



The
Gospel
of
John

Dr. Robert Holst

LIVING WAY
BIBLE STUDY



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WHO WE ARE

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Living Way Bible Study, Inc.

info4LWBS@aol.com

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LWBS Four-Step Method

Living Way Bible Study suggests this four-step method:

- 1. PERSONAL** – The student prays for guidance from the Holy Spirit and answers the Personal Application (P.A.) questions at home using only the Bible (no commentaries).
- 2. SMALL GROUPS** – The class meets for an opening and divides into small groups of 8–10 people. The small group leader guides the group through the P.A. questions, encouraging each to share their answers and discuss further as time allows.
- 3. THE MESSAGE** – The lecture or message is given by a pastor or layperson who has researched the material and presents the study, giving personal insight and augmenting, but not duplicating, the author's comments.
- 4. THE NARRATIVE** – The author's comments or narrative, along with the P.A. questions for the next lesson, are given out at the end of the class. At the next class meeting, before answering the P.A. questions, the small groups may choose to review the author's comments of the last lesson, and share what each has highlighted as meaningful or important.

Each lesson should be stapled together according to the number of the lesson in the right-hand corner of the page. The P.A. questions for the next week should be attached after the author's narrative for the current week, as they will be the home study for the next class session.

The first meeting of the class is an introduction to the study. Since the members of the small groups have no P.A. questions to discuss at the first meeting, they may use the time to get acquainted or to tell what they hope to receive by studying this course. At the first meeting, the lecturer presents background information about the course, using the Introduction lesson as a guide.

With this four-step method the student has the opportunity to study the particular section of Scripture covered by the lesson from four different approaches. This emphasizes the Bible text and gives the student an understanding and ownership for each section studied.



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“Our Bible Study in Genesis is in full swing and I had to let you know so far it is a great success. We have been struggling for some time attracting people to our studies and finally I think we have hit the jackpot! We have a full house (room) of enthusiastic, constant participants, including MEN! Our lessons are animated to say the least and everyone participates fully. ... We have been using your studies since 2003 and really enjoy them as they are very precise and informative, easy to understand and uplifting.”

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“Currently in our 10th year ...continue to be blessed... have between 70-90+ men and women... some are non-members of our church... use to plug new members in.”

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Lakeside Community Lutheran Church (Webster, WI - ELCA):

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“We are going on our 30th year in LWBS. Our group of about 40 really loves it and grows in our faith with each new study.”

Crown of Life Lutheran Church (Sun City, AZ):

“I used the Thessalonians study for the Ministry Staff Retreat (7 of us) and will be repeating a small portion of the study for a three week session with approximately 50 adults. The material is excellent and very helpful to me as I prepare to teach.”



The Gospel According to John

DR. ROBERT HOLST

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Author Information – Dr. Robert Holst

LWBS Courses: *The Gospel of John*

The Letters of John

Born in Austin, MN – baptized at Trinity Lutheran Church, Dexter, MN – Confirmed at St. John's Lutheran Church, Austin, MN.

Graduated from Concordia High School and College, St. Paul, MN and Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, MO.

Vicarage spent in Calgary, Alberta, Canada.

Received Master of Sacred Theology from Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, MO.

Received Ph. D. in Biblical Studies from Princeton Theological Seminary.

Married Lynne (nee) Grabowski - three children, Mark, Thomas and Ruth.

Served as assistant pastor at St. Paul's Lutheran Church, Hardin, IL.

Served five years as a missionary in Papua New Guinea.

Taught at Concordia Senior College, Fort Wayne, IN (1970-76). Taught at Christ College Irvine, Irvine, CA (1976-91).

Served as President of Concordia College, St. Paul, MN. (1991-2011)



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“John’s Gospel is no idle tale. Its goal is not entertainment. It calls for commitment. Like great music, it begins softly before reaching a dramatic crescendo. You may enjoy the music or plug your ears but you cannot ignore it.”

INTRODUCTION

Thank God for the Gospel of John. It preserves and teaches the story of Jesus with tremendous clarity and force. Often using simple words John conveys complex truths. “God so loved the world that He sent His only Son that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). That simple so-called “Gospel in a nutshell” summarizes the Christian faith well. It leaves us pondering the relationship of the Father and the Son, the uniqueness of Jesus, the meaning of faith, the threat of judgment, the blessing of eternal life and the mystery of God’s love.

PURPOSE OF THE GOSPEL

There is no mystery why the Gospel was written. John 20:31 clearly gives the goal. “These (signs) are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.” The words ring clear with typical Johannine simplicity and truth. Yet careful consideration reveals typical Johannine complexity. For example, what is “life?” *Is it spiritual life, or life after death, or both?* Does “believing” mean to know that Jesus is God’s Son, to be aware of His power, to trust Him as reliable, to expect Him to solve life’s problems, to understand the value of His death and resurrection, or all of the above? What does it mean to call Jesus “Christ” and “Son of God?” Do the titles complement each other or teach different truths? Does “in His name” refer to Jesus’ powerful signs (miracles), His teaching and revelation of God’s truth, His entire life and ministry, or does it even hint to Christian baptism? Hopefully, careful study of the Gospel will help us answer such questions.

