

JOHN

(1)

Author: John, son of Zebedee, one of the Twelve Apostles.

Date of composition: A.D. 80-110.

Place of composition: Ephesus (Greece).

Audience: Jews, Samaritans, Greek Gentiles. John did not intend to write a chronological account of the life of Jesus; rather he wanted to strengthen the faith of a second-generation of believers who were being influenced at the time by various heresies about Jesus. In defense, John emphasizes Jesus Christ as “the Son of God,” fully God and fully man.

Sources: While John was familiar with Mark’s earlier gospel, and drew material from all three gospels, he did not rely upon Mark, Matthew, and Luke to form the basis of his gospel. Not only does John leave out many of the short sayings of Jesus, but also the parables. Instead of parables John offers figures of speech or “word pictures” about the Good Shepherd and the Gate or Door of the Sheepfold in John 10:1-18. John also favors Jesus’ long discourses on his relation to God the Father (5:19-47), the Eucharist (6:35-71), and his relationship with the disciples before his Passion and death—including Jesus’ prayer to the Father (14 -17:26). Typically John marks divisions and endings in Jesus’ discourses with, “**As he was speaking these things . . .**”



Prologue (1:1-5)

Each of the four gospels has a unique beginning. In Mark it is, “**The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ.**” Matthew begins with the genealogy of Jesus. Luke begins by acknowledging those who have already “**undertaken to compile a narrative**” of the life of Christ. John’s gospel reaches back to Creation—the first verses of the Book of Genesis: “**In the beginning. . .**” (Genesis 1:1). John’s focus is on *revelation* and *redemption*; that is, the “new creation” will be all people who come to believe in Jesus Christ.

The testimony of John (1:6-3:36)

The coming of John the Baptist—“**sent from God**”—into the world is a continuation of God’s plan of salvation. John’s mission is “**that they all might believe through him**”—that is, through Jesus. The imagery of “**And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us**” (1:14), is of a pitched tent. This is not to suggest that the Word’s presence on earth was temporary, but that the world is not the proper home of the Word, for “**the Word was with God**” (1:1). Naturally “tent” evokes scenes of the Exodus from Egypt and the people of Israel wandering in the desert: “**I will put my dwelling place among you**” (Leviticus 26:11).

John the Baptist and Jesus (1:19-34)

The religious establishment in Jerusalem who acted as “regulators” of ritual purity, send a delegation to the River Jordan to investigate John the Baptist. While one-time ritual baptism was common in Israel, it was only for converts to Judaism. Jews by birth did not require baptism. Therefore John’s baptism of Jews signaled that a new age was at hand, and that *all* Israel needed

cleansing to prepare: **“I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities from all your idols (Ezekiel 36:25).**

When Jesus approaches, John the Baptist says, **“Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.”** John points to the Lamb Who is without defect or blemish, and therefore Who alone **“takes away the sins of the world.”**

Jesus and John the Baptist’s disciples (1:35-51)

Two of John’s disciples ask Jesus, **“Where are you staying?”** Having left John’s presence, they ask not out of idle curiosity but as “followers.” They presume Jesus is on his way, and that he is now their chosen leader. They want to know where he is leading them.

Jesus at the Wedding in Cana; Capernaum (2:1-12)

A shortage of wine at a wedding is not the same as a life-threatening illness. So Jesus’ words to his mother are not a refusal to act, but simply a reminder that the need is a relatively minor one. Note the extravagance: between 110 and 160 gallons of the finest wine are miraculously created. When Jesus gives, he gives abundantly (10:10).

Jesus and Nicodemus at Passover (2:23-3:21)

The question Nicodemus asks, **“How can a person be born when he is old?”** sounds as impossible as rebuilding a Temple in three days (2:19), or a camel passing through the eye of a needle (Mark 10:25). Birth from **“water and Spirit”** means the beginning of new life **“from above”** or **“eternal life.”** In John’s gospel, to be “born from above” is not an inevitability but the way one enters the kingdom of God.

