

It is a joy for me to give you a brief introduction to the Gospel of John, the Beloved Disciple. Surprisingly, the author doesn't name himself directly but calls himself "the disciple who Jesus loved" five times. It sounds like a strange claim, as if Jesus loved him more than the other disciples. That can't be true because throughout the gospel the author writes of Jesus' love for Mary, Martha, Lazarus and all his disciples, telling them "to love one another as I have loved you." So why does the author give himself this name, "the **Beloved Disciple**?"

First, it identifies the author as an eyewitness throughout the ministry of Jesus. He refers to himself in this oblique way at the Last Supper, at the cross as he receives Jesus' mother into his family, at the empty tomb, and in face to face contact with Jesus after the resurrection. He was there. This Gospel is his eyewitness account.

Calling himself "Beloved Disciple" is a way of saying, "My identity is not in my name. My identity is being loved by Jesus." He is simply rejoicing in that love.

Perhaps this is also one way of the author copying his Master. The pattern of Jesus' life is to shine a light on his Father's love, his Father's judgment, his Father's covenant and work. So in this gospel the author steps aside in order to focus on Jesus, the One he serves.

Calling himself the Beloved Disciple is his way of saying, 'The Son of God is why I'm writing this book. He is why I minister, why I live.' Like Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:14-15, the writer is saying "Christ's love for me controls me."

Over the centuries there has been quite a debate about the identity of the Beloved Disciple. Bruce Milne and D.A. Carson agree with the traditional authorship attributed to John, the son of Zebedee and younger brother of the apostle, James. They point out multiple clues to the writer's identity within the gospel itself: author is Jewish, obviously an eyewitness and a disciple who attended the Last Supper, someone who saw the crucifixion and was in a position to write detailed portrayals of characters like the woman from Samaria, Nicodemus and the man born blind, someone in close association with Peter. Outside sources like the early church fathers Irenaeus and Polycarp who knew the apostle John confirm his authorship. Second century figures like Tertullian, Clement and Origen also accepted John as the author of the fourth gospel.

We know from the other gospels that John was one of an inner circle (Peter, James and John), present at the Transfiguration, the raising of Jairus' 12 year old daughter

from the dead and chosen to be closest to Jesus during his agony at Gethsemane. John is frequently mentioned side by side with Peter in the book of Acts.

Who is John as he pens this gospel? He is an old man, likely the last disciple alive when the gospel was written. His brother, James was the first disciple to be martyred, 40 years earlier. From his letters we know that John has a shepherd's heart, a pastor's heart. According to Paul, in Galatians 2:9, John had been a pillar of the Jerusalem church along with his dear friend, Peter, and James, the brother of Jesus. This was before the church scattered and Rome destroyed Jerusalem in AD 70. For several decades now John has preached and taught the life of Jesus to his "dear friends" and "children" as he calls his scattered flock in 1, 2 and 3 John.

In the gospel, John's voice is wonderfully present as he remembers "what we have heard ...seen with our eyes...have touched with our hands!" (1 John 1:1) These are the amazed words of a once angry young man who Jesus named Son of Thunder or in Aramaic, Son of Rage. Decades later, life and loss within the love of Jesus and transformation by the Spirit has radically changed him and honed his message.

John understands Jesus from what theologians call a "high Christology." Like we might do in an email when we choose to bold and underline certain words, the Spirit led John to 'bold and underline' that Jesus is the Divine Word made flesh, God with us, the One through whom God made the universe. At the same time Jesus is intimately personal. John heard the warmth of Jesus' voice, saw his animated face, watched him call Lazarus from his tomb, leaned against him at the Last Supper, and eaten breakfast prepared by his resurrected hands. To quote Leon-Dufour from Carson's commentary, John's gospel 'is a work in which the testimony of man and the testimony of the Spirit have been fused into one, to bring out the true meaning of Jesus' earthly life.'

John brings that same eyewitness certainty to a gospel he has preached, taught and relived thousands of times.

Commentaries by Don Carson and Bruce Milne carefully narrow the writing to 80-85 AD or roughly 50 years after Jesus' death and resurrection. This was the last gospel to be written, 30/35 years after Mark.

Early church history places the writing of John's gospel at Ephesus; a city on the coast of Ancient Greece. John moved to Ephesus shortly before the destruction of Jerusalem.

A statement of John's purpose can be found in Chapter 20 verse 31. It's also on the cover of your study booklet. "But these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." John is a witness, an Evangelist urgently pressing men and women to see, to grapple with the Son of God and come to true faith.

Who was John's audience? According to Don Carson, the gospel was written for Jews of the diaspora, Jews spread out all around the Mediterranean. There is evidence of a very large Jewish community living in Ephesus. It is for this sophisticated Jewish community and others like them that John writes his own witness. Years of preaching to Jews, both in Palestine and in the diaspora, had given him some ideas about how it should be done. Here he puts his ideas on paper; the result is the Gospel of John.

Let's compare the other three gospels with John just a bit. Matthew, Mark and Luke have a common perspective which is why they are called Synoptic. They share roughly 90% of the same short episodes strung together in a narrative sequence; events, miracles and conflict interspersed with teaching that often uses parables.

In the Synoptics, the first part of Jesus' public ministry occurs in Galilee, where he teaches, heals, and comes into conflict with local religious leaders. Jesus then makes his way south to Jerusalem for the Passover celebration, where he is arrested, tried, crucified, and rises from the dead. If we just had the Synoptics, we might think Jesus' ministry covered less than a year.

