
Study Series: John

The Big Picture: Some things to keep in mind when reading John's Gospel

The story that the writer of the Fourth Gospel tells of Jesus is strikingly different from that of Matthew, Mark, and Luke (together often called the “synoptic gospels”). John’s Gospel contains some of the most well-known and beloved sayings attributed to Jesus about himself. For example, it is in John’s Gospel that Jesus makes statements that he is “the bread of life,” “the light of the world,” “the good shepherd,” and “the way, the truth, and the life,” among others.

It is interesting to note that John’s Gospel does not contain a single parable of Jesus. Moreover, there are no exorcisms anywhere in John. Instead, Jesus delivers long philosophical speeches whose subject matter is often himself (e.g., 5.19-47; 10.1-18; 14.1—17.26). Jesus is neither baptized nor tempted in the wilderness in John’s Gospel, either. Whereas in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus’ ministry lasts only a year, in John’s Gospel it lasts two or three years. John’s Jesus existed in heaven with God before the creation of the cosmos (cf. Philippians 2.6-11 and Colossians 1.15-20). Jesus descended into the world, embodied in human flesh, at a divinely ordained moment in human history (John 1.1-3, 14; 8.58; 12.41; 13.3; 17.5). This idea is nowhere to be found in the synoptics. Unlike what we find in the synoptics, Jesus’ miracles in John’s Gospel are intended to serve as *demonstrative proof* of his identity. Therefore, the author refers to them as “signs.”

The arrangement of John’s Gospel is quite different from that of the synoptics. The upheaval at the Temple takes place toward the end of Jesus’ ministry in Matthew (21.12-13), Mark (11.15-17), and Luke (19.45, 46), but it marks the beginning of Jesus’ ministry in John (2.12-25). Throughout the synoptics, Jesus ministers primarily in Galilee and the surrounding region and then travels to Jerusalem at the end. In John’s Gospel, Jesus is constantly traveling back and forth between Galilee and Judea. Finally, in the first three Gospels, Jesus is not recognized as the Christ until Peter’s confession at Caesarea Philippi (Matthew 16.1-4; Mark 8.27-33; Luke 9.18-22). In the fourth Gospel, however, Jesus seems to be recognized as the Messiah quite openly from very early in his ministry.

John’s presentation of Jesus is unique, not only among the four canonical Gospels but also in relation to most of the New Testament writings. The prologue (1.1-18) presents Jesus as the incarnate Word. This “Word” was present with God when God created and gave life to everything. This Word became a human being (1.14), so people could see what God is really like. John is thus the first of the four Gospels to ascribe pre-existence to Jesus. The “beginning of the Gospel” for John is not a specific moment in time; it precedes time and history. It is there even before the creation of the world. Consequently, John’s Gospel claims to be about the very character of God as revealed in the *person* of Jesus Christ. (Consider Matthew 11.25-27 and the parallel in Luke 10.21, 22.) The text may well have come from an earlier source to which Matthew and Luke both had access. Note the emphasis on Father and Son, knowing God, and revelation.

Finally, John’s Gospel portrays a troubled relationship between the followers of Jesus and those who were against him. This Gospel helps us better understand the struggle between those who followed Jesus’ new teachings and those who felt they could not do so and still remain loyal to the teachings of the Law of Moses.

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Questions about John 1.1-51

1. Who is the “Word” of God, and what did this Word do? What might this Word offer to people living today?
2. What other titles for Jesus are suggested in John 1? What makes each of these titles important?
3. What do you think is the main purpose of this chapter? Why? Which verses support your point of view?

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Questions about John 2.1—11.45

1. What do the many miracles in chapters 2-11 say about Jesus? What effect did Jesus' miracles have on people?
2. What did Jesus mean when he described himself as “the bread that gives life” (6.35, CEV)? As “the source of life-giving water” (7.38, 39, CEV)? As “the light for the world” (8.12, CEV)? As “the good shepherd” (10.14, CEV)?
3. What was remarkable about Jesus' meeting with the Samaritan woman at the well (4.3-42)? What point did Jesus make about worship (4.21-24)?
4. What did Jesus do that made the leaders angry enough to kill him (5.17, 18)? Why did they want to get rid of Jesus?
5. What did Jesus mean when he said, “If the Son gives you freedom, you are free” (8.36, CEV)? In what areas of your life do you feel you are not “free”?
6. When Jesus says he has come to give sight to the blind and make blind everyone who can see (9.39, CEV), what does he mean? In your life, what would you like to “see” more clearly? Why?

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Questions about John 12.1—21.25

1. Shortly before he was put to death, Jesus visited Mary and Martha in Bethany (12.1-7). What did Mary do and what did it have to do with Jesus' death? What was Judas' complaint? How did Jesus respond to this complaint? What did Jesus mean (12.7)?
2. Reread 12.23-26. What is the meaning of Jesus' words? Is anything worth risking death? If so, what?
3. Why did Jesus wash the feet of his disciples (13.1-17)? Why is this act surprising? How can Christians serve one another?
4. What is the "new command" Jesus gave his followers (13. 34, 35)? How can this command be followed?
5. Reread 14.6 and 15.1-3, and explain what Jesus means by these statements.
6. How did Jesus promise to help his followers after he left to be with the Father (16.5-15)?
7. How did Jesus reply to Pilate's question (18.33-37)? What is Jesus' kingdom?
8. What is the meaning of Jesus' statement in 20.29?
9. Who were the first persons to go to Jesus' tomb on Sunday morning (20.1-10)? What did they find, and what were their reactions?
10. What task did Jesus give his disciples when he met them after he was raised from death (20.21-23)? What does this mean for the church today?
11. What command did Jesus give to Peter (21.15-19)? What did that mean for Peter? What does it mean for Jesus' followers (the church) today?