AUTHORSHIP

Studies on the Gospel of John often begin by noting the tradition that claims the book was written by John, the Son of Zebedee, about 90 AD in

Ephesus. The tradition may be true, but the Gospel itself suggests such information is unimportant. The Gospel author remains anonymous (21:24). John, the Son of Zebedee, is never even named in the book. Unlike Paul's letters, John's Gospel does not tell by whom it was originally written. Rather than evaluate the tradition about authorship, profitable study begins with the study of the Gospel itself.

“On the other hand, John's uniqueness is not limited to theological insights. Thanks to John's Gospel we have a more complete historical understanding of Jesus' ministry.”

JOHN'S RELATION TO GOSPEL OF MATTHEW, MARK AND LUKE

The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke are often called the “Synoptic Gospels” because, as the Greek words behind “synoptic” suggest, they “look together” with a “common perspective” at Jesus' life and work. The Gospel of John presents the story of Jesus from such a unique perspective that it is usually studied somewhat independent of the other three Gospels. For example, read how the different Gospels describe the events in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night Jesus is arrested (Matthew 26:36-56, Mark 14:32-50, Luke 22:40-53, John 18:1-11). Matthew, Mark and Luke show the agony and humiliation of Jesus. John shows Jesus, as God, dominating the arrest procedure. He “gives” Himself to fulfilling God's will.

As another example of Johannine uniqueness, read the stories of Jesus cleansing the temple (Matthew 21:12-13, Mark 11:15-17, Luke 19:45-46 and John 2:13-17). One major difference is the timing of the cleansing. The Synoptics record it after the entry into Jerusalem but John puts it early in Jesus' ministry. Martin Luther, and scholars long before and after him, have debated the importance of the differences. They debate whether Jesus cleansed the temple once or twice. If twice, why did John report only the earlier incident and if once why did John tell it at a time so different from that of the Synoptics? Some Christians think that John tells of the event early in Jesus' career for theological (rather than chronological) reasons. John shows from the very beginning how Jesus critiques old religious practices and calls for a new relationship with God. With

the signs in Jerusalem the greatness of Jesus begins to unfold as promised to Nathanael (John 1:51). Furthermore, John's version eliminates the possibility of unbelievers thinking that Jesus was a revolutionary who was crucified because He tried to instigate a rebellion in the temple precincts. As you note ways in which John differs from the Synoptics, think about ways in which John may be using the material to teach more clearly Jesus' meaning.

On the other hand, John's uniqueness is not limited to theological insights. Thanks to John's Gospel we have a more complete historical understanding of Jesus' ministry. Most of Jesus' public ministry reported in the Synoptics is in Galilee while John also describes His work in or near Jerusalem. If we read only Synoptics, we could think that Jesus' public ministry lasted less than one year because He goes to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover only one time (Matthew 21:1ff, Mark 11:1ff, Luke 19:28ff). Because of John, we speak of Jesus' three year public ministry. Only John records Jesus going to Jerusalem for three Passover celebrations (d. John 2:13ff, 6:4, 13:1ff).

Part of the greatness of John's Gospel lies in telling us things not recorded in the Synoptics. Part of the mystery of John's Gospel lies in not telling us major important things about Jesus that the Synoptics all record. For example, in the Gospel of John there are no birth stories, no report of Jesus' own baptism or His subsequent temptations. John records none of the Synoptic parables, fewer miracles (John records seven signs, but Mark's shorter Gospel records nineteen miracles), no confession by Peter at Caesarea Philippi, no transfiguration, no words of institution of either baptism or eucharist, no prayerful struggle in Gethsemane, no help by Simon of Cyrene in carrying the cross, no darkness on Calvary and no cry of rejection from the cross. Did John deliberately leave out (Synoptic) information already known? Or did John, without reference to the Synoptic Gospels, simply tell the story differently?

Reference to the Johannine materials not found in the Synoptics also helps us think about such questions. For example, only John records the confession of John the Baptist, that Jesus is the Lamb of God (1:29), the wedding at Cana (2:1ff), the conversation with Nicodemus (3:1ff), the mission with the Samaritan woman (4:4ff), the healing at Bethesda (5:1ff), the self explanation after

feeding 5,000 people (6:25ff), the events at the Feast of the Tabernacles (7:1ff), the healing of the blind man in Jerusalem (9:1ff), the events surrounding the death of Lazarus (11:4ff), the upper room teachings (14-17), the events of Easter involving Peter, Mary Magdalene and other disciples (20:1-29), and the post-Easter events near the Sea of Tiberias (21:1-22).

Not only does John record different events in the life of Jesus but he also shows a different side of Jesus' teaching. To become more aware of some of the differences, read the Sermon on the Mount in chapter five through seven of Matthew and then read Jesus sayings in John 6:32-49 or in chapters fourteen through seventeen. Note that Matthew's report of the Sermon on the Mount emphasizes human conduct and it does not deal explicitly with who Jesus is. The focus is God's loving power and human beings' loving response. In John, however, note how much Jesus talks about Himself and His relationship to His Father and to His disciples. In Matthew, Jesus proclaims God's way, truth, and life. In John, Jesus shows that He is the way, the truth, and the life.

