

## 1. The Unique Purpose of John's Gospel

**Texts:** John 15:1-8; 17:20; 20:24-31; 21:20-25

### Quotes:

- The world is a kind of spiritual kindergarten where millions of bewildered infants are trying to spell "God" with the wrong blocks. *Edwin Arlington Robinson.*
- For in the last analysis, one does not believe that God exists, as one believes that Timbuktu or the constellation Andromeda exists. One believes in God, as one believes in a friend - or one believes nothing. *Thomas Cahill.*

### Introductory questions

What is the unique purpose of John's gospel? Why is it important to consider this? Why is this book so special? What would we miss if we did not have John's good news? What is the difference from the other gospels, and why? How would you sum up John's message?

### Discussion ideas

John writes his gospel so that we may *know*. This is more than intellectual information, more than stories about Jesus and his ministry, more than a recounting of doctrine—John's intent in his gospel is to share the Jesus he knows—very personally—so that we may know him intimately also. "Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent." John 17:3 NIV.

This being so, it is no surprise that John's gospel is very different to the other three. John is not trying to write a history, but a description of the nature and character of this Jesus, who comes to reveal God to us. In fact John is insistent in his declaration that Jesus is the revelation of God, and that if we have seen Jesus we have seen the Father. The whole of his purpose is to demonstrate Jesus as Savior, God's answer to the issues of the Great Controversy.

"What comes through in these scenes is the power of Jesus' words to overcome barriers of space. Distance is no problem for the Lord, who created the universe. Jesus' word is as powerful close at hand as at a distance. Though now manifested to us through the printed page, Christ's Word still retains the power to save and heal." (Thursday's lesson).

John is also writing as many of the original eyewitnesses are disappearing from the scene. How is the truth about God as so clearly demonstrated by Jesus to be kept alive? Only by providing a reliable record, a personal account, of how this "truth in person" lived and acted, spoke and related. John's special qualification is in his self-description as the disciple whom Jesus loved—not that Jesus did not love the other disciples, but that John felt a special relationship to Jesus. From the depth of his personal understanding John writes out his own account under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and what an amazing book it is! So many of the insights that are particularly precious to us are found in John's good news, the clearest depiction of Jesus. As we see Jesus in John, we see the one who sent him, we see the Father, we recognize we are no longer servants but friends, that Jesus says he does not need to pray the Father for us—for the Father loves us himself. Over and over again we marvel at what John writes, and delight to come to know the God Jesus reveals—one who loves us, reveals himself to us, and gives himself for us in a ways that are so incredible.

## Ellen White Comments

We have only one perfect photograph of God, and this is Jesus Christ. 7ABC 350.

How was God to be rightly represented to the world? How was it to be known that he was a God of love, full of mercy, kindness, and pity? How was the world to know this? God sent His Son, and He was to represent to the world the character of God... MS 7, 1888 in IHP 11.

Christ alone was able to represent the Deity. He who had been in the presence of the Father from the beginning, He who was the express image of the invisible God, was alone sufficient to accomplish this work. No verbal description could reveal God to the world....He lived out the character of God through the human body which God had prepared for Him. RH June 25, 1895.

...in Christ we behold the character of the Father, and see the pitying tenderness which God exercised for fallen man... RH March 9, 1897.

Christ was a representative before men and before angels, of the character of the God of heaven. Series A, 170.

Voluntarily He had made Himself of no reputation, and taken upon Him the form of a servant. But His words and works revealed His character. All whose hearts were open to divine illumination would recognize in Him 'the Only-begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.' DA 387.

The highest evidence that He [Jesus] came from God is that His life revealed the character of God. DA 407.

Christ alone could represent the Father to humanity... Christ's work testified to His divinity. Through Him the Father had been revealed. DA 664.

Christ was hid in God, and God was revealed in the character of His Son. To this revelation Jesus desired the minds of the people to be directed. MH 32.

Taking humanity upon Him, Christ came to be one with humanity, and at the same time to reveal our heavenly Father to sinful human beings....He who was the express image of the invisible God, was alone able to reveal the character of the Deity to mankind....Tender, compassionate, sympathetic, ever considerate of others, He [Jesus] represented the character of God, and was constantly engaged in service for God and man. MH 423.

The life of Christ is a perfect revelation of the character of God. PUR July 16, 1903.

