

The Four Gospel Accounts

PART 4: JOHN

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This morning I would invite you to turn with me again to the four gospel accounts. Four weeks ago, we started something of an overview based on a request that came in from one of the women of this congregation. She was asking for “a sermon comparing and contrasting the four gospel [accounts]; studying the differences and why they are important.” And that is what we are doing!

If you have not been here, I would just briefly mention a helpful resource we’ve been referring to in this brief series, *A Harmony of the Gospels (NASB)*, by Robert Thomas and Stanley Gundry. Whenever we study just about anything from one of the four gospel accounts, there is a huge value in seeing the four accounts laid out in a parallel way. Again, this is available on Amazon for less than \$25, and we also now have one of these in the church library. If I could only have three books with me on a deserted island, this would be one of them: 1.) A good English translation, 2.) a concordance, and 3.) this book, *A Harmony of the Gospels*.

We’ve been using a handout for these lessons. If you need another one, these are coming around again this morning - just take one and pass it on - and there are also several in the back room again. And for those who have not been here, we have a reading guide on one side and a grid on the other.

On the grid side, we have now covered Matthew, Mark, and Luke. We’ve learned that these men have different strengths, different backgrounds, and we’ve also learned that they seem to be writing to different audiences - Matthew is aimed at the Jews (with an emphasis on Jesus being the fulfillment of prophecy), Mark seems to target the Romans (with an emphasis on fast-moving action), and Luke is aimed at a Greek audience (with an emphasis on INCLUSION, with an emphasis on including groups that were often excluded in those days - women, and children, and foreigners, and so on). We’ve also seen a difference in writing styles between these three accounts: Matthew is extremely concise (with every word appearing to be very carefully chosen); Mark, on the other hand, almost rambles - Mark is one long run-on sentence, the 4-year old telling you what he did at his grandparents’ house - he uses the words *“immediately”* and *“and”* more than anybody; and Luke (as a highly educated medical doctor) uses a style that comes across as quite refined. Luke seems to be writing his account to some kind of wealthy sponsor. He acknowledges the previous accounts, but although he is not an eyewitness himself, he does his research, and so Luke’s account comes across almost like something we might find in a scholarly journal.

So, there are differences between the accounts, but there are also similarities. And each account is valuable. This morning, we come to the book that most of us know as John, the fourth gospel account. And as I've alluded to a time or two over the past few weeks, John is quite different than the others. Matthew, Mark, and Luke are sometimes known as the "synoptics," the "synoptic gospels." And even if we don't know the Greek language, most of us can look at the word synoptic, and we have some idea what it means. The first part, the "S-Y-N," means "together," and the second part of the word, "OPTIC," refers to "seeing" something. The word "synoptic," then, means, "to see together." Matthew, Mark, and Luke, then, are TOGETHER in the way they look at the life of Jesus. They are parallel. They have a somewhat similar structure. In the *Harmony of the Gospels*, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, will often have parallel accounts of the same events. In the *Harmony*, we will often have three columns. John, though, is different. John is unusual. John is off on its own. In the *Harmony*, John is often in a column all by itself. John does not "see together" with the others. John does not contradict the others, but there is a different emphasis in John. This morning, then, I want us to look at John with this in mind. John is unique.

In a sense, John is deep, incredibly deep. Some have suggested that brand new Christians can frolic in the edges of this book, almost like little children at the beach. But at the same time, there are those who have been Christians for many years (even scholars) who can explore the depths of this book for a lifetime, and yet they feel as if they have just barely touched the surface. Someone has noticed that many commentaries have been written on John, but most authors do not write on this book until they are very old. And I found that to be very interesting. The idea is: The more we study it, the less we feel as if we have "mastered" it. So, on one hand, the book of John is milk for spiritual newborns. Remember: John is a commercial fisherman. John is like those men on *Deadliest Catch*. He uses some very simple language. But at the same time, John is also meat for those who are spiritually mature. John is full of some very deep concepts.

