

*It is more profitable to know Jesus than to know about Him.*

**Weekly Edition – December 23, 2016**  
**Gospel According to St. John – Introduction**

**Introduction**

- 1) There is One God, who by His word and wisdom created all things and set them in order. His Word is our Lord, Jesus Christ, who in this last age became man and dwelt among men to unite the beginning, that is man, with the end, which is God.
- 2) The prophets, receiving the gift of prophecy from this same Word, foretold His coming in the flesh, which ushered in a new era of communion between God and man ordained by the Father – the plan of redemption and adoption since before the world began.
- 3) From the beginning the Word of God, speaking through men, prophesied that God would be seen by men and would live among them on earth; He would speak with His own creation and be present to it, bringing salvation and being visible to it.
- 4) He would *free us from the hands of all who hate us*, that is, from the universal spirit of sin (Psalm 107:10), and enable us *to serve Him in holiness and justice all our days*. (Isaiah 43:21)
- 5) The Gospel of John, written by a man divinely inspired by the Holy Spirit, is an eyewitness account of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, this same eternal Word. The prophets of old longed to see the day of the LORD's coming. John was an eyewitness to Him and His days among us. That John was inspired by the Holy Spirit will become more clear as we discover the amazingly colorful threads woven through the tapestry of twenty-one short chapters.
- 6) The starting point of John's Gospel is not human sinfulness, but an ideal of abiding restful union with God. This abiding restful union exists first of all in God, that is, between and among the persons of the Trinity. Yet we humans can participate – both in this life and the next one.
- 7) This ideal of abiding restful union is not alien to us or something that exists outside of us, but rather relates to something deep within us – a hunger and a longing of our hearts to be completed in God. Hence, the quest of faith is simply a quest to discover what already is and has been since the beginning.
- 8) Yet John's Gospel reveals a deep problem set against this positive invitation into abiding restful union with God. However oriented we might be towards the divine realms, however deep our longings, there is within us a darkness or dividedness – and the results are that we have difficulty connecting with our God.
- 9) This failure takes two basic forms: First in our daily lives we are so pre-occupied with matters of the flesh – with careers, love-life, sickness, families, etc. that we do not have the necessary “spirit” to relax and enjoy the essential union with God which is always there. Secondly, as we draw near to the end of our life, death overshadows life. We are each terminal so to speak – none of us get out of here alive. We cannot cross directly from this life to the next one with God without passing through death.
- 10) Our starting point for our study of John is a framing of this essential union with God, our longing for it, that this longing is planted deeply within us, and that most of the challenges of life and faith are simply a struggle to reclaim this essential unitedness that always exists between us and God.

**The Gospel of St. John**

**Part I**

- Prologue 1:1-14
- First Year 1:15 – 2:22
- Second Year 2:23 – 6:71
- Third Year 7:1 – 12:50

**Part II**

- The Last Discourse 13:1 – 17:26
- The Arrest and Trial 18:1 – 19:16
- Death and Resurrection 19:16 (b) – 21:25

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## Authorship

- 1) Both church tradition and evidence internal to the Gospel support that the Apostle John, one of the sons of Zebedee (Matthew 4:21), is the author of the work that bears John's name.
- 2) He never identifies himself by name, choosing to discreetly refer to himself as "the disciple whom Jesus loved." (21:20 & 24) He claims to be an eyewitness to the life and ministry of Jesus Christ (1:14 & 19:35) and he appears several times in the Gospel narrative. (13:23, 19:26 & 20:2)
- 3) The Beloved Disciple is clearly an Israelite, whose knowledge of Jewish feasts and institutions is detailed and well informed, and whose familiarity with the geography of Palestine is quite accurate.
- 4) The Beloved Disciple is one of the Twelve present with Jesus at the Last Supper (13:23 and Mark 14:17-25) and with the apostles after His resurrection. (21:4-7)
- 5) John is part of the inner-circle of disciples closest to Jesus – Peter, James and John. The close relationship between Peter and John portrayed in this Gospel is also mirrored in the Gospel of Luke and in Acts.
- 6) The details sprinkled throughout the Gospel show an attention to detail with all the earmarks of an eyewitness – he notices, for example, that the stone jars were filled "up to the brim" at the wedding in Cana (2:7) and that the multiplied loaves were "made of barley." He tells us that the perfume used to anoint Jesus "filled the house" where the event took place. (12:3)

## Date

- 1) When John wrote his Gospel is unclear. Tradition has dated it as the last Gospel to be written, somewhere between 90 and 110 AD, however, more recent archeological discoveries have moved that date forward into the 70 to 80 AD timeframe. Some argue that it was written before the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD, but that seems to be a stretch, even though a single reference in the text puts a present tense on a location. John wrote "there is" (present tense) a pool near the Sheep Gate in Jerusalem (5:2), suggesting the pool was intact and not buried under a heap of rubble at the time he was writing. We cannot read too much into this statement.

