

John's Gospel Introductory Message

BELIEVE AND HAVE LIFE

John 20:30-31, "Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book.³¹ But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."

2019 is a blessed year for us. It's the year we'll study John's gospel deeply and newly (if we've studied it before). We begin today the study of perhaps the most personal and powerful book in the Bible: the gospel of John. This gospel is indeed profound, as it is powerful and personal. Today, let's get a brief eagle's eye overview of what we can expect to learn. May God bless our year-long study to be sincere and wholehearted, so that each of us may truly believe in Jesus and have life in his name.

First, the right motivation to study John's gospel: love. We begin by considering something about the author. Historically, the church of Jesus Christ has always regarded one person to be the primary author of this gospel: John son of Zebedee. The church father Irenaeus (A.D. 130-200) said that Apostle John was the author and that he wrote from Ephesus. John was the brother of James, both fishermen by trade. These two brothers were also fishing partners to another pair of brothers: Peter and Andrew. Together, these four fishermen made up four of the twelve apostles of Jesus. So the source of this book was none other than Apostle John, one of Jesus' twelve apostles, hand-picked by Jesus.

Interestingly enough, John never identifies himself by name anywhere in the gospel. Rather, he calls himself repeatedly, "the disciple whom Jesus loved." On the surface, this sounds exclusive and arrogant, as if he is claiming to be the only disciple whom Jesus loved. But of course, that is not what the author meant. He simply meant, "Jesus loves me. I know this without a doubt, and no one can take that fact away from me. Not only so, Jesus' love has completely transformed my life. I am no longer the person I used to be."

How about you? Do you know that Jesus loves you? There is a children's song that goes: "Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so." There are several more beautiful verses to this children's song. The important thing is not that you know the song, but that you know without a doubt and can personally say, "Jesus loves me, this I know." Loving Jesus starts with receiving his love, that is, knowing he loves me. Loving Jesus Christ is what true Christianity is all about. Real Christianity is not attending church every Sunday, although that's good. It is not about being honest and doing good things, although those are both important. A good Jew or a good Muslim can be honest and do good things also. A genuine Christian, however, loves Jesus Christ with all their heart, soul and strength. They know, "Jesus loved me first. Jesus loved me enough to die for me. So I give my life to Jesus to love and live for him in return. I love him by the Holy Spirit whom he deposited in me, to take residence in me."

Second, the right purpose to study John's gospel: believe. It is always helpful if we know an author's purpose for writing. Thankfully, the author John tells us himself in 20:30-31. These are very important verses, which we will guide our entire gospel study. They read as follows: "Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not

recorded in this book.³¹ But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.”

Two things referred to here help us to believe in Jesus: signs and testimonies.

(1) Signs. John’s gospel records 7 miracles called “signs” which Jesus performed during his life. Of course, he did many more than 7 miracles, but the author mentions just these 7: changing water to wine at a wedding; healing a royal official’s son from a long distance with just a word; healing a crippled man at a poolside; feeding a huge crowd of over 5000 people with just 5 loaves of bread and 2 fish; walking on the Sea of Galilee; giving sight to a man who had been born blind; and raising a man who had been dead for four days out of his cave tomb. These 7 miracles are called “signs,” which means that they point to something more, something deeper about Jesus and heavenly things.

For example, after feeding the multitudes with a few loaves of bread, the people came back for more bread from Jesus the next day. That was the problem with this miracle: it satisfied their hunger for a day, but they were hungry again the next day. So Jesus had to teach them: “Do not work for food that spoils.” It meant, “Do not chase the things in the world that cannot truly satisfy your soul.” Jesus went on to teach them, “I am the bread of life...whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life.” When we study that passage, we can easily understand that Jesus was not telling them to become cannibals, eating his body. He wanted them to understand the spiritual reality of coming to him and believing in him, feeding on his words.

Here’s another example. Perhaps the raising of Lazarus from the dead is regarded as the greatest miracle Jesus performed while he was alive. In that passage, Jesus declares, “I am the resurrection and the life.” So Jesus’ miracles were signs that pointed to some deeper truth about Jesus, and believing in him. This leads to the second point which the author expounds.

(2) Testimonies. In John’s gospel, Jesus himself and many people testify to who Jesus is. Apostle John begins by boldly declaring that Jesus is one with the eternal Creator God, who became human in the person of Jesus Christ. Chapter 1 verse 14 says, “The Word [God] became flesh [human].” In John’s gospel Jesus makes bold claims that only God can make. In fact, if any man made his claims, that man would be regarded as a lunatic or a liar. That is in fact, what the British, Christian author and theologian C.S.Lewis argued in his book, “Mere Christianity.” He wrote:

