

THE GOSPEL OF JOHN – SESSION 1

Academy of Christian Discipleship

Introduction

A wise ministry leader once said, “Watch how I live, listen to what I say, observe what I do, pay attention to how I treat other people- then you will know who I am.” That saying accurately captures John’s purpose as he wrote his story of Jesus. John invited his original audience to watch Jesus, listen to what he said and see what he did. This study of John’s gospel extends the same invitation to everyone who will be involved in this Academy of Christian Discipleship. Watch Jesus for yourself and you will come to know not only what he did but also what he can mean for life today.

The insights gained from John’s Gospel are different from the other three stories about Jesus found in the New Testament. Those Gospels, called the Synoptics (the term is a combination of two Greek words, *syn* meaning “with” and *opt* having to do with sight, how people see) because they all build off of one common outline of the life of Jesus. In contrast, John’s Gospel develops through a variety of overlapping themes. Most importantly, John’s Gospel recorded eyewitness testimony. His narration bears the marks of authenticity written from the perspective of someone who actually experienced these things. In his first encounter with Jesus, John and his friend Andrew received the invitation “Come and see.” They accepted that invitation and they followed Jesus every day for approximately three years. They watched how he lived, they listened to what he said, they observed his actions, and they saw how he treated others. When a community of people spend a lot of time together, they get to know each other. The depth of their friendship is evident as John’s narrative style places his audience right there with Jesus so we can see what John saw, feel what John felt, experience the reality of the living presence of God on earth in Jesus.

Near the end of the story John writes, “Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book: 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” (20:30-31). John’s conclusion about Jesus is clear. He has been very selective in the stories he has chosen for one purpose. John wants to lead his audience in such a way that they conclude, as John already had, that Jesus is unique in his identity- he is the Son of God. John is also clear about Jesus’s mission- he is Christ, the Messiah, the One sent by God to set things right in the world. Identity and vocation are the twin pillars for everyone’s life. John’s life started to change the moment he met Jesus, and eventually John based his life purpose upon Jesus’ identity and vocation. Through this story about Jesus, John continues to invite everyone who studies this Gospel into that same life transformation. John accepted Jesus’ invitation to “Come and See.” If we do the same here is what we will learn.

John's Context, Audience, and Approach (John 1)

John wrote during a time of incredible cultural complexity. In the region where Jesus lived during the first century there were three distinct, competing worldviews at work, creating incredible tension for the people of Israel. First, the Roman imperial occupation of the region had brought emperor worship imposed by the might of the Roman army, the most powerful military force the world had ever seen. Roman kept control through intimidation by violence. Submit to the might the Empire, worship Rome's emperor or be crucified. Public crucifixion was the brutal tool the Romans used to intimidate their captive populations into submission to the power of their Empire, which they believed was invincible and would last forever.

Second, Greek philosophy with its emphasis on dualism had permeated the minds of the vast majority of the empire's citizens. This view held that God and the world were distinct. God was perfect, and the created world was filled with evil. God could not be involved with this broken world or God's perfection would be compromised and God would cease to be God. So the dualists developed a religion called Gnosticism, which held that it was the responsibility of truly spiritual persons to gain knowledge, *gnosis*, in order to reject this materialistic world and draw near to God spiritually. With Gnosticism, everything depended on personal spiritual effort to become separate from the worldly evil in order to attain spiritual knowledge, thus coming closer to the divine.

Third, Jewish monotheism had a powerful influence upon the Jews living in the regions of Galilee and Judea, the two provinces where Jesus carried out his ministry. The Jews believed that there was one God whose sacred name was Yahweh. In Jewish history it was this God who had rescued the people of Israel from Egyptian bondage and Babylonian captivity. As God had done in the past, so the growing expectation was that God would do the same thing once again, saving the Jews from the ruthless brutality of Roman occupation. This political salvation would come through Messiah, the one predicted by the prophet Isaiah. This Jewish worldview also held that God was to be worshiped exclusively at the temple in Jerusalem. The main expression of worship was the constant offering of animal sacrifice as a means of appeasing God against humanity's absolutely depravity, corruption and propensity to do evil.

Something had to give. Someone living in the days of Jesus could not simultaneously believe that 1) the Roman emperor was divine, 2) God's perfection could not be compromised through God's involvement with this evil world, and 3) there was one God who was very involved in the salvation of this world through the people of Israel. These three perspectives were mutually exclusive, each one absolutely convinced that the other two views were completely wrong.

