

Gospel of John: The Last Apostle

I want you to imagine for a moment the ancient but renowned city of Ephesus, ships heavy with cargo coming by the Aegean Sea bringing commercial goods from as far away as Rome. Marble quays protrude into the water, filled with products from the eastern provinces waiting for their trip west. Ephesus thrives on its celebrated status.

Visitors can see any number of various temples dedicated to the Greek Gods. Some consider the temple of Atermis one of the wonders of the ancient world. Ephesus' great theatre built into the shoulder of Mount Pion, seating twenty-five thousand guests. From the harbour travellers walk into the city along a column-lined road over nine metres wide. This reminds them of the grandeur of the city they are about to enter.

Yet on this day, few visitors see the small circle of Greeks gathered at a graveside beyond the columned thoroughfare. They are no different than the usual citizens of the city, with the exception that a few seem to have the characteristic dress and head coverings of Jews. One thing does set them apart, they are poor. Together they are burying a person of such significance, of such importance, that his marble tomb suggests a costliness far beyond the reach of any one person in the circle. "These are Christians and they have come to bury their beloved Pastor and Leader, John".¹

Who was John? He was the historian and theologian who bought the story of Jesus to them. He was a valued eye witness to the Life of Jesus. He could write with authority;

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. ²The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the father and has appeared to us. ³We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. 1 John 1: 1-3.

John had been there. He had heard, seen and touched the Word of life himself. He was the one who told about Nicodemus and rebirth, who described Jesus' miracle at Cana and many other episodes in his life. Other stories were circulating about Jesus but John had his own recollection and his own stories about Christ to tell. Surely, they thought, John was Jesus' beloved disciple.

John also stood with the church in times of terrible persecution and conflict. He was a courageous witness to Jesus. When struggles later came to the church, struggles of internal conflict and controversy, he again and again was the community's strength. Writing letters to encourage and exhort, he became known as the heroic pastor - theologian of Asia Minor. A spiritual giant whose Gospel would come to be known as the "Spiritual Gospel".

In the early Church the fourth Gospel was given the highest place of honour. It was penned by the beloved disciple of Jesus, John. Today it is the legacy of John's ministry and is no less beloved today than it was in the earliest years among his disciples. Few books of the Bible

¹ Gary M Burge, John: NIV Application Commentary, Zondervan: Grand Rapids, 2000, 21.

have influenced the life and thought of Christendom as has the Gospel of John. It was written with energy and has painted a portrait of Christ which is deeply satisfying.

There is a Gospel, three letters, and the book of Revelation that even today makes scholars salivate at the thought of once more mining its depths. It is both full of theological depth yet always witnesses to John's intimacy with Jesus. His incarnational theology was an important resource against early heresies in the church. The beloved disciple indeed. The fourth Gospel contributes to a central theme: the appearance of the Son of God in human history.

As I said earlier his incarnational theology has and continues to shape the Church then and today. John asserts the divinity of Jesus but also contends that Christ was fully human. For John, Jesus was eternally divine and fully incarnate. In other words, fully God and fully man. Jesus speaks with a very different voice in this Gospel. Without the Gospel of John, we would not have;

1. The word became flesh.
2. Water into wine.
3. For God so loved the world/Born again.
4. The Healing by the pool.
5. Let anyone who is thirsty come to me.
6. I am the light of the world.
7. I am the good shepherd.
8. Lazurus, I am the resurrection and the life.
9. Washing the disciples' feet
10. In my father's house
11. I am the way the truth and the life.
12. I am the vine; you are the branches.
13. In the World you will face persecution but take courage; I have conquered the world.
14. One of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear and at once blood and water came out.
15. Mary Magdalene supposing him to be the gardener.
16. Doubting Thomas.
17. Feed my lambs.

John was one of the initial twelve disciples of Jesus and therefore an eye-witness to the life of Jesus. John had a brother named James, who was also a disciple. They had been early followers of John the Baptist, but were by trade fisherman - and were actually in their boat, working on their nets, when Jesus called them to follow him.