Jesus self-revelation to the world; Jesus and the woman at the well (4:1-42)

Jewish custom frowned upon a man having an extended conversation with a woman, especially alone and moreover a Samaritan. After their conversation, neither shame nor uncertainty about Jesus’ identity keeps the woman from announcing to the whole town, **“Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Christ?”**

Healing of the man at the Pool of Bethesda (5:1-18)

By telling the man born blind and now able to see to pick up his mat and go home, Jesus is saying, *“Get up, leave this place because you are not coming back.”* In addition, by telling the man to **“pick up your mat and walk,”** Jesus is deliberately challenging the Pharisees, who would see the man healed walking in the Temple precincts carrying his matt, which was forbidden. In their eyes Jesus has caused a man to sin, and therefore the Pharisees see Jesus less as a miracle worker than a Sabbath breaker.

Jesus’ answer to the Jews in Jerusalem (5:19-47)

This is Jesus’ longest speech yet, and the longest uninterrupted speech to his opponents anywhere in the gospel. Jesus insists repeatedly that he never does or say anything on his own, but that the Son’s works are those of the Father.

“You search the Scriptures” Judaism taught that the Jewish Scriptures (Torah) were the source of life, and that studying them was the way to gain life: *“The more study of the law, the more life”* (Rabbi Hillel, 2nd century Torah scholar). However the Old Testament prophecies point to Jesus; and so to reject him is to deny the true life-giving power of the same Jewish Scriptures.

Feeding the five thousand; Eucharistic Discourse (6:1-66)

After the five thousand are fed, it is only natural to mention the baskets of leftovers. Jewish custom forbade the wasting of food, even scraps of leftovers.

Jesus says, **“You are seeking me not because you saw signs, but because you ate of the loaves and was satisfied.”** Much like the Samaritan woman who wanted “living water” so that she would not have to come to the well, the people wanted the abundance of bread to continue. Their words, **“that we may see and believe you,”** will be repeated by the chief priests and Pharisees shouting up to Jesus on the Cross: **“Let the Christ, the King of Israel, come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe”** (Mark 15:32).

“Amen, amen . . .” (or **“Truly, truly”**) is a kind of solemn vow (6:47-48) that what Jesus is about to say is true. Jesus is responding to the crowd’s earlier request to **“give us this bread always.”** However “this bread” is his own body, given up to death. Jesus will give life to the world by giving his flesh over to death so that **“everyone who believes in him might not be lost but have eternal life.”**

Jesus also says they must “drink his blood.” No one was prepared to hear that; for nothing was more abhorrent to Jewish sensibilities than the drinking of animal blood, much less human blood.

“For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink.” With the words “real” or “true,” Jesus is not suggesting cannibalism. He has already told his disciples that the **“food that you do not know about”** (4:32) is the doing of **“the will of the one who sent me.”** Jesus’ flesh is “real” food and his blood is “real” drink because both do what food and drink are supposed to do, and do it perfectly: nourish and give life, not for a day or a lifetime but forever.

“Do you also want to go away” (6:67)? Jesus is giving the Twelve the freedom to leave with the unbelieving disciples if they wish. Instead Peter says, **“Lord, to whom shall we turn? You have the words of life eternal, and we have believed and we know that you are the holy one of God”** (6:69).

Jesus in the temple (7:14-36)

Perhaps it is because of Jesus’ Galilean accent, or his manner of dress which was more like everyday Jews, that the Jews considered Jesus unlearned: **“The Jews marveled . . . ‘How is it that this man has learning, when he has never studied’”** (7:15)? They seek Jesus not only because he healed a man on the Sabbath, but because he **“was claiming God as his own father, making himself equal to God”** (5:18). Such a sensational claim the Pharisees and chief priests feared because then **“everyone will believe in him, and . . . the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation”** (11:48).

Woman caught in adultery (8:3-11)

As far as the scribes and Pharisees are concerned, there is only one correct answer to the question whether the woman should be stoned to death. Yet it is also true that in such cases the law required *both* the man and the woman to be stoned; for if the woman had been **“caught in the act,”** her partner must have been present and should have been seized as well (Leviticus 20:10).