And part of the reason John is the way that it is, is because of the author. The author, most likely, is John! As we have the last few weeks, we need to qualify this just a bit, because the authors did not sign their books. Volumes have been written on the various theories - the for and against, the evidence from inside the book itself (how it's written, and so on), and then the evidence from outside the book (how the book is quoted in the first few centuries, and who the early Christians believe wrote it). A few years ago, a good friend called and let me know about a situation where a man at his congregation became rather unhinged on the authorship of this particular gospel account. His theory was that Lazarus wrote it. And he believed this so strongly that he eventually pushed it to the point that if you didn't also believe that Lazarus wrote it, you were unfaithful to God. That harsh attitude eventually led to the downfall of that congregation. I've studied the theory that Lazarus wrote this book, but the overwhelming evidence internally and externally is that John wrote it. This morning, then, I'm working on the assumption that John wrote what we usually refer to as the book of John. Now, if I get to heaven and find out that Lazarus (or somebody else) actually wrote it, I won't be too upset. I think I'll just be thrilled to be in heaven! But for now, I am going with John.

And to me, John writing this book helps to explain why this book is so different. Who was John? First of all, John was one of the twelve apostles. That means that we now have two gospel accounts written by apostles and two that were NOT written by apostles. Secondly, though, not only was John one of the twelve, but he was also one of the Lord's closest friends in this life. John was one of the inner three. Most of us have a larger group of friends, but then we have those who are really close to us - one or two, or maybe three. John was in that number. Peter, James, and John, of course, were allowed to go with Jesus even to places where the others were not - they were with Jesus for the healing of Jairus' daughter, they were with Jesus at the transfiguration, they went with Jesus further into the Garden of Gethsemane than the others. The book of John, then, was written by one of the Lord's closest friends. John, therefore, includes quite a bit more

information that the other accounts do not - either because John was there, and the others were not; or, it might be that as one of Jesus' closest friends, John knew that certain situations were especially important to the Lord. John, for example, is the only one who tells us about the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus (in John 3). John is the only one who tells us about Jesus and the conversation he has with the woman at the well (in John 4). John is the only one who tells us about the interaction between Jesus and the woman caught in the act of adultery (in John 8). John is the only one who tells us about Jesus washing the apostles' feet (in John 13). John is the only one who tells us about Peter working things out with Jesus after the resurrection (in John 21). John's account is very personal. Again, we remember that John was a commercial fisherman on the Sea of Galilee. When Jesus called him, he left his nets and followed Jesus for the rest of his life.

But it's not just John and his relationship with Jesus that makes this book unique, it's also connected to WHEN this book was written. Generally, we believe that John writes at some point in the 90's! When we compare this to the others, it's obvious that John writes decades after the others. And this, I believe, has an impact on how and what John writes. First of all, we need to realize that a date in the 90's means that John is an old man at this point. He writes with a level of wisdom and insight that he didn't have earlier in his life. Unlike the others (who wrote much closer to when the events actually happened), John has now had 60+ years to think about everything he experienced. He's had time to see how Matthew, Mark, and Luke were received. And perhaps John sees that there is a need for yet another angle or perspective. As the last living apostle, John is able to give something of a "last word." This is it. This is the last inspired account to be written. John is the last living eyewitness. In John, then, we have deep insight into the mind of Christ. John boils it all down for us. He condenses it down to what is truly important.

Somewhere in here I should probably mention that John wrote some other books around this same time - the books of 1, 2, and 3 John, as well as Revelation. All of these were written, most likely, at some point in the 90's. Revelation was written from the Roman prison island of Patmos. The others (including the book of John) were most likely written from Ephesus, where John seems to have settled down a bit toward the end of his life - written from the city where John apparently served as one of the elders of that congregation.

As to the audience, we've alluded to this before, but John is writing to everybody. John is writing to US. John's gospel account applies equally to Jews and Gentiles, at all times, in all cultures. ***"For God so loved the WORLD" (John records for us), that He gave His only begotten Son, that WHOEVER believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life"*** (John 3:16).