John even became known as the disciple Jesus loved because of their close friendship. In fact, John – along with Peter and James – was the only one allowed to share the most intimate and personal moments with Jesus – such as at the transfiguration, where Jesus revealed His full glory as God the Son, the second Person of the Trinity; at the house of Jairus when Jesus raised his daughter back to life. John was one of the ones sent to make preparations for the Last Supper.

John was one of the three Jesus took with him into the Garden of Gethsemane to pray with Him before His crucifixion. John was the disciple leaning his head on the chest of Jesus at the last supper; being the first to be told that it would be Judas who would betray Jesus.

John would end up writing much of the New Testament. Beyond the gospel of John, we have the three letters he wrote, known as 1st, 2nd, and 3rd John. He also wrote the Apocalypse of John. Better known as the book of Revelation. So not only did he write the final eyewitness account of Jesus, he also wrote the last and final book of the New Testament. John lived longer than any of the others - he was the last living disciple.

We know that toward the end of his days he was exiled to the Isle of Patmos, during a time of persecution, for his Christian beliefs, but tradition has it that he eventually ended up in Ephesus, and it is there that he died as a very old man. And by the time of his death, he would not be known as the son of thunder, but as the great apostle of love because the love that lies at the heart of the Christian faith had so taken his heart. But here's what God wants you to know: Not only does God love you, but you can be forgiven. That's the Gospel.

After a last supper with His disciples, and a night in prayer in a garden called Gethsemane, He was arrested by the Jewish authorities, beaten, turned over to the Roman authorities, tried, and crucified. On the third day, He rose from the dead. Presenting Himself to His followers over a forty-day period on numerous occasions, and then ascended to heaven. There is obviously much, much more, but that is the essential flow of the story of Jesus' life.

What Sets John's Gospel apart? A lot. So much so that Matthew, Mark, and Luke are called the synoptic gospels. Synoptic means "from a similar viewpoint" or "seen in a similar way." They are very similar in terms of content. They tell many of the same stories, often in the same order, and often with similar wording or vocabulary. John is different. Different stories, different language, different perspective.

If you remember, he was the oldest and last surviving disciple. So, he was familiar with the other accounts and wanted to supplement theirs with additional teaching and miracles by Jesus that they had left out. In fact, ninety percent of what John tells us about the life and teaching of Jesus is not found anywhere else in the Bible. So, in John, we really do have the last account of the life of Jesus – the life that only John tells. The untold story finally told.

John is very intentional about what he includes, and what he doesn't. Which is why in John there is no genealogy; No account of Jesus' birth; Nothing about His boyhood; Nothing about His temptation; No transfiguration; No appointing of His disciples; No exorcisms; No tax collectors; No Sadducees; No sermon on the mount; No parables – not even one! No account of the ascension. But only in John is Jesus called "the Word." The Creator. The only begotten of the Father. The Lamb of God. The great "I AM." In fact, John is known for recording the seven great "I Am" statements of Jesus that point to His God-nature. In John, we have the recorded words of Jesus saying: "I am the bread of life" (John 6:35, NIV). "I am the light of the world" (John 8:12, NIV). "Before Abraham was born, I am!" (John 8:58, NIV). "I am the good Shepherd" (John 10:11, NIV). "I am the resurrection, and the life" (John 11:25, NIV). "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (John 15:6, NIV). "I am the true vine" (John 15:1, NIV). And then

only John records Jesus saying, on the cross, at the end, "It is finished." The work of God coming to earth, the mission, the great effort to seek and to save, was done.

So, John's purpose in writing is clear and if there be any doubt, at the end of his writing, he writes these words: "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" (John 20:30-31, NIV).

John wrote for one reason: so that people would believe in Jesus. That he was who He said he was. The Christ. The Son of God. In fact, the word "believe" is used ninety-eight times in John. And that by believing, they would experience the spiritual life, he offers to us all. That's the point of John's gospel – that you would believe, and that you would have life.

This is important: For John, the question wasn't, "Who is Jesus?" For John, it's more pivotal: who is the Messiah? Who is the Christ? Who is the One that has been sent to show us the way, to provide the way to God; who is that, Person? And for John, the answer is "Jesus."