



# Cultivate

A Christ-Centered Way of Life

*... as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted, and built up in him and established in the faith... Colossians 2:6-7*

---

## GETTING TO KNOW JESUS THROUGH THE 4 GOSPELS – PART 5

By Marius Gradwell

### **The Gospel of John: Jesus the Divine - The face of an Eagle**

John's Gospel is written not just to inform our minds but to inflame our hearts.

Think of John's Gospel not so much as a book but as a destination. He says to us, his readers, "You've got to see Jesus for yourself. There's so much more to Jesus, and what he's done for you, than you can possibly imagine or even hope."

Indeed, John did not write merely to communicate trustworthy data (which he did), but to generate transforming doxology (Praises of God) (which he does). As we meet Jesus in the text, John anticipates we will respond like the Samaritan woman whose story he shares with us: "Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?" (John 4:29). To see Jesus in John's Gospel is to discover Christ and, consequently, to be changed forever.

John speaks from a first-hand encounter with Jesus. He doesn't just tell about the One who came from "the Father's side" (John 1:18); he writes as one who felt close enough to Jesus to rest his own head against Jesus' side (John 13:23). This beloved disciple (John 20:2) wants us to discover what he discovered—that from Jesus' fullness we receive "grace upon grace" (John 1:16).

From his prologue to his epilogue, John sets out to answer two primary questions: "Who is Jesus?" and "What has Jesus come into this world to accomplish?" John fixes our eyes on Jesus himself, the very embodiment of the gospel. John begins his Gospel heralding the advent of the new creation story—positioning Jesus as the principal character and carrier of the whole narrative.

*Who is Jesus? He is the promised Messiah. Why did he come? Jesus has come to give us life—abundant life.*

Unlike the other three Gospel writers (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), John did not structure his Gospel with a strict chronology in mind. His is both a selective and a strategic record. In fact, while all four Gospel writers focus their accounts ultimately on the death and resurrection of Jesus, John spends a full 40 percent of his account on this last week—the most crucial week of our Lord's life and of human history (John 12:1-20:25). Everything John tells us about Jesus leads us to his cross and his empty tomb—to his substitutionary death and glorious resurrection.

We do not have to guess about John's purpose and goal in writing his Gospel. John tells us that he chose particular stories and "signs" so that "you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:30-31).

Who is Jesus? He is the promised Messiah. Why did he come? Jesus has come to give us life—abundant life (John 10:10), eternal life, the life of "the age to come" (cf. Luke 18:30; Heb. 6:5). The gospel of God's grace is so much more than a story about life after death. It is also a story about life before death—how through Jesus' death and resurrection the kingdom of God has already arrived and has restored fallen creatures, and the fallen creation, to their right relationship with the Lord of life. And one day this kingdom will arrive in fullness, eradicating all remaining sin and sadness.

## **Lessons from the Gospel of John**

New Christians are often advised to begin their Bible reading with the Gospel according to John. Why? Because this book, more than any other, comprehensively explains Jesus' identity as the Son of God who came to earth in order to save the world from sin.

This truth is encapsulated in the most famous verse in the New Testament: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

John tells us that because Jesus is "God in the flesh" (fully divine yet fully human) he is able to reveal God to us clearly and accurately. So, if we want to know what God is like, we only have to look at the life of Jesus of Nazareth who was, in the words of the apostle Paul, "the image of the invisible God.... For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell" (Colossians 1:15, 19).

To appreciate the true significance of John 3:16, let us analyse it within the context of the book as a whole. We will centre our discussion around what could be called the "twin pillars" of John's theology: Present Judgment and Present Salvation. We will quickly see that there is far more to the fourth Gospel than a sentimental call to "give your heart to the Lord."

## **Present Judgment**

John discusses the problem of sin more than any of the Gospel writers. In fact, he uses the word "sin" more than Matthew and Mark combined! This takes many Christians by surprise—probably because they do not usually associate John, "the apostle of love," with such an unlovely subject as sin.

But John makes it very clear that, unless sin is dealt with, human beings will perish eternally. The flip side of John 3:16 is that those who do not believe do not have everlasting life. We rightly cite this text to show that the ultimate demonstration of God's love is the provision he has made for the sins of humanity in the sacrifice of his only Son, Jesus the Christ. God forbid we should ever forget this central truth. But we must not overlook the fact that this love of God is aimed at saving us from a terrible fate. Those who believe are saved, but those who do not believe do not have everlasting life.

For John, the possibility of men and women perishing is very real indeed: "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him" (3:36). And Jesus himself warns: "If you do not believe that I am the one I claim to be, you will indeed die in your sins" (8:24).

In other words, unrepentant sinners exclude themselves from God's gift of life and bring his judgment upon themselves. And this judgment is a present one: "Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only begotten Son" (3:18).

True, there is a final judgment of Jesus Christ (John 5:27-29), but this judgment is not only a future reality, it is already in operation: "And this is the judgment, that the light [Jesus Christ] has come into the world" (3:18).

The problem is that some men and women love the darkness rather than the light. They prefer darkness (living in sin) over the light (living in Christ) and thus shut themselves up in darkness. This, to quote Martin Luther, is "man curved in on himself." In such a state, human beings are slaves of sin (John 8:34). Without God's salvation, they cannot break free.