By contrast, much of John's Gospel tells of Jesus' ministry in and around Jerusalem for various festivals where he addresses a sophisticated and powerful audience of religious leaders. There are three Passovers and three other festivals so that Jesus' ministry must have been anywhere from two and a half to three and a half years long. The fourth gospel selects events and teaching from 21 days out of the ministry of Jesus, a very concentrated perspective.

Following John's magnificent prologue, **the first half** of his gospel goes deep into seven miraculous events or what are called "Signs" that point beyond themselves to something greater. Signs such as: the wedding at Cana, the healing of a man born blind and feeding the five thousand. Two of the "Signs" also occur in the Synoptics but most are unique to John. He presents these signs as evidence concerning the identity, purpose and power of Jesus. The evidence establishes a foundation for a response of faith in Jesus the Messiah, Son of God. John wants us

to see that believing in Jesus is not a leap in the dark. Believing in Jesus is a step out of the dark and into the light.

From these “Signs” flow teaching or discourses. In this teaching Jesus often uses what he calls figurative speech: symbolism, metaphor, allegory like the Good Shepherd and the sheep, the Light of the world, living water, the Way, the Bread of Life. According to Milne and Carson, scrolls from Qumran demonstrate that the discourses in John have parallels with synagogue teaching at the time of Jesus’ ministry. The sermons contain the deepest theology of the gospels. It is for this reason that John is often called “the Spiritual Gospel.” Seven distinctive “I AM” statements point directly to the divinity of Christ. John is deep in theology but it’s language is simple and often poetic. The beauty of Jesus’ teaching leads me to a quote from D.A. Carson **that moves my heart**. “When all the evidence is taken together, it is not hard to believe that when we listen to the voice of the Evangelist in his description of *what Jesus said*, we are listening to the voice of Jesus himself.”

The second half of the gospel focuses on Jesus and his disciples. There is a unique account of: the Last Supper, Christ’s farewell teaching, final prayer, arrest, trial, crucifixion and resurrection. In the second half, ‘The hour has come.’ John’s writing helps us see, hear and feel the magnitude of God’s love in Christ for the disciples and us, “those who will believe in me through their word,” John 17:20.

Though different in style and content, taken together the synoptic gospels and John are complimentary, interlocking to give a complete picture of Jesus Christ.

Themes

The theme of the coming kingdom drives the plot of the gospel forward. This theme is tightly tied to what Jesus calls ‘the hour’; his death, resurrection and glory. From beginning to end, John and Jesus call our attention to the coming sacrifice of The Lamb of God for his people. The hour ‘is coming and has now come.’ Within this kingdom theme is a tension. The kingdom of God has come, but we must wait for it to come. Because of Jesus’ death and resurrection we can have eternal life now but future hope is coming for the renewal of all things. The Holy Spirit is given as a guarantee of the new heaven and new earth, our resurrection hope, but in the meantime we groan as we wait for what will be ours some day.

A Misunderstood Messiah- We can’t help but be surprised at how very little the disciples understood at the time. This is one reason my heart aches for Jesus,

surrounded by disciples who revere and love him but can't understand him. Men who after three years of instruction and intimacy still do not understand his work or know him deeply. Surrounded by people he is so alone. Even so Jesus assures us, his Father is with him. If they don't understand now, Jesus tells the disciples they will understand later, after he is resurrected, after the coming of the Spirit. John's gospel itself is resounding proof that this is so. As Carson puts it: John constantly "drew attention to the misunderstanding of the disciples and of others, and explained what was understood only later to make his readers see, again and again, that the disciples believed better than they knew, that Caiaphas prophesied better than he thought and Pilate gave verdicts more just than he imagined."

Another theme- John provides background that helps us understand **the rising fury of religious leaders** found in the Synoptic gospels. He tells us that Jesus spent time in and around Jerusalem during Jewish feasts where these leaders lived and worked; building relationships like those with Nicodemus, Joseph of A., and Lazarus and his sisters in Bethany an easy walk from Jerusalem. While in Jerusalem, Jesus spent time teaching in the temple courts and healing. The most influential Jewish leaders of the day had chances to hear him teach, see him heal, challenge Jesus and believe or become enraged.

There is also the theme of **Salvation**. If Jesus is the Lamb of God, his death frees us from our slavery to sin. The cross is the death of a Shepherd for his sheep, His life given for the world, the triumph of the obedient Son who gives his life, his peace, his joy, his Spirit for you and me.

Who Jesus is lies at the heart of the Gospel. Above all else that can be said about him, Jesus is the **Son of God**. Jesus relates to the Father in a unique way; *subordinate*, doing and saying *everything* that the Father says and does. Perfect obedience, total dependence. John communicates the full reality of the deity and humanity of Christ and so, through the centuries, helped the growing church confess Jesus Christ as one person in two natures.

What we learn about the Son of God leads us to the interworking of the **Trinity**. Nowhere else in the Bible does the **LORD, YHWH**, reveal his three persons with such dynamic clarity. Jesus speaks and his actions demonstrate the mysterious nature, work, responsibilities, and purposes of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Our God wants us to know him. Women who contributed to our study guide naturally picked up on this and formed questions that targeted this mysterious interworking of the Trinity.

As you move through the gospel, questions are highlighted in your *Study Booklet* that give special insight into our Triune God. Throughout the year we have a place to gather those thoughts from your study and in *The Well* to sift, discuss with your sisters and deepen your love for our amazing God...This brings us to the end of our brief Introduction.

May your year be defined by a growing understanding of God's love in Christ for you. A love that will not let you go today, tomorrow and forever. So that, like John, you will confidently rejoice that you are a beloved disciple of Jesus.
Join with me as I pray: