

## INTRODUCTION

When John, Jesus' disciple, later called an 'apostle', wrote his gospel in the AD 90s, he pulled together just a few of Christ's miracles and interspersed them between details of Christ's teaching not found in any of the other three gospels. He did this with the specific purpose that his readers should believe that the man Jesus is the Son of God, and by believing have life in his name (20:30-31).

This is John's passion. This is John's purpose. To get us to really see Jesus Christ and to really know Jesus Christ, because only by this seeing and this knowing can we have eternal life. This is his theme throughout his gospel.

We might wonder:

'Why is John so different?

Why did he deliberately include so much material ignored by Matthew, Mark and Luke?'

Those three gospels were already in circulation when John wrote. He had no need to repeat their content. But he did have a need to remind Christians of the true identity of Jesus Christ. Already by the end of the first century false teaching about the identity and significance of Christ was being taught in the churches.

This is evident in Paul's letter to the Colossians, written as early as AD60. This very short letter stresses that the fullness of God dwelt in the human body of Jesus. The letter to the Hebrews, probably written in the late 60s, also emphasises the true and full deity of Christ and the true and full humanity of Christ, warning its readers that to give up believing in *this* Jesus would be the ultimate disaster. John's first letter, written about the same time as his Gospel, calls his readers back to a true understanding of Jesus Christ: one who is really human and at the same time really God. He goes so far as to say that those who do not hold together the full humanity and the full deity of Christ are 'antichrist' (1John 2:18-23; see also 4:1-3; 5:1-5).

Thus John's Gospel deliberately addresses a defective understanding of the person of Christ that was current at that time. It presents more fully the truths stressed in his letter, and confronts the heresies addressed by his letter. Its critical relevance has not lessened; its central message is just as necessary today. Today's church is itself riddled with diminished and disempowered perceptions of the person of Christ, and thus of his death, and surrounded by a great multiplicity of false cults and religious beliefs that continue to corrupt perceptions of Jesus both within and outside the church.

We are breaking into this gospel half way through. This is unfortunate ... unless you have already studied the first half. There, in his very first verse, John laid down the essential, irreducible fact that he stressed right through those first ten chapters: the man Jesus is the eternal God.

The source of all life.

The source of spiritual life.

The only place where God is known.

One with the Father.

The light of the world, apart from whom there is only death, ignorance and darkness.

God incarnate – true God in true human flesh.

Here where we are breaking into John's Gospel he has already laid these foundations of the true deity and true humanity of Jesus Christ. John Chapter 1 gave a comprehensive introduction of these inseparable truths. Chapters 2 to 10 reported the ministry of Jesus Christ to unbelievers, where Jesus over and over again talked about his unity and equality with the Father and stressed the urgent necessity of believing in him. Repeatedly Jesus taught that he was the exclusive one-and-only source of spiritual life.

In John 11 to 21 John continues to confront us with this true identity of Jesus Christ, and the urgent necessity of believing in him. But now he also begins to draw us on towards the death and resurrection of Jesus: a real human death deliberately embraced; a real, physical resurrection deliberately and powerfully accomplished.

### **Thinking through these chapters**

*Chapter 11:* With this deliberate and real death and resurrection of Jesus already anticipated in John 10:11,17,18, John now reports the death and raising of Lazarus, a report with multiple layers of meaning.

Here the ultimate penalty of sin is reversed by Jesus.

Here the death and resurrection of Jesus are anticipated.

Here the spiritual regeneration of the sinner is depicted.

Here the end-time physical resurrection of believers is anticipated. Jesus is the resurrection and the life: those who believe in him live, even though they die.

When he raised Lazarus from death to life Jesus demonstrated the validity of all of his previous claims. All of those statements he had made about himself as the source and giver of life, all of those claims to equality and identity with God, they are all validated here where Jesus, who claims to be 'life', confronts death. Not a death that has just happened and the body is still warm. No. A death that is four days old – a death that has already been followed by decay. Only the one who is

God, only the one who is the Creator, could reverse this death! Jesus' claims to deity stand or fall here in the presence of this death.

And if he can reverse physical death and decay here, then he can also, as he claimed, reverse that other death, that other decay: that spiritual death, that separation from spiritual life and from God that holds every human being captive.

But when he raised Lazarus from death to life, Jesus basically signed his own death warrant. The leaders of the Jews were already very antagonistic towards him before this. As early as Chapter 5 they had wanted to kill him because he called God his Father, making himself equal with God. In Chapter 8, when he said 'before Abraham was born, I am' they had picked up stones to stone him to death, because he applied God's name to himself and claimed the same eternal existence as God. In Chapter 10, again they had stones in their hands, and twice attempted to kill him, because he said 'I and the Father are one' and 'the Father is in me, and I in the Father'.

