned into a movie. These and other accounts speak of things we don’t see in the four gospels, such as: strange miracles, Jesus being married, His travelling to India, or being only a man (not divine). Along with these claims are stories that the Catholic Church suppressed these gospels at the Council of Nicaea (325 AD) or later, for political reasons. However, consider a very early account:
 - ii. Irenaeus, c. 130-200, Bishop of Lyons, wrote: “It is not possible that the Gospels can be either more or fewer in number than they are. For, since there are four zones of the world in which we live, and four principal winds, while the Church is scattered throughout all the world, and the “pillar and ground” of the Church is the Gospel and the spirit of life; it is fitting that she should have four pillars, breathing out immortality on every side, and vivifying men afresh. From which fact, it is evident that the Word, the Artificer of all, He that sitteth upon the cherubim, and contains all things, He who was manifested to men, has given us the Gospel under four aspects, but bound together by one Spirit...”
 - iii. “These things being so, all who destroy the form of the Gospel are vain, unlearned, and also audacious; those, [I mean,] who represent the aspects of the Gospel as being either more in number than as aforesaid, or, on the other hand, fewer. The former class [do so], that they may seem to have discovered more than is of the truth; the latter, that they may set the dispensations of God aside.” (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*; Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 1, p. 428-429)
 1. Note that Irenaeus had been taught by Polycarp in his youth, a man who had been a disciple of the apostle John.
 - b. The other three gospels (**Matthew, Mark and Luke**) are very similar; John is different.
 - i. The three similar gospels often called “synoptic” a word coming out of Greek and Latin that means “to see together”
 - c. Why is the **Gospel of John** so different from the other three gospels?
 - i. Eusebius, in his famous work *History of the Church* (c. 325 AD) wrote:
 1. “For Matthew, who had at first preached to the Hebrews, when he was about to go to other peoples, committed his Gospel to

writing in his native tongue, and thus compensated those whom he was obliged to leave for the loss of his presence.

2. “And when Mark and Luke had already published their Gospels, they say that John, who had employed all his time in proclaiming the Gospel orally, finally proceeded to write for the following reason. The three Gospels already mentioned having come into the hands of all and into his own too, they say that he accepted them and bore witness to their truthfulness; but that there was lacking in them an account of the deeds done by Christ at the beginning of his ministry...” (then Eusebius explains that John fills in more of the details from Jesus’ early ministry, prior to the death of John the Baptist)
 3. “And the genealogy of our Savior according to the flesh John quite naturally omitted, because it had been already given by Matthew and Luke, and began with the doctrine of his divinity, which had, as it were, been reserved for him, as their superior, by the divine Spirit...”
 - a. (According to Eusebius, John did not need to repeat what had already been written down by the prior gospels, such as another account of birth and lineage of Jesus. Therefore, John’s focus was on things that the earlier gospels did not so fully explain, such as the divinity of Christ.)
 4. “But of the writings of John, not only his Gospel, but also the former of his epistles, has been accepted without dispute both now and in ancient times.” (Eusebius, Church History, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, vol. 1, pp. 152–154)
 - a. Eusebius notes that authorship of this gospel by the apostle John was accepted by the church in his day, as it had been from even more ancient times.
- d. What is the spiritual foundation upon which we should be building?
- i. “For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.” (**1 Corinthians 3:11**, NKJV)
 - ii. The ultimate foundation is studying both the life and teachings of Christ. All the material that the Holy Spirit has given us: all four gospels. Starting with **Matthew / Mark / Luke** as the first foundation, and adding the gospel of **John** as the second stage of the foundation (which fills in things not covered in the first three).
 - iii. To that foundation we continue to build with *all the rest of the Bible*, New Testament as well as Old Testament.