“I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept his claim to be God. That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic — on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg — or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God, but let us not

come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.”¹

So what did Jesus boldly claim? In John’s gospel Jesus makes at least 7 “I am” claims with a promise attached to them. Every Christian should memorize these. We will study these more deeply when we get to each of them. Jesus says in John 6:35, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” Jesus says in John 8:12, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” Jesus says, “I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved” (10:9). And, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (10:11). There are 3 more: “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die” (11:25). Perhaps Jesus’ most famous words, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (14:6). And my personal favorite, “I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.” Actually, Jesus said one more “I am” but it doesn’t include a direct promise (so it’s usually not counted in the list of 7 “I am” claims. Jesus said in 8:58, “Very truly I tell you, before Abraham was born, I am!” This was perhaps the most direct reference Jesus made to being God. Jesus was referring to God’s call to Moses at the burning bush in Exodus 3:14. When Moses asked God what his name is, God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.” Jesus said, “...before Abraham was born, I am!” His Jewish listeners understood very well what he was saying, so they picked up stones to kill him for blasphemy. They knew he was claiming to be God.

So the author John wants us, the listener and reader of his gospel, to believe that Jesus is who he claimed to be. Jesus is the bread of life, the light of the world, the gate, the good shepherd, the resurrection and the life; the way, the truth and the life; and the true vine. John’s gospel tells us that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, the One who baptizes with the Holy Spirit, the Chosen One, and the Holy One of God.

So what is our purpose to study John’s gospel? It should be the same purpose for which the author wrote. If it is not, we can’t say that we are good students of the author’s book. The goal of our study then is to believe in Jesus. But just what does it mean to “believe” in him? To believe means to believe that he existed as a real human being. I believe that Julius Caesar actually lived. But belief in Jesus is much more than that. To “believe” in Jesus means to trust in him personally, that is, to put our faith—our confidence, in Jesus Christ and him alone to save us from our sins and to bring us to God.

I have a favorite illustration I once heard, regarding what it means to “believe.” This is a true story. Charles Blondin (1824-1897), was a French tightrope walker, who crossed over the Niagara Falls many times and in many ways, walking on a tightrope: blindfolded, carrying his manager on his back, cooking an egg in the middle, etc. One time he pushed a wheelbarrow across on a tightrope, and the crowds cheered. He asked the crowd, “Do you believe that I am able to do it again?” They cheered, “Yes, we believe!” He pointed to one man in the crowd and asked him, “Do you sir, believe that I am able to do it again?” The man said, “Yes, I believe.” Blondin said to him, “Then get in the wheelbarrow.” But the man

¹ <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/6979-i-am-trying-here-to-prevent-anyone-saying-the-really>

was not willing. He believed in his head, but he was not willing to risk his life. He was not willing to entrust his life in the hands of Blondin. To believe in Jesus is more than a mental assent; it is to trust Jesus with our lives, that he will bring us to heaven. That is the kind of belief that this gospel is asking us to have.

To “believe” in Jesus is closely related to the word to “know” Jesus. After Jesus challenged the hungry crowd to eat his flesh and drink his blood, many turned away from Jesus and no longer followed him. Jesus asked his twelve disciples, “You do not want to leave too, do you?” Simon Peter answered, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God” (6:68-69). Again, Jesus said in John 17:3, “Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.” As we study John’s gospel, let’s come to Jesus, and put our complete faith and trust in him.

But let’s not stop there. Our Bible study should not stop with our own benefit. We must always think about how God wants to use us to bless others. We are blessed in order to be a blessing. So our second purpose of studying John’s gospel is to help others to also experience this new, abundant, eternal life in Jesus Christ. Practically, our goal then is two-fold: to believe in Jesus for ourselves and experience abundant life more fully in his name, and, to help even one person (or more) to “come and see” Jesus with us, so they also may experience new birth and life in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Third, the right result of studying John’s gospel: life. We have already heard many promises of Jesus to those who come to him and believe in him. 20:31 summarizes it in these words: “...by believing you may have life in his name.” Here, the word “life” is not simply physical life. Everyone has physical life. But not everyone really lives life to the full. Jesus promised in 10:10, “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.” Another translation says, “...and have it more abundantly.” Jesus promises us abundant life. The life Jesus promises is not just for after we die. We can experience it now in this life. John 5:24 promises us in the present tense: “Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life.” Do you want abundant life? Of course, we all want abundant life. The problem is we all try to get abundant life in our own way and on our own terms. We all want the abundant life that Jesus promises. So let’s come to him, not in our way, on our terms, but in his way, on his terms, that we may experience life in his name.

So can John’s gospel actually change my life? Yes, it not only can, but it should, because the word of God is living and active. One young man grew up in a Christian home. But he did not have a personal confession of faith in Jesus. So his life went astray. He got into ungodly music, immorality and drugs. He came to Bible study and God’s word began to work powerfully and personally in him. Finally, John 14:6 came into his mind and heart: Jesus is the Way. This verse of the Bible changed his life. Now, Steve Stasinos and his wife, Amy, are living for Jesus in Toledo. He experienced and is still experiencing life in Jesus’ name. May God abundantly our John’s gospel study throughout 2019 that we may all believe in Jesus and have life in his name.