Had God the Father come to our world and dwelt among us, humbling Himself, veiling His glory, that humanity might look upon Him, the history that we have of the life of Christ would not have been changed....In every act of Jesus, in every lesson of His instruction, we are to see and hear and recognize God. In sight, in hearing, in effect, it is the voice and movements of the Father. (Letter 83, 1895), TIMKH 338.

## Extra material

Take time to read through the whole book, and note down those verses that speak especially to you of "God made manifest in Christ." What kind of God is revealed? How does he speak and act? Why is he worth trusting? The essence of John's message is that the God revealed by Jesus is altogether trustworthy, that he is truth incarnate, that there is no other way in which God could answer the charges of the devil or to win us back to himself.

John's plea is to come to know God as he reveals himself, and to trust him for yourself.

## 2. Jesus is the Best

**Texts:** John 1

### **Quotes:**

- God embraces not only this tiny globe of ours, but millions and billions of such globes. How can we—little crawling creatures so utterly helpless as he has made us—how can we possibly measure his greatness, his boundless love, his infinite compassion? *Gandhi*
- The mind, gazing upon the universe of God’s handiwork, rapt by the divine and infinite light. *Maximus the Confessor*
- What really interests me is whether God had any choice in the creation of the world. *Albert Einstein*
- I want to know how God created this world. I am not interested in this or that phenomenon, in the spectrum of this or that element. I want to know His thoughts; the rest are details. *Albert Einstein*
- What we call the beginning is often the end, and to make an end is to make a beginning. The end is where we start from. *T. S. Eliot*

### **Introductory questions**

Why is it important that the “Word was God”? Why is it important that he is described as the creator of everything? What has the darkness not understood about the light? Why did the Word become flesh and dwell among us? Why did God, who is at God’s side, come to make God known? What difference does this all make?

### **Discussion ideas**

The prologue (1:1-18) presents the universe-wide setting of the Great Controversy. While we are particularly concerned with our own problems—most of all, with our own salvation—John introduces the larger view that includes the whole on-looking universe. The pre-existence of the Word was most important, especially to those to whom he was writing, and continues to be essential in the understanding of Jesus and his mission. So what is this “Word,” and what does it mean? And in a culture that saw the physical as evil, what did it mean for the Word to become flesh and dwell among us?

While these verses are wonderfully beautiful, a poetic image that appeals to our aesthetic senses, their primary aim is to convey deep truths. They speak to the pre-existence of the Word, explaining that while he came in human form at a point in human time, the Son was not a created or lower being. This is especially important, not for the reason that we often suggest—that only God could be a perfect sacrifice—but because only God could truly reveal God.

These verses also establishes creatorship. For John’s hearers, this was particularly significant, since the physical world was viewed negatively. It is also important for us today, since the Universe is here declared not to be the result of deterministic physical forces.

It’s unfortunate that John 1:19-51 are not included in the lesson. The most winsome words describe God’s self-effacing love in coming to this world he had made, unwelcomed. Jesus takes on human form, lives with us, reveals God in all his glorious truth, and in this way makes him known to us so that we can be saved and healed, restored to the fullest and deepest relationship with our creator-savior.

## Ellen White Comments

“Christ himself was the Word, the Wisdom, of God; and in Him God himself came down from heaven, and clothed himself in the habiliments of humanity. He engaged in the mysterious conflict with Satan and his hosts, that man might understand elevated themes of truth. He rescued the truth from the companionship of error, and sent it forth free to the world.” {RH February 1, 1898}

“Christ came to the world to meet these false accusations [of the Devil], and to reveal the Father....Jesus alone could reveal the truth which it was necessary men should know in order that they might obtain salvation. He only could place it in the frame-work of truth, and it was His work to free it from error and set it before men in its heavenly light.” {RH February 18, 1890}

“Christ came to reveal to the world the knowledge of the character of God, of which the world was destitute. This knowledge was the chief treasure which He committed to His disciples to be communicated to men. The truth of God had been hidden beneath a mass of tradition and error. Jesus came to change the order of things that then existed, and reveal to them the character of the Father. He drew aside the veil which concealed His glory from the eyes of mortals, and made manifest to the world the only true and living God, whom to know aright is life eternal.” {RH November 1, 1892}

“By coming to dwell with us, Jesus was to reveal God both to men and to angels....Not alone for His earthborn children was this revelation given. Our little world is the lesson book of the universe.” {DA 19}