The confluence of these three worldviews was, as biblical scholar N.T. Wright describes, the coming together of political, philosophical, economic, social, and most importantly,

religious ideas to create the “perfect storm.”¹ Into this volatile, violent world, John wrote his Gospel about Jesus. John claimed that there was indeed another way to live, not based upon fear either of God or government, not based upon the separation of God from the created world or humanity, not based upon the constant need to either try and become spiritual or appease God through religious performance. According to John, this other way of living is found exclusively in Jesus who said “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (14:6).

John invited his audience, a mixed group of Jews, Romans and Greeks, to go on a journey with Jesus as story after story rolls off the page. By virtue of his own life experience, John knew that the debate about which worldview is correct- Roman political pragmatism imposed by force, Greek philosophical speculation separating God from the world, or Jewish monotheism insisting on one place and only one way to worship God- this debate could go on forever without clear truth emerging from the confrontation. John’s invitation was not to avoid this debate but to approach it from a different angle, not through words but through his own personal experience with Jesus. John heard Jesus’ invitation, “Come and see” (1:39). As he followed, he was drawn into a profound, life-changing relationship with Jesus. Through his Gospel, John extends that same invitation “Come and see” (1:41) to anyone who will thoughtfully, honestly consider this story of Jesus. John’s life was changed forever through his relationship with Jesus, and this gospel offers that same possibility to consider the wonder of the one whom John says is God “with us” (1:14) in the person of Jesus.

In the introduction to this Gospel, John made this amazing assertion. Referring to Jesus as the “Word,” John wrote that “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and full of truth” (1:14). His readers don’t know this yet, but in this one verse, John had actually provided the central themes for Jesus’ gospel -full of grace and full of truth. Here is how the story develops.

John’s Biography

Before we begin our study of John’s Gospel, it is important to learn about the person who wrote this story about Jesus. John, like every one of us, has a story. When we share our stories with people, sometimes a listener will comment, “Now I understand more about who you are and why you act this way.” By gaining insight into John’s story, as we study the Gospel he wrote, we will see the marks of his life, especially the people who so deeply influenced him. Fortunately, in the four Gospels and the book of Acts, John is mentioned repeatedly. The Bible also contains three letters attributed to John (1-3 John) as well as the final book of the Bible, Revelation. John’s prominence in the New Testament provides the ability to track the trajectory of John’s life and watch him develop as a follower of Jesus over a long period of time.

Notes

1. Early Life

 2. Introduction to Jesus

 3. Apostle

 4. Friendship with Peter

 5. History in the Book of Acts

 6. After John's Departure from Jerusalem

 7. John's Vision in Revelation
- I. Gospel of John: Prologue (1:1-18)
 - A. Background of Gnosticism
 1. Platonic Dualism

 2. Gnostic Elitism

B. The Word (logos) is DIVINE

1. Eternal (Pre-Existent) (v. 1-2)

2. Agent of Creation (Echoes of Gen. 1-2) (v. 3)

3. Source of Life and Light (v. 4)
(Gk: zoe- life)
(Gk: phos- light)

4. Darkness “Cannot Put A Lid” on the Light (v. 5)
(Gk: skotos- darkness)

5. John the Baptizer (v. 6-8)

6. “True Light” Enlightening All People (v.9)

C. The Word (logos) is HUMAN

1. Three Responses to the Creator Incognito
 - a. The World does not Know Him (v. 10)

 - b. His Own Refuse to Receive Him (v. 11)

 - c. Children of God “Trust” in Him (v. 12)
(Gk. pisteuo- to believe)

2. Born of God's Will (v. 13)

D. The Incarnation

1. Like Us (v. 14)

(Gk: skenao- to pitch a tent)

2. Yet Unlike Us (v. 14)

(Gk: doxa- glory)

(Gk: monogenes- unique)

3. Reveal God's Grace and Truth (v. 14)

Gk: charis- God's unmerited mercy

Hb: hesed- God's covenant love

Gk: aletheia- God's truth

E. John's Second Testimony and the Moses Comparison

1. The One Who Comes After Me was Actually Before Me (v. 15)

2. The Theme of Grace (v. 16)

3. Relationship with Moses (v. 17)

a. Continuity and Contrast

F. The Word as God's SELF-PORTRAIT

1. The Only Begotten son “Exegetes” the Father (v. 18)
Gk: exago- to lead out/ to bring out
Gk: monogenes- unique/ only begotten

II. “Come and See” John 1:19-51

A. John the Baptist’s Testimony Regarding Jesus (1:19-28)

1. John is NOT...
 - a. The Christ (v. 19-21)
(Gk: Christos- Messiah/ Anointed One)

b. Elijah (v. 21a)

c. The Prophet (v. 21b)

2. John IS...

a. A voice for Christ (v. 22-23)

b. A Baptizer with Water (v. 25-26)

c. Unworthy of Christ (v. 27-28)