## Organization and Outline

- 1) The organization of the human body can be described many different ways according to various "systems" which comprise the whole and which are essential to understanding the whole. For example, we can describe the body by the skeleton arrangement of bones, or by the central nervous system, or by the limbs or the senses, or its complex vascular system. Each is an accurate and a correct portrayal, yet each is deficient in that none properly explain the whole.
- 2) We have same opportunity and limitations in the arrangement and organization of the Gospel of John. Unlike the so-called synoptic Gospels, John's is unusually complex, layered and multi-faceted. Whatever system of organization we choose to use for our study will be incomplete, and while it will be accurate along the one dimension of our choosing, it will exclude so much other richness.

## Eucharist View

- 3) One way of organizing John's Gospel is the arrangement of our Eucharistic Feast. The order of the ancient Liturgy has remained remarkably consistent and is comprised of these four parts which are suggested in John's Gospel:

<u>Symbol</u>	<u>Liturgical Element</u>	<u>Applicable Scripture</u>	<u>Invitation</u>
a) Door	Processional	John 1:1-14	Pray to enter life more fully
b) Book	Liturgy of the Word	John 1:15 – 12:50	Previewing and reviewing my day
c) Altar	Holy Communion	John 13 – 19	Deepening my covenant with God
d) Cup	Passing the Peace	John 20 – 21	Breathing in Christ's Holy Breath

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### **Time/Space Stages of Life View**

- 4) A second way of organizing John's Gospel is the arrangement of time and space. In comparison with the three synoptic Gospels, John not only gives an account which last three years, he gives a triple account, with the same elements recurring in each part of the triad. The elements which recur in each year are: (a) the calling of disciples (b) ministry in Galilee (c) ascent to Jerusalem (d) Passover and (e) clashes with the Jews.
  - a) **Year One** (1:1-2:22) As brief as these opening lines may be there is a great deal packed into them. We see the call of the disciples, ministry in Galilee at Capernaum and Cana, the Passover cleansing of the Temple, clashes with the Jews in Jerusalem, and references to what was to come – Jesus' death and resurrection and post-resurrection faith. (2:19-22)
  - b) **Year Two** (2:23 -chapter 6) In this second triad, the earlier themes repeat beginning with potential new disciples in Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman, more ministry in Galilee, returning to Jerusalem for a second Passover of His public ministry, allusions to Jesus' death and resurrection (6:52-58) and rejection by the Jews.
  - c) **Year Three** (Chapters 7-12) We see the same elements in with yet a third variation: drawing disciples, journey through Galilee, ascent to Jerusalem, clashes with the Jews and the emergence of disciples all building up to the final Passover and our Lord's death, resurrection and ascent.
- 5) Scholars have observed that this circular pattern within a three-year chronology is significant, not only because the variations are repetitions of the key themes, each similar, yet with distinct features year-by-year, but rather because they correspond to the three basic ages of human life – youth, midlife and old age. The first year suggests a mood which is youthful and optimistic. The second year shows the kind of problems which frequently are associated with midlife. And the third year shows the influence of the threat of death that corresponds to old age.
- 6) Building on this theme, the disciples who dominate year one give the impression of youthful exuberance and vigor and even the year's most colorful event is a wedding that takes place in Cana, a time associated with young adulthood.
- 7) The people and events of the second year seem to be full of the power and preoccupation typically associated with midlife – a prestigious leader, Nicodemus; a jaded lover (the Samaritan woman at the well) and the worried parent (the royal official).
- 8) In the third year, the Gospel never says that anyone is old, but it is the first time someone dies and people cry. The mood is serious and sober. There is increasingly clarity as one advances towards one's last days and finally greets death itself.
- 9) Each year contains the full account of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus – the complete story. Yet each time the complete story is repeated, there are variations on the theme. This migration through time and stages of life speaks to our own life's journey – the same themes repeated but never quite the same.
- 10) This repeating of the complete story corresponds to the fact that in your life and mine, no matter what our age, one knows the entire story of Jesus, or at least some of it. But as we encounter it again and again through the cycles of life, the Gospel changes. There are variations on the theme, so to speak, as we live more deeply into the mystery of life. The story learned as a child is not adequate in our middle years. And as our flesh grows weak and we must face our own death, we must re-discover again what it means that the life-giving God has become flesh and lived and died like one of us.
- 11) Finally, we observe that even the final commissioning of Peter (21:15-19) seems to use this parallel stage-of-life structure, with Jesus essentially calling Peter to care for people through the entire main stages of life – when they are young ("feed My sheep"), when they are grown and vigorous ("feed My lambs"), and when they are grown and no longer strong and vigorous, but have attained to a greater humility that old age can usher in ("feed My little sheep"). This spiritual feeding of one kind or another is needed at every stage of life.

