



## UNIT 3 NEW TESTAMENT

### LESSON 4

#### J O H N

The great Reformer John Calvin said: "This Gospel is the key which opens the door to the understanding of the others." Christians of many ages have found in this Gospel depths of spiritual truth unreached in any other New Testament writing. Compared with the Synoptists, said Wordsworth: "Thou hast kept the good wine until now".

#### Relation with the Synoptics (Matthew, Mark, Luke)

Before we notice the differences between this Gospel and the other three, we ought to note that John tells the same basic story as they do: how Jesus was baptised in Jordan, how he called disciples and went through Galilee and Judaea announcing the advent of God's salvation, how enemies arose against him, and how at last he was arrested, condemned and crucified. And there follows the same astounding sequel of the empty grave and the risen Lord. Having been made aware of the similarity however, it must be said that a reading of the fourth gospel, even in the most cursory way, will reveal the differences: the material John has in common with the Synoptics contains very little verbal agreement. John omits much of the material found in the Synoptics (virgin birth, baptism, temptation, transfiguration, cure of demoniacs or lepers, narrative parables, institution of the Lord's Supper, agony in the Garden, ascension etc.). These were possibly omitted because John, who probably wrote considerably later than Matthew, Mark and Luke, may have assumed his readers already knew these facts. Additional material is found in John which is not present in the Synoptics (miracle at Cana, encounters of Jesus with Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman, healing of the cripple and the blind man in Jerusalem, raising of Lazarus, washing of disciples' feet, farewell discourses etc. John's prologue 1:1-18 is also unique). A difference in presentation is readily seen in the Fourth Gospel, chiefly that there is less narrative and more discourse.

Whatever the differences, most readers of the Gospels in all ages have been unaware of any fundamental discrepancy between the Christ who speaks and acts in the fourth gospel and He who speaks and acts in the Synoptics.

#### Purpose

The fourth gospel is expressly missionary in its purpose. "These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name (20:31). This is the Gospel of the mission of Jesus; the words "He that sent Me" occur with almost monotonous repetition. Twice over, the mission of the disciples is set forth in the solemn words 'as the Father has sent Me, even so I send you', 'as Thou didst send Me into the world, so have I sent them into the world' (20:21; 17:18). The mission continues.

The fourth gospel is distinguished from the other three in that it is shaped with a conscious design to illustrate and establish an assumed conclusion (i.e. 'that Jesus is the Christ the Son of God').



In the choice of his material, John is highly selective (20:30; 21:5). Every part of his work is referred to one final truth made clear by experience, that 'Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God'. Marcus Dods has said: "In the whole range of literature, there is no composition which is a more perfect work of art, or which more rigidly excludes whatever does not subserve its main end. From the first word to the last, there is no paragraph, sentence, or expression which is out of its place, or with which we could dispense."

### Characteristics

a) Hebrew Thought and Tone

For many years, the prevailing opinion among scholars was that John was written by 'a Greek thinker for Greeks'. More recently, however, there has been a strong tendency to emphasise the significance, for John, of the Old Testament and Judaism. Although there are comparatively few quotations, there are many allusions to the Old Testament and John draws attention to Jewish festivals.

b) A 'Spiritual Gospel'

In John, we have an interpretation of Jesus, rather than a strictly literal account of His life. The historical outline is the vehicle of a theological presentation of Jesus.

c) Symbolic

Not only does the Gospel contain the three great allegories of the sheep-fold, the Good Shepherd and the Vine, from which Christian art has drawn its symbolism from the very earliest times, but the whole Gospel has symbolic representation. For example many of the miracles ('signs') symbolise and illustrate divine truths, e.g. the discourse on the Bread of Life (6:25); the conversation with the man born blind (9:8); the words spoken to Martha and Mary (11:20).

d) Typical Element

Individuals and groups or classes of people stand as types. This Gospel is far richer in distinct personal types of unbelief and faith than the others. In 'the multitude', 'the Jews', 'the Pharisees', 'the high priests' the broad outlines of the nature of unbelief are drawn, whereas Nicodemus, the woman of Samaria, Thomas etc. are 'types of faith'.

e) Teaching on the Spirit

There is more of our Lord's teaching about the Spirit in this Gospel than in any other (chapter 3; 4:24; 7:39; chapters 14-16).

f) The Comparative Lack of Movement

John's Gospel is reflective in mood. Compared with Mark's Gospel in particular, where the accent is on restless movement, John's record tends to be static. This is largely due to the amount of discourse material.

g) Great Themes

A number of great themes such as light, life, love, truth abiding are present. They recur at intervals throughout the book. Some occur first in the prologue (1:1-18). Two themes, for example, can be traced from the prologue through the Gospel - that of life and light.