“The earth was dark through misapprehension of God. That the gloomy shadows might be lightened, that the world might be brought back to God, Satan’s deceptive power was to be broken. This could not be done by force. The exercise of force is contrary to the principles of God’s government; He desires only the service of love; and love cannot be commanded; it cannot be won by force or authority. Only by love is love awakened. To know God is to love Him; His character must be manifested in contrast to the character of Satan.” {DA 22}

## Extra Material

Why is it significant that John chooses to use the idea of the Word to describe the pre-existent Christ? While there are many theological explanations, one of the most significant reasons is because the word is at the heart of communication. Without words all we have are signs and grunts! So *Jesus as the Word* summarizes the intent of God to share himself with us, to reveal who he is and how he can save and heal us from our tragic situation. God is willing to use our words, even our defective communication, as a means to reveal himself in all his fullness.

This says much about the nature and character of God. He does not want to be remote and distant, he does not want us to be ignorant of him, most of all he does not want to be seen as the God who is so Almighty that we cannot speak to him. Jesus’ use of the word “Abba”—Daddy—shows us that what God most wants is one-to-one intimate conversation with every one of his created beings. God seeks to share himself in so many ways, but recognizes that for us to know him the very best way—and the best reason why Jesus is the best—is to come himself

“If God speaks, he must use words to do so. Words express thoughts, commands, descriptions, and the like. The problem is that words and sentences. . . . must be interpreted if they are to be understood. It is far more than a matter of translation, for while translation gets at what God says, we are still left with the question of what God means.” *R.C. Sproul, Christianity Today.*

### 3. Something Better

**Texts: John 2:1-22**

#### **Quotes:**

- To turn water into wine, and what is common into what is holy, is indeed the glory of Christianity. *F. W. Robertson*
- There is no brilliant single stroke that is going to transform the water into wine or straw into gold. *Coleman Young*

#### **Introductory questions**

Why these two stories? What do they tell us about Jesus? Would you have started with these two incidents as a way of describing Jesus and his character? Why did Jesus tell his mother his time had not yet come? What was significant about Jesus in relation to the temple?

#### **Discussion ideas**

In this section of John's gospel we are presented with two pictures of Jesus. One is Jesus as the gracious guest, miraculously turning water into wine. The other is as an angry zealot, driving moneychangers from the temple. One could be forgiven for seeing in these two reports some very contradictory aspects. John is answering the question "Who is Jesus?" Here we have two answers. Which one do we choose?

Yet we need to be consistent and true to the belief that "All Scripture... is profitable." It is not a matter of picking and choosing. Both these incidents tell us something about Jesus, who he was, and the essence of his mission.

Clearly the wine was much appreciated—the master of the banquet clearly said so. This was the best. When Jesus is around, there is nothing but the best. And this is also true of the temple—by trying to clear the temple, Jesus was attempting to restore its original purpose and meaning, much better than the meaningless commercialization it had become. But there is much more to both stories than the actual events that reveal both the miracle-working power of Jesus and his authority.

Both are parables of the kingdom, to borrow a phrase from the other gospels. They are designed to make us think what Jesus' whole worldview is all about. In so many ways, the water-into-wine story seems to be a trivial kind of beginning to Jesus' ministry. Why begin there? Why mention it? Is Jesus just a casual bystander who just helps out to please his mother?

Nothing could be further from the truth. That water—a vital part of our life here, to be sure—is transformed into wine, one of the most appreciated products, almost a luxury, shows the overwhelming grace of God. Jesus could easily have said—why should I do this? Water is enough to keep people alive, why make wine? But to demonstrate the abundance of God's loving and gracious spirit, he agrees to help in this "luxury" miracle. He begins with wine, and then promises at the end that he will drink it new with the righteous in the world made new.

This was a revelation of his glory, John explains, and then straightaway records the temple incident. Certainly a demonstration of power, but of love? John records the "zeal for your house" quote as explanatory—that Jesus' motive was primarily for what the temple was meant to mean. His offence at what it had become was because human beings had perverted the ideas about salvation the temple was meant to share. Another acted parable of the kingdom. John also records the incident as a primary factor in establishing trust in Jesus after his death.