In summary, when we study the Gospel of John it is helpful to keep in mind the uniqueness of John. John is not merely telling the history about Jesus but wants us to share the faith of Jesus. Awareness of John's uniqueness often enriches our understanding of Jesus. In the Synoptics, Jesus speaks explicitly of the Kingdom of God but merely implies His relationship to the Father. On the contrary, in John's Gospel, Jesus speaks explicitly about His relationship with the Father while implying the truths about the Kingdom of God. In the Synoptics Jesus stresses what God is working while in John Jesus stresses how God is working in His Son. As the statement of purpose in John 20:30-31 told us, John writes with a special concern that we understand Jesus.

THE FIRST READERS OF JOHN'S GOSPEL

Who first read John's Gospel? Some readers must have known Jewish tradition very well. The Gospel contains some nuances that would be understood only by Jewish people. John is the most Jewish Gospel even though Matthew quotes the Old Testament more often. As we will see when we read the Gospel, John does not frequently quote the Old Testament but rather points to its allusions

and symbolic references. For example, Jewish-Christian readers would fully understand and treasure Jesus' allusion to Jacob's ladder (John 1:51. Cf. Genesis 28:12). Knowing Jesus is like having Jacob's Bethel experience. Gentiles would wonder what John 1:51 is all about. Jewish people would also catch the echo of Exodus 3:14 in Jesus' saying, "Before Abraham was, I AM" (John 8:58). The "I AM" which Moses heard from a burning bush now comes from Jesus' own mouth (Cf. John 1:17). Jewish people familiar with the usage of water during Tabernacles would find special irony and force in Jesus' proclamations on the last day of the feast (John 7:37-39). Repeatedly, the book contrasts the significance of Jesus and His message to Moses, national Jewish holidays, and Jewish traditions. Such claims reach out to Jewish people. John's Gospel clearly seeks to convince people of Jewish background that Jesus calls them to believe.

On the other hand, the Gospel seems to be written for some readers who know little about Jewish traditions. The Gospel contains several editorial comments to help such readers understand the story. For example, John translates simple Hebrew names and titles (e.g. John 1:38, 41, 42). He offers an explanation (4:9) to readers who apparently do not know about Jewish-Samaritan segregation practices. It reminds me of the way we today must tell young people about segregation laws in the United States that were in force a generation ago. Finally, only readers who had never visited Jerusalem would need to be told the distance of Bethany from Jerusalem (11:18). These and other explanatory comments hint that some readers lived far removed from the time and places of Jesus.

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"The most important theme in the Gospel of John is the meaning of Jesus."

MAJOR THEMES IN THE GOSPEL

Read John 1:1-18 and John 20:30-31 and you have a good review of major themes in John's Gospel. Nevertheless, let me point out a few themes.

1 The most important theme in the Gospel of John is the meaning of Jesus. He is the Messiah, that is, God's appointed leader. John shows how Jesus fulfills and surpasses expectations and hopes based on the Old

Testament and even Jewish traditions. Jesus is also the Son of God. John records again and again how Jesus related Himself and His work to the Father. Almost one hundred times the Gospel points to God as Father and all but eleven of these are out of the mouth of Jesus. Christology, the teaching of Christ, dominates the Gospel.

2. The Gospel calls people to faith. John explores the meaning of faith and also doubt. Strangers, like Samaritans (4:42), believe, but a disciple, like Thomas (20:25), doubts. Seeing a miraculous sign can create faith (11:45) but its report can also create incredible unbelief (11:53). The signs are recorded so that people will believe (20:30) but Jesus Himself declares that believing without seeing is more blessed (20:29). Faith is more important than miracles.

3. Life or eternal life is a major theme. The Gospel wants us to know what true life is and how we get it. John makes us think about the mysterious relationship of the Christian life on earth and the life after death. As we will see, the gift of life in chapter eleven deals not merely with the physical death of Lazarus but especially with the spiritual death of Martha, Mary, and others.

4. John emphasizes witnessing or revelation. Jesus is the light which means that He reveals the truth. The verb “to witness” appears about thirty times in John but only once each in Matthew and Luke and never in Mark. The noun “witness” occurs fourteen times in John, never in Matthew, three times in Mark, and but once in Luke. John wants to teach us how the Father witnesses the Son, the Son witnesses the Father and, in Jesus, we witness to truth, and to life.

5. John emphasizes the totality of God's action. God loves the whole world. Jewish traditions and festivals find deeper meaning in Jesus. Pagan Samaritans and Greeks seek Him. Human needs for essentials like food and water are met and surpassed by Jesus. Human institutions, for example the mighty Roman empire exemplified by Pilate, stands confused and indecisive compared to Jesus. The true world ruler is Jesus, not Rome. The gift of the Holy Spirit connects the past actions of God in Jesus with the future activities of God in the lives of all His disciples.

THE STRUCTURE OF JOHN'S GOSPEL

Some people prefer to study John's Gospel like a seamless robe. They think that one section leads into another without a break and the stories build on and interpret each other. A deed of Jesus often precedes a teaching by Jesus which builds on and explains the deed. No doubt if you read through the Gospel without interruption you will experience its unfolding power.

