

The Gospel of John—*The Unique Nature of the Fourth Gospel*
John 1:1-5

This morning we will begin our journey through the Fourth Gospel...the Gospel according to John. My intent is to unpack all 879 verses, so this is a journey that will likely require a few years before we get to the end. As we go through John, I would ask that you bring your Bible with you each Sunday. My hope is that, by virtue of this series, you will come to feel equipped to teach or at least draw upon this great gospel as you present Christ to our hurting culture in the years to come. I am also hopeful that you will study both before and after my messages, so that you are searching the scriptures for yourselves. My teaching is no substitute for your own engagement with God's Word, so please do not be satisfied to simply listen to my message while neglecting your own time in the Gospel. Now, in case you are wondering, I will be working from the English Standard Version in terms of my translation, but I encourage you to use whatever translation you are accustomed to. If you would like to use an ESV translation, let us know and we will attempt to provide one for you.

This morning my goal is to address some of the inevitable questions that accompany a cursory examination of the Fourth Gospel. In other words, when we read the first three gospels Matthew, Mark, and Luke...those gospels often referred to as the Synoptic Gospels...and then we compare the first three gospels to John's account, we immediately recognize that John is qualitatively unique in comparison. Whereas the Synoptic Gospels read like historical reportage, John does not. Whereas the Synoptic Gospels speak primarily to a Jewish audience regarding a Jewish Messiah, the gospel according to John does not. Whereas the teaching of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels is usually short and to the point, we find long discourses in John's gospel. Whereas the humanity and every day life of Jesus is emphasized in the Synoptics, we find an entirely different emphasis in John's Gospel. So, before jumping into a verse by verse treatment of the text, I would like to address the uniqueness of John's gospel so that you might better understand the historical and philosophical context that accounts for its unique place in the New Testament. Let's pray first, and then we'll jump in.

I. Date and Authorship

There is little doubt that the apostle John was a young, hot-headed fisherman when he first met Jesus as recorded in Mark 1:19 where we read, "And going on a little farther, Jesus saw James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, who were in their boat mending the nets. And immediately he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants and followed him." Please note that John was a fisherman...all the best Christians are, you know!

Now, let us acknowledge that John's youthful exuberance might account for the nickname that Jesus lovingly gave to the brothers as we read in Mark 3:16-17: "He appointed the twelve: Simon (to whom he gave name Peter); James the son of Zebedee and John the brother of James (to whom he gave the name *Boanerges*, that is, 'Sons of Thunder')..." Can you imagine how unruly you would have to be for Jesus to call you the Sons of Thunder?

I think it's safe to assume that first century peasant fishermen were likely a bit rough around the edges, but I think these young brothers were in a class all by themselves!

According to what we can learn from the New Testament, these knuckleheads were more inclined to pick a fight than to win souls to heaven! Remember in Luke 9:54 when the residents

of a Samaritan village refuse to welcome Jesus into their town? James and John come to Jesus and ask, “Lord, do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them?” But Jesus turned and rebuked them. And they went on to another village.

On another occasion (Mark 9:38), John, in his youthful zeal without knowledge, says to Jesus, “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.” But Jesus said, “Do not stop him...”

On yet another occasion the Sons of Thunder come up to Jesus just minutes after He predicts his torturous death, and they ask this tactful question (Mark 10:35-36): “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you...grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left in your glory.” That would be like asking a person diagnosed with only days to live if you could claim his fishing boat after he was dead! Not only did such comments cause Jesus to slap his forehead with wonder, but we also learn that (Mark 10:41) “when the ten heard it, they began to be indignant at James and John.” These stories of James and John, the Sons of Thunder, are almost comical, but they also reveal that these guys were just like us. As one author writes: “James and John were hopelessly human and remarkably unremarkable!”

As rude and inappropriate as they may have been at the outset, James and John were chosen by Jesus, and they occupied a special place of intimacy as they followed the Messiah from Nazareth.

Along with Peter, the Sons of Thunder were the only ones invited to join Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration. We learn in Mark 13 that, along with Andrew, they were also privy to some private conversations with Jesus. It was John along with Peter who Jesus sent to prepare the Passover meal, the last supper of Christ. It was John who leaned upon the breast of Jesus and asked, “Lord, who is it that will betray you?” As John matured, his loyalty to Jesus outshone the rest of the disciples. John was the only one of the twelve said to have witnessed the crucifixion (he was likely less conspicuous due to his young age). Jesus called upon John to take care of Mary, the mother of Jesus, just hours before he died on the cross. John was the first of the Twelve to gaze upon the empty tomb. Later in Acts, John is with Peter on the day of Pentecost and in the days that followed when they encountered the paralytic at the Beautiful Gate in Acts 3. John is referred to as one of the pillars of the early church by the Apostle Paul in Galatians 2:9.

