

Truth for Today

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The Gospel writers and their subject - John

“A son of thunder” (Mark 3:17) was the expression used to describe the apostle John owing to his speed in condemning others. This is shown when he desired fire to come down from heaven as judgement upon the Samaritans (Luke 9:54). This particular trait in his life was changed by the love of Christ. So much so, that he became the “disciple whom Jesus loved”.

John, along with his father Zebedee and brother James, was a fisherman on the Sea of Galilee. He was a disciple of John the Baptist before becoming one of the first to be a disciple of the Lord Jesus. He grew so close to the Lord Jesus that he could write about his Teacher as the very Son of God. He, with Peter and James, was specifically selected by the Lord Jesus to witness the raising of Jairus' daughter; the transfiguration on the mountain top and the agony in the Garden of Gethsemane. John appears to have been the only apostle at the cross of the Lord Jesus where he witnessed His death. He is called a “pillar” of the church in Galatians 2:9.

The main objectives of the Holy Spirit speaking through the Gospel according to John were twofold. First, He wished to reveal the Son of God to men in such a way that they would believe in Him. Second, He wanted to assure those who do believe that they have life through the name of Christ (20:31).

All the contents were selected by the Spirit in order to provide witness to the Son as the One who came out from heaven to live as a man among men and then to enter into heaven again. His Deity is confirmed although He was found in fashion as a man. In so doing, the relationship between Son and Father is shown to be unoriginated and eternal. John 1:14 tells us that the Word became flesh (being full of grace and truth) and dwelt among us. His glory was considered as that of being an only-begotten with a father.

In fact, the main purposes of the life of Christ on earth were to glorify His Father and finish the work He had been given to do (John 17:1-4). He did indeed glorify the Father because He has shown Him to us by the way He lived, and declared Him to us in the things He taught. He also finished the work that was necessary for our salvation and blessing when He went to the cross. Hence, He is called the “Saviour” of the world.

The Gospel begins by presenting the Son of God to us as the Word. “In the beginning was the Word” tells us that at the very first beginning, the Word already existed. Hence, He was and is eternal in His being. The term “the Word” shows that He is the living expression of both the nature and will of God. The phrase, “the Word was with God” shows us that He was a distinct Person who was face to face with God. “The Word was God” indicates that although He was a distinct Person, He was, nevertheless, God. As Hebrews 1:8 puts it: “But unto the Son, God saith, “Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever.”” The words, “The same was in the beginning”, show that He always existed as such. This is evidence of the tri-unity of God. “All things were made by Him” shows us that He is the Agent of creation. When we compare this with Colossians 1 where we find that the Son of the Father's love was the One who created, we can conclude that the eternal Word is the same Person as the eternal Son of the Father. At the same time, this shows that the Father is also eternal. This is confirmed by Christ's own words: “I came forth from (literally, “from beside”) the Father, and am come into the world: again, I leave the world, and go to the Father.” (John 16:28). Furthermore, it was the Father whom the Son or Word expressed to men during His life on Earth. As Christ said, “If ye had known me, ye should have known my Father also ... he that hath seen me hath seen the Father.” (John 14:7-9). The words: “In Him was life” reveal that He is the Source of eternal life. This is a further indication of His Deity. Furthermore, as such, He was the light of men. He was able to give people the full knowledge of God.

In 1:15, we are introduced to John the Baptist as the fore-runner to the Lord Jesus. He identifies Christ on the banks of the River Jordan as the Lamb of God which takes away the sin of the world and, during His baptism, John has confirmation from God that Jesus is the Son of God when the Holy Spirit abode upon Him in the form of a dove.

In the next few verses, we see the calling of some of the disciples. Andrew was one of them. After being with Jesus for a while, he finds his brother Simon and declares, “We have found the Messiah.” He earnestly believed that Jesus was indeed the expected Messiah, the Son of God. The chapter ends with Nathanael recognising that Jesus is all-knowing and saying He is both the Son of God and the King of Israel.

Chapter 2 presents the first of eight signs found in the gospel - the changing of water into wine. Each of the signs show that Jesus helped those who could not help themselves. Such is the way of God. The Lord is our Helper. The signs also proved that He had power over various aspects of creation. It was, however, the raising of Lazarus (chapter 11) from among the dead which proved Him to be the Son of God with power.

