



Introduction to the Gospel of John (Part One)

Outline of Introduction to John

- I. The Meaning of Life
- II. Foundational Doctrines of Bible Study
- III. Why Four Gospels?
- IV. The Author of John
- V. Memory Verse

I. The Meaning of Life

A. Human Beings Are Deeply Flawed

Almost every adult has a profound interest in understanding the meaning of life. Throughout the ages, people have struggled with human philosophies and concepts about who man is, where he came from, and what happens to him when he dies. Today, in our complex, affluent society, men and women are constantly seeking to find a sense of self-worth, inner stability, happiness and peace. All too often their search ends in the ways of the world because they do not acknowledge and submit themselves to the supremacy and self-revelation of their transcendent Creator, Almighty God, who is over all and above all.

Some 1500 years ago, Aurelius Augustine, the brilliant Bishop of Hippo, wisely stated, "Human beings are so profoundly flawed they can't begin to figure out the meaning of life on their own."

B. The Only Solution

Only God and His Holy Word hold a satisfactory explanation of the purpose and meaning of life. There is no greater truth, no greater wisdom, and no greater clarification of life and living than that contained in the Holy Bible, God's special self-revelation to mankind. The Creator and Sustainer of the universe is the only One who can stir man's soul, bring him to his knees, and save him from himself. Tragically, most people are choosing the "wide gate and broad way" of life, leading to eternal separation from God, rather than seeking "the small gate and narrow way" that leads to life forever with God (Matthew 7:13-14.)

C. The Ultimate Truth

In one of the greatest verses in the Bible, Jesus, the Son of God, said, *"I am the way, the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father except through Me"* (John 14:6.) Men's and women's first need is to sense the reality that God is the one and only Source of all existence, vitality and form. Then they must willingly respond to God's special call drawing them to Himself. Progressively, they then will receive the gift of faith, repent and accept Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and Savior. Only then will they come to a sense of wholeness, inner stability and peace. At that time, as new creatures in Christ, they begin to find their true meaning, identity and destiny in union with God. They start the challenging but glorious journey of denying self, taking up their cross daily, and following and obeying their new Master. Though they continue to struggle with the sin patterns of the flesh, the indwelling Holy Spirit encourages them that *"the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ"* (Titus 2:12-13.)

D. Where Do You Stand?

Have you taken this step of faith and surrendered your whole person and life to the Lord of Lords and King of Kings? If not, this is the first and most important decision of your life. God is not primarily concerned about your family background, your financial condition, your position, or your I.Q. He wants you to be His child - to have an intimate, interactive relationship with Him. If you haven't yet received Christ's forgiveness for your sins, and confessed with your mouth and believed in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, we lovingly urge you to do so with one of your class leaders, pastors, or other authentic Christian friends. Scripture tells us that only believers accept and understand the things of the Spirit of God (1 Corinthians 2:10, 14.) This means that we must be born-again in order to comprehend God's truth and the teaching of the Holy Spirit. For us to fully understand the life-changing knowledge, love and wisdom that

God has for us in the Gospel of John, we must surrender our hearts and minds to the Son of God.

II. Foundational Doctrines of Bible Study

In preparation for our study of this amazing Gospel, let's review the four basic doctrines that are foundational to our growing in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ. They are the Doctrine of Revelation, the Doctrine of Inspiration, the Doctrine of Illumination and the Doctrine of Application. A brief overview of these doctrines will enable us to better understand the divine framework and presentation of how and why ultimate truth came to mankind. As you reflect on these words, note that the first three doctrines explain "how" God provided His ultimate, objective truth to the world. The fourth doctrine explains the "why".

A. The Doctrine of Revelation

God communicated His ultimate truth to mankind in four ways:

1. *Visibly* - In the creation of the physical and spiritual universe, God clearly illustrated for mankind His supremacy, His sovereignty, His invisible attributes, His eternal power and His divine glory (Genesis 1:1; Romans 1:20).

2. *Orally* - God verbally *spoke* His commandments, promises and instructive guidance directly to the patriarchs, prophets and other Biblical persons throughout the Old and New Testaments (Genesis 2:16-18; 6:13; 12:1-3; Exodus 3:4-6; Acts 9:4-6, 10-16).

3. *Legibly* - God *wrote* His Ten Commandments on the stone tablets with His finger at Mt. Sinai (Exodus 34:1).

4. *Inspiringly* - God *breathed* His timeless truths into the minds of those He selected to write down His history, His wisdom, His literature, His prophesy, and His plan of redemption. Under the Holy Spirit's providential guidance, these timeless truths were written and eventually organized into the Old and New Testaments of our Holy Bible (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

B. The Doctrine of Inspiration

This is the process of mankind receiving and recording God's inspired truth without error. God *breathed* into the minds of His chosen authors the exact information, precepts and principles that He wanted documented. Under the supervision of the Holy Spirit, each author recorded God's truth

without error in the original manuscripts (2 Peter 1:20-21).

C. The Doctrine of Illumination

As we regularly and diligently study and meditate on God's Word, the Holy Spirit of promise illuminates our minds and enables us to understand the meaning of His inspired, recorded truth. Jesus told the disciples that when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all truth (John 16:13; Psalm 19:7b.) To claim and benefit from the Lord's promise, we should prayerfully ask the Holy Spirit to help us understand every time we read the Word.

D. The Doctrine of Application

Our responsibility under the Holy Spirit's enabling power is to regularly read, study and meditate on God's revelation. Increasingly, it permeates our minds and dwells richly in our hearts. We begin to practically, conscientiously and consistently internalize and apply His teaching, values, instructions and promises into our daily living. As we apply ourselves to "*working out our salvation with fear and trembling,*" we have God's promise that "*He is at work in us to will and to work His good pleasure*" (Philippians 2:12-13; Joshua 1:8).

Let's keep these precious and magnificent truths of God in our minds and hearts as we undertake the study of John's inspired Gospel (Psalm 25:4; scan Psalm 119:1-176).

III. Why Four Gospels?

The four Gospels are the heart and soul of God's remarkable revelation, the Holy Bible. Together, they tell the perfect and complete story of God's redemptive purpose for mankind through the reconciling death of Jesus Christ on the cross. Around the central theme of Jesus Christ, they have the common goal of showing through His teachings, miracles, death, and resurrection that the quest for ultimate, objective, eternal truth is inseparable from the holiness, love, justice, mercy and grace of God.

A. Distinctive Themes

But the question arises, why did God give us four Gospels in His revelation? Why did Matthew, Mark, Luke and John all have to write about the life and ministry of Jesus Christ? The answer, clearly, is that each one of the Gospels is distinct, purposeful, supplementary and complementary to the other three. Individually and collectively, they constitute divine purpose and complete harmony in conveying a deeper understanding of God and His Beloved

Son. Thus, they are written for different purposes and readership as follows:

1. Matthew, writing primarily to the Jews, presents Christ as the long-awaited Messiah, the Son of David and legal heir to the throne of Israel - the One who fulfills Old Testament prophecy. Matthew's theme is *Behold Your Rightful King!*

2. Mark, writing mainly to the Romans, portrays Jesus as Servant. Since servants in those days were not worthy of a genealogy, none is presented. Mark's action-oriented record highlights immediacy, and says *Behold Your Humble Servant!*

3. Luke, writing to the Greeks, emphasizes Christ's humanity and compassion as the Perfect Man. Building on the platform of historical reliability, Luke glorifies the Son of Man as the Savior of mankind. Luke's message is *Behold the Perfect Man!*

4. John, writing to all mankind, portrays Christ in His manhood and divinity as the Son of God - the Living Word - the Light of the world - the Way and the Truth - the Resurrection and the Life. His magnificent theme is *Behold the Almighty Son of God!*

In accommodating these distinctive themes, the four Gospels differ in certain other important aspects as well. One Gospel writer deliberately adds to his account what another has omitted. None of the Gospels has the complete life history of Christ. There are intentional gaps which none of the evangelists profess to fill in; for example, the eighteen years of Christ's life from 12 to 30 years of age. On the other hand, every Gospel is very selective and complete in itself. Each writer has recorded that which is relevant and pertinent to his theme. They were all conveyors and guardians of the truth and men of impeccable integrity and courage, especially after Christ's resurrection and ascension.

B. John's Differences with the Synoptics

1. Deeper Theological Thrust of John.

The first three books, Matthew, Mark and Luke, are called the Synoptic Gospels (meaning viewed together) because they are similar in organizational structure and description of Christ's earthly life and ministry. They were written thirty years, more or less, before John's Gospel. With the growth and development of the church, many questions arose during this period concerning the person of Jesus as the Messiah, His nature and work, and the significance of His death. In answering these ques-

tions, John brings out the deepest and most profound truths found in the Gospels. John was the last survivor of the twelve disciples, dying near the close of the first century. It seems as though he was kept on earth by divine Providence, until, like His Master, he, too, had finished the work given him to do.

