



A Course
In
**STUDIES IN
JOHN'S GOSPEL**

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A COURSE

IN

Studies in John's Gospel

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INTRODUCTION

We rejoice in the opportunity to study the Fourth Gospel, declared by critics whom we must respect to be the greatest book of all time. Dr. A. T. Robertson says that this "Gospel is supreme in its height and depth and reach of thought. . . the language of the fourth Gospel has the clarity of a spring but we are not able to sound the bottom of the depths. Lucidity and profundity challenge and charm as we linger over it."

We shall study this Gospel somewhat in detail, but we would not permit such study to deprive us of the privilege of lingering over it. It is infinitely more important to know what the Bible says than it is to know what someone, no matter how distinguished, has to say about the Bible. No part of the Book is modified in its meaning by any human opinion. We think that it is much more sensible to believe than to reason. Intellectual vanity or conceit would take issue with that position; but think it through and see if you do not agree that man pays a higher compliment to his intelligence by believing God than by trying to harmonize divine truth with finite reasoning.

The exact date of this Gospel cannot certainly be known; the approximate date, however, is rather easily fixed. We know no authority who places the date earlier than A.D. 85 or later than A.D. 110. After weighing the contentions and the evidence carefully, we believe John's Gospel was written about A.D. 90. Beyond doubt the Gospel was widely influential in the first part of the second century of our era, and there is respectable authority for the statement that this was the last Gospel book of the Bible to be written.

The question of the authorship of John's Gospel has been vigorously raised and debated in modern times. It is significant that from the third quarter of the second century to the beginning of the nineteenth century, John the apostle, the son of Zebedee, was universally accepted as the author of the Gospel, and this view is still the most probable account of its origin. Aside from the natural disposition of the human mind to take issue, to question, to speculate over points that can be neither disproved nor established, we see no reason at all for the contention that this Gospel was written by an Ephesian elder or by an Alexandrian philosopher.

Here we confine ourselves to the universally accepted kinds of evidence--external and internal--recording merely the obvious items of each. Externally, there is no doubt that the Fathers as well as the heretical writers of the second century referred to the Fourth Gospel, quoted

from it, and uniformly considered John as its author. Furthermore, between A.D. 150 and 180 four Gospels were recognized and used by the Christians in such widely separated districts as Syria, Gaul, Alexandria, Carthage, and Rome, and everywhere the Fourth was ascribed to John. To us the testimony of those closest to the time of the writing of the Gospel must take precedence over that of those who were eighteen hundred years removed.

The internal evidence is even more convincing. The author of this Gospel must have been a Jew, a Palestinian, an eyewitness, one of the twelve, possessing exceptional and intimate knowledge of Christ, and lastly the apostle John, although the name of this apostle does not appear in the Gospel. John is used twenty times in the Gospel, but always it refers to John the Baptist. The fact that the author uniformly slights the sons of Zebedee and never names himself points directly to the apostle John as the author, while John 21:20 clearly asserts that "the disciple whom Jesus loved" was the author. John confirms his own authorship by proclaiming himself an eyewitness to the things which he records (19:35), and by asserting that he knows his testimony to be true (21:24). From the standpoint of a layman who accepts the Bible as God's Word, it matters little who was the human agent in the writing of any one book; we have the book and that is the important thing.

John's, of course, is the fourth of the Gospels. The first three are known as the Synoptics; that is, they present the life of Jesus from the same viewpoint; they give the same general survey or synopsis, indicating a common objective; and are for these reasons called the "Synoptic Gospels." The Fourth Gospel does not pretend to give even a synopsis of the life of Jesus. "These are written," says John, "that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name" (John 20:31). John, therefore, selects from the life of Jesus those facts, teachings, and works which his inspired mind considered essential to the realization of his purpose. Acceptable study of this Gospel is impossible without keeping this specific fact in mind: John's Gospel was written for a definite Purpose.

Repeated reading of this Gospel reveals key words in complete harmony with the expressed purpose of the book. The word "belief" in some form occurs so frequently (73 times) that it is impressive; while the word "witness" occurs forty-seven times. The key thought of the book, therefore, would seem to bear upon a particular line of belief, and proof or evidence of that belief. Such thought is entirely in keeping with the author's purpose.

There are seven miraculous events beginning in Cana where John writes: "This first miracle." He continues through seven events unless you count his resurrection as the eighth. John tells more of his purpose in Jn. 20:30-31; "And many other signs [miracles] truly did Jesus in the presence of His disciples which are not written in this book:: But these are written that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name."

The omissions in this Gospel are striking. John omits reference to the birth of Christ, his baptism, his temptation, his transfiguration, the institution of the Lord's Supper, and the agony in the garden. He records no parables, and emphasizes only seven miracles. Outside of the events of the last week and of the resurrection period, the Fourth Gospel parallels the Synoptics in only one instance, that of the feeding of the five thousand and the walking on the water.