That Jesus stoops down to write with his finger on the ground is a kind of non-answer, as is clear from the comment that **“they kept on questioning him”** (7). Jesus reveals the hypocrisy of the woman’s accusers; for here again the law required that **“the hands of the witnesses must be the first in putting him to death, and then the hands of all the people”** (Deuteronomy 17:7). Thus Jesus invites the woman’s accusers to assert their own moral standing to act as witness, judge and executioner.

Last day of the festival: Jesus and the Jews who believed (8:30-59)

What especially offends the Jews is Jesus’ promise that **“the truth will set you free”** (32). *Set free from what?* The “Jews who had believed” are yet not ready to acknowledge the threat that they may

die in their sins (21). They are of Abraham's seed; they are enslaved to no one. Of course they *were* slaves in Egypt, and later in their own country under the Persians and the Greeks, and now the Romans. But for the Jews it's a matter of national pride: they never *inwardly* bowed down to foreign rule. However foreign rule is not the issue. Jesus answers, "**Amen, amen, I say to you, that everyone who commits sin is a slave of sin**" (34).

Having stood his ground effectively against those who called Him a "Samaritan" and demon-possessed, Jesus is ready to make another promise. "**Amen, amen, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never ever see death**" (51). The term "**never ever**" is deliberately redundant. Jesus is not promising exemption from physical death but from spiritual or *everlasting* death. As the Jews attempt to stone Him (59), Jesus' temple ministry, which began when Jesus "**went up to the temple and began teaching,**" comes to an end (7:14, 28; 8:20).

Jesus and the man born blind (9:1-30).

An intuitive sense within Judaism was that human sinfulness must somehow lie at the root of all misfortune (Exodus 20:5). The default assumption was that the victim was to blame, or in the case of someone born blind, the sins of the parents (Ezekiel 18). Jesus rejects both notions. After finding the man, Jesus asks, "**Do you believe in the Son of Man?**" However the man has no idea of what it means to "believe in" him. How can he believe in someone he has never seen? The man's reaction is natural: "**Who is he?**" Jesus responds, "**I am,**" which is also how Jesus answers the woman at the well ("**it is I – I who am speaking to you.**" 4:26).

To be "put out of synagogue" (9:22) as the blind man's parents feared, was to be banned from attending synagogue and shunned by society. Such punishment was common in early Judaism, although it was not meant to be final. The intent of being "put out of synagogue" was eventual reform and return to the synagogue community.

Sheep and shepherds (10:1-2)

Jesus speaks of "**the Door**" when we might have expected him to say "Shepherd of the sheep." "**Amen, Amen, I say to you, the one who does not enter through the door into the courtyard of the sheep, but goes up elsewhere, that one is a thief and robber.**" As "**the Door,**" Jesus is a closed entryway to all who threaten the sheep, and yet also the "Door" that will later welcome Gentiles.

"I am the good Shepherd."

What makes a shepherd "good" is that he lays down his life for the sheep. The point is not that a shepherd foolishly dies for the sheep—for this would hardly benefit them—but that he willingly accepts the risk of defending the sheep, even at the cost of his life.

Titles and works (10:22-42)

At the Portico of Solomon, a traditional place for teaching and discussion, the Jews ask Jesus, "**How long will you take away our life?**" which is another way of saying, "*the suspense is killing me.*" So the Jews ask, "**If you are the Christ, tell us plainly.**"

The overriding question remains, who is Jesus? Is he a sinner? Is he demon-possessed? Is he the Christ? They do not want to hear talk of "Bread" or "Shepherd" or "Door." They want to know whether he is the *Christ*—the Anointed One—who "**was claiming God as his own Father, making himself equal to God**" (5:18).

These are Jesus' last words in John's gospel to "the Jews." After the rejection and attempted stoning at the Tent Festival and the Rededication in Jerusalem, Jesus leaves Jerusalem before he returns and makes his triumphal entrance before Passover.