So the turning of water into wine established His glory, and His disciples recognised that here was One quite unlike any other man. Yet the hour for the manifestation of His glory as King of kings and Lord of lords had not yet come. Hence, the words of Christ to Mary who clearly knew His power, "Woman," the creatorial term, "what have I to do with thee." He was showing her that His power would be used at His own discretion.

Later in the same chapter, we find Jesus makes a whip from cords and drives out the businessmen from the temple at Jerusalem at the time of the Passover. Those who sold oxen, sheep and doves for sacrifice didn't realise that He was the true Lamb of God - the One whose sacrificial blood would shelter believers from God's judgement. He rebuked them for making His Father's house a house of merchandise. What would He think of churches which claim God's presence today? Sadly, many have become houses of merchandise.

When asked for a sign of His authority, He said, "Destroy this temple, and in three days will I raise it up." He was not speaking of Jerusalem's temple, but of His own body as being the true dwelling place of God. His words were also predicting His own death and resurrection. "He was delivered for our offences and raised again for our justification."

Chapter 3 shows the Son as the object of faith for eternal life. His talk with Nicodemus showed that the Sanhedrin, represented by this ruler, was ignorant of the way into the kingdom of God. This way was by new birth. Hence, the words of the Lord, "Ye must be born again." He was speaking of a spiritual birth through the application of God's cleansing word (the water) by the Holy Spirit to a man's life. Just as we had nothing to do with our natural birth, so we have nothing to do with our spiritual birth. It is God's work. This is followed up with a picture of Christ lifted up upon a tree like the Old Testament serpent upon a pole. In Numbers 21 the message was: "Look and live!". Here, it is: "Whosoever believes in Christ should not perish, but have eternal life."

John 3:16 is said to be the Gospel in a nutshell. Amazingly, it states, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life."

The chapter closes with John the Baptist's final testimony concerning the Son. He indicates that Christ is the Bridegroom who has come to claim His bride. The church is the heavenly Bride of Christ. The Baptist sees himself as the friend of the bridegroom showing the place of those born again in Old Testament times. The chapter concludes with words like: "The Father loveth the Son, and hath given all things into His hand. He that believeth in the Son hath everlasting life, and he that doth not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abideth upon him." Christ is presented as the Object of faith and as the One who should be believed and obeyed.

Chapter 4 leads to the description of true worship, namely, the worship of the Father. This requires no specific place (verse 21) nor artefact or aid (verse 23). (The latter is seen by the words "in spirit" with a small "s"). Such worship is characterised by a sincere heart; based upon scriptural revelation (truth); and generated by the Spirit of God (Philippians 3:3). The conversation with the sinful woman at the well leads to the Lord's own testimony that He was the Messiah, the omniscient Son of God. The woman's immediate testimony in the city led to the conversion of many. At the end of the chapter, we find the second sign, namely, the healing of the nobleman's son who was at death's door. The healing shows both the knowledge and power of Jesus. "Go your way, your son lives." It was at that very moment that the fever left him.

Chapter 5 begins with the third sign, the healing of the lame man at Bethesda on the Sabbath Day. The man had been both helpless and friendless for thirty-eight years. Jesus said to him, "Rise, take up your bed and walk." The man was healed immediately. Unfortunately, the Jews did not rejoice in this good work, but rather condemned it because Jesus had told the man to carry his bed on the Sabbath. Later, when they confronted Jesus about the matter, He said, "My Father has been working until now, and I have been working." The result was that the Jews became more hostile because Jesus was claiming equality with God. Then follows a long discourse showing the works of the Father and Son in life and in judgement which demand the Son should be honoured in the same way as the Father. Therefore, Jesus was indeed claiming equality with the Father.

Christ then outlines the witnesses to the glory of His Person. John the Baptist was such a witness; the works that Christ did were a witness; His Father was a witness; and, the scriptures spoke of Him.