If the omissions are significant, the additions are none the less noteworthy. We are indebted to John's Gospel for the story of changing water into wine, of the foot washing, and especially of the raising of Lazarus. John also throws much light on the first year of our Lord's ministry and adds a Jerusalem ministry. We find in John's Gospel alone some choice sentences: "There is a lad here" (6:9); "And it was winter" (10:22); "Now there stood by the cross of Jesus his mother" (19:25); and "Now in the place where he was crucified there was a garden" (19:41). John alone, of course, gives us the long discourses of Jesus from which Christians through the centuries have drawn comfort, courage, assurance, and hope.

John Calvin writes that "The Evangelists do not simply relate that Christ was born, and died, and conquered death, but also explain to what end He was born, and died, and rose again, and what benefit we derive from this. Yet there is also this difference between them, that the other three narrate the life and death of Christ more fully, where as John emphasizes more the doctrine in which Christ's office and the power of His death and resurrection are explained." (Calvin Com. Vol. 4)

John's witnesses are significant: the testimony of those who knew Jesus, both friend and foe; the signs which Jesus himself wrought; the testimony of the words which Jesus spoke. This Gospel is pre-eminently the "I am" Gospel. Such declarations as "I am the way," "I am the door," "I am the good shepherd" are the witnesses of the words of Jesus.

The place which this Gospel occupies in literature is unique. Literary critics say that this little book is perhaps

the strongest piece of literature that we know anything about. Just as a piece of writing it stands at the top of prose literature. We have said enough about this Gospel to challenge our interest. We trust that we shall approach the study with the seriousness of persons of intelligence.

We are not unaware of suggestions by some scholars that in many instances John's meaning would be made clearer by certain transpositions of the text. For our study purposes, however, it seems best to outline the text as it appears in the King James Version.

CHAPTER I

JESUS POSITION AFFIRMED

Outline

I. THE PREINCARNATE CHRIST (1:1-5)

1. His Deity
2. His Creative Work
3. Life and Light
4. Light Obscured

II. THE TRUE LIGHT (1:9-14)

1. Unrecognized
2. The Two Classes
3. The Incarnation

III. JOHN THE BAPTIST (1:6-8, 15-28)

1. His Mission
2. His Witness
3. His Confession

IV. THE LAMB OF GOD (1:29-34)

1. The Announcement
2. The Testimony
3. Son of God Revealed

V. THE SOUL-WINNERS (1:35-51)

1. Inquirers Seek
2. Hospitality Extended
3. First Soul-Winners

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JESUS POSITION AFFIRMED

JOHN 1

John's Gospel is about Jesus; everywhere Jesus is magnified. The concern of the inspired writer is to present Jesus so accurately and so attractively that honest readers cannot but recognize him. Such recognition must result in faith in Jesus as the Son of God, and believing faith wins eternal life for every believer. It is good writing, therefore, to introduce in the very first chapter the subject of the book, and John's Gospel is good writing.

I. THE PREINCARNATE CHRIST (1:1-5)

The Gospel opens with the identical words used in the first book of the Bible; it starts at the beginning, and declares that the Word (not a word), translation of the Greek Logos, a term used to designate Christ--this Logos was with God, was God, and was with God from the beginning. These assertions are made without argument and claim unequivocally continuous existence of Christ with the Father. Since Jesus came no one need be ignorant of God.

In his pre-incarnate state Christ was most active. All things without exception were made by him, and in him was life, spiritual and eternal, and this life was the light of men, shining in the darkness of moral evil, and those in such darkness did not comprehend (or apprehend) it. Sinful men, of course, not looking for such light would probably not see it, and if they did they would not understand it.

This same "Word was made flesh" (a reference to the Virgin Birth) and dwelt among men, and was full of grace and truth, and men beheld his glory but did not know who Jesus really is. The One who created mankind is the One who must now recreate him by introducing into creation the flawless man whose eternal life becomes the proto type of every child of God. His human

life is so vast and eternal that all who believe in Him are made Sons of God by the act of believing in Him. In this prologue (Jn. 1:1-14), the inspired writer says that Jesus was God, is God, and that He came from God to dwell among men. The world did not recognize Him, His own people did not receive Him, but to as many (repetitive aorist) as received Him He gave power to become sons of God. They were not born into the family of God by blood relationship, nor by the human will, nor by the will of men collectively: but God Himself gave them spiritual new birth. Whether we can comprehend the full meaning or not, it is perfectly clear that the deity of Christ is definitely, positively presented by John. One cannot believe the Bible and doubt the deity of Christ.

II. THE TRUE LIGHT (1:9-14)

There is no uncertainty of meaning here. Jesus is called the true Light, available for every man that cometh into the world. That men continue in darkness is not the fault of the Light. This verse (9) is often called the Quakers' text, for on it they base their belief that to every man that is born is given an inner light that is a sufficient guide. To us it seems that both common sense and experience oppose such an interpretation. The existence of the Light does not imply that all men possess the Light; besides there are too many men in the world without that Light. Jesus was in the world which was made by him and the world knew him not.