On the other hand, Christians for centuries have divided the Gospel into chapters and verses and proposed various outlines. Such logical divisions also facilitate study and understanding. Usually John 1:1-18 is identified as one unit and called “the prologue.” It serves as an introduction to the Gospel and can be studied independently. It anticipates the theology of the book but does not report stories.

The bulk of the Gospel tells what Jesus did and said. Often the first twelve chapters are described as Jesus' “public ministry” and chapters thirteen through twenty stand as His “private ministry.” In scholarly literature, the units are often called “The Book of Signs” and “The Book of Glory,” respectively. The division is helpful although I prefer to see chapters eleven and twelve as a hinge-section connecting the life of Jesus with His death and resurrection.

Until recently, chapter twenty-one has been viewed as a strange, even unnecessary, late addition to the Gospel. It is often called an appendix. I think that is wrong. Chapter twenty-one effectively bridges the gap between Easter and the ongoing activity of the church.

A FINAL WORD

As you read and study the Gospel according to John, I pray that you will feel the power of the Holy Spirit giving you new understanding and insights into the great truth of our Christian faith and life. John's Gospel is no idle tale. Its goal is not entertainment. It calls for commitment. Like great music, it begins softly before reaching a dramatic crescendo. You may enjoy the music or plug your ears but you cannot ignore it. When we read John we too cannot ignore the message. The truth soars high and dear. The invitation is to faith. The choice is acceptance or rejection. May God enrich your faith.

PERSONAL APPLICATION – JOHN 1:1-18

Pray that the Word of God will bless you as you read John 1:1-18.

1. John 1:1-18 is usually called the prologue. What is the purpose of The Prologue?

2. What words or verses in the prologue interest you the most? Why?

3. Read the introductory verses of each of the other Gospels. Write what each suggest about the purpose of the book and what it means to you.
Matthew 1:1-17

Mark 1:1

Luke 1:1-4

4. Why do you think John's prologue is so different from the introductory verses of the other Gospels?

5. How is the beginning of John similar to the beginning of Genesis?

6. How does the similarity influence your thinking as you begin reading John?

7. Describe the status and function of the "Word" in John 1:1-5.
What was it?

What did it do?

What is it doing now?

8. Why do you think John began with the term "Word" instead of simply using the name Jesus? Think about how God creates in Genesis chapter 1 and the role of the Word of God for the Hebrew prophets before you reply.

9. Compare John 1:3 to Colossians 1:17. What activity of Jesus is described?

How does awareness of Jesus' activity affect your attitude toward creation?

10. What does "life" mean to you? Read John 1:4, 3:3, 5:25, 11:25-26 and 20:20-31.

11. In John 1:4 & 5, what do you think light and darkness mean or symbolize?

12. How is John the Baptist (John 1:6-8 and 15) a model for us?

13. John carefully shows that John the Baptist is not greater than Jesus. List some things that you sometimes make more important than Jesus.

14. According to verses 12 and 13, how do people not become children of God?

Name some incorrect reasons why people today think they have a relationship with God.

15. According to verse fourteen, what happens when the Word becomes flesh?

16. Today, how can Jesus "become flesh and dwell among us" so that the glory of God can be seen?

17. Compare Exodus 34:6 and Psalm 86:15 to John 1:14 and 16. How do the Old Testament passages help you understand Jesus?

18. What does it mean to you that (1:16) we all receive "grace upon grace?" List some "grace upon grace" that you have experienced.

19. Why are you thankful for the law given through Moses but even more thankful for grace and truth in Jesus Christ?

20. According to John 1:18, what is the work of Jesus?

How does this work affect your faith?



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“If the prologue is comparable to a musical overture, the concluding verses provide a powerful theological crescendo.”

PURPOSE

Imagine yourself in a beautiful music hall awaiting an opera sung by famous soloists with the music provided by a great orchestra with a renowned director. The lights are lowered and you watch the director step to the podium. His baton is raised and music fills the air. Before the curtain goes up or any note is sung, that magnificent orchestra plays an overture introducing the musical themes of the evening. The overture previews the concert and alerts the listeners to the power, pathos, and beauty to follow. The artistic appetite is whetted.

The first eighteen verses of the Gospel of John are like a grand overture. Usually called the prologue, the verses introduce the Gospel by presenting major themes. But they do more than introduce ideas. They whet the theological appetite by raising profound theological questions. Where does the world come from? Who made it? Why are we alive? What is the origin of light? What does it mean that people receive or reject light? What is the importance of John the Baptist? How does John compare to Jesus? How does Jesus compare to Moses? What sort of person is Jesus? What is His relationship to God the Father? The prologue displays the mystery of God and the thoughtful reader wants to learn more.

BACKGROUND

Although the prologue is an excellent introduction to the Gospel, it also makes sense if studied alone. In fact, one major theme in the prologue, the “Word” or, to transliterate the Greek, the “Logos” theme, never appears elsewhere in the Gospel. The independence of the prologue and its careful organization have led many Biblical scholars to think the prologue was

a hymn sung in the early church. For example, the Jerusalem Bible prints the prologue in poetic form. If the scholarly conjecture is true, the Gospel begins with words familiar to the worshipping Christians. Like a pastor beginning a sermon by quoting words from a familiar hymn, the Gospel of John starts with words expressing the convictions of the people. The familiar words catch the attention of Christians and put them in a devotional frame of mind as they begin reading.