B. John’s Encounter with Jesus (1:29-34)

1. Jesus IS...
 - a. The Sin-Removing Lamb of God for the Whole World (v. 29)

- b. The Pre-Existent God-Man (v. 30)

 - c. The Stranger in the Midst (v. 31)

 - d. The spirit-Baptizing Servant of God for the Whole People of God (v. 32-33)

 - e. The Actual Son of God (v. 34)
- C. The First Four Encounters with Jesus
- 1. “Look the Lamb of God” (1:35-39)
 - a. John’s Referral of Two Disciples to Jesus

 - 2. A Family Invitation: “We Have Found the Messiah” (1:40-42)
 - a. Andrew’s Introduction of His Brother Peter to Jesus

 - 3. A Friendship Invitation: “Follow Me” (1:43-44)
 - a. Phillip Follows Jesus

 - 4. Another Friendship Invitation: “We Have Found the One...” (1:45-51)
 - a. Phillip is Eager to Tel His Friend Nathanael

Further Observations/ Notes/ Reflection on John 1:1-51

Special Exercise

From this first Session we reflect on what it means to hear and respond to Jesus’ call “Come and See.” This call stands in stark contrast to other calls illustrated by the Roman insistence on imperial power, the Greek influence of Platonic dualism and Gnosticism emphasizing the individual human endeavor to create contact with the divine, and the Jewish claim that only one are God’s “special people” and all others are inferior, indeed condemned by God. The story of Jesus portrayed in John’s Gospel reveals the folly of relying on political power, human endeavor or misguided superiority as the anchors of our lives.

For the next few weeks, pay attention to the subtle temptations you encounter to rely upon your own power, your own efforts, or ways in which you think you are superior to others. In those moments when you face the challenge to think this way, instead remember the simple invitation Jesus issues to every one of us every day, “Come and See.” Keep track of how your perspective is challenged by reflecting on this invitation and share those learning with your prayer partners and cohort members.

Special Project

In the final week of this month, just before the start of the new session, practice issuing the invitation to someone else to “Come and See.” This may be a family member, a colleague at work, an acquaintance at a community gathering, or someone living in your neighborhood. Share with that person what is going on in your life as a result of your participation in the this study of the Gospel of John. This exercise is about you learning to articulate in your own words and in your own way what Jesus is doing in your life. You are experimenting in what some call “giving your testimony.” You are not selling Jesus. You are simply sharing with others what Jesus means to you and what you are learning studying John’s gospel.

Homework Assignments

Using the content of John 1 as your guide, follow through with these assignments:

WEEK ONE:

- Read John 1:1-5 Daily
- Reflect on the Mystery of Jesus’ Deity- Fully God
- Reflect on the Themes of Light/ Dark, Life/ Death. How do you see these themes working out in your life, your circumstances, and with those who are close to you in your family and church? Pray for Light and Life to transform the Darkness and Death through Jesus.

WEEK TWO:

- Read John 1:6-13 Daily
- Reflect on the ways in which humans attempt to come into right relationship with God, compared to being brought into the family of God through faith and trust in Jesus
- Do you know people whose efforts are driving them further from God rather than closer? Pray for those people that the truth of John 1:6-13 will transform their lives.

WEEK THREE:

- Read John 1:14-18, especially v. 14 Daily
- Consider each clause of John 1:14 and pay attention to which one(s) seem to strike you as most significant for you at this point in your life
- Identify one person you know who needs to experience God’s grace right now, and one person who needs the liberation of Jesus’ truth right now. Pray for those people daily

WEEK FOUR:

- Read John 1:19-51 twice this week, lingering on those interactions between Jesus and others which seem most important to you.

- Identify someone who you think would be encouraged to receive the invitation to “Come and See” and start to pray for that person, specifically that God will open the door for conversation.

Small Group Questions

FIRST MEETING:

1. Just like Jesus did with Andrew and John, take some time to engage in conversation getting to know each other. Specifically, it will be helpful to share with each other what drew you to this study of the Gospels and John in particular. What are you looking for? What are you hoping for? What are you apprehensive about?
2. Conclude with a significant time of prayer during which the things that have been shared are prayed. Each person may want to pray for the person on their immediate left or right.

SECOND MEETING:

1. Now that each person has had time to watch the video presentations and do the homework/ special project, etc., share with each other what this first study in John 1 has meant to you. What are some of the key “ah-ha’s”, those insights when you realized, “I have never thought about that before”? How do you see these themes of identity and mission/ vocation working out in your own life? How can your church issue the invitation to “Come and See” in a way that will be attractive, inviting, relationship building?
2. Conclude with a significant time of prayer focused on the things which have been shared in this cohort session. Also pray for illumination as you move into session 2 and consider John 2-11.