For John, then, men and women divide according to their attitude to Jesus. Either you are for Christ and on the road to life, or you are against Christ and on the road to death. So monumental is this aspect of Christ's ministry that he can be said to have come into the world for the express purpose of judgment: "For judgment came I into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind" (9:39).

This does not mean that Christ's primary purpose was to condemn the world. On the contrary: "For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him" (3:17). John is simply making the point that, when the sun shines, shadows are inevitable. And when the light of Jesus Christ shines, those who hide in the shadows are shown up for what they really are: "This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil" (3:19).

## **Present Salvation**

Sin is not the central doctrine of the Bible. God is. And God tells us that his salvation – deliverance from sin through Jesus Christ – is available to anyone who asks him for it. Early in his Gospel, John salutes "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (1:29). This declaration of forgiveness is also not something that happens at some future judgment. Jesus himself tells us that it is a present possession of the believer: "I tell you the truth, whoever hears my words and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life" (5:24).

Note the present tense "has." We have eternal life and we have crossed over from death to life. John is not denying or diminishing our glorious future with God in a life beyond death; he is affirming that Christians also have a present possession of life that death cannot destroy. Time and again, John stresses that eternal life is a present possession of all who believe (1:12; 3:16, 36; 6:33, 40, 47). To put it another way, we are not saved because Christ will come. We are saved because he has come.

In addition, John reminds us that this life is not something that we can grab for ourselves. It is a divine gift: "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand" (10: 27-28; see also Romans 6:22 and Ephesians 2:8-9).

And more specifically than the other Gospels, John associates the giving of this gift with God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit.

First, the Holy Spirit convicts us of sin (16:8). Ordinarily, we human beings do not see ourselves as sinners. Only as the Spirit of God works with us do we begin to see ourselves for who we really are—as "enemies of God" (Romans 5:10). This same Spirit gives us life (John 6:33) and leads us into all truth (16:13).

Second, the Father also works with us by drawing us to his Son. Jesus said: "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draw him" (6:44). And he repeats it with emphasis: "No man can come unto me, except it be given to him by the Father" (6:65). We must not deceive ourselves into thinking that we can come to God any time we are good and ready. We cannot. Perception in biblical matters and a willingness to become a true disciple of Jesus are not natural attributes. They only come as a gift of God.

Third, the Son makes possible the gift of eternal life by his atoning death on the cross. Jesus said: "But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto myself." This "lifting up" in John's Gospel is always a reference to Jesus being lifted up on the cross (3:14; 8:28; 12:32, 34). Jesus' death will draw men and women to himself. Note, once again, that the initiative here comes from God. It is not a matter of human beings simply deciding to come to Christ.

Perhaps a similar thing is implied in Jesus' words to Nathaniel: "You shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man" (1:51). Christ's words allude to the story of Jacob's ladder in Genesis 28:10-22 where a stone pillar at Bethel was the focal point of communication between heaven and earth.

In John's Gospel, the stone is replaced by the flesh and blood of Jesus Christ. There is now communion between heaven and earth through Jesus. Our Lord explains: "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him" (6:54-56).

Indeed, John's entire Gospel is concerned with the way in which God has brought us life through the sending of his beloved Son. John presents Jesus as the revelatory Word (Greek: *Logos*) of God, the unique and pre-existent Son of God who, in obedience to his Father, became a real human being to die sacrificially for the salvation of other human beings. In Christ's own words: "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they might have life and have it to the full" (10:10-11).

As such, Jesus reveals the "truth." But this "truth" is no mere set of dry doctrinal propositions. Jesus himself is the truth (14:6). He is also "the bread of life" (6:35, 48; compare 6:41, 51); "the light of the world" (8:12); "the door" (10:7, 9); "the good shepherd" (10:11, 14); "the resurrection and the life" (11:25); and "the true vine" (15:1, 5). In short, Jesus was and is the ultimate reality of God's own person and character. Therefore, Jesus could boldly proclaim: "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" (14:9).

## The core of the Gospel

Although John's Gospel is written in simple Greek, its plain words carry profound meaning. It contains theological concepts that are not easy to master in a short time. These concepts challenge even the most mature Christian. Yet, its reassurance of God's love for us can be understood by anyone. This fact is imbedded in the author's thesis statement: "Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing, you may have life in his name" (John 20:30-31).

John highlights the Gospel – the good news that Jesus offers us eternal life here and now. We are invited to enter into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, whom we can trust implicitly because he is the Son of God. Indeed, it is only through trusting Jesus that we can understand God's plan for us and carry out his will in our daily lives.

Yes, John "the beloved disciple" of Jesus has given us a powerfully spiritual portrait of our Lord and Master, the Eternal Son of God. He knew that love, and he wants his readers across the ages to know it too. But we must never confuse this love with a shallow sentimentality that sees God as nothing more than a hip-pocket psychotherapist we use to meet our "felt needs."

Love, as John sees it, is not an invitation to indulge in a life of indiscriminate sentimentality or superficial spirituality. He asks us, instead, to soberly consider two great truths of Scripture: First, we are sinners who have brought the death penalty upon ourselves. Second, God has forgiven us because his only begotten Son died in our place. Genuine repentance acknowledges both the sentence and the acquittal.

In response, John tells us that God demands nothing less than our wholehearted allegiance.

You can read the 21 chapters of John in a couple of hours. The gospel is perfect reading for new Christians, but it also repays the study of a lifetime.

To Follow:

- The Seven Miracles in the Gospel of John
- The Seven "I Am" Statements in the Gospel of John