Tradition tells us that, in obedience to Jesus, John eventually moved to Ephesus taking Mary, the mother of Jesus with him. There he taught about Jesus and made many disciples. It was decades later, after the other gospels were in circulation, that John finally agreed to write his gospel.

We learn from a very early source named Irenaeus, dated AD 177, that, “John, the disciple of the Lord, who also leant upon his breast, himself also published the gospel in Ephesus, when he was living in Asia.” Later, Clement of Alexandria (AD 230) writes, “Last of all, John perceiving that the bodily facts had been made plain in the gospel, being urged by his friends, composed a spiritual gospel.”

By AD 130, John’s gospel was in circulation as evidenced by a partial fragment found in Egypt that is clearly dated to that year. The fragment is known as Manchester (p52) and it contains John 18:31-33, exactly as we have it in our contemporary translations. By 165-180, a Christian

named Tatian published a collection of the four gospels called *Diatesseron*, and the fragments we have of that document contain quotes from all four gospels. Others such as Justin Martyr and Origen of Alexandria provide clear evidence regarding the authorship and the early distribution of the four gospels.

So, given the early distribution of John, yet given that he clearly wrote his gospel after the other three gospels were in distribution, scholars date John's gospel to sometime between AD 80-100. If the Gospel was written as late as 100, it travelled very quickly to be found in Egypt by AD 130, so I think it likely that John's Gospel was written closer to AD 85-90.

I give you this history only to combat the ignorant claims of our critics that somehow the New Testament was written by the Roman Catholic Church sometime in the 5th century or other such nonsense. Clearly all four gospels were in circulation early in the second century, which means they were all written in the first century. Which means all four gospels were written and in distribution within the lifetime of the witnesses who could either confirm or deny the events said to have taken place. As ancient history goes, the four gospels are without question the earliest, most redundant, most widely distributed historical sources we have in comparison to all other sources of ancient history. And the translations we have today remain true to the manuscripts used by those in the second and third centuries. Due to archaeological digs throughout the middle east, Asia, and Africa, we now have thousands of fragments to draw upon dating from as early as AD130-150. Amazingly, the words of the New Testament have been painstakingly preserved from one fragment to the next over the centuries. Again, there is nothing even comparable to the veracity of the New Testament, and particularly the four gospels, in all of ancient history.

II. Pay Attention to the Details

One of the notable qualities of John's Gospel is his recollection of very specific details. These details confirm that the author was actually an eyewitness to the events that he describes. Here are a few examples that Barclay lists in his commentary.

John had a detailed knowledge of Palestine and Jerusalem. He knows how long it took to build the temple (2:20); that the Jews and the Samaritans had a permanent quarrel (4:9); the low Jewish view of women (4:9); the way in which the Jews regard the Sabbath (5:10; 7:21-23; 9:14). His knowledge of the geography of Palestine is intimate. He knows of two Bethanys, one of which is beyond Jordan (1:28; 12:1); he knows that Bethsaida was the home of some of the disciples (1:44; 12:21); that Cana is in Galilee (2:1; 4:46; 21:2); that Sychar is near Shechem (4:5). He has a street by street knowledge of Jerusalem. He knows the sheep-gate and the pool near it (5:2); the pool of Siloam (9:7); Solomon's Porch (10:23); the brook Kidron (18:1); the pavement which is called Gabbatha (19:13); and Golgotha, which is like a skull (19:17).

John also remembers events and conversations that the other gospel writers either didn't know about or did not choose to include in their gospel accounts. John alone tells of the marriage feast in Cana; the woman of Samaria; the way Jesus washed the feet of the disciples; so much of Jesus' teaching on the Holy Spirit is unique to John's gospel, as is the private conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus. John gives a glimpse into the personality of some of the disciples like Andrew, Phillip, Thomas, and Judas. John remembers that the loaves the lad brought to Jesus were barley loaves; that when Jesus came to them on the water, they had already rowed 3-4 miles; that there were six stone water-pots at the wedding in Cana; only John recalls

the four soldiers gambling for the seamless robe of Jesus; he knows exactly the weight of the myrrh and aloes used to anoint the dead body of Jesus; he remembers how the perfume of the ointment filled the house at the anointing in Bethany. These details are often unimportant for any teaching value, so their inclusion simply reveals that the one telling the story was actually there.

