

Introduction to John's gospel: (1)

Introduction

Next Sunday we begin a preaching series in John chapters 1-4. Over the next year or 18 months we're going to aim to preach through the whole of the gospel.

Most of us will know something of John's gospel. It's glorious! But it can also be tricky: it can be hard to find a logical flow in the book... there's lots of repetition (why?)... some of the language is unfamiliar (light, life).

In adult Sunday School over the next three weeks we're going to have a bit of an introduction to John's gospel.

- This week: the AIM of John's Gospel.
- Next week: the STORY of John's Gospel.
- Lastly: how John can encourage us in personal evangelism.

Hopefully these sessions will help us make the most of Sunday preaching in John. Also, I hope and pray it will encourage you to go away to read and feed on the wonderful riches that the Lord has put in the fourth gospel. And for those of us who are called in different ways to be Bible teachers hopefully these sessions will be useful for you too.

Before we turn to John's key verses let's get a flavour of John's gospel by reading from the beginning – 1:1-18.

A. The aim of John's Gospel

1. John's key verses – 20:30-31

Turn up 20:30-31. These are the key verses for understanding the whole gospel. If we're going to feed rightly on John then these need to be seared into our brains:

"Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."

Here John tells us his purpose in writing as he does: "these are written that...". I've written it all down, says John, for a particular reason. And it has to do with the "signs" or "signposts" around which the gospel is based.

2. The "signs" in John's gospel

What are the signs? And where in the Gospel do we find them?

The "signs" in question are the miracles of Jesus that John records for us.

[The word "sign" = 2:23, 3:2, 4:48, 6:2, 6:26, 7:31, 9:16, 11:47, 12:37, 20:30]

2:1-11	Water into wine	
4:43-54	The official's son	
5:1-15	Healing at the pool	
6:1-15	Feeding of the 5k	}
6:16-21	Walking on water	
9:1-12	Man born blind	} These belong together
11:1-43	Lazarus raised	
20:1-29	Resurrection	
21:1-14	Miraculous fish	

3. The signs POINT to something

In fact: The point of the signs is that they point to something. The point of the signs is that they point to something else. Each miracle is a signpost.

Actually, the word in v30 which the NIV translates as “miraculous signs” is literally just “signs” or “signposts.”

What does a sign do? It points to something. The important thing about the miraculous signs that John records is not the signs themselves. The important thing is what the signs point to. What the signs signify.

Suppose you’re driving along the M25 and looking for the sign which tells you when to leave. When that sign pops up we don’t get so fixated with the sign (the colour, the shape, the beautiful font) that we miss our turning.

So too with the signs in John’s Gospel. They point to something. We learn from the signs. And the thing God the Spirit longs for most as we look at the signs: is that we learn what they signify.

The meaning of the sign may not be clear from the sign itself. A sign is often followed by a conversation in which Jesus unpacks it. The sign AND the explanation must go together.

4. What do the signs signify?

Look again at 20:31...

“But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.”

God the Holy Spirit through John has 3 great aims for everyone who reads the Gospel.

1. Understand WHO JESUS is: the Christ, the Son of God
2. Instruct us about and encourage us to BELIEVE IN JESUS
3. As we believe in Him, we will have LIFE.

That gives us the three great themes of the Gospel: Jesus, belief and life. That’s the Big Picture of John’s Gospel: Jesus; Belief; Life.

Or to put it another way:

- first: the Gospel holds out to us the content of faith: WHO it is we’re to believe in. The Christ the Son of God – he is the one we’re called to believe in. And *Jesus* is that Christ.
- second: the Gospel holds us before the nature of faith: what saving belief is and isn’t. What false faith looks like.
- third: the Gospel shows us the result of faith: life – and what that life is. Especially it is KNOWING GOD (see a key verse here 17:3). Life is the opposite of death, darkness, facing condemnation. John is the book of life.

We need to get these imprinted in our hearts and minds: Jesus, belief, life. So that as we understand John’s gospel we’re learning in the way that God wants us to.

That means we’ll constantly want to be asking:

1. How does this passage enable us to believe that Jesus is the Christ the Son of God?
2. What does it mean to have life in his name?
3. What does a right response of faith in him look like?

We’ll spend time later thinking about each of those three points in turn.

B. The STRUCTURE of John's Gospel

What do we mean by “structure”? We mean the deliberate pattern or order within the book. The way that the gospel is constructed.

Why does understanding that help? We're helped to read it well. We're helped to read it in context. We come to realize what are those things that John is especially emphasizing.

There are different legitimate ways of thinking about John's structure. But there are some things that are clear for all to see. [Pretty much everyone thinks there are 2 large sections in the Gospel. Pretty much everyone disagrees about where the middle is.]

1. The pattern of the signs

It's clear from 20:31 that signs matter to John. God will do his aim in us as we understand what the signs (and accompanying explanations) have to teach us.

But we can go a bit further...

To some extent, God the Spirit through John has structured the Gospel around the signs. There's a pattern to them. They all occur in pairs. And they help us understand the material around them.

2:1-11 Water into wine
4:43-54 Officials son.
- *both occur at Cana in Galilee.*

5:1-15 Healing at the pool
9:1-12 Man born blind
- *both happen on the Sabbath and lead to negative reaction of the Jews.*

6:1-15 Feeding of the 5k
6:16-21 Walking on water
- *these occur in the middle of this section. They belong together. Signs like those performed by God at the time of the Exodus.*

11:1-43 Lazarus raised
20:1-29 Resurrection
- *two resurrections*

21:1-14 Miraculous fish
- *a final unpaired sign.*

2. An outline of the Gospel in one verse – 16:28

“I came from the Father and entered the world;
now I am leaving the world and going back to the Father.”

That sentence sums up the two halves of the Gospel. (chs 2-12 and 13-20)

- Jesus says: I am the Son who came from heaven. Revealing God to us. That's the first half.
- Now, I'm returning to the Father. Returning via the Cross, to the glory I had before all worlds. That's the second half of the Gospel.

The “shape” of John's gospel, then, is a bit like a tick: ✓

3. A fuller outline of the Gospel

Chapter 1. Introduction

1:1-18 Jesus is God
1:18-50 Jesus is Messiah

Chapters 2 – 12. Jesus comes from the Father.

**Jesus' identity and work is revealed in signs and words,
leading to final rejection by the Jews, and the Gospel goes to the Gentiles.**

Chs 2-4. Jesus is the promised king
Chs 5-10. Jesus is the divine king who gives eternal life and judges
Chs 11-12. Jesus will bring resurrection life through his death.
The Jews reject him, Gentiles begin to believe.

Chapters 13-20. Jesus returns to the Father – via the Cross.

Jesus goes to the Cross and teaches the disciples how to live in the light of the Cross

Chs 13-17. Trusting Christ and living for him once he's returned to the Father
Chs 18-19. Jesus' obedient, glorious, wrath-bearing sacrifice
Ch20. Jesus is risen. Believe the witnesses

Chapter 21. Epilogue

4. Useful resources on John's gospel

- Excellent Biblestudy notes, free online – see <http://city.st-helens.org.uk/resources/truth-at-work-resources>
- *Read, Mark, Learn: John* – by St Helen's Bishopsgate (fuller notes and study questions)
- D.A. Carson, *John's Gospel* (huge and difficult commentary; great for teachers)
- Andreas Kostenberger, *John's Gospel* (huge and difficult commentary; great for teachers)