III. Overview of the Gospel of John

- a. There are 21 chapters.
 - i. The middle one (chapter 11) is about Lazarus dying and being raised.
 - ii. After Lazarus raised, Jesus' enemies are extremely concerned and resolve to have him killed, as a matter of urgency. The last 10 chapters (after Lazarus raised) are all during the last week of Jesus' life. Note that John's gospel provides much more detail about the very end of Jesus' life.
 - iii. The first 10 chapters, before the Lazarus story, are from earlier in Jesus' ministry.
- b. Who did John think he was writing to? Whoever that was, he assumed that they were familiar with the Old Testament.
 - i. People often say that *Matthew's* gospel was written primarily with the *Jews* in mind; because in it we find so many Old Testament prophecies. (Perhaps that is another reason many people prefer to introduce others to Jesus by using John's gospel rather than Matthew's.)
 - ii. However, knowledge of the OT may be *even more important* for those reading **John**, if they want to really understand the significance of what is going on in that account! Consider just the first chapter of **John** (the number of allusions, names or quotes that tie back to parts of the Old Testament)
 1. Opening lines of John's gospel echo the **Genesis 1** creation account.
 2. Reference to the law coming through Moses (in **Exodus**, **Leviticus** and **Deuteronomy**)
 3. Prophecies quoted or alluded to, regarding John the Baptist's connection with the prophet Elijah:
 - a. Story of Elijah in **1 Kings** and **2 Kings**
 - b. Reference to Elijah coming before the Day of the Lord at the end of **Malachi**
 - c. "Voice crying in the Wilderness" quoting **Isaiah 40**
 4. John the Baptist is asked "Are you the Christ?" Then Peter tells Andrew, "We have found the Messiah, the Christ." This points back to:
 - a. **Psalm 2:2**
 - b. **Daniel 9**

5. John the Baptist is asked, “Are you the Prophet?” This points back to the great prophecy of Moses in **Deuteronomy 18:15-18**.
 6. John identifies Jesus as being “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” which points back to:
 - a. **Exodus 12-13** story of the Passover Lamb
 - b. **Isaiah 53** regarding one who would be “led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before the shearers is silent...”
 7. Philip tells Nathanael, “we have found Him of whom Moses wrote in the law, and also the prophets...” (This is the guy all over the Old Testament!)
 8. Nathanael identifies Jesus as “the Son of God” pointing to:
 - a. **Psalm 2:7**
 - b. **2 Samuel 7**
 - c. **1 Chronicles 17**
 9. Nathanael identifies Jesus as “the King of Israel” pointing to many prophecies about the kingdom, and the king who would come, descended from David.
 10. Jesus at the end of **John chapter 1** tells Nathanael that he will see “the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man” which points to
 - a. **Daniel 7** regarding ‘Son of Man’
 - b. **Genesis 28** story of Jacob’s ladder
- iii. Major take-aways here:
1. If you really want to follow what John is saying, you need to be familiar with the Old Testament.
 2. It is not just direct quotes (with footnotes), but many of the terms used, and allusions made to things discussed in the Old Testament, that are critical here.
 3. Keep reading through the OT, and stay on track to read through all the Bible: it will pay huge dividends in helping you to understand the NT better, even the gospel of John.
 4. Hint: knowing the life and ministry of Moses, from the books of **Exodus, Numbers** and **Deuteronomy** will be especially helpful to us in this class, especially through the first 10 chapters of **John**!

IV. In the Beginning was the Word (Read John 1:1-18)

- a. This opening is indeed very deep waters! Summary of the account:
 - i. "The Word":
 1. He was in the beginning.
 2. He was with God; yet...
 3. He was God.
 4. All things that have been made were made through Him.
 5. Although the world was made through Him, when He came the world did not know Him.
 6. He is described as being like light shining in the darkness.
 7. John (referring to John the Baptist, not John the apostle) came as a witness to that light, to the Word of God, who was coming into the world.
 8. The Word became flesh (human) and dwelt among people.
 9. He came full of grace (favor) and truth.
 10. He came to "his own", but (largely) they did not receive Him.
 11. To those who *did* receive Him and who believed in His name, He gave them the right to be "born of God" (a spiritual birth or rebirth) and to become "children of God".
 12. No one has ever see God, the Father; however the Son (the Word, Jesus Christ) who has the glory of the Father, and has made the Father known.
 13. "He" (the Word of God, the Son of God) is Jesus Christ. He is "the only begotten Son", who came from the Father (God).
 - ii. The term 'logos' (Greek word in **John 1:1** generally translated 'word')
 - i. This term also is used in **Revelation 19**: "He was clothed with a robe dipped in blood, and His name is called The Word (Greek: 'logos') of God." (**Revelation 19:13**, NKJV)
 - ii. The term 'logos' means the word or speech of God; however it also can mean the reason (from which we get our English word, 'logic') of God.
 - iii. Lactantius (c. 250-325 AD), a Roman teacher who converted to Christianity, wrote, "But the Greeks speak of Him as the '*Logos*', more befittingly than we (*Romans*) do as the word, or speech: for '*Logos*' signifies both speech and reason, inasmuch as He is both the voice and the wisdom of God." (Lactantius, *The Divine Institutes*; ANF vol. 7, p. 107)