The raising of Lazarus, and the impact this miracle had on the public, stirred the Jewish leaders to such fear and such opposition that they came to a formal decision to get rid of Jesus.

In *Chapter 12* John reports the last opportunity the crowds have to believe in Jesus. For part of this chapter Jesus stayed away from the public because of the Jews' plot to arrest him, because he knew that his death must occur at the Passover. When he did appear in public he made a number of very clear statements, urging people to believe in him while they still had the opportunity - to believe in the light while they still had the light:

Because to believe in him, is to believe in God.

Because to look at him, is to look at God.

Because he came as light, so that no one who believes in him should stay in darkness.

Because the words which he spoke, which were the words the Father commanded him to say, will, on the day of judgment, condemn all who do not believe in him.

Here in his final words to the crowds Jesus leaves the crowds with his final challenge to them: that in rejecting him and his words they are rejecting God, and that in doing so they are choosing darkness, they are choosing judgement.

But as well as these final words urging people to believe in him, Chapter 12 also reports Jesus' clear and deliberate commitment to his imminent death, and his understanding of that death.

In these few days leading up to this final predictive Passover, when he, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world will die, Jesus taught:

That his death was imminent ... he would soon be leaving them [verse 7,8].

That his death was the planned purpose of his coming [verse 23,27].

That his death meant glory – to himself and to the Father [verse 23,28],

That his death was essential for the life of many [verse 24].

That his death meant judgment on the world [verse 31].

That his death meant the disempowerment and eviction of Satan, the 'prince of this world' [verse 31].

From here on all of Christ's teaching is directed to his disciples, instructing them, preparing them, for life as his people beyond his death and resurrection.

*In Chapter 13* we move straight into the night that Jesus was arrested, the night before his death. Here, where Jesus and his disciples came together to eat the evening meal, John reports several things that Jesus *knew*:

He *knew* that the time had come for him to leave the world and return to the Father.

He *knew* that the Father had placed all things under his power, and that he came from God and was returning to God. But, even knowing this, indeed, because he knew this, he got up and washed his disciples feet.

He *knew* who would betray him – that was why he said not all of his disciples were 'clean'.

He *knew* whom he had chosen.

Jesus washed all their feet, including Judas, but he clearly indicated that Judas was not 'clean'. John 15:3 indicates that the eleven faithful disciples were 'clean' through the word that Jesus had spoken to them. They had believed his word, they had believed in him, but Judas had not. For them, because they believed in him, his death, which he had not yet accomplished, was already effective. He has already forgiven them, he has already cleansed them.

In this context we find the first two commands in John's gospel about how we should live as Christians:

That we should forgive each other in the same way that Jesus has forgiven us [symbolised by this physical picture of washing each other's feet].

That we should love one another as Jesus has loved us.

Having thus assured them of his love and cleansing [forgiveness], Jesus proceeds for three chapters (14 – 16) to prepare the eleven faithful disciples for life as his followers after his return to the Father. He knows that his talk of his death has troubled them, and he tries to reassure and calm them.

*In Chapter 14:*

Jesus reaffirms that

He is the way to God

He is the truth

He is the life.

No one comes to the Father except through him.

Because they have seen him they have seen the Father.

Because they know him, they know the Father.

And he gives them some new information:

When he returns to the Father he and the Father will send the Holy Spirit.

When the Holy Spirit comes, it is he, Jesus, coming, and the Father coming to make their home in them. Jesus is not leaving them alone, he is coming back to them.

The Holy Spirit is a Counsellor, just like Jesus.

The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth.

The Holy Spirit will be their teacher.

*In Chapter 15:*

Jesus gives the last of his 'I AM' claims – 'I am the true vine' – and explains one more time the critical necessity of a right relationship with himself. Previously, he has taught:

I am the bread of life – whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.

I am the light of the world – whoever believes in me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.

I am the gate for the sheep – whoever enters through me will be saved.

I am the good shepherd – my sheep listen to my voice ... I give them eternal life.

I am the resurrection and the life – whoever believes in me will live, even though they die.

I am the way, the truth and the life – no one comes to the Father except through me.

And now he says:

I am the true vine – if you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.

Each of these seven 'I AM' claims of Jesus point out the essential union with him that is necessary for spiritual life.