Now, I won't lie to you: there are some differences in John's account that we will observe as we go along...some of which are initially difficult to reconcile historically with the other gospel accounts in terms of the timeline or geographical location of an event. I will deal with those differences as we come upon them throughout the series, but I want you to appreciate that John certainly did not lack knowledge or an accurate memory. If anything, John's account is likely the most accurate when it comes to the details, though we should not be concerned if we can't make every single reference to the timeline or the geography match up with the synoptics. Remember, John had access to the synoptics, so he clearly did not think his gospel was in any way a contradiction to the gospels that were already written. And as we shall note in just a minute, John wrote his gospel with a different perspective and a different end in mind.

III. The Context of the Fourth Gospel

As previously mentioned, John penned his gospel while living in Ephesus towards the end of the first century. Given that the church was born in the early 30s following the resurrection of Jesus and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost in Jerusalem, John is finally writing his gospel after 50 years of preaching the gospel, defending the truth against heresies, and growing under the nurture of the Holy Spirit. As I was preparing for this message, every commentary I read made the same observation: John wrote his gospel not so much to record what Jesus did or said, but more to communicate WHO Jesus was and what Jesus MEANT. Furthermore, whereas the first three gospels were written with the Jew in mind as the primary audience (though Luke was certainly more sensitive to a Gentile audience), John's Gospel is almost exclusively directed towards non-Jews. In fact, we might conclude that John's gospel is specifically designed to present the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the Greeks...because those were his neighbors in Ephesus. No doubt John observed over the course of his ministry in Ephesus that the Greeks were not inclined to learn Hebrew or Jewish history in order to become followers of Jesus. After decades of debating with the Greek intelligentsia, John had learned how to reason for the supremacy of Christ using their own terms, leveraging their own love of philosophy and some of the building blocks that were already in place in the Greek mindset. Our text for this morning is a perfect example. Consider the prologue to John's gospel as we read it in John 1:1-5 (let's read it together): "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him was not any thing made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."

These are perhaps the most beloved, the most famous words of John's gospel, and yet there is no mention of King David, the prophets, or the fulfillment of the Messianic hope. Instead, John takes a well-known Greek concept, "the Logos"...the Word, and he develops his introduction to say Jesus is the LOGOS...and Jesus is God...and everything that is was created by Him and for Him. He is before all things, and yet he is the light who came into the darkness of our existence. All the language here...logos, light, darkness, etc...all of it speaks directly into the Greek's

philosophical starting place. I will unpack that in greater detail next week and throughout the series, but I want you to approach John's gospel with the understanding that John is addressing non-Jews. He is going to unapologetically present Jesus as the LORD of ALL and the only way into God's family...a family that is comprised of Jews and non-Jews...and that family finds its identity and its unity through one man and one man only: Jesus of Nazareth...the LOGOS.

By the way, this not the first time that we've observed an apostle of Jesus leveraging Greek philosophy and arguments in an attempt to reach non-Jews, right? Who can forget Paul's compelling address to the Areopagus in Athens in Acts 17 when he quotes multiple Greek sources in order to draw in his audience and share with them the good news of the gospel? Paul makes use of similar arguments in his letter to the Colossians. Not unlike the Apostle Paul, John was likely disheartened by the Jew's wholehearted rejection of Jesus over the course of his lifetime. John likely observed that the Greek-speaking Gentiles were far more likely to kneel before Jesus than the unbelieving Jews. John sadly laments in John 1, "[Jesus] came to his own, but his own did not receive him." It is no wonder then that John wrote his gospel with his Greek neighbors in mind—he clearly sought to make access to salvation in Jesus as simple and as clear as possible without throwing up Jewish roadblocks, and that is the very reason that so many people throughout history...so many people of every tribe, tongue and language, have found access to salvation in Jesus Christ through the simple reading of John's gospel. At the same time, those who are well-read in philosophy find incredible depth and richness in John's gospel, as John very skillfully presents a worldview that quite powerfully addresses the central questions of philosophical inquiry. Such is why I will regularly address both worldview and philosophy as we walk through John's gospel. Worldview and philosophy are always at the foundation of ancient and modern day issues alike, so these are important insights for us to master.

IV. Correcting Heresies

In addition to addressing the Greek philosophies, John was also aware of some pernicious heresies that were already sabotaging the true gospel in his context and throughout the ancient world. I will regularly speak of the heresies, so let me briefly mention them this morning and I'll come back to them later on.

A. The first heresy that existed primarily amongst the Jewish believers was the over-elevation of John the Baptist. The Jews were drawn to the prophetic language and declarations of John the Baptist, even to the degree that later in history there was an accepted sect of John the Baptist within the orthodox Jewish faith. In Acts 19 Luke describes a group of twelve men who only know of John's baptism. Such is why John very gently but firmly puts John the Baptist in his appropriate place throughout his gospel. John recalls and emphasizes the Baptist's own insistence that he was just the messenger, the one sent to prepare the way for Jesus...the One he referred to as the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. As Barclay writes, "There is no criticism at all of John the Baptist in the Fourth Gospel; but there is a rebuke to those who would give him a place which ought to belong to Jesus and Jesus alone."