Chapter 6 contains the fourth and fifth signs and shows the Lord providing food for the people as was predicted in Psalm 132:15. He uses the loaves and fishes given by a child to feed five thousand. Imagine the face of that boy when his gift was transformed in such a miraculous way! People try to explain this sign away, but it is specifically recorded that twelve baskets were filled with the fragments of the actual five barley loaves given. The Lord Jesus then goes on

to speak of Himself as the true manna, the true bread from heaven given by His Father; as the bread of God who came to give life to the world; and, as the bread of life who is able to satisfy everyone's spiritual need. In verse 40, Jesus says, "And this is the will of Him that sent Me, that everyone who sees the Son, and believes in Him may have everlasting life; and I will raise him up at the last day." This belief in the Lord Jesus Christ as the Son is then spoken of metaphorically in those who eat His flesh and drink His blood. This does not refer to the Holy Communion or the Sacrament. It is initial belief in the Person (the flesh) and the work (the blood) of God's Son. The disciples themselves found it difficult to understand these things. This is shown by verse 63 where Jesus tells His followers that these things are spiritual. Those of them who were not taught of the Spirit of God turned away from Him, but the twelve apostles stayed with Him. All of them, like Peter, believing that He was the Christ, the Son of the living God - except for the traitor Judas Iscariot whom Jesus labels "a devil".

Chapter 7 shows the development of opposition and division against Christ. He went up to Jerusalem secretly at the feast of tabernacles, before starting a public testimony in the temple courts. He corrected the Jews' false understanding about the Sabbath Day highlighting the fact that if they could circumcise a child on the Sabbath, then He could heal on the Sabbath. He spoke of His coming forth from, and returning to, the Father, and about the Holy Spirit flowing out in testimony from the hearts of all who believe in Him.

All this brought division among the people as to His Person. Those sent to arrest Him by the Pharisees and scribes reported back to their masters stating, "No man ever spoke like this Man!" The leaders claimed that they had also been deceived and asked rhetorically if any of the rulers and Pharisees had believed in Him. That was the point at which Nicodemus stood up for Christ and said, "Does our law judge a man before it hears him and knows what he is doing?" There was at least one ruler whose heart was affected by Christ.

Chapter 8 begins with the woman caught in the act of adultery. Nothing is said of her partner. According to Jewish law an adulterer was supposed to be stoned to death. Jesus said to her accusers, "He that is without sin among you, let him throw a stone at her first." Only Christ Himself could have done so, being sinless. However, He had not come in judgement, but in grace. He does not condemn the woman, but neither does He condone what she has done. In fact, He advises her to go and sin no more.

The Lord then testifies to the Pharisees that He is the Light of the world and that any who believe in Him have the light of life. The Pharisees did not like this at all. But a discourse follows in which the Lord Jesus puts them in their place. If they didn't believe in Him then they would die in their sins. He goes on to draw a sharp distinction between liberty granted by the Son, and bondage caused by Satan, for the devil was, in effect, the father of the Pharisees. Later in the chapter, Jesus says, "Before Abraham was, I am." Infuriated, they tried to stone the Lord, because of His claims to have both seen their father Abraham, and to have existed before him. In fact, He uses the term "I Am" which is a name of God - the self-existent One. This gives added force to the times that He uses "I Am" in different contexts in the book. A series of talks was previously given on these subjects and are available on Transcript numbers 26 to 32.

In 18:5, Jesus uses the term "I Am He" in such a way that those who have come to capture Him go backwards and fall to the ground in worship. "I Am He" is a name given to Yahweh in the Old Testament (see Isaiah 41:4).

Chapter 9 presents the sixth sign. A man who was blind from birth was given his sight by the Lord Jesus. The reason for his affliction was not due to sin, but because the works of God should be revealed in him. He was brought to the Pharisees and interrogated, but they could not shake his initial faith, which was later confirmed by the Lord revealing Himself to him as the Son of God. The fellow said, "Lord, I believe!" and followed this with worship.

In chapter 10, the Lord Jesus reveals Himself as the Good Shepherd who has entered into this world by the door of prophecy and has been admitted by the porter (who is symbolic of the Spirit of God). As the Good Shepherd, He preserves the sheep by giving Himself up to death, and by taking His life again. Jew and Gentile believers become one flock under this Shepherd.

Another unity which is emphasised is that between the Father and the Son. "I and My Father are one," declared the Son of God. The Jews recognised this as a claim to Deity and attempted to stone Him. As the hour of His suffering had not yet arrived, He escapes them again.