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- 12) The text goes on to speak to the three stages of Peter's own life in explicit reference to these three stages: Peter's youth ("when you were young"), a midlife time of strength (where he presumably was at the time), and Peter's old age ("but when you grow old").

### **Other Elements for Consideration**

- 1) Half of the Gospel of John is devoted to the last 24 hours of Jesus' life, and nearly a third of it is focused on the last discourse – what Jesus did (foot washing) and what He said at the Last Supper. That so much of his Gospel is devoted to this small window of time strongly supports the centrality of the Eucharist to John's understanding of faith, and John's view of the Christian life in Eucharistic terms.

### **Significant Themes**

- 1) John speaks frequently to the Jewish feasts – an unnamed feast (5:1), Tents (7:2), Dedication (10:22), and Passover (2:13, 6:4 & 11:55 – especially chapters 13-20) as John wants us to see that Jesus replaces the Jewish festivals ordained by the Law. He came not to abolish them, but to fulfill them.
- 2) A theme running throughout John is the idea of the centrality of the Sabbath – of resting in God, which is a further manifestation of John's central theme of abiding restful union. Whereas the Synoptic Gospels speak of God's kingdom as a feast, John has a more down-to-earth view: union with God that is festive, a union that is linked to Sabbaths and specific feasts and therefore, to the flow of daily life. The invitation is to live more fully into abiding restful union in the rhythm of our daily lives – in our circumstances. Here is where we find God and find our rest in Him, and this rest is wonderfully festive and joyful.
- 3) Another theme running through John is the idea of glory – the manifestation of God's love. As love tends to show itself in radiant ways – like flowers or poetry or songs or special actions – so divine love reveals itself. When you and I look at something or someone that manifests God, what we are able to grasp is the underlying divine love being spoken out in creation. Said differently, God's glory "leaks out" through people and things; when we catch a glimpse of God's glory we really perceive God's love.
- 4) When we look upon Jesus, or contemplate His life, we see the union of human and divine. But such union is difficult for us to hold together. So in John we see the Samaritan woman at the well, faced with the human Jesus, not able at first to perceive His divinity; whereas Peter, aware of Jesus' divinity, cannot reconcile it with something as human as washing of feet. The invitation, as well as the challenge, is possible only through the Holy Spirit – which is to discern the divine in what is thoroughly human. God did not create you and I to be specimens of holiness that rise out of and above our humanity, but to discover the divine presence in the ordinary drudgery and messiness of everyday life. Only here will we find authentic integration and peace. John's three stages of life each bring different kinds of messiness and drudgery, and new opportunities to discover or rediscover the divine presence in our circumstances.
- 5) Faith is the entry-point and means by which we enter into abiding restful union, and faith begins with believing. But believing is not a mechanical or intellectual exercise. Believing is closely linked in John to knowing – and within the distinctly Jewish understanding of knowing, knowing implies a form of union. John associates various types of signs with believing. Signs are given to evoke faith and to confirm it. But that does not mean signs alone suffice. The crowds, at first, follow Jesus because of His signs (6:2), but later are seen abusing the sign (6:14), failing to really see it (6:26), and finally, asking for one even though it had already been given. (6:30) John gives the impression that signs are good, but that we can in various ways ignore them or refuse them. In this way signs can evoke believing, or confirm it, but they don't guarantee it. No matter how wonderful, signs can be misunderstood, ignored or rejected.
- 6) John further shows that believing leads to care and to community or Church. Since believing is inseparable from love, it is inseparable from community – from church – inseparable from a concern for all people. John never uses the word "church" – because church is elusive; it is a mystery-filled phenomena between the believer and God that unites believers with one another. John seems to distrust institutions – the church being founded on the Holy Spirit is something which is bigger than itself, and united by spiritual ties which may or may not follow man-made lines and boundaries. No community means no real believing!