2. Differences in Structure and Style

The Gospel of John is written in a completely different way than Matthew, Mark and Luke. More than 90 percent of the content is original and is contained only in John. His writing is more spiritual in nature and has an authoritative manner different from the other Gospels. His record is more elevated in tone and more exalted in view than the other three. It is quite different in structure and style, emphasizing Christ's sign-miracles and incredible "I am" statements around the ceremonial Jewish feasts in Jesus' life. These include Tabernacles (celebrating the Lord's dwelling in glory with Israel) and Passover (commemorating God's sparing Israel's first-born in Egypt). Thus, John's approach is more theological than the Synoptics, meaning that he emphasizes the purpose and power behind the words and sign miracles of his Master.

C. Sound Reasons for the Four Gospels

In summary, God has given us sound, understandable reasons for Four Gospels. Jesus Christ is the one glorious theme of them all. But each of the writers focuses on some special feature in Christ's character and divine office. Each directs his "good news" to different groups of people. The Holy Spirit, recognizing the different backgrounds, individual personalities and personal characteristics of each of the Gospel writers, produced through them a logical, harmonious history of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ.

Since A.D. 393, when the Church Council at Hippo validated the twenty-seven books of the New Testament, there has been no serious questioning of the inclusion of the Four Gospels in the New Testament Canon by either Roman Catholics or Protestants (Josh McDowell - [Evidence That Demands a Verdict](#)).

IV. The Author of John

A. Who Wrote the Gospel?

1. Internal Evidence

Although the fourth Gospel, like the three Synoptic Gospels, does not indicate the author's name, most scholars agree that both the Biblical evidence and the writings of early church fathers point to the Apostle John as the author. Some critics have postulated other authors, but B.F. Westcott has given us a series of arguments for identifying John, the son of Zebedee as the author. His conclusions, based on internal evidence and agreed to by the majority of Biblical scholars, indicate that it was written: (a) by a Palestinian Jew; (b) by an eyewitness of the Lord's ministry; (c) by the disciple whom Jesus loved; and (d) by John, the son of Zebedee.

It is evident that John was present with Christ for most things related by him in his Gospel. He was an eye and ear witness of our Lord's labors, travels, discourses, miracles, passion, crucifixion, resurrection and ascension. After the ascension, he took part in all the apostolic activities in Jerusalem up to the day of Pentecost. There, with the others, he partook of the mighty outpouring of the Holy Spirit and was eminently qualified for the leadership role he afterwards held in the Apostolic Church.

2. External Evidence

Along with this sound, internal Biblical evidence, most of the early church fathers gave strong proof in their writings and statements that the Apostle John was the author of the fourth Gospel. Polycarp had been a direct disciple of John's during the Apostle's later years. Polycarp, in turn, had disciples Irenaeus, the Bishop of Lyons. On Polycarp's authority, Irenaeus testified that "John, the disciple of the Lord (i.e. the disciple whom Jesus loved), who reclined on His breast, published the Gospel of John at Ephesus in Asia" (Against Heresies). Following Irenaeus, other early church fathers, including Polycrates of Ephesus, Theophilus of Antioch, Tertullian of Carthage, and Origen, assumed the Apostle John to be the Gospel's author. Clement of Alexandria wrote that John, being aware of the truths set forth in the other Gospels and being moved by the Holy Spirit, composed a "spiritual gospel" (Eusebius' Ecclesiastical History). The modern theologian, F.F. Bruce, writes, "From Irenaeus onwards there is virtual unanimity in the church on the canonicity and authorship of the fourth Gospel (by the Apostle John)" (The Gospel of John).

3. One Exception.

Since the Second Century, the fourth Gospel has been designated "According to John". Although Christian tradition and most scholarship accept that the Apostle John, the son of Zebedee, is the author, there is one small exception. Scholars are unanimous in their conclusion that some textual evidence and difference of writing style indicate that Chapter 8:1-11 was not a part of John's original Gospel. All agree, however, that this passage is an inspired part of the Canon of Scripture and belongs in one of the Gospels as the Word of God. Since the early Church Councils considered it inspired by God and placed it in the Gospel of John, we can accept that it was done under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

B. The Apostle John's Background.

1. Immediate Family

John was the son of Zebedee and Salome (Mark 1:19; compare Mark 16:1 with Matthew 27:56). His brother, James, was also a disciple of Jesus and was probably the elder of the two since he is usually mentioned first. Their father, Zebedee, was probably in good circumstances as a fisherman since he employed hired servants (Mark 1:20). Scripture seems to indicate that Salome was the sister of the Virgin Mary (compare Matthew 27:56 with John 19:25), and if correct, Jesus and the brothers, James and John, were cousins.