Chapter 11 demonstrates the Son's authority over death. We find the Lord absent from Bethany where His friend, Lazarus, dies. He then visits Mary and Martha, declaring those wonderful words to Martha, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die." The power of His word was proven in the resurrection of Lazarus. When the Sanhedrin heard of this miracle, they conspired to put the Lord to death. They didn't want the hearts of all the people turning to Him.

Chapter 12 contains events that anticipated the death of the Son of God. He was anointed by Mary in view of His burial; He enters into Jerusalem triumphantly as predicted by Zechariah, but to hang upon a cross before His kingdom

could ever be established; and, He speaks to some Greeks predicting His own death and resurrection in the grain of wheat that falls into the ground. He knew His hour of suffering was upon Him and prays to his Father. Then John speaks of the glory of Yahweh of Hosts in Isaiah 6 as being the glory of the Lord Jesus. The chapter concludes with the fact that His mission was for salvation and not for judgement.

The next four chapters give us the last words of Jesus. They were dealt with in detail in a previous series and are available on Transcript numbers 104 to 110. We shall deal very briefly with these today.

Chapter 13 shows those who were morally bathed all over by the Word of God at new birth need only to have their walk cleansed by obedience to that same word in order to enjoy having part with Christ. Then we read of the identity of the traitor, together with his final departure from the apostolic group. Christ continues by speaking of the coming of the Spirit (the Advocate) who would teach them. He gives them the commandment to love one another. Jesus then has to inform Peter that he would deny his Master.

In Chapter 14, the Son speaks of His Father's house to which all believers will be taken. He also speaks of the Father seen in the Son, of the giving of the Spirit of truth, and of His character and work. After this, He and his disciples leave the upper room for the Garden of Gethsemane - the place of the press.

In chapter 15, the Lord Jesus presents Himself as the true vine in which His own must abide if they are to be fruitful for God in this world. At the same time, He encourages the disciples to love sacrificially remarking that they would suffer persecution if they remained faithful to Him.

Chapter 16 starts with the enemies of God thinking that they perform God's will when they persecute His people. Yet the Holy Spirit is presented as the One who will come to work in men's hearts with convicting power. The Lord promises to see the disciples again in resurrection after their few days of sorrow after His death. The chapter considers the subject of prayer in the Name of the Lord, and His anticipation of leaving the world to return to the Father.

In chapter 17, we find recorded an intimate prayer of the Son to the Father. He speaks of His finished work and of taking up the glory He had with the Father before the foundation of the world - now as a Man. He prays for those the Father had given Him as well as for those who would believe through their witness. I commend this chapter to your reading.

Chapter 18 starts with the Son being betrayed by Judas and the power in His Name "I Am". He submits to His captors saying, "Shall I not drink the cup which My Father has given Me?" Peter then denies Jesus as He stands before Annas and then Caiaphas. One loving look from Christ caused Peter to weep bitterly.

Jesus is then transferred to Pilate who could find no fault in Him. The governor offers the people a choice as to which prisoner should be released as it was the time of Passover. He was amazed to hear them cry for the release of Barabbas, a murderer. So the greatest travesty of justice this world knows took its course.

In chapter 19, Jesus is scourged, mocked, and crucified. The predictions of His suffering in Psalm 22 (among many other scriptures) were fulfilled. Christ lovingly commits His mother into the care of John, the writer of the Gospel. John, as witness, gives clear testimony that the Lord's death was real. This is followed by two timid disciples coming out publicly for Christ. Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, members of the Sanhedrin, are found placing His body in a sepulchre. There is no room for secret disciples where Christ is concerned.

In chapter 20, Jesus reveals Himself in resurrection to Mary Magdalene first of all. He sends her away with that marvellous message of a new relationship, "Go to My brethren and say to them, "I am ascending to My Father and your Father, and to My God and your God"." He then appears to some of His disciples in the upper room where He showed His wounded hands and His side. How glad the disciples were to see their Lord. Later, He appeared to them again and addresses Thomas who had doubted the witness of the others. Thomas immediately said, "My Lord and my God."

Chapter 21 concludes with a resurrection scene in Galilee. The sign of the catch of fishes showing that service done in dependence of the Lord is blessed mightily. Peter is then fully restored and commissioned to take care of the believers as would a shepherd his sheep. The Lord then predicts that Peter's death would be by crucifixion, while John is an example of a believer who lives in the hope of Christ's second coming. May we do so, for His Name's sake.

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