As to how Jesus is portrayed in John, John's mission is to convince us that Jesus is the Son of God. And I know, that is how Jesus is portrayed in Mark, but John straight up tells us that this is his reason for writing. A key passage to understanding John's purpose comes in John 20:30-31. Toward the end of the book, John tells us why he is writing. Notice, please, John 20:30-31,

³⁰ Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; ³¹ but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name.

John writes, then, not just to tell us who Jesus is; this is more than just informing; but instead, John writes to CONVINCED. John wants US to believe that Jesus is the Son of God. And this statement here at the end really helps to explain why John's account is so much different than the others. Think back with me, for example, to how the book starts (back in John 1:1). Remember, Matthew and Luke basically start with genealogies. Mark starts with the ministry of John the Baptist. John, though, just comes right out and makes this claim,

¹ In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being. ⁴ In Him was life, and the life was the Light of men. ⁵ The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.

And then in verse 14 he says, ***“And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.”*** These are some bold claims! And yet these are also some very simple words! We have words like “word,” and “beginning,” and “life,” and “light.” These are all very simple words, aren’t they? And yet was that an easy passage to understand? No! This is deep! Jesus is the Word. Jesus is the Light. Jesus is the Creator. Jesus is responsible for everything we see around us. Jesus is the Son of God! And in this book, John sets out to prove it. He gives evidence. He records testimony for us. The word ***“testimony”*** is repeated quite often in this book. Even as he tells us about some of the amazing things Jesus did, John uses a different word than Matthew, Mark, and Luke do. They use a word referring to an “amazing thing” (emphasizing the miracle itself), but John uses the word ***“signs.”*** So, yes, Jesus is performing miracles, but in John, those miracles are ***“signs”*** that he is the Son of God. We will get back to these signs in just a moment.

But back to proving that Jesus is the Son of God, the second half of the first chapter is full of testimony from those men who met Jesus for the first time, starting with John the Baptist who sees Jesus coming and says in 1:29, ***“Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”*** He continues in 1:34 and says, ***“I myself have seen, and have testified that this is the Son of God.”*** We then have the testimony of those who were the first to be called apostles. We studied this several months ago, but Andrew finds his brother and says, ***“Come and see. We have found the Messiah.”*** We have the testimony of Philip to his brother Nathanael in 1:45, ***“We have found Him of whom Moses in the Law and also the Prophets wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.”*** We have Nathanael’s testimony in 1:49, ***“Rabbi, You are the Son of God; You are the King of Israel.”*** A few chapters later we have the testimony of the woman at the well to the men of the city as she went and said to them in 4:29, ***“Come, see a man who told me all the things that I have done; this is not the Christ, is it?”*** And then, a few verses later (in 4:42), the men of the city come back to the woman and say, ***“It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves and know that this One is indeed the Savior of the world.”*** We have Peter’s testimony in 6:68-69, ***“Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life. We have believed and have come to know that You are the Holy One of God.”*** We have Martha’s testimony in 11:27, where she says, ***“Yes, Lord; I have believed that You are the Christ, the Son of God, even He who comes into the world.”*** And then, the book basically ends with the testimony of Thomas. Thomas, by the way, is something of a hero in our family. Going back several generations, many of the men in our family have been given the name Thomas. And so to us, he is not “Doubting Thomas,” but to us, he is “Believing Thomas.” He is “Thomas, the Believing Apostle.” Thomas refuses to believe until he has evidence, but once he sees the holes in the Lord’s hands and side, he responds by proclaiming in John 20:28, ***“My Lord and my God!”***

As to prominent ideas, again, we have really already covered this as well: John’s account puts an emphasis on BELIEF. He writes to convince us that we also need to believe that Jesus is the Son of God.