Furthermore, he came unto his own, and his own received him not. The English makes no distinction between the two phrases, "his own," but the Greek does. The first one is neuter plural, while the second is masculine plural; the first refers to things such as his own things or his own home; he came back to the world that he had made which was his own. The other "his own" could mean his own circle such as family, friends, or associates; it could mean the inhabitants of his own town or country; it probably refers to his own race, the Jewish people, the chosen people to whom he came first. There is room, however, to translate the words freely, somewhat as follows: "He came to his own world and the whole world received him not. He was rejected."

But some did believe, and to these he gave the authority or power to become what they were not before, namely, children of God in the spiritual sense. These were begotten of God by spiritual generation, and not of blood nor of the flesh nor of the will of men. The new birth would seem to be clearly the subject of this verse.

Furthermore, the Bible teaches that God's Son came to earth in human form, was born of a woman without any

earthly father, and that he lived among men, in the full exercise of his deity, and yet thoroughly sensible of all human weaknesses and needs and available for their adequate relief. We shall probably never understand the miracle of the incarnation; science cannot analyze nor demonstrate it. Faith, however, enables us to accept the teaching, and the results of childlike faith confirm our belief in Christ the Son of God, the Son of Mary.

III. JOHN THE BAPTIST (1:6-8, 15-28)

John the Baptist is identified simply as "a man sent from God." Such identification did not satisfy the Jews who sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to find out who he was. He denied that he was the Christ, or Elias, or any other prophet, and when pressed further said that he was the voice of one crying in the wilderness, "Make straight the way of the Lord," an allusion to Isa. 40:3. John is calling Israel to "Repent for the kingdom is here."

John was not the Light but was sent to hear witness of the Light; he was not the Christ, but his mission was to prepare the way for men to believe in the Christ. In anticipation of Christ's appearing, John declared that grace and truth came by Christ, that men should see God through Christ, and that he (John) was unworthy to untie the shoes of the Christ.

IV. THE LAMB OF GOD (1:29-34)

The opportunity for positive testimony came the next day. As John saw Jesus approaching, he called, "Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world" (1:29). In this declaration John made it clear that Jesus was the Saviour of the whole world, and not of the Jews only. Continuing John testified that he did not know Jesus until he saw the Spirit descending like a dove and resting upon Jesus. This had been given him as a sign. He saw and, therefore, testified that Jesus is the Son of God. So far as we recall, John is the first human witness to the deity of Christ. These few verses certainly major on that great doctrine. John's theology is framed by the Book of Isaiah where the King of Glory becomes the Lamb of God (Isa. 53).

V. THE SOUL-WINNERS (1:35-51)

The beginning of the public ministry of Jesus was as colorful as it was simple. As John and two of his disciples were standing, Jesus walked along, and John said to his disciples, "Behold the Lamb of God!" Immediately

the two disciples followed Jesus. When the Master saw them, - he asked them what they were looking for, - and they very courteously asked him where he lived. The Master's reply is most significant, "Come and see." In our scientific age, it is customary in some circles to hear the statement that one can't be scientific and spiritual at the same time. Such, of course, have overlooked the very first invitation: explore, investigate, and draw your own conclusion.

The disciples promptly accepted the invitation and spent two hours with Jesus. We wish there were some way of knowing how those hours were spent, but there isn't, so we avoid speculation. This observation may be made, there is no record that any man ever accepted Jesus' invitation and regretted it.

Perhaps the action of the disciples is an indication of the subject discussed with Jesus. One of the two, Andrew, immediately sought out his own brother, Simon Peter, and told him that they had found the Messiah, that is, the Christ. "And he brought him to Jesus." Jesus was impressed with Simon, and told him that henceforth he should be called Cephas, a stone. On the next day as Jesus went out into Galilee he called upon Philip, fellow townsman of Andrew and Peter, to follow him. This invitation was accepted, and almost immediately Philip found Nathanael, and in his effort to win him to Jesus used too many words, provoked a doubting question, which Philip answered by suggesting that he investigate. The conversation between Jesus and Nathanael is interesting, and developed an exercise of faith by Nathanael which drew from Jesus the observation that he should see yet greater things. The beginning of the services of the first disciples was clearly scientific.

Suggestive Exercises

1. Summarize Christ's pre-incarnate work.
2. Why did not men recognize the true Light?
3. Are all men children of God?
4. How does one become a child of God?
5. What was the mission of John the Baptist?
6. Discuss John's relation to Christ.
7. What was Christ's first invitation?
8. Relate this invitation to the scientific spirit.
9. State the experiences of the first soul-winners.
10. What contribution does this section make to carrying out the purpose of John's Gospel?

END OF SAMPLE