## Ellen White Comments

“A legal religion has been thought quite the correct religion for this time. But it is a mistake. The rebuke of Christ to the Pharisees is applicable to those who have lost from the heart their first love. A cold, legal religion can never lead souls to Christ; for it is a loveless, Christless religion. . . . The love of Christ will animate the believer with new life. He who drinks from the water of the fountain of life, will be filled with the new wine of the kingdom.” {1SM388}

“The Teacher from heaven, no less a personage than the Son of God, came to earth to reveal the character of the Father to men, that they might worship Him in spirit and in truth.... Christ came to the world to sow it with truth.... He presented to men that which was exactly contrary to the representations of the enemy in regard to the character of God, and sought to impress upon men the paternal love of the Father... [John 3:16 quoted]” {RH November 17, 1891}

“The word of God reveals His character. He Himself has declared His infinite love and pity.... God has bound our hearts to Him by unnumbered tokens in heaven and in earth. Through the things of nature, and the deepest and tenderest earthly ties that human hearts can know, He has sought to reveal Himself to us. Yet these but imperfectly represent Himself to us. Though all these evidences have been given, the enemy of good blinded the minds of men, so that they looked upon God with fear; they thought of Him as severe and unforgiving. Satan led men to conceive of God as a being whose chief attribute is stern justice,--one who is a severe judge, a harsh, exacting creditor. He pictured the Creator as a being who is watching with jealous eye to discern the errors and mistakes of men, that He may visit judgments upon them. It was to remove this dark shadow, by revealing to the world the infinite love of God, that Jesus came to live among men. {SC10,11}

## Extra material

In the context of the commercialization of the temple services, making money providing the required sacrifices and temple currency at inflated rates, you might take a look at a special offering in religious figurines. Just in case you thought it was impossible to commercialize a miracle, check out the Water into Wine doll produced by Ashton-Drake Galleries. On an internet site that also offers Gadgets for God, comes this offering. Hopefully it's a spoof...

“Suddenly, it's H2...whoaaah!!! Instant transubstantiation! Let all Cana rejoice! Now *that's* a full-bodied beaujolais fit for any nuptial knees-up. The Water Into Wine doll: yours for \$99.95, or five easy payments of \$21.99.” Water into Wine doll from Gadgets for God: <http://ship-of-fools.com/Gadgets/Devotional/066.html>

Alternatively, there's the teasing humor of Alfred Gingold, who makes these claims for “Water into wine” pills: “A favorite of outdoor alcoholics, connoisseurs and Fundamentalists, these pills turn water into wine. In 10 minutes the most fetid swamp scum in the forest can become modest red, elusive and light on first taste, yet playful—one might say a trifle impudent—on the afterbite. Saves pack space by eliminating need for bulky corkscrew, decanter and bottles. Store pills on their sides in a cool dark place.”

While some would recoil in horror at what they would view as sacrilegious talk, these two illustrations reveal how so many fail to see beyond the immediate claims of the gospel. Instead of seeing the graciousness of a generous God, they trip themselves up over what they see as mythical stories. A reminder to all of us who live in such a cynical and naturalistic society that we too must be careful not to slip into such denial of the supernatural gifts of the all-powerful God—a trustworthy God who seeks to bring us all back to rely on his saving, healing abilities.

## 4. Grace is All-Inclusive

**Texts:** John 2:23-4:42

### **Quotes:**

- May it not be that, just as we have faith in Him, God has to have faith in us and, considering the history of the human race so far, may it not be that faith is even more difficult for Him than it is for us? *Wystan Hugh Auden*
- Grace is the beauty of form under the influence of freedom. *Johann Friedrich von Schiller*
- Grace is but glory begun, and glory is but grace perfected. *Jonathan Edwards*

### **Introductory questions**

Why should we not trust in miracles? Why did Nicodemus have such a hard time with Jesus' statements to him? Compare Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman—which one is responding best, and in which areas? How do we see both in the need of grace? Why does Jesus compare himself to the bronze serpent? How did God give his Son to save us?

### **Discussion ideas**

So many comments could be made on these verses that it almost seems we need a whole quarter just to justice to all this deep and rich material! While the lesson concentrates on Nicodemus and the Samaritan women, there are other significant concepts:

- the comments on Jesus not trusting himself to his believers who had to come to trust on the basis of the miracles (2:24)
- John the Baptist's remarks about Jesus (3:22-30)
- The One from above 3:31-36 (is this John the Baptist or John speaking here?)