B. The second and even more pernicious heresy of the first century was a sect called Gnosticism. The very word "gnostic" suggests those with special knowledge. I won't go too deep into Gnosticism this morning, but I want you to get a general sense of what they taught so that you can begin to appreciate how purposefully John's gospel addresses this heresy. Again, I

encourage you to pick up William Barclay's commentary on John where he deals with Gnosticism in some detail.

For starters, the Gnostics held that matter is essentially evil and spirit is essentially good. The Gnostics went on to argue that on that basis, God himself cannot touch matter and therefore did not create the world. They held that there were multiple emanations that came from the true God, and that each emanation knew less and less about the one true God. Thus, over time, one of those distant emanations was so far from the one true God that he created the world, and did so as an act of hostility against the one true God. Accordingly, the Gnostics believed that the physical world is one of darkness, and all matter is a product of the evil creator. The world of light is where the one, true god lives, but the only way to get there is to escape the confines of the flesh and the dark world of matter.

When it came to Jesus, the Gnostics had their own views about him.

- 1) Some Gnostics argued that Jesus was one of the many emanations which proceeded from the true God; thus Jesus was not in any way divine. At best he was some kind of a demi-god, part of the chain of lesser beings between God and world.
- 2) Some Gnostics argued that Jesus had no real body, because no divine creature could touch evil matter, thus Jesus was like a phantom without real flesh and blood. This heresy would come to be known as Docetism, which in the Greek literally means, "To seem." In other words, Jesus just seemed to be human with a body, but he was really just a divine phantom of sorts.
- 3) Still other Gnostics suggested that Jesus was a natural born man whom the Holy Spirit descended upon at his baptism, but then the Holy Spirit left the body of Jesus prior to his crucifixion, because surely the Spirit of God could never suffer and die, right? A particular version of this heresy, by the way, found its way into Islamic theology. To this day the Muslims maintain that Jesus, the great prophet, escaped the cross and that it was a "body -double" that was crucified. No doubt this idea was a grandchild of ancient Gnosticism.

So, in summary, the Gnostic heresies attacked two of the central tenants of the Christian faith. Gnostics held that either Jesus was not really divine; or that Jesus was not really a human being of flesh and blood.

So listen again to our text from this morning, along with vs. 14, "In the Beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth."

Can you hear how John is masterfully slicing up Gnostic heresies and very purposefully presenting who Jesus is as the One who was fully God and fully Human? Having a rudimentary understanding of Gnosticism will give you a much greater appreciation of John's gospel and the impact it had in the development of the early church.

OK, that's enough context for now. Next week we'll jump into John 1:1-18. Now...here's what I want you to remember as you go into your week. I don't know if you've noticed, but our world is hurting...a lot. And to accommodate the pain of our culture, we keep making new laws that are supposed to somehow help alleviate the anger, violence, and hopelessness that leads people to drugs, suicide, and violence. But here's the truth: under the horrible dysfunction of our cultural woes is a worldview laced with untruths. You see, ideas matter. The idea that the body is nothing but impersonal mass plus time and chance directly accounts for the justification of abortion, euthanasia, the hook up culture, transgenderism, homosexuality, pornography, and myriads of other behaviors that are now considered "normal;" but these behaviors are not normal. In fact, all of these behaviors ultimately reveal souls who are living in incongruity with their bodies and their minds.

And here's what we'll observe as we trek through John's gospel: there's nothing new here. The same philosophies and heresies of the first century are those that are wreaking havoc right now. You will be shocked to discover the similarities in ancient Greco/Roman thinking and the philosophies of the 21st century. All that is to say: the Gospel of John is prophetically relevant...more so than you might think. Many of you have expressed your desire for me to speak to all the issues of our day. I suspect we will touch most, if not all, of those issues as we march through John's gospel because those issues are not new in history. Those issues are the natural bi-product of godless philosophies or tangential heresies, and the medicine for today's culture is exactly what was needed and so world-changing in the first century: the medicine is the Gospel. The Great Physician is still this Carpenter from Nazareth; the only begotten Son of the Father; the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world! Please come with your newspaper and your Bible, because I promise this series will be directly applicable to your life and to what is happening right now here and throughout the world. Bring your unbelieving friends, your gay and lesbian friends, your transgender friends, your radically liberal friends, your atheist friends...invite them to consider the Gospel in light of the philosophies of our age. Invite them to encounter The Truth. Not my truth...the Truth. Truth has a name, and His name is Jesus. Amen? Let's pray.