- iv. See also article on 'Logos' in *Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs*, David Bercot, editor.
- c. The divinity of Jesus Christ, the Word, the Son of God
 - i. It says, "He was with God" yet, "he was God". Is that a contradiction? How can that be possible? Also, how can Jesus be God, but also be the Son of God? (Understanding how to explain this to Muslims, who struggle with the idea of Jesus being the "Son of God", is especially important.)
 - ii. I have found the most helpful explanations (of the relationship between the Son and the Father, with respect to one another) to be in the early Christian writings.
 - iii. Poor and misleading modern examples I have heard include:
 1. Father/Son/Spirit being like water/ice/steam (implies that Father, Son and Spirit are the same thing, but just change form, with one turning into another).
 2. Father/Son/Spirit are like three corners or sides of a triangle.
 3. Examples where God (the Father) decides to reach out to us, so becomes one of us (changing into the Son). Again, implies changing form from one to another: a heretical understanding sometimes called "modalism".
 4. Problems:
 - a. In **Matthew 17**, at the Mount of Transfiguration, when the Father says, "this is My beloved Son...." He is not speaking to Himself!
 - b. The Father knew things that the Son did not! Speaking of the Last Day, Jesus said, "But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father." (**Mark 13:32**, NKJV)
 - c. Consider Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, before He was handed over to be tried and crucified. "He went a little farther and fell on His face, and prayed, saying, 'O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will.'" (**Matthew 26:39**, NKJV)
 - d. In the passage on head covering (and uncovering) Paul makes the point, "But I want you to know that the head of every man is Christ, the head of woman is man, and the head of Christ is God." (**1 Corinthians 11:3**, NKJV)

- i. The Son of God clearly is in the second position to the Father. This is how the early Christians saw it, and is consistent with Scripture.
 - e. So, any example given to describe the relationship of the Father and Son must fit with the above (and other) Scriptures.
 - iv. There are two analogies that the early Christians used to explain the Son of God and the divinity of Christ in a way consistent with **John 1** and the rest of the Scriptures. (I have used these effectively to explain to Muslims in Albania that we Christians only believe in one God, not three; and what we mean when we refer to Jesus Christ as “the Son of God” (*in what sense* He is the Son).
 - 1. A spring of water (water bubbling up out of the ground) on a hillside, from which a stream comes.
 - a. The stream proceeds from the spring.
 - b. The spring is the source or head of the stream.
 - c. The spring and the stream are in a sense “one”.
 - d. You can throw dirt into the stream and pollute it, without muddying the spring.
 - e. Those down in the valley may never see the spring, but they see the stream that proceeds from it; in that way the stream can “make known” the nature of its unseen source.
 - f. In this analogy, the spring = the Father; the stream = the Son.
 - 2. The sun in the sky, and the rays of light (and heat) proceeding from it.
 - a. If we look at the sun in the sky directly, we will be blinded.
 - b. However, we can enjoy the light and heat that come from it, and from that we can appreciate the nature of the sun.
 - c. In a sense, the sun and the rays that come from it are one. The rays proceed from the sun. They are “sun-light”.
 - d. The sun is the head and source of the rays that come from it.
 - e. The light has been proceeding from the sun for as long as the sun existed.

3. These two analogies maintain the headship (source) of the father, and explain the Father/Son relationship.
 - a. They illustrate in what sense the Son is God, while not the same person as the Father.
 - b. They show how the Father and the Son can have different characteristics (for example, we can see the Son but not the Father), and separate wills. There is one God, but different persons/ personalities.

V. How Should Knowing These Things About the Word of God Impact Our Lives?

- a. Read **Hebrews 1:1-4** and **2:1-4**
 - i. In the past, God spoke to people through prophets and angels. However, in these last days God has spoken to us through His Son, referred to as God also; who was with the Father from the beginning and through whom all things were made. This was further confirmed by miraculous signs.
 - ii. For that reason, in view of this great Messenger we must earnestly heed all He said to us, so that we don't spiritually drift away!