As to the arrangement of the book, we don’t have a formal structure, but we do have two lists of SEVEN in this book, starting with seven signs (or miracles) during Jesus’ ministry, a majority of which are only found in John (not in Matthew, Mark, or Luke):

- Water to wine (2:1-11) - Jesus’ very first “sign” or “miracle”

- Healing of the royal official's son (4:46-54)
- Healing of the man who had been paralyzed for 38 years (5:1-9)
- Feeding of the 5,000 with five loaves and two fish (6:1-14)
- Walking on water and saving Peter in the process (6:16-21)
- Healing of the man born blind (9:1-12)
- Raising of Lazarus from the dead (11:1-46)

Beyond this, we also have the seven **"I AM"** statements scattered throughout the book, none of which are found in the other gospel accounts. And again, these help with John's goal in this book, to prove that Jesus is the Son of God, to prove that Jesus is Deity. We remember that God is the **"I AM"** (going back to the interaction with Moses at the burning bush). Jesus, then, takes on this title or description as his own - seven times in John's gospel account:

- **"I am the bread of life"** (6:35, 48, 51)
- **"I am the light of the world"** (8:12, 9:5)
- **"I am the door of the sheep"** (10:7,9)
- **"I am the good shepherd"** (10:11,14)
- **"I am the resurrection and the life"** (11:25)
- **"I am the way, the truth, and the life"** (14:6)
- **"I am the true vine"** (15:1)

Again, those who heard these statements would obviously connect this to God talking to Moses back in Exodus 3:14. God wants Moses to go talk to Pharaoh, but Moses wants to know, "Who should I tell them sent me? If they want to know Your name, what do I tell them?" [paraphrased]. And God replies to Moses, **"I AM WHO I AM,"** and He says, **"Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.'"** In John, then, we have these seven **"I AM"** statements, further proving that Jesus really is the Son of God, that Jesus is the **"I AM."**

As to prominent words, various forms of BELIEVE are obviously featured in John. Again, this is the purpose of John's account, and so it's no surprise that various forms of BELIEF or BELIEVE are found close to a hundred times in John, more than all of the other gospel accounts combined. John wants us to believe, and he gives us examples of people believing. Believe! Believe! Believe! People see the signs Jesus performs, and they believe (2:23). People hear Jesus' words, and they believe (8:30). People hear the testimony given by others, and they believe (4:39). As Jesus says in John 8:24, **"...unless you believe that I am He, you will die in your sins."**

Besides belief, we also see an emphasis on **"light,"** and **"life,"** and **"love,"** and **"truth,"** and **"judgment."** The phrase **"truly, truly,"** or more literally, **"AMEN, AMEN"** is found 25 times, but by far, **"belief"** is the most prominent word in the book of John.

As to interesting facts, I find it interesting that if it were not for John, we would not know that Jesus preached for at least three years, and the reason is: John tells us about three Passovers in his book! John, then, gives us a span as he at least mentions these three celebrations. Chronologically, just by looking at Matthew, Mark, and Luke, we might assume that Jesus only preached for a year. John, though, tells us three times that Jesus traveled to Jerusalem for the Passover (2:13, 6:4-5, 12:1-2). At the same time, though, when we add everything up and combine it together with the other gospel accounts, it seems that John describes only around 20 days in the life of Jesus! And to me, that is amazing! Sixty years after the Lord's death, John boils it

all down to twenty days and uses the events of those twenty days to convince us that Jesus truly is the Son of God. When we realize that John only tells us about 20 days in the life of Jesus, the last two verses make a lot of sense, ***“This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and wrote these things, and we know that his testimony is true. And there are also many other things which Jesus did, which if they were written in detail, I suppose that even the world itself would not contain the books that would be written”*** (John 21:24-25).