--this in addition to the incredible depth and quality of Jesus' reflections and remarks to both Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman that include some of the best-known and best-loved verses of Scripture.

Contrast the two persons. Nicodemus is named, he is a highly-placed figure in the national religious leadership, he is a respected and knowledgeable theologian. The Samaritan woman is nameless, viewed by that society as insignificant and of no value, being both female and one of the despised Samaritans. Yet to Nicodemus Jesus expresses surprise over Nicodemus' lack of religious knowledge and insight; while to the Samaritan woman he offers living water. Both he invites into a saving knowledge and acceptance of the graciousness of God.

In both cases Jesus is looking for an opportunity to share who he is, and to fulfil his mission of representing God to fallen human beings. He wants Nicodemus to be shocked into real consideration of the nature of God and his salvation—you must be born again (or born from above). Jesus doesn't want Nicodemus to remain within his comfort zone of accepted theology. He wants to radically challenge the picture of God that Nicodemus holds.

Similarly in his conversation with the Samaritan woman, Jesus is challenging her to look again at the God she professes to believe in. Jesus also wants her to overcome the racial discrimination—even hatred—that would prevent her accepting the truth from a Jew. He breaks all the rules, the taboos, and makes her face the reality of meeting the Christ, the One from God.

Much of this whole passage is the encouragement not to trust in miracles, as the lesson indicates (see Sunday). Miracles are not enough, and can never be the basis of faith in God.

## Ellen White Comments

The only hope for these souls is to realize in themselves the truth of Christ's words to Nicodemus, "Ye must be born again." "Except a man be born from above, he can not see the kingdom of God." John 3:7, 3, margin. {COL 48}

The man who attempts to keep the commandments of God from a sense of obligation merely--because he is required to do so--will never enter into the joy of obedience. He does not obey... The great truth of the conversion of the heart by the Holy Spirit is presented in Christ's words to Nicodemus: "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born from above, he can not see the kingdom of God. . . . {COL 97-8}

Nicodemus held a high position of trust in the Jewish nation. He was highly educated, and possessed talents of no ordinary character, and he was an honored member of the national council. With others, he had been stirred by the teaching of Jesus. . . .

Jesus bent His eyes upon the speaker, as if reading his very soul. In His infinite wisdom He saw before Him a seeker after truth. . . . He came directly to the point, saying solemnly, yet kindly, "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born from above, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3, margin). . . . {CC 291.5}

"The way in which Christ worked was to preach the Word, and to relieve suffering by miraculous works of healing. But I am instructed that we cannot now work in this way; for Satan will exercise his power by working miracles. God's servants today could not work by means of miracles; because spurious works of healing, claiming to be divine, will be wrought.... The truth must be proclaimed in the highways and byways, and thus the work is to be done by sensible, rational methods... We are to keep as far from the theatrical and the extraordinary as Christ kept in His work." {LT 53, 1904}

## Extra material

A wicked and adulterous generation. And if ever there was a generation of sign seekers, it's now. "Show us a sign," they say, "Then we'll believe you." Really?

What kind of sign would convince people today? Listen, even the resurrection of people from the dead didn't persuade the Pharisees. Remember the story of Lazarus? Do you think we'd be any more effective—even if we did raise the dead?

No: this wicked and adulterous generation just wants the spectacular, the amazing. It's a show-biz world, even in the church. Look at the health/wealth gospel—putting your hand to the TV screen, the preacher saying, "God is talking to me directly, right here in the studio."

No signs, says Jesus. I refuse to pander to your desire for fake religious excitement, to amaze you with power. Could he have amazed them by signs and wonders? Yes. But he turned his back on that kind of display, for it would not bring about the kind of trust in the truth that he really wanted. Sadly Jesus said: "Unless you people see miraculous signs and wonders, you will never believe." John 4:48. For even if you did believe, it would be for all the wrong reasons.

God wants us to believe for truth's sake—not because of spectacular signs or wonders. In fact, the presence of this kind of miracle-working, the flamboyant, showy marvels, prove the wrong kind of attitude to faith, which should be true trust in the Lord. Miracles can get in the way and confuse people. Jesus never performed miracles for their own sake, but always for a very real reason. And he never performed a miracle to vindicate himself. So don't make miracles the test of your faith. The real test is: Is it true? Is it in harmony with God's word? Even the working of the Holy Spirit must be tested in this way. (See 1 John 4:1, 2).

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