By this union with Jesus Christ those who believe in him are cleansed [forgiven], and fruitful. The love that he has for them will be evident in their lives as they love each other.

But Jesus also taught that because of this union with him, we who believe in him will also attract the same rejection that he attracted: the world will hate the disciples of Jesus, just as it hated him.

*In Chapter 16:*

Chapter 16 reports Jesus' final teaching to his disciples.

He continued to warn them of the opposition they would face because of their allegiance to him.

He told them that he would soon be returning to the Father, and that this would be better for them than if he stayed with them, as it meant that the Holy Spirit would then come to them and be with them for ever.

He gave further teaching about the Holy Spirit – that when the Spirit came to live within believers he would prove the world to be wrong in respect to sin, righteousness and judgment. This is the work of the Spirit through the church's witness about Jesus Christ.

He told them that they would soon be very sad, but that their sorrow would be turned to joy.

And he taught them about the effectiveness of prayer in his name.

As a final word he said "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."

*In Chapter 17:*

Chapter 17 records the prayer that Jesus prayed in the presence of the eleven disciples before going out to the Mount of Olives. There are three main topics in his prayer:

He talks to his Father about glory. He sums up his life on earth with the words 'I have brought you glory on earth' and prays, firstly, that now, in his

death, both he and his Father would be glorified, and, secondly, that he would return to the eternal glory he had shared with his Father.

He prays for his disciples, given to him by the Father. They no longer belong to the world, and so are the victims of the world's hatred, so he asks his Father to protect them from the evil one.

He prays for all who believe in him, present and future – that they will be united, that they will be with him where he is and see his glory, and that they will love each other in the same way that the Father loves the Son.

### *In Chapters 18 and 19*

Chapters 18 and 19 report the arrest, trial and crucifixion of Jesus. As John relates the well-known details he includes some important perspectives:

That Jesus was fully committed to this death – 'Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me!' As he had previously said – it was for this death that he had come into the world.

That Jesus' kingdom is not of this world, not a physical kingdom, not a kingdom that is won by physical fighting, but he is indeed a King.

That there is a second reason Jesus was born and came into the world – to testify to the truth. It is this testimony of Jesus to the truth that John has spent most of his gospel reporting – that Jesus Christ reveals the truth about God: that in seeing and knowing Jesus Christ we see and know God.

That Pilate would have no power over him, unless that power was given to him by God. This death, including Pilate's part in it, was planned, directed and over-ruled by God.

That, just before he died, Jesus said 'It is finished.' By these words he indicated that God's eternal plan of salvation, put in place before the creation of the world, put in place even before we sinned, was here, in this death, completely accomplished.

### *In Chapters 20 and 21*

In Chapters 20 and 21, where John reports the resurrection appearances of Jesus, he includes two significant incidents that are not in the other gospels:

He tells us about Thomas and his unbelief. To Thomas, it simply did not seem possible that Jesus could be really and physically alive, regardless of what the others were saying. He would have to feel the real flesh of Jesus with his own hands to believe such a thing. And this is actually a very valid position – because dead men, and particularly a man who had been so badly beaten prior to his death, don't live. Dead men can't live.

But, suddenly, there was Jesus, with his hands stretched out, showing the holes left by the nails. There was Jesus, pulling aside his robe to show Thomas where the thrust of the spear had penetrated. And Thomas? What did he do? There was only one thing he could do. There was only one conclusion he could make: that this Jesus, victorious over death, alive, physically alive instead of physically dead, was indeed all that he had ever claimed to be: 'My Lord and my God!'

John also relates Jesus' conversation with Peter, in which he, three times, gave Peter the opportunity to reaffirm his love for Jesus, and in which he, three times, recommissioned Peter to take care of his 'sheep'.

### *In conclusion*

When he wrote this gospel towards the end of his life John was still totally overwhelmed by Jesus, and he wants us, his readers, to also be overwhelmed.

He wants us to be fully convinced that Jesus Christ is

The eternal, creator God, who, for our salvation, became man.

The Lamb of God, whose death for our sins was planned in eternity, and was deliberately accomplished by him.

For John, there is no option but to believe in Jesus Christ. Apart from Christ

There is only spiritual death.

There is only spiritual starvation.

There is only spiritual darkness.

There is only condemnation.

But, for those who receive him, for those who recognize and believe in him, for those who confess that he is God –

There is life.

There is permanent spiritual sustenance and satisfaction.

There is light and truth.

There is the freedom of sins forgiven.

There is the permanent presence of God.

May we all, with Thomas, confess Jesus Christ as 'My Lord and my God!'