I would also point out that the longest prayer in the New Testament is found in John. In a sense, this is trivia, but when we are dealing with the Bible, even trivia really isn't trivial! But in John 17 we have a prayer Jesus prayed on the night before he dies. And in that prayer, he prays for us. He prays for his future disciples. He prays for unity. He prays that the world would come to believe in Him because of the love they see in us. Sometimes people refer to the Lord's Prayer as being what we find in Matthew 6 and Luke 11, ***“Our Father in Heaven, hallowed be your name,”*** and so on. And yet that isn't really the “Lord's Prayer.” In fact, of all the prayers in the Bible, that is the one prayer we know Jesus never actually prayed. And I say this, because in this prayer, he says, ***“forgive us our sins.”*** Jesus never sinned. Jesus would have never actually prayed that. When we look at it carefully, Jesus was giving that prayer as an example. He started by saying, ***“Pray then in this way,”*** and then he gives an example. The “real” Lord's Prayer, though, is actually found in John - John 17:1-26.

Conclusion:

There is so much more we could say on the four gospel accounts and on the book of John in particular, but we have come to the end of this series. I am thankful for the good Christian sister who asked that we study these things. Next week is a fifth Sunday, so we plan on setting aside some extra time for singing and for the public reading of Scripture. I'm hoping we can use next Sunday to continue this focus on the gospel.

As we think back over what we've learned today, I'm hoping we can take some time this week to read John's account. It takes just over an hour for most of us, and what a great experience that would be - keeping an eye out for some of these things we've studied.

As I said at the beginning, John writes his account to convince. If we don't believe, John wants to change that. And when we study John's account, when we read his eyewitness testimony, we have a choice to make: Either we accept it or we reject it. And John's preference is that we accept it, that we believe this good news and that we obey it. Everything he writes is an invitation. Everything he writes is a challenge, a challenge to believe and obey, a challenge to believe and to follow Jesus as the Son of God.

As we studied a few weeks ago, there really isn't a middle ground here. Either he is the Son of God, or he isn't. And if he isn't, then he is either a deceiver who lied to his followers, or he is insane himself (thinking he's God, when he isn't). And so, he can't just be a “good teacher” if he isn't who he claimed to be. This morning, then, we are asking you to consider this evidence. And our hope is that you will come to the same conclusion Thomas did, ***“My Lord and my God!”*** Jesus is the Son of God. He died for us. He was buried. He came back from the dead. In response, we turn to him in faith, and we obey his command to be immersed in water for the forgiveness of our sins.

By the way, right after Thomas confesses his belief in Jesus as being God, Jesus immediately says to him, ***“Because you have seen Me, have you believed? Blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed.”*** All of us in this room are in that verse! We are those who have not seen and yet believe. And that's where John continues, ***“Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not***

written in this book; but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name.”

If you are at this point, we would love to help you in any way we can. If you are interested in studying further, get in touch. But if you are ready to obey this good news right now, we invite you to let us know right now as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

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	Matthew	Mark	Luke	John
Author				
Date				
Audience				
Jesus				
Big Ideas				
Arrangement				
Key Words				
Interesting Facts				

Highly Recommended: *A Harmony of the Gospels (NASB)*, by Robert L. Thomas and Stanley N. Gundry

	Matthew	Mark	Luke	John
Author	Matthew or Levi (Tax Collector, Apostle)	John Mark (cousin of Barnabas)	Luke (beloved physician)	John (Apostle, fisherman)
Date	60's	50's	60's	90's
Audience	Jews	Romans	Greeks	Universal
Jesus	King	Son of God	Son of Man	Son of God
Big Ideas	Law and the Prophets	Power	Inclusion	Belief
Arrangement	Five Sermons	Rambling Action	Parables	7 Miracles/"I AM"
Key Words	fulfilled, kingdom of heaven, kingdom of God, authority, disciple, student, follower, multitude	immediately	Son of Man	Believe (light, life, love, truth, judgment, truly truly)
Interesting Facts	Extremely concise, as if written by an accountant	Fast-paced, almost to the point of rambling ("and"); might be the naked guy	Medical terminology; Emphasis on history	20 days in 3 years; longest prayer

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com