Life            1:4; 3:15, 16, 36; 4:14; 6:35, 47, 54; 10:10; 17:2; 20:31

Light          1:4; 3:19ff; 5:35; 8:12; 9:5; 11:9; 12:46

See also the theme of love - 3:16, 35; 5:20; 10:17; 14:23; 16:27

h) Portrait of Jesus

In addition to the traditional names given to Jesus in the Synoptics (Rabbi, Prophet, Bridegroom, He that comes, King, the Holy One of God), names appear in John not seen elsewhere, namely the Bread of Life, the Light of the World, the Door of the Sheep, the Good Shepherd, the Resurrection and the Life, the True Vine, and the Way and the Truth and the Life. The central and basic ideas reflected in John's portrait of Jesus are:

1. His Humanity

That the Word became flesh amongst men, and that His glory was seen, is the dominating theme of the fourth Gospel (1:14). Jesus' real manhood and humanity are stressed (2:15; 4:6, 31; 6:5, 20; 11:33, 35, 38; 19:28).

2. Relationship to the Father

He is the divine Son of God. This is expressed by the frequency of the terminology of Sonship (Son of God, the only begotten Son, the Son, your Son, my Father) (1:29; 3:14, 17; 4:42; 6:51; 12:27, 32, 47; 15:13; 18:11).

3. The Eternal Word (Logos)

Right at the beginning of the Gospel, Jesus is affirmed to be the word of God (1:14, 17). The word "Word" or "Logos" had special meaning for both Jews and Greeks so it was useful for John to use to speak to both groups.

4. The Holy Spirit in Relation to the Father and the Son

Thanks to John's inspiration, a much richer conception of God has prevailed, so that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit can be distinguished as Persons within the unity of the one God. (See especially 14:15-17, 25, 26; 15:26; 16:7-15).



5. The Lamb of God, the Saviour

Christ's death is not an incident of His life: it is the aim of it (10:17f). (See also 6:35; 8:12; 10:7, 11; 11:25; 15:1; 14:6).

6. Relation to the Believer

Probably in no other single work of the New Testament is the living, vital relationship of Christ to the believer seen in all its depth and close communion as here. (See especially chapters 15 and 17, and the seven 'I am' sayings.)

It has been said that 'the structure of the Gospel is simple in outline, complicated in detail.' One simple plan suggested is:

- a) Prologue 1:1-18
- b) Self-Revelation of Christ to the World 1:19 - 12:50.
- c) Self-Revelation of Christ to His Disciples ch.13-20.
- d) Epilogue chapter 21.

### **GOSPELS CONTRASTED**

Every one of the Gospels was written from a certain point of view. Very often on stained glass windows the writers of the Gospels are pictured; and usually to each of them is attached a symbol. The symbols vary but one of the commonest allocations of them is this: the emblem of Mark is a man. Mark is the simplest and most straightforward of the Gospels. It has been well said that its characteristic is realism. The emblem of Matthew is a lion. Matthew was a Jew writing for Jews and he saw in Jesus the Messiah, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the one whom all the prophets had predicted. The emblem of Luke is an ox, bearer of burdens and used for sacrificial offerings. Luke saw in Jesus the sacrifice for all the world. The barriers are broken down and Jesus is for Jew and Gentile, saint and sinner alike. He is the Saviour of the World. The emblem of John is the eagle. The eagle can fly higher than any other bird. It is said of all the creatures, only the eagle can look straight into the sun. John is the 'theological Gospel'; its flights of thought are higher than those of any of the others. It is the Gospel where the philosopher can find themes to think about for a lifetime and to solve only in eternity (Barclay).



**Question 1**

Briefly describe some of the differences between John's Gospel and the other Gospels.

**Question 2**

What is the main purpose of John? How do we know?

**Question 3**

What divine truth is symbolised and illustrated by the miracle and discourse about bread in John 6:1-15.25-59?

**Question 4**

What aspects of Jesus' real manhood and humanity are shown in these verses - John 1:14; 4:6-7, 31; 11:33, 35, 38; 19:28, 34?

**Question 5**

List, in summary form, the contents of these verses which follow the theme of "love" through John's Gospel: John 3:35; 5:20; 10:17; 3:16; 14:23; 16:27.

**QUESTION FOR GROUP STUDY**

Read and summarise the following verses, which show the theme of "Light" in John's Gospel. What is the most meaningful verse or aspect for you? John 1:14; 3:19ff 5:35 8:12; 9:5cf; 11:9; 12:46).