“John begins by shining the light of the Gospel on all time and history.”

UNIQUENESS OF THE PROLOGUE

Let us rapidly survey the Johannine Prologue by comparing it to the way the other Gospels begin. Unlike Mark, John displays no sense of urgency. Unlike Matthew, John does not begin explicitly in Jewish traditions. And unlike Luke, John does not argue for his own credibility. John starts the prologue as far back as the human mind can move (1:1) and ends with a revelation no mind can discover (1:18). The mysteries of creation and divine purpose come together in the unending struggle of light and darkness (good and evil), the witness of a man named John, human reception or rejection of the light and the fullness of grace coming in the Word made flesh. John begins by shining the light of the Gospel on all time and history. The prologue speaks to persecuted Christians, pious Jews, educated Greeks, noble Romans and indeed all people of every time and place.

“The mysterious Word is connected with God, and then creation is inextricably bound to both God and the Word.”

JOHN 1:1-5

I like to call the first five verses of John “staircase poetry.” The words build on each other moving the theological revelation forward. Note how the words weave together and interlock. The mysterious Word is connected with God, and then creation is inextricably bound to both God and the Word. Finally, the Word is the source of the life and light shining into darkness. Key words to consider in 1:1-5 are “In the beginning,” Word, life, light, and darkness.

“In the beginning” is a pregnant expression that challenges Greeks, Romans, and Jews to go back to the basics. What is primal? John challenges Greeks and Romans who consider “man the measure of all things” to rethink their priorities. How does God fit into the origins of their anthropocentric world view? The words also defy the wisdom of pagan philosophers who thought the world evolved from fire, water, earth, air, or some primal element. Jewish readers would find also echoes of Biblical truth. “In the beginning” is not only the first phrase of Genesis 1:1 but also translates the Hebrew name of Genesis. By alluding to “In the Beginning” (or ‘Genesis’) the first three words call Jews not only to think about elements of primal matter but also matters of primal faith.

THE “WORD” OR “LOGOS”

The Greek word “logos” taunts and torments interpreters because its full meaning cannot be captured in the translation “Word.” A United Bible Society study suggests a search for equivalents to “an expression with meaning, a message, a communication, a type of revelation.” (cf. Barclay M. Newman and Eugene A. Nida, *Translator’s Handbook on the Gospel of John*, p.7). To keep open a full range of meaning, sometimes it is helpful simply to speak the Greek word “logos.”

“Logos” offers various meanings and allusions for different readers. The famous Greek philosopher, Heraclitus, writing (in Ephesus) about 600 years before John, thought that “logos” gave order to the universe. Pagan philosophers, like the stoics, considered “logos” the divine cause that determined individual and corporate fate. A Greek speaking Jew named Philo frequently used “Logos” to describe someone or something that connected God and matter and administered the divine plan for the world.

The term “logos” holds even richer allusions for readers familiar with the Hebrew Bible. Genesis 1 revealed that creation happens when God gives the word and the Psalmist (33:6) sang about that truth. The Law taught that the Word guided and even gave life (Deuteronomy 32:46-47; cf. Psalm 119, especially verse 105). We often incorrectly refer to God’s guidance as the “Ten Commandments” but the Hebrew Bible simply calls them the “Ten Words” (Exodus 34:28, Deuteronomy 4:13, 10:4). The word of the Lord made prophets see and proclaim

the truth (e.g. Jeremiah 1:4, Hosea 1:1, Joel 1:1, Jonah 1:1, Micah 1:1, Zephaniah 1:1, Haggai 1:1, Zechariah 1:1, Malachi 1:1). Furthermore, the Word had an inherent power which insured its effectiveness (Isaiah 55:11). Using a concordance you can find Old Testament allusions to the Word which filled the minds of readers of John 1:1. Finally, Christian readers may have thought of the Gospel itself (Mark 4:14-15 and Acts 8:25).

THE WORD WAS GOD – JOHN 1:1C

In the third phrase of John 1:1, people who deny the Trinity often point out that there is no definite article *“the”* before the word *“God.”* They argue the phrase means *“The Word was a god.”* They are wrong. There is a technical Greek grammatical interpretation, usually called Colwell’s Law, that proves that such translation is not required. The Greek is similar to English since the translation *“The Word was God”* implies, *“the Word was the God.”* Often in English (as in Greek), we need not use the word *“the”* to be specific. For example, we refer to the same God if we say *“The God of love is good”* or *“God is love.”* The Greek word for God appears without a definite article (no *“the”*) also in John 1:6, 12, 13, and 18.

“Life is a major theme in the Gospel of John.”

IN HIM WAS LIFE – JOHN 1:1-4

Life is a major theme in the Gospel of John. In fact, enabling people to have life is the very purpose of the Gospel (20:30-31). Many people think so much about life in this world that they ignore the reality of death and avoid the question of existence after death. John has words of warning to such people (John 5:28). There is life after death. But some people, including Christians, think so much about life after death that they overlook the power and purpose of God in their lives now. John has a special concern to help such people using Jesus’ teaching about spiritual life before death (John 3:3, 5:25-26).