2. Personality Traits

John was a disciple of John the Baptist before becoming a follower of Jesus. We know little about his personage except that he and his brother, James, apparently were aggressive and somewhat impulsive with flashes of anger and self-assertiveness (Mark 10:35-41). Jesus called them "*sons of thunder*" (Mark 3:17) because of their responses to certain situations (Luke 9:49-50, 54-55). Even with these pent-up emotions showing forth on occasion, John is known as "the apostle of love", both from his self-description as "*the disciple whom Jesus loved*" (John 13:23) and the loving nature he developed from being around Christ.

3. Friendship With Jesus

For three years, John lived with and learned from his beloved Master and mentor and enjoyed a very special relationship with Jesus. This unique friendship with the Lord permitted him to: observe the raising of Jairus' daughter (Mark 5:37; Luke 8:51); be present at Christ's Transfiguration (Matthew

17:1; Mark 9:2); lean against the Lord at the institution of the Last Supper (John 13:23); be near to Jesus in His pre-arrest prayer time in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26:37); and courageously stand at the foot of the cross and accept responsibility to take care of Jesus' mother (John 19:26). This remarkable friendship enabled John to attain the most profound and penetrating insights into the spiritual background and life of the carpenter from Nazareth.

4. Christ's Inner Circle

Along with Peter and James, John comprised Christ's inner circle among the disciples and the three of them were with Him on several special occasions including the Transfiguration (Matthew 17:1-13.) After the Lord's resurrection and ascension, John became one of the pillars of the church in Jerusalem (Galatians 2:9.)

5. New Testament Authorship

The Apostle John wrote five books of the New Testament: the Gospel, three Epistles, and Revelation. At the time he wrote, the life and work of Jesus were well known. The "good news" of Jesus Christ had been preached, Paul and Peter had suffered martyrdom, and all the other apostles had died. It is believed that he wrote the fourth Gospel between A.D. 80 and 98. Scholars are not able to arrive at a consensus as to the precise timing or order of John's major contributions to the Bible.

C. The Apostle of Love

1. Transformed Life

John will forever be known as "*the disciple whom Jesus loved*" (John 13:23, 21:7, 21:20.) Christ's immeasurable love and compassion so impacted and inspired his life that he was transformed from a passionate "*son of thunder*" to an Apostle of Love. John's many disciples, including Polycarp and the recipients of his epistles, knew him not only as an Apostle of Jesus, but as a loving, caring teacher-shepherd who endearingly called them "*My little children*" (1 John 2:1) and "*beloved*" (1 John 3:21; 3 John 2.) His epistles emphasize over and over that we are to "*love in truth*" and "*love one another*", and instruct us to "*not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth*" (1 John 3:18.)

2. John's Final Words

R.V.G. Tasker writes in the Tyndale New Testament Commentaries on John, "John testified in his teaching, probably up to the time of his death, to

what Jesus had said and done. The nature of the apostle's testimony given in his extreme old age is reflected in a moving and well-known passage in Jerome's Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians, here quoted in Westcott's translation:

'When he (Apostle John) tarried at Ephesus to extreme old age, and could only with difficulty be carried to the church in the arms of his disciples, and was unable to give utterance to many words, he used to say no more at their several meetings than this, 'Little children, love one another'. At length, the disciples and fathers who were there, wearied with always hearing the same words, said, 'Master, why dost thou always say this?' 'It is the Lord's command,' was his worthy reply, 'and if this alone be done, it is enough'."

As we undertake this life-transforming study of John together, let us thoughtfully heed these wise words from the aged Apostle John, the beloved disciple who listened, watched, touched and fellowshiped intimately with the Lord Jesus Christ in His glorious three-year ministry on earth.

Next week, we will study Part Two of the Introduction to the Gospel of John, including a discussion of the Purpose of the Gospel, Substance and Style, Focus and Impact, and Christ's Miracles and Incredible "*I am*" statements.

V. Memory Verse: 2 Timothy 3:16

God speaks directly to us through His Word. Most evangelical pastors and theologians strongly recommend the memorization of special truths, promises and commands of God as vitally important in our lives. Committing to memory and hiding His still, small voice in our hearts provides a divine, interactive resource that enables us to co-partner with the Holy Spirit in times of trials and blessings.

A Scripture verse or passage will be suggested occasionally for your memorization. Although it is optional, we strongly urge you to undertake the extra few minutes to lock these words in your soul. It will benefit you with an unsurpassable peace and an affirming sense of God's righteous right hand upholding you during all of life's situations, circumstances, problems and difficulties.