THE LIGHT OF MEN SHINES IN DARKNESS – JOHN 1:4-5

“Light” in John’s Gospel symbolizes revelation, truth, goodness or God’s love. The corresponding metaphor “darkness” symbolizes sin, human rebellion, ignorance or evil. Jesus’ claim to be the light of the world (e.g. 8:12) means that Jesus reveals the truth of God to people. In symbolic and literal ways, John’s Gospel refers again

and again to the revelation of God’s truth in Jesus. In the prologue itself, there are two more references. Symbolic language is used in verse 9 (“The true light that enlightens every man was coming into the world”) but the truth stands explicit in verse 18. (“No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father’s side, has made him known”).

JOHN 1:6-8 & 15

The role of John (the Baptist) as witness dominates these verses. The theme has positive and negative intent. The verses, together with verse 15, show the importance of John but also carefully distinguishes primary (“being the light”) and secondary (“witnessing to the light”) responsibilities. Stress on the secondary nature of John (the Baptist) suggests that some Christians may have overemphasized his importance. Perhaps, like some Christians today, they loved him so much (as a saint?) that they thought more about him than they did about Jesus. The idea becomes more credible when we remember that some Christians in Ephesus, at the time of Paul’s third missionary journey (AD 53-57), knew only about John the Baptist’s baptism (Acts 19:1-5). The positive lesson for all of us, however, remains that we, like John, are witnesses to the light. Yet, negatively, God warns us that denominations, congregations, committees, clergy, individuals, and even Bible study groups are tempted to become self-important. All, like John, deserve mention only because they witness to the light.

JOHN 1:9-13

Here we read clearly of the tragedy of human sin and the necessity of God’s action. Rejection greets God’s light when it comes to the world He made and the people He calls His own. The verses build on 5 (“The light shines in darkness and the darkness has not overcome it”) by showing the astounding human preference of darkness rather than light, evil rather than good. That sad theme will be described repeatedly in the Gospel (e.g. 5:17-18, 6:66, 11:45-53, 19:38). The verses also introduce the call to believe (1:12). The power of God comes to people who believe and makes them God’s children.

Observe how the Gospel carefully describes the Christian relationship to God differently than Jesus’ relationship. The Gospel of John calls Jesus a “son” of God and never a “child”

The Word became flesh, but in the humanity was seen the glory of the One and Only (only begotten) who came from the Father.

of God. (The Greek word for “children” refers to people but the word “son” points to Jesus). The distinction is part of the Gospel’s careful teaching about the uniqueness of Jesus.

JOHN 1:14-18

If the prologue is comparable to a musical overture, the concluding verses provide a powerful theological crescendo. Verse 14 presents the agony and ecstasy of Christology. The Word became flesh, but in the humanity was seen the glory of the One and Only (only begotten) who came from the Father. The word emphasizes the uniqueness of Jesus. The same word is used in Hebrews 11:17 to show the uniqueness of Isaac. The translation “only begotten” became popular after St. Jerome’s (incorrect) translation, because it fought the heresy which claimed that Jesus was “made” by the Father rather than “begotten.”

Verses 15-17 show the greatness of Jesus. He is greater than John the Baptist according to John’s own testimony. Good chronological history would argue that Jesus is John’s successor but sound theology gives priority to Jesus. Verse 16 calls for elimination of historical competition and celebration of the many blessings received by grace. Verse 17 reminds us that God certainly

blessed His people by giving the Law through Moses, but that blessing pales in comparison to grace and truth which came through Jesus Christ.

Truth is a major concern in John’s book, but the meaning is more profound than our own. We, like the Greeks, consider truth an intellectual issue. Something is true or it is false, right or wrong. John usually uses the Hebrew concept of truth. Truth becomes a moral issue. It means trustworthy, faithful, reliable, or honest. Unlike the writings of Paul, the word, grace, never again appears in the Gospel of John. Its usage with truth, in 1:14 and 18, recalls the Old Testament description of God. Psalm 25:10 describes God’s ways as “loving and faithful.” In Exodus 34:6 and Psalm 86:15, God appears as compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness. That Old Testament description of God, John applies to Jesus Christ.

The final verse of the prologue (1:18), summarizes its theological message. Knowledge about God comes not from human experience but from Christ’s revelation. With that majestic note, the prologue ends and we stand eager to learn more about the revelation by reading the words and deeds of Jesus.

PERSONAL APPLICATION – JOHN 1:19-51

Read prayerfully John 1:19-51 and ask the Lord to bless your study of this powerful Gospel.

1. What are the questions which people ask John the Baptist regarding his ministry? (1:19-22)

2. How does John describe his own ministry?

3. Did people expect (or want) more than John's ministry offers? Or, do you think people were pleased that John is not Christ, Elijah, or the prophet? Give reasons for your answer.

4. Do we have false demands or expectations of the church or fellow Christians? List ways in which we may want people, like John the Baptist, to solve our-problems.

5. People question not what John was doing as much as his right to do it (1:25). In what ways might we discredit other people's service to God by asking questions?

6. John the Baptist never explains why he baptizes. Instead, how does he answer the question? (1:26-27)

7. Think of questions or circumstances that are best answered by pointing to Jesus rather than by making a personal defense.

8. What is John's emphatic message concerning Jesus? (1:26-27, 29-34, 36)

9. Why would John the Baptist describe Jesus as the "Lamb of God"? (Exodus 12:5; Isaiah 53)

What meaning might John's listeners give the title?

10. In an urban setting today, where some people understand neither lambs nor the Old Testament symbolism involved, what title might be used to point people to Jesus. (Example: Behold the "green beret!") See: Acts 10:42; 1 John 2:1; Hebrews 7:27, 9:12, 10:10.

11. Two disciples of John the Baptist tell Jesus that they want to know where he is staying. (1:38) Do you think their statement completely presents their interest or are there some unspoken reasons? Why?

12. What is Jesus' response to the disciples' question and what is the result of His response? (1:39-42)

Can the narrative be used as a model for evangelism? If so, how?

13. What is the first thing Jesus does to Simon? (vs. 42)

14. Consider the significance of being people with a "new name." Is it possible to understand life in Christ and even our baptism as (like Peter) receiving a new name? (Romans 6:4; 2 Corinthians 5:17; James 2: 17; 1 Peter 4:14-16; John 10:3)

15. How does Jesus call Philip? (1:43)

What is the full meaning of the words "follow me?" (John 8:12, 10:4-5, 12:26; Matthew 16:24)

16. Why does Nathanael respond so enthusiastically to Jesus? (1:49)

What do the titles mean?

Could the "King of Israel" indicate an incorrect faith? (6:15)

17. How does Jesus expand Nathanael's faith?

Can extraordinary "signs and wonders" sometimes hinder faith? (John 4:48, 20:29; 1 Corinthians 1:22-31)

18. In v. 50-51 what do you think are the greater things that Jesus promises Nathanael?

19. How has this chapter increased your interest in the life of Jesus?



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“Jesus promises Nathanael that, as a disciple, he will see not only God’s power but also God’s love.”

COME SEE THE GREATNESS OF JESUS

Christianity begins with the question, “What do you think about Jesus?” John 1:19-51 poses that question in a variety of forms. What is John the Baptist’s relation to Jesus? What is Jesus’ role as Lamb of God? What is Jesus’ ministry in the Holy Spirit? What is His relation to Moses and the prophets? Is He great? Such questions touch lives of several people as John begins telling the story of Jesus. The reactions of the people illustrate ways in which ancient and modern humans can understand or misunderstand Jesus. Faith, curiosity, and doubt present themselves vividly even before Jesus’ public ministry begins.

This section of study divides into two units. Verses 19 through 34 deal with the witness of John the Baptist. The second unit, verses 35 through 51, tells how five people face the decision of whether or not to follow Jesus. John the Baptist and his testimony introduce the first section. People come to question John’s personal claims and seek his rationale for baptizing people.

Before continuing it is desirable to comment on John’s use of the word “Jews.” It is an important issue since some people charge John with being anti-semitic or anti-Jewish. Frequently the Gospel of John uses the word “Jews” not to describe a race of people but to indicate religious leadership that opposes Jesus. Certain Bible translations interpret the word correctly when they translate “Jewish leaders” (Living Bible) or “Jewish authorities” (Today’s English Version). I like to paraphrase “Jews” with terms like, “religious leaders opposed to Jesus.” For example, the term in verse 19 must indicate such a meaning because the priests and Levites would, in the ethnic sense, also be “Jews.” The main characters in chapter one, including John the Baptist, Andrew, Simon Peter, and Jesus Himself, were ethnic Jews. The Gospel of John is not anti-Jewish. The Gospel of John wants all people, including ethnic Jews, to respond in faith to the Good News of Jesus.

JOHN THE BAPTIST IS QUESTIONED – JOHN 1:19-28

The prologue told us (1:6-8) that John the Baptist was sent by God, not as the light of the world but to bear witness to the light. John 1:19-28 elaborates and illustrates the truth. “Who are you?” stands as a loaded question. The intent of the question would be captured well in American slang with the words, “Who do you think you are anyway?”

The inquisitors suggest three options. First, “Is John the Christ?” “The Christ” translates the Hebrew title “The Messiah” (cf. 1:41) and was a loaded word at the time of John.

During the Roman occupation of Palestine the title often referred to a leader who would bring national freedom by providing military leadership. Popular usage had so drained the title of its spiritual meaning that Jesus avoided the term and preferred the more neutral title “Son of Man” (cf. Mark 8:29-31). By asking John the Baptist if he was the Messiah, the people ask if he views himself as a God-given military leader. John the Baptist proclaims that he is not in the desert trying to raise and organize an army.

The second question they asked of John was: “Are you Elijah? On the basis of Malachi 4:5, people of John’s time believed that Elijah would return shortly before the Lord would rescue His people. Therefore, they ask if John is the beginning of the end. John replies in the negative (Matthew 11:14).

Finally, they ask if John is “the prophet.” Again the question has an Old Testament background based on an interpretation of Deuteronomy 18:18. “The Prophet,” according to popular belief, would be a Moses-like figure who would again lead people into realizing God’s promises. Although “The Prophet” and “The Messiah” cover two distinct expectations (cf. John 7:40-41), they are similar. The people are asking John if he is personally ushering in God’s Rule. John correctly rejects such a role.

John the Baptist interprets his ministry in terms of Isaiah 40:3. He is a voice calling people to action. He is not the Messiah, Elijah, or the Prophet bringing about God’s Rule. He is helping people get ready for God’s coming. John is witness to the impending action of God. He prepares people for God’s action but he himself is not the Divine Actor.

John then faces a second question. Why does he baptize? (vs. 25) John does not immediately answer the question. He neither explains nor defends his ministry of baptism, but he continues to function as witness and points to something or, actually, someone greater. John tells the questioners that they search for unimportant information. Seeking to understand John’s ministry they overlook someone greater — someone whose sandals John is not worthy to untie.

The curiosity of John’s questioners is, nevertheless, understandable. “Baptizing” had a broader meaning at John’s time than it does for Christians today. “Baptism” referred to a range of ways in which water was used to purify people or things for service to God. (cf. Leviticus 14:9, 15:6-23, 17:15; Mark 7:1-5) John’s questioners want to know why he dares to “purify them.” To use modern slang, “What gives you the right to ‘clean up our act?’

But John, as the faithful witness, will not be diverted by unimportant questions. Rather than deal with ignorance of his baptismal authority, John points to a more important deficiency. They don’t know Jesus. The first section leads us from the question, “Who is John the Baptist?” to a much more important question, “Who is the unknown one who is greater than John?” John the Baptist introduces the Gospel story pointing to Jesus rather than drawing attention to himself.

THE LAMB OF GOD – JOHN 1:29-34

In verses 29-34, the person, power, and ministry of Jesus is set forth in the witness of the Baptist. First, John calls Jesus “the Lamb of God.” That metaphor is loaded with Old Testament symbolism and meaning. Readers familiar with the history of Israel connect Jesus as the “Lamb of God” with the Passover lamb (Exodus 12), the lambs of daily temple sacrifice (Exodus 24), and the prophetic lamb of Isaiah 53:7. Since the Lamb is described as carrying the sins of the world, Isaiah 53:4-6 creates a vivid background for interpreting John’s proclamation.

Second, John the Baptist points to Jesus as the one who was “before” him (vs. 30). Then John confesses that the Spirit enabled him to know that Jesus is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit (vs. 32-33). Finally, the section ends with the testimony that Jesus is the Son of God (vs. 34).

Observe how clearly John's Gospel focuses on Jesus. In telling the story, John even omits important details that might distract our attention. For example, from the Synoptics we know that the Baptist saw the dove descend at Jesus' baptism. John's Gospel doesn't even mention the baptism of Jesus. The Gospel soars like an eagle. Earthly details fade away as we soar in the theological vision of the heavens. The important question is "Who is Jesus?" — not "What is John doing to Him (in baptism)?"

THE FIRST DISCIPLES – JOHN 1:35-51

The chapter concludes on the theme of discipleship. The person and power of Jesus do not operate in a vacuum. Jesus affects people. He changes lives. John the Baptist takes the initiative in the first scene (vs. 35). John's witness that Jesus is the Lamb of God leads two people to investigate, to stay with Jesus, and then (one of them) to invite his brother to consider Jesus as the Messiah (vs. 36-41). To redirect Simon's life, Jesus names him "Peter." Furthermore, naming or re-naming a person was a way to claim, bless, or guide a person (cf. Genesis 17:5-8, 15-16; 32:28). Like a good shepherd, Jesus calls His own by name to show His protecting love (cf. John 10:3, 14; John 20:16).

The story continues when, moving north to Galilee, Jesus finds and calls Philip to follow Him. (vs. 1:43). As if to illustrate the fact that Good News dare not be hidden (4:35-48; 20:21; 21:15, 17), Philip approaches Nathanael with the claim to have found in Jesus fulfillment of expectations given in the prophecies. Nathanael's hesitation need not be criticized because there is not one specific passage claiming that the Messiah will come from Nazareth. The expectation seems to rest on a number of passages using Hebrew words that sound something like "Nazareth." For example, a "nazir" is a person consecrated to do God's work (Judges 6:1-21). The promised Messiah comes from the "neser" (stump) of Jesse (Isaiah 11:1, cf. Matthew 2:23). Philip's invitation rests (1:46), like that of Jesus (1:39), on direct contact. Rather than engage in an argument concerning data or even the interpretation of Scripture, proper evangelism means asking people to come and see Jesus.

Jesus then confronts Nathanael on two levels. First, He speaks with divine extraordinary knowledge (1:47, 48). His words give a sign that leads Nathanael to confess Jesus as Son of God and King of Israel. Second, as if to strengthen Nathanael's faith, Jesus points to a faith based on revelation of divine matters.

Jesus' words (1:51) allude to Jacob's experience (Genesis 28:12) where a ladder connects heaven and earth. Jesus promises that He is now that link to God. Significantly, Jesus points to Himself as Son of Man rather than repeating either title, Son of God or King of Israel. Son of God and King of Israel may be understood to embrace only kingdom, power, and glory. Son of Man includes rejection and suffering (cf. John 3:14; 6:27, 53; 8:28; 12:23-28; Mark 8:31). Jesus promises Nathanael that, as a disciple, he will see not only God's power but also God's love.